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DYNASTIES COLLECTION

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Robyn Grady

One Season And Dynasties Collection

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A double bill collection from Mills & BoonA collection of Mills & Boon titles including the One Season Collection and the Dynasties Collection

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About the Authors

ANDREA BOLTER has always been fascinated by matters of the heart. In fact she's the one her girlfriends turn to for advice with their love-lives. A city mouse, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband and daughter. She loves travel, rock 'n' roll, sitting at cafés, and watching romantic comedies she's already seen a hundred times. Say "hi" at andreabolter.com

Her New York Billionaire is Andrea Bolter's debut title for Mills & Boon. Visit her Author Profile page at millsandboon.co.uk

A former au pair, bookseller, marketing manager and seafront trader, **JESSICA GILMORE** now works for an environmental charity in York, England. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humour, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes!

TRISH WYLIE worked on a long career of careers to get to the one she'd wanted from her late teens. She flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder while playing the promotions game, patted her manicured hands on the backs of musicians in the music business, smiled sweetly at awkward customers during the retail nightmare known as the run-up to Christmas, and got completely lost in her car in every single town in Ireland while working as a sales rep.

It took all that character-building and a healthy sense of humour to get her dream job, she feels —where she spends her days in reindeer slippers, with her hair in whatever band she can find to keep it out of the way, make-up as vague and distant a memory as manicured nails, while she gets to create the kind of dream man she'd still like to believe is out there somewhere. If it turns out he is, she promises she'll let you know…after she's been out for a new wardrobe, a manicure and a makeover…

SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. She's worked in the health service for twenty years, trained as a nurse and a health visitor. Scarlet now works in public health and lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons. Writing medical romances and contemporary romances is a dream come true for her.

New York Times bestselling author **RAEANNE THAYNE** finds inspiration in the beautiful northern Utah mountains where she lives with her family. Her books have won numerous honours, including six RITA® Award nominations from Romance Writers of America and Career Achievement and Romance Pioneer awards from RT Book Reviews. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached through her website at www.raeannethayne.com

MARIE FERRARELLA is a *USA Today* bestselling and RITA® Award-winning author and has written more than two hundred books for Mills & Boon, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com

STACY CONNELLY dreamed of publishing books since she was a kid writing about a girl and her horse. Eventually, boys made it onto the page as she discovered a love of romance and the promise of happily-ever-after. In 2008, that dream came true when she sold *All She Wants for Christmas* to Mills & Boon. When she is not lost in the land of make-believe, Stacy lives in Arizona with her two spoiled dogs.

BARBARA HANNAY lives in North Queensland where she and her writer husband have raised four children. Barbara loves life in the north where the dangers of cyclones, crocodiles and sea stingers are offset by a relaxed lifestyle, glorious winters, World Heritage rainforests and the Great Barrier Reef. Besides writing, Barbara enjoys reading, gardening and planning extensions to accommodate her friends and her extended family.

ANNE OLIVER lives in Adelaide, South Australia. She is an avid romance reader, and after eight years of writing her own stories, Mills & Boon offered her publication in 2005. Her first two published novels won the Romance Writers of Australia's Romantic Book of the Year Award in 2007 and 2008. She was a finalist again in 2012 and 2013. Visit her website anne-oliver.com

Author of more than 100 titles for Mills & Boon, native Arkansan **GINA WILKINS** was introduced early to romance novels by her avid-reader mother. Gina loves sharing her own stories with readers who enjoy books celebrating families and romance. She is inspired daily by her husband of over thirty years, their two daughters and their son, their librarian son-in-law who fit perfectly into this fiction-loving family, and an adorable grandson who already loves books.

RAYE MORGAN has been a nursery-school teacher, a travel agent, a clerk and a business editor, but her best job ever has been writing romances – and fostering romance in her own family at the same time. Current score: two boys married, two more to go. Raye has published more than seventy romances, and claims to have many more waiting in the wings. She lives on the Central California Coast with her husband.

ABIGAIL GORDON loves to write about the fascinating combination of medicine and romance from her home in a Cheshire village. She is active in local affairs, and is even called upon to write the script for the annual village pantomime! Her eldest son is a hospital manager, and helps with all her medical research. As part of a close-knit family, she treasures having two of her sons living close by and the third one not too far away. This also gives her the added pleasure of being able to watch her delightful grandchildren growing up.

MAUREEN CHILD is the author of more than 130 romance novels and novellas that routinely appear on bestseller lists and have won numerous awards, including the National Reader's Choice Award. A seven-time nominee for the prestigious RITA® award from Romance Writers of America, one of her books was made into a CBS-TV movie called *The Soul Collector*. Maureen recently moved from California to the mountains of Utah and is trying to get used to snow.

TESSA RADLEY loves travelling, reading and watching the world around her. As a teen, Tessa wanted to be a foreign correspondent. But after completing a bachelor of arts degree and marrying her sweetheart, she ended up practicing as a lawyer in a city firm. A break spent traveling through Australia re-awoke the yearn to write. When she's not reading, travelling or writing, she's spending time with her husband, her two sons or her friends. Find out more at www.tessaradley.com

Bestselling author and Rita finalist **EMILIE ROSE** has been writing for Mills & Boon since her first sale in 2001. A North Carolina native, Emilie has 4 sons and an adopted mutt. Writing is her third (and hopefully her last) career. She has managed a medical office and run a home day care, neither of which offers half as much satisfaction as plotting happy endings. She loves cooking, gardening, fishing and camping.

EILEEN WILKS is the *New York Times* best-selling author of over thirty books and novellas. Eileen came to writing the usual way: by reading compulsively and daydreaming a lot. She likes quilting, dark matter, chocolate, books on brain science, yoga (even though she's not good at it), and painting things – walls, boxes, furniture, floors, even canvases sometimes…but not the cats. The cats do not wish to be painted.

USA TODAY bestselling author, **KATHIE DENOSKY**, writes highly emotional stories laced with a good dose of humour. Kathie lives in her native southern Illinois and loves writing at night while listening to country music on her favourite radio station.

BARBARA MCCAULEY has written more than twenty books for Mills & Boon, and lives in Southern California with her own handsome hero husband, Frank, who makes it easy to believe in and write about the magic of romance. Barbara's stories have won and been nominated for numerous awards, including the prestigious RITA® Award from the Romance Writers of America, Best Desire of the Year from *Romantic Times* and Best Short Contemporary from the National Reader's Choice Awards. Barbara loves to hear from her readers.

KATHERINE GARBERA is a strong believer in happily-ever-after. She's written more than thirty-five books and has been nominated for career achievement awards in series fantasy and series adventure from *RT Book Reviews*. Her books have appeared on the Waldenbooks/Borders bestseller

list for series romance and on the *USA TODAY* extended bestseller list. Visit Katherine on the Web at www.katherinegarbera.com

LEANNE BANKS is a *New York Times* bestselling author with over sixty books to her credit. A book lover and romance fan from even before she learned to read, Leanne has always treasured the way that books allow us to go to new places and experience the lives of wonderful characters. Always ready for a trip to the beach, Leanne lives in Virginia with her family and her Pomeranian muse.

CAROLINE CROSS writes romance because life is endlessly challenging and she believes we all need an occasional reminder that good people and true love do exist—if one just looks hard enough and has faith in happy endings. Winner of numerous awards, including a RITA® Award for Best Short Contemporary, she lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband of two decades, has two wonderful daughters, and depends on her family and friends to keep her grounded. A devoted romance reader herself, she always hopes that her books can bring others a little of the enjoyment and satisfaction she feels when she reads her own favourite authors.

SHERI WHITEFEATHER is an award-winning, national bestselling author. Her novels are generously spiced with love and passion. She has also written under the name Cherie Feather. She enjoys travelling and going to art galleries, libraries and museums. Visit her website at www.sheriwhitefeather.com where you can learn more about her books and find links to her Facebook and Twitter pages. She loves connecting with readers.

ROBYN GRADY has sold millions of books worldwide, and features regularly on bestsellers lists and at award ceremonies, including The National Readers Choice, The Booksellers Best and Australia's prestigious Romantic Book of the Year. When she's not tapping out her next story, she enjoys the challenge of raising three very different daughters as well as dreaming about shooting the breeze with Stephen King during a month-long Mediterranean cruise. Contact her at www.robyngrady.com

Since her first venture into novel writing in the mid-nineties, **KRISTI GOLD** has greatly enjoyed weaving stories of love and commitment. She's an avid fan of baseball, beaches and bridal reality shows. During her career, Kristi has been a National Readers Choice winner, Romantic Times award winner, and a three-time Romance Writers of America RITA finalist. She resides in Central Texas and can be reached through her website at http://kristigold.com

A typical Piscean, award winning *USA Today!* bestselling author, **YVONNE LINDSAY**, has always preferred the stories in her head to the real world. Which makes sense since she was born in Middle Earth. Married to her blind date sweetheart and with two adult children, she spends her days crafting the stories of her heart and in her spare time she can be found with her nose firmly in someone else's book.

In 2002 **JANICE MAYNARD** left a career as an primary school teacher to pursue writing full-time. Her first love is creating sexy, character-driven, contemporary romance. She has written for Kensington and NAL, and is very happy to be part of the Mills & Boon family – a lifelong dream. Janice and her husband live in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains. They love to hike and travel. Visit her at www.JaniceMaynard.com

USA Today bestselling author **KATHERINE GARBERA** is a two-time Maggie winner who has written more than ninety books. A Florida native who grew up to travel the globe, Katherine now makes her home in the Midlands of the UK with her husband, two children and a very spoiled miniature dachshund. Visit her on the web at http://www.katherinegarbera.com, connect with her on Facebook and follow her on Twitter @katheringarbera

ANDREA LAURENCE is an award-winning contemporary author who has been a lover of books and writing stories since she learned to read. A dedicated West Coast girl transplanted into the Deep South, she's constantly trying to develop a taste for sweet tea and grits while caring for her boyfriend and her old bulldog. You can contact Andrea at her website: http://www.andrealaurence.com

One Season Collection and Dynasties Collection
One Summer in New York
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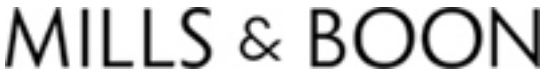
One Autumn Proposal
Scarlet Wilson, RaeAnne Thayne and Marie Ferrarella
One Winter Wedding
Stacy Connelly, Barbara Hannay and Anne Oliver
One Spring Baby
Gina Wilkins, Raye Morgan and Abigail Gordon
Dynasties: The Jarrods
Maureen Child, Tessa Radley and Emilie Rose
Dynasties: The Ashtons
Eileen Wilks, Kathie DeNosky and Maureen Child
Dynasties: The Danforths
Barbara McCauley, Maureen Child and Katherine Garbera
Dynasties: The Barones
Leanne Banks, Caroline Cross and Sheri WhiteFeather
Dynasties: The Lassiters
Robyn Grady, Kristi Gold and Yvonne Lindsay
Dynasties: The Montoros
Janice Maynard, Katherine Garbera and Andrea Laurence



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ONE SEASON COLLECTION

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Note to Readers

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Change of font size and line height
Change of background and font colours
Change of font
Change justification
Text to speech

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About the Publisher

One Season Collection
One Summer in New York
Andrea Bolter, Jessica Gilmore and Trish Wylie
One Autumn Proposal
Scarlet Wilson, RaeAnne Thayne and Marie Ferrarella
One Winter Wedding
Stacy Connelly, Barbara Hannay and Anne Oliver
One Spring Baby
Gina Wilkins, Raye Morgan and Abigail Gordon

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Her New York Billionaire
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Unveiling The Bridesmaid
Jessica Gilmore
Her Man in Manhattan
Trish Wylie

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Her New York Billionaire
Andrea Bolter
His fake fiancée?

Artist Holly Motta arrives in New York to make a new start...only to find billionaire Ethan Benton occupying the apartment where she is meant to be staying! But there's another surprise in store... Ethan needs a fake fiancée—fast!—and he wants her to fill the role!

But Ethan's got no intention of trusting any woman with his heart. Until he lets beautiful Holly into his world...and discovers she is the only woman he'd really like to make his wife!

For Alex

CHAPTER ONE

"WHY IS YOUR face blue?"

Holly froze in shock. She had just opened the door to the apartment she'd expected to find empty. But instead of flicking on the lights in a vacant living room she'd walked in on lamps already blazing. And a shirtless man sitting in the center of the sofa. Reading a newspaper. A gorgeous brown-haired shirtless man was reading a newspaper.

"Why is your face blue?" he repeated. Broad shoulders peeked out over the newspaper he was holding.

Why is your face blue? Holly heard the individual words but couldn't put them together to understand them as a question. She could hardly get over the fact that there was a man in the apartment, let alone make sense of the sounds coming from his mouth.

She checked the keys in her hand. Perhaps she was somehow in the wrong place.

And then she saw.

Her hands were blue. Cobalt Blue Two Eleven, to be exact. She'd know that color anywhere. It was one of her favorites.

It suddenly made sense. Just a few minutes ago she'd ducked out of the rain and under the front awning of the building to rifle through her duffel bag for the piece of paper that confirmed the address. The duffel held paint tubes and brushes, paperwork, clothes and heaven knew what else. The cap must have come off her Cobalt Two Eleven.

And she must have touched her face with paint-covered hands.

"What are you doing here?" Holly asked the shirtless man.

"This apartment belongs to my company."

He lowered his newspaper, folded it matter-of-factly and laid it beside him. Giving Holly a full view of his long, lean torso that led down to the plaid pajama bottoms covering the lower half of his body.

"What is it that you are doing here?"

The lump that had balled in Holly's throat delayed her response. She hadn't seen a half-naked man in a very long time. And she hadn't seen a man who looked like he did while he was busy being half-naked in...well, possibly ever.

"I'm staying here," she answered.

It had been a grueling journey, and the last thing she'd expected was to have to reckon with someone once she got here.

She blinked her eyes hard to pull herself together and tried not to panic. "I was told I could use this apartment."

"That must have been a mistake."

Mistake? What was this man talking about?

"I've just arrived from Florida. My brother, Vince, works in the Miami office of Benton Worldwide Properties. This is one of the apartments they keep for visitors to New York."

"That is correct."

"Vince arranged for me to stay here. He confirmed it last week. And he called again yesterday to Benton Boston headquarters."

"I am Ethan Benton, Vice President of Benton Worldwide. As you can see from my..." he gestured down his chest "...state of undress, I am staying here at the moment."

"Okay, well, I'm Holly Motta and I was counting on using this apartment. See?" She shook the blue-painted keys. "The Boston office left the keys in my name with the doorman downstairs."

"I apologize for the mistake. I have just arrived tonight myself. In the morning I will look into who is responsible for this egregious error and have their head lopped off."

The left corner of his mouth hitched up a bit.

Ethan Benton and his bare chest sat on a black leather sofa. Matching armchairs faced opposite, separated by a modern glass coffee table. The furnishings were spare. Two large framed photos were the only adornments on the wall. Both black and white, one was of a potted orchid and the other a maple tree.

Bland as a plain piece of toast. A typical corporate apartment, Holly guessed, having never been in one before. Elegant, yet all business. With no personal touches.

It was hardly the type of place where a beautiful shirtless man should be reading a newspaper. Not at all the kind of place where one brown curl of hair would fall in front of that man's forehead as if it were no big deal. As if that wasn't the most charming thing that a wet and exhausted young woman from Fort Pierce, Florida could imagine.

"Again, so sorry for the miscommunication," said the man that curl belonged to, "but you are going to have to leave. I will have the doorman hail you a taxi."

"Not so fast."

Holly snapped out of her fascination with his hair. She stomped over to one of the chairs opposite the sofa. Keeping her blue hands in the air, so as not to get paint anywhere, she lowered herself down.

"If your corporate office didn't have you scheduled to stay here, maybe it's you who should leave."

The corner of his mouth ticked up again—which was either cute or annoying. Holly wasn't sure yet.

"Obviously I am not going to leave my company's apartment."

Holly couldn't believe this was happening. This morning she had taken a bus from Fort Pierce to West Palm Beach airport. Then her flight to Newark, New Jersey had been delayed. When it had finally landed she'd taken another bus to the Port Authority terminal in Manhattan. It had been raining and dark by then, and there had hardly been a taxi to be had. She'd got drenched flagging one down. The cab brought her to this address on the Upper East Side.

And now—same as always, just when she was trying to do something for herself—someone else's need was somehow one-upping hers.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I would suggest you go to a hotel."

Hotels in New York were expensive. Holly had been saving money for months to make a go of it when she got here. She couldn't use up any of her funds on a hotel stay.

"I can't afford it."

Ethan fixed a strangely searching stare on her.

While he assessed her Holly's eyes followed his long fingers as they casually traced the taut muscles of his chest down and then back up again. Down. And up. Down. And up.

After seemingly giving it some thought, he reasoned, "You must know people in New York that you can stay with?"

"No. I don't know anyone here. I came here to..."

Holly stopped herself. This man was a total stranger. She shouldn't be telling him anything about her life. He didn't need to know about her ex-husband, Ricky the Rat, her crazy mom, or any of it.

Maybe all that chaos was behind her now. Maybe the whole world was at her feet. Or maybe there were more hard times ahead.

Holly didn't know. But she was going to find out.

Hard rain continued to pelt against the window.

An unwelcome tear dropped its way out of her eye. When she instinctively reached up to brush it away before Ethan noticed she found Cobalt Two Eleven was smeared on the back of her hand as well.

"Are you crying?" Ethan asked, as if he were observing a revolutionary scientific function.

"I'm not crying," Holly denied. "It's been a long day."

"Perhaps you would like use the bathroom to wash up," Ethan offered. He pointed behind him. "It is the door on the right."

"Thank you." Holly hoisted herself up without touching anything, and made her way past Ethan and his curl of hair. "By the way—I'm not leaving."

Behind the sofa was a small dining table made of glass and steel like the coffee table. Four orange leather dining chairs provided a much-needed pop of color. Beyond that was a teeny kitchen.

Her brother had told her it was a very compact one-bedroom apartment. It would do quite fine. This was to be a temporary stepping stone for Holly. Either she was in New York to stay or it was merely a transition to somewhere else. Only time would tell.

She found her way into the marble-appointed bathroom and tapped the door closed with her boot. Made a mental commitment to also slam the door shut on her intense immediate attraction to Ethan Benton...astoundingly handsome, half-naked. Although it took her a stubborn minute to stop wondering what it might be like to lay her cheek against the firmness of one of those brawny shoulders.

Oh, no! She caught her reflection in the mirror above the sink. It was so much worse than she could have envisioned. She had Cobalt Two Eleven streaked across her face in horizontal stripes. Like a tribal warrior. Her black bangs were plastered to her forehead in sweaty points. She was a scary mess. What must this man think of her?

Not wanting to get anything dirty, she used her elbow to start the faucet. With both hands under the running water, she saw color begin swirling down the drain. She rubbed her hands together until enough paint was removed that she could adjust the tap to make the water hotter and pick up the pristine bar of white soap.

Eventually her hands were scoured clean—save for a little residual blue around the cuticles and under the nails. As usual. She reached for the fluffy towel hanging on the rack.

Next, Holly wanted to get her jacket off before she tackled washing her face. She unzipped the sleek and stylish black leather jacket she had bought at the shopping mall in Fort Pierce yesterday. With Florida's mild climate, there hadn't been a lot of selection, but she'd needed something warm for New York. When she'd seen it, she'd known it was the one for her.

Ricky the Rat would have hated it. He'd have said it was highfalutin'. Yeah, well, falute this! Decisions were going to be made by her, for her from now on. Not based on what other people wanted or thought.

After her face was scrubbed she towel-dried her bangs and peeled off her ponytail band. Fluffed out the dark hair that had grown far past her shoulders. With the longer hair, she realized she already had a new look. New hair. New jacket. New city. She was ready for a new life.

Giving a yank on her tee shirt and a tug on her jeans, she was more than a little concerned about how she'd look to Ethan when she went back into the living room. Which was, of course, completely ridiculous because she didn't even know him.

* * *

My, my, but Holly Motta cleaned up well. Distracted by the blue paint on her face, Ethan hadn't noticed the other blue. The crystal color of her eyes. How they played against her lush jet-black hair.

As soon as she returned from the bathroom a rush of energy swept through the living room. He didn't know what kind of magic she held, but it wasn't like anything he had been in the same space with before.

All he could mutter was, "Better?"

It wasn't really a question.

He was glad he had nabbed a tee shirt from the bedroom, although he was still barefoot.

"Yes, thanks." She slid past him to her luggage, still at the front door.

He reached for his computer tablet and tapped the screen. Best to get Holly out of the apartment right now. For starters, he had no idea who she was. Ethan knew firsthand that there were all sorts of liars and scammers in this world, no matter how innocent they might look. He had his family's company to protect. The company that he was to run.

As soon as he could get his aunt Louise to retire.

As if a heart attack hadn't been enough, his beloved aunt was now losing her balance and mobility due to a rare neurological disorder that caused lack of feeling in her feet. Benton Worldwide's annual shareholders' gala was this Saturday. Ethan hoped Aunt Louise didn't have any bruises on her face from the fall he'd heard she'd taken last week.

Ethan owed everything to Aunt Louise and to Uncle Melvin, who had passed away five years ago. Without them he would just have been an abandoned child with no one to guide him toward a future.

His aunt had only one final request before she retired from the company that she, Uncle Mel and Ethan's late father had spent fifty years growing into an empire. She wanted to be sure that Ethan was settled in all areas of his life. Then she'd feel that everything was in its right place before she stepped down and let him take over. One last component to the family plan.

Ethan had lied to his aunt by claiming that he'd found what she wanted him to have. But he hadn't. So he had a lot to take care of in the next few days.

His temples pulsed as he thought about it all. Commotion was not an option. This exhilarating woman who had blown into the apartment needed to leave immediately. Not to mention the fact that there was something far too alluring about her that he had to get away from. Fast.

On top of it all he had a conference call in a few minutes that he still had to prepare for.

But with a few swipes across the tablet's screen he confirmed that all the Benton properties in New York were occupied.

Holly slung her jacket on the coat rack by the door and sat down on the floor. After pulling off one, then the other, she tossed her boots to the side. Ethan was mesmerized by her arms as they rummaged through her bag. She seemed to be made up only of elongated loose limbs that bent freely in every direction. Lanky. Gangly, even.

Downright adorable.

Nothing about Holly was at all like the rigid, hoity-toity blondes he usually kept company with. Women who were all wrong for him. Since he wasn't looking for someone right, that didn't matter. It kept his aunt happy to see him dating. But, of course, now he had told Aunt Louise that was all coming to an end. And he had a plan as to how to cover that lie.

Under her boots, Holly was wearing one red sock and one striped. She rolled those off and wiggled her toes. "That feels good..." She sighed, as if to herself.

Ethan's mouth quirked. "Miss Motta, please do not make yourself at home."

"I have nowhere else to go."

Holly death-stared him right in the face, putting on her best tough guy act. In reality she looked terrified that he was going to throw her out. She'd already been in tears before she washed up.

"Can't you be the one to leave?"

His stern expression melted a bit. What was he going to do? Toss her out into the cold rain?

She said she didn't know anyone in New York that she could stay with. Funny, but he didn't either. There were dozens—hundreds—of colleagues and workers in the city, connected with various Benton projects. Yet no one he'd call late on a rainy night to see if they had a sofa or guest room he could use.

Ridiculous. He'd sooner go back to the airport and sleep on his private jet.

He could pay for Holly's hotel room. Or he supposed he himself could go to a hotel. But—good heavens. He'd been in flight all day, had already unpacked and undressed here. Why on earth should he leave his own property?

"I do not suppose it will do for either of us to try to find other accommodation at this late hour."

"What's your plan, then?"

Ethan always had a plan. His life was structured around plans. He was about to embark on his biggest yet—moving Aunt Louise into retirement and taking the CEO seat.

"We will both spend the night here."

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I'm sure you're a very nice per—"

"I assure you, Miss Motta, I have no motive other than getting a peaceful night's rest. You will sleep in the bedroom and I will make do out here." He gestured toward the sofa.

"I need to think about that. That doesn't seem right. Maybe I should call my brother. Let me just get my things straightened out." Holly returned to her task of sorting out her duffel bag, quarantining paint-stained items in a plastic bag.

She didn't look up at him until she lifted out a pair of white socks. They were splattered with the same blue that had been disguising her lovely face. "Occupational hazard."

"You are a painter, I take it?"

"Yup."

"And you have come to New York to pursue fame and fortune?"

"Ha! That would be nice. Who wouldn't want their work to hang in a museum or a gallery here...?"

"I sense there is a but at the end of that."

"I've been making money doing large pieces and collections for corporate properties."

"Office art, lobby art, art for furnished apartments?"

Ethan was well aware of that kind of work. He'd spent many hours with interior designers making decisions about the art at Benton developments all over the world.

"Indeed, the right pieces are vitally important to a unified decor. They announce a mood."

"A point of view," Holly chimed in.

"It sets the tone." He pointed at the two black and white nature photos on the wall. "Those, for example."

"Dull."

"Safe."

"Yawn."

They both laughed in agreement. A sizzle passed between them. It was so real Ethan was sure he saw smoke.

How alive Holly was. The type of person who said exactly what she thought. A bit like Aunt Louise. And nothing at all like most of the women he knew.

He flashed on a possibility.

Then quickly thought better of it.

"My aunt's new husband selected this apartment. He frequently comes down from Boston."

Ethan rolled his eyes. Fernando Layne was no favorite of his. Definitely no substitute for Uncle Mel. Fernando was a plaything for Aunt Louise. Ethan tolerated him.

"I will remodel this property while I am in New York. Perhaps you can advise me?"

What a stupid thing to say. He was never going see Holly again past this awkward evening interlude. An unfamiliar sense of disappointment came over him.

He generally steered clear of his feelings. When they did arrive they were usually of the painful variety and proved too confusing.

"Do you want to look at my website?" Holly gestured to the tablet he still had in his hand.

"I am sorry to be rude but I have a phone meeting in five minutes. I need to prepare."

"At this time of night?"

"I am expecting a call from Tokyo, if you must know." He also wasn't used to explaining himself to anyone. "I will take it in the bedroom," he declared.

Then he picked up a roll of architectural blueprints from the desk and marched down the hall, perturbed in twenty different ways.

* * *

Ten o'clock on a rainy New York night.

Holly had left Fort Pierce at eight that morning.

Hungry and tired, she absentmindedly ran her hand along the sofa where Ethan had been sitting when she came in. The leather still held his warmth.

She probably should have been afraid when she'd opened the door to find a total stranger in the apartment. Yet she hadn't felt the slightest inkling of fear. She'd felt ticked off, maybe. Or something else entirely.

It might have something to do with the fact that Ethan Benton looked less like a serial killer than he did the lord of a countryside manor. With his imposing height and lean muscles and that stunning wavy brown hair that had a touch of red flecked in it.

His tone was bossy, but she supposed it must have been quite a shock for him that a woman with a blue face, a tattered duffel bag and a squeaky-wheeled suitcase had just barged into the apartment he'd thought he had to himself.

Now she was trapped here with him unless she was willing to face the stormy night. The man —who may or may not have a British accent—definitely had the most soulful eyes she had ever seen. The man who was now in the next room, conducting business halfway around the world.

New York was getting off to a rollicking start.

Would he be angry with her if she checked to see if there was anything to eat? Should she care, given that this apartment was supposed to be hers?

A rumbling stomach propelled her to the kitchen. She'd picked at snacks all day, but had not had a proper meal. On the counter lay one basket of fruit, and another of breads and bagels. The refrigerator held beer, milk, eggs and cheese.

Had this food been purchased for her arrival as a hospitality custom? Or was it Ethan's? Or did it belong to his aunt's husband, who Ethan had said used this apartment frequently?

The sight of the food rendered Holly too hungry to care. Being hungry was a unique ache that she had experience with. Surely Ethan wouldn't mind if she took one shiny red apple.

She hoisted herself up to sit on the countertop. Let her legs and bare feet dangle. Smiled remembering the apple's symbolism here in New York. Like so many others, she was here to take her bite. With one satisfying chomp after the next, her mind wandered about what might be.

"Miss Motta!" Ethan looked startled to find her sitting on the kitchen counter after he finished his call. "Must you always make yourself so...so comfortable?"

Holly shrugged her shoulders and slid off the countertop. Whatever. If her sitting on the counter was a big deal to him, she wouldn't do it.

She jutted out her chin. "I bet you haven't eaten."

"Not since early this afternoon on the flight," he confessed. "Is there food?"

"Looks like there's eggs and some things for breakfast."

"We will have something delivered."

"Sounds good to me."

"What would you like?"

"You know what? I haven't been to New York in years. Want to get some famous New York pizza?"

"Pizza it is." He swiped on his tablet. "Yes, Giuseppe's. I ordered from there quite a bit when I was last in New York, working on a project. What type of pizza do you like?"

It was nice of him to let her choose. This man was a bundle of contradictions. Scolding one minute, courteous in the next.

"Everything," she answered, without having to think twice.

"Everything?"

"You know—pepperoni, sausage, salami, mushrooms, onions, peppers, olives. The whole shebang."

"Everything..." he repeated. "Why not?"

"I'll pay for my half."

His mouth twitched.

"Twenty minutes," he read out the online confirmation.

She eyed the kitchen clock.

"I guess I'm staying tonight." She crunched on her big apple.

A bolt of lightning struck, flashing bright light through the window.

CHAPTER TWO

ETHAN HAD A peculiar urge. The minute he'd said he'd sleep on the sofa tonight he'd wanted to lie down on the bed with Holly. Not to get under the covers. Just to lie on the bed with her. He wanted to relax. To hold her body against his. Caress her hair. Find out if those ebony locks were as silky as they looked.

Huh. A woman he had never met before, who had charged into his apartment and refused to leave. He had no idea who she really was or what she was doing here.

Yet he wanted to hold her.

The thought had interrupted his phone call several times.

He wasn't going mad. He'd just been working too hard. That was it. It had already been a long evening.

From the moment his flight had landed it had been one thing or another. He'd managed to sort out some of the details for the shareholders' gala. Many more remained. He'd heard there were construction delays on the low-income housing development in the Bronx that was so dear to his heart. He'd talked to a few people at the Boston headquarters to see how Aunt Louise was doing after the fall she'd taken. The news was not good. Then he'd worked on trying to resolve problems with a building permit in Detroit.

It had only been about an hour ago that Ethan had changed into pajama bottoms and quieted down to read the newspaper. Before Holly had arrived, with the sparkling blue eyes and the creamy skin he now couldn't take his gaze off.

"While we're waiting for the pizza would it be okay if I took a shower?" she asked.

It would be okay if I took it with you.

Ethan surprised himself with the thought he didn't voice. He settled for, "Go right ahead."

Ethan did not like the way warmth resonated from Holly's body when she passed by him en route to the shower. Did not like it a bit because it stirred sensations low within him. Fierce sensations. Urgent.

The bathroom door shut with the quick smack that only happened when you closed it with a foot. Did she always shut doors with her feet?

His tongue flicked at his upper lip when he heard the sound of the shower. He couldn't help but imagine which article of clothing Holly was removing first. What each long limb might look like uncovered. Her torso was straight, rather than especially curvy, and he envisioned the smooth plain of her back. When he started to imagine what her... Well, he begged his brain to move to a different topic. No easy task.

Normally Ethan maintained a controlled world, without surprises. A world that allowed him to keep the upper hand. Maneuver as he saw fit. Because he was usually right.

Mushroom pizza, for heaven's sake.

A thirty-four-year-old man knew his own ways. Protected his orbit. Holly seemed to tip the universe off-kilter. Made the earth spin off its axis.

He preferred his pizza with only mushrooms on it!

She had to be stopped.

Yet he hadn't the heart to force her out on the street—especially given the time of night. He didn't doubt that she was capable of fending for herself. But he didn't want her to.

That insane idea glimmered again. He needed to get it out of his head.

Ethan had too much to think about already. He was in a bind. Aunt Louise needed to retire. She'd had a distinguished career, and Ethan wanted her to go out on top. Concern was growing that she would sustain a fall in public. That word would spread. That people might remember her as a

woman who had stayed on past her prime. That she was doddering, weak, bruised... All things that Louise Benton was most certainly not.

His aunt and his Uncle Melvin—his father's brother—had taken Ethan in as their own when he was nine years old. Now the time had come for the roles to be reversed. Ethan needed to make sure his decisions were in his aunt's best interests. His father would have told him to. Uncle Mel would have counted on him. It was the very least he could do.

But Aunt Louise had that one condition before she stepped down and moved from frigid Boston to the sunny compound in Barbados they'd had built for just that purpose. She wanted to know that Ethan would run their global business with a stable home life as a foundation.

Even though she and Uncle Mel hadn't been able to have children of their own, they'd experienced the joys and the heartaches of parenting through Ethan. In turn, his aunt wanted him to know the profound love of a parent for a child. And the united love and partnership that only came with decades of a shared life.

Aunt Louise would retire once Ethan was engaged to be married.

And because he'd become so alarmed about his aunt's escalating health problems, and his responsibility to guard her reputation, Ethan had lied to her.

"You always say that deep down in your gut you know when something is right," Ethan had said, twisting his aunt's advice when he'd given her the news that he had met the soul mate he would wed.

Trouble was, Ethan had no such fiancée. Nor would he ever.

That was why he'd come to back to the States a few days ahead of the shareholders' gala. Tomorrow he was having lunch with the woman he planned to marry. In name only, of course.

He'd found a beautiful actress who'd be a suitable bride-to-be. This was New York, after all. There was hardly a better place to find a performer capable of pulling off this charade. He clicked on his tablet to the talent agency website where he'd located Penelope Perkins, an educated and sophisticated blonde with a stately neck.

It was a simple matter, really, in Ethan's mind. He'd chosen the actress and scheduled a meeting with her under the guise of hiring her for a promotional campaign for his company. If he found her to be acceptable and unencumbered he'd have her thoroughly investigated by Benton Worldwide's Head of Security, Chip Foley.

While Chip was completing a background check and every other kind of probe there was, Ethan and his stand-in fiancée would get to know each other and create a history for their relationship. Their engagement would be announced at the gala.

Penelope would also sign numerous non-disclosure and confidentiality agreements. She'd understand that if she were ever to reveal the arrangement she would be sued. Benton lawyers played hardball. They never lost their cases.

For her services, this performer would be paid generously.

It was a solid plan.

* * *

"Clean at last." Holly emerged from the bathroom while towel-drying her hair. A fresh tee shirt and sweatpants made her feel cozy after the day's journey. "Traveling makes you so grimy, you know?"

"Yes. I showered on the plane before arrival," Ethan agreed.

"You showered on the plane? How does someone shower on a plane?"

"I have a corporate jet. It does have a number of creature comforts."

Holly whistled. Highfalutin'. "I haven't flown that many times in my life. I'm still excited to get free soda and peanuts."

"Yes, well...perhaps you would enjoy all the amenities on private planes."

She tilted her head to one side and squeezed a little more moisture from the tips of her hair onto the plush towel. Sure, she'd like to be on a private plane, with a shower and enough room for her legs not to feel cramped into a ninety-degree position the entire flight. But that wasn't something that was ever going to happen, so she didn't see any point in discussing it.

"You have a little bit of an accent. And a kind of formal way of talking." Holly had a sometimes bad habit of blurting aloud everything that came into her mind. She called 'em as she saw 'em. "Are you American, or what?"

That left side of his mouth quivered up again in the start of a smile. "Boston-born. Oxford-educated. I would be the complete cliché of an entitled rich boy save for the fact that my father died when I was nine and I was raised by my aunt and uncle."

"What about your mother?"

The landline phone on the desk rang. Ethan turned to answer it. "Thank you. Please send him up." He headed toward the door. "Our pizza is here."

With his back to her, Holly was able to take in the full height of his slim, hard build. Probably about six foot three. Much taller than she was, and she always felt like a giant rag doll.

Ethan moved with effortless authority and confidence. Of course this was a man who showered on planes. This was a man who had been born to shower on planes.

Speaking of showers...it had been weird to shower in the apartment with him there. She knew there was no way he was an axe murderer who was going to hack her to bits. But she couldn't be a hundred percent sure that he was a gentleman who wasn't going to come into the bathroom while she was undressed.

A devilish thrill shot through her at the thought that he might have.

Attraction to a man during her first evening in New York was not on her itinerary. Especially not a man who had put all her plans in jeopardy.

She'd just have to make it through the night. In the morning her brother would help straighten things out about the apartment.

Staying here for a few weeks was meant to be the leg-up that she desperately needed. It would buy her time to find work and decide whether New York was where she should be. It had been two years since she'd kicked out Ricky the Rat. Two years was enough time to move on and move forward.

It was her brother, Vince, who had finally convinced her to take a chance. To take a risk. To take something for her own.

Maybe someday a man would fit into the picture. Not any time soon. She needed to concentrate on herself.

"Join me." Ethan gestured for her to come sit on the sofa after the delivery. He laid the pizza down on the coffee table, then dashed into the kitchen, returning with two plates, a stack of napkins and two bottles. "Will you have a beer?"

She took one from him and popped the cap with a satisfying twist.

As they sat down beside each other Holly winced involuntarily and moved away a bit. Being close to him felt scary. Strange. Strangely great...

He noticed her sudden stiffness. "I do not bite."

Pity. She held back a laugh. It wasn't fear that he'd bite that was bothering her. It might have been fear that he wouldn't.

Ethan flipped open the box and a meaty, cheesy, tomatoey aroma wafted up to their noses.

"I do not believe I have ever seen a pizza with this many ingredients on it."

As if performing a delicate procedure, he used two hands to lift one hefty slice onto a plate and handed it to Holly. Then he served himself.

"Ah..."

They groaned in unison as the first bites slid down their tongues. Unable even to speak, they each quickly devoured their slices.

Holly was the first to reach for a second. Then she sat back on the sofa and put her bare feet up on the coffee table.

"'Everything' is now officially my favorite pizza topping," Ethan confirmed, after taking another slice.

Observing Holly stretched out and seemingly comfortable, he did the same. His leaned back against the sofa. Tentatively he extended one leg and then the other onto the coffee table, and crossed them just as Holly had hers.

And there they sat, both barefoot, eating pizza, as if they had known each other for eons rather than minutes.

She thought of something to ask. "Where did you fly in from?"

"Dubai. Before that I was in Stockholm. I have been out of the country for a month."

"Where do you live?"

"I keep a small apartment in Boston, near our headquarters. Although I travel most of the time."

"Your company has properties all over the world?"

He nodded and washed down his pizza with a sip of beer. "Yes. Some we build. Some we buy and refurbish. In the last couple of years I have been spending a lot of my time on affordable housing for low-income buyers."

"Vince told me about the development you built in Overtown. He said he was so proud to have been part of a project helping people in one of Miami's neediest areas."

That left side of Ethan's mouth rose up again, but this time it continued until the right side lifted to join it in one full-on heart-melting smile.

Holly almost choked on her pizza. She thought a person might enjoy looking at that smile for the rest of her life.

"After my aunt retires I plan to turn most of Benton's focus toward housing for homeless or low-income families."

"When will she retire?"

Ethan sized Holly up in a gaze that went from the tip of her head down to her toes. As if he were taking her all in. Measuring her for something.

When she couldn't stand the moment any longer she reached for another piece of pizza and pressed, "Does your aunt want to retire?"

Holly watched his concentration return to the conversation at hand.

"I think she must, whether she wants to or not. She has peripheral neuropathy. It is a rare inherited condition. She's starting to lose some of her faculties."

"I'm sorry."

"I am, too. She is a wonderful woman."

"She's lucky to have you looking out for her wellbeing." Holly didn't think anyone would ever care about her that much.

"I would like to see her relaxing in Barbados. Swimming in warm waters and enjoying her silly trophy husband."

"But she doesn't see it that way?"

"She has a stipulation that she is insistent on before she retires, the details of which have not been worked out yet." Ethan reached for his beer. "So, tell me, Miss Holly Motta, you have come to New York completely on your own?"

What did his aunt want? Was there a family secret?

Holly was dying to know. In fact she wanted to know about all of Ethan's joys and triumphs and struggles and defeats. Wanted to tell him all of hers. Though she couldn't fathom why.

Even if she had been open to meeting the right man—a man with whom she would share the deepest, darkest nooks and crannies of her life—it wouldn't be a man who showered on airplanes.

A man like Ethan Benton had no business with a girl who had grown up in a trailer park in Fort Pierce. Never going to happen. And she wasn't looking for someone, anyway. This was her time.

She chewed her pizza, suddenly agitated by the way Ethan continued to examine her, as if she was an object he was considering purchasing.

"I have to say I cannot remember the last time I was with a woman who ate half a pizza in one sitting."

"Of course not. You probably only keep company with women who eat one green bean and then tell you how full they are."

That crooked grin broke into a hearty belly laugh. "You are absolutely right. If they eat anything at all. You are definitely not like the women I tend to meet."

"Should I consider that a compliment?"

"Please tell me why you have come to New York alone."

"Who would I have come with if not alone? I haven't seen my mother in years. My brother, Vince, is doing well in Miami. I have no other ties."

She'd grown up strategizing and compensating for her unreliable mother. Looking out for Vince. Then working around Ricky's bad behavior. Juggling two or three jobs. Keeping the house clean. Making sure people were fed. Paying bills. Always being the responsible one. Day after day. Year after year.

"I'm through with being cautious." She couldn't believe she was blathering this out to a man she'd only just met. "Yes, I came to New York alone. No job. No permanent place to live. I don't even know if here's where I belong. That's why I was going to stay in this apartment for a while—to figure it out. I'm sure it all sounds insane to you."

"How it sounds is brave."

* * *

Ethan furrowed his brow. A minute ago Holly had confided that she wasn't in contact with her mother. No mention of a father. He sensed there was plenty more that she hadn't said. That she'd been through more than her share of trouble and strife. Although it might be a made-up story meant to evoke sympathy from him to let her stay in the apartment.

Every previous experience he'd had with women other than Aunt Louise had led him to believe that they were never what they seemed.

Starting with his own mother.

Do not trust trust. It was a lesson he'd learned decades ago.

That was why he'd devised this scheme to set up a fake relationship, so that Aunt Louise would think she had gotten her wish. She would retire with her mind at ease and her attention on her health.

An imitation fiancée would suit him perfectly. The women he'd known before had always wanted something from him. With this arrangement he'd dreamt up everyone would get what they were after. Clean and upfront, with clear expectations and no disappointment.

After he and Holly had finished eating she retrieved a pad and pencils from her luggage and sat herself in the window, with its second-floor view out onto the street. She turned sideways, somehow wedging her long legs into the windowsill, and propped her sketchpad on her knees.

"You are welcome to pull a chair over," Ethan tossed out, not in the habit of contorting himself to fit into small spaces.

"I'm fine, thanks."

Unsure what to do with himself, he picked up his tablet to check emails. If he'd been there alone, as planned, he would have gone to bed. It was going to be a busy week.

He could ask Holly to take her things into the bedroom. Then he could turn off the lights, try to get comfortable on the sofa and hope to fall asleep.

Yet it was so unusual for him to be in an apartment with someone he craved her company and wanted to prolong it. He wasn't ready for her to retreat to separate quarters.

How crazy was the idea that kept popping into his mind?

As Holly drew, he began telling her more about Aunt Louise. About the cruel medical condition that was taking away pieces of her.

"How did your family's company get started?" she asked, while working on her drawing.

"With nothing. When my father and Uncle Mel were in their twenties they saved their money from doing carpentry work until they had enough to buy the South Boston apartment they grew up in. Then they bought the whole building. And then the one next to it."

"That takes focus and determination. Hmm..." She shook her head.

"Hmm—what?"

She kept her eyes on her pad. "It's just that nobody I've ever known has done anything like that."

"After my uncle married Louise, she helped them grow the business. My father died twenty-five years ago. Then Aunt Louise took over as CEO when Uncle Mel died five years ago."

Ethan had only vague memories of his father. But he so missed the uncle who had become a second father to him. Melvin Benton had been a smart leader. A just and fair man.

"Uncle Mel would have agreed that it is time for Aunt Louise to step down. Before industry gossip sullies her reputation as the competent successor to his legacy that she was."

"What is it that your aunt wants you to do before she'll agree to retire?"

Oh, so Holly had been paying close attention earlier, when he'd started to tell her about Aunt Louise's request and then stopped himself.

"She wants to see me established in my personal life. For me to have what she and Uncle Mel had. She is waiting for me to be engaged to be married."

"And now you are?"

"So to speak..."

"There's no 'so to speak.' You're either engaged or you're not."

"Not necessarily."

Why had he started this? He'd revealed more than he should have.

"Tell me," she persisted, without looking up.

"I would rather talk about you. You have come to New York with no work here at all? This city can be a very tough place."

"I know. But I do have some people to contact. You're probably thinking my coming to New York was a really reckless bet. But if I didn't do it now I never would have."

When Ethan glanced down to the inbox on his tablet his eyes opened wide at the latest email. It was the talent agency, apologizing for contacting him so late in the evening and asking for the duration of his booking for Penelope Perkins, his soon-to-be "fiancée." Because, the representative explained, Mrs. Perkins had just informed them of her pregnancy. She expected to be available for a few months but, after that her altered appearance might be an issue for any long-term acting assignment.

Good heavens. Yes, Mrs. Perkins's blossoming pregnancy was going to be an issue! That would be too much to disguise from Aunt Louise. First an engagement and then a pregnancy right away? Not to mention the fact that Penelope was apparently Mrs. Perkins. And a certain Mr. Perkins was be unlikely to be agreeable to such an arrangement.

The veins in Ethan's neck pulsed with frustration. As if he didn't have enough to do! Now the engagement plan he'd worked so hard to devise was in jeopardy. Could he choose someone else and get an appointment with her in time? He quickly tabbed through the photos of the other actresses on the website. They were all of a suitable age. Any one of them might do.

Then he glanced up to lovely Holly, sketching in the windowsill.

What if...?

He'd been exchanging pleasant conversation with Holly all evening. Why not her? It might work out quite nicely. Perhaps they could have an easy, friendly business partnership based on mutual need. He had a lot he could offer her.

Of course the fact that he found her so interesting was probably not a plus. It might add complication. But who was to say that he wouldn't have been attracted to Penelope Perkins, or some other actress he'd chosen?

A sense of chemistry would be palpable to Aunt Louise and anyone else they would encounter. It would make them believable as a couple. And he certainly wouldn't be acting on any impulses. It wasn't as if he was open to a genuine relationship.

A fake fiancée was all he was looking for. Holly was as good a bet as any.

He gazed at her unnoticed for a moment. She turned to a new page on her sketchpad. Then, when she asked him again about whether or not he was engaged, he finally told her the truth.

He picked up the beer he had been drinking with the pizza. Carefully peeling off the label that circled the neck of the bottle, he rolled it into a ring. And then stepped over to Holly in front of the window. Where anyone in New York could be walking by and might look up to see them.

"I was intending to hire an actress," he explained. "But I think Aunt Louise would like you. You remind me of her. There is something very...real about you."

He got down on one knee. Held up the beer label ring in the palm of his hand.

She gasped.

"Holly, I do not suppose you would... If you might consider... Would you, please? Can you pretend to marry me?"

CHAPTER THREE

"HEAR ME OUT," Ethan said, still on one knee.

Holly had been so stunned by his proposal that moments stood still in time. It was as if she watched the scene from outside her body.

In an Upper East Side apartment in New York an elegant man with wavy brown hair waited on bended knee after proposing to his dark-haired intended. Would she say yes?

Holly couldn't remember if she had dreamt of a moment like this when she was a little girl. A dashing prince, the romantic gesture of kneeling, white horse at the ready. She'd probably had those fantasies at some point but she couldn't recall them. They were buried under everything else.

Most of Holly's memories were of hard times.

Growing up, it had been her alarm clock that had snapped her out of any dreams she might have had. The clock had made her spring her up quickly to check if her mother had woken up and was getting dressed for work. Or if she wasn't going to get out of bed. Or hadn't made it home at all during the night. Leaving Holly to scrounge together breakfast and a sack lunch for her and Vince.

No, Holly hadn't had much time for fairy-tale dreams. She'd been proposed to before. After all, she'd been married. But Ricky's offer had been about as heartfelt as their marriage had been. It had been on a sweaty, humid day in his beat-up old truck and it had gone something like, "I guess you want to get married..."

At the time, she'd thought that was about as good as it was going to get.

"It would be strictly business, of course." Ethan continued with his proposition. "An engagement in name only."

So Holly's second marriage proposal was to be just as unromantic as her first.

A twinge of despair pinged through her.

Ethan was suggesting a fake engagement to appease his aunt and get her to retire before poor health tarnished her standing. She understood why he was asking, but she didn't see what would be in it for her.

He anticipated her immediate trepidation and added, "We can negotiate a contract that is mutually beneficial."

"That certainly sounds cut and dried, Mr. Benton."

Even having this discussion was making her uncomfortable. Because it brought up notions like a little girl's dreams and happily-ever-afters. Thoughts she couldn't afford to linger on. Not then and not now.

She squinted at him. "Could you please get up?"

"I can."

He rose, yet still held out the beer bottle label. Looking down at it he assured her, "We would purchase a proper engagement ring."

"Let's put the paper ring down for a minute, okay?"

He laid it gently onto the coffee table as if it was a thing of great value. "I have a scenario..." He gestured toward the sofa.

She followed him, but this time didn't sit next to him as she had when they were eating pizza. She chose one of the black chairs opposite him. Best to keep her distance.

"May I be frank?"

"Oh...okay," Holly answered with apprehension.

"You are new to New York. You mentioned that you do not yet have work. You mentioned that you could not afford to stay in a hotel. I am offering you very easy temporary employment. Pose as my fiancée. What I would pay you will help you establish yourself here. Shall we bring it to the bargaining table? Name your price."

"Name my price!" Such a ruthless businessman! Everything was a deal to him. "Are you used to getting everything you want simply by demanding it?"

"Oh, I always get what I want." His stare drilled into her.

Wow, what a predator. And why did that excite her rather than repel her?

Just for entertainment's sake, she took a minute to fantasize what being his pretend fiancée might be like. She'd probably be physically near him quite a bit. He'd have his arm around her shoulder. Sometimes around her waist. They'd hold hands. He'd probably even place a kiss on her cheek in front of other people, just to put on a convincing show.

Holly snuck a glance at his mouth. Ripe lips that looked to be endlessly kissable. No way would a plan that involved her standing close to his lips ever, ever be a good idea.

But it didn't matter, because she was just playing along hypothetically. "I'm not for hire by the hour!" She feigned indignation.

"There need not be anything sordid about it, Miss Motta." Ethan eyed the paper ring on the table. "I assure you I am only proposing a trade agreement."

She didn't doubt that. This was a man who'd already said he kept company with stunning, glamorous women who ate one green bean. He'd never be interested in her romantically. She'd have nothing to worry about there.

But she couldn't resist throwing in for fun, "My brother, Vince, is up for a promotion in your Miami office. Let's say this deal included helping him along in his career..."

"Done," Ethan answered quickly. "I would have to look at his human resources file and speak with the people who work with him. But if he is deserving, I would certainly look to promote my future brother-in-law."

He leaned forward. Even though there was the coffee table between them, she could feel him zeroing in on her. Coming in for the kill. Determined to make the sale.

"What else, Miss Motta?"

He was so maddeningly sure of himself. Holly hadn't met many people who were like that.

She sat dumbfounded, way out of her league.

Ethan raised a finger in the air with a thought. "Shall we consider it another way? You need somewhere to live. How about if I give you this apartment? I will put it in your name."

Holly tried to keep her eyes from bugging out. How about if I give you this apartment? Who even said that?

"As you can imagine, real estate is something I have as a bartering tool. Regardless of what happens, you will have a home in New York."

A home in New York. He really did know how to persuade a deal.

"What is it that might happen?" She had no intention of taking him up on his offer, but she was curious. "How is it that you see this working?"

He'd obviously thought this through well. Today was Monday. His aunt Louise and her boy-toy husband, Fernando, would be coming down from Boston this week in preparation for their Saturday shareholders' gala. He'd present Holly to them on Wednesday night.

"Dinner. Le Cirque. Or one of the new Asian-Spanish fusion restaurants in Tribeca. Something flashy that shows us as a hip New York couple on top of the trends."

"How about instead I throw a pot roast in the slow cooker?" Holly countered, batting him the idea.

His mouth tipped. "A home-cooked meal? Like she and Uncle Mel used to make on Sundays? Brilliant!"

Holly was no gourmet cook, but she knew how to work with the basics. She'd had to learn if she and her brother were ever going to eat. When they were kids she'd search through the pockets of pants left on the floor. Between the couch cushions. Under the seats in the car. Somehow she'd find

enough money to buy a few groceries and put a meal together for her and Vince. Restaurant visits had been few and far between.

"Mashed potatoes. Roasted carrots. Apple pie..." She completed the menu.

"Perfect. I will try to be of assistance."

"Continue," she requested.

It was amusing to hear Ethan's outline for the masquerade that she wasn't actually going to be any part of.

Their next appearance would be at the shareholders' gala on Saturday, where Holly would be formally introduced as Ethan's fiancée.

"So I'd look amazing that night? Dress? Jewels? Hair and makeup? The whole nine yards?"

He sat silent for a minute, as if lost in his own memories. But then he snapped back with, "Of course. A couture gown would be chosen for you. My tuxedo tie will match your attire."

"It'd be a crime if it didn't."

Then there would be an engagement party in Boston. A month or so later would come the announcement that Aunt Louise was stepping down. A grand retirement luncheon would send her off in style.

"In between those dates," Ethan explained, "I would travel, so that you and I should not have to attend many events together. I will devise reasons that I have to spend prolonged periods in Florence or Sydney or the like."

Ethan went on. After those appearances Aunt Louise and Fernando would move to Barbados as planned. Ethan and Holly—the happy couple—would fly to the island for long weekends three or four times during the first year. In between those visits Holly would be free to live the life she chose, as long as there was nothing criminal or anything that attracted attention.

Then they'd evaluate. They could continue to visit Aunt Louise and make excuses as to why they hadn't yet married. Or they could tell fibs about a lavish wedding that would take an entire year to plan.

"Or," he continued, "especially if you were to meet someone else and need to be free, we could call off the engagement. Aunt Louise would be settled into her island life of leisure. By that point there would not be any danger of her wanting to return to frigid Boston and the working grind."

"And what if you were the one to meet someone?" she clipped, pretending to advocate a deal for herself.

"Impossible!" he spat immediately. "I will never marry."

His harshness hit her like a slap in the face.

Or perhaps it was a warning.

"I see," she assured him, and knew she'd understood his underlying message.

"Therefore, when we split up, you will own this apartment outright—which you can either keep, lease or sell. And the engagement ring. And whatever clothing and jewels have been purchased. Your brother's position will be secure. We can also agree on a monetary settlement. In exchange for very little labor on your part, I can provide you with a lifetime of comfort and luxury."

Game over.

Enough was enough.

Even if it could be as simple as he made it sound she had come to New York to get her own life straightened out. Not to get tangled up in someone else's.

"Ethan, I appreciate the offer. And I think it's great that you've done so much planning on this. It shows how much you care about your aunt. But this is not for me."

He swallowed hard. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. His jaw tightened.

Was he upset?

Of course. This was a man who was used to getting everything he wanted. It wasn't personal. She was a mere obstacle for him to overcome in order to reach his goal.

Ethan tapped his tablet. “Holly Motta dot com—is that it?”

She nodded, yes. What was he up to?

He typed.

“Huh...” His thumb slid through what she assumed to be her website’s gallery. “Huh...”

What was he thinking? She took great pride in her work. Suddenly it mattered to her what he thought of it. Which was silly, because his opinion was of no concern to her at all. Yet she sat on the edge of the chair, spine held stiff as she waited for a comment.

His thumb continued to swipe the tablet.

“Hmm...” His next sound was at a higher pitch than the one before. It sounded like approval.

“Why are you looking at my website?”

Ethan ignored the question and continued. His finger slid less frequently. He was spending more time on each piece of work.

Holly imagined what it might feel like to have that thumb slide across her cheek instead of the tablet screen. Or slowly down the center of her chest. That thumb and its nine partners on those two big hands looked as if they’d always know exactly what to do.

More fantasy. She hadn’t been touched in a long, long time.

Finally Ethan looked from the screen to her. “These are extraordinary.”

“Thank you,” she breathed with gratification—and relief.

He raised a finger in the air again. “Perhaps we can negotiate a merger that would be satisfying to both of us.”

She squished her eyebrows.

“In exchange for you posing as my fiancée, as I have outlined, you will be financially compensated and you will become legal owner of this apartment and any items such as clothes and jewels that have been purchased for this position. Your brother’s career will not be impacted negatively should our work together come to an end. And...” He paused for emphasis.

Holly leaned forward in her chair, her back still board-straight.

“I have a five-building development under construction in Chelsea. There will be furnished apartments, office lofts and common space lobbies—all in need of artwork. I will commission you for the project.”

Holly’s lungs emptied. A commission for a big corporate project. That was exactly what she’d hoped she’d find in New York. A chance to have her work seen by thousands of people. The kind of exposure that could lead from one job to the next and to a sustained and successful career.

This was all too much. Fantastic, frightening, impossible... Obviously getting involved in any way with Ethan Benton was a terrible idea. She’d be beholden to him. Serving another person’s agenda again. Just what she’d come to New York to get away from.

But this could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. An apartment. A job. It sounded as if he was open to most any demand she could come up with. She really did owe it to herself to contemplate this opportunity.

Her brain was no longer operating normally. The clock on Ethan’s desk reminded her that it was after midnight. She’d left Fort Pierce early that morning.

“That really is an incredible offer...” She exhaled. “But I’m too tired to think straight. I’m going to need to sleep on it.”

“As you wish.”

Holly moved to collect the luggage she’d arrived with. Ethan beat her to it and hoisted the duffel bag over his shoulder. He wrenched the handle of the suitcase. Its wheels tottered as fast as her mind whirled as she followed him to the bedroom.

“Good night, then.” He placed the bags just inside the doorway and couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

Before closing the door she poked her head out and called, “Ethan Benton, you don’t play fair.”

Over his shoulder, he turned his face back toward her. “I told you. I always get what I want.”

* * *

Holly shut the door with her bare foot and leaned back against it. She pursed her lips together to keep from screaming. Her heart thumped so loud she was sure Ethan would hear it in the other room. Goodness gracious.

Ethan Benton and his proposition were quite simply the most exciting things that had ever happened to her!

A rush went through her as she recalled that devilish grin creeping slowly up his mouth. Those deep brown eyes that had stayed glued on her, assuring her he was listening to her when she spoke.

Holly hadn’t talked and listened as much as she had tonight in a long time. She hadn’t dated anyone since leaving Ricky the Rat two years ago. With her in Fort Pierce and Vince a two-hour drive away in Miami, she usually saw her brother twice a month. There was a girls’ night here and there with friends. That was about it.

She hadn’t really thought about it, but now when she did she realized she led a fairly solitary existence. Hopefully New York would jostle that, along with everything else.

But the change wasn’t going to come by stepping into Ethan Benton’s life. Although it might be the most fun she’d ever have. A jet-set world she’d only read about in magazines... Who wouldn’t want to dash off to Barbados for long weekends? To walk on pink sand with her toes in sparkling blue water. Attend glitzy parties...throw some of her own. Buy clothes without looking at the price tag. Never worry about where the rent or her next meal was coming from. Have the best of everything.

It would be amazing—even if it was only for a short time—to be completely taken care of. After all those years of putting other people ahead of her.

Which reminded her of how this deal could benefit her brother. Becoming part of the Benton family, even in name only, might help him further his career in a way he’d never have the chance to otherwise. He’d get to spend more time with Ethan and Louise. They’d see up close how capable and special he was.

No. This wasn’t about Vince. He’d be fine on his own. He was a grown man and his career was underway.

It was time for her future to begin. Period. In the morning she would tell Ethan no.

Besides, once he heard that she had already been married and divorced he wouldn’t think she was an appropriate choice for his game.

Right now, she needed to get some sleep.

She stopped short at the sight of the room’s king-size bed. This was where Ethan Benton had been planning to lay that tall, sturdy frame of his tonight. A wiggle shot up her spine at the mental image of him stretched out on this bed. Perhaps only wearing the plaid pajama bottoms as when she’d first seen him on the sofa.

On the bed she counted one, two...eight plush pillows, overlapped in a tidy row against the brown leather headboard. She imagined Ethan’s head against those pillows, with that curl of hair tousled on his forehead.

The luxury pillowcases alternated in color, tan then black. Which coordinated with the tightly fitted tan sheets. She ran a finger along the black duvet, tracing it down the right side of the bed. Then across the bottom. Then up the left. It was all too matchy-matchy for her tastes, but clearly made of expensive fabrics.

She eyed the wall-to-wall closet. If she took Ethan up on his proposal it would become filled with designer gowns for glamorous black tie dinners. Trendy separates for groundbreaking ceremonies. Classic sportswear for sailing jaunts and tennis tournaments. The finest shoes and purses and jewels.

None of that was her. She couldn’t picture it. Not even for make-believe.

Back on earth, Holly didn't know whether she should unpack her suitcase full of jeans, comfortable skirts and tee shirts. She slid the blond wood closet door open to see if anything was inside.

Four men's suits hung neatly on wooden hangers, with breathing room in between each. Dark gray, light gray, navy pinstripe and a beautiful maroon. They looked to be Ethan's size. He'd probably look especially handsome in that maroon. It would go well with his brown eyes and that brown hair with its speckles of red.

There were freshly laundered shirts. Complementary ties. Polished shoes. A tuxedo and its accessories. Two pairs of pressed jeans. A pair of casual boots. She resisted the temptation to open any drawers. She had seen an overcoat and a leather jacket on the coat rack by the front door.

It wasn't a large wardrobe. Ethan had said he traveled a lot, but hadn't mentioned how long he was staying in New York.

She fingered the lapel of the maroon suit jacket. Ricky the Rat had only owned one wrinkly black suit. She could count on one hand the times he'd worn it. He was the jeans and workboots type. There were times she'd thought he was sexy.

One of the times he hadn't been sexy was when she'd come home from work early one day and the workboots were all he'd had on. While he was in bed with their neighbor Kiki.

The rain was heavier outside now. Holly watched the bedroom window being pounded with sheets of the downpour. A rumble of thunder emphasized the storm's strength. Good. Let it wash away her past.

Deciding to leave her suitcase on the floor for the night, she pulled back the duvet on the bed and climbed into the king-size reminder of the man who was already making her feel as if she were spiraling away from her old life. Even though her encounter with him would come to an end in the morning, her transition to something new had begun.

The bed was divine. The mattress firm. The sheets crisp. She pulled the thick cover over her. Beyond comfortable, she nestled in the oasis, away from cares and plans. It was a peaceful heaven on earth after such a long day. Time to rest her body and mind. She was going to sleep like a log...

Two hours later Holly tossed and turned with exasperation. She hadn't kept her eyes shut for more than a minute before her brain had assaulted her with more and more opinions.

What Ethan was proposing could be her lucky break. A commission to do the artwork for his big development in Chelsea... A chance to really get started in New York...

She'd come to the city armed with work references, but the life of an artist could be tricky. Maybe nothing would pan out from the names and phone numbers she'd collected. Or she'd get small jobs here and there but they might not lead to anything else.

Ethan's proposition was a multi-phase project that would probably be six months of work at least. In that time she could really put down roots here.

She was determined to make her entire living as an artist. Not to have to work anymore as a maid or a nanny during the lean times. Her goals were clear. New York was the place where dreams were made or broken. If it didn't work out here, so be it—but she was certainly going to take her shot.

Imagine how much easier it would be without any astronomical rent to pay. New York apartment prices were notoriously high. Holly knew that she would probably have to live with a roommate. Maybe several of them. Some might have come to New York for the twenty-four-hour-a-day lifestyle, for the party that never ended. The household might be full of noise and people and activity at all hours of the day and night. It might prevent Holly from getting her work done or resting when she needed to.

Or she might end up with people who were slobs. Not able to tolerate a dirty mess, she would end up cleaning up after them. Cleaning up after people—how much of her life had she already spent doing that? She'd never minded taking care of her brother, but her ex-husband hadn't ever seemed even to know where the trash can or the washing machine were. Nor had her mother.

Maybe these roommate slobs wouldn't pay their share of their rent and she'd get evicted. She might end up having to move from place to place through no fault of her own. That would be maddening.

Ethan was offering work and a place to live. This tasteful apartment all to herself. It was one thing to be allowed to stay here while she looked for a place. It was quite another to have it belong to her. She could paint here. Reposition the furniture in the living room to make the most of the natural light.

Wait a minute.

Part of Ethan's bargain was that he would pay her. She would be able to afford to rent studio space. A New York artist with her own studio... If that wasn't a dream come true!

But on the other hand...

And she needed to consider...

She couldn't really...

And then what...?

When Holly opened her eyes, a drizzly morning sky crept in through the window. At some point she had finally dozed off, her mind twirling about the past and what the future could hold. Now, with morning's dawn in Ethan Benton's bedroom, certainty hit her like a ton of bricks.

If something seemed too good to be true, it was.

Not cut out to be anyone's pretend anything, Holly was only who she was. Ethan was kidding himself. It could only end in disaster. She would do him a favor by acknowledging the impossibility of his proposal, even though he wasn't able to see it for himself.

His judgment was clouded by his deep love for his aunt Louise. How touching was his concern for her welfare, for her reputation and her happiness. Blood ran thick. A good man took his family responsibilities seriously...

She had to call her brother. She wouldn't tell him about Ethan's offer. But she did need his help sorting out this confusion about her staying in the apartment. It would be good to hear his voice. In the end, he was the only one she really had in her corner.

He'd be working out in the garage of the little house he rented in Miami. Lifting weights. Bench pressing and hoisting dumbbells before showering and getting to work at Benton.

"Vinz." She pictured him, no doubt in a muscle shirt drenched in sweat. His close-cropped blond hair so unlike her black. The round blue eyes marking him as her kin.

"Holz! How's the Big Apple so far?"

She explained the mix-up with the apartment.

Vince promised to make some calls as soon as he got into the office. "I'll get it fixed," he assured her.

"I don't know if you can."

"Listen to me, big sis. We're going to sniff out opportunities for you and you're going take them. You'll grab everything that's thrown your way."

"Yeah."

"Remember—straight up or fall down!" He chanted their lifelong rally call—the desperate bravado of two kids with no one but each other to root for them.

After hanging up, Holly held the phone in her hand and stared absently out the window for a while. Thick clouds in the sky moved horizontally across her vision.

There had always been rainy days. No one knew how many more were ahead. It would be such a gift to have an umbrella.

Finally she tossed the phone onto the bed and opened the door.

Ethan was in the kitchen. She watched him start a pot of coffee before he noticed she was there. When he did, she leaned against the doorway. Her hair was probably a mess. Surely she had bags

under her eyes from her fitful night. She lifted her hand and looked at her fingers with their perpetual paint around the cuticles and under the nails. She was who she was.

"Okay, Ethan. I'll marry you."

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE SAID YES! Ethan wanted to shout it from the rooftops. She said yes!

His blood coursed. His muscles tingled.

She said yes!

And then he caught himself. Good heavens. There was no cause for fireworks to be launched from his heart. There was no reason to announce his undying devotion in front of the citizens of Manhattan. He was not a giddy groom filled with bliss and anticipation.

A woman he'd met yesterday had agreed to a jointly beneficial contract. He signed deals every day. This was just another one.

With a flick on the switch of the coffeepot he shook his head, trying to dislodge the obvious cobwebs in his skull.

He'd gotten a bit carried away.

Truthfully, he hadn't been alone with a woman in a long time—and certainly not in the close quarters of a small apartment. Perhaps that had stirred up a primal reaction in him. While the mating ritual wasn't part of his daily life, it was a natural phenomenon.

Although Ethan employed thousands of women in all aspects of his business, he shunned intimate social situations with them as much as possible. Keeping a clear and level head was what he did best. Women were distracting. Distractions were to be avoided. Problem—solution.

This was the first lesson he needed in order to carry off his plan. He was going to be spending a lot of time with an attractive woman. He'd need to guard and defend himself against her feminine charms. It wasn't personal. It didn't matter whether it was Holly, pregnant Penelope Perkins or another actress he'd picked from a photograph.

In three measured breaths, with his face toward the coffeepot, he set his focus. Guard and defend.

Then he turned to Holly, still standing in the doorway. Dark cascades of hair fell around her pretty face, which had a just-woken flush in her cheeks. Her tee shirt was definitely not concealing a bra.

Involuntarily, his body began to lean toward hers. A kiss pushed forward from his lips.

Guard and defend!

In the nick of time, he pulled himself back. Her allure was something he'd need to get accustomed to. His body's involuntary response to her worried him...told him that might be difficult.

But he would be triumphant. For the sake of Aunt Louise he could conquer anything.

Ethan directed himself to talk, since he couldn't kiss. "How did you sleep?"

"Great," she lied.

Her eyes looked tired. He hadn't got much sleep, either. He was far too tall to stretch out comfortably on that sofa. Plus, his mind had taunted him with replays of the evening.

"That coffee smells good," she said as she massaged the back of her neck.

"It does. How do you take it?"

"Lots of milk or cream. No sugar."

Ethan opened one of the cabinets to look for cups. It held only drinking glasses. He hadn't spent enough time in this apartment to know where everything was kept. His second try yielded large white mugs. Setting them on the black granite countertop, he poured the steaming coffee.

The kitchen was Manhattan Minimal. Pint-size efficiency. Cabinets, sink and dishwasher on one side. Stove and refrigerator on the other. A one-person kitchen. Too cramped for two people to work in.

Which was why when Holly stepped in to open the fridge he felt her hips brush past him. In turn, his hips reacted of their own volition—which, fortunately, she didn't notice.

“What are we eating for breakfast?’ she asked as she peered into the refrigerator.

“What do we have?” He’d only had bottles of water when he’d got in yesterday, and beer last night with the pizza.

“Eggs, butter and cheese. And the bread and fruit.” She pointed to the baskets on the counter. “We can work with this.”

The way she said we made Ethan’s ears prick up. He wasn’t used to we. He’d worked very hard at avoiding we. This was no time to start. Although for the first time he was curious about we. He reasoned that this fake engagement was a perfect way of safely pretending to experience we, with both parties knowing fully well that the truth was me and me achieving individual goals.

Right. However, now it felt somewhat confusing.

Holly pulled the carton of milk out of the fridge and handed it to him. Ethan was keenly aware of their fingertips touching during the exchange.

She laid ingredients on the counter. “How does cheese omelets, toasted bagels and sliced fruit sound?”

“What do you generally eat for breakfast?”

Holly giggled. A bit of blush rose in her cheeks. How adorable. “Was that a get-to-know-each-other question?”

“It was. If we are going to be convincing as an engaged couple, we have to know those sorts of things about each other.”

He handed her a mug. She took a slow sip and exhaled her satisfaction.

“You put the perfect amount of milk in my cup, so we must be off to a good start.”

Ethan felt ridiculously proud that she liked her coffee.

“How do you take yours?” she went up.

“Also without sugar. But not as much milk.”

“I’ll eat anything...” She went back to his question. “If we hadn’t polished off that pizza, that’s great cold in the morning.”

“Cold pizza? Noted.”

“Do you know how to cook?”

“I could probably manage to broil a steak without ruining it.”

“Eggs?”

“Not really,” he confessed.

“Today you learn, then.”

“Is that so?”

“I’ll put on a show for your aunt Louise, but surely you don’t think I’m going to be cooking and cleaning for you.” Her face stilled in a moment of earnest uncertainty. “Do you?”

“Of course not, phony fiancée.”

“It’s just that I’ve done plenty of taking care of people in my life. I just want to take care of myself.”

Holly had been through a lot. He’d been able to tell that about her from the start—had seen it right through her spunky attitude. She was no fresh-faced hopeful, arriving in New York full of delusions and fantasies. There was a past. A past that he suspected included hardship and pain.

Another one of those innate urges told him to wrap his arms around her and promise that he’d make up for all her hurts. That now she would be the one taken care of. That he’d quite like to make it his life’s mission to take care of her in every possible way.

Once again he had to chastise himself sternly. He had merely hired her to perform a service. For which she would be paid very well. With that opportunity she would be able to find whatever she’d come to New York to get. She didn’t need him.

The agony of that shocked him. A reminder to guard and defend.

Holly handed him the carton of eggs. She gave him a bowl. “Four.”

Finding a cutting board and a knife, Holly sliced cheese while Ethan cracked eggs. They stood side by side at their tasks, each dependent on the other in order to get the job done. Ethan appreciated teamwork. That was what made Benton Worldwide, and every other successful venture work. It must be the same in a marriage.

Two bagels were halved and popped into the toaster.

"Frying pan?" she mused to herself, and quickly moved to his other side to find one.

His mind flipped back to the past. To Aunt Louise and Uncle Melvin. It had been almost ten years since they'd done the normal things that married couples did. Mel had died over five years ago. Before that recurrences of his cancer had often had him bedridden. But they'd had moments like these. Hundreds, even thousands of cozy day-to-day moments like preparing breakfast.

Those moments strung together added up to a life shared between two people.

In reality, with their success and privilege it was not as if Aunt Louise and Uncle Mel had often been in the kitchen frying up eggs. But they had always cooked Sunday supper together whenever they could. It had been one of their signatures.

Ethan had potent memories of the two of them together as a couple. The way they'd been with each other. Even if it they had just been at the front door on the way out, helping each other layer on coats, scarves and hats to brave the Boston winter. How they'd maneuvered around each other. With effortless choreography. Totally at ease with each other, aware of each other's moves, each other's needs, each other's comforts.

He understood why Aunt Louise so wanted that same security for him. Why she was concerned with the way he jetted around the globe, working all the time, never stopping, never settling. The wisdom of age had shown her what might happen to a man who didn't balance power and labor with the other things that made life worth living. Family. Love.

But his aunt should accept that after all Ethan had been through love wasn't an option for him. He would never open his heart. Her destiny wasn't his. Yet he couldn't blame her for wishing things were different. That his past hadn't defined his future.

In reflection, Aunt Louise had valued her relationship with Uncle Mel above everything else in her life. She'd had a love so true it had never let her down.

Unlike him.

This ruse was the best solution. If the knowledge that Ethan was engaged to be married made Aunt Louise happy, and put her mind at ease, then he'd have taken good care of her. Ethan was in charge of all decisions now, and he wanted them to be in his aunt's best interests.

He and Holly sat down at the table with their breakfast. Just as she had with the pizza last night, she dug in like a hungry animal. She took big bites and didn't try to disguise her obvious pleasure.

Ethan asked if maybe she had gone hungry as a child.

"My mother was...unpredictable."

Something he himself knew more than a little about. Anger burned his throat.

A bittersweet smile crossed her mouth as she cut circular slices of an orange and handed one to him. "Vince and I used to call these rings of sunshine. There were always oranges in Florida."

He wanted to know how she'd been wronged. But he wasn't going to walk on that common ground.

"Aunt Louise and Fernando are coming for dinner on Wednesday." He cut to the matter at hand. "We need to prepare. Our first order of business is making this apartment look like we truly live here. We will start with..."

"The artwork!" they chimed in unison.

"We will visit my favorite galleries in Soho. You can make the final selection."

Outside, stormy skies had given way to more hard rain.

"Dress accordingly."

He plucked his phone from his pocket and began tapping.

* * *

Half an hour later, a stocky man in a suit and chauffeur's cap held a car door open for Holly.

"This is my driver, Leonard," Ethan introduced.

"Ma'am."

Holly darted into the black car without getting too wet from the downpour. Sliding across the tan leather backseat, she made room for Ethan beside her. Leonard shut the passenger door and hurried around to the driver's seat.

As they pulled away from the apartment building, Ethan activated the privacy glass that separated the front seat from the back.

Holly didn't know what she'd gotten herself into. Fear and excitement rattled her at the same time.

Soho galleries and shareholders' galas... She didn't really know how she was going to fake her way through a life so different from hers. Being ferried around New York in a town car with a privacy glass.

Ethan had clearly noticed her discomfort at his shielding his driver from any conversation they were going to have. "Obviously we need complete discretion to pull off our little enterprise, do we not?"

"Yup."

"Off we go, then. Yes?"

As crazy as it was, she'd already said yes to this wild ride with him. "Yes."

She watched New York though the car window. The city was gorgeous in the rain. Buildings seemed even taller and grander beneath the turbulent skies. People in dark clothes with umbrellas hurried along the sidewalks. To her eyes, they looked as if they were from a bygone era. Her mind snapped mental pictures. She wanted to paint all of it.

While Ethan checked messages on his phone Holly was aware of every breath he took. Her lungs couldn't help synchronizing each of his inhales and exhales with her own. They were so near each other on the seat her leg rested along his. She detected a faint smell of his woodsy shampoo.

You'll get used to him, she told herself. Soon enough, he won't be so enchanting.

Ethan touched his phone and brought the device to his ear.

"Nathan. Did you receive my text? Have you made all of the appointments for today?"

He nodded once as he listened.

"Diane—got it. Jeremy—got it. Thank you. Set me up for meetings next week with Con East and the Jersey City contractors."

He looked toward Holly and licked his top lip, although she was sure he didn't realize he had.

"I will be in New York for a while this time. As a matter of fact I have quite the announcement to make at the shareholders' gala."

A squiggle shot up Holly's back. No one had ever looked at her the way he did.

Ethan sent a sincere laugh into the phone. "All right, Nathan. I suppose I can spare you your beheading. This time."

He clicked off the call. "That explains the mystery about the apartment. Nathan had me booked in for the same dates but next month. You were right—it was meant to be yours. But now, to everyone concerned, the apartment is ours."

Holly pulled up the collar on her leather jacket as Leonard shuttled them downtown.

Curbside at the first gallery, Leonard helped them out of the car. And then back in as they made their way to the second. And then to the third.

Naturally the staff at each were overjoyed to see Ethan. They reminisced about art openings and museum dedications. Holly felt completely out of place, with nothing to add to the conversations. But she held her own, making intelligent comments about the art on display.

Ethan didn't mention anything about their upcoming nuptials. That announcement was for the gala. Instead he introduced Holly as a friend and painter from Florida whom he had been lucky enough to enlist for an upcoming commission.

Back in the town car again, they munched on the fancy sandwiches Ethan had had Leonard pick up from a gourmet shop. They discussed the paintings they had seen. Holly wanted two, and explained why she'd chosen them.

"If we had more time I'd have my brother send up some canvases that he's storing for me," she said. "If it was really our apartment I'd like to have my own work on the walls."

"I would like that, too," Ethan agreed, with such unexpected warmth it stretched at her heart.

He was masterful at throwing her off-kilter. When they'd been making breakfast that morning she'd had the feeling several times that he was going to kiss her. At one moment she had desperately hoped he would, while in the next she'd known she must turn away.

Ethan Benton was a bundle of inconsistencies.

Such a precise way he used a paper napkin to brush away imagined crumbs from the corners of his mouth. He was so definite about everything he did. Hobnobbing with gallery people or eating take-out lunch in the car—he did everything with finesse.

It wasn't as if any crumb would dare stick to those glorious lips. Men who showered on planes didn't get food on their faces.

Yet Holly knew there was something damaged underneath all Ethan's confidence and class...

"Can I paint you?"

He contemplated the question as he slowly popped the seal on his bottle of artisan soda.

"You know those drab black and whites of the tree and the flower on the wall?" she went on.

Last night when they'd been critiquing those photographs, flickers had flown between them.

"Flat, corporate..."

"Impersonal," she finished. "That's where I'd hang a painting of you. It would bring personality to the whole room and really make it ours."

"Yes..." he concurred with reluctance. "I suppose it would."

In a flash, Holly understood his hesitation. People were often uncomfortable at the prospect of her painting them. It involved trust. They had to be reassured that she wasn't going to accentuate their pointy nose or, worse still, the loneliness in their eyes.

A good portrait exposed someone's secrets. What was it that Ethan was worried she would reveal to the world?

"Can I?"

"I doubt we could get a painting done in two days' time."

"Let me show you."

Once people had seen Holly's work, she was able to put them at ease. She pulled out her phone and thumbed to her website. "I don't know if you saw these when you were on my site last night. But look. I don't do a typical portrait."

She showed him the screen. "I call them painted sketches. See how they're a bit abstract? And not all that detailed? I would just catch the essence of you."

He whipped his head sideways to face her. "What makes you think you know the essence of me?" he challenged.

Holly's throat jammed at the confrontation. He was right. She didn't know him. They'd met yesterday.

But she knew she could get something. Those big and expressive eyes. And, yes, there was some kind of longing behind them.

She might not know him, but she wanted to. This morning at breakfast he had been visibly shaken when she'd hinted at the hardships she'd endured. She had sensed some kind of connection there—a fierce similarity.

She hadn't explicitly told him about the mother who had never consistently provided food for her children. She hadn't mentioned the father who'd come around every couple of years with promises he'd never kept. How Holly had often had to fend for her younger brother and herself.

Yet the damage that dwelled behind Ethan's eyes had made her want to lay her pain bare to him. And for him to lay all his beside hers. As if in that rawness their wounds could be healed.

But none of that was ever to be. They were business partners. Nothing more. Besides, she wasn't going to make herself vulnerable to anyone ever again.

"Never mind." She called his bluff. "I guess we won't ever find out how much of the real you I could get on a canvas."

One side of his mouth hiked. "I did not say no."

"So you'll let me paint you?"

"I will have you know right now that I have very little patience for sitting still."

"You probably had to sit for family portraits with Aunt Louise and Uncle Mel, right? Dressed up in uncomfortable Christmas clothes by the fireplace? The dutiful family dog by your side? It was torture. You had to sit without moving for what seemed like an eternity."

"I absolutely hated having to hold one position while a greasy bald man who smelled like pipe tobacco painted us."

Flirty words tumbled out of her mouth before she could sensor them. "I promise I'll smell a lot better than the bald man did."

"No doubt."

"And it won't take long."

"I think it might."

Were they still talking about painting?

He lowered the glass separating them from the driver. "Leonard, we are going to change our next stop to Wooster and Broome."

Leonard let them out in front of a painting supplies store the likes of which Holly had never been in before.

She ordered a lot of her materials online, because there were no shops in Fort Pierce that carried fine products like these. When she was low on money she'd make do with what was available at the local brand-name craft store, that also sold knitting yarn and foam balls for school projects.

She cowered at another memory of her ex-husband. As usual, Ricky hadn't wanted to go shopping with her because he thought painting was silly and that she should spend more time going to motorcycle races with him.

Yelling at her to hurry up while she picked out some tubes of paint, Ricky had lost his patience. With a flick of his hand he'd knocked down a display of Valentine's Day supplies. Heart-shaped cardboard boxes, Cupid cutouts and red and pink pompoms had crashed to the floor as Ricky stormed out of the store.

Humiliated, Holly had been left to make apologies and pay for his outburst.

It had been a few months later that she'd caught Ricky in bed with their neighbor. But she'd known that day in the craft store that she couldn't stay married to him.

Now here she was, a million miles away in Soho, the mecca of the American art world, with another man who would never be right for her. Although in completely opposite ways.

Life had a sense of humor.

She chose an easel, stretched canvases in several sizes, new paint and brushes, and palettes and sketchpads, pastels and charcoals. All top-notch. This was the Holly equivalent of a kid in a candy shop.

At the checkout, Ethan opened up an account for her. "That way you can pick up whatever tools and materials you need for Benton projects."

"My goodness..." Her eyes bugged out. "Thank you."

“Of course, my dearest.” He winked. “And the next item on the agenda is buying my pretty fiancée some proper clothes.”

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH my clothes?" Holly demanded as Leonard helped them out of the car in front of a Fifth Avenue shopping mecca.

"Not a thing. You do the artist with paint on her hands bit quite well. All you need is a French cigarette in your mouth and a beret on your head," Ethan answered.

"Very funny."

He laid his hand on the center of her back to guide her through the store's revolving entrance door. Holly's shoulders perked up at his touch.

"However," he continued as they bustled through the busy sales floor, "there is the shareholders' gala, and then there'll be charity dinners and social occasions we will be attending. As we discussed, this arrangement necessitates an appropriate wardrobe."

When they reached the Personal Styling department, an older blonde woman in a sleeveless black dress and pearls was awaiting their arrival.

"Are you Diane?" Ethan extended his right hand. "My assistant, Nathan, spoke with you earlier."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Benton." Diane took his outstretched hand with both of hers.

"This is my friend Holly Motta."

"Oh..." Diane gave her a limp handshake, taking notice of the paint under Holly's fingernails.

"Hi!" Holly chirped.

She was going to have to get used to the surprise in people's voices when they met her. Everyone probably knew Ethan as a wealthy playboy who dated fashion models and princesses of small countries. He'd have no reason to be with a mere mortal like her.

Ethan raised his eyebrows at Holly, which made her giggle and feel more at ease.

He peered straight into Holly's eyes while he spoke to the other woman. "Diane, my friend will be accompanying me to numerous events. She is an artist, with little need for formal clothes. Can you help us outfit her in a way that stays true to her creative and unique self?"

Holly's mouth dropped open. Could anyone have said anything more perfect? He wanted to buy her clothes but he didn't want to change her.

Diane was stunned as well. "Cer...certainly," she stuttered. "Can I offer you a glass of champagne?"

And thus began her trip to Fantasyland. While Ethan sipped bubbly on a purple velvet settee, Diane showed Holly into a private dressing room that was larger than all the fitting rooms in the discount shops she usually went to put together.

Six full-length mirrors were positioned to allow for a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view. The carpet was cream-colored, as was the furniture—no doubt chosen so as not to compete with the clothes. A vanity table with padded chair was ready for any primping needs. Hats, gloves, scarves and purses had been pre-selected and lay waiting in a glass display case. A collection of shoes stood neatly on a shoe rack. Jackets and coats hung from pegs.

Diane ducked away behind one of the mirrors.

Holly whistled out loud as she took it all in. And then laughed at her predicament. She'd overheard Ethan talking on the phone in the car about a Diane. And a Jeremy. He had prearranged the gallery visits and now this, too. And Holly had thought herself to be the taking-care-of-business type! She could take a lesson from him.

"We'll start with daywear," Diane announced as she wheeled in a rack of clothes.

Besides the fact that there hadn't been any money when she was growing up, Holly had never been especially interested in clothes. She dressed functionally and comfortably, and ended up staining

most everything with paint anyway. But if she had ever dreamt of wearing stylish garments made of luxurious materials these would be them.

The first ensemble Holly tried on was a white pantsuit. The slim line of the trousers made her legs look eight feet long. And the coordinating blazer with its thin satin lapels was both distinguished and chic. Worn with a navy silk shirt unbuttoned one notch past prim, the outfit delivered "sexy" as well.

Diane moved in quickly to pin the jacket's waist for a trimmer fit.

She suggested Holly try a brown slingback shoe, then plucked the proper size from a stack of boxes waiting at the ready. Diane might be a bit snobby, but she sure as heck knew what she was doing.

"Perhaps you'd like to add a touch of lipstick?" Diane inquired—a polite way of reminding Holly that she'd need to attend to her makeup and hair.

Diane opened a drawer in the vanity table that contained a palette of options. Holly dabbed on some lip gloss, undid her ponytail and brushed her hair. Surveying herself in the mirror, she knew this was without question the best she had ever looked.

"Shall we show Mr. Benton?" Diane suggested.

When Holly stepped into the waiting lounge that seemed destined for wealthy boyfriends and mothers of brides, Ethan was busy typing into his phone.

He leaned comfortably back on the settee with one leg crossed over the other knee. Effortless elegance. Although the wavy reddish-brown hair that always had a bit of a tousle to it made sure hints of his untamed side came through.

Ethan glanced up. His eyes went through her and then right back down to his phone.

Holly was delighted as recognition gradually took hold. His jaw slackened. Eyebrows bunched. Nostrils flared.

Only then did his eyes rise up again for the double-take.

And take her in he did, indeed. Ever so slowly. From the tip of her head to the pointy toes of her designer shoes. His gaze was wicked. As if she was standing in front of him naked rather than dressed in this finery. The feeling thrilled and aroused her down to her core.

That smile made its way millimeter by millimeter across Ethan's face. "My, my..."

"So you approve?" she flirted.

"To say the least."

"Do you want to see more?"

Focused on the opening of her shirt, where perhaps that questionable button should have been closed but wasn't, he sighed. "I would most definitely like to see more."

She pivoted, and when her face was out of view from him let a satisfied grin explode. This was so much fun. She was long overdue for some harmless fun. Harmless, right?

Diane helped her into the next outfit and pinned it for alterations. Another silk blouse—this one black, with a square neckline and a gold zipper down the back—tucked into a tan pencil skirt. The look was dressy, but edgy.

Ethan's reaction was all she could have hoped for as he lingered over the snug fit of the skirt across her hips.

Next, dark wash jeans tucked into boots and a flowing white blouse were complemented by Holly's own black leather jacket.

"More," Ethan demanded.

A crisp red dress with a pleated skirt, short sleeves and matching belt provided a timeless silhouette.

A silver satin cocktail dress draped her curves without being tight. At the sight of her in that one, Ethan shifted in his seat.

As a kid, Holly had sprouted up early and had always been the tallest girl in her class. She remembered feeling big and awkward. It had taken her years to train herself out of slouching her

shoulders forward. Slim, but with hips wider than was proportionate to her small bustline, she'd never thought she wore clothes well.

Until today.

With Diane's wizardry to pinch here and fold there, these clothes looked as if they'd been custom-made to flatter her perfectly.

In all, ten outfits were put together, ranging from casual to semi-formal. Extra pieces would be added to mix and match.

Ethan had promised that no matter what happened with their phony engagement the clothes would be hers to keep. That had meant nothing to Holly when he'd said it, but now she understood how important an offer that was.

In these outfits she was distinctive. They made a statement. The woman who wore them was someone to take seriously. These were clothes that were the epitome of good taste, that she could—and would—care for and wear for years to come.

But the pièce de resistance came when Diane brought out an evening gown for the black-tie shareholders' gala. Tears unexpectedly sprang in Holly's eyes at the artistry of it. She couldn't fathom ever needing a dress so fancy.

It was a pearly sky-blue completely covered in hand-sewn crystals. Holly was surprised at how much the gown weighed. Sleeveless with a deep-scooped neck, it skimmed the floor until Diane had her step into coordinating high-heeled sandals.

Whether the dress complemented Holly's icy blue eyes or her eyes enhanced the dress, it didn't matter. There couldn't be a more perfect gown.

She hoped Ethan liked it.

As she stepped into the lounge to model it for him, she wanted to be sure that she was wearing the gown rather than the gown wearing her. Standing up straight, with her shoulders back, Holly reminded herself of what she had learned from the posture correction videos that had helped her rid herself of her slump. Stand tall. Ribs over hips. Hips over heels.

She smiled demurely at Ethan as she approached.

He hiccupped as he almost choked on his sip of champagne.

Holly giggled. She high-fived herself in her mind. Mission accomplished.

She cooed, high on a unique rush of power she'd never known she had, "Do you still want to marry me?"

Ethan set his champagne flute down on the side table and cleared his throat. "You have no idea..."

* * *

"One more stop and then we will go to dinner," Ethan said as he ushered Holly back into the car.

Leonard shut the passenger door, then went around to slide into his place behind the wheel. He deftly maneuvered them away from the curb to join the Fifth Avenue traffic.

Ethan was thinking ahead. "What else do you need for the gala? I assume you would like to have your hair and makeup done?"

"Please."

"I will have Nathan book that."

Holly held her hands up in front of her. There was often a rainbow of colors staining her fingers and nails, but today it was just the Cobalt Two Eleven leftover from last night's spill. "And I think I need a manicure, don't you agree?"

"The way you look in that gown, I doubt anyone would notice."

No fair for him to say things like that. Things that made her want to lean over and cover his luscious lips with an hour-long kiss. Not fair at all for him to speak words that made her contemplate what it would be like to be with someone who made her feel good about herself. Who was on her side.

Not just for business purposes.

Gridlocked traffic was only allowing them to inch forward. The rain had ceased for the moment but the sky was a thick grey. Throngs of pedestrians rushed to and fro. Some darted across the streets, jaywalking quickly in between cars. Horns honked. Drivers yelled at each other. Music blared from taxicab radios. A siren screamed.

Together, it sounded like a riotous symphony. New York was alive and kicking.

One minute she had been crammed into an economy seat on a packed airplane, headed for the Big Apple and who knew what. And then a minute later she was modeling a jewel-encrusted evening gown for a young billionaire.

A smokin' hot young billionaire who had ogled her as if he not only wanted to see those clothes on her, but also wanted to see them in a heap on the floor beside his bed.

By the end of her fashion show Holly had been imagining it as well. How it might feel to have Ethan's big and no doubt able hands unzipping the zippers and unbuttoning the buttons of those finely crafted garments.

How far would it be safe to go with this charade they had embarked on? Surely not as far as clothes being strewn at the bedside.

Holly was going to have to learn to regally accept a peck on the cheek in front of other people without melting into a puddle of desire. She might have to place a reciprocal smooch on Ethan's face at some point. If push came to shove she might even have to receive a kiss on the lips at, say, the shareholders' gala when their engagement was announced.

She had no idea how she'd handle that, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it. However, under no circumstances would her make-believe fiancé's tuxedo—or anything else of his —end up crumpled at the foot of her bed.

No one would ever see them behind closed doors. And she'd do well to remember that to a man like Ethan Benton this was all just a deal. A game. A con. He'd only go as far as was absolutely necessary to do what he deemed right for his aunt Louise's future.

Holly would keep her eye on the prize. A great place to live, steady work, a leg-up for Vince. That was more than she could have ever hoped for. Let alone on her first day here. That was enough. That was astounding.

"Out." Ethan opened the car door in the middle of the street. "This traffic is unbearable. We will go on foot."

"What?"

He firmly grasped Holly's hand and slid them out of the backseat. "Leonard, meet us in front," he instructed, before thumping the door shut. He tugged Holly. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asked as he ushered her to the sidewalk.

"I told you. One more stop."

They joined the masses of legs charging north on Fifth Avenue. New Yorkers during rush hour. Always in a hurry. Always somewhere to go. The air was cold. The pace was exhilarating.

Maybe this would become home. Maybe this enthralling city itself would fill up the emptiness she'd always had inside.

Two blocks later she stopped dead in her tracks. They had arrived at their destination. She looked up to take in the majesty of the Art Deco architecture. The bronze sculpture of Atlas holding up the building's clock. The elaborate window displays.

People were moving in and out of the store's entry doors. Many of those leaving held the light blue shopping bags that were known the world over.

"I do not suppose it would do for my fiancée to wear an engagement ring made from a beer bottle wrapper," he said, and winked.

So he hadn't brought her to a jewelry store to get a ring. He'd brought her to THE jewelry store.

Ricky had never given her an engagement ring. They'd waited for a sale at the jewelry store in their local mall and bought the two cheapest gold bands there. It had only been last month that she'd gotten around to selling hers for bulk weight to help pay for her plane ticket to New York.

Now she was standing in front of the most well-known jewelry store in the world! Little blue bags!

Inside, Ethan gave his name and they were immediately escorted to the private salon. A man in a pinstriped suit introduced himself as Jeremy Markham.

Again Holly remembered hearing Ethan on the phone that morning with his assistant, Nathan, mentioning a Diane and a Jeremy. Diane was clothes...obviously Jeremy was jewels. Ethan had everything figured out.

"Jeremy, we will need some help with a wardrobe of jewelry in the weeks to come, but today we would like to choose a diamond ring."

"Of course, sir. May I present a selection?"

Ethan nodded.

A private appointment to pick out an engagement ring? Ho-hum, just an ordinary day.

"Please, sit down." Jeremy, chin up high, held a chair out for Holly after giving her a once-over. Like Diane with the clothes, had this salesman who clearly only dealt with VIPs already figured out that Holly was just one big fake? Another opportunist going after a rich man's money.

Using a key extracted from his jacket pocket, Jeremy let himself into a back room.

Ethan pulled a chair next to Holly's.

"Check these out!" she exclaimed at the glass case to the left of them.

A heritage collection of gemstone jewelry was on display. Elaborate necklaces and bracelets made from pounds of gold and carat upon carat of colorful stones. The pieces were too ornate for her taste, but she was attracted to the hues.

What had really caught her eye was a simple ring of blue topaz. The stone was a large oval cut, bordered on each side by two small diamonds.

"Look at how stunning that ring is. That blue is so brilliant it's blinding. Light is bouncing off it in twenty different directions."

Holly's eyes were light blue, like the stone. It had always been her favorite color from as far back as she could remember. Maybe that was why she'd instantly fallen in love with the sky-blue evening gown Ethan had bought for her.

While it had always been pink for girls and blue for boys Holly, as usual, had swum against the stream. It wasn't as if the trailer she'd lived in with her mom and brother had had any décor to it. The walls had been covered in flowery peeling wallpaper. Sheets and blankets had always been chosen by what was on clearance sale, which had usually translated to scratchy fabrics with dark prints. But Holly could remember a few occasions when her father had been in town for a day or so with some money and bought her new clothes. She'd always chosen items in shades of blue.

"It's just dazzling," she continued, pointing to the ring. "I've never seen anything like it."

Ethan glanced over to it and shrugged his shoulders, indifferent.

Jeremy returned with two velvet trays that held a wide variety of ring styles, all with humongous diamonds.

Ethan whispered to Holly, "We ought to be able to find something perfect amongst these."

She shot one final glance at the astounding blue topaz. "Whatever you say. You're the boss..."

* * *

"Feng, we will start with hot and sour soup. Follow that with the chef's special duck, beef with broccoli, shrimp chow mein. And oolong tea."

"Thank you, Mr. Ethan." The waiter bowed and hurried away.

After the jewelry store, Ethan had instructed Leonard to drive them to Chinatown. Now he and Holly were comfortably ensconced in a booth at a casual restaurant his family often frequented when they were in New York.

"I am famished," Ethan proclaimed. "Shopping is exhausting."

With a suitably enormous diamond engagement ring now on Holly's finger, the day's checklist was complete. They had been downtown, midtown, and now back downtown, but he was craving familiar food.

"Do you do a lot of shopping?" Holly questioned.

"I suppose I do my fair share, but it is not an activity I have a feeling for one way or another," he lied.

Watching Holly model one comely outfit after another would rank pretty darn high on his list of pleasurable pastimes. Although a lot of his other work had been accomplished today as well, thanks to the convenience of technology. Securing a fiancée had been at the top of his to-do list.

"Do you..." Holly twirled a lock of her raven hair "...shop for women on a regular basis?"

Hmm...fishing, was she?

"Women have dragged me to find gold in China, the finest silks in India, the best leather in Buenos Aires, if that is what you are asking."

She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and sat up straight. "Oh."

The previous women in his life were a sore point with him. In fact Ethan and women had never been a good combination, period. Going all the way back to his mother. Other than Aunt Louise, every woman Ethan had encountered seemed to him to be one hundred percent selfish. Only out for what they could get. Gifts, money, travel, status—you name it.

Which was why he was resolute that he'd never fall in love. To love you had to trust. And that was something he was never going to be tricked into again.

So it was a logical step for him to dream up this scheme that would allow Aunt Louise to think Ethan had found lifelong love as she had with Uncle Mel. Ethan would never have to marry a woman whose motivation he'd question. Intention, compensation and expectation were all upfront with this plan. It might be the brainiest partnership deal he'd ever conceived.

"Hot and sour soup." Feng placed the steaming bowl on the table. While he ladled out two servings he questioned, "May I ask if Mrs. Louise is feeling better?"

His aunt Louise had been in New York several times in the past few months. Feng had probably seen her more recently than Ethan had.

"Was she unwell when she was last here?"

The waiter pursed his lips and bowed his head, which said more than any words could.

Ethan's heart sank. This validated the fact that he was on the right track. Doing whatever it took to get Aunt Louise to retire and relax in Barbados before worse things than stumbles and bruises stole her dignity.

It was all going to work out.

As long as Ethan continued to stare past but not into Holly Motta's face. Because when he did steal a glance she didn't look like a business proposition. Or a gold-digger out to get what she deemed hers. With that slouch she kept correcting, and that milky skin, and the hint of ache in her eyes...

No, she was a living, breathing, kindred spirit who could shred his master plan into a million slices if he wasn't careful.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked with her spoon in the air.

"Like what?" Ethan threw back his head with an exaggerated nonchalance.

She gave him a mock frown.

"Eat your soup," he told her.

One very ungenteel slurp later... "Yummo!"

"We should learn more about each other if we are to be convincing as a couple. You clearly like food."

He mocked her slurp until they were both laughing.

"My turn," she said. "You're an only child."

"You have one brother."

"You studied at Oxford."

"What is your favorite movie?"

Holly dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Are you kidding me? If we're going to get to know each other we have to get real. What is the one thing that has hurt you the most in your life?"

His mother. Of course it was his mother. Nothing could devastate a nine-year-old boy more than being left behind by his mother. It was horrible enough that his father had died instantly when a drunk driver had plowed into his car at racing speed, killing him instantly. But then shortly after that to lose his mother in the way he had... It was unthinkable.

"Beef with snow peas. Shrimp chow mein. Chef's special duck," Feng announced as he and another waiter positioned the platters in the center of the table. "Please enjoy."

Saved by the duck.

Ethan wasn't going to expose his darkness and despair to someone he'd met only yesterday. As a matter of fact he wasn't in the habit of talking about his feelings with anyone. It was better that way.

He scooped a portion of each dish onto his and Holly's plates.

But wasn't it rather amazing that this woman was so genuine she didn't want to discuss trivial matters?

As she lifted her chopsticks to grab at her chow mein he admired the diamond ring he had put on her finger. It was staggering in its size and clarity, and he knew any woman would be filled with pride to wear something so timeless and flawless.

Yet he could kick himself because he hadn't bought her the blue topaz ring she had admired at the store!

Quick thinking had told him to buy the type of ring that was expected of him. Anything other than a traditional diamond engagement ring would invite inquiry. Such as where and why and what sentiments had inspired him to buy such an unusual ring. Those were extra questions they didn't need. It would just add to the risk of them flubbing up as a believable couple.

But now he thought blue ring, purple ring, green ring—what would it matter if that was what she wanted?

Pulsing and vibrant, Holly Motta had careened into his apartment with blue paint on her face and, he feared, had changed his life forever. Forcing him to think about women differently than he ever had. Making him for the first time vaguely envision a role in which he cared if someone was happy. Edging him into speculation about what it would be like if someone cared about his happiness, too.

And now she was making it hard to concentrate on anything other than leaping across the table and planting a kiss on that sweet mouth that was busy with noodles.

After a bite of food to steady himself, Ethan resumed their interview. "Tell me something about yourself that I would not have guessed."

"I used to be—" she blurted, and then abruptly stopped herself. She put her chopsticks down and took a slow sip of her tea. Trying to recover, she finished with, "A pretty good softball player."

Aha, so it wasn't as easy for her to be as open and candid as she wanted him to believe it was. What had she been about to say that had proved too difficult to reveal? And what had she avoided telling him at breakfast that morning about the mother she'd characterized as unpredictable?

He'd gone along with her easy sincerity, but Ethan really didn't know the first thing about her. He'd garnered that she'd had a difficult childhood, but it wasn't like him to take anyone at face value. Not after what he'd seen of life.

Guard and defend.

He had his family's empire to protect.

"Excuse me," he said as he put his chopsticks down and pulled out his phone. "I have just remembered one more bit of business for the day."

He texted Chip Foley, Benton Worldwide's Head of Security. Just as he'd intended to do if he'd hired an actress for the fiancée job.

Chip, please run everything you can on a Holly Motta from Fort Pierce, Florida. Claims her occupation is artist. I would place her age at about thirty. Tall, slim, blue eyes, black hair. She says her brother Vince works for us in Miami. I do not know if it is the same last name. Do an across-the-board check on her for me.

After hitting the "send" button, his eyes returned to Holly.

She pointed her chopsticks at him and taunted, "Hey, you never told me what it was in your life that hurt you the most."

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS THE dead of night, but Holly could still hear New York outside the bedroom window. Cars drove by. A dog barked. People laughed boisterously on the street.

The city that never slept.

Lying in Ethan's bed, with her head sinking into his soft pillows, she could hardly make sense of the day. Visiting Soho galleries, buying all those art supplies, a new wardrobe, a diamond ring... Then that dinner in Chinatown.

She'd lived a lifetime in the last twenty-four hours.

Ethan was just beyond the door in the living room. Was he sleeping? Was he working? Or was he lying awake thinking about her as she was of him?

Of course not, Holly reminded herself. Ethan Benton had more important things on his mind then his wife for hire. She'd better remember that.

But when they'd watched each other's faces at the restaurant it had seemed as if maybe she would, in fact, linger in his thoughts and keep him up at night. He'd looked at her as if there was nowhere else he'd rather be. The restaurant might have been crowded and clamoring, but he'd never taken his eyes off her.

Through most of the evening they would have convinced anyone they were an engaged couple. Finishing each other's sentences... Digging their chopsticks into each other's plates...

And then there had been those awkward moments when they'd asked each other questions neither was ready to answer.

Holly hadn't been able to bring herself to tell Ethan that she had been married. She feared he would think of her as a used product and not want to go through with their agreement. He didn't need to know about her mistake in marrying someone who hadn't loved her for who she was. Who hadn't supported the person she wanted to become. Ricky Dowd wasn't a name that ever needed to come up in conversation.

They would go through with their pretend engagement so that Ethan could protect his aunt as her health declined. And, as he'd said, either they would continue to meet for official occasions or eventually call off their deal. Whatever happened, Ethan would never have to know about Holly's wasted time on wrong decisions that tonight seemed like a million years ago.

Just as she might not find out what he was hiding because he didn't want to tell her what had caused him the most hurt in his life. It had to be something terrible, because both times when he'd avoided the topic his eyes had turned to coal.

But the rest of the evening was a dream she never wanted to wake from. When they had got to unimportant questions, like favorite movies and television shows, they'd laughed themselves dizzy remembering jokes from silly comedies. Laughed some more about bad childhood haircuts and mean teachers they'd hated in school.

They had stayed long after the restaurant had emptied, until the staff had been ready to leave. Feng had walked them out to the street and waved them goodbye as they'd tucked themselves into the car so Leonard could deposit them home.

Holly drifted off to sleep, replaying over and over again how Ethan had gently kissed the back of her hand and thanked her for an unforgettable day before he closed the bedroom door.

* * *

In the morning, Ethan scrutinized his unshaven face in the bathroom mirror. He hadn't laughed as much as he had last night in a long time. Truth be told, he couldn't remember ever laughing that much. Everything was full power with Holly. Near her, he felt alive with a liquid fire.

That might burn down his life as he knew it.

After showering and dressing, he charted a direct route into the kitchen toward the coffeepot.

"Morning," she greeted him.

"Yes."

He was careful not to touch her as he crossed behind her in the tiny kitchen to pour a cup. It took stupendous will not to reach for her, to put his arms around her waist and find out what her hair might smell like if his face was buried in it.

Instead, more guarding and defending.

He gained distance by busying himself with checking the morning's urgencies on his tablet. His approval was needed on important architectural specifications for the Jersey City project. An email chain between several of the interested parties provided updates. Thank heavens for work. He needed the interruption from his growing and wholly off-track desires for more than what he'd signed up for with Holly.

Despite his efforts, his eyes of their own volition kept darting upward from the screen as he watched her lay out a light breakfast of toast and juice.

"Right, then, we have an important day," he directed as soon as they'd sat down with their food. "Aunt Louise and Fernando will arrive at six o'clock. She does not like to stay out late in the evening. We should have dinner on the table by seven."

"I made a shopping list," Holly reported. "I'll go to the store, then get the pot roast into the slow cooker."

"I have several meetings today. Can you manage the shopping on your own?"

She snickered. "I've been doing the grocery shopping since I was seven years old. I think I can handle a New York City supermarket."

"I am the one who would have trouble."

"But after that I'll need you for the painting. I have the canvas size I want. And I'll use acrylic so it will dry quickly. We'll hang it later this afternoon, and no one will be any the wiser that I only painted it today."

With a busy day ahead, he'd selectively forgotten that he had agreed to her doing a painting of him. He had no time for posing. Although a painting by her would be a very eye-catching and convincing symbol that they were really a couple.

Plus, it would put him in proximity with her from midday. Which he had to admit he'd be looking forward to.

He mentally reprimanded himself for that thought.

In front of the building, Ethan watched Holly walk down the block while Leonard held the car door open for him. Her glossy hair swung to and fro. It was another gloomy day, but dry at the moment. Her jeans and that black leather jacket she seemed to favor would be sufficient for her shopping trip. Why he was concerned with how she was dressed for the weather was baffling. And disturbing.

But what would a Florida girl know about winter? She might catch cold...

Leonard ferried him from one appointment to the next. The low-income housing project in the Bronx was behind schedule and over budget. He pored over blueprints with the architect until they found a way to enlarge the kitchens for the exterior-facing units. The architect was feuding with the contractor over the selection of materials, but that always seemed to be the case. Ethan was able to smooth some ruffled feathers.

He stopped at the hotel where the shareholders' gala would be held on Saturday. Gave his authorization for the layout of the ballroom. Visualizing the room full of formally dressed people, he could picture them raising their champagne glasses as Aunt Louise offered a toast to him and Holly. His bride-to-be would charm the crowd with her engaging smile and shimmering gown...

In the silence of the empty ballroom, Ethan's heart pleaded for something he couldn't fully grasp. A dull ache thudded in the center of his chest.

Swiftly shoving those confusing feelings aside, he hurried out through the hotel doors to Leonard's car and his next meeting.

The multi-use development in Chelsea had come a long way since he'd last seen it. As he strode through he offered dozens of hellos to the many workers laboring on the project's five buildings. It was for this large venture that he'd offered Holly the commission to do the artwork. The opportunity that had sealed the negotiations for her to agree to pose as his fiancée.

Ethan's interior designer had been intrigued to hear about the up-and-coming artist from Florida he had brought onto the job. He had provided Stella with Holly's website address.

Midday, he returned to the apartment. Holly must not have had any trouble with the slow cooker, because the aroma of cooking meat practically had him salivating.

"My, my..." he said as he removed his coat and hung it on the rack.

The open area by the living room window had been turned into a temporary artist's studio.

"I've been working."

"I can see."

The easel they had bought yesterday was unpacked and in use. A side table with a tarp thrown over it for protection had become a paint station. Another tarp covered the area's floor.

"What have you done with my apartment?"

"Hey, I thought it was my apartment."

"Tonight it will be our apartment."

"Don't worry. I'll clean it all up after I do the painting of you."

"What do we have here?"

Three pastel drawings on paper lay on the floor. Moving vehicles was their theme. One was a bright yellow taxi done in abstracted horizontal lines that made it look as if it was in motion. Ditto for a blue city bus motoring along. And likewise for a silver train car that appeared to be whizzing by.

"I was working out some ideas. Will there be a valet and transportation station at the Chelsea development?"

Of course. He nodded with immediate understanding. Paintings like this would be stylish and hip, and convey the movement of the city. They'd be perfect. Even if their marriage arrangement proved to be the wrong move, Ethan was at least sure he'd hired an artist who would produce what he needed for the multi-million-dollar project.

"Excellent."

"We'd better not waste any time. When can you be ready to sit for me?"

A grin tried to crack at his mouth. "Let me just wash up. Dinner smells delicious."

Minutes later, he stepped onto the tarp of her studio area.

"I am ready for you," he said bravely, with arms outstretched.

In reality, he didn't know what to expect. Was not at all comfortable with how Holly might portray him. He reminded himself that this was ultimately for the good of Aunt Louise. He could put up with a little uneasiness for the sake of her wellbeing.

"I'll have you sitting on the stool." Holly, all business, gestured for him to take his place.

She studied him intently. Backed away to get one perspective. Inched to the side for another. Then came in close. So close he could feel the heat of her body, which made him want to do anything but sit still.

"What are you deciding on?"

"The perspective. I think I'll do it at an angle that's a partial profile."

"Will it be only my face?"

She ran a finger across his upper chest from shoulder to shoulder to illustrate the cut-off point. Blood pumped double-time to every inch of him she touched. He instinctively leaned away.

"Don't worry. I won't bite."

His voice came out a jagged growl. "It was not you I was worried about."

She smiled quizzically for several beats. His chest muscles continued to vibrate from her touch.

It occurred to him that for all the questions they'd asked each other about favorite things and childhood memories, they hadn't talked about past relationships.

Had a man broken her heart? Had she broken someone's? Was she looking for love?

Did she wonder about him?

Love wasn't on the bargaining table in their business deal. He'd never loved. Didn't love. Wouldn't love. That was a contract signed a long time ago.

Holly programmed some upbeat music into her phone and began. She wanted to do a preliminary pencil drawing on paper, and when she was satisfied with that move on to paint and canvas.

With a last adjustment to his angle, she requested, "Try not to move."

"Do I need to be silent?"

"I'll let you know when I'm sketching your mouth. Just keep your head still when you talk."

With his face turned toward the window, it was odd to feel her eyes on him when he couldn't see her face. Odd, but spine-tingling. And erotic. He wished he could rip off his clothes and have her paint him in the nude.

Holly made him want to let go of the well-bred and well-mannered businessman he was. With her, he wanted to howl naked under the moonlight. And to ravage her with the savage passion he kept tightly caged inside him.

"Can you soften your facial expression?" she asked, making him realize that he was not masking his arousal.

He neutralized his jaw.

"Tell me about your morning," she coaxed.

He appreciated her trying to help him relax. "There are ongoing issues with my housing development in the Bronx. I want to build the maximum number of comfortable units on the property to give as many families as possible a home of their own."

"What are the problems?"

"Materials are costly. I have shareholders to answer to. And Aunt Louise. I promised this as a break-even project—not one on which the company would lose a lot of money. I may have to move it into the category of charitable endeavor. I will have to present it accordingly. Tricky."

"Here, take a look." Holly unclipped from the easel the large piece of paper she'd been using for her sketch and held it up in front of her for him to see.

After preparing himself to hate it, he saw that it wasn't bad at all. She'd used those same short lines she had on the transportation drawings. Together, the strokes formed the likeness of a pensive man looking into the distance.

Holly's face was flushed. She was nervously waiting for his reaction.

With a voice tight and caught, she squeaked, "What do you think?"

"Is this how I look?"

"Well, obviously you're handsome. I hoped I could convey your seriousness, too."

She'd said "handsome" as matter-of-factly as it would have been to say he was wearing a white shirt. He liked it that she thought he was handsome.

"I suppose I am serious."

"That feels like your core. You're formal. You're measured."

"Whereas you just say or do anything that comes into your mind."

"And you don't seem like someone who ever loses control."

Oh, if she only knew the thoughts he was having about grabbing her and showing her exactly how out of control he could be.

She was uncovering wild ideas in him. Holly, with her mesmerizing black hair and sinewy limbs. He'd stripped open more of his true self to her in the last two days than he had with anyone in his life. Not all his secrets, but he'd revealed a lot.

And he must rein that in right now. She only needed to know what was relevant to their phony engagement. Nothing more.

He stood up from his stool to stretch and take a break. Checked messages on his phone. Fired off a couple of texts.

Using a sketchpad, Holly quickly drew more versions of his mouth until she was satisfied. Then showed him the one that she liked.

"Interesting... It looks as if it is easy enough for you to make a small correction here and there and come out with a quite different result."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess so. Trial and error."

"I would not have a clue how to do that."

"I'll show you sometime."

"I would like that."

How absurd this was—letting someone sketch his mouth. In the middle of a workday. When he had a thousand other things on his mind.

But he didn't care. Inexplicably, he wanted to be near Holly. She'd definitely cast a spell on him.

She lifted a large canvas onto her easel and adjusted the height. Then picked out her first brush.

"I'm ready to paint. Let's begin."

* * *

"Holly Motta, this is my aunt, Louise Benton." Ethan made the introduction as soon as he'd ushered in the visitors.

With a welcoming smile Holly shook the older lady's hand. "I'm happy to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"And I so little about you..." Louise assessed her. "How pretty you are, dear."

"I'd say the same about you. Let Ethan take your coat."

Holly reminded herself to stay focused in spite of her nerves. At this moment her end of the contract had come due. Louise had to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that not only was she Ethan's true love, but that he had made the right choice in her.

As Ethan helped his aunt to remove her coat Louise almost lost her balance. A telltale sign of her medical condition. How difficult living with a chronic problem like that must be. Still, Louise had style despite her petite and frail frame. A sheet of thin white hair curled under at her shoulders...her simple dark green dress was the picture of good taste.

She was the type of accomplished woman Holly looked up to. Holly was glad she had chosen to wear the black trousers and gray blouse from the new clothes Ethan had bought her. Even though it was dinner at home, these were not people who dined in jeans.

"Such an unusual silver necklace..." Holly initiated conversation.

Louise looked to Ethan. "Yes, my dear nephew brought it back from...remind me where it was from?"

"Turkey."

"Yes, Istanbul. Ethan always brings me unique trinkets from his travels."

With Louise's head turned toward Ethan, Holly noticed the large bruise across her cheekbone. That must have been from the fall Ethan had said she'd taken last week. Holly understood his wish to shield his aunt from the public eye, with her decline so visible.

"Huh...low...oh..." Louise's husband, Fernando, finally insisted on being acknowledged. Ethan hadn't yet taken his coat, and nor had an introduction been made.

"Yes, Fernando Layne—meet my fiancée, Holly Motta."

"Charmed," Fernando replied, without extending his hand.

"Nice to meet you." Holly rocked back on her heels, unsure how to move on if they weren't going to shake hands.

"Are we having cocktails?" Fernando flung his coat to Ethan.

"Let me mix you something," Ethan offered.

"I know where the drinks are." Fernando rebuffed him and headed to the liquor cabinet.

Ethan had told Holly it was Fernando who had bought this apartment. On behalf of Benton Worldwide and with the company's money, of course. And that he made frequent shopping trips to New York.

Forty-five years old trying to look twenty-five, judging from his slicked-back hair and skinny pants. No doubt Fernando preferred chic New York to less flashy Boston, although Holly couldn't say for sure having never been there. But in an instant she knew that she wouldn't trust Fernando if her life depended on it.

"Louise." Fernando presented his wife with a glass of brown liquor.

She refused. "You know I'm not drinking with the new medications," she said.

"A sparkling water, then." He took the glass and drank it in one tip, then scurried back to the bar to pour Louise some water. Not asking if Holly and Ethan wanted anything.

Fernando's eye caught the painting of Ethan, now on the wall where those impersonal black and white photos had been. "You two have certainly settled in."

Holly bit her lip. If he only knew. About her barging in on Ethan just two days ago... That this apartment Fernando thought was his had become part of Ethan and Holly's agreement... How no one in this room knew that her feelings for Ethan were becoming closer to real rather than the masquerade they were meant to be...

"Did you do this, my dear?" Louise moved toward the painting to take a closer look.

It had turned out well, especially for only an afternoon's work. It was all done in blue—a tribute to the paint color she'd had on her face and hands when she had first rushed into this apartment, expecting it to be empty.

She'd probably had more fun than she should have painting Ethan. What an impressive subject he was. With his upright posture. Finely chiseled jaw. The deep, deep eyes with just a hint of crinkle at the outer corners. And his mouth! That mouth! No wonder it had taken her a few sketches until she got it right. Lips not so full as to be feminine. Lips she longed to explore with her own, not with her paintbrush...

"The first of many to come, I hope." Holly slipped her arm through Ethan's in a way she thought a fiancée in love might. His muscles jumped, but at least he didn't bristle and pull away. "Ethan's not keen on sitting for me."

"He never was," Louise agreed. "Didn't we have to bribe you with sweets in order to get you to stay still for those Christmas portraits every year?"

"I told Holly about that crotchety old painter who smelled of pipe tobacco. She is lucky I was not scarred for life."

Conversational banter. Check. This couldn't be going better.

"I see you captured that distinctive curl of hair over Ethan's forehead," Louise noted.

That curl had captured Holly—not the other way around. The magnificent way his wavy hair spilled over in front. Just a little bit. Just enough...

It was the one thing that wasn't completely tamed and restrained about Ethan. Somehow that curl hinted at the fiery, emotional man she knew lay beneath the custom-made suits and the multi-million-dollar deals.

"I certainly never learned how to paint or draw," Ethan said, with a convincingly proud smile of approval at his fiancée's handiwork.

While they chatted about the painting Fernando moseyed over to Ethan's desk. Out of the corner of her eye, Holly saw him snooping at the papers on top of it.

Fernando was making himself a bit too much at home. Funny that Holly felt territorial after only two days. She knew that Fernando used this apartment frequently. But he didn't keep any of his personal possessions here because other employees and associates of Benton Worldwide also used it when they were in New York.

Still, she didn't think Fernando had the right to be looking at anything Ethan might have put down on the desk. But it wasn't her place to say anything.

"Louise, would you like to sit down at the table?" Holly suggested.

She took Louise's elbow and guided her toward the dining area. Ethan and Fernando followed suit behind them.

Holly overheard Fernando hiss to Ethan, "I know what you're up to. You've found a wife so that Louise will retire and you can take over. If you think I'm going to spend the rest of her life getting sunburned on a boring island, you've got another think coming."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"SO FAR SO GOOD," Holly said as she placed four plates on the kitchen counter so that she and Ethan could begin to serve dinner.

"Except that I had forgotten how much I detest that little Fernando," he retorted.

Holly was only playing the role of soon-to-be member of this unusual family. She shouldn't be privy to the disagreements and resentments that might lie beneath the surface. So it wouldn't be proper for her to ask Ethan what Fernando had meant about not wanting to move to Barbados when Louise retired. Obviously the comment had made Ethan mad.

She removed the lid of the slow cooker. "Where did they meet?"

Speaking in a hushed voice, because Aunt Louise and her man-toy weren't far away at the dining table, Ethan explained. "Our office manager at Headquarters hired him. His title is 'Client Relations Coordinator,' or some such nonsense. He does scarcely more than order fancy coffees for meetings and come here to New York or go to Europe to spend the company's money. Of course I cannot fire him." Ethan gritted his teeth. "As much as I would like to."

With serving utensils, Holly lifted hearty chunks of the pot roast onto each plate. Ethan reached in with a fork to assist her. They worked seamlessly as a team, anticipating each other's moves. Now pros at navigating the square footage of the small kitchen.

"What does she see in him?"

"Companionship. I suppose he makes her feel younger. She was devastated after Uncle Mel died."

"She must miss Mel horribly."

"They were a partnership in more ways than I can count. Not being able to have children brought them even closer. Taking me in was another thing they did together."

With Ethan having witnessed such a solid marriage between his aunt and uncle, Holly wondered why he was so adamant that he himself would never marry for love. What had happened to close him off to the possibility?

Ethan ladled mashed potatoes while Holly spooned gravy on top. "So Fernando has been able to fill the hole left by your uncle's death?"

"Hardly. He could never step into my uncle's shoes. But I will grant that he provides a diversion. Within a year of Uncle Mel's death Aunt Louise began having symptoms of this hereditary neuropathy that she remembers her mother suffering from."

"Losing your husband and developing an illness, one after the other. That's awful."

"She could have sunk into a depression. Fernando at least gives her something to do. He keeps her busy with Boston society dinners and parties on Cape Cod. He will do the same in Barbados. I will remind him that I am the boss as often as I need to. We know a lot of people there. He can develop a social calendar for her."

"Give her things to look forward to?"

"Yes. Without children, there are no grandchildren on the horizon. Although I suppose she assumes you and I will have..." He trailed off.

Children. With Ethan.

The mere thought halted Holly in place. A home of her own. Filled with noise and food and laughter and love. Beautiful toddlers running around with reddish-brown tufts of hair falling onto their foreheads. Tall Ethan reaching down to hold little hands.

Did he ever think about having children?

He'd frozen too, holding a spoon in his hand, also lost in contemplation. Was he picturing the same thing?

He'd be a good father. The way he put so much care and thought into his aunt and what was best for her was like the devotion and concern she had for Vince, having practically raised her brother single-handedly because her mother had proved incapable. She had more of that kind of love to give.

Someday.

It wasn't going to be now.

That was much further far down the line. If ever.

No, this current arrangement was ideal. A new life for herself in New York. Not being pulled down by other people. Putting herself first. Free at last.

Everything was upfront with Ethan. There was zero chance of her being hurt. Zero love. Zero disappointment. So he was intelligent and intense? And gorgeous? That was ultimately irrelevant to the duties at hand. They were two professionals, doing their jobs.

Holly used tongs to crown each dinner plate with roasted carrots. Forging ahead. Although she wished her fingernails weren't spotted with paint.

"We did it. Dinner is served."

As she carried two plates to the dining table, she saw Fernando's hand atop of Louise's. The older woman's face did seem to have a livelier blush with his attention on her. Even if Fernando's intentions were less than honorable, Holly could understand the purpose he filled. Life was all about compromises.

Ethan brought the other two plates. While he poured water she ducked back into the kitchen for rolls and butter before sitting to eat.

"Holly, this is delicious," Louise proclaimed.

"I'm glad you like it. You sound surprised?"

"Indeed. I don't know that Ethan has ever dated a woman before who would know how to make an old-fashioned pot roast."

Ethan leaned to pat Holly's arm. She smiled at the unspoken compliment, as a fiancée should. "Aunt Louise, I have never dated a woman who has likely ever eaten pot roast, let alone prepared it."

"Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"I took a course in cooking classic American comfort food," Holly fibbed, without missing a beat. Louise didn't need to know that if she hadn't taught herself to cook she and Vince wouldn't have eaten. "I'll have to make cheeseburgers for you next time."

"Now, Ethan, dear," Louise said, "you have been keeping your delightful lady a secret. You must tell us everything about where and how you met," she insisted.

Fernando buttered a roll and gobbled it down.

Holly and Ethan, the happy couple, gazed lovingly at each other as if to signal that they were off and running. They'd been rehearsing. Now they'd be put to the test.

"Aunt Louise, I wanted to be absolutely sure of myself before I said anything to you," Ethan began. "Holly's brother is Vince Motta. He works for us in the Miami office."

Aunt Louise listened attentively as she continued eating. Fernando chomped on chunks of meat that he yanked off his fork with his lower teeth.

"It was at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Coconut Grove project," Holly continued. For accuracy, Ethan had filled her in on the details of that luncheon. "We were both reaching for the same shrimp on the buffet table. Our hands touched."

"And it was magic."

Ethan fluttered his eyelashes, which made Holly giggle.

She'd visualized this fairy tale over and over—to the point that now she would have sworn it had actually happened. The elegant outdoor celebration... Her in a pink dress, talking to her brother, Vince, and a couple of his coworkers... After excusing herself she left them to explore the lavish seafood table. And just as she reached for the plumpest, juiciest-looking shrimp on the tray a hand from the opposite direction nabbed the same one.

She tugged on her end of the shrimp, the other hand on the other end, until their fingers intertwined.

They turned to look at each other.

He surrendered the crustacean.

The skies parted.

The angels cascaded down from heaven playing trumpets.

“It was love at first shrimp...” They sighed in unison.

“How romantic.” Louise was sufficiently charmed.

“We talked for hours that afternoon.” Ethan laid it on thick. “But then I had to board a plane for Bangkok.”

“We didn’t see each other again for months.”

Caught up in their “reminiscing,” they moved their faces toward each other. Involuntarily. As if pulled together by a magnet.

Ethan bent in and brought his mouth to Holly’s. Only it wasn’t a feather-soft fake dinner kiss, meant to convince his aunt. No, his unexpected lips were bold. And hot. And they smashed against hers.

Their insistence didn’t let her pull away. She swirled inside. Got lost in the moment. Let it go on several beats too many.

Until she could finally separate herself from him.

Holly feared that everyone at the table could hear her heart pounding outside her chest.

Ethan looked as shocked as she felt. But after a moment he picked up his fork and resumed eating. Following his lead, she did the same.

Fortunately neither Louise nor Fernando had noticed anything strange. Holly and Ethan were engaged, after all. Why wouldn’t they spontaneously kiss?

But he wasn’t helping her any with a kiss like that. Let that be a warning to her.

Louise inquired, “Are your people from Miami, dear?”

Holly barely had a moment to catch her breath—nowhere near enough time to recover from that inebriating kiss before there came the next flaming hoop she had to jump through. She didn’t have “people.” And the people she did have she needed to keep a secret. Her people were not Benton kind of people.

“No. Fort Pierce.”

“Fort Pierce?” Fernando tossed back.

Certainly not the kind of stylish metropolis full of chic hotels, South Beach beauties and all-night parties that would interest him.

“We met again last year here in New York, when Holly was exhibiting paintings at a Soho gallery,” Ethan fibbed to move their story forward.

“Then wasn’t the next time when you came down and we visited Key West?”

He leaned over to brush the side of her cheek with the back of his hand. “It was then that I knew for sure.”

His tender touch across Holly’s face made it a struggle to keep her eyes open. Especially after that not so gentle kiss had rocked her to the bone.

Ethan sensed he had made her uncomfortable. “More water, anyone?” he said quickly, refilling glasses without waiting for an answer.

Thankfully giving her a moment to regroup.

After a couple of quiet sips Holly ventured, “I’m so happy we’re finally together in New York. I haven’t been here in five years.”

Ethan, Louise and Fernando all looked at her.

Oh, no! Oh! No!

Fernando’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you said you had a painting exhibition here last year?”

Gulp. Ethan's soft stroke to her face had thrown her off course. Let her talk before she thought.

Dead silence. Which was finally broken by the sound of a fax coming in on Ethan's desk.

"I meant that I haven't explored the city in years." Holly took a shot. "That was a work trip. I hardly left the gallery."

"Shall we have dessert?" Ethan did his best to defuse the moment.

"Let me help you, dear." Louise slowly rose and followed Ethan into the kitchen.

Fernando kept his glare on Holly one uncomfortable moment longer before he shot up to strut to the liquor cabinet.

Left at the table, Holly stood and began clearing the dishes. Not knowing how badly she had messed things up. Whether Ethan would be furious with her or sympathetic over her flub. Unsure if anyone had bought her quick cover-up.

Louise, even with her reduced ability, had offered to help Ethan with dessert in the kitchen. She must want to say something to him that she didn't want Holly to hear.

Careful not to interrupt Ethan and his aunt's private conversation, she stacked the dirty plates and brushed crumbs off the table. The dessert dishes and silverware were on a side shelf, so she set those out.

The evening had been going so nicely. Louise seemed to like her. Hopefully Holly hadn't unraveled everything with one slip of the tongue.

With each passing minute Holly had come to like the idea of being Ethan's pretend fiancée more and more. She wanted to make this work. To have the art commission and a place to live. It was a peculiar arrangement, for sure, but a better starting point for a new life than she could ever have imagined. At almost thirty, it was time for her to rewind and reboot. Put the bad choices—Ricky—and the bad luck—her mother—behind her.

When Ethan had sweetened the deal by agreeing to use his influence to help her brother, Vince, get a promotion, Holly had had to roll the dice and give it a try. Ethan had said he couldn't make any promises, but Holly knew Vince was a hard and devoted worker who could easily manage additional responsibilities. She'd never forgive herself if her mistake tonight had done anything to endanger his chances of success.

And, wow, she was going to have to lay down some ground rules about her physical interactions with Ethan. She was shocked at how she was drawn to him almost hypnotically, easily touching his arm and lightly laying a hand on the small of his back as if it was no big deal. Like a fiancée would.

But that kiss had shown her how quickly things could go too far. His mouth on hers had dizzied her, made her lose track of her thoughts, forget the company she was in. Ethan's lips were dangerous weapons. They could completely daze her, leave her woozy and unable to do the job he had hired her for.

What she needed was to figure out a system whereby his touch had no effect on her. She'd work that out. This was playacting, after all.

The dessert and coffee dishes set, an odd sight greeted Holly when she turned around from the table. Fernando was again in front of Ethan's desk. This time he was peering at the fax they had just heard come through. His eyes widened and he snatched the piece of paper from the machine, folded it and slid it into his pocket. Not noticing that Holly was watching.

Because Fernando supposedly spent a lot of time in this apartment, the fax might be something he was expecting. But it irked her that he was again hovering around the paperwork and personal items that Ethan had spread out on the desk. However, she didn't know all the facts. He was Louise's husband. She couldn't question him even though she wanted to. She was a hired hand who didn't know what went on in this family.

She had already screwed up. Her job right now was to keep her nose down. And do her best to salvage the rest of the evening.

* * *

Ethan's arm around Holly's shoulder, they said goodbye to Louise and Fernando as the elevator door closed.

Back in the apartment, Ethan clenched his fist in victory. "Success!"

"Do you think everything went all right? I was so worried. And then I bungled up about not having spent time in New York."

"You recovered. Aunt Louise adored you instantly."

"She did?"

"In the kitchen she told me she could tell right away that you had good character and were not out for our money or the family name."

"If she only knew..."

Ethan mused on that truth.

Together they cleared the remains of the apple crisp and cinnamon-flavored coffee. The kitchen looked as if they had just fed a hundred people. Dirty pots and pans were strewn on every available surface. The sink was stacked with plates. Spills puddled on the countertops.

"I will pay the housekeeper triple to clean this tomorrow!" Ethan said.

"Do you want to go out?" Holly asked.

"Out? Right now?"

"Yes. It's not that late. And I'm full of nervous energy."

Ethan contemplated the idea. Aunt Louise had started to tire so easily the dinner had been over even earlier than expected. "Where would you like to go?"

"Show me some of the Benton buildings in New York."

He whipped out his phone.

Ten minutes later they were curbside as Leonard pulled up in the town car. It was a dry but very cold evening. Holly wore that favorite black leather jacket, and looked utterly lovable with a red beanie, scarf and gloves. Ethan didn't bring a hat, but dressed warmly with his own brown leather jacket and wool scarf.

Once they'd pulled away from the building Ethan recited to Leonard a quick list of addresses and the tour commenced. As usual, his driver maneuvered the car deftly through the always-present Manhattan traffic.

Holly had had the right idea. The crisp night was invigorating.

Or maybe she was the cause of the vigor he felt.

She had played her part to a tee at dinner, and he was sure Aunt Louise suspected nothing of his ruse. How fragile his dearly loved aunt had looked tonight. With those bruises on her face from the tumble she'd taken—in front of employees, no less—at Benton headquarters.

He plugged a reminder into his phone to hire an expert makeup artist for the gala.

But a nagging complication had plagued him throughout dinner. Nothing about the evening had felt fake. Everything had come naturally. From their comfortable banter to the way he and Holly had served the food together and the electrifying kiss they'd shared while telling the story of how they met.

Moment after moment had passed when he had almost forgotten this was a charade. Worse still, the feeling had filled him with a jarring elation and contentment.

This was new territory and it petrified him. He'd never given serious thought to a real-life real wife, and now was not the time to start. Concentrating on moving Aunt Louise into retirement and moving the company into a more charitable direction was plenty for the foreseeable future. Plus, he had vowed long ago never to be swayed into forgetting one critical fact.

Women were not to be trusted.

Aunt Louise was the only exception in his life. Didn't he know that well enough?

All—and that meant all—the women he had ever dated had betrayed him. Society girls, daughters of noblemen and businesswomen alike. They might have approached him as a colleague.

Or cozied up to him as the wholesome girl-next-door. Others had come on stronger and seduced him with sexual wiles.

Not that he hadn't gone along with them.

He'd satisfied his urges. Indulged in temptations.

Several of them quite memorable.

Yes, maybe a few of them had made him imagine going past three dates or three weeks. But in the end they had always showed their true colors. They hadn't been who they'd said they were. Even some of their body parts hadn't been real. They had all been something other than what they had seemed. Out for something. A piece of him.

And his mother—his own mother—had been the worst offender of them all. That a woman could turn her back on her own son for personal gain was a hurt he'd do well to remember for the rest of his life. Apparently women were capable of the unthinkable.

So, even though his aunt sensed that Holly's intentions were good, he mustn't forget that they were performing in a play. All he could really know was that Holly was a competent actress. Instinct told him that this enchanting woman had a kind heart and honorable aims. But he'd only known her for a couple of days. She might prove herself to be just like the others. And there was plenty she could be hiding. Ethan hadn't received the background probe from his security chief yet.

"This is the Seventy-Fourth Street development we did about a decade ago." He pointed out the window when they reached their first destination. "Leonard, can you pull over to the curb?"

Lit from within, the gleaming glass tower shot upward into the night sky. Ethan leaned close to Holly, beside him in the backseat, to show off some details.

"We did the first story with a wider base, and then the remaining twenty-nine floors in a slender tower coming up in the middle. The larger platform of the first level allows for greenery to encircle building."

"Is the first-story garden accessible?" Holly asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes. It was designed so that employees in the offices can go outside into green space whenever they want."

Their next destination was Forty-First Street.

"This one is over twenty-five years old. It was the last project my father worked on before he died. Here they had the issue of erecting new construction in between two buildings from the nineteen-thirties," he explained.

"New York is amazing like that, isn't it?" Holly seemed to understand him.

"You can see that we did not build right up against the buildings on either side. We created those cement walkways and benches." He pointed. "We built our structure thinner than we might have, so that occupants in the buildings on either side could still see out of their windows."

Ethan was enjoying this tremendously. He was so proud of what his father, Uncle Mel and Aunt Louise had produced. He loved to visit the Benton properties that his father had helped construct. They were all he had left of his dad. Steel, glass and concrete. But they were monuments that would endure for years to come.

They rode downtown to look at a low-rise housing development near the East River. Holly asked a million questions about why a door was placed where it was and what materials had been used for what.

Next was a refurbishment in Greenwich Village from the eighteen-nineties. "We spent a fortune on those windows!"

"They look original." Holly nodded in appreciation.

"That was the idea."

Then Ethan had Leonard park curbside in front of the massive Chelsea construction zone. The steel skeleton columns were up for all five buildings. Architectural renderings of what the finished project would look like were hung on fences and announced it to be "Benton Chelsea Plaza."

"This is all one property?" Holly was surprised by the size of the site.

"Five buildings of living, working and retail space. And I have commissioned a talented and, I might add, beautiful painter to do the artwork for the public spaces."

"The Chelsea project! This is it!"

Despite the cold, she lowered the car window and jutted out half of her torso to get a better view. Ethan bent forward to get an arm in front of her and pointed out some features.

Although he'd make sure Aunt Louise received the accolades, this venture was really all his. He'd made the difficult decisions and agonized over the setbacks. He knew this endeavor would have made Uncle Mel and his father proud if they had been alive to see it. And it would allow Aunt Louise to go into retirement on a high note.

His chest pressed into Holly's back as he pointed through the window. Impulse ordered him to move her scarf aside, so that he could kiss the back of her neck. Sheer will kept him from doing so. But it was being sorely tested in this close proximity.

It wasn't difficult to envision losing power over himself in an instant and laying her down on the car seat, climbing on top of her and delving into her softness. A softness he might not ever be able to return from.

Which was not at all part of their deal.

In fact, that kiss at dinner had been much too much. He himself had been startled by the force of it. He could sense it had unbalanced Holly as well.

He'd only meant to enhance their charade with some harmless and sanctioned affection. Prior to that his "guard and defend" strategy had helped him withstand her casual pats on his arm and his back all evening. Yet his own lips had barely touched hers when they'd begun to demand more, and he hadn't restrained himself in time. That kiss had been out of the scope of what was necessary in both intensity and duration.

His actions had overpowered him—a phenomenon he wasn't accustomed to. Lesson learned.

He forced himself back to describing the project. "For Building One we have leases for three fine dining restaurants and a food court of six casual establishments."

"So all that open space will be outdoor seating?"

"Exactly. And we will have a retractable awning with heating units for the colder months."

"I can imagine it."

He continued telling her about the plaza's features. As with everything Benton Worldwide built, Ethan hoped to live up to architecture's fundamental principle of providing a building with both form and function for its users.

"I just thought of one other building I would like to take you to see. It is not a Benton property, but I think you will agree it has merit."

* * *

"You've brought me to the Empire State Building?" As she and Ethan got out of the car Holly craned her neck up at the monolith.

"As long as we were looking at New York architecture," he said, nodding, "I thought we ought to give this grand dame her due."

Taking her hand, Ethan led her into the Art Deco lobby, with its twenty-four-karat gold ceiling murals and marble walls. "Whew!" she whistled.

"Do you want to go up to the top?" he asked.

"Heck, yes."

But as they rode the escalator up one floor to the ticketing level memory slapped Holly hard.

She didn't mention to Ethan that she had been here once before. With Ricky. They'd come to New York for a long summer weekend. Stayed in a cheap hotel room in New Jersey.

The Empire State Building had been one of the sights Holly had most wanted to see on their trip. The weather had been hot and humid and the ticket lines crowded with tourists. Unlike tonight —late on a winter Wednesday.

Ricky had got impatient. He'd wanted a beer. He'd tugged her back down to street level, found a bar and that had been the last Holly had seen of the Empire State Building.

"Are you nervous about the elevator ride up?" Ethan asked, reacting to what must be showing on her face.

"No! I was just...um...let's go!"

Rocketing into the sky, Holly felt excitement pump through her veins. She was happy to leave old memories as far behind as she was leaving the asphalt of Thirty-Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue.

When they reached the top Ethan guided her quickly through the indoor viewpoints and exhibits to the outside observation deck.

And there it was.

Three hundred and sixty degrees of New York in the dazzling clear night.

It was utterly freezing. Two sorts of chills ran through her—one from the cold and the other sheer awe.

"Oh. My. Gosh." That was all she could say.

The city was so glorious, with the grid of its streets, the grandeur of its buildings and the galaxies of its lights.

They passed a few other visitors as they circled the deck. Holly gawked at Times Square. At Central Park. The Chrysler Building. The Statue of Liberty. The Hudson River.

She begged for a second lap around. "Let's take selfies!" She grinned as she pulled out her phone.

"You look very beautiful," Ethan said in a husky voice. "Your cheeks are pink from the cold."

She sensed him watching her more than he was looking at the views. He'd seen the sight of Manhattan before. It was probably all ho-hum to a global traveler like him. He had seen all the wonders of the world. And was probably amused at Holly's enthusiasm.

But he gamely put his arm around her and they posed to get photos with the skyline behind them, the Brooklyn Bridge in the distance. Holly surrendered the phone to him, to lift it higher than she could. He clicked several shots.

As he handed the phone back to her he kissed her on the cheek.

"I am so sorry." He backed away. "I did not mean to do that. I have no idea why I did."

"Maybe because a million romantic movie scenes have taken place right here?"

"Yes, that must be it. My apologies. It will not happen again."

She braved it and said what she wanted to say. "Actually, I'm glad you did. At dinner in front of your aunt and Fernando I got so flustered when you kissed me. I think I'll need to practice physical contact with you until it feels more expected."

She wasn't sure if she had really said that out loud or merely thought it. Rehearse kissing Ethan? That was insane.

"You might be right."

He moved in front of her so they were face to face. With her back to the observation deck's railing. The glistening city behind her.

Her breath sputtered. "In order to be convincing..."

Ethan arched down and brushed his mouth ever so slightly against hers. A wisp of his breath warmed her lips when he asked, "So, for example, you need to practice doing that?"

"Uh-huh," she squeaked out.

Why did he have to be so attractive? This would be much easier if she had become the fake fiancée of an unappealing man who didn't ignite her inside.

Clearly practice was all that was needed. Practice would make perfect. Eventually she'd become numb to him. Kissing would be a choreographed action they'd perform like trained seals.

She was sure of it.

"What about this?" he taunted, and more strength applied a firmer kiss to her lips.

A jolt shot up her back. Her hips rocked forward uncontrollably.

"I... I..." She struggled to take in a complete breath. "I think I need to work on that one."

She tilted her head back for mercy.

Giving her none, he took both sides of her face in his two hands and drew her to him. He kissed her yet again. Harder. Longer.

"Do we need to rehearse this?"

Now he'd opened his mouth. And he didn't stop there. The tip of his tongue parted her lips. Forced her tongue to meet his. Drove her to take. Give. Insist on more.

A dark moan rumbled from low in his gut.

A group of tourists strode past, ignoring them and pointing out landmarks in spirited voices. Holly couldn't see them. Ethan was all she could see.

His hands slid from the sides of her face slowly down her arms to the tips of her fingers. His lips traced across her jaw and then he murmured into her neck, "Do you think an engaged couple might need to kiss like that on occasion?"

"I do," she whispered.

He took hold of her hips and crushed himself into her. Pinned her back against the railing. She stretched her arms up around his neck, going pliant and yielding against the steel of his body.

With New York as her witness, he kissed her again and again and again. Until they had only one heartbeat. Until there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that this was a couple who were deeply in love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLOATING ON A CLOUD. Ethan had heard that saying before but this was the first time he'd experienced what it meant. Yes, his physical body lay on the uncomfortable leather sofa that was too small to stretch out on. But his heart and soul wafted above him in a silken, curvy vision he never wanted to wake from.

Of course, real sleep eluded him. It seemed an utter waste of time when Holly Motta was in the world. Sleep would just be hours and minutes spent away from thinking about her. What if, during sleep, his subconscious drifted away from the cocoon of her embrace? No, sleep was not time well spent. Not when instead he could linger in this half-daze, filled with the memory of her velvety lips on his and her long arms wrapped around him.

Though reality nagged at him.

After that mind-bending interlude of kissing at the Empire State Building they both knew that something unintentional, inappropriate and very dangerous had passed between them. Something they were going to need to backtrack from. To run from. And to return themselves to the "strictly business" contract they had made.

During the car ride afterward they'd chit-chatted about the architecture of a couple of noteworthy buildings along the way. Once they'd got home Holly hadn't been able to get away from him fast enough. She'd emerged from the bathroom in a tee shirt and pajama shorts, poured herself a glass of water, voiced a quick good-night and then rapped the bedroom door closed with her foot.

Ethan hoped that she was in his bed, resting in peaceful sleep. At least one of them ought to be. If he was being honest, he also hoped that she was having sweet dreams about him. Just as he was drifting in his trance about her.

As the endless night wore on Ethan's elation turned to irritation. This was not what he'd signed up for. Lying awake thinking about a woman? No deal!

He couldn't afford to have that kind of preoccupation in his life. None of his plans included a woman.

Sure, he could enjoy the company of the exotic and enticing females that his travels put him in contact with. That was a game he could play indefinitely. He wanted something from them that they'd readily give in exchange for a taste of his affluence and the limelight. Then they would want more and he would move on. He knew the routine well.

For all his aunt's prodding, Ethan hadn't ever truly acknowledged the possibility of really devoting himself to someone and building an inner circle with them. A private life together. Not after what he'd seen of the world. Not after his mother.

Blasted Holly! She'd exploded into his life and detonated every stronghold he held.

Worse still, to all intents and purposes he had reached the point of no return with her. He'd already introduced her to Aunt Louise. The gala was in three days. It would be a huge setback to back out now.

There was no choice but to see this through. However, once his aunt had stepped down and was securely ensconced in the warm Barbados sand, Ethan might have to cut the Holly engagement short. He couldn't take much more of this.

Uncle Mel had taught him that admitting and analyzing his mistakes was the crucial first step toward moving forward. Ethan had made a grave error in misjudging his own ability to keep this a purely business transaction.

Or perhaps it was just Holly. He'd chosen the wrong person for the job.

Holly was testimony that his aunt and uncle might be right—that an authentic love might be out there in the world for him. A love that was worth bowing to and sacrificing for. That defined his future and ordered everything else to work around it.

Which was not at all where Ethan was headed.

Argh! The road not taken... If only he had stuck to his original plan to hire an actress. She'd have been a consummate professional who knew exactly how to separate reality from performance. Her expertise would have shown him the way.

Just for torture, he flicked on a lamp and snatched his tablet from the coffee table. He clicked onto the website of the talent agency where he had located his original choice. The—unfortunately for him—pregnant Penelope Perkins. The website featured headshot photos of the talent they represented. Tap on the photo and a short bio appeared.

Ethan leaned back on the couch and studied Sienna Freeman. A willowy redhead with a daisy in her hair. An inquiring click told him that she had performed at regional theatres throughout the country, portraying the ingénue in famous American musicals. She looked as if she could have easily been groomed to play the fiancée in Ethan's little domestic drama. A sweet-faced young woman.

Trouble was, she wasn't Holly.

Gabrielle Rivera was a temptress with dark hair and crimson lips. A substantial list of her appearances in television comedies and commercials proved she was capable of working in a wide range of situations. Gabrielle would probably handle herself beautifully at important occasions. A fine choice.

Her fatal flaw? She wasn't Holly.

Glamazon Zara Reed was picture-perfect for a socialite wife. With her blond tresses swept into an up-do, Zara looked born to hang on a wealthy man's arm. Add in her master's degree in psychology and small roles in quirky films, and you had one convincing package. A jaw-dropper.

But—poor Zara. She simply wasn't Holly.

Enough! Ethan put the tablet down, turned off the light and attempted his now customary bent position on the sofa. Every molecule in his body screamed Holly's name.

He tossed until dawn, exhausted and annoyed.

* * *

Ethan came into the kitchen after he'd showered. Holly was picking at the apple crisp from the baking dish they had managed to stick in the refrigerator last night after Aunt Louise and Fernando had left.

Before they'd gone out looking at buildings. And at each other.

He joined her in scavenging through the mess of the kitchen for breakfast. "Is there coffee?"

She nodded. Once again, the cramped space was making her uneasy. Holly winced at every accidental slide against Ethan's starched white shirt or suit pants as she prepared two cups of java.

There had been quite enough touching him last night. She needed a break.

With him carrying the coffee, she followed him to the table with the apple crisp. She licked bits off her fingers as she folded herself into a chair.

"We could use forks," he suggested, "like evolved humans."

"Sorry if I'm not civilized enough for you."

"I did not say that."

He imitated her by gnawing his own fingerful of the leftover desert. Trying to make her laugh. Unsuccessfully.

Not that he didn't look cute doing it.

"I think it's obvious," she sneered.

Truth was, she was more than a little ticked off at what had happened last night at the Empire State Building. Even though she had asked for it. But how dare he kiss her like that if it didn't mean anything to him? That went way beyond the call of duty in this assignment she'd consented to.

Of course she'd had her part in it. She certainly hadn't pushed him away. The opposite, in fact. His kisses had fed a vital nutrient into her body that she had been starved of for so long she hadn't even known she was ravenous for it.

Nonetheless, she was still furious at him for stoking that hunger.

"What I think is obvious..." he paused for a sip of coffee "...is that you are angry at me and I do not know why."

"Welcome to marriage."

"No surprise I have steered clear of it."

She undid and redid her ponytail, buying a moment to regroup. Deciding to be honest.

"We went too far last night."

"I agree completely," he replied quickly.

"You do?"

His kisses hadn't offered any apology. They had been the kisses of a man entitled to his desires, who confidently took them with no cause for second guesses.

"Clearly we need to define the parameters of our physical contact," he stated, as if he was discussing an architectural floor plan. "It is important that we keep any sentiment out of the framework."

Was he admitting that he had felt as much as she had in that transcendental swirl of urgent kisses and intimate embraces? Or was he scolding her for crossing boundaries?

"It's my fault," she said, strategizing. "I asked you for some practice kissing because I don't want us to appear awkward in front of other people."

He took a minute to measure her words, carefully contemplating them before he responded.

"We simply got carried away," he concluded. "We will not do it again."

Inexplicably, her heart crashed to the floor. Which made no sense—because not passionately kissing Ethan Benton again was exactly what did need to happen.

"Right..." she granted. Yet sadness ricocheted between her ears.

As a diffuser, she munched on another chunk of the apple dessert.

Clearly no longer interested in the leftovers, Ethan reached for his phone. He ignored her to swipe, read and type.

She looked at her painting of him on the wall. She had never painted Ricky, nor the other couple of men she had dated. None of them had gotten under her skin like Ethan had. Filling her not only with the inclination but with the outright necessity to bring her brush to his likeness.

Ethan was like the multi-faceted diamond she wore on her finger. Every way she turned she saw something new. Something more. Something unexpected. Something unfathomable. She could paint him a hundred times and still not be done.

Eventually he glanced up and observed her, as if maybe he had forgotten she was in the room.

"So. Shall we establish some ground rules?"

"O-okay," she stumbled, unsure where he was going with this.

"I believe we will need to kiss on occasion. We will certainly want a convincing display of affection at the shareholders' gala, when our engagement is announced."

Holly braced herself, suddenly unsure if she was really going to be able to go through with this charade. She felt ill-suited to the task. It was too much.

"I think it will be beneficial for us to define what type of kissing is necessary," he continued.

"Absolutely," she bluffed, shifting in her seat.

"For example, I see no need for our tongues to touch, as they did last night."

Well, that was for sure. Her head and heart couldn't afford any more kisses like last night's. The kind that made a girl forget that she was only an employee of the most compelling and sexy man she had ever met. A man who had made it clear that he had hired her to help him protect his aunt, the only woman he'd ever love.

A fact she'd be wise to keep in the forefront of her mind.

Which his kisses completely clouded.

"Got it—no tongues." She nodded once and reached her hand across the table to shake his in a gentlemen's agreement.

Ethan's mouth hooked up as he shook her hand. He was amused by her gesture of sportsmanship.

Except he didn't let go of her hand after the shake. In fact he fought to keep it like a possession he'd battle to the ground for. He turned it over and caressed the tops of her fingers with the pad of his thumb.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't press your body into mine." Holly yanked her hand free and continued. She sparked at the memory of last night's six feet and three inches of solid manpower searing into her.

"How far away shall I stand?" he asked, holding his thumb and forefinger apart as a measurement. "This far?"

"Further than that."

Widening the gap between his fingers, he tilted his head. "This far?"

"At least."

"And would that be all of my body? Or just certain parts?"

Oh, Lordy, he was mocking her.

"Probably all parts." She kept going. "Of course we should have friendly hugs, but nothing prolonged."

"Shall I program a timer?" He smirked.

She lifted her palms in surrender. "Look, it was your idea to lay down some guidelines."

"You are right. I did not realize how ludicrous it would sound stated aloud." He abruptly stood and gathered his phone, tablet, keys and wallet. "For the moment we need not be concerned about our proximity to each other. My schedule today is filled with appointments."

With that, he turned toward the front door. Holly shifted her eyes to spy him putting on his suit jacket followed by his overcoat. He picked up a roll of architectural blueprints that had been propped up beside the door, and out he went.

Holly wasn't exactly sure why a sharp tear stung her cheek.

* * *

The left side needed more of the muddy purple she had mixed. Holly dipped thin bristles into the unusual color and applied them to her canvas. When they'd been at the art supply store Ethan had insisted on buying her a full range of brushes—a luxury she wasn't used to. She flicked tiny lines with a brush that was ideal for the task of depicting the rain outside.

Music blared from her phone—a pop singer belting on about how it was time to move on from a man who had done her wrong.

A wild sprawl of buildings and weather... Holly couldn't decide whether or not she liked this painting. It didn't matter, though. The important thing was the doing.

Painting had always been Holly's best friend. It had kept her alive during a tumultuous childhood with an unstable mother and a man she'd called her father whom she had seen so few times she could count them on her fingers. Painting had got her through a disaster of a marriage to a selfish man-child. And then through an ugly divorce.

Painting was her escape. Her entertainment. Her coping mechanism. Her voice. Her salvation.

Early on, her brother, Vince, had found sports. And she'd discovered canvas and color. It was unimaginable where they'd be without those outlets.

In the past few years she had been fortunate enough to have been able to make some money creating artwork for paying clients. But in times of trouble she still picked up her brush purely for emotional release. For safety. For comfort.

Which was what was required now. Because she was disturbed and confused. Art gave her a little bit of a sanctuary in an unpredictable world.

So she had re-created her little studio area after packing it up for Louise and Fernando's visit last night. And she'd got back to work.

As often happened when she was painting, her problems became evident.

She had developed strong feelings for Ethan. And if that wasn't bad enough, she sensed the same might be happening for him.

How he managed to be so volatile while remaining so formal she'd never understand. He was in control of himself, yet there was a barely masked vulnerability there. Manners and restraint mixed with something brutal and pounding.

Those kisses atop the Empire State Building had come from somewhere organic inside him. Beyond rational intent. That kind of intensity couldn't have been plotted.

In spite of that he would never care for her as anything more than an employee. Plain and simple. Even if he did, he would clamp his emotions down and lock them away as soon as he acknowledged them. He was too strong and too true ever to be swayed once he'd made a decision.

A means to an end. That was all she was to him.

And he to her.

Her phone buzzed.

"Ethan, here."

"Hi."

"I wanted to apologize for making light of your concerns about what physical interaction between us would be appropriate."

"I just don't want to mess up at the gala. I'm worried I'm going to get flustered, like I did at dinner last night. I want everything to go right for you and your plan for Aunt Louise."

"I agree that we could use more training sessions where we are surrounded by other people. I have a charity event to attend tonight. You and I will go together. As colleagues."

That was a terrific idea. She wanted to fulfill her end of the contract and make this arrangement work with Ethan. He was offering her the door into a New York that she could never open on her own. How hard could it be? He'd contracted her for a job that she was capable of doing. She just needed to keep the right mindset, purpose and goals.

An evening as colleagues. Perfect.

A couple of hours later the building's doorman knocked and handed Holly a delivery. She thanked him and carried the large white box to the table. Untying the gold ribbon that gave the box the appearance of a gift, she lifted the lid. A notecard was tucked on top of the gold tissue paper concealing the contents.

Tiny dress. Warm coat.

See you at the dock.

Ethan.

She unfolded the tissue to discover a black sequined party dress. It was sinfully short, with thin straps and a scooped back. Holly sucked in an audible whoosh of air. She couldn't believe that Ethan had sent her this sexy slip of a dress. Was this what his colleagues wore?

Tingles exploded all over her body.

For all the clothes he had already purchased for her, he must have thought none of them were just right for the charity event he was taking her to tonight.

Anticipation rocketed through her.

The warm coat—cream-colored, in a heavy wool—he had already bought her. The reference to a dock must mean they were going to be on or near a boat. The mystery of it felt hopelessly romantic, even though with Ethan she knew it wasn't. Nonetheless, she could hardly wait until nightfall.

Leonard picked her up at the scheduled time and transported her to the Battery Park dock where Ethan was waiting to open the car door. He extended his hand to help her out of the car. It was chilly, but there was no rain, and she wore her coat open over the new dress. Admittedly to show it off.

"Thank you, Leonard," Ethan called to his driver and closed the passenger door. To Holly he said, after a leisurely once-over, "I knew you would look stunning in that."

Their eyes met. She smiled. The left side of his mouth curved up.

"Shall we?" He offered his bent arm and she slipped hers through. But then he glanced down and stopped with caution. "Oh. Right." He lightly touched her engagement ring. "I generally do not bring a date to events like this. Because our arrangement—rather, our engagement—will not be announced until the gala, would you mind terribly...?" His voice trailed out.

"No, of course not," she responded, hoping he didn't see the rush of disappointment sweep across her.

She slithered the diamond off her finger. She also hoped that, in the moonlight, he hadn't noticed that she'd been unable to remove every fleck of paint from her cuticles. She'd scrubbed her hands raw, but this was the best she could do. With any luck the stylists he'd hired to spruce her up for the gala would have some magic tricks up their sleeves.

"Shall I keep it?" he asked, and he took the ring from her and secured it in his pocket before she'd had a chance to answer. "I will introduce you as a coworker. We can have the evening to practice being comfortable with each other's company in public and nothing more."

"Exactly."

He presented his bent arm to her again. "All aboard."

As they ascended the gangway, Ethan waved politely to a few people, this way and that.

"Who was that?" Holly asked. "Where are we going?"

"Tonight is a fund-raiser for a private organization I belong to that supports maintenance of the Statue of Liberty as state funding is not sufficient. We will cruise to Liberty Island. The vantage point is spectacular. I think you will enjoy it."

The yacht set off into the New York Harbor, away from lower Manhattan. Champagne was passed on trays. Ethan and Holly mingled with a few guests onboard, sharing mainly superficial banter.

He introduced her as part of his interior design team and she shook a few hands. When they were out of anyone's earshot he instructed, "You can discuss the Chelsea Plaza project. Tell people you are currently analyzing the requirements. That you are handling the art, and much will depend on what materials the furnishings are made of."

During their next chat, around a standing cocktail table, the project came up. Holly interjected with, "We are assessing how people will move through the public spaces."

Ethan subtly nodded his approval. Holly was grateful for the positive reinforcement. She had never interacted with these mega-rich type of people before. Many of them were older than her—men in dark suits and women in their finest jewels. Wall Street leaders, heads of corporations, prominent doctors and lawyers. All of whom, apparently, with their charity dollars, were helping to keep the Statue of Liberty standing proud.

There would probably be many more people like this at the shareholders' gala on Saturday. Ethan had been smart to bring Holly here, so she could get a taste of this world she knew nothing about.

As they ferried closer to Liberty, Ethan led Holly to the yacht's railing to gain the best view.

"She is amazing."

Holly could only gawk up at the massive copper statue, famously green with its patina of age. From the spikes of Liberty's crown—which Ethan had told her represented rays of light—to the broken chain at her feet symbolizing freedom, she was a towering monument to emancipation. And her torch was a beacon of enlightenment.

Lady Liberty seemed to speak directly to Holly tonight. Holly looked into her eyes and pleaded for her wisdom and guidance.

"'Give me your tired, your poor...' Isn't that poem about this statue?" she asked Ethan.

"The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus."

"'Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.'" Holly had been suffocating in Florida. All her ghosts were there. "Maybe in New York I can breathe."

"What has constricted you?"

Making up for her mother's failings, with no father in the picture. Protecting her brother. Appeasing her explosive ex-husband.

"Where I come from nobody thinks big. Everyone is just trying to survive one more day."

Ethan moved a bit closer to Holly. They stood side by side while the yacht circled Liberty, allowing them to observe her from every angle.

"Fate has such irony. I know so many people who have everything," he said, "and yet it means nothing to them."

"Gratitude is its own gift."

He smiled wryly and nodded.

"As I mentioned, after Aunt Louise retires I plan to move Benton Worldwide's new construction solely into housing ventures for disadvantaged people. I like giving houses rather than just money. Because I can supply the knowledge and the labor to build them properly."

Colored lights began to flash on the deck and a band started playing in the dining room. Guests progressed to make their way inside the boat.

Ethan didn't move, and Holly stayed beside him as the boat turned and the tall buildings of Manhattan returned to their view.

"I have seen so much poverty in the world," Ethan continued musingly. "People living in shacks. In tents. In cardboard boxes. If I can help some of them have a safe and permanent home I will have accomplished something."

"You can only imagine what a house might mean to someone who doesn't have one." Holly knew about that first-hand, having moved from place to place so many times as a child.

"In any case..." Ethan shrugged "...for all my supposed wealth and success, giving is the only thing that is truly satisfying."

Once all the other guests had filed inside, Ethan gestured for Holly to follow him in. At the dining tables they sat with some older couples who were discussing a landscaping project for the grounds around the statue.

When the band began a tamer version of a funky song that Holly loved, she stood and reached her hand down for Ethan's. "May I have this dance, sir?"

Ethan's signature smile made its slow journey from the left to the right side of his mouth. He stood and followed her onto the dance floor, where they joined some other couples.

She faced him and began to swing her hips back and forth to the music. When her hips jutted left, her head tipped right. Then she flung her head left and he hips responded to the right. Like ocean waves, her body became one undulating flow. Back and forth. Back and forth.

The dress was slinky against her skin. She loved how it swung a little with every move she made. From what she could surmise in Ethan's watchful eyes, he liked the movement of the dress, too.

At first he just rotated one shoulder forward and then the other, in a tentative sashay. But after a bit any self-consciousness dissolved and he let his body gyrate freely to the beat of the music.

He had a natural rhythm—just as Holly had known he would. It was part of that primitive side of him—the part he kept hidden away. The part she wished she could access.

Their eyes locked and their movements synchronized until they were undeniably dancing together.

There was no doubt of their attraction to each other. But they were doing a very good job of keeping the evening friendly and nothing more, just as planned.

As a matter of fact, when he had been talking on the deck earlier, about the good feeling of giving, it had been as if Holly was an old pal he could confide in. Pals were good.

Which was why when the band switched to a slow song Holly turned to leave the dance floor. Slow dances weren't for buddies.

But a strong arm circled her waist.

"This doesn't fit in with our no touching policy this evening." Holly shook her head in resistance.

Ethan pulled her toward him and into a firm clinch. He secured her against him with a wide palm on her back.

Her breath hiccupped. Tonight was supposed to be time off from physical contact with him. After their intimacy at the Empire State Building last night had gone far outside the realm of their contract. Tonight, the last thing Holly needed was to have her face pressed against his neck, with the smell of his skin and his laundered shirt intoxicating her into a dangerous swoon.

"We may as well have a run-through, future Mrs. Benton," he murmured into her ear. "We will be expected to dance together at the gala."

He lifted one of her arms and placed her hand on his broad shoulder. He clasped her other hand in his.

"I don't know if I can do it," Holly protested.

"Surely I am not that irresistible."

She laughed, although that was only half funny. "What I meant was, I don't know how to partner-dance."

"Well, young lady, you are in luck. I happen to be three-time champion of the Oxford Ballroom Dance Society."

"Really?"

"No. Of course not."

He began moving and she followed in line.

"But it is not that difficult. Can you feel my thigh leading yours...?"

* * *

When they got home, before they retreated to their separate sleeping quarters, Ethan retrieved the engagement ring from his jacket pocket.

As he replaced it on her finger, he asked, "Holly, would you marry me...again?"

CHAPTER NINE

"WHO ON EARTH would notice the difference between a napkin color called Eggshell and another called Champagne?" Ethan bellowed to Holly as she made her way across the vast hotel ballroom. "And good morning."

"There's actually a big distinction." Holly jumped right in and snatched the two samples from him. She held one up in each hand to catch some of the room's light. "See—the Champagne is iridescent. The Eggshell is matte. It's a very different effect."

"Thank you for being here."

About an hour ago Ethan had called Holly and asked her to meet him here to finalize the details for tomorrow's gala. Aunt Louise was not feeling well.

"I would call in my assistant, Nathan, but I have him on a dozen other tasks right now."

Ethan's brow furrowed as he remembered yet more specifications he needed to take care of.

"What's wrong with Louise?" Holly inquired.

"She said she felt a bit weak and lightheaded."

"Will she be okay by tomorrow?"

"I hope so. She will stay upstairs today, resting in one of the suites we booked for the week. Fernando is with her. Not that he is of any help."

"What do you think triggered it?"

"Rainy weather is especially difficult for her. And, even though she likes to be involved in planning these galas, I think the strain is too much."

He'd feel immense relief once his aunt had retired and no longer bore the weight of continuing as CEO of their billion-dollar company. With any luck she'd be flying in from Barbados for next year's gala, with no cares other than what dress she should wear.

"I'm here to help, Ethan. What can I do?"

Holly's concern softened his tension. He gestured to the table in front of him—the only one in the bare ballroom with a tablecloth on it. Several place settings were laid out for approval, each complete with different options for china, napkins, silver and stemware. There were modern styles, and those that were more ornate. Some in classic shapes, others unusual.

"Can you make these decorative decisions? You are the artist," he said, and added with a whisper, "and the fiancée."

There was no one directly in earshot, but hotel employees bustled about doing their work. With camera phones and social media these days, Ethan wanted to be sure details of his engagement weren't released to the world any earlier than he wanted them to be.

"Oh. Good grief."

"What?"

He pointed to her hand. "The ring again. I am so sorry."

She gamely glided it off her finger, handed it to him and filled her cheeks with air to make a funny face.

"It is ludicrous. I apologize again. Now, Aunt Louise had started to select a certain color palette. She picked out this tablecloth..."

Holly lifted a corner of the linen draping the table and found an identifying label underneath. "This color is called Stone. I like its earthiness. Instead of choosing a lighter napkin, how about a darker one? Can we see samples that might be called something like Pewter or Slate?"

"Sweetheart, you can see anything you want as long as you get this taken care of."

He immediately regretted the endearment. It had fallen from his mouth spontaneously. He supposed that was what he'd need to be doing once they were announced as an engaged couple, so he

might as well get used to it. Still, he wasn't in the habit of referring to women by pet names. Holly's widened eyes told him she was surprised by it as well.

Thankfully, one of the hotel's event managers was passing by. Ethan flagged down Priya to come talk to Holly. And to get him out of the moment.

As the two women conferred he stepped away to return a couple of missed phone calls. Which was a bit difficult because the napkins weren't the only things that reflected light from the ballroom's massive chandeliers.

Holly's lustrous hair, flowing freely long past her shoulders, framed her face with a glowing halo. Her sincere smile came easily during her conversation. Sidetracking him from his call to the point when he had to ask his site supervisor on the Bronx project to repeat what he had just said. Which was both embarrassing and unacceptable.

How many reminders did Ethan need that a woman had no place in his life?

She bounded over to him after her consultation with the event manager.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've had a vision. I did go with a pewter napkin. And a minimalist kind of china and flatware..." She rattled off details at a mile a minute. "With a silver napkin ring to give it a sort of elemental look. Earth and metal, kind of thing."

He mashed his lips to suppress a smile, although he was charmed at her zeal.

"And, if it's okay," she persisted, "I thought we could do a sleek centerpiece with white flowers in clear glass vases, to bring in a water element as well. I think it'll all tie together with the lighting." She pointed up to the modern chandeliers with their narrow pieces of glass. "Do you think your aunt would like that?"

"She will appreciate your creativity," he said after Holly's debriefing. "Miss Motta, it sounds like you have a knack for this sort of thing."

She shrugged. "I guess it's just a painter's eye. And at my own wed—"

Ethan's phone rang. He lifted one finger to signal to Holly to hold that thought while he took the call. "Yes, Nathan?"

Holly's cheeks turned pink. She bit her lip.

Something he wouldn't mind doing.

Sweetheart. He'd accidentally called her sweetheart.

"Schedule me for a late lunch with him next Tuesday at that restaurant he likes on Jane Street. Thank you." He turned his attention back to Holly, "Sorry—what were you saying?"

"Oh. Um... Just that Priya says the tech crew are here if you're ready to go to the podium."

"Come with me."

He took her hand. After taking the few stairs from the ballroom floor up to the stage, Ethan and Holly turned to face the empty event space. Tomorrow night Benton Worldwide Properties would once again fête many of their shareholders with an evening of appreciation. Close to a thousand people —some from nearby, others who had traveled far—would fill this grand room for the annual event.

Holly whistled. "What a breathtaking location for a dinner." She pointed to the large gold wall sculptures that circled the back of the room. "Those give the idea of waves in an ocean, don't they?"

Ethan surveyed the familiar surroundings. "The burgundy carpeting is new this year. It used to be a lighter color. That is about the only change I have noticed."

"You hold the dinner here every year?"

"We have been using this room for as long as I can remember. These galas are as ingrained into my family as birthdays and Christmas are to others."

This year's event wouldn't be a run-of-the-mill evening, though, when his and Holly's engagement was to be announced.

Holly gestured with her head toward the podium on the stage. "Will you be giving a speech?"

"The baton will pass to me next year," he said. Uncle Mel had always given the speech and, after he died Aunt Louise had taken over the duty. "Only a few of us know that this is the last time Aunt Louise will deliver the CEO's report."

Louise's retirement wouldn't be revealed at the gala. Ethan and his aunt had decided that the first step in her exit strategy would be to introduce his fiancée. That would cause enough pandemonium for one evening.

Shareholders could be tricky. They didn't like too many changes all at once. Benton Worldwide had already made them a lot of money by sticking to the original principles Uncle Melvin and Ethan's father had established when they'd started the company with one small apartment building in roughneck South Boston.

So only the engagement announcement would come at the gala. In a month, they'd inform the shareholders in writing that Louise Benton was retiring after a distinguished career. A month after that they'd throw a splashy retirement party.

Tomorrow night would belong to him and Holly Motta. In addition to their proclamation to the shareholders, a press release would notify the world that Ethan Benton had finally chosen a bride. Photos of them would appear in the business sections of newspapers and websites across the planet.

Ethan peered at Holly by his side on the stage. Sudden terror gripped him. What if this masquerade was too risky? This pretty young woman appeared to be genuine and of good will. But what if she wasn't? What if she was like every other woman he'd ever met? Deceptive. Manipulative. Out for herself.

He'd only met her a few days ago, for heaven's sake. It wasn't long enough to put her intentions to the test. And he still didn't know much about her other than what she'd chosen to disclose. Hopefully his head of security, Chip Foley, would get back to him soon with any information he had found. If there was something he didn't want exposed he'd need to figure out how to bury it so that the press didn't have a field-day.

Doubt coursed through him. What if Holly simply wasn't as capable a performer as he'd hired her to be? Maybe she'd crack under the spotlight and the attention. Confess that this was all a set-up, causing Benton Worldwide embarrassment and loss of credibility.

His mind whirled. What had he been thinking? In his haste to plan Aunt Louise's departure from public life before her medical condition diminished her position of respect, Ethan had made an uncharacteristically rash decision. If it was the wrong one his family would pay dearly for it for the rest of their lives.

However, there was no choice now but to take a leap of faith.

"Are you ready for this?" He took Holly's hand, as he would tomorrow. Her fingers were supple and comforting, and immediately slowed his breath.

"I may faint afterward, but I promise to put on a show," she answered amiably, lacing her fingers in his.

"Imagine every table filled with people in tuxedos and evening gowns. Staring at you."

Her shoulders lifted in a chuckle. "Gee, no pressure there!"

Her humor reassured him that she could pull this off. She wouldn't have agreed to it if she didn't know in her heart that she could handle it. And she'd done fine on the yacht last night.

Aunt Louise wanted this one thing for Ethan before she stepped away and let him officially run the company. He was determined to give it to her.

An astute woman, his aunt knew that Ethan's constant travel was to avoid settling down. He didn't have any sustained commitments outside of work. Hardly had a base other than his rarely visited corporate flat near their headquarters in Boston. He dated women—and then he didn't. He spent months alone on a boat. Socialized, then disappeared into a foreign country. He was free. There was nothing to tie him down. He could do whatever he wanted, go wherever he pleased. And he did.

His aunt believed that a fulfilled life took place on terra firma. She wanted him to find a home. A home that would shelter him from the topsy-turvy world of highs and lows, change and disappointment.

Home wasn't a place.

Home was love.

An all-encompassing love that he could count on. That could count on him. That made life worth living day after day. Year after year.

Because of Holly, Ethan had now had a glimpse into what it might be like to coexist with someone. Like he had last night on the Liberty cruise, easily sharing his thoughts and plans and hopes.

But he would stay firm in his resolve to go it alone.

And that was that.

That was his fate.

That was his destiny.

So he'd give Holly to his aunt as a retirement gift. Deliver her on a silver platter. Let the one woman who had ever been good to him hold the belief she most wanted.

But Ethan would not forget the truth.

"Mr. Benton?" A voice boomed from a dark corner of the ballroom. "We'd like to do a sound-check from the podium, if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course," Ethan said to the unseen technician.

Still clutching Holly's hand, he led her to the side of the stage before they parted. His fingers were reluctant to let go. Yet he dutifully took his place at the lectern and adjusted the microphone. Substituting for Aunt Louise, who would be introduced tomorrow to deliver her speech.

"Thank you for joining us this evening at Benton Worldwide Properties' annual shareholders' gala. We are so delighted you are here... Test, test. Test. Testing..."

Ethan dummied through as the technician made adjustments to the sound system.

"Without our shareholders we would not have experienced the global development... Hello, hello. You give us the inspiration... Thank you, thank you. Testing one, two, three."

He turned to wink at Holly. She grinned in response.

"Thank you, Mr. Benton," the technician called out. "Now we'd like to run the video, if you'd like to watch and okay?"

"Will do."

Ethan escorted Holly back down the steps to one of the tables. They took their seats as a screen was lowered from above the stage.

"Hey, do we get to sample the food?" Holly asked. "Quality control?"

"No, that is one department Fernando is actually handling. He was here earlier, approving everything with the chefs, before he went to attend to Aunt Louise."

"Rats!" She snapped her fingers, cute as could be.

Which made him want to kiss her.

Which was more irrational thinking he'd need to get a handle on.

Kissing was only for show, when people were watching. No more recreational kissing. The Empire State Building kissing shouldn't have happened. Where he'd thought he might have been able to keep kissing Holly until the end of the world.

His body quirked even now, remembering.

He locked his attention on the screen as the presentation began with a graphic of the company logo and some sprightly music. A slick narrator's voice explained a montage of all the Benton Worldwide projects that had been started or completed during the past year.

In another montage employees were shown holding babies, celebrating their children's college graduations, tossing a football at company picnics.

A historical section flashed older photos—one of Uncle Mel and Ethan's father, Joseph, holding shovels at a groundbreaking ceremony.

"That is my dad." Ethan pointed. His heart pinged as the image quickly gave way to the next photo. Joseph had died when he was nine. Twenty-five years ago. "I do not remember much about him anymore," he admitted.

Holly put a hand on his shoulder. He prickled, but didn't pull away despite his automatic itch to do so.

"Tell me one thing you do remember about him."

"That photo shows him in a suit. I can only think of him in a casual work shirt. Uncle Mel was the businessman. My father was always at the construction sites."

One glimpse of memory Ethan did have of his father was of when he'd come home from work at night. He'd greet Ethan and then head straight to the shower to wash off his honest day's work.

His mother was not a part of that picture. She would sequester herself in her private bedroom before Ethan came home from school, and there she'd stay throughout the evening. It had been a nanny who'd tended to Ethan in the afternoon.

Another older photo had clients at a job site, with Joseph in a hard hat on one side of them and Uncle Mel and Aunt Louise on the other side.

"Do you have any pictures that include your mother?"

"Oh, she was in that shot. We had her edited out. We cut her out of every photo."

Holly tilted her head, not understanding. "Why?"

Now he shook Holly's hand off his shoulder. He couldn't take her touch.

"Because we did not want her in any way associated with Benton Worldwide."

"But why?"

"My father and Uncle Mel worked hard for every dollar they made. They earned it. They deserved it. And they were loyal to the people who were loyal to them. Values my mother cared nothing for."

Ethan's blood pressure rose, notifying him to end this conversation. When Holly started to ask another question, his glare shut her down.

Another photo documented him and Aunt Louise in front of a gleaming high-rise building. "Ah, the Peachwood Center in Atlanta. One of my favorites."

The last photo had Aunt Louise surrounded by ten or so Benton executives in front of their headquarters. Even though in reality Ethan had been running the company since Aunt Louise's health had begun to fail, he still made sure that she got all the credit and glory.

"Is everything correct on the video, Mr. Benton?" the technician called from the back of the ballroom.

"Yes—thank you."

"May I trouble you for one more thing, sir? Can I get an okay for sound and lighting on the dance floor?"

Ethan stood and made his way to the polished wooden floor in the center of the ballroom. Fully surrounded by the burgundy carpet and the tables defining the perimeter, the dance floor was its own little world, and it was lit as such with a yellow tint and spotlights beaming down from the ceiling.

"Mr. Benton, we'd like to check the lighting with some movement. Would you be able to find someone to do a quick waltz around the dance floor for me?"

Naturally Ethan gestured to Holly. Stretching out his arm, he beckoned. "So, we dance again."

* * *

Holly stood and navigated between the tables in the empty ballroom to reach Ethan on the dance floor. She envisioned what he had described—how tomorrow night the room would be filled

with well-dressed shareholders gaping at her. Not giving in to panic, she reminded herself that she was here to do a job. To supply what she'd offered.

A love ballad suitable for ballroom dancing began from the sound system. Ethan started to dance and Holly's body fell in line with his.

He'd taught her well last night, and although she didn't think she could pull off any fancy ballroom dance moves she didn't trip all over his feet.

The lights were so bright on the dance floor that she could hardly see out to the tables. Which didn't matter that much because she really only wanted to close her eyes and enjoy the moment. The croon of the singer... Ethan's sure steps... His rock-sturdy chest...

Dancing with him, she thought they really were a couple—an entity that was larger than the sum of two individuals.

Ah... Her head fit so well underneath his chin as they danced. Being tall, she'd always had a sense of herself as being gawky around Ricky and the other men she had dated. She loved being encompassed by Ethan's height and width. As they glided across the dance floor, she felt graceful. A fairy princess. A prom queen. The object of attention.

All things she wasn't.

How would it be tomorrow, with a roomful of guests scrutinizing her? They wouldn't think she was beautiful enough for a man like Ethan! Everyone would know that she wasn't pedigreed and educated. They'd wonder why a Benton had settled for someone as ordinary as her.

Although she would be wearing the magnificent sky-blue gown covered in crystals. That gown alone would convince leaders and kings that she was one of them. Her hair and makeup would be professionally done. The smoke and mirrors tricks would be believable.

She'd hobnobbed with the New York elite last night and no one had guessed that she was not of their social standing. They hadn't known that she'd grown up in a trailer park with an unmarried mother who'd been too drunk to get out of bed half of the time.

Of course at the gala Ethan's fiancée would be under closer examination.

She tilted her head back to study her hand on Ethan's shoulder. Just as she had last night, she actually missed wearing the gargantuan diamond ring that labeled her Ethan's intended. She thought back to the paper ring he had used to propose to her. When he had bent down on one knee with a ring made from a beer bottle label.

And then she flashed back to the shopping spree on Fifth Avenue. To the blue topaz ring she had loved. But Ethan was right, of course. The ring he'd chosen was one befitting the future Mrs. Benton.

Leaning back further, to look up into Ethan's handsome face, she asked him, "Being in the spotlight doesn't faze you in the least?"

"I suppose I have always been visible to the shareholders. They watched me grow up."

"You came to the galas as a child?"

His muscles twitched. "When I was younger I was kept upstairs in a suite with my mother, who hated these evenings. We would come down and make an appearance."

Holly had noticed that Ethan's voice became squeezed every time his mother came up in conversation. Hints of rage had come spitting out when he'd explained how they had edited her out of all the photos in the slideshow.

"Wasn't your mother obligated to attend?" Holly persisted.

"She would call the kitchen to find out exactly what time dinner was being served. A half-hour before she would trot me down here in a tuxedo. We would do our annual mother-and-son spin around this dance floor. Then she would tug me to the exit, offering excuses that it was my bedtime or that she had a migraine."

"What about your dad?"

"He was not much the tuxedo-and-martini type, but he would soldier through alone. My mother was not gracious, like Aunt Louise. She would not mingle and exchange pleasantries with the guests. Not even to support my father. He knew that she was not an asset to the company."

"Was it awful for you, being paraded around?"

"Not really. I understood at an early age that my mother was not good for business but that I was. Whether it had been a profitable year or a struggle, seeing that there was a next generation of leadership instilled confidence in the shareholders. I have always been proud to represent our company."

"Is your mother still alive?"

"I have no idea," he bit out. "Nor do I care in the least. I have always assumed the shareholders believe that she went into seclusion and retired from public life after my father died."

With that, he tightened his hold around Holly's waist, bolted her against him and guided her with an absolute command that started at the top of his head and ended at the tip of his toes.

Holly molded herself to him and allowed his confident lead. Knowing that talk of his mother had unleashed the beast that he had now locked back into the cage inside him.

As they circled the music got louder, then softer. The low bass tones became more pronounced and then were corrected. Lights were adjusted as well, becoming hotter, then diffused and milky.

"Just one minute more, Mr. Benton!" the technician announced.

The music changed to a swinging standard.

Ethan relaxed his grip and backed Holly away to arm's distance ready for a quickstep. He twirled her once under his arm. She stumbled and they chuckled into each other's eyes.

His head tilted to the side. They leaned in toward each other's smiles. Drawn to each other.

Out of the corner of her eye Holly saw Aunt Louise's husband, Fernando, enter the ballroom and scurry toward them.

When they had come to the apartment for dinner she had noticed the way Fernando walked with small, mincing steps. She hadn't liked how he had snooped at the things on Ethan's desk and taken a fax from the machine. And she had overheard him telling Ethan that he didn't want to spend his life in Barbados when Louise retired.

But at this moment it was important for them to unify for the sake of Louise. Since the older woman wasn't well today, Ethan and Fernando had taken charge of the final details for the gala. Ethan had to be grateful for whatever help Fernando was offering. Perhaps he had a report on the status of the menu...

"I've been trying to call you!" Fernando approached and yapped at Ethan.

Ethan glanced over to one of the empty tables, where he had left his phone while he was on stage at the podium and while he and Holly had danced. "Is everything in order?" he asked.

"No, it's not. Louise has taken a bad fall. I've called the paramedics."

CHAPTER TEN

ETHAN LED THE charge out of the ballroom and toward the hotel elevators, with Fernando and Holly racing behind him to keep up. When they reached the bronze elevator bank Ethan rapped the call button incessantly until one set of doors opened. Pressing for the twenty-sixth floor as soon as he'd stepped in, he backed against the gilded and mirrored wall of the elevator car.

His neck muscles pulsed. As the elevator ascended he kept his eyes peeled on the digital read-out of the floor numbers.

One, two, seven, twelve...

"What happened?" He forced the question out of a tight throat.

"Louise had been resting on the sofa in the suite's living room," Fernando reported. "She stood up and said she was going to make a phone call. Then, as she started to walk, she tripped on the coffee table and fell face-forward."

"Why did you not help her get up from the sofa in the first place?" Ethan seethed.

"She didn't tell me she was going to stand up. She just did it. I rushed to her, but it was too late."

Ethan's jaw ground as he fought to keep himself together. This incompetent idiot should have never been allowed to care for Aunt Louise. She was going to need full-time nurses. He'd arrange that immediately.

The read-out reached twenty-three, twenty-four...

On the twenty-sixth floor, Ethan pushed through the elevator doors before they had fully opened. Holly and Fernando followed. At the room's door, he snatched the key card from Fernando's hand.

Ethan rushed into the suite. "Aunt Louise?"

Louise sat on the floor with her back against the sofa. Angry scrapes had left red stripes across her right cheek and her knees. She massaged her wrist.

"I'm all right, dear," she assured him in a fairly steady voice. "Don't embarrass me any more than I've already embarrassed myself."

"There is no reason to be embarrassed," Ethan said, trying to soothe her. These incidences must be so humiliating for her. She'd always been such an able woman.

"Falls happen," Fernando chimed in. "We've been here before, Louise. You'll be fine."

Ethan fired a piercing glower at Fernando. He didn't need to try to make light of the situation.

"Oh, goodness. Holly!" Louise spotted Holly standing back from them. She managed a dry smile. "Somehow I've become an old woman."

"Thank goodness you weren't hurt worse." Holly nodded her respect.

"At this point we do not know if or how much she is injured," Ethan snapped, angry with everyone. "She needs to be examined."

Right on cue, there was a soft knock on the door. Ethan let in the hotel manager, who confirmed that they were expecting paramedics. Two emergency medical technicians filed in.

One checked Louise's vital signs, such as her blood pressure and heart-rate. He shone a small light into her eyes. Another technician asked questions about her medical history and what had happened.

While that was going on Ethan noticed Fernando pouring himself a cocktail. Holly had noticed too.

He and Holly raised eyebrows at each other. This was hardly a time for drinks.

Ethan clenched his fists and mashed his lips tightly. He stood silently.

Fernando had accused Ethan at dinner the other night of finding himself a wife just so that Louise would retire. Fernando had said he had no intention of spending his life on boring Barbados, as he characterized it, with Louise.

So, following that logic, Fernando should be doing everything he could to try to keep Louise as healthy as possible. Yet he obviously didn't bother with trivial matters, such as protecting her from falling. And now—with paramedics in the room, no less—he clearly thought it was cocktail hour.

"There don't appear to be any broken bones," one of the technicians informed them. "But, given her overall medical condition, we're going to transport her to the hospital for a more complete evaluation."

Ethan brought a hand over his mouth, overcome with worry. This woman had shown him so much love—had gone above and beyond the call of duty for him his entire life. Maybe his caring so much for his aunt was a sign. That he was capable of loyalty. Of devotion.

He refused his inclination to look over to Holly.

The technician issued instructions into his phone.

Fernando walked over to pat Louise gently on the shoulder in between sips of his drink.

"Can we take her down in a private elevator?" Ethan asked the manager, who waited quietly beside the door. "And out through a private garage? Many of our shareholders are staying here at the hotel, and we would like to keep this matter to ourselves."

"Of course, Mr. Benton."

Fernando settled himself closer to where Ethan was standing. "Clever..." he said under his breath. "Always thinking about image. I've got a little surprise for you with regards to that."

Ethan whipped his head to look into Fernando's eyes. "What on earth are you talking about at a time like this?" he demanded.

Two more paramedics came through the door with a stretcher.

Louise protested, "Oh, please, gentlemen—a wheelchair would do."

"It's for your protection, ma'am."

"I will ride in the ambulance with Louise," Ethan declared.

"No. I will," Fernando countered.

"Family only, please," one of the technicians said over his shoulder as he secured Louise onto the stretcher.

"I'm her husband."

"I am coming as well," Ethan insisted.

To the outside eye they must look like an odd sort of family. Elderly Aunt Louise. Nephew Ethan, who was probably being mistaken for her son, and Holly for his wife. Then Fernando, with his tanning salon skin and over-styled hair, who looked exactly the part of a cougar's husband.

The hotel manager headed the pack as the technicians began wheeling the stretcher out of the suite. Fernando and Ethan followed closely behind.

Ethan turned his head back to Holly. "You go home to the apartment."

"I'd like to come to the hospital, too."

Irritated at even having to discuss this further, Ethan repeated his order. "There is no need for you to be at the hospital. Go back to the apartment."

The hotel manager led them to a private elevator and swiped her access card.

Ethan dashed a text into his phone.

"I could take a taxi and meet you there," Holly pleaded. "I want to be there for you and—"

He cut her off. "I have just instructed Leonard to pick you up in front of the hotel."

This was a private matter that Holly had no place in, despite appearances. While he had certainly become accustomed to having her around, she was still only an employee, and Louise's health was a personal thing. Ethan did not want Holly to overhear any discussions with doctors, or any information regarding a prognosis for his aunt. What Holly had just witnessed in the suite was beyond what his fiancée-for-hire should be privy to.

Ethan feared that he was starting to lose his better judgment around Holly. It was becoming so easy, so natural to let her into his life. If he allowed himself to, he might long for her support at the hospital. He knew it would be hours of waiting and worrying while Aunt Louise was examined.

He had nothing to say to Fernando. Wouldn't sitting with Holly in the waiting area, sharing a paper cup full of coffee, huddled together, be a comfort?

No! Once again, he reminded himself of Holly's place in this dynamic. Despite how they might appear, to the paramedics or anyone else, Holly was not part of this family.

Not. Family.

He pointed down the hall toward the public elevator they had ridden up to the suite. "Holly, please return to ground floor and retrieve my things from the ballroom. Thank you."

Louise was wheeled into the private elevator, and everyone but Holly got in.

Just as the doors were closing Ethan saw in Holly's eyes that he'd upset her by not allowing her to come along. But this was no time to focus on her. She should know and respect that.

"I will phone you as soon as I hear anything, all right?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

* * *

So much for being part of the family.

Holly made it through the car ride home from the hotel, and it wasn't until she opened the door to the dark, empty apartment that tears spilled down her face.

Louise's condition was heartbreaking, and Holly hoped that she wasn't seriously injured after the tumble she'd taken. That she would be able to make it to the gala tomorrow night.

Ethan and Louise had such a finely tuned strategy to keep the extent of her illness hidden from the public. Holly admired their efforts. And thankfully the paramedics were only taking Louise to the hospital as a precaution.

She flipped on the lights. Slung her jacket on the coat rack. Kicked off her boots. And then she allowed in some self-pity. If she ever needed a reminder that this engagement was all a front, she had her proof. She was not, and nor would she ever be, a member of this clan.

Once they'd arrived at Louise's hotel suite Ethan had barely acknowledged her presence. Not that she would have expected him to pay lots of attention to her, but she had to admit she was surprised at how completely he had shut her out.

Holly had offered to go along to the hospital to be there for Louise and for Ethan—as a friend who rallied round when maybe a hand to hold would be welcome. But Ethan would have none of it, and hadn't been able to get her out of the picture swiftly enough.

Everything had moved so fast this week. How had she got here? To feeling sorry for herself because she was left behind? How had she come to care so much for these people so quickly? She'd become so involved in Ethan's life she could hardly remember a time when she hadn't been. Had she forgotten who she was?

Holly Motta was an artist who had spent four long years married to the wrong man.

Ricky hadn't made it easy for her to leave. Even after she'd moved out of the last place they'd been living he'd shown up at her work and insisted on talking to her. Or he'd followed her car and confronted her at a supermarket or in a bank parking lot. It had got to the point that she'd had to change her phone number. Month after month he had refused to sign the legal documents divorcing them, leaving her hanging in limbo. Finally he'd given up and cut her loose.

It had taken her two years to feel truly unshackled from the demanding and possessive hold Ricky had on her. Now she was determined to move forward with her life. This prospect with Ethan had presented itself and she'd snatched it. The job, this apartment, the clothes...the promise of a glamorous escapade with an exciting man.

Nothing wrong with any of that. Life was throwing her a bone, for once. And she was taking it. Life on life's terms.

The problem was the illusion was so convincing that she was starting to buy it.

Twenty-nine years of hurt overtook her. She wasn't tough, like New York. She couldn't endure another defeat. Withstand another wound. Her heart functioned in broken pieces that were only taped together and could collapse at any minute. Maybe this masquerade was too dangerous. She didn't think she had it in her to bounce back from anguish yet again.

Restless, she went to the kitchen. Drank a full glass of water in one gulp. It had been hours since she'd eaten. A few slices of cheese and bread went down easily as she munched them standing up.

She hoped Ethan would get a bite to eat at the hospital. He'd be hungry, too. Ugh! She needed to stop caring about things like whether or not he had eaten. Had to break her habit of always looking after people.

She paced back to the living room. Judged the paintings she had been working on in the little studio area she had created by the window. They were a good start to the ideas she had in her head. A drawing pad perched on the easel. She mindlessly picked up a stick of charcoal and began to put it to paper.

After a few minutes she cranked up some funky music and swung her hips from left to right to the beat. A little sketching, a little boogie-woogie—that was always how she got through everything in her life.

Curved lines on the page. A man's jaw. Not square and chiseled like Ethan's. That buzz-cut hair. The thick swash of eyelashes.

A smile crossed her lips.

Small ears. The rounded shoulders. The only person she could count on. Her brother.

Yet she hadn't been honest with Vince about the events of the past few days. She had called him the first night she was here, when the mix-up with the apartment had started everything that had come since. She'd hinted that something had come her way. Vince had reminded her that it was her time now. That she should take hold of any prospect life threw at her.

They'd had so little in the way of support as kids. They'd always had to be each other's cheering section.

Straight up or fall down... Holly mouthed their childhood chant.

They had been texting every day, as they always did. She'd told him that New York was amazing. That it was mostly raining. But she hadn't told him about this weird arrangement she'd agreed to. Which had become a wild rollercoaster of feeling so right and then, in the next moment, feeling so wrong.

She hadn't even told Vince about meeting Ethan. And she hadn't told Ethan about her rat ex-husband, Ricky. It wasn't like her to keep secrets. But she didn't know where anything stood anymore. She didn't want to make things more complicated than they already were. Even if nothing were to work out for her here in New York, Holly needed to make sure that Ethan kept his word about helping Vince.

Her brother was a good man. She was so proud of him. Every day she hoped and prayed for a bright future for him. That separately, yet bound in spirit, they'd rise up like phoenixes from the ashes of their childhood.

She thumbed her phone.

"Holz?" Vince used his nickname for his sister.

"Vinz!" Holly sandwiched the phone between her ear and her shoulder as she finished drawing her brother's arm. Their builds were so different... It was only in the eyes of their mother where the resemblance was undeniable.

"How's New York treating you?"

"Oh... I kinda got involved in something I thought was one thing but now it seems like it's another."

As in tonight. Which had been reinforcement of the fact that Ethan would never regard her as anything more than a hired hand. That the feelings she'd started to have for him could only lead to misfortune.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know... I met a man."

"Well, sis, it's about time you met a man. You haven't dated anyone since you left the Rat."

"I know. But this might not be the right thing."

Somehow she couldn't bring herself to tell him that the man she was talking about was Ethan Benton. The billionaire vice president, soon to be CEO, of the company Vince worked for.

"So you'll move on to something else. We've done that enough times in our life, haven't we?"

"That we have, bro."

How often had their mother made promises? Then broken them.

"Straight up or fall down!" they recited in unison.

"Get some sleep, Holz. You sound tired."

Holly continued sketching after the call. Line after line, listening to song after song. More glasses of water downed in one go.

Finally she sprawled across the sofa and pondered the painting of Ethan on the wall. His mouth... That urgent mouth that had covered hers a few midnights ago atop the Empire State Building. He had kissed her lips. Along her throat. Behind her ear. Her eyelids.

They fluttered with the memory.

The phone woke her up.

"Hello?" Her voice was gravelly.

"Ethan, here."

"How's Louise?'

"Stable. She was not badly injured by the fall."

"Thank heavens."

Holly's eyes didn't want to open fully. The sound of his voice caressed her, but didn't erase the sting of him banning her from the hospital yesterday. Despite wishing he'd make mention of it, she knew he wouldn't.

She had to carry on forward. "What time is it?"

"Eight in the morning."

Tonight was the gala. Her end of the bargain was due.

"Are you still at the hospital?"

"No, I came back to one of the hotel suites to get some sleep. I did not want to wake you by coming in during the middle of the night."

Holly stroked the leather of the sofa where Ethan had been sleeping the past few nights. If he had come home he'd have found her conked out on it after she simply hadn't been able to stand at the easel any longer.

She'd done eight different renderings of Vince. Must have been some sort of homesickness, she mused to herself now, in the gray haze of the cloudy morning.

She stretched her neck. "What happens now?"

"Aunt Louise will be discharged in a couple of hours. Then I will send Leonard to pick you up. He will help you manage my tuxedo and your gown and whatever else you need. We can get dressed in this suite. I have ordered food. And a makeup artist and hairstylist are coming."

"Okay."

Ethan had everything so organized it made her head spin. How did he keep himself together? She needed a shower and coffee.

"Be prepared for a busy day and night," he continued. "I hope you are ready, my fiancée. Because it is showtime."

* * *

When the makeup and hair people departed the hotel suite, Holly and Ethan were finally alone for the first time all afternoon.

The last few hours had flown by. People from Benton Worldwide and from their public relations firm had come and gone from the lavish suite that had a bedroom, living room and dining table in addition to the spacious dressing area where they were now.

All of the suite's Zen-like furnishings and décor were made from precious woods and fine fabrics, while floor-to-ceiling windows provided panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline, where the gloomy and rain-drenched day had turned to dusk.

It had been a whirlwind of introductions as Ethan had presented Holly, although of course he hadn't yet revealed their engagement. Members of the shareholders' board of directors had been in to confer with Ethan. And Holly had finally met Ethan's trusted assistant, Nathan—a young man wielding four electronic devices in his two hands.

A sandwich buffet and barista bar had kept everyone fortified. Then the glam squad had arrived to give Ethan a haircut and work their magic on Holly, before filing out just now to do the same for Louise.

In the first quiet moment since she had arrived, Holly inspected herself in the mirror. She wore a white satin robe, but had already put on her jewelry and heels.

Shimmery eye makeup and soft pink lipstick gave her skin a luminous glow. The style wizards had managed to remove every speck of paint from her cuticles, so that a pearly pink manicure could complement the gown. Her hair was magically doubled in volume, thanks to the expert blow-dry she'd just received.

They had experimented with hairstyles, but gave Ethan veto power. Every time she'd asked his opinion of one of the looks they'd tried he had taken a long gander at her. He'd stopped to scratch his chin, or shot her a wink or half a smile. The way he'd studied every inch of her had been almost obscenely exciting.

And seemingly had had little to do with her hairstyle. Because each time he had decreed that he liked her hair better down.

Now she observed Ethan's reflection behind her in the mirror. He was perched on a stool in the dressing area, reading over some papers, already in tuxedo pants and dress shoes. His stiff white shirt was on, but had not yet been buttoned. She imagined her fingers tracing down the center of his bare, lean chest.

This was really happening. She was in this castle of a hotel, about to be crowned as princess and then ride off on a majestic horse with this regal prince.

Of course in real life at the end of the night they'd shake hands on a con well played. But what the heck? She might as well enjoy it.

"Louise was okay when you talked to her a little while ago?"

"Under the circumstances." Ethan didn't look up from his work.

"I have an idea for tonight that might make it easier on her," Holly said as she tightened one of her earrings in front of the mirror.

"Oh?"

"You were telling me that when it's time for her to give her CEO speech you'll escort her from the table up the stairs to the stage?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking it may be difficult for her to walk up the stairs after her fall. And it won't help to have a thousand people staring at her."

"What is the alternative?"

"I noticed that there is a side entrance to the stage from the waiters' station. While the video montage is playing, and it's dark in the ballroom, we could help Louise get away from the table and up to the stage that way. With no one watching her. Then, when she's introduced, all she has to do is come out from the side of the stage and go to the podium."

Holly followed Ethan's reflection in the mirror as he walked toward her. He came up behind her and circled his arms around her shoulders. He hugged her so authentically, so affectionately, she melted.

"Thank you for thinking of that," he said softly into her ear. "Thank you for thinking about it at all. My, my.... You have already gone far beyond what I expected of you. Please accept my gratitude."

She wanted to tell him how horribly it had hurt when he hadn't let her go to the hospital yesterday. How much she'd wanted to be part of his family, and not just what her obligations required. How she longed to be there for him in good times and in bad.

She still had so much of her heart left to share. Nothing in her past had squelched that out of her.

But she'd never get to give that heart to him.

Even though she was now positive that he was the only man to whom she ever could.

Fearing she might cry, and tarnish her stellar makeup job, she flicked an internal switch and squirmed away from him.

"Can you help me into my gown? It weighs about ten pounds!"

Ethan went to back to the stool he had been sitting on and patted his tablet for music. A smooth male voice sang a romantic song.

Not taking his eyes off her, he drank a sip from his water bottle and then recapped it. "I would love to help you into your dress."

She raced over and punched into his tablet the upbeat music that she favored.

Ethan's grin swept across his lips.

Holly couldn't resist sashaying her hips to the rhythm as she turned and headed to the closet where her gown hung. She was sure she heard him gasp when she let her robe fall to the floor to reveal the skimpy undergarments underneath.

And so the pretend soon-to-be-married couple helped each other get dressed for the gala.

"Careful with the base of the zipper—it's delicate."

"Blast! Do this right cufflink for me. I am no good at all with my left hand."

"I hope this eye makeup doesn't look too dark in the photos."

"I do not know how women can dance in those heels. I am booking you a foot massage for tomorrow."

"Is my hair perfect?"

"Shoulders back."

"How do I look?"

"How do I look?"

The supposed future Mr. and Mrs. Ethan Benton exited the suite preened, perfumed and polished to perfection.

Just as they reached the entrance to the ballroom Ethan remembered he had the engagement ring in his pocket. He skimmed it onto Holly's finger.

Yet again.

They entered the gala to a cacophony of guests, cameras and lights befitting a royal wedding.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BALLROOM VIBRATED with the din of a thousand people. Holly's heart thundered in her chest as Ethan maneuvered them from table to table for introductions. He charmed all the women and the men regarded him with great respect.

"Ethan, how has another year passed already?"

"Lovely to see you, Mrs. Thorpe. Good evening, Mr. Thorpe." Ethan pecked the older lady's cheek and shook the hand of her white-haired husband. "I would like to introduce you to Holly Motta."

Mrs. Thorpe's crinkly eyes lit up. "Well, now, Ethan, are we to believe that you have given up the single life at last?"

"Only because you are already spoken for," Ethan said, flattering her.

Holly was dumbstruck and could only squeak out, "Nice to meet you."

She felt horribly out of place. The giddy fun of getting dressed was gone now, and in this moment she felt like a young child in a Halloween princess costume. It was one thing to imagine being the fiancée of a respected and victorious billionaire. But it was another thing entirely actually to be presented as such.

"You look exquisite," Ethan whispered in her ear, as if he sensed her discomfort.

It offered no reassurance.

This wasn't going at all the way she'd thought it would. She hadn't felt this kind of pressure on the yacht the other evening, when Ethan had made small talk with casual acquaintances. The people here tonight knew him well, and she felt as if everyone—but everyone—was inspecting her. Panic pricked at her skin like needles, even while her brain told her she must not let Ethan down.

Taking short and fast breaths, she shook hands with a plastered-on smile.

"Henri!" Ethan clasped the shoulder of a mustached man. "Cela fait longtemps."

"Ça va?"

"Marie. Magnifique, comme toujours." Ethan kissed the man's wife on both cheeks. "Je vous présente Holly Motta."

French. Naturally Ethan spoke perfect French. As men who take showers on private planes were likely to do.

As they walked away he told her, "Mr. and Mrs. Arnaud made a substantial personal donation to a low-income housing project we did outside of Paris."

"Merci!" Holly threw over her shoulder.

Ethan's eyes always took on a special shine when he mentioned those charity projects that were so important to him.

They approached a stone-faced man whose huge muscles were all but bursting out of a tuxedo that was a size too small. He stood ramrod-straight, with his arms folded across his chest. Holly saw that he wore a discreet earpiece with a barely noticeable wire.

"Holly Motta, this is Chip Foley, our head of security," Ethan introduced her.

Chip bent toward Ethan's ear. "I take it you received that fax with the information you requested, sir?"

Ethan looked confused. "No, I did not."

A Japanese couple were coming toward them.

"Ethan. Ogenki desu ka?"

The woman wore an elaborate kimono.

"Hai, genki desu," he answered back.

French wasn't intimidating enough. He had to speak Japanese, too.

The evening was starting off like a freezing cold shower.

Holly had imagined it was going to be easier. And more fun. What girl wouldn't want to be at the ball with the dashing prince she was madly in love with?

Madly. In. Love. With.

The four words echoed through her as if someone had yelled them into her ear. Especially the third word. Because there was no denying its truth.

She was in love with this sophisticated, handsome, brilliant man beside her.

Had it happened the very night she'd arrived in New York, when she'd opened the door to the apartment and found him reading his newspaper with that one curl of hair hanging in front of his eyes?

Had it been when he'd bought her all the painting supplies she'd been able to point to, because took her seriously as an artist in a way that no one else ever had?

Maybe it had been atop the Empire State Building, when those earth-shattering kisses had quaked through her like nothing she'd known before?

Or had it been on the yacht, under the tender shadow of the Statue of Liberty, when they'd danced together as one, late into the night?

It didn't matter.

Because she was in love with Ethan Benton.

And that was about the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

"We should make our way to the table now," Ethan said, after finishing his small talk in Japanese.

He took her hand and led them toward the head table, where Aunt Louise and Fernando were already sitting.

Awareness of his touch was a painful reminder that Holly would never have a bona fide seat at this family table. There would be no keeping the glass slippers. The Ethan Bentons of this world didn't marry the Holly Mottas. She was a commoner, hired to do a job—hardly any different from either a scullery maid or an office assistant in his corporation.

Ethan's world was a tightly coiled mechanism of wheels. She was but one small cog. Loving him was going to be her problem, not his.

She willed herself not to fall apart now. Overall, Ethan had been kind and generous to her. She had to hold her end up. That much she owed him. Despite the fact that she was crumbling inside.

Love was awful.

"Louise, you look wonderful tonight." Holly greeted the older woman with a kiss on the cheek.

The style magicians had worked wonders. None of the scrapes and bruises from her fall were visible. No one would guess she wore a wig that was thicker and more lustrous than her own thinning hair. Shiny baubles complemented her black gown.

Holly nodded hello to Fernando who, in return, lifted his nose and looked away.

Fernando sat on one side of Louise and Ethan the other. Holly sat next to Ethan. Rounding out their table were company VIPs whom she'd been introduced to earlier today but couldn't remember their names.

As the ballroom's lights were slightly dimmed a spotlight was aimed on Louise, and a waiter brought her a microphone. Louise stood, subtly using the table for leverage and balance. Holly saw a grimace pass quickly across her face.

"Good evening, Benton Worldwide extended family," Louise greeted the guests. "It's been another profitable and productive year for us, which you'll hear about in my report later. As you know my late husband, Melvin Benton, and his brother, Joseph Benton, began this company with the purchase of a one-bedroom apartment in South Boston. And look where we are today."

The ballroom filled with the sound of applause.

"Together we have made this happen. Melvin taught me many things. The most important of which is that money in our wallets means nothing without love in our hearts."

Louise smiled at Ethan and Holly.

"And so," she continued, "if you'll indulge an old woman before we get on to pie charts and growth projections, I'd like to share something personal with you."

A hush swept the room.

"Many of you have watched my nephew Ethan grow up over the decades. I hope you share in my pride at the man he's become. He's a leader who drives himself hard, a savvy negotiator who insists on fairness, and a shrewd businessman with a philanthropic spirit."

The guests applauded again.

Ethan bowed his head, clearly embarrassed by the accolades. Holly touched his arm. He turned his head slightly toward her.

"Yet there's been one thing missing. It has always been my greatest wish for Ethan that he would find a partner to share his life with. To rejoice with in triumph and to weep with in sorrow. To have a home. To have children. To know a love like Mel and I had. And it's with great joy tonight that I announce that Ethan has found that soul mate. And, although it's asking a lot of her to meet her extended family of one thousand all in one evening, I'd like to introduce you to Ethan's fiancée: Miss Holly Motta."

Ethan and Holly looked at each other, both knowing this was their moment. They rose from their chairs in unison and turned to face the crowd. Holly's chest crackled at the irony of the moment.

Applause and good wishes flooded the room.

"Bravo!"

"Bravo!"

"It's about time!"

"Holly!"

"Ethan!"

They smiled and waved on cue—as if they were a royal couple on a palace balcony. Guests began tapping their knives against their water glasses in a signal for a couple to kiss.

Without hesitation, Ethan leaned in to Holly's lips. Thankfully not with a passionate kiss that would have thrown her off balance. But it wasn't a quick peck either. Perhaps he was incapable of a kiss that didn't stir her up inside.

She felt herself blushing. When she giggled a little the guests cheered.

As planned, the chandeliers were dimmed further and the dance floor became bathed in a golden light. Ethan took Holly's hand and brought her to the center of the dance floor, this time as two thousand eyes fixed on them.

The love song from their practice session boomed out of the sound system.

Holly lifted one hand to Ethan's shoulder. One of his fastened around her waist. Their other hands met palm to palm.

They floated across the dance floor, bodies locked, legs in sync. The moment was so perfect Holly wanted to cry.

It was a moment she would never forget. Yet, in time she must learn to forget, if she was ever to love someone who could return her love.

With the gleam of lights beaming down on the dance floor and the rest of the ballroom darker, it was hard to see. Yet Holly's eyes landed on the table where they had been seated. Ethan turned her as they danced, but she kept craning her neck to focus on a strange sight.

Louise was chatting with a couple who had come over to the table. Meanwhile Fernando finished his drink and stood up. He reached into his tuxedo jacket's pocket and pulled out two pieces of paper. He placed one on the chair where Holly was sitting and the other on Ethan's seat. Then he smirked with a satisfied nod.

* * *

Holly was so spectacularly beautiful Ethan couldn't help glancing down at her as they danced. She was really just as fetching—if not more so—casual and barefoot in a tee shirt and jeans, having breakfast at the apartment. But tonight... The dance floor lights cast an incandescent glow on her face. The baby pink of her lipstick emphasized the sensual plumpness of her mouth.

It made him want to brand her with kiss after kiss, until he had to hold her up to keep her from falling to the ground. His body reacted—in fact overreacted—to the intimate feel of her breasts, belly and hips pressed to him as he held her close.

Every now and then the sobering fact that Holly wasn't really his fiancée would flit across his mind. There wasn't ever going to be the wedding, home and children that Aunt Louise had spoken of during her toast. He batted away the reality of those thoughts every time they came near. If only for tonight, he actually did want to believe the masquerade was real.

He could risk that much.

Yet a voice in his gut pleaded with him to stop. Told him that he knew better. That his mission had been to guard and defend. That dangerous fantasies would confuse his intentions and lead to irrevocably bad decisions.

Opposing forces argued within him. So his rational mind welcomed the distraction when he followed Holly's eyes to the table where they'd been sitting. He watched with curiosity as Fernando placed a piece of paper on his and Holly's chairs.

As soon as the dance was over Ethan nodded politely at the applauding guests to the left and to the right. When the next song began he gestured for others to join in the dancing. Couples stood and approached. Once the rhythm was underway, and the dance floor was well populated, he gestured to Holly to return to their table.

Ethan slipped the piece of paper on his chair into his jacket pocket and sat down, trying not to draw any attention to the action. When everyone was occupied with their first-course salads and dinner conversation, he'd discreetly look at it.

Holly held her piece of paper in her lap. She looked downward to read it.

Her face changed instantly. The rosy blush of her cheeks turned ashen white. The blue in her eyes darkened to a flat gray. She blinked back tears.

Trancelike, she slowly stood.

Her murmur was barely audible, and directed to no one in particular. "Excuse me..."

Fortunately, with the dance floor in full swing and one of the video presentations playing on several screens throughout the room, Holly's exit from the table didn't appear too dramatic.

Ethan watched her cross the ballroom as if she was headed to the ladies' lounge.

Instead she opened a sliver of one of the French doors that led to the ballroom's terrace. She slipped through and closed it behind her.

At the table, Ethan caught Fernando's eye. He grinned at Ethan like a Cheshire cat. Ethan's blood began to boil. But he kept his cool as he rose. He moved slowly toward the terrace. And slid out through the same door Holly had.

The frigid and windy evening slapped across his face and straight under the fabric of his tuxedo. Holly stood across the large plaza of the terrace with her back to him. He figured she must be chilled to the bone.

What was it that had upset her so much that she'd had to leave the ballroom and retreat to this empty space that was not in use during the winter months?

With dread in his heart, Ethan pulled the paper from his pocket.

His temples pulsated louder with each word he read.

Fax to Ethan Benton from Chip Foley, Head of Security, Benton Worldwide Properties.

Regarding Holly Motta.

Per your request, I have gathered the following intelligence.

Holly Motta, age twenty-nine, last known residence Fort Pierce, Florida.

Internet and social media presence significant only as it relates to her occupation as an artist.

No criminal record.

Sometimes known as Holly Dowd.

Married until two years ago to a Ricky Dowd, age twenty-eight, also of Fort Pierce.

Married and divorced.

"Holly!" he spat.

Her shoulders arched at the sound of his voice.

She spun around and they marched toward each other. Meeting in the middle of the grand stone terrace.

"You had me investigated?" she accused, rather than questioned.

"You were married?" he fired back.

"Without telling me?"

"Without telling me?"

"That must simply be business as usual for you, Mr. Benton. Background checks on the hired help and all that."

"As a matter of fact, it is. My family has spent two generations building our empire. We had better damn well protect it with every tool we have."

"You might have let me know."

The hammering at Ethan's temples threatened to crack open his skull as he read the fax aloud.

"'Ricky Dowd, also known as Rick Dowd and Riff Dowd, indicted for armed robbery at age nineteen. Served twenty-two months in prison, released early due to penitentiary overcrowding. Indicted six months ago, again for armed robbery. Currently serving a sentence at Hansen Correctional Facility in central Florida.'"

Ethan broke away from the page to glare at Holly.

"Twice indicted for armed robbery?"

He felt heat rise through his body in a fury that, for once, he might not be able to contain.

Holly's face was lifeless. Her eyes downcast. She didn't even seem to be breathing.

Finally she muttered softly, "I didn't know Ricky was in prison again."

"But you knew who you married." Ethan's jaw locked.

"The first robbery was before we were married. This new incident happened after our divorce. I haven't seen or talked to him in two years."

"Yet you married a convicted criminal? And deliberately withheld that from me? How will that look to my shareholders? Do you not understand the importance of an impeccable reputation?"

Ethan was approaching cruelty. Rubbing salt into her wounds. But he couldn't stop himself.

Women were never who they seemed! Once again a female had betrayed him. Had not been honest. The same as every other woman he had known. The same as his mother.

This was exactly what he'd been warning himself of, despite his growing attachment to Holly. Why would she turn out to be any different from the others? How dense was he still not to have learned his lesson?

They'd spent so much time together this week. Yet all along she'd withheld the information that not only had she been married, but to someone convicted of serious crimes. She obviously didn't understand how, if that information was to be revealed publicly, it would become an integral part of people's perception of her. Of them.

What else was she hiding? Omission was its own form of lying. And he'd always known that if this engagement façade was to work, they'd have to be straightforward with each other. He'd told her about his future plans for Benton Worldwide. She knew about his aunt's health problems. He'd even let her witness Louise being wheeled out on a stretcher by the paramedics. Without measuring the risks of his actions, he had, in fact, trusted Holly.

Trust. Every year, at every shareholders' gala at this hotel, Ethan got a reminder that trust was a dirty word. One that he should never factor into an equation. After all, a boy whose father had just died should have been able to trust that his mother had his best interests at heart.

To read this background information about Holly, to confirm that he didn't know her at all, was an unbearable confusion. Just like the one he'd suffered as a boy, never really knowing his mother, or what could make a woman betray her only child.

A familiar fist pummeled his gut more viciously than ever. He wanted to scream. For the nine-year-old boy who'd lost both his parents within a few months of each other. One in a horrifying car accident.

To complicate matters even more, he was also seething with jealousy that Holly had given her hand in marriage to another man. Any other man! Irrationally, he wanted her only for himself.

Ethan clenched his teeth and read on while Holly clutched her own copy of the fax.

Brother Vincent Motta, age twenty-six.

Well-regarded employee at Benton Miami office.

Mother Sally Motta, age forty-eight.

Dozens of jobs, ranging from waitress to telemarketer to factory employee. No position held longer than six months. Never married. Motta appears to be maiden name.

Father of Holly Motta—unknown.

Father of Vincent Motta—unknown.

Unknown whether Holly and Vincent have the same father.

It was hard to say whose story was sadder—his or Holly's.

Her lower lip trembled uncontrollably until a sob erupted from her throat. "So now you know everything, Mr. Benton!" she cried. "Do you want to share my humiliating past with everyone in the ballroom?"

As tears rolled down her face she shivered in the cold and used both hands to rub at her bare arms.

"I do not know what I want to do!" Ethan shouted—uncharacteristically.

He yanked off his tuxedo jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. "If you had given me all this information at the outset I could have discussed it with my team."

"Discussed it with your team?" She pulled the jacket closer around her. "What would you have done? Created a new identity for me? Erased the past? You masters of the world think of everything, don't you?"

"That is exactly what we have been doing, is it not? We have dressed you up and presented you as a suitable bride for me. Which is what we agreed upon in the beginning."

"Yes. Playing dress-up. Pretending someone like me could be suitable for someone like you. My mistake, Ethan. I thought we had become more than our contract. I thought we had..." She eyed the ground again. "I thought we had become friends."

He blamed himself for this predicament. It had been insanity to hire someone he'd only just met for this charade. In fact the whole ruse had been preposterous. Paying someone to pose as his fiancée in order to get Aunt Louise to retire. His heart had been in the right place, but he'd had a temporary lapse in judgment.

In fact he'd been deceitful to Aunt Louise. The one and only woman in his life who had always been truthful with him. Although he knew that no matter how big a mess he'd made of everything his aunt would still love him. That he could depend on.

For one of the only times in his life Ethan didn't know what to do. Didn't know how to reckon with all the events of the past few days. Just as he didn't know where to put the decades of shame that had mixed with the years of phenomenal successes.

And he surely didn't know how to make sense of his feelings for Holly. For once he was out of his league.

After a stare-down with her that had them both turning blue with cold, logic set in.

He wondered aloud, “How did Fernando get this fax from Chip Foley?”

Holly explained how she had seen Fernando take a fax from the machine when they’d had him and Louise over for dinner. Because Fernando used the apartment during his trips to New York, she hadn’t thought it unusual that he’d receive a fax there.

“That weasel...” Ethan scowled with disgust.

All along Fernando had been conjuring up ways to ruin Ethan’s engagement because he didn’t want to move to Barbados with Aunt Louise. He no doubt planned to use Holly’s history as a way to prove her an unbefitting bride.

“I will deal with him later. We will sort all this out later. For now, we will go back inside and finish the evening as planned.”

“Okay,” Holly whispered, but it wasn’t convincing. She looked utterly shell-shocked with his jacket grasped tightly around her. The rims of her eyes were red and her makeup had smeared.

“I will slip back into the ballroom. You will go up to the suite and pull yourself together. I will meet you back at the table.”

“Yes,” she consented.

Ethan only hoped she’d be able to get through the rest of the night.

Once inside, Holly handed him his jacket and ducked toward the exit. Ethan soon got roped into a conversation with a Swedish architect. He returned to the table just as the wait staff cleared the salad plates. His and Holly’s were untouched.

Ethan made small talk with his tablemates as the main course was served. Over and over again the information in the fax repeated itself in his brain. And he kept glancing in the direction Holly should be returning from. It seemed to be taking her an inordinate amount of time.

Guests were enjoying their surf-and-turf entrées of lobster and filet mignon. A pleasant buzz filled the ballroom.

Still no Holly.

Maybe she’d fallen and hurt herself.

Maybe she’d been taken ill.

Maybe she’d been so upset by the fax that she was crying her eyes out.

Ethan had to go find her. But just as he was about to get up the president of the board of shareholders, Denny Wheton, stood from his seat at the next table. A spotlight landed on him. A waiter gave him a microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” Denny began.

Ethan scanned the whole ballroom for Holly, his insides filling with fear that Denny was going to make a toast to them.

“On behalf of the shareholders’ board,” Denny continued, confirming Ethan’s worry, “I want to express our delight at the news of Ethan’s engagement. As Louise said earlier, we’ve watched Ethan become the driving force of Benton Worldwide. His father and uncle would be proud. As to his bride...we haven’t had a chance to get to know her yet, but we’re sure Ethan has chosen her with the same diligence and discernment he puts into all his endeavors. To Holly and Ethan! Congratulations!”

Guests at the other tables lifted their glasses.

“Congratulations!”

Voices came from every corner of the room.

Ethan froze as a second spotlight beamed onto him. Hadn’t Denny stopped to notice that Holly was not in her seat? He’d probably had too much to drink.

“Holly?” Denny called into his microphone.

The congratulations ceased. The room became silent.

“Holly?”

A microphone was handed to Ethan.

Who had to think fast.

"Thank you for your good wishes," Ethan stated robotically.

He'd kill himself if something bad had happened to her.

"I apologize that Holly is not present for this toast. She is feeling a bit under the weather."

"Under the weather?" Denny boomed into his microphone. "Under the weather? Will Benton Worldwide be introducing the next generation's CEO nine months from now?"

The ballroom exploded with applause and cheers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HOLLY HAD NEVER been so relieved to be home in her entire life. She toed the apartment door closed and leaned back against it. With a deep sigh she dropped the couple of bags she had retrieved from the hotel suite before catching a taxi.

She closed her eyes for a few breaths, hoping to shut out all that had happened.

When she opened them again everything was still the same.

Only she had made matters worse by running away from Ethan and the gala.

En route to the bedroom, she heard her crystal gown swish audibly in the quiet of the apartment. A sound that hadn't been heard under all the activity at the gala. The sky-high heels were killing her, so they were quickly nudged off.

It was a struggle to reach the zipper of her dress. Much nicer earlier tonight, when Ethan had zipped her in. Eventually she was carefully able to wriggle out of the dress. Her impulse was to leave it pooled on the floor, but the adult in her at least managed to put it on the bed.

This gown wasn't her life.

Her jeans and tee shirt were familiar friends.

This wasn't her home.

It was time to go.

Time to cut her losses.

Holly had too much experience with that. Her marriage. Her mother. False hopes and grand promises that hadn't panned out. This was simply another.

With her tail between her legs, it was time to take two steps backward and keep striving for that next step ahead.

Sure, memories of New York would sting. Memories of Ethan would slice deeper than any wounds she'd ever endured before. But she was no stranger to pain.

Besides, she was supposed to be working on herself. Not getting mixed up in someone else's priorities. Not falling in love. This was the wrong road. Time to change direction.

Packing her clothes took less time than she'd thought it would. It was still the middle of the night. With plans to leave in the morning, she paced the apartment.

In the living room, the paper ring Ethan had made from his beer bottle label still sat on the coffee table. The one he'd used to propose to her with. When he had asked her to embark on a business venture that was not to become a matter of the heart. For the moment she still wore the enormous diamond that had been on and off her finger all week.

Holly rolled the ring round and round on her finger. She thought about the symbolism of rings —how the circle could never be broken. It had no beginning and it had no end. Continuous. Lasting. Eternal.

Undying love was not her and Ethan's story.

Their tale was of two people who had crossed paths in a New York City apartment. Now they both needed to continue on their separate journeys. Ethan built skyscrapers, but was determined not to build love. Holly had a past she could never escape.

His investigation into her hadn't even uncovered all her dirty laundry. He hadn't found out that she wasn't sure if the man who'd shown up every few years while she was growing up was really her father. Despite her mother's insistence that he was.

Wayne had been nice enough to her and Vince when he'd pass through town. He'd take them to get some cheap clothes that he'd pay for with a short fold of twenty-dollar bills he'd pull from his front pants pocket. Then they'd be shuffled off to a neighbor's house so that he could spend time alone with their mother.

Neither Holly nor Vince looked like him. But nor did they look like each other. It wasn't something they talked about much. They couldn't be any closer than they already were. What difference did it make? They could have DNA testing, but it wouldn't matter.

So she had never known whether she and her brother were half or full siblings. Or who their father—or fathers—were. They shared the same eyes as their mother. That was all Holly could be sure of.

Sally's blue eyes had been cloudy and bloodshot the last time Holly had seen her, five years ago.

Vince! Sorrow rained down on her. Her actions—lashing out at Ethan about the investigation and then abruptly leaving the gala without a word to him or to Louise—would cast an unprofessional shadow on Vince.

Her knees buckled and she sank down to the edge of a chair, vowing never to forgive herself if she had ruined her brother's chances at the promotion he'd worked so hard for.

Head in hands, she began to cry for all she and Vince had lacked when they were children. Not just material things, but adults to provide the care that every child needed. As much as they had looked out for each other, they'd always have holes in their hearts.

She wept for this week—for this failed chance to catapult her career to a potential high. For this lost opportunity to turn her goals into reality.

And she sobbed because she'd unexpectedly found a love in Ethan truer than any she could have imagined.

A love that the crux of her knew she would never have again. But she wasn't able to claim it.

Numbly, she picked up her phone. "Vinz...?"

"What's wrong?"

Only her brother would know after one syllable that she was shattered.

With the back of her hand she wiped the tears from her face. "I guess New York is not how I thought it would be."

"You wouldn't be the first person to say that."

"The thing is, I sort of think I've let you down."

Holly stopped herself there. She didn't have to explain everything right now. Maybe Ethan wouldn't hold all this against Vince. At this point she didn't have any control over the situation. All she had was regrets.

"Why would you have let me down? Because you took a shot and it didn't pan out? At least you did it."

"I'm just licking my wounds. I want to come home."

Where was home? She'd given up her dingy apartment in Fort Pierce to pin everything on her future. Neither she nor Vince had any current information on their mother's whereabouts.

"Fly here to Miami. My garage is yours to paint in. And my sofa bed has your name on it. I'll pick you up at the airport."

After the call, Holly took inventory of the mini art studio she'd set up by the window. Methodically she cleaned brushes. Tucked sketches into portfolios. She organized neatly, remembering the open tube of paint that had started this magical ride in New York. Cobalt Two Eleven all over her face.

Her gaze darted to the blue-painted sketch of Ethan on the wall. She was so proud of that piece—felt that she had caught his spirit in each line. Power and gravity and sensuality, with demons fighting behind his eyes.

As a matter of fact she would take the painting with her. It would either be a testament to the legacy Ethan would hold in her heart forever. Or it would be a torment that would haunt her for the rest of her days. Either way, it was hers and she wanted it.

With a small knife she found in the kitchen she carefully removed the staples attaching the canvas to its frame. She'd roll up the painting and buy a tube to transport it in before she left town.

There was nothing more to do.

She wasn't interested in sleeping. Didn't want to give up even one last minute of this magical city and its hex that made people believe dreams could come true. These moments were all she had, and she'd treasure them for a lifetime.

She stared out the window. A million stories were unfolding in the city. Hers would end here.

Inching off the diamond engagement ring, she placed it next to the paper ring on the coffee table. Beside each other they were as odd a couple as she and Ethan.

As usual, not knowing what else to do with her feelings, Holly said goodbye to her fancy manicure and reached for her charcoals.

* * *

Ethan closed the door on the hotel room where he'd managed a few hours of tortured sleep in a chair. He walked down the hall to Aunt Louise's suite. Still in his tuxedo pants, although his tie was off and the first two buttons of his shirt were undone, he scratched his beard stubble. He'd been unable to face a shower just yet, and had promised his aunt they'd reconvene their discussion during breakfast.

"Come in, Ethan," Louise called out as soon as she heard the keycard click to unlock the door.

"I have not had coffee!" Ethan managed a trace of a smile for his beloved aunt.

"I'll pour you a cup." Louise wore a dressing gown and slippers. She sat at the dining table in her luxury suite, heavy drapes open to the city.

Ethan took the seat across from her.

"Does anything look different to you in the light of morning?" She tipped her eyebrow to him in a familiar way.

When he was a teenager, living with her and Uncle Mel, if he'd been grappling with a dilemma or regretting a bad choice, Aunt Louise would always tell him to sleep on it and see if a new day brought any fresh insight.

The insistence in her arched brow today told him that she had decided what realization he should have come to. His intuition told him what her conclusion was. He peered into his coffee cup to try to shut the thought down.

Something like a tribal drum pounded inside him, urging him to lift his eyes and embrace the truth.

"Where is Fernando?" Ethan tried to change the subject—at least for a moment.

But on and on the internal drum sounded.

"Gone. Good riddance," Louise clipped. "Before dawn this morning I called Bob Parcell to draw up a non-disclosure agreement."

Ethan snorted. "Lawyers work around the clock."

"Ours do. I signed a generous check, contingent on the fact that Fernando never speaks a word about our family, our company or anything to do with us. If he does, our people will make sure the rest of his life is spent behind bars."

"Well done."

Louise took a sip of her coffee, then smacked the cup loudly back onto the saucer. "And that, my dear nephew, is the end of my foray into having a younger companion."

After Holly had disappeared last night he and Louise had held their heads high until the last guest had left the gala. Then they'd sat up together until the wee hours. He'd confessed about the engagement ploy and his motivation behind it. Begged for her forgiveness. Told her about the fax and Fernando's part in it.

Now Ethan lifted his aunt's hand and gently kissed the back of it. "I am so sorry you fell prey to him"

"Don't you think I knew what he was doing?" she retorted. "His trips down here to New York while I stayed in Boston. The restaurant bills that were surely more expensive than dinner for one.

Charges to women's clothing shops although I never received any gifts. Fernando was clearly taking advantage of me from the beginning."

"You never told me."

"The vanity of a rich old woman... Perhaps I thought I could simply buy myself something to replace the emptiness left by your Uncle Mel's death. But even with all the money in the world you can't purchase or declare love. You can't arrange it. It's love that rearranges you."

Ethan knew what she was telling him. The drum beat louder in his ears. Yet he couldn't. Mustn't. Wouldn't.

"I know that you're torn inside..." Louise continued.

For all her health problems, when Louise Benton was clearheaded she was a shrewd and intelligent woman.

"It's what I feared for you. That after so much loss you wouldn't be able to love. When your mother went—"

"You were the only mother I ever had," Ethan interrupted, taking her hand again. "Everything I have achieved is because of you."

Louise's eyes welled. "I must have done something right. You're a rare man to go through all this trouble to get me to retire. When I said I wanted you to be married and settled before you took over, I never imagined you'd concoct such an elaborate scheme just because I've been too hardheaded to see that my time has come. And I had no idea I'd raised such a skilled imposter!"

She snickered, forcing a crack through Ethan's tight lips.

"We Bentons do what we have to, do we not?" he joked in a hushed voice.

"My guess is that your playacting became real and you've fallen in love with Holly. Am I right, Ethan?"

He wanted to cover his ears, like a young child who didn't want to hear what was being said. Love her? Those drumbeats inside him sped up like a jungle warrior charging toward his most threatening battle.

Yes, he loved Holly. He loved her completely—like nothing he'd ever loved before. He wanted to give her everything she'd never had. Wanted to have children with her. Wanted to spend every minute of his life with her. Wanted to hold her forever as both his wife and his best friend.

That invisible opponent marched toward him and pushed him back behind the battle lines.

He lashed out without thinking. "Holly deceived me about her past. She lied to me. Look at what she came from."

"Oh, hogwash!" Louise dismissed. "How about what you came from? What I came from? Your father and Uncle Mel were brought up on the tough streets of South Boston without a dime or a university degree between them. I was a poor Southie girl whose father skinned fish for a living. It's not shame about Holly's past that you're concerned with. The time has come for you to let go of shame about your own."

Of course he wore shame—like a suit of armor. Who wouldn't be ashamed that his own mother didn't want him?

He studied his aunt's face. Hard-earned wrinkles told the story of a life embraced. Could he let go of his pain and open up to the fullness the world had to offer?

Could he gamble again on trust?

Gamble on Holly?

On himself?

In an instant he knew that if he didn't now, he never would.

He sprang to his feet. Leaned down to Louise and kissed both her cheeks. Moved to the office desk in the well-appointed suite. Wrote a quick note and then sent it through the fax machine.

"Wish me luck," he said as he flew out the door, too impatient to wait for a response.

In his hotel room, he shaved and showered. Called Leonard to bring the car around. He placed a second call to George Alvarez, manager of the Miami office.

"What are your thoughts about the site supervisor position?" Ethan asked him.

Liz Washington, the previous supervisor, had transferred to the Houston office.

"I've had a young guy apprenticing with Liz for a couple of years now. Done a terrific job," George pitched. "He's ready for the step up. Name of Vince Motta."

"Yes, Vince Motta," Ethan approved with relief.

He valued George, and wouldn't want to go against his expertise. But he knew that if he was able to help Vince it would mean a lot to Holly. That was the kind of sister she was. The kind of woman she was.

The kind of woman he was going to make his.

He raced down the hotel corridor to the elevators, and then out through the front entrance of the hotel. Because once Ethan Benton had made up his mind about something, it couldn't happen fast enough.

"To the apartment," he instructed Leonard as he got into the car.

After Holly had vanished from the gala last night Ethan had checked the hotel suites. She had been nowhere to be found. Even though there had been no answer on her cell phone, or at the apartment, that was where he figured she'd gone. A midnight phone call to the building's doorman had confirmed that Holly had indeed arrived by taxi.

Yes, he had called the doorman to investigate her whereabouts! How could she blame him for an action like that? He oversaw a corporation with thousands of employees all over the world. He couldn't possibly command that without being on top of all available knowledge. Information was power. Artistic Holly Motta might not understand that, but he relied on it. She'd have to get used to the way he thought.

Just as he'd have to get used to her freewheeling ways. How she slammed doors closed with one foot. Ordered pizza with everything but the kitchen sink on it. Said whatever came into her mind. Needed to devote hours of scrubbing to getting her hands clean of paint. Ethan thought he wouldn't mind spending a lifetime looking at and holding those graceful fingers that brought art and beauty into the world. Seeing the ring on her finger that proclaimed her lo—

"Leonard! I need to make a stop first. Take me to Fifth and Fifty-Seventh."

* * *

Holly winced when she heard the key in the door. If only she'd stuck to her original plan and left at the crack of dawn after her sleepless night. She'd known that Ethan would make his way back here to the apartment. It would have been easier to slink away than to say goodbye in person. What was it that had kept her from going?

Her heart dropped in freefall to the floor as he strode through the door. She wanted to run to him. To put her arms around him. To kiss him until all the problems of the world faded away and there was just the two of them.

"Why did you leave last night?"

His eyes looked weary. His cheeks were flushed.

That one perfect curl of hair that always fell forward on his forehead was dotted with snowflakes. So was his coat.

Holly shifted her gaze out the window to see that it had started to snow. The whole week she'd been in New York it had rained and been cold and dreary. But it hadn't snowed.

She'd fantasized about walking the city streets during a snowfall. Seeing the soft powder billowing down as she crossed busy intersections and marveled at architectural landmarks that stood proudly dusted with white.

Instead she'd be returning to the sunny Florida winter. Snow—ha! That was what fantasy was. By definition not real.

"Answer my question," he insisted.

Holly's voice came out hoarse. "I'm truly embarrassed by my behavior. I know it was completely unprofessional."

She cut her eyes toward the floor.

"Look at me. How about the fact that I was worried about you?"

"What do you care? Let's be honest."

He stepped in and took her chin in his hand, lifting her face to meet his. "Certainly you leaving the gala without a word was not good business..." he began.

"I'm so sorry."

"But this is not business anymore, and if you want to be honest you know that."

"Know what?"

He moved his hand to caress her cheek tenderly, sending warmth across her skin.

"I love you, Holly. I love you. And I suspect you love me, too."

Tears pooled somewhere far behind her eyes. She fought them before saying what she needed to. "Now that you know the truth about me from your investigation, you've found out that I'm not who you want. I'm not a match for you. I'm damaged goods."

"You think you are the only one?"

"What do you mean?"

He let the hand that was touching her face fall to his side. His mouth set in a straight line.

"After my father died..." he started, but then let the words dangle in the air for a minute.

Holly anxiously awaited what he was so hesitant to say.

"Within a few months of my father dying, my mother—who was not much of a mother to begin with—met a man. And together they came up with an idea."

Bare pain burned in Ethan's eyes. Holly knew he was going to tell her something he had to dig out from the rock bottom of his core, where he kept it submerged.

"My mother told Uncle Mel and Aunt Louise that she and this man were going to take me away. That they would never see or hear from me again unless..."

He swallowed hard, his breath rasping and broken.

He regained his voice, "Unless they wanted to keep me instead. Which she would allow them to do in exchange for five hundred thousand dollars. In cash. She specified cash."

Agony poured from every cell in Holly's body. Grief for the little boy Ethan. And for herself. For her brother, Vince. For all the children unlucky enough to be born to parents who didn't give them the devotion they deserved.

"So, you see, my mother sold me to my aunt and uncle. I believe that means that you are not the only package of damaged goods around here."

The spoken words swirled around the room.

Again Holly wanted to hug the man she loved.

And again she didn't.

It was time for her to go.

He thought he loved her. He'd fallen for the drama they were starring in.

She'd have to have the cooler head. If she let him believe he loved her, one day he'd wake up and realize that he didn't want something this raw. That instead he could stuff his hurt right back down and act in a different play, with another kind of woman. With someone who'd never have to know about the betrayed and discarded child. About the gashes that still bled, the sores that would never heal. In his next pantomime he could be with a woman who knew only the functional and successful adult he'd managed to become.

She averted her eyes to the diamond ring on the table. To the beer wrapper ring beside it. She bent down for them and handed both to Ethan.

"I am glad you've returned these rings," he said. "They do not belong on your finger."

His words confirmed what she already knew. That it was time to leave.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a small turquoise box. Holly's breath quickened.

He knelt down on one knee and held it out to her in the palm of his hand.

"Because an ordinary diamond ring does not fit the uniqueness of you. Like this, you are one of a kind."

He opened the box. Inside was the blue topaz ring she had admired from the private gemstone collection they'd seen that day they had gone shopping.

Uncontainable tears rolled down Holly's cheeks.

"I love you, Holly. I have loved you since you bounced through the door with that ridiculous blue paint on your face. I have never met anyone like you. Pretending to be engaged to you has shown me something I never thought I could see."

"What?" Holly asked, her spirits soaring.

"That our pain does not have to define us. That a past and a future can coexist. That there is beauty to be had every day. I want to share those miracles with you. To walk through life together. Please. Please. Will you marry me? This time the ring will never leave your finger."

She had to take the chance if he was willing to. To trust their authentic selves—scars and all. Together.

"I will." She nodded as he fitted the ring onto her finger.

Ethan stood. Holly reached her arms up around his neck and drew him into a kiss that couldn't wait a second longer.

Many minutes later he whispered, "Did you check the fax machine?"

"No." She'd heard the sounds and beeps of the machine before he arrived, but she hadn't looked to see what had come. She'd had quite enough of faxes already.

"Go," he prodded.

The piece of paper contained a two-word question.

Will you?

Had she read it earlier, she'd have known he was coming to propose.

She flirted with her fiancé. "Will I...?"

The smile kicked at the corner of his mouth. "Will you teach me how to draw?"

"It's a deal." Her grin joined his.

They pressed their lips to each other's in an ironclad merger, valid for eternity.

* * * * *

Unveiling The Bridesmaid

Jessica Gilmore

Best man for the bridesmaid!

A devastating accident left Hope McKenzie the sole carer for her little sister. So now that her sister is engaged, Hope will do all she can to organize the wedding—even if that means dealing with reluctant best man Gael O'Connor!

Famous New York artist Gael has spent his life observing his parents' affairs—he's convinced love is a sham. But in spending time with shy Hope, he coaxes her out of her shell. And soon wonders if this beautiful bridesmaid is what he's been missing all along!

For Kristy, roommate, cocktail enabler and partner in crime extraordinaire.

Here's to many more RWA conferences—and another evening in the rum bar some day. xxx

CHAPTER ONE

BEEP, BEEP, BEEEEEP.

Hope McKenzie muttered and rolled over, reaching out blindly to mute her alarm, her hand scrabbling to find the 'off' button, the 'pause' button, the 'Please make it stop right now' button. Only... Hang on a second... She didn't have an alarm clock here in New York; she used her phone on the rare occasions when the sun, traffic and humidity didn't wake her first. So what was that noise? And why wouldn't it stop?

Beeeeeep.

Whatever it was, it was getting more and more insistent, and louder by the second. Hope pushed herself up, every drowsy limb fighting back as she swung her legs over the metal frame of the narrow daybed and staggered to her feet, glancing at the watch on her wrist. Five-thirty a.m. She blinked, the small room swimming into dim focus, still grey with predawn stillness, the gloom broken only by the glow of the street light, a full floor below her sole window.

Beeeeeep.

It wasn't a fire alarm or a smoke alarm. There were no footsteps pounding down the stairs of the apartment building, no sirens screeching outside, just the high insistent beep coming from the small round table in the window bay. No, coming from her still-open laptop on the small round table in the window bay.

'What the...?' Hope stumbled the few short steps to the table and turned the laptop around to face her. The screen blared into life, bright colour dazzling her still-half-closed eyes, letters jumbling together as she blinked again, rubbing her eyes with one sleepy hand until the words swam into focus.

Faith calling. Accept?

Faith? At this time? Was she in trouble? Hurt? Wait, where was she? Had she left Europe yet? Maybe she'd been framed for drug smuggling? Maybe she had been robbed and lost all her money? Why had Hope left her to travel alone? Why had she swanned off to New York for six months while her baby sister was out there by herself alone and vulnerable? With a trembling hand Hope pressed the enter key to accept the call, pushing her hair out of her eyes, scanning the screen anxiously and pulling up the low neckline of the old, once-white vest top she slept in.

'Faith?' Hope took a deep breath, relief replacing the blind panic of the last few seconds as her sister's tanned, happy face filled the screen. 'Is everything okay?'

'Everything is fab! Oh, did I wake you? Hang on, did I get the time wrong? I thought it would be evening in New York.'

'No, it's morning, we're behind not ahead. But don't worry about that,' she added as her sister's face fell. 'It's lovely to hear from you, to see you. Where are you?' Still in Europe somewhere, she thought, doing a quick date calculation. Despite Faith's promises to call and write often, contact with her little sister had been limited since Faith had boarded the Eurostar, just over three months ago, to start her grand tour. She was spending the summer Interrailing around Europe before flying to Australia to begin the global part of her adventures but, unlike her big sister, Faith preferred to go with the flow rather than follow a meticulously thought-out plan. Which meant she could be anywhere.

Hope grinned at her sister, the early hour forgotten. It was okay that Faith had been a little quiet; she was busy exploring and having fun. The last thing she wanted to do was call her fusspot of a big sister who would only nag her about budgets and eating well.

'I'm in Prague.' Faith pulled back from the screen a little to show the room—and view—behind her. She was in some kind of loft, sitting in front of French windows, which led out to a stone balcony. Hope could just make out what must be dazzling views of the river and castle behind. Wow, youth hostels were a lot fancier than she had imagined.

‘I thought you arrived in Prague six weeks ago?’ Faith hadn’t intended spending more than a few days in any one place and Hope was pretty sure her sister had texted her from Prague at the beginning of July.

‘I did. I never left. Oh, Hope, it’s like a fairy tale here. You would love it.’

‘I’m sure I would.’ Not that she had been to Prague—or to Paris or to Barcelona or Copenhagen or Rome or any of the other European cities so tantalisingly in reach of London. Their parents had been fans of the great British seaside holiday, rain and all—and since their deaths there had been little money for any kind of holiday. ‘But why did you stay in Prague? I thought you wanted to see everything, go everywhere!’

‘I did but...well...oh, Hope. I met someone. Someone wonderful and...’ Hope peered at the computer screen. Was Faith blushing? Her sister’s eyes were soft and her skin glowing in a way that owed nothing to the laptop’s HD screen. ‘I want you to be happy for me, okay? Because I am. Blissfully. Hope, I’m getting married!’

‘Married?’ She couldn’t be hearing correctly. Her little sister was only nineteen. She hadn’t been to university yet, hadn’t finished travelling. Heck, she’d barely started travelling! More to the point Faith still couldn’t handle her own bills, change a fuse or cook anything more complicated than pasta and pesto—and she burnt that two times out of three. How could such a child be getting married? She could only think of one question. ‘Who to?’

Her sister didn’t answer, turning her head as Hope heard a door bang off-screen. ‘Hunter! I got the times wrong. It’s still early morning in New York.’

‘I know it is, honey. It’s not even dawn yet. Did you wake your sister?’

‘Oh, she doesn’t mind. Come and say hi to her. Hope, this is Hunter, my fiancé.’ The pride in Faith’s voice, the sweetness in her eyes as she raised them to the tall figure who came to stand next to her, made Hope’s throat swell. Her sister had been deprived of a real family at such a young age. No wonder she wanted to strike out and find one of her own. Hope had done her best but she was all too aware what a poor substitute she had been, younger than Faith was now when she took over the reins. Maybe this boy could offer the stability and opportunities she had tried so hard to provide.

And if he couldn’t she would be there, making sure he stepped up. She forced a smile, hoping her fierce thoughts weren’t showing on her face. ‘Hi, Hunter.’

‘Hi, it’s great to meet you at last. I’ve heard so much about you.’ She summed him up quickly. American. Blond, blue-eyed, clean-cut with an engaging smile. Young. Not quite as young as Faith but barely into his twenties.

‘So, how did you two meet?’ Hope forced back the words she wanted to say. Married? You barely know each other! You’re just children! She had promised herself nine years ago she would do whatever it took to make sure Faith was happy—and she had never seen her sister look happier.

‘Hunter’s an artist.’ Pride laced every one of Faith’s words. ‘He was doing portraits on the Charles Bridge and when I walked past he offered to draw me for free.’

‘You had the most beautiful face I’d ever seen,’ Hunter said. ‘How could I charge you when all I wanted to do was look at you?’

‘So I insisted on buying him a drink as a thank you and that was that.’ Faith’s dark eyes were dreamy, a soft smile playing on her lips. ‘Within an hour I knew. We’ve been inseparable ever since.’

A street artist. Hope’s heart sank. However talented he was, that didn’t sound too promising as far as setting up a home was concerned and Faith had no career or any idea what she wanted to do after this year was up. She forced another smile. ‘How romantic. I can’t wait to see the portrait—and meet Hunter in person rather than through a screen.’

‘You will! In just over two weeks. That’s when we’re getting married! In New York and...’ Faith adopted a pleading expression Hope knew only too well. ‘I was really hoping you’d take care of some of the details for me.’

Hope froze. She knew what 'taking care of some of the details' meant in Faith speak. It meant do everything. And usually she did, happily. Only this was her first time away from her responsibilities in nine years. It was meant to be Hope Getting A Life Time.

Admittedly she hadn't actually got very far yet. Oh, she'd rushed out her first week here in New York and splashed out on a new wardrobe full of bright and striking clothes, had her hair cut and styled. But she couldn't rid herself of feeling like the same old boring Hope. Still, there were three months of her job swap left. She still had every opportunity to do something new and exciting. She just needed to get started.

'Details?' she said cautiously.

'Hunter and I want a small, intimate wedding in New York—just close family and a few friends. His mother will host a big reception party a couple of days later and Hunter says she'll go all out so I think the wedding day should be very simple. Just the ceremony, dinner and maybe some entertainment? You can handle that, can't you? I won't be there until a couple of days before the wedding. Hunter hasn't finished his course and I don't want to leave him alone. Besides, you are so good at organising you'll do a much better job than I ever could. You make everything special.'

Hope's heart softened at the last sentence; she'd worked so hard to give Faith a perfect childhood. 'Faith, honey, I'm more than happy to help but why so very soon? Why not have it later on and plan it yourself? Travel first, like you arranged.' Give yourself more time to get to know each other, she added silently.

'Because we love each other and want to be together as soon as possible. I'm still going travelling—only with Hunter on our honeymoon. Australia and Bali and New Zealand and Thailand. It's going to be the longest and most romantic honeymoon ever. Thank you, Hope, I knew I could rely on you. I'm going to send you some ideas, okay? My measurements for dresses, flowers, colours, you know the kind of thing. But you know my taste. I know whatever you pick will be perfect.'

'Great. That will be really good.' Hope tried to keep her voice enthusiastic but inside she was panicking. How on earth could she work the twelve-hour days her whole office took for granted and plan a wedding in just two weeks? 'Thing is I do have to work, you know, sweetie. My time is limited and I still don't know New York all that well. Are you sure I'm the best person for the job?' She knew the route between her apartment and the office. She knew a nice walk around Central Park. She knew her favourite bookstore and where to buy the perfect coffee. She wasn't sure any of that would be much use in this situation.

Faith didn't seem to notice any of her sister's subtext, ploughing on in breathless excitement. 'There's no budget, Hope, whatever you think is most suitable. Don't worry how much it costs.'

Hope swallowed. 'No budget?' Although she and Faith had never been poor exactly, money had been tight for years. Her parents had been reasonably well insured and the mortgage on their Victorian terrace in north London had been paid off after they died, but after that tax had swallowed up most of their inheritance. She had had to raise Faith on her wages—and at eighteen with little work experience those wages had been pretty meagre. 'Faith, I know that you have your nest egg from Mum and Dad but I don't think it'll stretch to an extravagant wedding.' Was Faith expecting Hope to contribute? She would love to buy her sister her wedding dress, but the words 'no budget' sent chills down her spine.

'Oh, Faith doesn't need to touch her money—I'm taking care of everything,' Hunter said, reappearing behind Faith. 'I've arranged for a credit card to be sent to you.' Hope's eyes flew open at this casual sentence. 'For expenses and deposits and things. Anything you need.'

'For anything I need?' Hope repeated unable to take the words in. 'But...'

'Only the best,' Hunter continued as if she hadn't spoken. 'Anyone gives you any trouble just mention my name—or my mother's, Misty Carlyle. They should fall into line pretty quickly.'

'Mention your name. Okay.' She seemed incapable of doing anything other than parroting his words but the whole situation had just jumped from bizarre to surreal. How did a street artist in

Prague have the power to send credit cards for a budget-free wedding shopping spree across the ocean without batting an eyelid? Just who was Faith marrying? A Kennedy?

'Actually, the best person to speak to will be my stepbrother Gael. Gael O'Connor. He only lives a few blocks away from you and he knows everyone. Here, I'll email you the address and his number and let him know to expect you.' He beamed as if it was all sorted. For Faith and him it was, she supposed. They could carry on being in love in their gorgeous attic room staring out at the medieval castle while Hope battled New York humidity to organise them the perfect wedding.

Well, she would, with the help of Hunter's unexpected largesse. She would make it perfect for her sister if it killed her. Only she wasn't going to do it alone. She was all for equality and there was nothing to say wedding planning had to be the sole preserve of the bride's family after all. As soon as it was a respectable hour she would visit Mr Gael O'Connor and enlist his help. Or press-gang him. She really didn't mind which it was, as long as Faith ended up with the wedding of her dreams.

* * *

Gael O'Connor glanced at his watch and tried not to sigh. Sighing hadn't helped last time he checked, nor had pacing, nor had swearing. But when you hired a professional you expected professional behaviour. Not tardiness. Not an entire twenty minutes' worth of tardiness.

He swivelled round to stare out of the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined one whole side of his studio. Usually looking out over Manhattan soothed him or inspired him, whatever he needed. Reminded him that he had earned this view, this space. Reminded him that he mattered. But today all it told him was that he was taking a huge gamble with his career and his reputation.

Twenty-five minutes late. He had to keep busy, not waste another second. Turning, he assessed once again the way the summer morning light fell on the red velvet chaise longue so carefully positioned in the middle of the room, the only piece of furniture in the large studio. His bed and clothes were up on the mezzanine, the kitchen and bathroom were tucked away behind a discreet door at the end of the apartment. He liked to keep this main space clutter-free. He needed to be able to concentrate.

Only right now there was nothing to concentrate on except the seconds ticking away.

Gael resumed pacing. Five minutes, he would give her five more minutes and if she hadn't arrived by then he would make sure she never worked in this city again. Hang on. Was that the buzzer? It had never been more welcome. He crossed the room swiftly. 'Yes?'

'There's a young lady to see you, sir. Name of...'

'Send her up.' At last. Gael walked back over to the windows and breathed in the view: the skyscrapers dominating the iconic skyline, the new, glittering towers shooting up around him as New York indulged in a frenzied orgy of building, the reassuring permanence of the old, traditional Upper East Side blocks maintaining their dignified stance on the other side of his tree-lined street. He shifted from foot to foot. He needed to use this restless energy while it coursed through him—not waste it in frustration.

The creak of the elevator alerted him to his visitor's imminent arrival. No lobby, not when you had the penthouse; the elevator opened right into the studio.

And he did have the penthouse. Not as a gift, not as a family heirloom but because he had worked for it and bought it. Not one of his friends would ever understand the freedom that gave him.

The doors opened with an audible swish and heels tapped tentatively onto the wooden floor. 'Er...hello?' English. He hadn't expected that. Not that he cared what she sounded like; he wasn't interested in having a conversation with her.

'You're late.' Gael didn't bother turning round. Usually he made time to greet the women, put them at their ease before they got started but he was too impatient for the niceties today. 'There's a robe on the chaise. You can change in the bathroom.'

'Excuse me?'

‘The bathroom.’ He nodded to the end of the room. ‘There’s a hanger for your clothes. Go and strip. You can keep the robe on until I’ve positioned you properly if you prefer.’ Some did, others were quite happy to wander nude from the bathroom across the floor to the chaise. He didn’t mind either way.

‘My clothes? You want me to take them off?’

‘Well, yes. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?’

He moved around to face her at the exact same moment she let out a scandalised-sounding, ‘No! Of course not. Why would you think that?’

Who on earth was this? Dark-haired, dark-eyed, petite with a look of outraged horror. She was pretty enough, beautiful even—if you liked the ‘big dark eyes in a pale face’ look. But he was expecting an Amazonian redhead with a knowing smile and whatever and whoever this girl was she certainly wasn’t that.

‘Because I was expecting someone who was supposed to be doing exactly that,’ Gael said drily. ‘But you are not what I ordered. Too short for a start, although you do have an interesting mouth.’

‘Ordered?’ Her cheeks reddened as the outrage visibly ratcheted up several notches. ‘I’m sorry that I’m not your takeout from Call Girls Are Us but I think you should check before you start asking complete strangers to strip.’

‘I’m not the one who has gatecrashed their way past the doorman. Who are you? Did Sonia send you?’

‘Sonia? I don’t know any Sonia. There’s clearly been some kind of mix-up. You are Gael O’Connor, aren’t you?’ She sounded doubtful, taking a cautious step back as if he might pounce any second.

He ignored her question. ‘If you don’t know Sonia then why are you here?’

She took a deep breath. ‘My sister is getting married and...’

‘Great. Congratulations. Look, I don’t do weddings. I don’t care how much you offer. Now, I’m more than a little busy so if you’ll excuse me I have to make a call. I’m sure you can find your own way out. You seemed to have no trouble finding your way in.’

The dark-haired woman stared at him, incredulity all over her face as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Ignoring his unwanted visitor, Gael scrolled through what felt like an endless stream of emails, notifications and alerts. His mouth compressed. Nothing from the agency. With a huff of impatience he found their name and pressed call. They had better have a good explanation. The phone rang once, twice—he tapped his foot with impatient rhythm—three times before a voice sang out, ‘Unique Models, how may I help?’

‘Gael O’Connor here. It’s now...’ He glanced up at the digital clock on the otherwise stark grey walls. ‘It’s nine a.m. and the model I booked for eight-thirty has yet to show up.’

‘Gael, lovely to speak to you. I am so sorry, I meant to call you before but I literally haven’t had time. It’s been crazy, you wouldn’t believe.’

‘Try me.’

‘Sonia was booked yesterday for a huge ad campaign—only it was a last-minute replacement so she had to literally pack and fly. I saw her onto the plane myself last night. International perfume ad, what an opportunity. Especially for a model who is...’ the booker’s voice lowered conspiratorially ‘...outsize. So we are going to have to reschedule your booking I am so sorry. Or could I send someone else? We have some lovely redheads if that’s what you require or was it the curvier figure you were looking for?’

With some difficulty Gael managed not to swear. Send someone else? An image of the missing Sonia flashed through his mind: the knowing expression in her green catlike eyes, the perfect amount of confident come-hitherness he needed for the centrepiece of his first solo exhibition. ‘No. I can’t simply replace her, nor can I rebook. I’ve put the time aside right now.’

After all, the exhibition was in just five weeks.

‘Sonia will be back in just a couple of days. All I can do is apologise for the delay but...’

It would help, he thought bitterly, if the booker sounded even remotely sorry. She would be—he would never use a Unique model again. He hung up on her bored pretence for an apology. Once Sonia was back she would be of no use to him. Unlike his photographs Gael didn’t want the subjects of his paintings to be known faces. Their anonymity was part of the point. He spent too much time documenting the bright and the beautiful. For this he wanted real and unknown.

His hand curled into a fist as he faced the bitter facts. He still had to paint the most important piece for his very first exhibition and he had no model lined up. He mentally ran through his contacts but no one obvious came to mind. Most of the models he knew were angular, perfect for photography, utterly useless for this.

Damn.

‘Mr O’Connor.’

Palming his phone, Gael directed a frustrated glance over at his unwanted intruder. ‘I thought you’d left,’ he said curtly. She was standing stiffly by the elevator, leaning towards it as if she longed to flee—although nobody was stopping her, quite the contrary. Gael allowed his gaze to travel down her, assessing her suitability. Before he had only looked at what she lacked compared to the model he was expecting to see; she was much shorter, slight without the dramatic curves, ice to Sonia’s fire. She wore her bright clothing like a costume, her dark hair waving neatly around her shoulders like a cloak. Her eyes were huge and dark but the wariness in them seemed engrained.

She took another step back. ‘Do you mind?’

‘It is my studio...’ he drawled. That was better; indignation brought some more colour into her cheeks, red into her lips.

‘I am not some painting that you can just look at in that way. As if...as if...’ She faltered.

But he knew exactly what she had been going to say and finished off her sentence. ‘As if you were naked.’

He had lit the fuse and she didn’t disappoint; her eyes filled with fire, her cheeks now dusky pink. She would make a very different centrepiece from the one he had envisioned but he could work with those eyes, with that innocent sensuality, with the curve of her full mouth.

He nodded at her. ‘Come over here. I want to show you something.’

Gael didn’t wait to see if she would follow; he knew that she would. He strode to the end of the studio and turned over the four unframed canvases leaning against the brick wall. There would be twenty pictures in total. Ten had been framed and were stored at the gallery, another five were with the framers. These four, the most recent, were waiting their turn.

He heard a sharp intake of breath from close behind him. He took a step back to stand beside her and looked at the paintings, trying to look at them with fresh eyes, to see what she saw even though he knew each and every brush stroke intimately.

‘Why are all the women lying in the same position?’

Gael glanced over at the red chaise standing alone in the middle of the studio, knowing her eyes had followed his, that she too could see each of the women lying supine, their hair pulled back, clad only in jewellery, their faces challenging, confident, aware and revelling in their own sensual power.

‘Do you know Olympia?’

Her forehead creased. ‘Home of the Greek gods?’

‘No, it’s a painting by Manet.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘It was reviled at the time. The model posed naked, in the same position as each of these,’ he waved a hand at his canvases, at the acres of flesh: pink, cream, coffee, ebony. ‘What shocked nineteenth-century France wasn’t her nudity, it was her sexuality. She wasn’t some kind of goddess, she was portraying a prostitute. Nudes at that time were soft, allegorical, not real sensual beings. Olympia changed all that. I have one more painting to produce before my exhibition begins in just

over a month.' His mouth twisted at the thought. 'But as you must have heard my model has gone AWOL and I can't afford to lose any more time. I want you to pose for me. Will you?'

Her eyes were huge, luminous with surprise and, he noticed uncomfortably, a lurking fear. 'Me? You want me to pose? For you? On that couch? Without my clothes? Absolutely not!'

CHAPTER TWO

HE WANTED HER to what? Hope stepped back and then again, eyeing Gael O'Connor nervously. But he lost interest the second she uttered her emphatic refusal, turning away from her with no attempt to persuade her. Hope could see her very presence fading from his mind as he began to scroll through his phone again, muttering names speculatively as he did so.

Maybe she should just go, try and arrange this wedding by herself. She looked around, eyes narrowing as she took on the vast if largely empty room, the huge windows, the high ceiling, the view... This much space, on the Upper East Side? Hope did some rapid calculations and came up with seven figures. At the very least. Her own studio would fit comfortably in one corner of the room and the occupant probably wouldn't even notice she was there. Hunter had said that his stepbrother could get her into all the right places and this address, this room, Gael's utter certainty that he commanded the world indicated that her brother-in-law-to-be hadn't been lying.

Hope cleared her throat but her voice still squeaked with nerves. 'Hi, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Hope McKenzie and I'm here because your brother—stepbrother—is engaged to my sister.'

He didn't look up from his phone. 'Which one?'

'Which what?'

'Stepbrother. I have...' he paused, the blue eyes screwed up in thought '...five. Although two of those are technically half-brothers, I suppose, and too young to be engaged anyway.'

'Hunter. Hunter Carlyle. He met my sister, Faith, in Prague and...'

'Hunter isn't my stepbrother. He was,' Gael clarified. 'But his mother divorced my father a decade ago, which makes him nothing at all to me.'

'But he said...'

'He would, he clings to the idea of family. He's like his mother that way. It's almost sweet.'

Hope took a deep breath, feeling like Alice wrestling with Wonderland logic. 'As I said, he's engaged to my sister and I was wondering...'

'I wouldn't worry. I know he's young. How old is your sister?'

Was she ever going to say what she had come here to say? It had been a long time since she had felt so wrong-footed at every turn—although being asked to strip by a strange man at nine a.m. would wrong-foot anyone. 'Nineteen, but...'

He nodded. 'Starter marriages rarely last. There will be a prenup, of course, but don't worry, the Carlyles are very generous to their exes. Just ask my dad.' Bitterness ran through his voice like a swirl of the darkest chocolate.

'Starter marriages?' This was getting worse. Was she going to be able to formulate a whole sentence any time soon?

He raised an eyebrow. 'That's why you're here, isn't it? To ask me to stop the wedding? I wouldn't worry. Hunter's a good kid and, like I said, the prenups are generous. Your sister will come out of this a wealthy woman.'

Hope's lips compressed. 'My sister is marrying Hunter because she loves him.' She pushed the part of her brain whispering that Faith had only known Hunter for six weeks ruthlessly aside. 'And I am sure he loves her.' Based on a two-minute conversation through a computer screen but she wasn't going to give Gael O'Connor the satisfaction of seeing her voice any doubts. 'They want to get married, here in New York, two weeks on Thursday and they asked me to organise the wedding.'

Gael's mouth pursed into a soundless whistle. 'I wonder what Misty will say to that. She prides herself on her hostessing skills.'

'I believe she is holding a party on Long Island shortly after. A small and intimate wedding, that's what Faith's asked for and that's what I am going to give her. But it's going to be the best small

and intimate wedding any bride ever had. Hunter thought you would be able to help me but it's very clear that you are far too busy to get involved in anything as trivial as a starter marriage. I won't bother you any more. Good day.'

Head up, shoulders straight and she was going to walk right out of here. So she might not have Gael O'Connor's connections; she had a good head on her shoulders and determination. That should do it.

'Hope, wait.' There was a teasing note in his voice that sent warning shivers through her. Hope was pretty sure that whatever he wanted she wasn't going to like it.

'Pose for me and I'll help you give your sister the perfect wedding. I can, you know,' he added as she gaped at him. 'My little black book...' he held up his phone '...is filled with everyone and anyone you need from designers to restaurateurs. You do this and your sister will have the wedding of her dreams. And that's a promise.' His gaze swept over her assessingly, that same lazy exploration that made her feel stripped to the skin. She shivered, her heart thumping madly as each nerve responded to his insolence.

Mad, bad, definitely dangerous to know. She was horribly out of her depth. 'I...look, this isn't something you can just throw at someone. It's a big deal.'

A small smile curved his mouth. It didn't reach his eyes; she had a sense it seldom did. 'Hope, life modelling is a perfectly respectable thing to do. Men and women of all ages and body shapes do it day in, day out.'

She cast a quick glance at the canvases still facing out, at the exposed flesh and the satisfied, confident gazes. 'But these aren't men and women of all ages and shapes,' she pointed out. 'They are all women and they are all beautiful, all sexy.'

'That's because of the theme of the show. If Olympia had been a middle-aged man then we wouldn't be having this conversation. It'll be quite intensive. I'll need a week or so of your time, first a few sketches and then the actual painting. The first session is the most important—I need to know that you're comfortable with the pose, with the jewellery you choose and its symbolism. The tricky bit is finding the right mood. The other models have spent some time thinking about their past, about their sexuality and what it means to them; the original Olympia saw sex as business and that comes across in her portrait. She is in control of her body, what it offers.'

Which meant, she supposed, that he thought she could portray sexuality. Awareness quivered through her at the idea. Awareness of his height, of the lines of his mouth, the steeliness in his eyes. It was an attractive combination, the dark hair, such a dark chocolate it was almost black, and warm olive skin with the blue-grey eyes.

Eyes fastened solely on her. Hope swallowed. It had been a long time since anyone had intimated that they found her sexy. Attractive, useful, nice. But not sexy. It was a seductive idea. Hope stared at the red couch and tried to imagine it: her hair piled up, pulling at the nape of her neck, the coolness of a pendant heavy on her naked breast, the way the rubbed velvet would feel against the tender skin on her thighs and buttocks, against her back.

How it would feel to have that steely gaze directed intently on her, to have him focus on every hair, every dimple, every curve—Hope sucked in her stomach almost without realising it—every scar.

Hope's cheeks flamed. How could she even be having this conversation? She didn't wear a bikini, for goodness' sake, let alone nothing at all. If she could shower in her clothes she would. As for tapping into her sexuality...she swallowed painfully. How could you tap into something that didn't actually exist? Even if she had the time and the inclination to lie there exposed she didn't have the tools.

'You're talking to the wrong woman.' Her voice was cold and clipped, her arms crossed as if she could shield herself from his speculative sight. 'Even if I wanted to model for you—which I don't—I don't have the time. I have a job to do, a job which takes up twelve hours of every day and often my weekend as well. I have no idea how I am going to sort out a wedding in less than three weeks

and still keep Brenda Masterson happy but, well, that's my problem. I will manage somehow. I don't need or want your help. Goodbye, Mr O'Connor. As you don't consider Hunter to be part of your family I doubt we'll meet again.'

Hope swivelled and turned, heading for the door, glad of the heels, glad of the well-cut, summery clothes and the extra confidence they gave her. She was new Hope now, new Hope in New York City. She had time to invest in her career, a little money to invest in herself and the way she looked. Any day now she would try her hand at salsa or Zumba or running, join a book club and go to interesting lectures. So she had missed out on being a young adult? It wasn't too late to become the person she once dreamed of being.

But first she would organise her sister's wedding. And not by taking off her clothes and posing for some artist no matter how much she liked the way his eyes dwelled on her. Eyes she could feel follow her as she crossed the room, and pushed the button to summon the lift. Eyes that seemed to strip her bare and see straight through the thin veneer of confidence she had plastered on.

If he did paint her she knew it wouldn't just be her body that would be bared for the world to see. It would be her soul as well. And that was a risk she would never be able to take.

'Did you say you work for Brenda Masterson?'

She paused. One minute he was dismissing her, the next making her an outrageous proposal—and now small talk? She turned and glared at him, hoping he took her impatient message on board. 'Yes, I work at DL Media. I'm in New York on a job swap as Brenda's assistant.' Brenda's very late assistant. She was probably focussing that famously icy glare right at Hope's vacant desk right this moment.

Gael kept her gaze as he pressed his phone to his ear, a mocking smile playing on his well-cut lips. 'Brenda? Is that you?'

What? He knew Brenda? He had said he knew everybody but she didn't think he meant her boss.

'Hi. It's Gael. Yes, I'm good, how about you? I've been having a think about that retrospective. Uh-huh. It's a good offer you made me but there's some work I need to do first, going through the old blogs, through the old photos.' He paused as Brenda spoke at some length, her words indiscernible to Hope.

She shifted from foot to foot, wishing she had worn less strappy heels in this heat—and that she had catlike hearing. This job was her chance to be noticed, to stop being Kit Buchanan's loyal and mousy assistant and to be someone with prospects and a real career—if Gael O'Connor messed this up for her she would knock him out with one of his own paintings...

'As it happens,' Gael continued smoothly, 'I have your assistant here. Yes, very cute. Love the accent.' He winked at Hope and she clenched her jaw. 'It would be great if you could spare her for a couple of weeks to help me with the archiving and labelling, maybe start to put together some copy. Yeah. Absolutely. You're a doll, Brenda. Thanks.'

A what? Hope was pretty sure nobody had ever called Brenda Masterson a doll before and lived through the experience. Gael clicked his phone off and smiled over at Hope. 'Good news. You're mine for the next couple of weeks.'

She what? In his dreams. And she was going to tell him so just as soon as she had the perfect withering put-down—and when she had answered the call vibrating insistently through her phone. Hope pulled the phone out of her pocket and the words hovering on her lips dried up when she saw Brenda's name flashing on the screen. She didn't need to take a course in fortune telling to predict what this call would be about. With a withering look in Gael's direction, which promised that this conversation was totally not over, Hope answered the call, tension twisting in her stomach.

'Brenda, hi. Sorry, I'm on my way in.' Damn, why had she apologised? She hadn't realised just how much she said 'sorry' or 'excuse me' until she moved to New York where no one else seemed to spend their time apologising for occupying space or wanting to get by or just existing. Every time she said sorry to Brenda she felt her stock fall a little further.

‘Absolutely not. Stay right where you are. I didn’t realise you knew Gael O’Connor.’ Was that admiration in Brenda’s voice? Great, three months into her time here and she had finally made her boss sit up and take notice—not through her hard work, initiative or talent but because of some guy she’d only met this morning.

‘My sister is engaged to his stepbrother. Ex-stepbrother.’ She couldn’t have this conversation in front of him, not as he leaned against the wall, arms folded and an annoying Gotcha smirk on his admittedly handsome face. Hope walked past him, heading for the door she’d seen at the other end of the apartment. It might lead to his red room of pain or whatever but she’d take the risk. Actually it led to a rather nice kitchen—an oddity in a city where nobody seemed to have space to cook. It was a little overdone on the stainless-steel front for Hope’s tastes and ranked highly on the ‘terrifying appliances I don’t know how to use and can’t even guess what they’re for’ scale but it was still rather impressive. And very clean. Maybe having a kitchen was a status thing, the using of it optional.

She shut the door firmly behind her. ‘I don’t know Gael O’Connor exactly. I only met him today to discuss wedding plans.’

‘You’ve obviously impressed him. Let’s keep it that way. I’m seconding you to work with him over the next two weeks. I want regular updates and I want him kept sweet. If you can do that then I can promise that all the right people will know how helpful you’ve been, Hope. It wouldn’t surprise me if you got your pick of roles at the end of this secondment here or back in London. After all, as you’ve probably heard by now, Kit Buchanan’s resigned from the London office inconveniently taking my assistant with him. Maybe we could arrange for you to stay here, if you wanted to, that is...’

Hope’s breath caught in her throat. Keep him sweet? Did Brenda know just what he wanted her to do? Was she suggesting that nude modelling was part of her job description? Because Hope was pretty sure she’d missed that clause unless it fell somewhere under ‘any other business.’

But Brenda had also tapped into a worry that Hope had been trying very hard not to think about. Her role in London had been working as a PA for the undoubtedly brilliant if often frustrating Kit Buchanan. Yet in less than three months he had fallen in love with Maddison Carter, her job-swap partner and owner of the tiny if convenient Upper East Side studio Hope was currently living in. And that had changed everything. She hadn’t expected to feel so lost when she’d heard the news, almost grief stricken. It wasn’t that she was jealous exactly. She wasn’t in love with Kit. She didn’t really have a crush on him either, although he had a nice Scottish accent, was handsome in an ‘absent-minded professor’ kind of way and, crucially, was the only single man under thirty she spent any time with. But Kit’s resignation meant that in three months she would be returning to a new manager—and possibly a different, less fulfilling role.

It was a long time since Hope had dreamed of archaeology; she’d pushed those dreams and any thought of university aside after her parents died, starting instead as an office junior at a firm of solicitors close to her Stoke Newington home. But when she had moved to DL Media three years ago Kit had been quick to see potential in his PA and ensured there had been a certain amount of editorial training and events work in her duties. There was no guarantee a new manager would feel the same way. But if Brenda was impressed with her then who knew what opportunities would open up? Hope took a deep breath and tried to clear her head. ‘Why does Gael need an assistant from DL Media?’ And why me? she silently added.

‘Because Gael O’Connor is planning a retrospective of his photographs and the blog that catapulted him into the public eye and I want to make sure that he chooses DL Media as his partner when he does so. I’ve been courting him and his agent for nearly a year and got nowhere. They say that his archive is incredible, that he could bring down careers, end marriages with his photos,’ Brenda’s voice was full of longing. ‘I can smell the sales now. This could be huge, Hope, and you could be part of it straight from the start. I want you to get me those photos and the anecdotes that accompany them. Help him sort out his archive and make sure that at the end he is so impressed he signs on the dotted line of the very generous contract we offered him. Take as long as you need, do whatever you

have to do but get that signature for me. You have an in. He asked for you, your sister is marrying someone he's close to. Anyone would kill for that kind of connection. Exploit it. If you do then I guarantee you a nice promotion and a secure future here at DL Media...'

Hope didn't need to ask what would happen if she failed—or if she refused. Back to England in ignominy and coffee-making, minute-taking and contract-typing-up for the rest of her days. If she was lucky. But if she agreed then she was not only getting a huge boost up the career ladder but she would also be away from the office, out from under Brenda's eye and could grab the time to sort out Faith's wedding. Damn Gael O'Connor, he had her exactly where he wanted her.

'Okay,' she said, injecting as much confidence into her voice as she could manage. 'I'll do it. You don't have to worry, Brenda. I won't let you down.'

* * *

Gael couldn't hear Hope's conversation with her boss but he didn't need to. Hope was as good as his. He'd met Brenda Masterson several times and he knew her type; her eyes were fixed firmly on the prize and she wasn't going to let anything or anyone get in her way.

The kitchen door opened and Hope stalked through, her colour high but her eyes bright with determination. 'I suppose you think you are very clever,' she said. 'Of course some might call it blackmail...'

'Call what blackmail? Your boss wants my archive and I need help organising it. Seems like a fair trade to me.' But Gael couldn't stop the smile playing around his lips. 'You should thank me. I'm much less of a clock watcher than Brenda. You might even get some wedding organising done while you're here. In fact you can have today to get started. Consider it my wedding gift to the happy couple.'

'Is there even an archive or is this just some kind of ruse to keep me here?'

Gael stilled. He was so used to people knowing who he was, what he was, that the scorn in her all too candid eyes took him back. Back to the days before Expose. The days when he was nothing. 'I see. You think this is a ploy to get you to pose? Get real, princess. I may have asked you to sit for me but I don't beg and I certainly don't coerce. Every one of those women over there...' He nodded over at the canvases. 'They came to me freely.'

Her forehead creased. 'So why did you ask Brenda if I could work for you?'

'Because I was planning on saying yes to Brenda's offer anyway and this saves me the hassle of finding an assistant. Because I won't mind how you organise your time as long as the archiving work gets done so this way you can pop out to look at venues or cakes or whatever else you need to do. Not to force you into anything. Nobody is keeping you here against your will, Rapunzel, there's no escape ladder needed. You can leave at any time.'

Hope looked over at the chaise, a frown still creasing her forehead. 'I'm sorry, I just thought...you said you wouldn't help me with the wedding and then this all happened so fast.'

'I'm not helping you. I'm giving you time but that's all you'll get out of me. I have a model to find and paint, an exhibition to put on and an archive to explain to you and oversee. The wedding's your problem, not mine. Unless you change your mind about the picture, in which case I'll keep my end of the bargain and help you but, like I said, your decision. It's not part of your duties here. I have no interest in a reluctant subject.'

She took a visible deep breath, her eyes clouded, her forehead still wrinkled with thought. She was close to a decision but whether that decision was changing her mind and posing or walking out and telling him to go to hell he had no idea.

It was intriguing, this unpredictability.

'If I said yes...' She stopped, her eyes wary again.

He should be feeling triumphant. He almost had her, he could tell. But Hope McKenzie wasn't like his usual subjects. They were all eager for him to tell their stories with his paintbrush—she was all secrets and disguises. 'Before we go any further, I need you to know exactly what you're getting into.'

‘I lie there and you paint me. Right?’ The words were belligerent but her eyes dark with fear.

‘It’s not easy being a life model. It’s a skill. You have to keep the same pose for hours. No complaining about being cold, or achy or hungry.’

‘Okay.’

‘I asked each model to wear some jewellery that meant something to them. Something very personal.’ He pointed over at one canvas. ‘That girl there, Anna? She’s wearing pins in her hair she wore on her wedding day. This lady, Ameena, she’s wearing gold necklaces and bangles gifted to her by her parents when she emigrated to the US.’

‘And they have to be naked. I mean, I would have to be. Totally. I couldn’t, instead of jewellery have a scarf or something. It’s just...’

‘Sorry.’ And he was. It wasn’t easy for even the most seasoned model to lie there so exposed to him and even though his other models had been enthusiastic about the project they had still found posing difficult, embarrassment covered in a multitude of ways, by jokes, by attempted seduction, by detachment.

‘That’s okay.’

It didn’t seem okay; her hands were twisting together in an attempt to hide a slight shake.

‘The last thing is probably the most important. If you model then I need you to think about sex. What it means to you, good and bad. I need you to think about that the whole time I paint you. I know that’s an odd request but it’s the theme of the paintings and it needs to show in your eyes, on your face. If it helps I can play any music you want, audiobooks, relaxation tapes—whatever makes you comfortable.’

It was odd, he’d had this conversation many times before and he had never felt so like some kind of libertine before. Every other model had known exactly why she was there, had volunteered for this. It was business, not personal.

But this time it felt horribly personal and he had no idea why.

‘Think about sex?’

‘Is that a problem?’

‘It might be.’ Her colour was even higher, rivalling the red of the chaise. ‘You see, I haven’t actually...I don’t...I’m not...what I’m trying to say is...’ she swallowed ‘...I’m a virgin. So I don’t think I can lie there and think about something I know nothing about. Do you?’

CHAPTER THREE

‘THANK YOU. NO, I see. Yes. Absolutely. Thank you.’ Hope clicked her phone off and resisted the urge to throw it off the fire escape and let it smash into smithereens. Another hotel she could cross off her ‘possibles’ list. Three hours of calling and emailing and she still hadn’t made one appointment.

She scanned the list she’d made the second she’d arrived home. It had all seemed so simple then.

1. Find a dress
2. Sort out flowers
3. Ceremony—where????
4. Read through Brenda’s six zillion emails
5. Try and show Gael O’Connor that you’re competent and professional and not a complete basket case...

Hope resisted the urge to bang her head on the wrought-iron railing she was propped up against. She might have managed to steal one day of wedding planning from Gael O’Connor’s manipulative hands but where had it got her? Every venue she had phoned had either laughed at her incredulously or sounded vaguely scandalised. ‘A wedding? In two weeks? Ma’am, this isn’t Vegas. I suggest you try City Hall.’ And as for a dress...you would think she had asked them to spin straw into gold, not supply one white dress, US size four.

And yes, she could try City Hall. And she could pop into any one of a dozen shops and pull a dress off the racks and it would do. And she could book a table in a five-star restaurant and the food would be great. But it wouldn’t be special. It wouldn’t show Faith just how much Hope loved her. It wouldn’t make up for the fact that Faith would have no proud father walking her down the aisle, no mother in a preposterous hat wiping away tears and beaming proudly. Faith deserved the best and Hope had vowed nine years ago that she would have it. This wedding wasn’t going to beat her, no, not if it killed her. Her baby sister would have the finest and most romantic whirlwind wedding New York had ever seen. She just needed to work out how and where.

Hope took a sip of coffee and stared at her laptop, balancing precariously on her open window ledge, hoping it would give her some much-needed inspiration. Maybe if she had spent a little more time actually in the city itself and less time either in the office or here, sunning herself on the fire escape outside her apartment window, she might actually have some unique and doable ideas. Okay. She was in the greatest city in the world, how could her mind be so blank? ‘New York,’ she muttered. ‘New York.’

A ping from her laptop broke her half-hearted reverie and Hope looked across at it, sighing when she saw yet another email from Brenda flashing on her screen. What was going on? She had never seen her famously ice-cool boss this het up over anyone. Hunter had said that Gael knew everybody and what was it Brenda had whispered? He had the power to finish careers and destroy marriages? Remembering the mocking smile and the coldness in the blue-grey eyes, Hope didn’t doubt it.

Setting her coffee cup to one side, she scrambled onto her knees and pulled up her internet browser. ‘Who exactly are you, Gael O’Connor?’ With a guilty look around, as if the starling on the rail above could see her snooping, Hope pressed Enter and waited. She wasn’t sure what to expect but it wasn’t the lines and lines of links that immediately filled her screen. Headlines, photos, articles —and a comprehensive Wikipedia entry.

Gael O’Connor. Photographer. Blogger. Society darling. It looked as if he didn’t just know the New York scene—he dictated it, moving through it, camera at the ready, creating instant stars.

Nowhere would say no to him. Nowhere would tell him that two weeks was impossible. No one would suggest that Gael O’Connor tried City Hall...

Damn.

Her choice was stark. Either she compromised on the wedding or she agreed to Gael's demands and posed for him. If he still wanted her, that was, after her moment of hysterical oversharing. Hope groaned, slumping back again against the sun-hot railing. It was going to be bad enough facing him the next day in a working capacity, how on earth could she bring up the whole naked posing thing? Maybe she should run away instead. Somewhere no one would ever find her—she'd bet Alaska was nice and anonymous and a nice bracing contrast to this never-ending humidity.

At that moment her phone rang. She didn't recognise the number and answered it cautiously. After this morning's 'blurting out secret personal information to a stranger' debacle she'd probably tell the telemarketer about the time she wet herself in playgroup or when she shoplifted a chocolate bar when she was five—and how her mother made her take it back with a note of apology. 'Hope speaking.'

'How's the wedding planning coming along?' A gravelly voice, like the darkest chocolate mixed with espresso.

Hope glared at her laptop. How had Gael known she was thinking of contacting him? Maybe he had sold his soul to the devil and just thinking about him summoned him? 'Great!' Just a little lie.

'That's good. I was worried that two weeks' notice might be too tight for any of the really good venues.'

'How sweet of you to worry but actually I have it all under control.' Another little lie. Any moment her nose was going to start growing.

'Excellent. So you'll be here nice and early tomorrow to start work?'

'I can't wait.' Yes, she'd better hope that long noses were going to be fashionable this year because the way she was going hers was going to be longer than her outstretched arm.

'All you need is your laptop and a lot of patience. I do hope you like cataloguing.'

'I love it. I'd hate to get in your way though, while you're painting. I could work from the office or from mine if that's more convenient.' Please let it be more convenient.

'There's nothing to get in the way of. I haven't found a model yet.' The mockery slipped from Gael's voice, his frustration clear.

'Oh.'

It was a sign. A big neon sign. He still needed a model and she, like it or not, needed his help. Hope took a deep breath. 'Look, Gael. I hate to deprive you of the joy of wedding planning and it looks like we're going to be spending some time together anyway so...' It was even harder to say the words than she'd anticipated.

'So?'

He knew, she could tell, but was no doubt taking some unholy satisfaction from making her spell it out.

'So I can pose. For your picture. If you still want me after, well, if you still want me...' She wasn't going to own up to her virgin status again. She still couldn't believe she had mentioned it at all, said it out loud. To a complete stranger. A state of affairs she had barely acknowledged over the last few years, pushing the thought away as soon as it occurred. Her own secret shame. Hope McKenzie, old before her time, withered, sexless.

'An intriguing offer.'

She tried not to grind her teeth. 'Not really,' she said as breezily as she could. 'I didn't exactly give you an answer, if you remember.' No, she had backed away, muttered something about needing to get things sorted, said, 'Thank you for the offer to take today to start planning and see you tomorrow, thank you very much...' and scarpered as fast as her feet could carry her, out of the studio and back to the safety of her own apartment.

'I thought your mad dash out of the studio was answer enough. Why the sudden change of heart?'

Hope never admitted to needing anyone; she didn't intend to start now. 'You need someone to start straight away and spend the next two weeks at your beck and call. Well, whether I like it or not I am already at your beck and call. It makes sense.'

'How very giving of you. So you're offering because it's convenient?'

Her fingers curled into a fist. He'd asked her—why on earth was she the one working to convince him? 'And although I am more than capable of sorting this wedding alone it would be foolish of me not to use all the resources available. I barely know the city but you live here, your input could save me a lot of wasted effort—and this is the only way you'll help. I'm big enough to admit that if I want Faith to have the best wedding possible then I need to involve you.'

'Another altruistic motive.' Hope's cheeks heated at the sardonic note in Gael's voice. 'And very laudable but you've seen the other portraits. Sacrificial victim isn't the look I'm going for. It's not enough for you to agree to pose. I need you to want it. Tell me, Hope. Do you want it?' His voice had lowered to a decadent pitch, intimately dark. Hope swallowed.

Did she want to pose for him? Lie on that chaise, his eyes on every exposed inch of skin?

Hope stared out through the black iron railings. She knew the view by heart. The buildings opposite, the tops of the trees. This was where she hung out with a coffee and a book or her laptop, too scared to venture out of the comfort zone she'd carved for herself. She didn't mean to speak but somehow the words came spilling out. Another sad confession. 'I meant to shake things up when I moved here. New York was my chance to reinvent myself. I started, I bought new clothes and chopped off some of my hair and thought that would be enough. But I'm still the same. I don't know how to talk to people any more, not when it doesn't involve work or superficial stuff. I don't...' She hesitated. 'I don't know how to make friends, how to have fun. Maybe this will help me loosen up. It'll be a talking point if nothing else.'

'You want me to help you loosen up?' Her pulse quickened at the velvet in his voice.

'Yes. No! Not you exactly. What I mean is that I need to try something different, to be different. Posing for you will be new, unexpected.'

'Okay. Let's try this.'

She hadn't known how tightly she was wound waiting for his answer, how the world had fallen away until it was just the two of them, sharing an intimate space even though they were half a mile apart, until he agreed.

'Great.' She inhaled a shaky breath. 'So what now? Do you want me to come over and...?' Her voice trailed off. How was she going to do it if she couldn't even say it?

The laughter in his voice confirmed he was probably thinking the same thing. 'Not today. I think we need to warm up a little first. You, Hope McKenzie, have just admitted you need me to help you discover new things.'

That wasn't what she had said. Was it? Certainly not in the way she thought he was implying. 'And you think you can do that for me, do you?'

'Maybe.'

She didn't have to see him to know that he was smiling. Anger rose, sharp, hot and a welcome antidote to the sudden intimacy—but she wasn't entirely sure if she was more angry with Gael for his presumption or herself for laying herself open like that. 'How very altruistic of you, and what's in it for you? A better painting or the virtuous glow of helping poor, virginal Hope McKenzie? Sprinkle a little of your privileged, glamorous Upper East Side fairy dust on me and watch me transform? Well, Professor Higgins, this little flower girl doesn't need your patronage, thank you very much.'

'Are you sure about that?' Before she could respond Gael continued smoothly. 'In that case why don't we get started on planning this whirlwind wedding? Any venues you want to see?'

Hope glared at the laptop as if it were to blame for her lack of possibilities. There was no way she wanted to admit she didn't have one idea as yet. 'Yes. Meet me...meet me on top of the Empire

State Building in an hour and a half.' Did they do weddings? It almost didn't matter. It was iconic and it was a start.

'On top of the Empire State Building? How romantic. What a shame it isn't Valentine's Day. Am I Cary Grant or Tom Hanks in this scenario?'

'Neither, you're not the hero. You're the wisecracking friend who ends up handcuffed to a stripper on the stag night.'

'I must have missed that scene. Oh, well, there are worse things to be handcuffed to.' And he hung up leaving Hope with a disturbing image involving Gael O'Connor, handcuffs and the red chaise longue. What was more disturbing was the swirl of excitement in her stomach at the very thought...

* * *

It was predictably busy at the top of the Empire State Building, the sun and the wind combining to make the walkway uncomfortable in the early afternoon heat, but none of the tourists seemed to be complaining, too busy taking selfies and pointing out landmarks to notice the conditions.

And they would all be tourists. No self-respecting New Yorker would be up here at this time, during the height of the sightseeing buzz. In fact Gael couldn't remember the last time he had set foot up here. It had probably been for a photo shoot—that was why he visited most tourist locations.

Which was a shame because, even hardened local that he was, he had to admit the view was pretty spectacular, the blue of the ocean merging with the blue of the sky and the city rising from the ocean's depths like some mythological Atlantis.

Gael walked around three sides of the viewing platform before he spotted Hope, bright in the same red dress she'd been wearing earlier. She was standing half turned away from him, leaning on the railing staring out over the city, the dark strands of her hair whipping in the wind. It was odd, he'd only met her this morning but her image was indelibly printed on him—probably because most women didn't gatecrash his studio, demand he help them with a wedding and then blurt out their sexual history—or lack of—before nine a.m.

A smile tugged at his lips. He hadn't seen that one coming and at this stage in the game he could have sworn he'd seen it all. Dammit, he had to admit he was intrigued. How old was Hope? He looked at her assessingly. Somewhere in her mid to late twenties, he'd guess. Which meant she had to be either holding out for true love or had a considerable amount of baggage and neither of those things appealed to him. Not that he was interested in Hope in that way. He just needed a model.

She shifted and her full profile came into view. Nice straight nose and a really good mouth —full bottom lip and a lovely shape to the top one. Almost biteable. Almost... 'So, is this it? The perfect spot?'

She jumped as he joined her at the barrier, her cheeks flushing as she threw a stilted smile his way. 'I don't know. It looks a bit busy for a wedding.'

'Which is a good thing because it turns out you can only get married up here on Valentine's Day and only then if you win a competition. I checked...' he added as she raised an enquiring eyebrow. 'They could marry elsewhere and then come up here for photos but to be honest with you Hunter isn't that keen on heights.'

'He isn't?'

'Turns green on the Brooklyn Bridge,' Gael confirmed.

'Why didn't you tell me any of this before I arranged to meet you here?' She turned and glared, hands on her slim hips in what was clearly meant to be an admonishing way. She looked more like a cute pixie.

'And ruin your Deborah Kerr moment? Or are you Meg Ryan? Isn't it every girl's dream to arrange a meeting on the top of the Empire State Building?'

'I already told you, your role is the wisecracking best friend, not the hero.'

‘What about your role, Hope? Who are you?’ No woman he knew was content to play the supporting role in their own lives.

‘Me? I’m the wedding planner.’ She stared out over Manhattan, her face softening. ‘Isn’t it breathtaking? I can’t believe I haven’t been up here yet.’

‘Seriously? I thought this was the first destination on every tourist’s wish list.’

‘I’m not exactly a tourist. I live here. Well, for three more months I do. I mean to do the tourist trail at some point but I haven’t had a chance yet.’ Her voice was wistful.

Not the heroine of her own story, neither a tourist nor a native. If he didn’t have a pose in mind he’d paint Hope as something insubstantial, some kind of wandering spirit. ‘Why are you here, Hope?’

She turned, blinking in surprise. ‘To meet you and make a start on the wedding, why?’

‘No, why are you in New York at all? Here you are in the greatest city on earth but you’re barely living in it, not experiencing it.’

“I’m planning to.’ But her words lacked any real commitment and she looked away. ‘But I want a real career, to make something of my life that’s about me. All this...’ She waved her hand over Manhattan. ‘This can wait. It will still be here in ten years’ time. I’m here because for the first time in nine years I don’t have to worry about anyone but myself. I can put my career and my choices first.’

‘Is that what this is? Putting yourself first? Because from where I’m standing you’ve agreed to all kinds of things you don’t want to do for other people. For Brenda, your sister...’

‘Brenda’s my boss, of course I’m going to do what she asks me to do. As for Faith, it’s complicated. Our parents died when I was eighteen and Faith was only ten. I’ve raised her. I can’t turn my back on her now, not when she needs me, wants me. Besides, she’s marrying Hunter in two weeks. She won’t be my responsibility any more. This is the last thing I can do for her and I want it to be perfect.’ Her mouth wobbled and she swallowed. ‘It will be perfect.’

She’d raised her sister? That explained a lot. ‘Of course it will. I’ve agreed to help. Besides, as soon as you mention the Carlyle name any door in the city you want opening will swing open.’

‘There’s no budget for the wedding at all. Hunter’s sending a card. But seriously, what does that even mean? Everyone has some kind of budget.’

Gael couldn’t help his grin. It was so long since he’d spoken to someone who didn’t live in the rarefied Upper East Side bubble. ‘No, not the Carlyles. You’ve heard people say money’s no object?’ She nodded, dark eyes fixed on him. ‘The Carlyles take that to a whole new level. I have no idea how rich they are but filthy doesn’t even begin to cover it.’

‘Wow.’ She looked slightly stunned. ‘And I was worrying that Faith was marrying a street artist with no prospects. I think I was worrying about all the wrong things. I don’t think Faith and I are going to fit in with people like that. We’re very ordinary.’ She hesitated and then turned to him, laying her hand on his forearm. ‘Will she be okay? They won’t look down on her, will they?’

He might be standing on a platform hundreds of feet up in the air but the air had suddenly got very close. All Gael could feel was that area of skin where Hope’s hand lay, all he could smell was the citrus notes of her perfume. He tried to drag his concentration back to the conversation. ‘Misty doesn’t think like that. She’s the least snobby person I’ve ever met and, believe me, living where I live and doing what I do I have met a lot of snobs.’ A thought struck him. ‘She’ll be delighted I’m helping with the wedding. In her head Hunter and I will always be brothers even though he was an annoying three-year-old brat when I moved into their house and we’ve never hung out in the same circles.’ Truth was Hunter had always idolised him. He’d even decided to follow in his footsteps and study art rather than the business degree Misty Carlyle had picked out for her only son.

‘She sounds nice, Misty. If she was such a good stepmother then maybe she’ll be good for Faith.’ Hope’s mouth trembled into a poor attempt at a smile. ‘Poor Faith has only had me for so long, she deserves a real mother.’

Gael suspected that Misty would be delighted to have a young and pliable daughter-in-law. She still introduced herself as his mother even though she'd divorced his dad ten years ago. Still, that was more than his own mother did. 'She is nice,' he conceded. 'By far the best of my parents.'

Hope blinked. 'How many do you have?'

'Are we counting discarded steps? Misty is my father's second ex-wife. My mother was his first. His current wife is number four. We all try and forget about number three.'

Her eyes widened. 'That's a lot of wives.'

'Misty's just divorced husband number five and my mother is on her third marriage.' He shrugged. 'No one in my family takes the whole "as long as you both shall live" part very seriously.'

'My parents met at university, married as soon as they graduated and that was that. I used to think they were really boring. Old before their time, you know? Now I envy them that. That certainty.'

'Oh, my parents are certain every time. I'm not sure if it's more endearing or infuriating, that eternal optimism. They were dancers, Broadway chorus dancers, when they met.'

'No way.'

'Oh, yes,' he said wryly. 'It was very Forty-Second Street. Right up to the minute my twenty-year-old dad knocked up my nineteen-year-old mom and carried her back to Long Harbor to the family bar.' His poor young mother, a streetwise Hispanic girl with stars in her eyes, wasn't content with a life serving drinks to the moneyed masses who flocked to the Long Island resort in the summer. 'I don't remember much about that time, but I do remember a lot of yelling. She's Cuban and my dad's Irish so when they fought crockery flew. Literally. Just before my fifth birthday she packed her bags and walked out. Never came back.'

He hadn't realised that he was clenching his fist until Hope's hand covered his, a warm unwanted comfort. He'd shed the last tear he would ever shed on his mother's behalf on his fifth birthday when she'd failed to turn up to her own son's birthday party. 'I'm so sorry. Do you see her now?'

'Occasionally, if I'm near Vegas. She has a dance troupe there, she's doing well but the last thing she needs is a six-foot, twenty-nine-year-old son reminding her that she's nearer fifty than thirty.'

'So you were raised by your dad?'

'And my grandparents, aunts, uncles—anyone else who wanted to tame the wild O'Connor boy. Not that there was much time to run wild, not with a family business like the Harbor Bar—there's always a surface to clean, a table to clear, an errand to run if you're stupid enough to get caught. And Dad wasn't broken-hearted for long. It seemed like there was a whole line of women just dying to become my stepmom. But they all were swept away when Misty decided she was interested. She was fifteen years older than my dad and it was like she was from a different planet. So calm, so together. So one minute I'm that poor motherless O'Connor boy living on top of a bar with a huge extended family, the next I'm rattling around a huge mansion with a monthly allowance bigger than my dad's old salary. It was insane.'

'It sounds like a fairy tale. Like Cinderella or something.'

'Fairy tales are strictly a girl thing. It's okay for Cinderella to marry the prince, not so okay for an Irish bartender to marry his way into the upper echelons of society. The more polite people called him a toy boy, but they all wore identical sneers—like they knew exactly what Misty saw in him and didn't think it should be allowed in public. And as for me? Breeding counts, money counts and I had neither. When Dad became Misty Carlyle's third ex-husband then I should have returned to the gutter where I came from.'

By unspoken accord they moved away from the railing and began to walk back to the elevator lobby. 'What happened?

'Misty. She insisted on paying for college, persuaded my dad to let me spend my holidays with her, Christmas skiing, spring break in New York, the summers in Europe. Of course everyone at school knew I was there on charity—not even her stepson any more.' It was hard looking back remembering just how alone he had been, how isolated. They hadn't bullied him; he was too strong

for that—and no one wanted to incur Misty's wrath. They had just ignored him. Shown him he was nothing. Until he'd started Expose and made them need him.

'That must have been tough.' Her dark eyes were limpid with a sympathy he hadn't asked for and certainly didn't want.

'Expensive education, great allowance and a suite of rooms in one of the oldest and grandest houses in the Hamptons? Yeah, I suffered.' But Gael didn't know if his words fooled Hope. He certainly never managed to fool himself. He greeted the elevator with relief. 'Come on, I'll buy you a coffee and fill you in on everything you need to know about life with the Carlyles. I'll warn you, you may need to take notes. There's a lot to learn.' For Gael as well as Hope. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd decided to go all This is Your Life with her but one thing he did know. He wouldn't let his guard down again.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘IT’S ALL SET UP and ready to go. Where do you want me to start?’ Hope was perched on one achingly trendy and even more achingly uncomfortable high stool, her laptop set up on the kitchen counter, her bright yellow skirt and dotted cream blouse feeling incongruously feminine and delicate set against the stainless steel and matt black cupboards and worktops.

To one side was Gael’s own laptop and several backup drives plus a whole box of printed photos, most of which had names and dates pencilled on the back. Hope had spent the morning looking through the box and scanning through a couple of the hard drives before setting up the spreadsheets and database she was planning to use.

Gael strolled into the kitchen carrying yet another box, which he set next to the first. Great. Even more photos. ‘I think you are best off starting with the old blog posts. They’re all archived and filed.’ He pushed one of the hard drives towards her and Hope plugged it into the side of her laptop.

‘Okay. So what do you want? Names obviously so we can cross reference them, dates—what else?’

‘Any references made to the subjects in Expose. Once we’ve finished with that we’ll move on to the photos I either didn’t use or were taken after the blog closed down. We’ll only need names and dates unless they were used professionally in which case the magazine will need referencing as well. Most are saved with all the relevant information but any that aren’t put aside into a separate folder and I’ll go through them with you at the end of each day.’

She was scribbling fast, taking notes. ‘Got it. I don’t think it’ll take too long. You’ve kept good notes and everything seems to be labelled...’ She hesitated and he looked at her. Really looked at her for the first time since they had left the Empire State Building yesterday afternoon. Oh, she’d spent time with him. Had coffee, learned some tips on handling her new in-laws-to-be, drawn up a list of possible venues for her sister’s wedding, but he had retreated behind a shield of courtesy and efficiency. She barely knew him and yet that sudden withdrawal left her feeling lonelier than she had for a long time.

‘Everything okay?’

‘Yes, it’s just... Obviously I know that you’re a photographer.’

‘Were,’ he corrected her. ‘Hence the retrospective. I’m a struggling unknown artist now.’

Hope looked around at the kitchen full of gleaming appliances, each worth the same amount as a small car, and repressed a smile. There were few signs of struggling in the studio. ‘Were a photographer. And you do—did—a lot of society shoots and fashion magazines and stuff...’

‘And?’

‘Where does the blog fit in? If I’m going to catalogue properly I need to know what I’m dealing with.’ Somehow Brenda had failed to make this clear in any one of her excitable emails, most of which just reminded Hope how important this assignment was.

Gael leaned on the counter close beside her. He was casually clad in dark blue jeans and a loose, short-sleeved linen shirt. Hope could see every sharply defined muscle in his arms, every dark hair on the olive skin. ‘Expose was a blog I set up when I was at prep school. My plan, not surprisingly given the name, was to expose people. The people I went to school with to be more precise. I took photos chronicling the misadventure of New York’s gilded youth. It just skated the legal side of libellous.’ His mouth curved into a provocative smile. ‘After all, there was no proof that the senator’s son was going to snort that line, that couple on the table weren’t necessarily going to have sex, but it was implied.’ The smile widened. ‘Implied because generally it was true.’

Hope thought back to the hundreds of black and white photos she had already seen today, stored on hard drives, in the box, some framed and hung on Gael’s studio walls, the attractive, entitled faces staring out without a fear in the world. What must it be like to have that sort of confidence

ingrained in you? ‘And they let you just take photos, even when they were misbehaving?’ She cursed her choice of word. Misbehaving! She was living her own stereotype. She’d get out a parasol next and poke Gael with it, saying, ‘Fie! Fie!’ like some twenty-first-century Charlotte Bartlett.

He laughed, a short bitter sound. ‘They didn’t even notice. I was invisible at school, which was handy because nobody suspected it was me. They simply didn’t see me.’ How was that possible? Surely at sixteen or seventeen he would still have been tall, still imposing, still filling all the space with his sheer presence? ‘By the time I was outed as the photographer the blog had become mythic—as had its subjects. To be posted, or even better named and the subject of a post? Guaranteed social success. The papers and gossip magazines began to take an interest in the Upper East Side youth not seen for decades—and it was thanks to me. Instead of being the social pariah I expected to be I found myself the official chronicler of the wannabe young and the damned. That was the end of Expose, of course. It limped on through my first years at college but it lost its way when people started trying to be in it. I became a society photographer instead as you said, portraits, fashion, big events; lucrative, soulless.’

‘But why? Why set it up in the first place? Why run the risk of being caught?’ She could understand taking photographs as a way of expressing his loneliness—after all, she had been known to pen the odd angsty poem in her teens. But that was a private thing—thank goodness. She shivered at the very thought of anybody actually reading them.

Gael straightened, grey-blue eyes fixed on Hope as if he saw every secret thought and desire. No wonder he’d been so successful if his camera’s eye was as shrewd as his own piercing gaze. She swallowed, staring defiantly back as if she were the one painting him, taking him in. But she already knew as much as she was comfortable with. She knew that his hair was cut short but there were hints of a wild, untamed curl, that his eyes were an unexpected grey-blue in the dark, sharply defined face. She knew that he could look at a girl as if he could see inside her. She didn’t want to know any more.

‘Because I could. Like I say, I was invisible. The people at the schools I went to cared about nothing except your name, your contacts and your trust fund. I had none of the above, ergo I was nothing.’ His mouth twisted. ‘The arrogance of youth. I wanted to bring them down, show the world how shallow and pathetic the New York aristocracy were. It backfired horribly. The world saw and the world loved them even more. Only now I was part of it for better or for worse. Still am, I suppose. Still, at least it should guarantee interest in the show. Let’s just hope the paintings are as successful as the photographs were.’

‘But why change? You’re obviously really successful at what you do.’

‘Fame and fortune have their perks,’ he admitted. ‘The studio, the invitations, the parties, the money...’ the women. He didn’t need to say it; the words hung in the humid New York summer air, shimmering in the heat haze. She’d seen the photos: pictures by him, pictures of him—with heiresses, actresses, It Girls and models.

Hope didn’t even try to suppress her smirk. ‘It must have been very difficult for you.’

‘I’m not saying my lifestyle doesn’t have its benefits. But it wasn’t the way I thought I’d live, the way I wanted to earn a living. Expose was just a silly blog, that was all. I thought anyone who saw it would be horrified by the excess, by the sheer waste, but I was wrong.’ He shrugged. ‘My plan was always art school and then to paint. Somehow I was sidetracked.’

‘So this is you getting back on track?’

‘Hence the retrospective. Goodbye to that side of my life neatly summed up in an A4 hardback with witty captions. Right, lunch was a little on the meagre side so I’m going to go out and get ice cream. What do you want?’

‘Oh.’ She looked up, unexpectedly flustered. ‘I don’t mind.’

He shot her an incredulous look. ‘Of course you mind. What if I bought you caramel swirl but really you wanted lemon sorbet? The two are completely different.’

‘We usually have cookie dough at home. It’s Faith’s favourite.’ Hope’s mind was completely blank. How could she not know which flavour she preferred?

‘Great, when I buy Faith an ice cream I’ll know what to get. What about you?’

‘No, seriously. Whatever you’re having. It’s fine.’ She didn’t want this attention, this insistence on a decision, stupid as she knew that made her look. Truth was she had spent so long putting Faith’s needs, wants and likes before her own it was a slow and not always comfortable process trying to figure out where her sister ended and she began. ‘Thank you.’

Gael didn’t answer her smile with one of his own; instead he gave her a hard, assessing look, which seemed to strip her bare, and then turned and left leaving Hope feeling as if she’d failed some kind of test she hadn’t even known she was meant to study for.

* * *

‘Any more? I don’t think you tried the double chocolate peanut and popcorn.’

Hope pushed the spoon away and moaned. ‘No more, in fact I don’t think I can ever eat ice cream again.’ She stared at the open tubs, some much less full than others. ‘And even after eating all this I don’t know which my favourite flavour is.’

‘Mint choc,’ Gael said. ‘That one has nearly gone. Impressive ice-cream-eating skills, Miss McKenzie.’

‘If I ever need a reference I’ll call you.’ She paused and watched Gael as he placed the lids back onto the cartons and stacked them deftly before carrying them to the industrial-sized freezer. She hadn’t known what to say, what to think when he’d returned to the studio carrying not one or two but ten different flavours of ice cream.

‘You wouldn’t pick,’ he’d said in explanation as he’d lined the pots up in front of her. A bubble of happiness lodged in her chest. Nobody had ever done anything so thoughtful for her. Maybe she could do this. Work with this man, pose with him, because there were moments when she crossed from wariness to liking.

After all it would be rude not to like someone who bought you several gallons of Italian ice cream.

The pictures on the computer screen blurred in front of her eyes. ‘I feel sleepy I ate so much.’

‘Then it’s a good thing you’re about to get some fresh air. There’s no time to slack, not with your schedule.’

‘Fresh air?’

‘Central Park. I spoke to a couple of contacts yesterday and they might just be able to accommodate your sister.’

Central Park! Of course. One of the few iconic New York landmarks she had actually visited and spent time in. Hope obediently slid off her stool, pressing one hand to her full stomach as she did so. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d indulged so much. The last time she’d felt free to indulge, not set a good example or worry about what people thought.

Central Park was barely a ten-minute stroll from Gael’s studio. Hope had spent several hours wandering around the vast city park but it felt very different walking there with Gael. He clearly knew it intimately, taking her straight to a couple of locations that had availability on Thursday in two weeks’ time.

‘What do you think?’ he asked as they reached the lake. ‘Romantic enough or did you prefer the Conservatory Garden?’

‘The garden is lovely,’ she agreed. ‘It’s a shame the floral arch is already booked. I think Faith would love it. But with such short notice she’ll just have to be grateful we found her anywhere at all.’

‘Why on earth is it such short notice? Is it a religious thing? Is that why your sister wants to marry Hunter on six weeks’ acquaintance? Why you are still a virgin? You’re waiting for marriage? For true love?’ She could hear the mockery inherent in the last phrase.

The small bubble of happiness she'd carried since the moment she'd seen the bags heaped with ice cream burst with a short, sharp prick. He thought she was odd, a funny curiosity. 'I don't see that it is any of your business.'

'Hope, tomorrow, or the day after or the day after that, the moment I think you are ready, that you can handle it, you are going to pose for me for a painting which is supposed to symbolise sex. If this is going to work I need to understand why you have made the choices you have. I'm not going to judge you—your body, your decisions. But I need to understand.'

Hope stopped and stared out over the lake, watching a couple in a boat kissing unabashedly, as if they wanted to consume each other. Her stomach tightened. 'Honestly? Is it that unbelievable that a twenty-seven-year-old woman hasn't had sex yet? Does there have to be some big reason?'

'In this day and age, looking like you do? You have to admit it's unusual.' Happiness shivered through her at his casual words. Looking like you do. It was hard sometimes to remember a time when she had felt like someone desirable, bursting with promise and confidence, confident in her teeny shorts and tight tops as only an eighteen-year-old girl could be.

'It's no big mystery. It's not like I have been saving myself for my knight in shining armour.' She didn't believe in him for one thing. 'It just happened.' Hope turned away from the lake, dragging her eyes away from the oblivious, still-snogging couple with difficulty. For the first time in a really long time she allowed herself to wish it were her. Oblivious to everything but the sun on her back, the gentle splash of the water, his smell, his taste, the feel of his back under her hands. She had no idea who 'he' was but she ached for him nonetheless.

'I told you I raised Faith after our parents died. My aunt offered to help. She had a couple of kids Faith's age and would have been happy to have had her. But I wanted her to grow up where I grew up, in the family house, stay at her school with her friends.' She twisted her hands together. It all sounded so reasonable when she said it but there had been nothing reasonable about her decision at the time. Just high emotion, bitter grief and desperate guilt.

'So you put everything on hold?' He sounded disbelieving and she couldn't blame him; it sounded crazy said so bluntly. But she had had no real choice—not that she wanted to tell him that. To let him know she was responsible for it all. She had to take care of Faith—if it wasn't for Hope she would have had her family intact.

She swallowed, the old and familiar guilt bitter on her tongue. 'I didn't mind. But it meant my life was so different from my friends' new worlds—they were worrying about boyfriends and exams and going out and I was worrying about paying bills and childcare. It was no wonder we drifted apart. My boyfriend went to university just a few weeks after the funeral and I knew it would be best to end it then, that I wouldn't be able to put anyone else first for a long time.' It had seemed like the logical thing to do but she had hoped that he would fight for her, just a little.

But he had disappeared off without a word. He was getting married in just a few short weeks, his life moving on seamlessly from grungy teen to pretentious student to a man with responsibilities, just the way it was supposed to. Just as hers was supposed to have done.

Gael was like a dog with a bone. 'Let me get this straight: you didn't date at all? Since you were eighteen you have been single?'

How could she explain it? It all sounded so drab and dreary—and in many ways it had been. Those first few years when she earned so little, the long nights in alone while Faith slept, studying for her Open University degree, the ever-widening chasm between herself and her school friends until the day she realised she had no one to confide in. Too young for the mums at the school gates and the other secretaries at her law firm, too old at heart and shackled by responsibilities for the few girls around her age she managed to meet.

And then there was the rest: the lack of money or time to take care of herself and the slow dawning realisation she had lost any sense of style or joy in clothes and hair. It was hard when she had no budget to indulge herself and little time or talent to make the most of what she could afford.

But there had been other things that compensated—watching Faith star in her school play, taking her ice skating at Somerset House, organising sleepovers and pamper evenings and home-made pizza parties for her sister and her friends and seeing her sister shine with happiness. Surely that was worth any sacrifice?

'No, I dated. A little. But I didn't like to stay out late, even when Faith was older and no one could stay over, it didn't seem right. And so the few relationships I had never really went anywhere. It's really no big deal.'

'Okay,' but she could hear the scepticism. Hope didn't blame him. How could she fool him when she had forgotten how to fool herself? 'Come on.'

Gael took her arm and turned her down a path on their left, his walk determined and his eyes gleaming with a devilish glint she instinctively both distrusted and yearned for. 'Where are we going?'

He stopped in front of a red and yellow brick hexagon and grinned at her. 'When's the last time you rode on a carousel, Hope?'

Was he mad? He must be mad. Hope stared over at the huge carousel. It was like a step back in time, wooden horses, their mouths fixed open, heads always thrown up in ecstasy, their painted manes blowing in a non-existent breeze as the circular structure turned to the sound of a stately polka. 'I don't know when I last rode on one,' she said and that was true. She couldn't pinpoint the date but she knew it was before Faith was born. Before she had elected to opt out of family life. She vividly remembered standing by the side of a carousel in the park as her parents took her laughing baby sister on one. She had refused to accompany them, had said it was too babyish. Instead she had stood by the side feeling left out and unloved, hating them for respecting her word and not forcing her to ride.

'You'll always be able to answer that question from now on. The eighteenth of August, you can say confidently. In New York, around...' He squinted at his wrist. 'Around two-forty in the afternoon.'

'No, I can say the eighteenth of August is the day some crazy person tried to persuade me to go on one and I walked away.' She swivelled, ready to turn away, only to be arrested by a hand closing gently around her wrist. She glared at Gael scornfully. 'What, you're going to force me to go on?'

'No, of course not.' He sounded bemused and who could blame him? She was acting crazy. But she could still see them, the two forty-somethings cradling their precious toddler tight while their oldest child stood forgotten by the exit.

Only she hadn't been forgotten. They had waved every time they passed by, every time. No matter that she hadn't waved back once. Hope swallowed, the lump in her throat as painful as it was sudden. Why hadn't she waved?

Gael leaned in close, his fingers still loose around her wrist. His breath was faint on her neck but she could sense every nerve where it touched her, each one shocking her into awareness. 'Doesn't it look like fun?'

Maybe, maybe not. 'I'll look ridiculous.'

'Will you? Do they? Look at them, Hope.'

Hope raised her eyes, her skin still tingling from his nearness, a traitorous urge to lean back into him gripping her. Stop it, she scolded herself. You've known him for what? Two days? And he's already persuaded you to pose nude, holds your career in his rather nicely shaped hands and is trying to make a fool of you. There's no need to help him by swooning into him.

But now he was so close she could smell him, a slight scent of linseed and citrus, not unpleasant but unusual. It was the same scent she had picked up in his studio. A working scent. He might be immaculately dressed in light grey trousers and a white linen shirt but the scent told her that this was a man who used his hands, a physical being. The knowledge shivered through her, heating as it travelled through her veins.

'Hope?'

'Yes, I'm looking at them.' She wasn't lying, she was managing somehow to push all thoughts about Gael O'Connor's hands out of her mind and focus on the carousel, on the people riding it. Families, of course. The old pain pierced her heart at the sight; time never seemed to dull it, to ease it.

But it wasn't just families riding; there were groups of older children, laughing hysterically, a couple of teens revelling in the irony of their childish behaviour. Couples, including a white-haired man, stately on his golden steed, smiling at the silver-haired woman next to him. 'No,' she admitted. 'They don't look ridiculous. They look like they are having fun.'

'Well, then,' and before she could formulate any further response or process what was happening she was at the entrance of the building and Gael was handing over money in crisp dollar bills.

'Go on, pick one,' he urged and she complied, choosing a magnificent-looking bay with a black mane and a delicate high step. Gael swung himself onto the white horse next to hers while Hope self-consciously pulled her skirt down and held on to the pole tightly. He looked so at ease, as if he came here and did this every day, one hand carelessly looped round the pole, the other holding a small camera he had dug out of his jeans pocket.

'Smile!'

'What are you doing?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Practising my trade. Watch out, it's about to go. Hold on tight!'

The organ music swelled around them as the carousel began to rotate and the horses moved, slowly at first, before picking up speed until it was whirling around and around. At first Hope clung on tightly, afraid she might fall as the world spun giddily past, but once she settled into the rhythm she relaxed her grip. Gael was right, it was fun. More than that, it was exhilarating, the breeze a welcome change on the hot, sticky day. Above the organ music she could hear laughter, children, adults and teens, all forgetting their cares for one brief whirl out of time. She risked a glance at Gael. He was leaning back, nonchalant and relaxed, like a cowboy in total control of his body; his balance, his hand was steady as he focussed the camera and snapped again and again, watching the world through a lens.

And then all too soon it was slowing, the walls slowly coming back into focus, the horse no longer galloping but walking staidly along as the music died down. She looked over at Gael and smiled shakily, unable to find the words to thank him. For a moment then she had been free. No one's sister, no one's PA, no expectations. Free.

'Another go?'

'No, thank you, one was enough. But it was fun. You were right.'

'Remember that over the next two weeks and we'll be fine.' Gael dismounted in one graceful leap, holding a hand out so that Hope could try and slide down without her skirt riding up too far. 'Come on, let's have a drink at the Tavern on the Green and you can decide if you like it enough to shortlist it for the wedding drinks.'

'Good idea.' Damn, why hadn't she thought of that? Celebrating her sister's wedding in such an iconic venue would certainly be memorable.

Hope stopped, suddenly shy, trying to find the right words to frame the question that had been dogging her thoughts since their conversation at the lake. 'Gael, when will I be ready? To be painted?'

It wasn't that she felt ready; she wasn't sure she ever would be. But knowing that at some point it would happen, at some point she would have to keep her word, made it almost possible for her to relax.

Gael didn't answer for a moment, just stared at her with that intense, soul-stripping look that left her feeling as if she had nowhere left to hide.

'When you start living,' he said and turned and walked away. Hope stood still, gaping at him.

'I am ready,' she wanted to yell. Or, 'Then you'll be waiting a long time.' Because the truth was she was scared. Scared of what would happen, scared of who she was, scared of what might be unleashed if she ever dared to let go.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOPE STOOD IN her walk-in wardrobe and stared at the rack of carefully ironed clothes, fighting back almost overwhelming panic. Panic and, she had to admit, a tinge of anticipation. Every day for the last nine years had followed its own dreary predictable pattern and even here, in the vibrant Upper East Side, she had managed to re-establish a set routine before she'd worked out the best place to buy milk.

But not today. She had no idea what Gael had in store for her. He'd told her to be ready at ten a.m. and that he would call for her. Nothing else.

He'd mentioned risks. Allowing herself to live. Unlocking herself. Hope swallowed. She liked the sound of that, she really did. She just wasn't sure whether it was possible, that if she stripped away the layers of self-sufficiency and efficiency and busyness there would be very much left.

'Okay,' she said aloud, the words steadying her. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

Oh. She shouldn't have even thought that because now, now she had opened up the floodgates, it turned out she could think of lots of worst things. Maybe he was going to suggest skydiving or bungee jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge—illegal but even Hope had heard the rumours and she bet Gael O'Connor didn't give two figs for legality anyway. Or climbing up some skyscraper—or walking a tightrope between them. She inhaled shakily. No, she was pretty sure she could strike the last one off her list.

Or maybe when he said he wanted her to loosen up he was talking about her V card. He might be a member of one of those exclusive clubs where expensive call girls and even more expensive cigars and whisky were shared by men in ten-thousand-dollar suits. Possibly. She'd seen a TV show once where the detective went undercover in exactly that kind of club right here in New York City...

Or maybe he would want her to explore her own sexuality in a burlesque class or pole dancing or actually perform in some kind of club or...or no. Ten minutes would be nine minutes and fifty nine seconds longer than she needed to convince any stage manager that she most definitely didn't have what it took. After all, how many four-year-olds were asked to leave baby ballet?

'Stop thinking.' Hope grabbed a pair of high-waisted orange shorts and a cream broderie-anglaise blouse and marched out of the wardrobe, throwing them onto the daybed, which doubled as a sofa and place to sleep. Living in a studio so compact it practically redefined the word had meant she needed to find new levels of neatness and organisation or resign herself to living surrounded by everything she had brought with her in disordered chaos. And that, obviously, would be intolerable.

Dressed, her hair brushed and tied back into a high ponytail, and her feet encased in a comfortable pair of cream and tan summer loafers, she should, she reflected, have felt better. That was what her new, eye-wateringly expensive wardrobe was supposed to do. Make her feel ready for anything. Make her feel like someone. Instead she felt all too often like a little girl playing dress up in the bold colours, designs and cuts. Maybe she should get changed...

Right on cue, as if Gael knew the exact moment she was feeling the most insecure, the buzzer went. No doorman here, no lift or fancy hallway. Just a buzzer and several flights of stairs.

Not that the four flights of stairs seemed to faze him. He was annoyingly cool when she opened the door, his breathing regular, not a damp patch to be seen on the grey short-sleeved shirt he'd teamed with a pair of well-cut black jeans. His clothes gave no clue to the day's activities although she could probably rule out the gentleman's club. Her eyes met his and, as she took in the lurking laughter, all the calm, welcoming words she had prepared and practised fell away.

'Do you want to get going?'

He took a step forward until he was standing just inside her threshold. 'Are you in a hurry? It's usually considered polite to invite a guest in. Or is there something you don't want me to see?'

As if. Her life was an open book. A very dull book, which had been left to gather dust on the library shelf, a little like her. 'Not at all. I just thought you might want to get started. Ah, come in. Although you are. In.'

How had he done that? Eased himself in through the door and past her so smoothly she had barely noticed. She should add magician to his list of talents.

Come on, Hope, get some control. 'Tea?' When in doubt revert to a good national stereotype.

'Iced?'

'No, the normal kind. I have Earl Grey, normal, Darjeeling and peppermint.'

His mouth quirked. 'Seriously?'

'Er...yes. I found this little shop which sells imported British goods and I stocked up...' Stop talking right now, Hope. But her mouth didn't get the message. 'Tea and pickle, sandwich pickle, not gherkins. And real chocolate, no offence. There's many things the US does better, like coffee and cheesecake, but I would give my firstborn for a really mature cheddar cheese and pickle sandwich followed by a proper chocolate bar.'

Just in case he had any doubt she was socially awkward she was spelling it out for him loud and clear. She hadn't always been this way; if only she could turn the clocks back nine years—although if it was a choice between getting her confidence back or her parents there was no contest. She'd happily be awkward for ever.

Mercifully Gael didn't pursue the conversation. He stood in the middle of the room, dominating all the space in the tiny studio. 'Nice address.'

'Location is everything. Apparently it makes up for the lack of actual space—at least that's what Maddison says. It's her apartment,' she explained as his eyebrows shot up in query. 'We swapped homes when we swapped jobs.' Not that Maddison was currently occupying either Hope's home or her job; instead she was cosied up in the home of Hope's old boss, Kit Buchanan, planning a future together. Hope had worked with Kit for three years and he had never stepped even a centimetre over the professional line but barely a couple of months with Maddison and he had given up his job and was planning a whole new life with the American. Hope couldn't help wondering how the job swap had turned Maddison's life so radically upside down while hers was left untouched.

And look at Faith. Less than three months into her travels and she was engaged to the heir to a multimillion-dollar fortune, which was an awful lot more than most people managed on a gap year. What had Hope done in the city that never slept? Tried a few new bagel flavours and experimented with her coffee order. Hold the front page.

Maybe today wasn't going to be so horrendous after all. Whatever Gael had planned at least it would be new. Maybe this was all for the best—what was the point in bemoaning the dullness of her life if she didn't grasp this chance to shake things up a little?

Gael strolled over to the window in just four long strides. 'I like it. Nice light.' The apartment didn't compare with his, of course, but thanks to the gorgeous bay window the light did flood in, bathing the white room with an amber glow. The window opened far enough for Hope to climb out onto the fire escape so she could perch on the iron staircase, cup of tea in one hand, book in the other, soaking up the sunshine.

'It does for me. I don't need much space.' Which was a good thing. A tiny table and solitary chair sat in the bay of the window, the daybed occupied the one spare wall lying opposite the beautiful and incongruously large fireplace. The kitchen area—two cupboards and a two-ring stove—took up the corner by the apartment door and a second door to its right led into the walk-in closet equipped with rails and drawers, which opened directly into the diminutive but surprisingly well appointed bathroom. Two people in the studio would be cosy, three a crowd, but this was the first time Hope had shared the space with anyone else. Unless she counted the Skype conversations with her sister.

Loneliness slammed into her, almost knocking the breath out of her.

Gael's mouth quirked into a knowing smile. 'I'm sure you don't. More used to accommodating others than demanding space, aren't you?'

'There's nothing wrong with being able to live simply. What do I need? For today? A coat? Different shoes?' She wasn't going to ask what they were doing, show any curiosity, but she wasn't above digging for a clue.

Gael turned and looked her over slowly and deliberately. It was an objective look, similar to the way he'd looked at her when he asked to paint her, as if she were an object, not a living, breathing person and certainly not as if she was a woman or in any way desirable. And yet her nerves smouldered under his gaze as if the long-buried embers remembered what it felt like to blaze free.

'You'll do as you are.' That was a fat lot of help.

'Great.' Hope grabbed her bag. 'Lead on, then. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get on with some wedding planning for Faith. Don't think I'm here for any other reason.'

But even as she said the words Hope knew she wasn't being entirely honest, not with him, not with herself. She could tell herself as much as she liked that she was only spending time with Gael for her sister, for her job. But the truth was she needed a way out of the rigid constraints and fears she had built around her. And whatever happened over the next two weeks or so Hope knew that she would be changed in some way. And that had to be a good thing, didn't it? Because this life swap had shown her that it wasn't her old job, or raising Faith or living in her childhood house that had imprisoned her. It was Hope herself. Which meant there was no handsome prince or fairy godmother waiting in the wings to transform her life, to transform her.

This was her chance and she was going to grab it.

* * *

'So, where exactly are we going? Do we need to get a cab?' Hope was trying to sound nonchalant but Gael could tell that she was eaten up with curiosity. What had she been imagining? Probably the worst—after all, hadn't he told her that he wanted her to take some risks? To start living? She'd probably put those remarks together with the paintings and come up with some seduction scenario straight out of a nineteen-seventies porn movie.

But it wasn't her body he needed to start exploring, no, not even in those shorts, which hugged her compact body perfectly, lengthening her legs and rounding nicely over what was a very nice bottom. He had never deflowered a virgin, not even in his school days, and had no intention of starting now. Inexperience physically meant inexperience emotionally and Gael had no intention of dealing with crushes or infatuation or anything else equally messy. No matter how enticing the package.

Hang on—when had Hope gone from convenient minion and model to enticing? He'd been so busy with the exhibition he'd been living like a monk for the last few months—which was more than a little ironic, considering how much naked female flesh had been on display in his studio. It wasn't her per se. No, Hope was just the first woman he had spent any time with in a social capacity in a while. Obviously boundaries would blur a little.

Not that this was really social. Sort out the wedding, crack open that shell she'd erected around herself and she'd be ready for him to paint. That was why he was here, why he'd spent yesterday afternoon wandering around Central Park encouraging her to forget her dignity and enjoy the carousel ride. At the end of the day it was all business.

And he refused to dwell on just how enjoyable the business had ended up being... 'No cab needed. It's just a few blocks.'

'Okay.'

She still sounded apprehensive and Gael's conscience gave him a small but definite nudge. His skill, talent aside, had always been to put people at their ease, so much so that they almost forgot he was there. That was how he managed to take so many fly-on-the-wall photos; no paparazzi tricks for him. No, just the ability to blend in, to become part of the furniture. But something about Hope

McKenzie had him rubbed up all the wrong way; he liked seeing her bristle a little too much, couldn't resist winding her up. But a brittle, wary subject wasn't going to give him the kind of picture he needed. It was time to turn up the charm. 'We're going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I want you to look at an original Manet and some portraits to get an idea of what I want from you—and then we can look at the roof terrace. It's beautiful up there and you might want to consider it for the reception. They don't usually hire it out but I might be able to pull some strings.'

'That sounds great.'

Gael repressed a grin as Hope exhaled a very audible sigh of relief. 'What, did you think I was going to send you on some kind of Seduction 101 course? Starting with the dance of the seven veils and ending up in some discreet bordello?'

'Of course not,' but the colour in her cheeks belied her words. Interesting, her imagination had definitely been at play. Had he figured in it at all? The seducer, the cad, the lover? The architect, leading her through her seductive education? Gael tore his mind back to the matter at hand, refusing to allow it to dwell on the interesting scenes so effortlessly conjured up.

He stopped as Hope halted at a snack stand to pick up a bottle of water and an apple. She turned, the apple in one hand, like Eve tempting him to fall. 'Would you like anything?'

'No, thanks.' He'd forgotten that girls, that women, did that. Bought their own water, a normal bottle of water from a normal silver metal snack stand just outside Central Park. The women he dated demanded fancy delis and even fancier water imported from remote places with prices to match.

And they never paid their way. Hope hadn't even sent him a hopeful sideways look; instead she'd offered to treat him. To water and a piece of fruit, but still. It was a novel experience—and not a displeasing one.

'So.' She had sunk her teeth into the apple, juice on her lips. He tried not to stare, not to be too fascinated by the glistening sweetness, but his eyes were drawn back to the tempting plumpness. The serpent knew what it was doing when it selected an apple; Adam had never stood a chance. 'Do we have to go into special rooms to look at the paintings or are they respectable nudes?'

'It's all perfectly respectable,' he promised as they turned the corner and walked towards the steps leading up to the arched entrances of the museum. As usual the steps were crowded: groups of girls gossiping while sipping from huge coffee cups, lone people scrolling through phones, sketching or reading battered paperbacks, couples entwined and picnicking families. The usual sense of coming home washed over him. The museum had been a sanctuary when he had lived in Misty's town house, the place he had come to on exeats from school. The only place where he had felt that he knew who he was. Where his anonymity wasn't a curse but a blessing as he moved through the galleries, just another tourist.

Hope tossed her apple core into a trash can and wiped her hands on a tissue before lobbing that in after her apple. 'I pass this every day on my way to work,' she said as they began to climb the stairs. 'I always meant to come in.'

'What stopped you? It's open late and at weekends.'

Hope shrugged. 'I don't know, the usual, I suppose.'

'Which is?'

'That because I haven't before I don't know how to. And before you say anything, yes, I know it's stupid. But even though we lived in London my parents weren't really museum people or theatre people—they were far more likely to take us for a walk. They liked nothing better than driving out to a hill somewhere so we could walk up it and eat sandwiches in the drizzle. It was always drizzling!'

'My parents didn't take me to museums either—Misty's interest only runs to showing off her philanthropy and my dad only stepped foot inside when it was the annual ball and only then under duress. I think that's why I loved it so much; it's somewhere I discovered for myself. What did you do as a teenager?'

‘Hung out with friends, the usual.’ But her voice was constrained and she had turned a little away from him, a clear sign she didn’t want to talk about it.

They reached the doors and entered the magnificent Great Hall with its huge ceilings and sweeping arches. Gael palmed his pass, steering Hope past the queues waiting patiently to check their bags in and pay for admittance until he reached the membership desk.

The neatly dressed woman behind the desk smiled, barely looking at his pass. ‘Good morning, Mr O’Connor. Is this young lady your guest?’

‘Good morning, Jenny. How’s the degree going? Yes, Hope’s with me.’

‘First-name terms with the staff?’ Hope murmured as he led her down the corridor, expertly winding his way around tour groups and puzzled clumps of map-wielding visitors.

‘I may come here fairly regularly.’ Plus he was a patron—and Misty sat on the prestigious Board of Trustees but Hope didn’t need to know that. He didn’t want to dazzle her with his connections; he’d learned long ago that women impressed with those were only after one thing—influence. He’d vowed long ago never to be used again. He might be enjoying Hope’s company but, just like every other woman, she was with him because of what he could do for her. It was a lesson he was unlikely to forget.

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Hope sank onto the couch with a grateful cry. ‘I wore my most comfortable shoes and still my feet ache. We must have walked miles and miles and miles without ever going outside. And my eyes ache just as much as my feet.’

Gael suppressed a smile. ‘It’s not easy compressing two thousand plus years of art history into a four-hour tour.’

‘Five hours and only a twenty-minute coffee stop,’ Hope said bitterly. ‘I almost fainted away right in front of the Renoir—or was it Degas?’

‘Better get it right or you’ll fail the written test later. I’ve ordered a cheese plate, water and a glass of wine. Do you think that will fortify you?’

‘Only if I don’t have to move again. Ever.’

‘Not for the next half hour,’ Gael promised. ‘But then we have a private tour of the roof garden and the Terrace Room. Your sister can’t get married here but she can certainly have the reception. Do you know how many you’re organising it for yet?’

Hope rubbed her temples. ‘Not exactly but because Misty is planning such a lavish party and a blessing two days later the wedding day itself is to be kept small and intimate. Last email she said that she would like to keep it down to me, you, Hunter’s mother of course. His father—will that be awkward in such a small group?’

‘I don’t think so. Misty and he still move in all the same circles. I told you yesterday, she specialises in civilised divorces.’

‘Then a couple of the groom’s friends and apparently they are paying for two of Faith’s school friends and our aunt and her family to fly over. So that will be...’ she totted up the amount on her fingers ‘...fifteen.’

‘Hmm, we might rattle around a bit in the Terrace Room. Let’s have a look and see what you think.’

‘Faith emailed yesterday to say she would definitely like to have two dresses, which is great because finding just one isn’t proving to be at all awkward. Something subtle for the wedding because it’s so small, but I think she wants to go all out for the party, especially as they will be repeating their vows.’ Hope bit her lip. ‘It’s such a responsibility. The couple of places I spoke to yesterday seemed to imply that it was easier to learn to do heart surgery in a fortnight than it is to buy and fit a wedding dress. And it’s not just the dress. There’s a veil, tiara, jewellery. Underwear. And she wants me to

sort out bridesmaids' dresses for just me for the ceremony but for both friends and our cousin for the party as well.'

Gael got that Hope felt responsible for her sister, that she had raised her. But this amount of stress all for someone else? He couldn't imagine a single member of his family—including all the exes and steps—putting themselves out for someone else. He had them all on the list for his exhibition's opening-night party and knew Misty would be there if she possibly could. His father if there was nothing better to do. But his mother? She hadn't made his graduation from school or college, he doubted she'd make the effort for a mere party. Funny how, much as he told himself he didn't care, her casual desertion still stung after all these years—only he was so used to it that it was more of a pinprick than anything really wounding.

He didn't know if it was better or worse that she adored his two half-brothers so much, every occasional email a glowing testimonial to their unique specialness. No, he might still have two living, breathing parents but Faith was luckier than he was. What would it be like to have someone like Hope on your side? Someone you could count on? 'You could say no. Ask her to come and organise it herself.'

But she was already shaking her head. 'No. I promised her that I would take care of everything. If things were different she'd have a mother to help her. Well, she doesn't, she only has me. I won't let her down.' There was a telltale glimmer in her eyes and her words caught as she spoke. She looked away, swallowing convulsively as the waitress brought their food and drink over.

Gael sat back, smiling his thanks as the waitress placed their drinks and the cheese platter onto the table. Hope swallowed again and he gave her a moment to compose herself, glad that it was so quiet in the members' only lounge he had brought her to. 'What about you, Hope? Who takes care of you?'

She stared at him, her eyes wide in her pale face. 'I take care of me. I always have.'

'And you're doing just fine, is that what you're saying? You don't know how to step out of your limited comfort zone. You pour all your energy into work and looking after your sister and you're lonely. But you don't need anyone. Sure. You keep telling yourself that.'

What was he saying? He was all about the self-sufficiency himself. But it was different for him. He was toughened whereas Hope was like a toasted marshmallow—a superficial hardened edge hiding an utter mess on the inside. He'd only known her for less than three days but he'd diagnosed that within the first day. And it was a shame. She was a trier...that was evident. She cared, maybe a little too much. A girl like that should have someone to look out for her.

'Thanks for the diagnosis, Doc.' Hope picked up her wine glass and held it up to him in a toast. 'I'll make sure I come to you every time I need relationship advice. Especially as I spent a lot of time yesterday looking through photos at your place and do you know what I didn't see? I didn't see a single photo of you having fun. Oh, yes...' as he tried to interrupt. 'There are pictures of you posing next to women. Sometimes you have your arm around their waist. But you never look like you're enjoying yourself, you never look relaxed. You're as alone as I am—more so. I have Faith. Hunter said you were his brother but you were very quick to deny any relationship with him at all.'

Touché. Gael clinked her glass with his own. 'But I prefer to be by myself. It's my choice. Is it yours, or are you just too afraid to let anyone in? Either way, here's to Hunter and Faith, getting their wedding and this painting out of the way and returning to our solitary lives. Cheers.'

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT WAS IT about Gael O'Connor that made her bristle like an outraged cat? Hope usually hid her feelings so well sometimes it seemed, even to her, that she didn't have any. Slights, slurs and digs passed her by. It didn't rankle when the girls at work went out without her, when they chatted about nights out in front of her as if she weren't even there. She barely noticed when photos of school reunions she hadn't been invited to showed up on her social-media pages or when wedding photos were circulated and she wasn't amongst the guests. Hope had chosen to remove herself from the human race, had chosen to devote herself and her life to Faith; she wasn't going to complain now her job was almost done.

Why would she when she had raised a happy, confident, bright girl who had her whole future before her? She could never fully make things up to her little sister but she had done as much as was humanly possible—and if she had sacrificed her own life for that, well, that felt like a fair trade. She was at peace with her decision.

At peace until Gael opened his mouth, that was. As soon as that mocking note hit his voice her hackles rose and she responded every single time. Was it because he didn't care for the official 'Hope is wonderful to give everything up for Faith' line, instead making her sound like a pathetic martyr living life vicariously instead of in reality? She didn't need it pointed out. She knew she wasn't wonderful or selfless but she didn't feel like a martyr. Usually.

Still, she couldn't complain too much when in one afternoon he had managed to sort out the wedding venues and in such smooth style. It helped that they were looking at a Thursday afternoon wedding and not the weekend but Gael had known all the right people to talk to, to ensure the tight timescales weren't a problem. After consulting with the blissful and all too absent couple they had decided to hold the ceremony in Central Park itself, at a beautiful little leafy spot by the lake, followed by cocktails at the Tavern on the Green. The Met's Roof Garden closed to the public at four-thirty p.m. and wasn't usually available for private hire, but Gael had managed to sweet talk the event coordinator into letting them in after hours for drinks and dinner. So all Hope needed to do was organise afternoon entertainment, evening entertainment, flowers and clothes. She still had just over ten days. Easy.

Now all she wanted to do was fling herself onto the surprisingly comfortable daybed and sleep for at least twelve hours. Her feet still throbbed from the whistle-stop tour through the history of art and her head was even worse. But sleep was a long, long way away. Instead she had less than an hour to shower and get ready. 'I'll pick you up at eight,' Gael had said brusquely as they'd finalised the details with first the event organiser at the Met and then with the Central Park authorities. 'It might be worth eating first.'

Okay. This wasn't a date. Obviously. It was part work, part family business but still. Hope would bet her half of her overpriced London home that not one of the beauties she had seen hanging off Gael's arm in photos had ever taken less than three hours to get ready—and he would have always bought them dinner.

She crammed the rest of her Pop-Tart into her mouth and grabbed a banana reasoning that the addition of fruit turned her snack into a balanced meal.

Thirty minutes later she was showered with freshly washed and dried hair and dressed in one of her new dresses. She hadn't dared wear it before, much as she liked the delicate coffee-coloured silk edged with black lace; it was just so short, almost more of a tunic than a dress... She fingered a pair of thick black tights; surely they would make the dress more respectable? But it was still so hot and humid and her own legs were the brownest they had ever been thanks to weekends spent reading on her fire escape. Hope stared down at what seemed like endless naked flesh before cramming her

feet into a pair of black and cream sandals she'd bought on sale but not yet worn because she wasn't entirely sure she could walk in them.

Hope steeled herself to look in the mirror. It was like looking at a stranger: a girl with huge eyes, emphasised with liquid liner and mascara, hair swept back into a low, messy bun, tendrils hanging around her face. This girl looked as if she belonged on the Upper East Side; she looked ready for anything. This girl was an imposter but maybe, just maybe, she could exist for a night or two.

The sound of the buzzer brought her back to the room, to the evening ahead, and Hope blinked a couple of times, getting her bearings back, returning to reality. Rather than buzz Gael up she grabbed her bag and slowly, teetering slightly as she adjusted to the height of the shoes, made her way out of the studio and down the stairs into the evening heat.

Gael took one look at her feet and hailed a cab, much to Hope's relief. She breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction as she sank into the back seat and swapped the evening humidity for the bliss of air conditioning. She had spent twenty-seven years in London considering air conditioning a seldom-needed luxury—less than a day in the New York summer and she'd changed her tune for ever.

She didn't recognise the address Gael gave the cab driver and so sat back, none the wiser about her destination, watching the streets of Manhattan slide slowly past. They were heading west and down, towards the busy tourist hotspots of Times Square and Broadway. She lived barely half an hour's walk from the lively theatre district and yet had only visited once, quickly defeated by the crowds and the heat. Hope stared out of the cab window at the crowded streets thronged with an eclectic mix of tourists, locals and hustlers—the busiest district of New York City by far.

The cab made its slow progression along Fifty-First Street until just after the road intersected with Broadway and then pulled up outside a small, dingy-looking theatre. Hope hadn't been entirely sure what to expect but it wasn't this down-at-heel-looking place. She pulled the dress down as she got out of the cab, wishing she had worn the black tights, feeling both overexposed and overdressed. Gael took her arm. 'This way.' They were the first words he had said to her all evening.

He ushered her through the wooden swing door into the lobby. It was a study in faded glory: old wooden panelling ornately carved and in need of a good dust, the red carpet faded and threadbare in places. It was the last place she had expected Gael to bring her. He was smart in a pale grey suit, his hair sleeked down, as incongruous a contrast to the tatty surroundings as she was. He handed two tickets to a woman dressed like a nineteen-forties usherette and then led Hope down the corridor into the theatre.

It was like stepping into another world. The huge chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling gave out a warm, dim glow, bathing the gold-leafed auditorium in flattering lowlights. The seats had been removed from the stalls and instead it was set up cabaret style with round tables for two, four or six taking up the floor space instead. Many tables were full already, their laughing, chattering occupants wearing anything from jeans to cocktail dresses.

The stage was set up with a microphone and a comfortable-looking leather chair. Nothing else. Steps led up from the floor to the stage.

Gael led her to a small table with just two chairs near the front, pulling a chair out for her with exaggerated courtesy. 'Two glasses of Pinot Noir, please,' he said to the hovering waitress, who was also dressed in nineteen-forties garb. Hope opened her mouth to change the order, she preferred white wine to red, especially on a hot night like this, but she closed it again as the waitress walked away, not caring enough to call the woman back.

'What is this?' she asked as she took her seat. 'Are you thinking this will be suitable entertainment for after the wedding meal?'

'What? Oh, no. We're looking into that later. Right now, this is all about you.' The wolfish look in his eyes did nothing to reassure her and she took the glass the waitress handed her with a mechanical smile. This wasn't some kind of comedy improvisation place, was it? Oh, no, what if

it was audience participation? She would rather dance in public than try and tell jokes. And she'd probably prefer to strip naked rather than dance. Maybe that was the point.

Just as she tried to formulate her next question the lights dimmed and one lone spotlight lit up the chair and the microphone. The buzz of conversation quietened as, with an audible scrape and squeak, all chairs turned to face the stage. It remained empty for what was probably less than a minute but felt longer as the anticipation built, the air thick with it. Hope clasped her glass, her stomach knotted. She doubted she was here to see an avant-garde staging of Shakespeare or some minimalist musical.

Finally, a low drum roll reverberated throughout the room, the low rumble thrumming in her chest as if it were part of her heartbeat, and a woman stepped out onto the stage. She was tall, strikingly dressed in a floor-length black dress, a top hat incongruously perched on her head.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you to the Hall of Truth tonight. As you know the entertainment is you and the stage is yours. This is where you are able to free yourselves of an unwanted burden. You are welcome to share anything—a secret, something humorous, a sad tale, a confession, a rant, a declaration, anything you like. Here are the rules: what's said in the Hall of Truth stays in the Hall of Truth unless it's illegal—there's no confessor's bond here, people.' A nervous laugh at this as people turned in their seats as if searching out any potential villain.

The blonde Master of Ceremonies smiled as the laugh faded away. 'No slander, no judgement and—most importantly—no lies. And no singing or dancing. There are no directors here searching out their next star! Oh, and please switch your cell phones off. Anyone caught recording or videoing will be prosecuted and, besides, it's bad manners. Okay. As is customary on these occasions I'll start. Anyone who would like to contribute please let a waitress know and you'll be added to tonight's set list.' She took in a deep breath, her rich tones captivating the audience. 'Tonight I am going to share with you the story of my daughter's hamster and my parents' dog and I must warn you that I can't guarantee that no animals were harmed during the making of this tale.'

'You've brought me to a place that tells pet snuff tales? Shame on you,' Hope whispered and a gleam of amusement flickered on Gael's face.

'Compared to some of the stories I've heard here this is practically fluffy and warm.'

'I bet that's what the dog said.' But Hope's mind was whirling. He'd come here before? More than once. Did he sit here and listen, just as he'd sat to the side and taken photos when he was younger? Or did he join in? What did he have to confess? She couldn't imagine him telling a funny story.

'Have you done this?' she whispered as the first audience participant stumbled up onto the stage, pale and visibly nervous as he launched into a tale of wreaking revenge at a school reunion on the bullies who had made his school life a misery. Gael leaned in, his mouth so close to her ear she could feel the warmth of his breath on her bare shoulder. Hope shivered.

'I can't tell you that, I'm afraid. You heard her. What's said in the Hall of Truth stays in the Hall of Truth.' He leaned back and the spot on her shoulder tingled, heat spreading down to the pit of her stomach. Hope drew in a shuddering breath, glancing sideways at Gael. He was concentrating on the stage, his eyes shuttered. Why did he come here to hear strangers speak? And more importantly why had he brought her?

Hope wouldn't have thought it possible that so many people would be prepared to stand up and bare their souls to a room of strangers but, as the first hour ticked by, there was no shortage of willing volunteers. There was a pattern, she noticed. Most ascended the steps nervously, even the ones with confident grins showed telltale signs, the way they tugged at their hands or pulled at their hem. But they all, even the woman who confessed to crashing her husband's car and blaming it on their teenage son, bribing him to take the fall, descended the steps with an air of a weight having been removed from their shoulders, a burden lessened. It was an appealing thought.

The red wine was heavier than she cared for and yet the first glass was finished before she noticed and replaced with a second, which also disappeared all too easily. Gael motioned the waitress

over to get their glasses topped up again and a wild idea seized Hope. Maybe she too could lessen some of her burdens. True, she didn't deserve to. But she'd been carrying the guilt around for nine long, long years. Would it hurt to share it? To let this crowd of strangers be her judge and jury.

Her breath caught in her throat, the very thought of speaking the words she'd buried for so long out loud almost choking her. But as the man on stage finished relating a very funny tale of neighbourhood rivalry taken to extremes her mind was made up and when the waitress came over in response to Gael's gesture Hope handed her the slip, slumping back in her chair as the waitress nodded.

What have I done? Her chest was tighter than ever, nausea swirling in her stomach as her throat swelled—her whole body conspiring to make sure she didn't say anything. She glanced at Gael and saw his eyes were fixed on her. Was that approval she saw in their blue-grey depths? He'd brought her here for this, she realised. Wanted her to expose herself emotionally before she did so physically. He was probably right—posing would be a doddle after this.

If she went through with it.

She barely took in the next speaker, her hands clammy and her breath shallow. She swigged the wine as carelessly as if it had been water, needing Dutch courage in the absence of actual courage. She didn't have to do this; she could get up and walk away. She should get up and walk away. What was stopping her? After all, her sister's wedding was almost sorted—and if this was the price she had to pay for her career then maybe she needed to reassess her options.

True, Gael wasn't making her do this. Just as he wasn't making her pose for him and yet somehow she was agreeing to do both. He was her puppet master and she was allowing him to pull her strings.

Her head was buzzing, the noise nearly drowning out every other sound and she barely heard her name called. Just her first name, anonymity guaranteed. She didn't have to do this...and yet she was stumbling to her feet and heading towards the steps and somehow walking up them, even in the heels from hell, and heading towards the microphone. She grasped it as if it were the only thing keeping her anchored and took in a deep breath.

The spotlight bathed her in warmth and a golden light and had the added bonus of slightly dazzling her so that she couldn't make out any faces on the floor below, just an indistinguishable dark grey mass. If she closed her ears to the coughing, throat clearing, shuffling and odd whispers she might be alone.

'Hi. I'm Hope.' She took a swig of the water someone had thrust in her hand as she had stepped onto the stage, glad of the lubrication on her dry throat. 'I just want to start by saying that I don't usually wear heels this high so if I stagger or fall it's not because I'm drunk but because I have a really bad sense of balance.' Actually after three glasses of Pinot Noir following a dinner comprising of two Pop-Tarts and a banana she was a little buzzed but, confessional or not, she didn't see the need to share that with the crowd.

Hope took another long slow breath and surveyed the grey mass of people. It was now or never. 'My parents loved to tell me that they named me Hope because I gave them hope. They planned a big family, only things didn't work out that way until, after four years of disappointment and several miscarriages, I was born. They thought that I was a sign, that I was the beginning of a long line of babies. But I wasn't.' She squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment, remembering the desperation and overwhelming need in their voices when they recounted the story of her name to her.

'My childhood was great in many ways. I was loved, we had a nice house in a nice area of London but I knew, I always knew I wasn't enough. They needed more than me. More children. And so my earliest memories are of my mother crying as she lost another baby. Of tests and hospital appointments and another baby lost. I hated it. I wanted them to stop. No more tears, no more hospitals, no brothers or sisters. Just the three of us but happier. But when I was eight they finally gave me the sister I didn't want. They called her Faith...' was that her voice breaking? '...because they'd always had faith that

she would be born. And although they still didn't have the long line of children they had dreamed of, now Faith was here they could stop trying. She was enough. She completed them in a way I hadn't been able to.'

The room was absolutely still. It was like speaking out into a large void. 'Looking back, I know it wasn't that simple. They didn't love her more than they loved me. But back then all I knew was that she wasn't told to run along because Mummy was sad or sick or in hospital, her childhood wasn't spent tiptoeing around grief. She had everything and I...I hated her for it. So I pulled away. Emotionally and physically, spending as much time at friends' houses as I could. I pushed my parents away again and again when all I really wanted was for them to tell me I mattered—but they had no idea how to deal with me and the longer they gave me space, the angrier I got and the wider the chasm became. Once I hit my mid-teens it was almost irreparable.

'I wasn't a very good teen. I drank and stayed out late. I wore clothes I knew they'd hate and got piercings they disapproved of. Hung out with people they thought trouble and went to places they forbade me to go. But I wasn't a fool, I knew my best shot at independence was a good education and I worked hard, my sights set on university in Scotland, a day's travel away. And still they said nothing, even when I left prospectuses for Aberdeen lying around. I thought they didn't care.' She took another sip of water, her throat raw with suppressed tears.

'The summer before I was due to go away they booked a weekend away for my mother's fiftieth birthday and asked me to look after Faith. You have no idea how much I whinged, finally extorting a huge fee for babysitting my own sister. I was supposed to have her from the Friday till the Monday morning but on the Sunday I called them and told them they had to come home because I had plans.'

This was the hard bit. True, she had never told anyone what a brat she'd been, how miserable she'd made her family—and herself—but that was small stuff. This, now, was her crime. Her eternal shame. 'I'd been seeing someone, a boy from school, and his parents had made last-minute plans to spend the Sunday night away. I thought I might be in love with him and I didn't want to go to university a virgin, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to finally sleep together—in his house, in a bed with total privacy.

'I called my parents and told them they needed to finish their weekend early. That I would be leaving the house at four and if they weren't back then Faith would be on her own. It was their choice, I told them, they were responsible for her, not me. And I put the phone down knowing that I had won. I had. Right that moment they were packing their things, their weekend ruined by their own daughter.' She swallowed, remembering the exact way she had felt at that moment. 'I knew even then that I was being unfair, I didn't feel victory or anticipation, just bitterness. At myself for being such a selfish idiot—and at them for allowing me to be. I hadn't left them much time to get home so I think they were distracted, hurrying. They weren't speeding and my dad was a really good driver. But somehow he didn't react in time to the truck that pulled out right in front of him. It was instant, the police said. They probably didn't feel a thing. Probably.'

Utter silence.

'I didn't lose my virginity that night but I did become a grown-up. I had deprived my sister of her parents and so I took on that role. I gave up my dreams of university, gave up any thought of carving out my own life and dedicated myself to raising my sister.' Hope couldn't stop the proud smile curving her lips. 'I think I've done okay. I spoiled her a little but she's a lovely, warm-hearted, sweet girl. And she loves me. But I've never told her what I did. And I don't know if I ever will. Thank you for listening.'

* * *

He only had himself to blame. He'd wanted to know what she was hiding, had wanted her to open up and now she had.

He should be pleased, Hope had shed a layer of armour, allowed her vulnerability to peek through just as he had planned. It would make her picture all the rawer. So why did he feel manipulative? Voyeuristic in a way he hadn't felt even as a teen taking secret photos to expose his classmates?

Because now he knew it all. He knew why she was still a virgin, why she would put her whole life on hold to plan her sister's wedding, why she put herself last, didn't allow herself the luxury of living. And Gael didn't know whether he wanted to hug her and make it better—or pull her to him and kiss her until all she could do was feel.

The way she looked on that stage was terrifying enough: endless legs, huge eyes, provocative mouth. But the worst part was it wasn't the way she looked that had him all churned up inside. It was what she said. Who she was. He had never met anyone like her before.

For the first time in a long time he wasn't sure he was in control—and hadn't he sworn that he'd never hand over control to a woman, to another human being ever again? Because in the end they always, always let you down.

Hope slid into the seat next to him, shaking slightly as the adrenaline faded away. He remembered the feeling well, the relief, the euphoria, the fear. 'Can we go?' she asked.

'Sure. Let me just pay.'

'Great, I'll wait for you in the lobby.' And just like that she was gone, walking tall and proud even in the heels she could barely balance in. His chest clenched painfully. He'd never met anyone like her before. Brave and determined and doing her best to cover up how lost she actually was. He'd spent so long with society queens obsessed with image, with money, with power that he had forgotten that there were women out there who played by a whole different set of rules.

It didn't take long for him to settle up and join her. Hope was standing absolutely still, lost in a world of her own, her dark eyes fixed on something he couldn't see. Guilt twinged his conscience. 'That was a brave thing you did in there.'

'Was it?' She looked at him pensively. 'I don't know. Letting go would be brave. Telling a room full of strangers? I don't know if that's enough.'

'Who else could you tell?'

'Sometimes I wonder if I should let Faith know the truth. If she should know just what kind of person I really am, not worthy of her love and respect.'

'Punish yourself more, you mean? What would that accomplish? Look at me, Hope.' He took her chin gently in one hand, forcing it up so her eyes met his gaze. They were so sad, filled with a grief and regret he couldn't imagine and all he wanted was to wipe the sadness out of them. 'What matters is what you have done in the last nine years and that makes you more than worthy of her love and respect. Don't make her feel that she wasn't a responsibility you accepted joyfully but a burden that you took on through guilt. Think that she's the reason you've spent the last nine years locked away from any kind of normal life. Honesty isn't always the best policy, Hope.'

'You think I should keep lying?'

'Do you love her?'

'Of course I do!'

'Would you sacrifice everything for her?'

'Yes!'

'Then that's your truth. How you got to this point is just history. Goddammit, Hope, the girl lost one set of parents. Don't threaten the bond she has with you as well.' He knew all too well what it felt like to have that bond tossed aside as if it—and he—had meant nothing. 'Come on, I'll take you home.'

But she didn't move. 'I thought we were going out afterwards. You said you knew the perfect place we could go to after the wedding dinner and we should try it out tonight.'

‘Haven’t you had enough excitement for one night?’ He knew he had. He wanted to get back to his studio and draw until all these inconvenient feelings disappeared. This sense of responsibility, of kinship. This stirring of attraction he was trying his damnedest to ignore. So her legs went on for ever, so a man could get lost in her eyes, so he never quite knew what she would say or do next, one minute opinionated and bossy and the next strikingly vulnerable. So he wanted to make everything that had ever gone wrong in her life better. None of this meant anything. Once he’d painted her all these unwanted thoughts and feeling and desires would disappear, poured into the painting where they belonged.

Irritation flashed in her eyes. ‘Don’t tell me what I have or haven’t had, Gael O’Connor. You may have orchestrated tonight but I’ve been looking after myself for a long, long time. You promised me that I would loosen up and have some fun—well, right now I’m more tense that I think I’ve ever been so what I need is for you to keep your word and for you to show me a good time.’

Her words were belligerent but the look in her eyes was anything but. She wanted to forget; he understood that all too well. He weighed up the consequences. He should put her in a cab and go somewhere where he could drink until every word she had said on stage was no longer seared into his brain. But common sense seemed less than desirable, everything seemed less than desirable while she stood there in a dress that barely skimmed her thighs, need radiating from her like a beacon. He swore under his breath. He was a fool—but at least he was aware of it. ‘Come on, then, what are you waiting for?’

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS A short walk to their destination but, after a swift assessing look at her feet, Gael flagged down a cab, tipping the driver well in advance to make up for the swift journey. It took less than five minutes before the car pulled up and Hope blinked as she took in their surroundings, unable to keep the surprise off her face as she looked around at the massive hotel they'd been dropped off by. As she turned she could see the bright lights of Times Square flashing brashly just a few metres away. 'Every time you take me somewhere you surprise me,' she said. 'Art museums, funny little theatres and now a hotel?'

'We're not going into the hotel proper,' he assured her and steered her past the darkened windows of the hotel to the bar tucked into the ground floor. 'Just into here.'

'Okay,' but she wasn't convinced as he opened the anonymous-looking door and stood aside to allow her to precede him inside. 'It's just this is a hotel bar and it's not really the kind of thing I think Faith is wanting...' She stopped as abruptly as if her volume had been turned down, her mouth still open as she slowly turned and surveyed the room. It was perfect.

Wood panelled and lit with discreet low lights, the piano bar evoked a long-gone era. Hope half expected to see sharp-suited men propping up the bar, their fedoras pulled low and ravishing molls, all red lipsticks and bobs, on their arms.

The long wooden bar took up most of the back wall, a dazzling array of drinks displayed on the beautifully carved shelves behind. A line of red-leather-topped stools invited weary drinkers to sit down and unload their cares into the ever open ears of the expert bartenders. Gael nodded towards a table, discreetly situated in the corner. 'Cocktail?'

Hope weighed up the consequences. A cocktail on top of all that wine? But the five minutes she had spent on stage had sobered her up more effectively than an ice-cold shower and she needed something to alleviate the buzz in her veins. 'Yes. Please. I don't mind what. I know, I'll try one of the house specialities.'

She took a seat, watching Gael as he ordered their drinks. He fitted in here, sleek and handsome with an edge that was undeniably attractive, probably because it was unknown, slightly dangerous. She looked away quickly, hoping he hadn't caught her staring, as he joined her. 'This place is awesome. It's like the New York I hoped to find but haven't yet, if that makes sense.'

'It's exactly like a film set,' he agreed. 'Piano and all. They'll have a jazz band playing on the night of your sister's wedding...'

'So we can come here after the dinner? Oh, Gael, thank you. What a brilliant idea. Faith is going to be so happy. The only thing is it's not that big and there will be fifteen of us. Can we reserve a table?'

He nodded. 'They don't usually but I should be able to...'

'Pull a few strings? I've noticed that. Hunter was right. You know everyone.'

'That's why he sent you to me.'

'Yes. I could never have done this on my own, thank you.'

'I'm not helping you out of the goodness of my heart,' he reminded her.

'Oh, I know, I owe you a debt.' She did but she couldn't begrudge him that, not now. Hope had seen a lot of weddings recently, mostly vicariously through photos shared on social media, far too cut off from her old social group to merit an invitation. They all varied in location, in expense, but the trend seemed to be for huge, extravagant, glitzy events. This small but very sweet wedding she and Gael were putting together in record time made the rest seem tawdry and cheap. It was, she realised with a jolt, the kind of wedding she would want for herself.

The realisation slammed into her and she gripped the table. Would she ever have the opportunity to do this for herself? She wasn't sure she'd know how to date any more, let alone fall in love—

and suddenly it was dawning on her just how much she wanted to. Spending the last three days with another human being, a very male human being, had been eye opening. She wasn't entirely sure she always liked Gael; she certainly wasn't comfortable around him. But he challenged her, pushed her, helped her. Attracted her.

Yes. Attracted. Was that so wrong? She was twenty-seven, single, presumably with working parts. Attraction was normal. Only she was a beginner and she was pretty sure he was at super-advanced level. Far too much to handle for her first real crush in a decade. She should start slow. With a man who wore tweed and liked fossils.

Thank goodness, here was her cocktail and it was time to stop thinking. With relief Hope took an incautious sip, eyes watering as the alcohol hit her throat. 'Strong,' she gasped.

'They're not known for their half measures. How are you?'

'Choking on neat gin?'

He raised an eyebrow and she sighed. 'I feel like I've been for a ten-kilometre run or something. It's exhausting baring your soul to complete strangers.'

'I know.'

It was obvious that he did. Either the alcohol or the knowledge he truly had seen everything she was emboldened her to push deeper. 'What did you say? When you went up? You did go up, didn't you? That's how you know it's what I needed.' It had been, she realised. She'd needed to drain some of the poison from her soul.

Gael didn't answer at first, fingering the rim of his glass as he stared into the distance. Hope watched his capable-looking fingers as they caressed the glass in sure strokes and something sweet and dark clenched low inside her.

'I first went there because I was looking for inspiration. My photos felt stale, uninspired. I had just been asked to shoot a series for Fabled about the next generation of Upper East Side, all unimaginatively dressed up as Gatsby and co. There they were, ten years younger than my friends and just as entitled, just as arrogant, nothing had changed. I came to the Truth night looking for hope. I didn't expect to be getting up on stage and bearing my soul.' His mouth twisted. 'It could have been professional suicide. I know it's supposed to be confidential but if a journalist had heard me confess how much I hated my work they could have destroyed me.'

'Is that what you said?'

'It's not what I meant to say but near the end it hit me. I was miserable. I needed to change, get back to what I'd originally planned to do—paint.'

'So what did you say?'

'I don't know why but I wanted to tell them about the first time I went to Paris, about the effect the whole city had on me. I'd spent days in the Louvre and so when I went to the Musée d'Orsay I was a little punch-drunk.'

'I can relate to that after this afternoon.'

He grinned. 'Not so punch-drunk that I mixed up Renoir and Degas.' Hope pulled a face at him, absurdly pleased when he laughed. 'Then I saw her, Olympia. I don't know why she struck me the way she did. It wasn't that I found the painting particularly sexy or shocking or anything. But her honesty hit me. I didn't know that relationships could be that honest.'

Hope set her drink down and stared. 'But isn't she a courtesan?'

He nodded. 'And she's upfront about it. There's no coyness, no pretence. "Here I am," she says. "Take me or leave me but if you take there's a price." Everyone knows where they stand, no hard feelings.'

Hope tried to put his words into a context she understood. 'But a relationship, a real one, a lasting one, that's based on honesty, surely.'

'Is that what you believe?'

Was it? She was doubting herself now. 'It's what I'd like to believe.' That much she knew.

'Exactly! You've been sold the fairy tale and you want to believe it's true, but you and me, we live in the real world, we know how rare true honesty is.'

'Hey, don't drag me into your cynical gang of two! What happened to make you so anti love?'

He smiled at that, slow and serious and dangerously sweet. 'Oh, I believe in love. First love, love at first sight, passion, need. I just don't believe in happy-ever-after. Or that love has anything to do with marriage. The marriages I see are based on something entirely different.'

'What's that?'

'Power. Either one person holds all the power and the other is happy to concede it—that's how the whole trophy-wife—or husband, in my father's case, it can be equal opportunity—business works. One half pays, the other obeys. Once they stop being obedient, or they live past their shelf life, then they get replaced.'

'In your crazy world of wife bonuses and prenups maybe, not in the real world.'

'In every world. It may not be as obvious or understood but it's there.'

'But if that was the case then all marriages would fail eventually,' she objected. 'And they don't. Some, sure. But not all.'

Gael shrugged. 'Some people are happy with the imbalance. Or they have equal power and can balance each other out, but that's rare. Now my dad, he keeps marrying women with money. In the beginning they like that he's younger, they think he's handsome, it gives him status—he holds the power. But once they are used to his looks and the lust dies down and they realise their friends aren't so much jealous as amused by their marriage then the power shifts. That's where he is right now. Again.'

'Does he love them? The women he marries?'

'He loves the lifestyle. He loves that they don't demand anything from him. My mom, she held the power because he was absolutely besotted. He tried everything to make her happy. That's her trick. Only in her case she always stays on top. She leaves them when a better deal comes along. Although she's been with Tony for ten years and they have two kids so who knows? Maybe this one she'll stick out.'

'Not all marriages are like that. Your parents were so young when they married.'

'Like Hunter and Faith?'

'Yes.' She wanted to say things would be different for them but how could she when they were still such strangers? But her sister's marriage was hers, to succeed and fail as it would. Hope would help where she could but in this her sister, for the first time in her life, was on her own. 'But they are hardly typical either. Look, you have spent your whole life watching these absurdly rich, absurdly spoilt people play at marriage, play at love, grabbing what they want and walking away the second it gets tough. The real world isn't like that. My parents survived seven miscarriages—seven—IVF. Me,' she finished sadly. She was all too aware just what a strain her behaviour had been on her parents. She would give anything to go back and do it all over again. Yes to Saturday night pizza and films, yes to Sunday walks in the country, yes to that damn carousel ride.

She tried again. 'Look, I might have little real-time experience of love or relationships. I've obviously never been married. But I know something about living up to expectations. If you go around believing everyone is looking to shaft everyone else then that's what you'll find. I don't believe that. I won't.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Look at that, Hope McKenzie all fired up. I like it.'

And she was. She was on fire, living, completely in the moment for the first time in nine years. Her chains loosened, her self-hatred relieved. 'In that case,' she said slowly, scarcely believing the words coming out of her mouth, 'I believe we have a painting to start working on.'

Time stilled as Gael studied her, his eyes still narrowed to intense slits, his focus purely on her. Hope made every muscle still, made herself meet that challenging stare as coolly as she could. If they didn't start this now she wasn't sure she'd ever have the guts to go through with it. But right here, right now, she was ready.

He pushed his stool back and stood up in one graceful, almost predatory movement. ‘Yes, it’s time,’ he said and a shiver ran through her at his words. ‘Let’s get this painting started.’

* * *

The scene was set. He’d planned it all out the day he met her and it was the work of seconds to pull the chaise round to exactly the right angle and to set up the spotlights he used for his photographs to simulate the sun. ‘Here,’ he said, throwing a clean robe over to her. ‘Go and get changed. Can you screw your hair up into a high knot?’

Hope nodded. She had barely said a word since they had left the bar, since her unexpected challenge. But she’d lost that wide-eyed wariness that had both attracted and repelled him. Tonight she was filled with some other emotion, an anticipation that pulled him in. She was ready, ripe for the unveiling.

Gael swallowed. She wasn’t the only one full of anticipation. His hands weren’t quite steady as he threw a white sheet over the chaise, adding a huge pillow and a rumpled flowery shawl. The other models had brought in their own jewellery, pillows, throws to lie on, things that had significance to them, but he was painting Hope in almost identical colours and attitude to the original. The virgin posing as the courtesan.

‘Wait, take this as well.’ He handed her a bag.

Hope took it, opening it and peering at its contents. A thick gold bracelet, a pair of pearl earrings and a black ribbon to tie around her neck. Mule slippers. An orchid for her hair. ‘Okay. What about make-up?’

‘You don’t need any. You have perfect skin.’

A blush crept up her cheeks at his words and she threw him a quick smile before heading off to the small bathroom he had directed her to just three days ago. Was that all it was? He’d lost count but what he did know was that it felt like weeks, months since he had met her and he didn’t want to analyse why that might be.

It didn’t take him too long to set up his tools: paints, palette, brushes, linseed oil, rags. They evoked a fire deep inside that his camera and lenses never could; the messy, unpredictable elements appealed even as he tried to impose order on his emotions. Gael ran a hand through his hair as he took stock one last time. The setting was perfect, all he needed was his model.

‘Hi.’ She appeared at the door as if summoned by his thoughts, the white robe clasped tightly around her waist, the mule slippers on her feet. She’d fastened her hair up as directed, the orchid set above one ear, the vibrant pink contrasting with the paleness of her face. Two pearls dangled from her lobes.

‘Hi.’

‘So where do you want me?’ She grimaced. ‘Stupid question.’

She walked over to the chaise, slow, small steps, obviously steeling herself as she neared the middle of the room. She halted as she reached the chaise and looked at him enquiringly. ‘Do I just...?’

Gael nodded. ‘You can drop your robe behind the chaise or hand it to me, whichever.’

‘I don’t expect it makes much difference. I’m going to end up the same way whichever I do.’ But she didn’t loosen the robe although her hands were knotted around the tie.

‘I could put on some music? If that helps?’

‘I don’t think so, thank you. Not tonight anyway. Do you need silence while you work or could we talk?’

‘I don’t mind either way unless I’m focussing on your face. Your mouth will want to stay in one position then but that won’t be for a few days.’ He usually left conversation up to the models. Some liked to chat away, almost as if they were in a therapy session, others preferred silence, lost in a world of their own. Gael didn’t care as long as he got the pose and expression he needed.

Hope walked around the chaise and stared down at the sheet, the pillow, the rumpled shawl. ‘Looks comfy.’

‘Okay, you’ve seen the painting. You’re propped up on the pillow, your head slightly raised and looking directly at me. One leg casually over the other with the slipper half on, half off—but I can adjust that for you. The arm nearest me bent and relaxed, the other resting on your thigh.’ Although she would be fully nude the pose preserved a little bit of modesty, a nod to the Renaissance nudes that had inspired the original pose.

‘Got it.’ With a visible—and audible—intake of breath Hope untied the robe and slipped it off, handing it to him as she did so. Gael turned away to place it on the floor behind him, deliberately not looking as she lay on the chaise and positioned herself. He had done this exact thing nineteen times before and not once had he had this dizzy sensation, as if the world were falling apart and rearranging itself right here in front of him. Not once had he been both so eager and so reticent to turn around and examine his model.

It’s just another model, another painting. But he knew this girl, knew her secrets and her hopes. Had coaxed them out of her so that he could capture her in oils and hang her up, exposed, for all the world to see. Only right now he didn’t want the world to see, he wanted to keep this unveiling for himself, her secrets to himself. It was his turn to take a deep breath, to push the troubling, unwelcome thoughts out of his mind and turn, the most professional expression he could muster on his face.

She was magnificent. Almost perfect, as pale as the original except for her legs, tanned to a warm golden brown. Petite and curvy with surprising large breasts proudly jutting out and the sexy curve of her small belly. Every woman Gael had dated boasted prominent ribs and a concave stomach; they looked fantastic in the skimpy designer clothes they favoured but felt insubstantial, as if the real joys in life eluded them. Not surprising when they considered dressing on a salad a treat and cheese the invention of the devil.

She was almost perfect, in a way he hadn’t even considered, conditioned as he was by the gym-going gazelles he had been surrounded by for the last fifteen years. Her only flaw was the silver scars crisscrossing the very top of her thighs. There were more lines than he could count, covering the whole thigh from the side round to the fleshy inner thigh. They stopped just where a pair of shorts would end. Where the dress she was wearing tonight had ended, hidden from the world.

She stiffened as his gaze lingered there and when he looked back into her eyes all he could see was shame mingled with hurt pride and something that might be a plea for understanding. ‘It hurt when my parents died. It hurt giving up my dreams. It hurt how much I blamed myself. Sometimes it hurt so much I couldn’t stand it.’

‘You don’t have to explain anything to me.’ He picked up the yellow ochre and squeezed an amount onto his palette before adding in some cadmium red light, the titanium white close at hand ready to lighten the blend to the exact shade of Hope’s upper half.

‘Every time I swore it was the last but then the pressure would get too much and the only thing that let it out was blood. For that second, when the blade sliced, I had peace. But then the blood would start to well up and I would feel sick again, hated myself, knew I was so weak. Faith used to ask why I wore old-fashioned swimsuits, you know, with skirts and I pretended it was because I liked the vintage look. In reality I couldn’t bear for anyone to see my thighs.’ She stopped. ‘They will though, won’t they? They’ll see them on this.’

‘I can’t exclude them. It would be like editing you. Not quite real.’

‘I knew that’s what you’d say.’

‘When did you stop?’

‘When I’d accepted the situation. When it became my reality and not this horrible nightmare with no escape. When I put my old self and my old dreams away and devoted myself to Faith. Then I could cope.’

'Or you exchanged one mechanism for another? How long have you been locked in that box, Hope? How long have you suppressed who you are, what you want, what you need?' His voice had deepened and he wasn't even pretending to mix colours any more, the palette lying in his lap, the brush held casually in his hand as his eyes bore into hers.

'I don't any more. I'm at peace with who I've become.' Liar, a little voice inside her whispered.

'That teen rebel who kept a clear head on her shoulders while she did just what she wanted? The girl who had her future planned out down to where she wanted to study and when she was going to sleep with her boyfriend. The girl with dreams which took her away from the family home, away from London. Has she really gone?' His words sent an ache reverberating through her for the lost dreams and hopes she barely even acknowledged any more.

'I am away from London.'

'Still anchored to your family home. To your sister. Still doing the sensible thing.'

'This isn't that sensible,' she whispered.

His eyes pinned her to the pillow; she couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to. 'No.'

Hope had a sense she was playing with fire and yet she couldn't, wouldn't retreat. 'I'm bored of being sensible. So very, very bored.'

'Your hand,' he said hoarsely. 'I just need to position it.'

Hope's mouth was so dry she couldn't speak, couldn't do more than nod in agreement as Gael put the palette down and walked towards her. He had changed into old, battered, paint-splattered jeans and a white, equally disreputable shirt, buttons undone at the neck. She could see the movement of his muscles, a smattering of hair at the vee of the low neck and something primal clenched low down inside her.

She had never been so aware of her own body before, not as a teenager, her mouth glued to her boyfriend's as she fended off his hands, not as she'd stood in the bathroom, razor blade in hand. Every nerve was pulsing, jumping to the increasingly rapid beat of her heart. She could sense Gael over the ever shortening distance, sense him physically as if she were connected to him on some astral plane.

'This hand.' His voice was now so hoarse it was almost a rasp. 'I need it here.'

The second he touched her she gasped, unable to bear the pressure building up so slowly inside her any longer. His fingers on hers, the coolness against the heat of her skin, the sight of those deep olive tones on her own pale hand, the gentle strength inherent in his touch as he moved her. It was as if she had been craving his touch without even knowing it and that one movement opened up a deep hunger inside her.

But she had no doubt, no hesitation. She might be inexperienced but she instinctively knew what to do. She half closed her eyes, watching him through her lashes. 'Here?' She slid her hand a little way along her thigh and, with feminine satisfaction, watched him swallow. 'Or here?' She slid it slightly further so the tips of her fingers met his and, almost of their own volition, caressed the roughened tips.

'Hope...' She didn't know if he was uttering a warning, an entreaty or both but she was past caring. The last few days this man had laid her bare, exposed her deepest secrets and made her confront them. She was tired of confronting, tired of hiding, she just wanted to feel something good —and if her nerves were tingling like this from the mere touch of hand on hand then she had the suspicion this could get really good really soon.

'I think here, don't you?' Her fingers travelled up his hand to explore the delicate skin at his wrist. Gael closed his eyes and Hope thrilled at the knowledge that one simple touch could have such a potent effect, only to draw in a breath of her own as he captured her hand in his, his thumb sliding down to return the favour. One digit, one tiny area of skin but her whole body was lit up like Piccadilly Circus and she knew she couldn't, wouldn't walk away.

She should feel shame or embarrassment lying here wearing nothing but a flower in her hair, a ribbon round her neck while he was still dressed but she didn't feel either of those things. She felt

powerful as she tugged at his hand, powerful as in answer to her command he sat at the side of the chaise, powerful as she raised her hand to his face and allowed herself the luxury of learning the sharp cheekbones, the dimple by the side of his mouth, the exquisitely cut lips.

'Hope,' he said again, capturing her hand once again, this time holding it still while he looked deep into her eyes. She saw concern and chafed at it. She saw need and fire and thrilled to it. 'This isn't right. It's been an emotional evening. I can't take advantage of you...'

'Right now I feel like I'm taking advantage of you.'

A primal fire flashed in his eyes and her whole body liquefied as his mouth pulled into a wolfish grin. 'You believe that if you want, sweetheart.'

'Would you be pulling back if I was any other woman?'

'I wouldn't be here if you were any other woman.' The admission was low, as if it had been dragged from him.

Oh.

'That's not what I meant and you know it. If I wasn't a virgin, if you knew I'd been swinging from the chandeliers with a whole regiment of lovers, then would you be pulling away?'

'No,' he admitted. 'But you are and the first time, Hope, it should be special. With someone you love. I don't do love, I don't do long term and I don't want to hurt you. You deserve better.'

'How very teen drama of you. I'm twenty-seven, Gael. I don't know how to flirt or date or be in that way. The way things are going I'll be a thirty-eight-year-old virgin and you holding my hand will be the single most erotic thing that's ever happened to me and it would be most unfair of you to condemn me to that. I'm not holding out for a knight on a white charger, you know that. If things were different I'd have lost it to Tom Featherstone nine years ago, in his parents' bed with a White Musk candle to create the mood and James Blunt on the speakers telling me how beautiful I was. I liked Tom. I liked him a lot. I wanted to sleep with him, but I didn't love him and I promise not to fall in love with you. I know you think you're good but you can't be that good.'

His mouth curved into a reluctant smile. 'That sounds like fighting talk.'

'It was supposed to be seductive talk.'

The virgin seducing the playboy. It was completely the wrong way round but it turned out that this playboy had scruples. Hope respected them, she just wanted him to get over them already and respect her choice.

Gael studied her for a second longer and Hope stared back more brazenly than she ever had, allowing all her need and want and desire to spill out until, with a smothered groan, he leant in, arms either side of her head, his face close to her, mouth within kissing distance, almost.

Hope moistened her lips.

'Let's get this straight,' he said. 'If there's going to be any seducing tonight then I'll be the one who's doing it.'

Her body liquefied again, every bone melting so she felt as if she could simply slide off the chaise to lie in a puddle on the floor—and he wasn't even touching her. Only then he was, one hand tilting her chin up before he claimed her mouth with his and the last coherent thought Hope knew was that when it came to seduction Gael was right: he was definitely the one in control.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS ALMOST like a relationship. Almost. The doorman let her straight up without even buzzing first, she had a bag with hot bagels and two coffees in one hand and a Bloomingdale's bag in the other, her toothbrush and a change of underwear in the handbag slung over her shoulder, just in case.

But it wasn't a relationship. When the lift doors opened and she walked into the studio Gael looked up and smiled—which was an improvement on his old non-greeting—but he made no move to come over and kiss her. They didn't kiss, or hold hands, or feed each other titbits or cuddle. They had sex. Every night for the last week and a couple of times in the day as well—after all, she was spending most of the day naked—but they weren't affectionate.

It was as if life was in two halves: the normal half filled with wedding planning, painting, archive sorting and anything else that needed doing—and the secret half. The half when Gael's eyes darkened to a steely blue and just the look in them made her stomach swirl and her pulse speed up. And the two halves were totally disconnected.

That very first night, afterwards, he had asked if she was okay. Probably still worried that she was going to transfer twenty-seven years of singledom into one giant, all-encompassing 'thank you for the first orgasm I didn't sort out on my own', wholly inappropriate crush. Obviously all the serotonin and oxytocin had been a little overwhelming; she'd wanted to be completely absorbed in and by and round him while her heartbeat returned to its normal pace and her breathing slowed. Hope completely understood, for the first time, how knee-weakening, chest-tightening, dry-mouthed lust could be mistaken for love.

But she'd spent the last nine years ignoring her wants and wasn't going to let a little bit of—okay, a lot of—sex change the carefully ingrained habits. A wide-eyed, 'So that's what all the fuss is about,' followed by, 'I can't believe it's taken me so long,' wrapped up with a 'thank you' was all that she allowed before wrapping the handy robe around herself and disappearing into the bathroom.

And so she'd reassured him—and herself—that she was more than okay, that she understood exactly what this was. Temporary, fun, no strings, no expectations. Hope guessed that this was what was meant by friends with benefits. Not that they were exactly friends either. Soon to be kind of in-laws with benefits?

Gael threw a pointed look at the industrial clock on the wall. 'Got lost? I thought you were heading back to yours for a change of clothes. Last time I looked your apartment was a ten-minute walk from here.'

Hope felt a slight twinge of guilt. She was supposed to be cataloguing again this morning. 'I know I took longer than expected, but I did bring coffee and bagels because, honestly, it is far quicker to go and buy coffee than it is to work that fiendish machine of yours.'

'Coffee from Bloomingdale's?' He nodded at the huge bag in her hand.

'Well, no. I just popped in while I was passing...'

'Passing? Your apartment is straight north from here. How were you passing Third Avenue?'

'Okay, I took a little detour. I know we have an appointment at the bridal shop this afternoon...yes. We,' she added firmly as he pulled an all too expressive face. 'I am not going on my own. But Faith needs two gowns and it's stressful enough getting one made up on time, so as the New York dress can be a lot less formal I thought I'd look elsewhere. Besides, I haven't really had a chance to flex the credit card Hunter gave me yet. Shopping with an unlimited budget is a lot more fun than bargain hunting, let me tell you. This might not be an actual wedding dress but it cost more than most entire weddings. I seriously thought they'd added an extra digit by mistake.'

She placed the bag carefully on the floor and opened it. 'What do you think? It was the last in her size so I bought it straight away but now I'm worrying I didn't look at enough options.' She pulled

out a delicate cream dress with a lace overlay on the short bodice and cap sleeves, the silk almost sheer around the high waist before cascading into a long pleated skirt. 'I wanted something floaty and unstructured which will be comfortable to wear. After all, she's moving around a lot on the wedding day—Central Park, then to the boat for the afternoon cruise.'

Hope had been unsure what to do with the fifteen guests in the four hours between the cocktails at the Tavern on the Green and dinner at the Roof Garden. They were such an odd selection of people from Hunter's multimillionaire socialite mother to her aunt and uncle who lived in a small village in Dorset and hated big cities. Luckily inspiration had led her to a small business that chartered boats out and she had booked an old-fashioned sailboat for the afternoon to take the guests on a cruise around Manhattan. It would probably be a little unsophisticated for Misty, who actually owned her own yacht, but Faith and her UK guests would love it.

'Then she's at the Met and finally the piano bar. It's a busy day and she wants white for the party and blessing so I wanted to make sure there was a contrast. It's such a beautiful shimmery cream as well. I got a gorgeous cashmere wrap in a soft gold and both flat shoes and heels so she can swap. What do you think?'

Gael didn't just nod and say, 'Very nice, dear,' as her father used to do. She guessed that was the advantage of wedding planning with an artist and former society photographer. Instead he took the hanger from her and hung the dress from a hook on the wall, standing back, brow creased in concentration.

'Gold accessories?'

Hope felt a little as if she were taking a test. 'Soft gold, not metallic. Because of the thread in the lace.'

'So Hunter and I will need ties in that colour. His dad too probably.'

Hope stared at him, horrified. Suits? She hadn't even thought about suits. Dear God, she wasn't expected to sort the rings out as well, was she?

To her relief Gael carried on. 'My tailor has already started on the suits for the party. A light grey with white linen shirts. You can work with that? We'll order the ties once you have chosen the bridesmaids' dresses. I think we'll want a darker, almost charcoal suit for the wedding, to go with the soft gold accents in the cream of the dress. And a lightweight fabric.' He pulled his phone out and started tapping. How could it be that simple?

Easy, she reminded herself, he had connections. Besides, dress number one had been pretty easy for her thanks to the limitless budget. She'd met up with a personal shopper and this dress was the second she'd seen. She'd fallen for it instantly—more importantly she knew Faith would love it.

Gael looked up from his phone. 'What about you? Have you sorted a dress out yet?'

'No, not yet but I still have a few days. Besides, I don't have a limitless budget so an hour with a personal shopper isn't going to cut it for me. I thought I'd head downtown tomorrow and see what I can find in a soft gold. It's Faith's day anyway so as long as I complement her in the photos it's all good.'

'Hope, just use Hunter's card. He'll be expecting you to use it.' He threw her a shrewd glance. 'But sure, hide away in the background as usual.'

'I'm not! It's her wedding. Some sister I would be if I tried to overshadow her.' Besides, that huge canvas right there? She was in the foreground there. Enough in the foreground to last her a lifetime. 'I'll find something, I promise. Besides, Hunter wants me to put the bridesmaids' dresses for the party on the limitless card so this afternoon I'll spend big. You won't recognise me, my dress will be so attention seeking.'

'I'd know you anywhere,' he said softly and her heart trembled. No, she scolded herself. No reading meanings into words. No thinking this is more than it is. You escaped awkward if sweet fumblings with Tom Featherstone for toe-curling, out-of-body-type sex. How many people go straight to advanced levels, huh? It's just your emotions are still stuck on beginner level. Give them a chance to catch up.

Besides. She wasn't that stupid. She trusted Gael with her body but there was no way she would trust him with her heart. She was pretty sure he couldn't handle his own, let alone somebody else's. No, she would enjoy this for what it was and when it was over take the confidence and belief she was gaining day by day and go out and make herself a happy life. One day she might even feel that she deserved to.

'We're due at the shop in four hours. Do you need me to pose?' Airily said but each time she still needed to take a deep breath before she let the robe slip. Habits of a lifetime were hard to escape and after years of keeping in the background being under such intense scrutiny was hard. More than hard.

'No, there's not really enough time. I'm doing some work on the background so I don't need you. Why don't you get on with the archive?'

And there she was. Relegated from lover to muse to wedding planner to assistant in four easy steps. Know your place, she told herself sternly as Gael snagged the brown bag to take out his coffee —black, two shots—and bagel—pumpkin seed with cream cheese and smoked salmon. Both a stern contrast to her own more adventurous orders but she was a tourist, it was her duty to experiment. She grabbed her own food and headed off into the kitchen where her workstation was set up. She enjoyed the work but this time away from the office was making her face some uncomfortable truths. She'd hoped this job swap, working with Brenda, would give her the time she needed to work on her career —but instead it was becoming increasingly clear that although she was good at office work and ran events smoothly and meticulously she was bored. In fact she had been bored for a long time if she was honest with herself—something was missing and she couldn't put her finger on exactly what that was.

Hope had fallen into a rhythm over the last week. Gael kept good records and she was beginning to recognise many of the faces so she barely had to put any aside for future clarification. She had already worked her way through his junior year at school and made a good start on senior. The photos were all taken anonymously up to this point but there was a step change the second he was outed: less candid, more posed, less scandalous.

And more of Gael himself. Set-up group shots, time delays. He didn't look at ease, didn't pose, a faraway look on his face as if he was dreaming of being safely back behind the camera.

It wasn't just Gael who made more of an appearance. Time after time the camera lingered lovingly on a willowy blonde girl. She had possibly the most photogenic face Hope had ever seen, the sharp angles and exaggerated features made for the lens. It wasn't just the camera who loved her, judging by the close-ups. The photographer had too.

Hope checked the face against the records she was building up. The girl had been in the junior year pictures as well, only in the background, watching the main players as yearningly as the camera. At some point, like Gael, she had come out of the shadows to shine on centre stage. Tamara Larson.

With half an eye on Gael through the open door, Hope brought up her internet browser and typed in the name. In less than a second it presented her with thousands of possibilities. She pressed randomly on one link. She almost knew what she'd see before the picture loaded: Gael looking down at Tamara, almost unrecognisable. It wasn't just that he was more than a decade younger, slim to the point of skinny, still wearing the gangliness of a very young man. It was the softness in his face, the light in his eyes, the warmth in his smile that made him so alien. Hope had never seen him look that way, not even in their most intimate, unguarded moments.

'I believe in love,' he had said. The proof was right here. He had loved. Adored.

Hope's breath caught in her throat and her fingers curled into fists. It wasn't that she was jealous —well, she conceded, maybe just a teensy weensy bit in a totally irrational way but no, in the main it wasn't jealousy consuming her, it was curiosity. Something had happened to wipe that softness out so complexly replacing it with cynicism. What was it?

She clicked back and scrolled onwards until a headline caught her eye. 'Expose photographer and muse to wed' it screamed in bold type over a picture of a beaming Tamara Larson showing a

gigantic—and tacky, Hope sniffed—ring, Gael standing proudly behind her, his hands possessively on her shoulders.

Engaged! He must have still been a baby, younger even than Hunter.

What had happened? There was definitely no socialite living here in the loft. Of course Gael had no obligation to tell her if he was divorced, none at all.

Hurt flickered inside her. Small but scalding. He knew everything about her from the scars on her thighs to the scars on her heart and yet he had shared nothing that wasn't already public knowledge. No, this definitely wasn't anything like a relationship. For him she was a convenience; a convenient model, a convenient assistant, a convenient lover.

Which was absolutely no problem. She just needed to remember, remember exactly what this was—and exactly what it wasn't.

'Researching?' How had she not heard him come into the kitchen? Hope jumped guiltily. 'How very keen.'

'I didn't know you were engaged.' There was no point in prevaricating; she'd been caught red-handed.

His mouth twisted. 'Briefly. It was a long time ago.'

'What happened?' She saw the shutters come down and pressed on. 'You're going to have to tell me at some point. She's going to feature heavily in the retrospective; half your pictures from that time are of her.'

'Tale as old as time: boy meets girl, girl sees opportunity, boy falls for girl, it ends tragically. The end.' The mocking tone was back but this time it was entirely self-directed. That was worse in some ways than when he employed it against her.

She tried for a smile, wanting to lighten the suddenly sombre mood. 'Fairy tales have darkened since my day.'

'Oh, this is no fairy tale. It's an old-fashioned morality tale of lust, hubris and greed.' He hooked a stool out and sat down opposite her, leaning on the steel countertop, eyes burning with sardonic amusement. 'They rarely have a happy ending.'

Hope was right. He couldn't have a retrospective and not include his own secrets and shame. What would be the point in that? Besides, Tamara was no secret. Their relationship was well documented as the long list of web links on the laptop attested.

Gael spun the laptop round and stared at the photo. All he felt, all he wanted to feel was pity for the poor fool. Standing there looking as if he had won life's lottery, as if the right honeyed words from the right girl were all he needed to count in this world. 'It's really no big deal. It wouldn't be worth a footnote in the retrospective if I hadn't been stupid enough to think I was old enough to get married.'

'But you did get engaged?'

'Does it count as an engagement if the blushing bride-to-be had no intention of going through with the wedding?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'It's not that exciting, Hope. No big romance. Tamara was in the year behind me at school. She was...' he paused, searching for the right word '...she was ambitious. She felt that she belonged at the very top of the social strata; she was beautiful, smart, athletic, rich—but our school was full of beautiful and smart rich girls and somehow she couldn't even get into the inner circle, let alone rule it. She was left out on the fringes.'

'Like you.'

Like him but so much more ambitious. 'Like me. But I knew my place and had no desire to move upwards. I think she knew who I was before I was outed. Sometimes I think she was the one who outed me, because a couple of months before it happened, a few months into my senior year, she started to make a very subtle and clever play for me. Of course I, sap that I was, had no idea. I thought it was the other way round and couldn't believe that this gorgeous girl would ever consider a commoner like me. But the more I noticed her—and she made sure I did—the more I photographed her, the more she made it into Expose and the more she featured on the blog the higher her status grew.'

‘She might not have planned it. You make her sound like Machiavelli.’

Proof Hope didn’t belong on the Upper East Side; the boys and girls he’d gone to school with had studied Machiavelli at preschool. ‘Oh, she planned it. She played me like a pro—like father, like son. Suckers for a poor little rich girl every time. No one can make you feel as special as a society goddess, like Aphrodite seducing a mere mortal. We started dating spring break that year and right through my first year at college. I asked her to marry me when she graduated from high school. Can you even imagine?’ He couldn’t. He couldn’t begin to imagine that kind of wild-eyed optimism any more. You’d think his own parents would have taught him just how foolish marrying the first person you fell for was. Turned out it was a lesson he needed to learn for himself.

‘She said yes?’

He nodded. ‘Oh, she wasn’t finished with me yet, and such a youthful engagement ensured she was in the headlines, just where she wanted to be. She dropped out of college to play at being a fashion intern, did some modelling and dumped me for the heir to a hotel empire. I don’t think she has any regrets. Her penthouse apartment, properties in Aspen, Bermuda, Paris and the Hamptons more than make up for any lingering feelings she may have had.’ He ran into Tamara every now and then. She usually tried to give him some kind of limpid look, an attempt at a connection. He always ignored her.

‘You were much better off finding out what she was like before you got married.’

‘That’s what Misty said. She sent me to Paris for my sophomore year as a consolation prize and that’s when I really fell in love.’

‘With Olympia?’

He smiled then. ‘Olympia and all her sisters.’

‘You’re lucky.’

‘Lucky? Interesting interpretation of the word. Foolish, I would have said.’

‘Not for Tamara, for Misty. To have someone who cares. Okay, you lost out a little in the parent lottery. They were too young, too self-absorbed to know how to raise you.’

‘Were?’ Neither of them had ever grown up, at least where he was concerned.

‘But it sounds to me like Misty has always been there for you. Not everyone has that.’

Interesting interpretation. But there was a kernel of truth there that niggled at him uncomfortably. He’d never asked why Misty had kept him after she divorced his father; he’d been more focussed on the fact both biological parents had walked away rather than appreciating the non-biological one who’d stayed. But she had kept him. Supported him, still expected him to come and stay every Christmas, Thanksgiving, every summer. She’d have bought him the studio, made him an allowance if he weren’t so damned independent. Her words.

He’d always thought that somehow he was fundamentally flawed, unlovable; that was why his parents didn’t stay, why Tamara could discard him without a qualm. That was why he only dated women with short-term agendas that matched his, never allowed himself to open up. But maybe he wasn’t the one who was flawed after all.

Because it wasn’t just Misty who believed in him. He might have bribed Hope into posing, manipulated her into helping him, but she’d responded with an openness that floored him. The painting was almost taking on a life of its own, rawer and more honest than he had thought possible. And then there was the sex...

He’d be lying if he said that was unexpected. There had been a spark between them from the first moment and although he’d been reluctant to take her virginity in the end he’d been powerless when confronted by the desire in her eyes. She was a grown woman and she had made it clear she knew exactly what she was doing.

What was unexpected was how calmly she accepted the situation. No expectations for anything beyond his limited offer. He should be relieved. He wasn’t sure what it meant that he wasn’t. He was very sure that he didn’t want to know.

CHAPTER NINE

LUCKY. SEVERAL HOURS later Hope's words were still reverberating around Gael's head. He'd been called lucky before—when his father married Misty and he stopped being one of 'us', a local, and became one of 'them', the privileged summer visitors. Lucky when he started seeing Tamara, lucky as his career progressed. It had been said with envy, with laughter, with amusement but never before with that heart-deep wistfulness.

He'd never been able to think about that time with anything but regret and humiliation. Tamara's manipulation had been the final confirmation of everything he had suspected since the day his mother had walked out, her next lover already lined up. His subsequent relationships hadn't done much to change his mind, a series of models, socialites and actresses whose beautiful eyes were all solely focussed on what he, his camera and his influence could do for them. The only thing in their favour was that they knew the score, were only interested in the superficial and the temporary and made no demands on his heart or future.

Of course he had never dated outside that narrow world. Never searched for or wanted anything more meaningful. Why would he when so many easy opportunities presented themselves with such monotonous regularity?

Until Hope. She broke the mould, that was for sure. The first woman he had met who seemed to want nothing for herself—he didn't know whether he admired her or wanted to shake her and shout at her to be more selfish, dammit. To live. It would be so easy to take advantage of her, to hurt her. Every day he told himself that they should end their affair. And yet here they still were.

Maybe he wasn't the one with the power here after all; in his own way he was as bad as she was, living safely, ensuring his emotions were never stirred, that he remained safe.

Gael scowled, pushing the unwanted thought out of his mind. He was challenging himself, opening himself up to potential ridicule with his change of direction. In a few weeks his paintings would be exhibited at one of the most influential galleries in town, exposing his heart and soul in a way that his photos never had. Besides, look at him now. Wedding planning, ordering suits, playing happy families so that his pain of a little brother could have the perfect wedding.

Little brother? He was usually so quick to disassociate himself from any close relationship with Hunter by a judicious 'ex' and 'step'. Just as he always added the 'half' qualifier onto his mother's two children.

Gael shifted, uncomfortable on the overstuffed velvet seat. A few phone calls had led Hope and he here to the exclusive bridal salon popularised on the TV show Upper East Side Bride. Women from all over the States—and further afield—travelled here, prepared to pay exorbitant prices for their one-of-a-kind designs, hoping for a sprinkle of rarefied fairy dust to cast a sparkle over their big day.

'I have your sister's measurements and her choices from our available stock,' the terrifyingly elegant saleswoman had said, eyeing Hope as if she were a prize heifer. 'You're a couple of inches too short and a little larger around the bust but I think it's best if you try on the dresses I have selected. That way you'll know how they feel, how your sister will feel when she puts it on.'

Hope had gaped at her, looking even more terrified than when Gael had first asked her to model. 'Me?' she had spluttered but had been whisked away before she could formulate a complete sentence. That had been half an hour ago and Gael had been left in splendid isolation with nothing to occupy him except several copies of Bridal World and a glass of sparkling water.

Tamara had never tried on a wedding dress. They hadn't even discussed the guest list. In fact, looking back, she'd shown no interest in anything but the ring—the largest he could ill afford and one she hadn't offered to return.

'Don't laugh.' Hope's fierce whisper brought him back to the here and now. Finally. He'd begun to wonder if this was some form of purgatory where he would be left to ponder every wrong move he had ever made.

Hope teetered into the large room, swaying as if it was hard to get her balance. The private showroom was brightly lit by several sparkling chandeliers and a whole host of high and low lights, each reflecting off the gold gilt and mirrors in a headache-inducing, dazzling display. The walls were mirrored floor to ceiling so he couldn't escape his scowling reflection whichever way he turned. The whole room was decorated in soft golds and ivory from the carpet to the gilt edging on every piece of furniture. A low podium stood before him, awaiting its bride.

Or in this case a bridesmaid masquerading as the bride. A pink-faced, swaying bridesmaid.

'Because Faith's two inches taller they've made me wear five-inch heels,' she complained as she gingerly stepped onto the podium. 'I'm a size bigger as well but they have these clever expanding things so hopefully we'll get an idea but bear in mind that Faith won't spill out the way I am.'

Of course he was going to stare at her cleavage the second she said that—he was only flesh and blood after all—and she was looking rather magnificent if not very bridal, creamy flesh rising above the low neckline of the gown.

The huge, ornate, sparkling gown. It looked more like a little girl's idea of a wedding gown than something a grown woman would wear.

But what did he know? Gael understood colour, he understood texture, he understood structure. Thanks to the work he had done for many fashion magazines he knew if an outfit worked or not. But in this world he was helpless. The second they'd sat down he'd been ambushed with a dizzying array of words: lace, silk, organza, sweetheart necklines, trails, mermaids—mermaids? Really? People got married in the sea?—ball gowns, A-line, princess, crystals. This was beyond anything he knew or understood or wanted to understand, more akin to some fantasy French court of opulent exaggeration than the real world. Marriage as an elaborate white masquerade.

'Say something!'

Hope looked most unbridal, hands on hips and a scowl on her face as she glared at him.

'It's...' It wasn't often that Gael was at a loss for words but he instinctively knew that he had to tread very carefully here. His actual opinion didn't matter; he had to gauge exactly what his response should be. What if this was Faith's dream dress—or, worse, Hope's? He swallowed. Surely not Hope's. Her body language was more like a child forced into her best dress for church than that of a woman in the perfect dress, shoulders slumped and a definite pout on her face.

Gael blinked, trying to focus on the dress rather than the wearer, taking in every detail. There were just so many details. A neckline he privately considered more bordello than bridal? Check. Enough crystals to gladden the heart of a rhinestone cowgirl? Check. Flounces? Oh, yes. A definite check. Tiers upon tiers of them spilling out from her knees. It seemed an odd place for flounces to spill from but what did Gael know?

'It doesn't look that comfortable.' That was an under-exaggeration if ever he'd made one; skintight from the strapless and low bust, it clung unforgivingly all the way down her torso until it reached her knees, where it flowed out like a tulle waterfall. If Gael had to design a torture garment it would probably resemble this.

'It's not comfortable.' She was almost growling. 'Worse, I look hideous.'

'You could never look hideous.' But she didn't look like Hope, all trussed up, tucked in and glittering.

Hope pulled a face. 'Now you start complimenting me? Don't worry, Gael, I don't need your flattery.'

Was that what she thought? 'I don't do flattery. But if you want honesty then I have to say that dress doesn't suit you. But you're not looking for you and I don't know your sister at all.'

She studied herself in the mirror. ‘She did shortlist it but I don’t think she’d like it. I can’t imagine her picking it in a million years but who knows? Even the sanest of women, women who think a clean jumper constitutes dressing up, get carried away when it comes to wedding dresses. This was designed for a reason. Someone somewhere must think it’s worth more than a car. But no, I don’t think Faith would. Still, it’s not up to us. Take a photo and email it to her.’

The next dress was no better unless Faith dreamed of dressing up as Cinderella on steroids. The bead-encrusted heart-shaped bodice wasn’t too bad by itself—if copious amounts of crystals were your thing—but it was entirely dwarfed by the massive skirt, which exploded out from Hope’s waist like a massive marshmallow. A massive marshmallow covered in glitter. Gael didn’t even have to speak a word—the expression on his face must have said it all because Hope took one look at his open mouth and raised eyebrows and retreated, muttering words he was pretty sure no nicely brought-up Cinderella should know.

He very much approved of dress number three. Very much so, not that it was at all suitable unless Faith was planning a private party for two. Cream silk slithered provocatively over Hope’s curves, flattering, revealing, promising. Oh, yes. He approved. So much so he wanted to tear it right off her, which probably wasn’t the response a bride was looking for. Regretfully he shook his head. ‘Buy it anyway, I’ll paint you in it...’ he murmured and watched her eyes heat up at the promise in his voice as she backed out of the room.

‘I like this but I think it’s too simple. She’s already wearing one flowy dress, I think she wants something a bit more showy for the party.’

Gael looked up, not sure his eyes could take much more tulle or dazzle, only to blink as Hope shyly stepped onto the podium. ‘I like that,’ he said—or at least he tried to say. His voice seemed to have dried up along with his throat.

He coughed, taking a sip of water as he tried to regather himself. Brought to his knees—metaphorically anyway—by a wedding dress? Get a grip. Although Hope did look seriously...well, not hot. That wasn’t the right word, although she was. Nor sexy nor any of the other adjectives he usually applied to women. She looked ethereally beautiful, regal. She looked just like a bride should look from the stars in her dark eyes to the blush on her cheek.

Looked just like a bride should? Where had that thought come from? He’d attended a lot of weddings, many of them his parents’, but right up to this moment Gael was pretty sure he’d never had any opinion on how a woman looked on her wedding day. It was this waiting room, infecting him with its gaudiness, its dazzle, its femininity.

But Hope did look gorgeous. The dress was deceptively simple with wide lace shoulder straps, which showed provocative hints of her creamy shoulders, and a lace bodice, which cupped her breasts demurely. The sweetheart neckline was neither too low nor too high and the skirt fell from the high waist in graceful folds of silk. She was the very model of propriety until she turned and he saw how low the back of the dress swooped, almost to her waist, her back almost fully exposed except for a band of the same lace following the lines of her back.

‘I’ve seen statues of Greek goddesses who look like you in that dress.’

‘I look okay, then?’ But she knew she did. Look at the soft smile curving her mouth, the way she glowed. Not only did she look incredible, she obviously felt it too.

‘Is this the one, then?’ An unexpected pang hit him as he asked the question. Not at the thought of the day’s purgatory finally ending, but because Hope should buy that dress for herself, not for someone else. It was hers. It couldn’t be more hers if it had been designed and made for her. But here she was, ready to give up the perfect dress to her sister, just as she had given up everything for Faith every day for the whole of her adult life.

‘I don’t know.’ Hope was obviously torn. ‘I really, really love it. It’s utterly perfect. But is it right? She asked for a showstopper for the party and this is too simple, I think. Take a photo and send it but I’m not sure she’ll pick it.’

Gael disagreed. His show had been well and truly stopped the second Hope appeared in the dress. ‘Whatever that dress is it isn’t simple.’

‘It is the most gorgeous dress I have ever seen. I can’t imagine finding anything more beautiful. But I’m not sure it’s what Faith has in mind.’

‘There is a whole salon of showstopping dresses you haven’t tried on yet,’ Gael said, heroically reconciling himself to another several hours of dazzling white confections. ‘Let’s fulfil the brief and get your sister what she wants. But, Hope, you look absolutely spectacular in that dress. You should know that.’

She looked at him, surprise clear on her face. Surprise and a simple pleasure, a joy in the compliment. ‘Thank you. I feel it, for once in my life I really do.’

* * *

Gael stood back and surveyed the painting before looking over at Hope, lying on the chaise in exactly the same position she had assumed every day for the last eleven days. She had complained that she was so acclimatised to it she was sleeping in the same position now. ‘I think we’re done.’

‘Really done? Finished and done? Can I see?’ Gael hadn’t allowed her to take as much as a peep at her portrait yet and he knew she was desperate to take a look. ‘I need to, to make sure you haven’t switched to a Picasso theme and turned me blue and into cubes. Actually, that might be easier to look at. I vote Picasso.’

‘No to the blue cubes, possibly to taking a look and no, not finished, but I don’t need you for the second pass, that’s refinement and detail. I have photos and sketches to help me for that. But I am absolutely finished for now. I’m going to let it dry for a few days and then work on it some more.’

Hope was manoeuvring herself off the couch, as always reaching straight for the white robe, visibly relaxing as she tied it around herself. ‘It’s good timing. Faith gets here in what, three hours? We’ve got a fitting almost straight away. Tomorrow I am going to walk her through the whole wedding day and then we have afternoon tea with Misty. I hope Faith’s happy with the decisions we made. Not that she has much choice at this late hour.’

‘If she isn’t then just point out that rather than frolic in Prague she could have sorted it all out herself.’

Hope ignored him. ‘Wednesday is the hen do all day—that’s a spa day, afternoon tea, Broadway show followed by dinner and cocktails and then Thursday is the actual wedding. Friday we recover while the happy couple love it up in the Waldorf Astoria and then it’s the blessing and party on Saturday. So it’s a good thing you don’t need me. I don’t have any time to pose this week. I’ve just about finished the archiving as well. Brenda has a designer and a copywriter ready to start working with you the second that contract is signed.’

Which meant they were done. He didn’t need her to cross-reference any more photos or pose and the wedding was planned. So where did that leave them? Funny how they had been heading to this point for nearly two weeks and yet now they were here he felt totally unprepared.

Because he was unprepared. The wedding was the end date; they both knew it. He’d finish his paintings and prepare for his show, she’d go back to DL Media and complete her time here in New York before heading back to London. Yet he felt as if something wasn’t finished. As if they weren’t finished.

Gael swallowed. It had been a long time since he’d cared whether a relationship was over or not. And this wasn’t even a relationship, was it?

It wasn’t meant to be... His chest tightened. Of course, it most definitely wasn’t. He didn’t do relationships, remember? Because that way he didn’t get hurt. Nobody got hurt. And he’d told her that right from the start.

So why was he feeling suddenly bereft?

Hope kicked off the mule, stretching out her leg. ‘Thank goodness that’s over with. Do you know how uncomfortable it is holding your leg in that one position for hours at a time? So, may I see?’ Hope nodded at the easel and gave Gael her most appealing smile. ‘I know nothing about art anyway, so you know my opinion isn’t worth anything.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Why do you do that?’

‘Do what?’

‘Put yourself down. Your opinion is worth a lot more than most of those so-called critics who will make or break me in three weeks’ time. Because it’s genuine. Because somewhere hidden deep inside you have heart and passion and life if you’d just let yourself see that. But you never will, will you? Far easier to wallow and self-deprecate and hide than put yourself out there, risk falling or heartbreak again.’

He wanted to recall the words as soon as he’d said them as she physically recoiled, staring at him, her face stricken. ‘I put myself out there. Good God, in this last two weeks all I’ve done is try new things.’

He could apologise. He should apologise but he kept going, dimly aware he wasn’t so much angry with Hope as he was with himself. Angry because at some point he’d broken his own rules and started caring—and he hadn’t even noticed. Angry because yet another person was about to walk away out of his life and not look back—and he had no idea how to stop her. ‘You’ve let me lead you into new things. You followed. That’s not quite the same thing.’

She straightened, her colour high and her eyes bright with anger. She looked magnificent. ‘Oh, excuse me for not walking in here and stripping off and begging you to paint me. Of course, where I come from that behaviour can get a girl arrested but why should that have stopped me?’

‘You never tell me that no, you don’t want steak you want Thai, you never say no, I don’t want red wine I’d like white even though I know you prefer white. You don’t tell me what ice cream you prefer so I end up buying out the whole store. You don’t tell me when your legs have cramps and the pose hurts. You don’t tell your sister that organising a wedding in two weeks is impossible.’

‘Because those things don’t matter to me. I wanted to help Faith. I genuinely don’t care what wine I drink. Why are you saying this?’

Gael stood back from the easel, his eyes fixed on her, expression inscrutable. ‘Tell me this, Hope. Tell me what you want to happen next. Tell me what we do tomorrow when you no longer have to come here. What we say to your sister, to Hunter. Tell me how it ends.’

Tell me how it ends. There was no point telling him anything because no matter what he said there was no real choice. It would end. Today, Sunday, when she went back to the UK—only the date was in doubt.

She had to focus on that because if she thought about everything else he had said she would collapse. Was that how he saw her? She always thought of herself as so strong, as doing what was needed no matter what the personal cost. But Gael didn’t see a strong woman. He saw a coward.

I know you prefer white.

She did. Why hadn’t she said so? Because she was so used to putting other people’s needs, their feelings first at some point it had become second nature. Well, no more.

‘It has ended. It ended when you put that paintbrush down. We no longer have anything to offer each other.’

‘So that’s what you want,’ he said softly.

Yes! No! All she knew was that it wasn’t a choice because if he could make her feel like this, this lost, this hurt, this needy, after less than two weeks then she had to walk away with her heart and pride intact. Or at least her pride because it felt as if something in her heart were cracking open right now. It shouldn’t be possible. She knew who he was and what he was and she had kept her guard up the whole time and yet, without even trying, he had slipped through her shields.

Without even trying. How pathetic was she? He didn't need to do anything and she had just fallen in front of him, like her aunt's dog, begging for scraps. The only consolation was that he would never know.

'You knew I preferred white and bought red anyway?'

The look he shot her was such a complicated mixture of affection, humour and contempt she couldn't even begin to unravel it. 'All you had to do was say.'

Affecting a bravado she didn't feel, she walked forward until she was standing next to him then turned and looked at the painting.

It was at once so familiar and yet so foreign. The pose, the setting so similar to the painting she had now seen so many copies of she could probably reproduce it blindfolded—but this was magnified. No dog, no servant, no backdrop, the attention all zoomed in on Hope. Her eyes travelled along her torso, from the so casually positioned slipper along her legs. She winced as she took in the scars, each one traced in silvery detail, an all too public unveiling.

The actual nudity wasn't as bad as she'd feared, not compared to the scars. She was curvier, paler, sexier than she had expected; she looked like a woman, not like the girl she felt inside. Her breasts full and round, even the slight roundness of her stomach suggested a sensual ease.

But her face... Hope swallowed. 'Do I really look that sad?'

Unlike Olympia she wasn't staring out at the viewer with poise and confidence. She wasn't in control of her sensuality. She looked wary, frightened, lost. She looked deeply sad.

Gael was watching her. 'Most of the time, yes. I paint what I see, Hope. I tried to find something else, thought if you confronted some of your sadness I could reach a new emotion but that's all there was.'

All there was. She wasn't just a coward, she was a miserable one.

'Between the scars and my emotions you have exposed everything, haven't you?' Hope whispered.

'I didn't expose anything, Hope, it was all right there.'

But it wasn't, it hadn't been, she'd hidden it all under efficiency, under plans, under busyness, until even she had no idea how she felt any more. It had taken his eye to see it and strip her bare until she couldn't hide any more. 'I hope you're satisfied, Gael. I hope this painting brings you fame and fortune. I hope it's worth it. But at the end of the day that's all you'll have. You tell me I'm a coward? I'm not the one recreating pictures of an idealised woman. I'm not the one cold-shouldering the family who love him, who care for him, who have done nothing but support him even when they no longer had any legal link. I'm too afraid to go for what I want? I'm not the only one. You'd rather photograph life, paint life than live it.'

Hope would have given anything to make a dramatic exit but unless she wanted to walk through the grand marble foyer, past Gael's doorman and out into the streets in a white robe that was never going to happen. She changed as quickly as she could, gathering all her belongings and stuffing them into a bag. It didn't take long. She'd practically lived here for the past eleven days, heading back to her own tiny apartment every couple of days to get a change of clothes, but she had left no residue of herself. Her bag didn't even look full and it was as if she had never stepped foot inside—apart from the painting, that was.

She walked back through the vast studio. At what point had the picture-covered brick walls, the cavernous empty space, the mezzanine bedroom begun to feel like home? Hope took one last look around; nothing would induce her to return.

Gael certainly wasn't going to make the effort. He was leaning by the window, a beer in one hand, looking out at the skyline. He barely turned as she walked by.

'I guess I'll see you at the wedding,' Hope said finally, glad that her voice didn't wobble despite the treacherous tears threatening to break through the wall she was erecting brick by painful brick.

'I guess.'

She pressed the lift button, praying it wouldn't take too long. 'Bye, then.'

He looked up then. 'Hope?'

Her namesake flared up then, bright and foolish. 'Yes?'

'You deserve more. You should go and find it. Believe it.'

She nodded slowly as the flare died down as if it had never been, leaving only a bitter taste of ashes in her mouth. 'You're right, Gael. I do deserve better. See you around.'

CHAPTER TEN

‘DO I LOOK OKAY?’

Gael turned to see Hunter pull at his tie, trying to fix it so it was perfectly aligned, pulling at the knot with nervous fingers until it tightened into a small, crumpled heap. Otherwise he looked like a young man on the cusp of a life-changing moment, shoulders broad in the perfectly cut suit, eyes bright and excited and a new maturity in his boyish face.

‘Here,’ Gael said gruffly, trying to hide the pride in his voice. ‘Let me.’

He had taught Hunter how to tie a tie in the first place, how to ride a bike, how to swim. He’d bought him his first beer and listened through his first infatuations. And now his little brother was moving on without him, going forward, past Gael into a whole new life. ‘There you go.’ He stood back and surveyed him. ‘I don’t know what Faith sees in you but you’ll do.’

Hunter still looked pale but he managed a smile. ‘She’s wonderful, isn’t she? I don’t know what I did to deserve her. I’m the luckiest man alive.’

He really believed it too; there was sincerity in every syllable. All credit to Misty for bringing up such a decent young man. Gael had known plenty of men with lesser looks, lesser pedigrees and lesser fortunes who prowled the earth believing themselves young gods. Hunter genuinely didn’t believe his face, name or income made him any better than anyone else—it just made him work harder to prove he deserved his privilege. Gael had only met Faith once briefly, two days ago after her afternoon with her new mother-in-law, but had quickly decided that either she was the world’s best actress or as genuinely besotted by Hunter as he was with her.

He had hoped to see Hope, to try and make some kind of amends so that the next few days wouldn’t be too awkward, but Hope hadn’t been with her sister. He hadn’t seen her since she’d walked away without a backwards glance. Not since he’d allowed her to. It was better for them to be apart; they both knew it. So why that bitter twist of disappointment when Faith had announced that her sister had gone shopping—and why this even more twisty and unwelcome anticipation as he savoured the knowledge that in just an hour’s time she would be by his side?

They were both adults. They had spent two enjoyable weeks together. She had inspired him to create one of the best paintings he had ever done, even if it wasn’t exactly what he’d set out to paint; he was thinking of calling it Atlas—because she looked as if she were carrying all the cares in the world on her slim shoulders. They could meet to celebrate this wedding as friends, surely? But when he thought of her in that wedding dress, glowing, when he thought of her lying on the chaise, posed and perfect, when he thought of her in his bed, then ‘as friends’ seemed a cold and meagre ambition.

But what was the alternative? Ask her out properly? They had said everything that needed to be said; he knew her more intimately than some men knew their wives of fifty years. How could he go from that to the kind of dating he did? The kind of dating he was capable of? Premieres, dinners in places to be seen, superficial and short-lived. He couldn’t but he knew no other way.

He didn’t want to know any other way. Because his way couldn’t go wrong. It ended without tears, without acrimony, without devastation. It was safe. There was nothing safe about Hope and the way he was with her—harsh, unyielding, pushy. He wanted too much from her and she let him demand it. But, oh, how he liked it when he surprised her; her face when he had laid out all the different tubs of ice cream. Like a small child set loose in a toy store. She almost made him believe he could be the kind of man who lived a different way. Almost.

He pushed the thought away. Today wasn’t about him and, despite his attempts to deny kinship, he was proud that Hunter had asked him to stand by his side. ‘You ready?’

Hunter nodded. ‘I was ready the first day,’ he said simply. ‘I saw her walking towards me and I just knew.’

Gael's mind instantly flashed back to the moment he had first seen Hope. What had he known? Surprise that she wasn't the woman he was expecting, yes. Annoyance at the delay in his plans? Absolutely. Recognition? He would like to deny it but something had made him keep her there, manipulate the situation so she stayed with him. He didn't want to dwell too much on what his reasons might have been. He attempted humour instead. 'Knew she was hot?'

'Knew she was the one for me. I was prepared to learn Czech or German or French, whatever I had to do to talk to the girl with eyes like stars—you can imagine my relief when I discovered she was English! Not that it would have made any difference whatever nationality she was. We would have found a way to communicate.'

'Hunter, you've known her what, two months? And it's not like your mom has had the best track record with the whole happy-ever-after thing. Are you sure you're not rushing into things?'

'Man, I am totally rushing into marrying Faith. Full pelt. I just know that she's the one for me and I'm the one for her and I can't wait to get started on our adventures together. As for Mom? She'd be the first to say she never listened to her heart. She didn't trust it not to lead her astray so she married strategically, for fun, for friendship—and then ended up divorced anyway.'

When had Hunter got so wise? Gael straightened his own tie, unable to look the younger man in the eye. 'I don't know what a good marriage is. What makes a relationship worth fighting for.' The confession felt wrought out of him and he turned slightly so that Hunter wouldn't be able to see his expression.

'I think it's when you trust someone completely and their happiness means more to you than your own—and when you know that they feel exactly the same way. You balance each other out, make the other person safe.'

Balance. What had he said to Hope? That marriage was about power? Hunter was saying the same thing only he saw it as a positive thing. That allowing someone else the power just made you stronger. Gael was almost light-headed as he tried to work it out. But looking at Hunter, so happy and so confident, he couldn't help but wonder if he possessed a knowledge Gael just couldn't—or wouldn't—understand.

He didn't have much time to dwell on his stepbrother's words as the next hour was a flurry of activity, first meeting up with Hunter's father and the two friends the groom had invited to this small, intimate celebration, and then they had to make their way to Central Park and the little lakeside glade where Hunter and Faith would be making their vows. Hunter didn't seem at all nervous, laughing and joking with his friends and patiently listening to all his father's last-minute advice—and who knew? Maybe Hunter's father did know what he was talking about because not only had he stayed good friends with Misty but he had clocked up fifteen years with his current wife, a record amongst all the parental figures in Hunter's and Gael's lives.

In no time at all they were at the lake, which had been made ready according to Hope's detailed instructions; a few chairs had been arranged in a semicircle either side of the little rustic shelter under which Hunter and Faith would make their vows. White flowers were entwined in the shelter and yellow and white rose petals were scattered on the floor. All against Central Park's stringent regulations but the Carlyle name had persuaded the officials that an exception could be made.

Gael looked up at the cloudless sky and smiled; somehow Hope had even persuaded the weather to comply and the rain and wind which sometimes heralded the beginning of September had stayed away. Hunter's father and friends took their places while Gael stood beside his brother at the entrance to the pavilion, making polite conversation with the official who was conducting the short service. But what he said he hardly knew. In just a few minutes he would see her—and the spell her absence had cast would be broken. She'd walked away before he had decided it was time. That was all this sense something was amiss was. Nothing more.

He turned as he heard feminine voices, his heart giving a sudden lurch, but it wasn't Hope, merely a group of hot-looking women dressed in bright, formal clothes, fanning themselves and

giggling as they took their seats. They were accompanied by one harried-looking elderly gentleman who breathed a sigh of relief as he took in the other men. Hope's uncle must have felt fairly overwhelmed by all the womenfolk he had spent the last three days escorting around the city.

He took a brief headcount as Misty wafted in, looking as elegant and cool as ever. The five men in Hunter's party, Misty, the bride's uncle and aunt and four young women who must be her two cousins and two friends. They were all here except for the bride herself—and her bridesmaid. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. It had been a brief fling, that was all. He bumped into old flames all the time and didn't usually turn a hair. There should be nothing different this time.

Shouldn't be and yet there was.

And then the string quartet, placed just out of sight around the curve in the path, struck up and the small congregation rose to their feet and turned as one. Every mouth smiled, every eye widened, many dampening as Faith floated towards them in the ethereal designer dress Hope had chosen for her beloved sister. Her hair was twisted into loose knots with curls falling onto her shoulders, she carried a small posy of yellow and white roses and her eyes were fixed adoringly on her groom. But Gael barely took any of it in, all his attention on the shorter woman by her side. Faith had asked her sister, the person who had raised her, to walk her down the aisle both today and for the blessing in two days' time.

Gael was the only person there who knew how much this gesture cost Hope. How touched she was but also how full of grief that their father wasn't there to do it—and that she would be symbolically relinquishing the last of her immediate family to someone else. That the moment she stepped back she truly would be alone.

His chest swelled with empathic grief because although her full mouth was curved in a proud smile and her carriage straight her eyes were full of tears and the hand holding a matching posy was shaking slightly.

Hope's hair was also tied up in a loose knot with a cream ribbon looped around, contrasting with the darkness of the silky tresses. She wore a knee-length twenties-style dress in a slightly darker shade than her sister's soft golden cream; she was utterly beautiful, utterly desirable. Damn. That wasn't the reaction he had been hoping for at all.

Hope looked up as if she could feel the weight of his gaze. Her lips quivered before her eyelashes fell again. Look at me, Gael urged her silently. Let me work out what's happening here. But his silent plea fell flat and although she smiled around at the gathered audience she didn't look at him directly again, not once.

* * *

The day was at once eternal and yet it passed in a flash. One moment Hope was kissing her sister's cheek, knowing that this was the last time she would be her next of kin, her first confidante, her rock, the next she was listening as Hunter promised to take care of Faith for ever.

She believed him. They were absurdly young but there was a determination and clearness amidst the starry-eyed infatuation that made her think that maybe they had a shot at making it work. Faith had grown up so much it was impossible to take in that the sisters had only been apart for three and a half months.

They moved seamlessly from ceremony to drinks, from drinks to the boat, which dreamily sailed around Manhattan in a gentle ripple of sparkling waters and blue skies before the cars took them to the now shut Met for a VIP tour followed by dinner. Now, at the end of the day, they were back at the speakeasy, reserved exclusively for the wedding party until midnight; there had been a last-minute panic when Hope realised that Faith's age meant she would be unable to enter the premises if it was open to the public. The bar didn't usually do private parties but a quiet word from Gael had ensured their cooperation; she wouldn't have been able to organise half of the day without him. He

knew exactly who to speak to, how to get the kind of favours Hope McKenzie from Stoke Newington wouldn't have had a cat in hell's chance of landing. She should say thank you.

She should say something. They had been in the same small group of people for ten hours and somehow avoided exchanging even one word. She should tell him that he was wrong about her, that when it mattered she would always stand up for herself; she should tell him that, uncomfortable as his painting made her, she still recognised what a privilege it was to be immortalised that way. She should thank him for all his help with the wedding. She should tell him that two weeks with him had changed her life.

But she didn't know where to begin. She was just so aware of him. They could blindfold her and she would still reach unerringly for him. She knew how he tasted, she knew how his skin felt against hers. She knew what it felt like to have every iota of his concentration focussed on her. How did people do it? Carry this intimate knowledge of another human being around with them? She hadn't expected this bond, not without love.

Because of course she didn't love him. That would be foolish and Hope McKenzie didn't do foolishness. She wasn't like her sister; she couldn't just entrust her heart and happiness to somebody else. Especially somebody who didn't want either and wouldn't know what to do with them even if he did.

The sound of a spoon tapping on a glass recalled her thoughts to the here and now and, as the room hushed, she looked up to see Faith balancing precariously on a chair, her cheeks flushed.

'Attention,' her sister called as the group clapped and whistled. 'Bride speaking.'

Hope slid her glance over to Gael and, as she met his eyes, quickly looked away, her chest constricting with the burden of just that brief contact.

'I know we're doing speeches on Saturday,' Faith said when she had managed to quieten the room. 'So you'll be glad to hear this isn't a speech. Not a long one anyway. I just wanted to say thank you to my big sister.'

Hope started as everyone turned their attention from Faith to her. She shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, cursing her sister as she met the many smiles with a forced one of her own. Faith knew how much she hated attention.

'There are so many thank-yous I owe her that I could keep you here all night and not finish. Most of you know that Hope raised me after our parents died. You might not know that she gave up her place at university to do it, that she planned to study archaeology and travel the world, instead she became a PA and worried about bills and balanced meals and cooking cakes for the PTA bake sale. She refused to touch the money our parents left us, raising me on her salary—and I never did without. It was only recently that I realised that while I didn't go without, Hope often did. But she never made me feel like a burden. She always made me feel loved and secure and like I could be or do anything.' Faith's voice broke as she finished that sentence and Hope felt an answering lump in her own throat, a telltale heat burning in her eyes.

She heard a gulp of a sob from her aunt and a murmur from Misty but her eyes were fixed on her sister. The two of them against the world one last time.

'She gave me this amazing day, the best wedding day a girl could have asked for, with only two weeks' notice. She has always, always put me first. Now it's time she put herself first and I am so happy that she's decided to quit her job and go travelling.'

'What?' Hope wasn't sure if anyone else heard Gael's muffled exclamation as the room erupted into applause. 'I know she can afford to do it by herself but, Hope, I hope you will accept this from Hunter and me.' Faith held out an envelope. 'It's a round-the-world ticket and an account with a concierge who will organise all the visas and accommodation you need. It doesn't even begin to pay you back for all you've done and all you are but I just want you to know how much I love you—and when Hunter and I start a family I just hope I can be half the mother you were to me.' Faith was clambering off the chair as she spoke and the next minute the two girls were in each other's arms,

tears mingling as they held each other as if they would never let each other go. Only Hope knew as she kissed her sister's hair that this was them letting go, this was where they truly moved on.

'Thank you,' she said as she reluctantly and finally moved back. 'You absolutely didn't have to...'

'I wanted to. So did Hunter. It gives you three months to explore the US and South America before taking you to Australia, then New Zealand and from there to Japan and across Asia. You choose when and where—as long as you turn up in Sydney in three months' time because that's when we'll be there and I hope you'll join us for that leg.'

'You can count on it.' She knew this was the right thing for her to do, to start living some of the dreams she'd relinquished all those years ago. The world might seem larger, scarier—lonelier—than it had back then, but she was a big girl now. She'd cope. But as she glanced over at Gael's profile a sense of something missing, something precious and lost shivered through her. She couldn't leave without making sure things were mended between them. It wouldn't be the same, not after the things they had said, but she wasn't sure she would have had the courage to move on without him. He should know that. Because she knew he was broken too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS NEARLY MIDNIGHT. A car was waiting outside to whisk Hunter and Faith back to the Waldorf Astoria where they had a luxury suite booked for two nights. Hope would see Faith in less than forty-eight hours at the blessing and party in Long Island but as she hugged her new brother-in-law and kissed her sister goodbye it was as if she was saying goodbye to a whole portion of her life.

The bride and groom departed in a flurry of kisses and congratulations and the party began to disperse as the bar staff efficiently began to set the room back up ready to reopen to the public. Hope's aunt and uncle were taking their daughters and Faith's friends back to the apartment Hope had booked for them, a day of non-wedding-related sightseeing waiting for them the next day. Hope had excused herself from joining them with the excuse that she still had some arrangements to finish for the Saturday—but in reality all she wanted to do was lie in her apartment and work out the rest of her life. She fingered the envelope her sister had given her. She had a year's hiatus at least.

'Congratulations on the travel plans. It seems a little sudden though.' She shivered as Gael came up beside her, not touching and yet so close she could feel every line of his body as if they were joined by an invisible thread. Her body ached for him; she wanted to step back and lean into him and let him absorb her. Typical, first time she tried for a light-hearted fling and she was having to go full cold turkey, knowing one touch would drag her back in.

Okay, deep breath and light chit-chat. She could do this. 'Sudden or really overdue. I was always going to go travelling after university. I had my route planned out. Lots and lots of ruins. Machu Picchu, the Bandelier national monument, Angkor Wat...' Her voice trailed off as she imagined setting foot in the ancient places she had dreamed about studying.

'What about Brenda, the job you wanted so much?'

'I phoned her yesterday and handed in my notice. I know it seems that I'm just jumping into it but I'm not. It turns out there's plenty of time to think at a spa day. I lay there on a massage table covered in God knows what, baking like a Christmas turkey, and your words echoed round and round.'

He caught her wrist and pulled her round to face him. The nerves in her wrist jumped to attention, shooting excited signals up her arm.

'I was out of line.'

'You were right,' she said flatly. 'I let life happen to me—I only did the job swap because Kit told me to apply. If he hadn't I would still be in Stoke Newington, missing Faith, wearing baggy tunics with my hair four inches too long because regular haircuts feel like an extravagance, getting the same bus to work, eating the same sandwich on the same bench every lunchtime and not even allowing myself to dream of anything better. Thinking I didn't deserve anything better.'

They moved aside with a muttered apology as a waiter pulled another table into place and a waitress pulled chairs across the floor, their legs screeching as they dragged on the wood. Gael winced. 'Let's get out of here. We're going the same way, at least let's share a cab.'

A cab pulled up almost the second they hit the pavement and Gael opened the door. 'Will you come back to mine?' he asked as she climbed in. 'I have a bottle of white in the fridge. I would really like to clear the air before the party. We're almost related now, after all.'

He'd bought a bottle of white wine. It was too little too late but it was something. 'Okay.' They did need to clear the air. The last thing she wanted was for Faith to know that they had been involved; it was all too messy.

They didn't speak again until they reached his studio. It was only three days since she had last walked through the lobby, greeted the night porter and taken the exclusive lift that led up to Gael's penthouse studio but she felt as if she had been away for months, suddenly unsure of her place in this world.

‘Wine?’ Gael asked as they stepped into the studio and Hope nodded. He’d bought it for her after all, a peace offering, it would be rude to say no.

She kicked off the pretty, vintage-style Mary Jane shoes, uttering a sigh of relief as her feet were freed from the straps and three-inch heels. She looked around, unsure where to sit. The chaise held too many memories, there was no way she was heading up the winding staircase to the small mezzanine, which contained a bed and very little else—and there was no other furniture in the place. Hope placed her shoes on the floor and followed Gael through to the kitchen instead, perching herself on one of the high stools as he poured wine from a bottle with an obscure—and expensive-looking—label.

‘To new adventures,’ she said, taking the glass he slid over to her and raising it in a toast. ‘My travels, your exhibition.’

‘When are you off? A month’s time?’

Hope took a sip of the wine. Oh, yes. Definitely expensive. You wouldn’t get a bottle of this in a price promotion in her local corner shop. ‘No. Next week.’

‘Next week?’ He set his glass down with an audible clink. ‘Didn’t you have to work out your notice?’

‘No, thanks to you signing the contract I was so far in Brenda’s good books that she’s offered me a year’s sabbatical. I don’t know if I’ll take it. Who knows what I’ll want to do or where I’ll want to be in a year’s time but there is a job with DL Media if I need it, which is reassuring.’ She grimaced. ‘It’s not easy being spontaneous all at once. Baby steps.’

‘But next week! Don’t you have to plan and pack and sort out an itinerary?’

Hope pulled the envelope Faith had given her out of her bag. ‘No, thanks to Faith. These people will sort it all out. I tell them where I want to go and they make sure I do. They’re already looking at converting my work visa here to a tourist one and sorting out everything I need for South America. I’ll spend a couple of days shipping some things home and sorting out what I need and then I’ll be ready to go. It’s working out really well actually. Maddison is coming to New York to clear the rest of her things out of the studio. If I leave she can cancel her rent. I don’t think she’s planning on coming back to the city.’

It would be interesting to meet her life-swap partner, the woman who captured Kit Buchanan’s heart. Funny how a six-month change of locations could alter things irrevocably. Maddison was engaged, moving countries, her whole world changing. Hope might be more alone than ever but at least she was no longer staying still.

‘You have it all organised, as always.’ There was a bleak tone in Gael’s voice she didn’t recognise but when she glanced at him his expression was bland.

‘The plane ticket is first class as well. I can’t believe they did this.’

‘I can. Your sister loves you, Hope.’

‘For the first time in nine years I feel unburdened. Free. I’ll always miss my parents and I’ll always regret the person I was but I’m ready to forgive myself.’ She forced herself to hold his steady, steely gaze. ‘Thanks to you, Gael. I’ll always be grateful.’

‘You won’t be here for the opening night of the exhibition.’

‘No.’ She blinked, surprised at the sudden change of subject. ‘I’m not sure I could have faced it anyway. People looking at me and then at the painting. It’d be a little like the nightmare when I’m walking down the street naked. Only it would be real.’

‘That’s a shame. I wanted you there.’ He paused while Hope gaped at him, floored by the unexpected words. He wanted her at his big night? As a model—or to support him? ‘Look. I wanted to let you know that I’ve decided not to show it, your painting.’

Time seemed to stand still, the blood rushing to her ears as she tried to take in his words. ‘But, you need it. The centrepiece. It’s less than three weeks away.’

‘I have nineteen pictures I am proud of. Nobody else knows I planned a larger twentieth. I’m not sure that I’ll ever paint a better picture than the one I did of you but I don’t need to show it. I’d rather not, knowing it makes you so uncomfortable.’

He was willing not to show the picture? After everything he had done to persuade her to pose? Even though he thought it was the best he had done? Hope had no idea how to respond, what to say. This graciousness and understanding was more than she had ever expected from anyone. She slid off the stool and walked to the door, pausing for a second as she took in the easel with the large canvas balanced perfectly on it dominating the empty space and then, with a fortifying breath, she went over to take a second look.

It wasn’t such a shock this time. Her skin was as white, her body as nude, she still wished she’d done daily sit-ups so that her stomach was concave rather than curved but, she conceded, her breasts looked rather nice. Biting her lip until she tasted blood, Hope forced herself to step in and examine her scars, remembering the pain and the secrecy and the self-hatred that went into every one of the silvery lines.

She pulled her gaze away from her torso and looked into her own eyes. Sad, wary, lonely. That was who she was; there was no getting away from it, no hiding. She shouldn’t blame Gael for painting what he saw. She could only blame herself. Well, no more.

‘Show it,’ she said. ‘I want you to. It’s real. Maybe one day you can paint me again and I’ll be a different person, a happier one.’

‘You can count on it.’ He was leaning against the door, watching her, hunger in his eyes. She recognised the hunger because she felt it too. Had felt it all day, this yearning to touch him, for him to touch her. For the world to fall away, to know nothing but him and the way he could make her feel; sexy, adored, powerful. Wanted.

She was leaving in less than a week. What harm could it do, one last time?

‘On Saturday we’re the best man and the bridesmaid once more. We have busy, sensible roles to play.’

The hunger in his eyes didn’t lessen; if anything it intensified. ‘I know.’

‘Sunday I’m helping Faith get ready to go off on her travels and then I need to spend a couple of days preparing for mine.’

Gael pushed away from the door frame and stalked a couple of steps closer. ‘Hope, what are you saying?’

Deep breath. She could do this. ‘I’m saying that this is the last time we can be ourselves, Hope and Gael. Painter and model. Carousel riders. Storytellers.’ She moistened her lips nervously. ‘Lovers.’

‘Last time?’

She nodded.

He smiled then, the wolfish smile that sent jolts of heat into every atom in her body, the smile that made her toes curl, her knees tremble and her whole body become one yearning mass. ‘Then we better make the most of it, hadn’t we?’

* * *

The morning sun streamed in through the huge windows, bathing the bed in a warm, rosy glow. Gael had barely slept and now he rolled over to watch Hope slumber, the dawn light tinging her skin a light pink, picking out auburn lights in her dark hair.

He felt complete, that all was right in his world. Probably, he decided sleepily, because Hope and he had tidied up their brief relationship, ending it in a mutually agreeable and agreed manner. No more messy arguments or avoiding each other, no more hurt emotions or dramas. Instead a civilised discussion and one last night together before they went their separate ways. Neat, tidy and emotionless. Just how he liked it.

It was a shame she wouldn't be there for the opening night though; he would have liked to have seen her reaction when all the pictures were displayed together for the first time with her at the very heart of the show.

He trailed his finger over her shoulder, enjoying the silky feeling of her skin. She was right. Tomorrow they had their roles to play and those roles didn't involve making out on the dance floor. Probably for the best that they had agreed last night was to be the final time.

But right now, in dawn's early light, was in between times, neither last night nor today. They were out of time, which meant there were no rules if they didn't want there to be. And that meant he could press his lips here, and here, and here...

'Mmm...' Hope rolled over, smiling the sleepy yet sated smile he had come to know and enjoy. 'What time is it?'

'Early, very early, so there's no need to think about getting up yet,' he assured her, dropping a brief kiss onto her full mouth, shifting so his weight was over her. 'Can you think of any way to spend the time as we're awake?'

Her eyes, languorous and sleepy, twinkled up at him, full of suggestion, but she put her hands onto his chest and firmly, if gently, pushed him off. 'Plenty, but none suitable for people who are just friends.'

'Ah.' That wasn't disappointment stabbing through his chest. He could walk away at any time, after all. 'We've reached the cut-off point, then.'

'I think it might be wise.' She sat up, the sheet modestly wound around her. The message was clear—I'm no longer yours to look at or touch or kiss. 'Besides, I could do with an early start. Your stepmother—ex-stepmother—has asked me to go to Long Harbor this evening and stay so that I'm there for the morning when the caterers and everyone arrives. I know this party is all her work but I think she'd appreciate some backup. You'll be with us Saturday before three p.m., won't you? That's when my family arrives, with the blessing ceremony due to start at four.'

They were back in wedding-planning mode, it seemed. Gael slumped back onto the pillows, curiously deflated. 'I'll be there.'

'Great. I'll see you then.' Hope slid off the bed, still wrapped in a sheet, and headed towards the stairs. She turned, curiously dignified despite her mussed-up hair, her bare feet, the sheet held up modestly, just her shoulders peeking out above its white folds. 'Thank you, Gael. For waking me up, for challenging me, for making me challenge myself. I'm not saying I'm exactly relaxed about giving up my job—even with a sabbatical as a safety net—and if I think too hard about travelling by myself I get palpitations here.' She pressed her hand to her stomach. 'But I know it's all really positive—and I don't think I would have got here on my own. So thank you.'

'You'd have got there,' he said softly. 'You just needed a push, that was all. You were ready to fly.' He wanted to say more but what could he say? He didn't have the words, didn't have the feelings—didn't allow himself to have the feelings—so he just lay there as she turned with one last smile and watched her walk down the stairs. And five minutes later, when he heard the elevator ping and knew that this time she really had walked out of his studio for the last time, he still hadn't moved. All he knew was that the complete feeling seemed to have disappeared, leaving him hollow.

Hollow, empty and with the sense that he might have just made the biggest mistake of his entire life.

Five hours later the feelings had intensified. Nothing pulled him out of his stupor, not working on the painting—that just made the feelings worse—not going over his speech for the next day, not proofing the catalogue for his show. The only thing that helped was keeping busy—but he couldn't keep his mind on anything. Finally, exasperated with the situation, with himself, Gael flung himself out of the apartment, deciding if he couldn't work off this strange mood he would have to run it off instead. He stuck his headphones on, selected the loudest, most guitar-filled music he could find and set off with no route in mind.

Almost inevitably his run took him through Central Park, past the carousel and down towards the lake. Every step, every thud of his heart, every beat an insistent reminder that last time he was here, the time before that and the time before that he wasn't alone.

Funny, he had never minded being alone before. Preferred it. Today was the first day for a long time that he felt incomplete.

It didn't help that everywhere he looked the park was full of couples; holding hands, kissing, really kissing in a way that was pretty inappropriate in public, jogging, sunbathing—was that a proposal? Judging by the squeal and the cheering it was. Were there no other single people in the whole of Central Park? With a grunt of annoyance Gael took a path out of the park, preferring to pound the pavements than be a bystander to someone else's love affair.

He. Preferred. Being. Alone. He repeated the words over and over as his feet took him away from the park and into the residential streets of the Upper East Side. The midday sun was burning down and the humidity levels high but he welcomed the discomfort. If you were okay on your own then no one could ever hurt you. If he hadn't loved his mother so much then her absence wouldn't have poisoned every day of his childhood. If he hadn't relied on his father so much then it wouldn't have been such a body blow when his father left him behind with Misty. If he hadn't fallen so hard for Tamara then her betrayal wouldn't have been so soul-guttingly humiliating.

You could only rely on yourself. He knew that all too well.

And yet he couldn't shake Hope's words. You're lucky to have Misty, to have someone who cares. Hunter had wanted—no, needed—him by his side yesterday. Misty hadn't just paid his school and college fees, she had given him a home, shielded him from his father's impulsive and destructive post-divorce lifestyle. In those tricky few days after his authorship of Expose became public knowledge she had stood by him. She insisted he came to her every Thanksgiving and Christmas even now.

Hope had seen that when he couldn't—or wouldn't. But then she knew all about being a mother figure, didn't she?

And now it was her time to shine. He wished he could see her as she finally visited the places she had always wanted to visit, could capture the look on her face as she finally reached Machu Picchu, in photographs, in pencil sketches, in oils. He could draw her for ever and never run out of things to say about the line of her mouth, the curve of her ear, that delicious hollow in her throat.

His steps slowed as he gulped for air, his discomfort nothing to do with the heat or his punishing pace. Somehow, when he hadn't even noticed it, Hope McKenzie had slid under his guard and he could walk away—leave her to walk away—and it would make no difference. She'd still be there. He'd still be alone but the difference would be now he'd feel it. He'd not just be alone—he'd be lonely.

He bent over, trying to get his breath back and reorder his thoughts, and as he straightened he saw a familiar sign, the shop they had visited so recently, the shop where Faith's wedding dress still hung, the last alterations completed, ready to be steamed and conveyed to Long Island in the morning. The shop where Hope had tried on a dress that, for one moment, had made him wish that he were a different man, that they had a different future. A dress that belonged to her.

Was this a sign or just a coincidence? It almost didn't matter. What mattered was what he chose to do next.

CHAPTER TWELVE

'YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL.'

Hope smoothed down her dress and smiled at Gael, her heart giving a little twist as she did so. By tacit consent they had kept their distance from each other all day except when posing for photographs, but now the evening had drawn in and the event moved from celebration to party the rules they had set themselves didn't seem quite so rigid. They were aiming for friends, after all.

'It's all the dress. Lucky I had some expert help choosing it.' All the bridesmaids wore the same design, a halter-necked knee-length dress with a silk corsage at the neck, but while the other four bridesmaids' dresses were all a deep rose pink Hope, as maid of honour, wore a cream and pink flowered silk. 'If your show is a flop you could always turn your hand to wedding styling. You have quite the knack.'

'All I did was nod in the right places. I think you knew exactly what you were looking for.'

'Maybe. So that was a good speech you did back then.' She'd heard lots of people talking about it—and him. It was hard to keep a bland smile on her face when she kept overhearing beautiful, gazelle-like girls in dresses that cost more than her entire wardrobe discussing just how sexy they thought he was and speculating whether his net worth was high enough for a permanent relationship or whether he was just fling material.

They weren't lying about how sexy Gael looked today. Some men looked stilted or stuffy in a suit; Gael wore his with a casual elegance and a nonchalance that made a girl sit up and take notice. Even this girl. Especially this girl.

His tie was the same dark pink as the flowers on her dress. They looked as if they belonged together.

Funny how deceiving looks could be.

'Thank you. Hunter deserved something heartfelt and not too cruel. He's a good kid. Although now he's a married man I suppose I shouldn't call him a kid.'

'I suppose not.' Hope looked over at the dance floor where her sister swayed in her new husband's arms, the two of them oblivious to the two hundred or so guests Misty had invited. It was a beautiful party. Lanterns and fairy lights were entwined in the trees all around and in the several marquees that circled the dance floor, one acting as a bar, one a food tent, one a seating area and one a family-friendly place with games and a cinema screen for the younger guests.

The swing band that had accompanied the meal had been replaced by a jazz band crooning out soulful ballads as the evening fell. A sought-after wedding singer was due to come onto the purpose-built stage at nine to get the dancing really started and then a celebrated DJ would entertain the crowd into the early hours. The blessing had been beautifully staged and even though Hope had seen her sister make similar vows just two days before she had still needed to borrow a hanky from her aunt when she welled up for the second time.

'Would you like to dance?'

The question took her by surprise. 'I don't know if that's wise. Maybe later when the music is less...'

'Less what?'

'Less sway-like. I hear the wedding singer does an excellent Beyoncé. I'll dance with you to that.'

'It's a deal.'

So they had made small talk and it wasn't too hard, made civilised plans for later. No one looking over at them would think that they were anything but the best man and the maid of honour relaxing after a long day of duties. Good job on both sides. It was probably time to drift away to opposite sides of the dance floor so Hope could resume sneaking peeks at him while pretending even to herself, especially to herself, that she wasn't.

The night after the wedding had been her gift to herself. A chance to be bold and brave. A way of ensuring that something sweet and special didn't turn sour, that her memories of Gael and her time with him were something to savour. A time for her to take control and show them both just what she could do, who she could be. And then she had walked away with her head held high. Chosen when, chosen how.

So why did her victory feel so hollow? She had a sinking feeling it was because things weren't finished between them, much as she tried to fool herself that they were. There had been a tenderness that night she hadn't felt before. A closeness that she wasn't sure she believed was real and not just a figment of her overheated imagination. Truth was, Gael knew her better than anyone else in the entire world. How did she walk away from that?

But she didn't know what the alternative was or if she was brave enough to explore it. Hope turned away from the dance floor. Ahead of her, through the small scrub-like trees, was a private path that led directly to the beach. She'd been meaning to take a look at the ocean but hadn't had a chance to. 'I'm going to take a walk,' she said, kicking her shoes off, taking a couple of steps away. She didn't know if it was devilry or the moonlight that made her swivel back around and aim a smile in Gael's direction. 'Coming?'

He didn't answer but his movement was full of intent and she didn't demur as he took her hand, leading her through the trees with sure steps. The path through the trees was lit with tiny storm lanterns swaying in the slight breeze like an enchanted way.

All Hope knew was the salt on her lips, the sea breeze gentling ruffling her elaborately styled hair, the coolness of the sand between her toes and the firmness of Gael's grip. 'What was it like living here?'

He didn't answer until they cleared the trees and reached the top of the dunes. The beach spread out before them, dim in the pearl glow of the moon, behind them Hope could hear music and laughter, ahead the swish of the waves rippling onto shore.

'I didn't feel like I belonged,' he said finally. 'I was a scrubby kid who biked around Long Harbor getting into trouble, the kind of kid begging for a chance to go out on a boat, trying to find ways of earning a few dollars through running errands. Home was chaotic, living with my grandparents, I always fell asleep listening to the music in the bar downstairs. And then I came here. A driver to take me where I needed to go, money, more than I could spend, a boat that belonged to the family I could take out whenever I wanted complete with a crew. And when I fell asleep at night it was to total silence. I had a room, a study and a bath all to myself.'

'How did it feel?'

'Like I didn't know who I was.' His hand strengthened in hers. 'I still don't. Except...'

She wasn't sure she dared ask but did anyway. 'Except what?'

'These last couple of weeks I've had an inkling of who I could be, the kind of man I'd like to be.'

'Me too. Not the man part but the seeing a new way. It's not easy though, is it?'

Letting go of his hand, Hope sank down into the soft sand, not worrying about stains on her dress or if anyone was looking for her or if there were things she should be doing. All those things were undoubtedly true but she didn't have to take ownership of them. Gael folded himself down beside her with that innate grace she admired so much and Hope leaned into him, enjoying his solid strength, the scent of him. The illusion that he was hers.

'You've made a good start though. Travelling, carefree, no plans.'

'Hmm. On the surface maybe,' she conceded. 'I want to go, don't get me wrong, but there's still the little voice in my head telling me I don't deserve it. And another little voice shrieking at me to plan it all down to the final detail, account for every second because if it's planned it can't go wrong.'

'Sounds like it's getting crowded in your head.'

'Just a little. Planning makes me feel safe so trying to learn to be more spur of the moment is, well, it's a challenge. My real worry is...' She hesitated.

‘Go on.’

‘Being lonely,’ she admitted. ‘Even lonelier than I have been because I have always had Faith and a job, a routine. I’m not good at talking to people, Gael. I suck at making friends. A whole year of just me for company looms ahead and it terrifies me.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. It sounds pretty good to me.’

Surprise hit her oomph in the chest. In her heart. Not just the words but the way he said them. Low, serious and full of an emotion she couldn’t identify. Her pulse began to hammer, the blood rushing in her ears, drowning out the sound of the sea. She’d always wanted to matter to someone, be worthy of someone, but at some point in the last two weeks her goalposts had shifted.

She wanted to matter to Gael.

Proud, cynical Gael. A man who gave no quarter and expected none. A man who knew what he wanted and pushed for it. A man who had made her confront all her secrets and sins and forgive herself.

A man who made her feel safe. Worth something.

‘You could travel,’ she said, looking down at her feet, at the way her toes squished into the sand. ‘Do the whole Gauguin thing.’

‘Been reading up on your history of art?’

‘I remember some things from my whistle-stop tour.’

‘I could. I could travel, stay here, move to Paris or Florence or Tahiti. I’m not sure it would make much difference though. I’d still be hiding.’

‘What from?’

‘Myself. From emotion. From living. Do you know why that painting of you is the best thing I have ever done?’

She still couldn’t look at him, shaking her head instead.

‘Because I felt something when I painted it. Felt something for you. Complicated, messy, unwanted human emotions. Lust, of course. Exasperation because I could see you hiding all that you are, all that you could be. Frustration that you didn’t see it. Annoyance because you kept pushing me, asking awkward questions and puncturing the bubble I had built around myself.’

Exasperation, annoyance. Frustration. At least she had made him feel something.

‘And I liked you. A lot. I didn’t want to. The last thing I needed was a dark-eyed nymph with a wary expression and a to-do list turning my carefully ordered world upside down.’

‘Is that what I did?’ She raised her head and looked directly at him, floored by the unexpected tenderness in his smile.

‘I think you know you did. I have something to show you. Will you come?’

She nodded mutely.

* * *

Gael pulled Hope to her feet and led her back along the path to the house, skirting the party and the merry-making guests, neither of them ready or able to make small talk with Hunter’s Uncle Maurice or Misty’s drunken college room-mate. He took a circuitous route round the Italian garden and in through a side door that only he and Hunter had ever used as it led straight into a boot room perfect for dropping sandy surfboards and towels and swim trunks with a shower room leading right off it. It was empty today, no towels folded on the shelves, no boards hanging on the wall, no crabbing nets leaning in the corner. For the first time Gael felt a shiver of fond nostalgia for those carefree, summer days. He might not have ever admitted it but this huge nineteen-twenties mansion had at some point become his home—just as its mercurial, warm-hearted, extravagant owner had become his mother.

The boot room led into a back hallway, which ran behind the reception and living areas, avoiding the famous two-storey main hallway with its sweeping, curved staircase and ornate

plasterwork. Instead Gael led the way up a narrow back stairway, once used solely by the army of servants who had waited on Misty's great-grandparents, the original owners of the mansion.

'I feel like I'm a teenager again, sneaking girls up to my room through the back stairs.'

'Was there a lot of that?'

'No, sadly not. I was too grand for the girls I grew up with and not grand enough for the girls Misty introduced me to. Besides, there wouldn't have been any sneaking. Misty would have offered us wine and condoms and sent us on our way. She was embarrassingly open-minded. Nothing more guaranteed to make a teen boy teetotal and celibate—even if he wasn't a social pariah!'

'I bet there were hundreds of girls just waiting for you to look in their direction,' Hope said. 'I would have been.'

'Maybe,' he conceded. He had been so filled with his own angst he would never have noticed.

A discreet door led onto the main landing. Closed again, it blended into the wooden panelling. The house was riddled with hidden doors and passageways and he knew every single one of them.

'Don't think I'm not appreciating this behind-the-scenes tour of one of Long Island's finest houses but where are we going?'

'Here,' Gael said and, opening the door to his own suite of rooms, ushered her inside.

It hadn't changed much since he first took possession of the rooms as a boy. A sitting area complete with couch, a TV and a desk for studying. The computer console was long gone and the posters of bikini-clad girls replaced with paintings he admired by local artists, but the window seats still overlooked the beach and the Victorian desk was still piled with his paints and sketchbooks. A door by the window led into his bedroom.

'These are yours?'

'Misty apologised when she assigned them to me, said she hoped I wouldn't be too cramped but she thought I'd prefer not to be stuck out in one of the wings.'

Hope wandered into his bedroom, her eyes widening as she took in the king-size bed, the low couch by the window, and she opened the door to his bathroom complete with walk-in shower and a claw-foot bathtub. 'You poor thing, it must have been such a chore making do with just the two huge rooms and a bathroom fit for an emperor.'

'I managed somehow.'

Now she was here, now the moment was here, unexpected nerves twisted his stomach. What if he had got her, got them, got the situation wrong? For a moment he envied Hunter his certainty. He'd known, he'd said, the second he'd seen Faith. They had been together for just two months and there they were downstairs, husband and wife.

He'd known Hope for less than three weeks but he couldn't imagine knowing anyone any better after three years.

He looked over at her as she stared out of the window at the moon illuminating the sea. Her hair was still twisted up, held with a rose-pink ribbon, the dress exposing the fine lines of her neck and the fragile bones in her shoulders. Desire rippled through him, desire mixed with a protectiveness he had never experienced before, an overwhelming need to protect her from life's arrows. She'd already been pierced too many times. 'I got you something.'

She turned, a shy smile lighting up her face. 'You didn't have to.'

'I know. It's not a parting gift. It's an I hope you come back gift.'

Her mouth trembled. 'Really?'

Words failed him then, the speech he'd prepared during the sleepless night. Words telling her he wanted her to go, to experience, to live. But at the end of it all he hoped she'd choose to come back. To him. 'It's in the closet.'

With a puzzled frown wrinkling her forehead, Hope opened the door to his walk-in closet. It was practically empty, the few essentials he kept here folded up and put away on shelves at the back. There was only one item hanging up.

Hope stood stock-still, one hand flying to cover her mouth. ‘My dress.’

‘I didn’t think anyone else should have it.’ It was hers. They had both known it the second she had put it on. Every line, every delicate twist of lace, every fold of silk belonged to her.

‘But...it’s a wedding dress.’

‘I don’t want to confine you, Hope. I don’t want you to go away tied down. I want you to live and laugh and if you love then that’s the way it’s supposed to be.’ He swallowed as he said the words, alternate words trembling on his tongue. Stay with me. ‘This dress is a talisman, a pledge. That if you choose to come back to me then I’ll be here. And if you don’t, well. It’s yours anyway. If you want it.’

Did she understand? Did she know what it meant that he had asked her to come back to him? He had never asked anyone before. Never exposed himself. Taken each desertion on the chin and then wrapped another layer of protectiveness around himself.

* * *

Hope couldn’t take her eyes off the dress, perfect as it hung in the closet, every fold exactly where it should be. It did belong to her, he was right. Nothing had ever felt so right—nothing but being in Gael’s arms. And he had bought it for her.

The dress had been exorbitant but she knew it wasn’t the dollar price that made it special, utterly unique. It was the gesture behind the gift. It was opening himself up to rejection. It was allowing her the power to reject him. That was his real gift. He was giving her power. He trusted her with his heart just as she had trusted him with her body and soul.

‘Come with me,’ she said. ‘Travelling. You can paint anywhere, can’t you? Come with me.’

‘But it’s your big adventure.’

‘And I want to share it with you.’ That was what had been holding her back. Her dream travels seemed ash grey when she contemplated doing it alone. She wanted to share each discovery, each experience with Gael. She wanted him to tease her, to push her, to make her feel, to stretch herself. ‘I have done since I booked it. I knew I should be excited but instead every time I thought about getting on that plane, flying away from you, I felt sick with dread.’

‘You really want me along?’

‘Always.’ She put her hand on his shoulder and instantly knew she was home, that no matter where she was in the world if he was there she would be settled. ‘When Faith told me she was marrying someone she barely knew I thought she was crazy. Well, people will tell me I’m crazy, that two weeks is nothing at all, but I have lived a lifetime in the last fortnight. A lifetime with you. It wasn’t always easy or comfortable but for the first time in a long time I was alive. You brought me to life. I didn’t think that I knew what love was, that I was capable of it, that I deserved it, but you have made me change my mind. I love you, Gael. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life having adventures with you.’

His eyes had darkened to a midnight blue as he pulled her in close, caressing her with light scorching kisses along her brow, her cheeks, her mouth. Hope pressed herself as close as she could, her hands holding on tightly as if she would never, ever let go. And she wouldn’t; this man was hers. She knew it with every fibre of her being and her body thrilled with ownership. He was hers and she was his.

‘I love you,’ he said, the words catching in his throat. ‘I didn’t want to, I fought against it but I think I loved you from the first moment you unleashed your outrage on me.’

‘I’d barely said hello and you asked me to strip,’ she protested. ‘Gael, will you come with me? I don’t want to be away from you, from us, but I don’t want to walk away from a chance to do something new again. If I don’t travel now I never will.’

‘On one condition.’ He smiled into her eyes. ‘Monday you put on that dress and we go to City Hall and get married. I’ll need to be in New York in three weeks for the exhibition launch party but otherwise I’m yours for the next year. For the rest of my life. What do you say?’

‘I say you’d better ask me properly.’

She was only teasing but Gael stepped back, dropping to one knee, like a picture from a fairy tale. Hope’s heart stuttered with longing and love as he took her hand in his. ‘You’d better say yes now I’m down here.’

‘Ask the question and then I’ll be able to answer.’

‘Hope McKenzie. Would you do me the honour—the very great honour of being my wife?’

She didn’t answer straight away, taking a moment to take in the devilish glint in his eye mingling with the love and tenderness radiating from him. Hope dropped down to kneel in front of him, taking his face in her hands as she did so. ‘Yes. Yes, I will. Always.’ And as she leant in to kiss him she knew that her adventures were only just beginning and that she would never be lonely again, not while she had Gael by her side.

* * * * *

Her Man in Manhattan

Trish Wylie

Up close and personal—with her bodyguard!

It seems mayor’s daughter Miranda Kravitz has scored herself a new and very dreamy bodyguard! Apparently the fireworks between them are scorching, but will this tabloid darling really be willing to give up her newfound taste for freedom—no matter how gorgeous Tyler Brannigan is?

Rumor has it Brannigan hates playing by the rules and has used up all his strikes with the NYPD vice squad. So now this cop’s paying his dues with a temporary assignment as babysitter. If anyone can keep this Manhattan princess in check, surely it’s this tough-guy detective? Hopefully handcuffs won’t be necessary!

ONE

Tyler wasn't the only guy watching her. It was just a shame he didn't want to be there and resented the living hell out of the fact he didn't have a choice.

If things had been different he could enjoy the view.

Pinpricks of sparkling light swirled over the dance floor as she sashayed sideways and made a sexy rotation of her hips. She had a body made for sin: tall, slender, with full breasts and flawless, sun-kissed skin. Raising bared arms above her head lifted the hem of her silver minidress, exposing several more inches of delectably long legs encased in white platform-heeled knee-high boots. Add the sleek bob of a snowy wig, which covered her trademark hair, to darkly made-up eyes and ruby-red lips and she would make a fortune dancing on a dais.

When she bent her knees and shimmied downwards—rising with an effortlessly fluid curve of her spine—he didn't have difficulty picturing her with a spotlight following her every move. Judging by the fun she'd had fending off potential dance partners she would probably get a kick out of it. But despite her obvious comfort in the centre of so much male attention she stood out of the writhing mass of humanity too much for his liking. She was lucky no one had recognized her and if there was one thing Tyler knew, it was luck had a tendency to run out.

Even for the Irish.

Without warning her gaze collided into his with a pinpoint accuracy, which made it feel as if she'd known he was there all along. The impact created a sudden flare of heat in his body, like a spark igniting a fuse. Refusing to accept it was anything but the natural biological reaction of red-blooded male to hot female, he held his ground and waited to see what she would do next.

Rolling her shoulders and hips, she ran the tip of her tongue over glossy lips and smiled a slow, sensual smile. The silent come-on might have summoned him to the dance floor if he'd ever danced a day in his life. But even if he had he wasn't the kind of guy who came running when a woman crooked an invisible finger. If she wanted to come talk to him she could slide on over. A corner of his mouth lifted.

He was willing to bet she'd be pleased as punch when she found out who she'd been flirting with.

When something was yelled in her ear by her friend she laughed and turned away. A moment later she flashed another smile over her shoulder and swayed, drawing his gaze to the curve of her rear.

Tyler dragged his gaze away. It didn't take a genius to work out she was going to be trouble. He'd known that before he laid eyes on her.

Lifting the beer bottle in his hand, he took a long pull and frowned at the label in disgust as he swallowed. Light anything had never been his style; when associated with the word beer it was just all kinds of wrong.

As he experienced a visceral demand from his body to watch her again he forced his gaze elsewhere. Even if he was officially on the clock he wasn't paid to watch her every move. He had to focus on his surroundings; survey the room for potential threats and monitor the crowd. Being attracted to her was a problem he didn't need, especially when it felt as if they'd been tumbling down on him like boulders after a landslide of late.

He missed the days when he had more control over his life. How had it got so screwed up?

When it came to why he was standing there the path was easy to track. A guy had a friendly word of warning for one low life too many and suddenly the brass were tossing around phrases like 'desk duty' and 'temporary leave of absence.' Granted, the fact he was unrepentant probably had something to do with it, but what he still didn't get was why his punishment involved babysitting.

Despite his ability to provide what she was looking for, he had better things to do with his time than spend it reining in an entitled rich kid in search of a few thrills to liven up her—

A familiar face caught his gaze as the music changed to a faster beat and raised an enthusiastic cheer from the crowd. Immediately on alert, Tyler swiftly scanned the rest of the room, targeting two more likely subjects before he hit another face he recognized.

He had to get her out of there.

Setting the bottle down on the nearest table, he looked at the dance floor and frowned when he discovered she wasn't there. Gripping the brass railing in front of him, he played a short game of Where's Waldo? before locating her on her way to the bar with her friend. After checking the nearest exit point, he headed straight for her.

He was two steps away when the music stopped and voices yelled out, 'NYPD. Everyone stay where you are!'

With her focus on what was happening on the other side of the room, she jumped in surprise as he grabbed her hand. Her eyes widened when she looked up at him. 'What—?'

'This way.'

She tugged against his hold as he dragged her towards the exit. 'Let me go!'

'You want to get arrested?'

'No, but—'

'Then follow my lead.'

Hauling open the door, he stepped them into a dimly lit hallway and looked from side to side. A lightning-fast inventory revealed restrooms, a payphone, steps to what Tyler assumed was a basement on their left and enough banging from the right to indicate they were about to have company. The basement was the most viable option if it had a loading bay that opened onto the sidewalk, but before he could check he heard a crash. Out of time and in need of a distraction, he backed her into the wall and smashed his lips against hers.

Big mistake.

The fuse she'd lit from the dance floor set off the equivalent of an explosive charge. Plumes of fire engulfed him, incinerating rational thought as the invitation of her parted lips was met with the instinctual thrust of his tongue. Need pulsed through his body as an appreciative moan vibrated in her throat. His hand gripped her hip and slid lower. In response she lifted her leg off the ground and hooked it around the back of his knee, allowing him to cradle a silky thigh and lift it higher.

It didn't matter if they were seconds away from being discovered in a highly compromised position. If anything it immediately turned his thoughts to the position his body desperately wanted to be in—his imagination adding fuel to the fire with the suggestion her underwear was as sexy as her dress. Or, better still, non-existent.

'You seeing this?' a voice asked.

'Hey! Break it up over there,' another voice demanded.

Wrenching his mouth free, Tyler hauled in much needed air before squinting at the beams of light aimed their way. Allowing the leg he was holding to lower to the floor he took a step forwards to block her body with his.

'Stay right where you are, buddy,' the first voice said in warning.

Recognizing who it was, Tyler raised his arms at his sides, palms forwards, and waited for the penny to drop with the heavily armed cop. Since silently willing the younger man not to do anything stupid was pointless when saying the words out loud had never had any effect, he added an almost imperceptible shake of his head. When the torch nodded a little he assumed the point had been made and lowered his arms. But when it moved in an attempt to see who was behind him Tyler frowned. 'Problem, Officer?'

'You know there's a raid going on next door?'

'Can't say I'd noticed...'

'We can guess why.' The cop cleared his throat before asking, 'Do we need to search you two for narcotics?'

Funny guy. ‘What we’re high on doesn’t have anything to do with drugs.’ Tyler smirked.

A fine-boned hand snaked around his arm and flattened on his chest. ‘Can we get arrested for not being able to keep our hands off each other?’ the woman behind him asked in a passable, not to mention sultry Southern accent.

Tyler made a note of the fact it obviously wasn’t the first time she’d acted her way out of a tricky situation. ‘If we can I’m willing to do the time.’ He glanced over his shoulder. ‘How about you?’

‘Are there co-ed jails in the state of New York?’ She chuckled throatily, the sound strumming across the taut strings of his libido. ‘Just think how much fun we could have sharing a room.’

When she gently caught his ear lobe between her teeth and touched it with the wet tip of her tongue, he felt the impact of the contact all the way to his toes.

‘Getting a room somewhere sounds like a plan to me,’ the officer in front of them said before he lowered his torch. ‘Get outta here before I change my mind.’

Grasping hold of the hand on his chest, Tyler headed down the hall and through the busted door. As they entered an alley bathed in flashing red and blue lights one of the cops by a line of vehicles lowered his hand from the radio on his shoulder and waved them through. If he’d been her, he would have had questions about the ease of their escape, but apparently she was too busy jogging on her platform heels to keep up with his determined stride to ask.

‘My friend—’

‘Unless she’s carrying drugs she’ll be fine.’

When she tripped he simply tugged on her hand and kept walking, the anger he felt directed as much at himself as her. He could still taste her on his lips: a combination of strawberries, spice and liberation. He couldn’t remember a time he’d wanted a woman so badly he would have risked everything for a brief moment of mutual release. What he could remember were the days when his timing—not to mention his judgment—had been better.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked a little breathlessly as they rounded a corner onto a wide street where they stood a better chance of finding a cab.

If she’d been any other woman who reacted the way she had when he kissed her, they’d be headed straight for his place. But he couldn’t use her to make him feel good for a few hours even if he made certain she felt the same way. Until he completed his assignment, went back to where he was supposed to be and handed out some justice, he didn’t have the right to live his life as if nothing had happened.

To focus his mind he summoned the memory of another woman’s face and the words he’d said to her. ‘I won’t let anything happen to you,’ he’d lied. ‘You can trust me.’

‘I’m not taking you anywhere.’ When he spotted a flash of yellow he raised an arm in the air to flag down the cab. ‘He is.’ Digging in his pocket for a handful of bills as the vehicle drew to a halt beside the kerb, he handed them through the window to the driver. ‘That should cover it.’

He held open the rear door and waited for her to get inside, his gaze lowered to watch long legs fold gracefully into place before he looked into the shadows of her eyes.

‘I don’t get a name?’ she asked.

‘You already have one.’

Her mouth curved into a smile. ‘I meant your name.’

Tyler shook his head at the liquid cadence of her voice. Next she’d be asking for a phone number and when she could see him again. It was all just one big game to her. He could have been anyone—drug dealer, kidnapper, serial killer—she had no idea how dark the world could be.

But he did.

‘You’re welcome.’ He closed the door and turned away without mentioning she’d be seeing him again real soon.

Why ruin the surprise?

Since it was the last one she'd have in a while, he hoped she'd enjoyed her little adventure. Come Monday she would be playing by his rules.

Cross him and he'd make her sorry they ever met.

TWO

After checking that Crystal made it out of the nightclub okay and apologizing profusely for abandoning her, Miranda spent the rest of the weekend fantasizing about her rescuer.

She'd felt his gaze on her before she saw him, which was rare for someone who had spent most of her life being watched. Understandably curious she'd sought him out, her breath catching when she laid eyes on him.

He was the most compelling man she'd ever seen.

From what she could tell he was handsome in a rough-edged kind of way, but that wasn't what made him exciting. What did was that even while standing tall and straight he gave the impression of a predator crouched to spring on its prey. Brazenly answering his interest in her with a smile of encouragement had felt like playing with fire, the associated rush of adrenaline addictive.

And when it came to that kiss, oh, my...

Smoothing her palms over her elegantly tailored linen dress, she followed the curve from breast to waist to hip. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to imagine the hands touching her body were larger and more masculine; a deep voice was rumbling in her ear, describing everything he was going to do to her in explicit detail.

A sigh of regret left her lips.

If they hadn't been interrupted...

None of her small acts of rebellion had ever given her the same rush she got when she thought about doing more than kissing him. But how would she find him again in a city the size of New York when she didn't know his name?

A familiar three-tapped knock on her bedroom door snapped her out of her reverie.

'Come in,' she called as she stepped over to sit on the stool in front of her dressing table.

'Good morning, Miranda.'

'Good morning, Grace,' she answered cheerfully when her father's personal assistant appeared. 'Isn't it a beautiful morning? The park looks lovely from the windows. I don't suppose there's enough of a gap in my schedule today to allow for a leisurely stroll?'

'No.' Grace's reflection smiled apologetically. 'But at least you'll be outside for a while.'

'Well, that's something.'

While Miranda attached small pearl-drop earrings to her lobes, the ever efficient fifty-something who had been in her life for so long she'd become a kind of maiden aunt opened her file and got down to business.

'You have a nine a.m. appointment for a dress fitting with Ms Wang. At ten you're due at a community project in the Bronx with time for a meet-and-greet before morning coffee. At eleven-thirty—'

'Do you think the world would come to an end if we took a day off?' Miranda mused as she added a flawless string of pearls to her neck and fluffed her hair into place. 'We could pack a picnic, grab a handful of gossip magazines and spend the morning people watching...'

When she nodded enthusiastically in the mirror Grace closed her file. 'Before or after you go through the Help Wanted ads with me?'

'One little day,' Miranda cajoled with a pout and a flutter of long lashes.

'Your father would like to see you before you leave.'

'Ten bucks says it's a reminder to kiss babies.'

'I don't think they're eligible to vote.'

'No. But with any luck they'll have fathers there for me to flirt with or mothers for me to charm with talk of how much I want kids of my own one day.' Pushing to her feet, she lifted her bag and shoes and linked their arms at the elbows as they crossed the room.

It was the kind of simple human contact she didn't stop to think about with Grace. She'd heard somewhere people needed eighteen inches of personal space but for most of Miranda's life the distance had been greater. Hence a small part of why the memory of full bodily contact with a virile male was so hard to shake, most likely.

Not that there weren't other reasons.

'It's remiss of me not to have produced a suitable grandchild by now,' she continued in the same bright tone. 'Chubby toddlers are always a hit with the electorate.'

'If you start planning ahead you could schedule it for the whispered campaign for Governor.'

'Always best to keep something in reserve.' Miranda nodded in agreement. She smiled as they stepped into the hall. 'Good morning, Roger. Is that a new tie?'

'Wife bought it for my birthday,' her father's press secretary replied with an answering smile.

'She has excellent taste.'

'Speaking of spouses, finding a husband before you have that chubby toddler might be a good idea,' Grace whispered conspiratorially.

Miranda leaned closer to whisper back, 'I've heard you don't have to have one to get the other.'

'You do when your father's the mayor.'

Another face in the hallway earned another smile. 'Good morning, Lou. How was the Little League game?'

'Two strikes and a home run,' her father's head of security replied with the swing of an invisible bat.

'Tell Tommy I said "yay,"' she replied with a ladylike punch to the air.

'Shoes,' Grace reminded her outside the door to her father's study.

'What would I do without you?'

'Run barefoot and be late for appointments.'

'Now doesn't that sound like fun?' She handed over her bag for safekeeping, slipped on her heels and took a step back to turn a circle. 'Am I ready for inspection?'

'You'll do.'

After a light knock on the door, she waited for the cursory 'come' and turned the handle.

'Ah, here she is,' her father said from behind his mahogany desk as she crossed the room. 'Miranda, this is Detective Brannigan. He'll be overseeing your security during the remainder of the campaign.'

Though unaware there were any changes planned, she kept a smile in place as she waited for the man to stand up and turn around. Her first impression was of his size; he was six feet two, possibly three, his build more running back than linebacker. Many people would have been surprised by that —when they thought bodyguard they pictured brute force—but while physical strength and fitness were both important the members of her family's protective details came in many shapes and sizes. Keen observation skills and an ability to think on their feet were of equal importance.

Any following thought on the subject disappeared in a flash and was instantly replaced by shock when she looked into cobalt-blue eyes. It took every ounce of her social skills to prevent the drop of her jaw.

'Miss Kravitz,' he said in a low rumbling baritone as her hand was engulfed in a firm handshake.

It wasn't what she'd fantasized he would say if they met again but the sound of his voice was enough to remind her of every imagined word. She peeled her tongue off the roof of her mouth as heat suffused her palm and rushed up her arm. Had he known who she was when he came to her rescue? Had he been watching her because he was on duty? How long had he been following her?

As she remembered to reclaim her hand and lowered it to her side—his touch still tingling on her skin—her gaze shifted to her father. There was no way to determine how much trouble she was in while he was wearing his elected official expression but if he was upset about something it was a new

tactic. Usually the punishment for her supposed misdemeanors involved a lecture on responsibility—the kind she liked to think she'd endured stoically over the years.

'He'll report to Lou the same way Ron did,' he said. 'They've selected a new detail for you.'

All of her guys had been replaced—since when and, more to the point, why?

'Detective Brannigan suggested a shake-up,' he added so she knew who to blame.

While he turned his attention to some of the papers on his desk she looked at the man beside her to see if the reality lived up to her fantasy. Strong masculine features—short, dark blond hair, thick lashes framing his intense eyes. He was every bit as compelling as she remembered. Seeing him again reawakened the potent sensual awareness in her body. It transported her back in time to when he'd kissed her into a boneless puddle of lust and walked away.

Now she thought about it Miranda wasn't certain she'd forgiven him for that. Particularly when it was more than obvious he still had the upper hand. She'd wondered how he managed to get them past a cordon of New York's finest with such ease. In her furtive imagination he'd been everything from a mafia don with cops on his payroll to a combination of secretive billionaire by day and caped crusader by night. That he was with the NYPD made more sense but why hadn't he said so? Why the charade? Why kiss her instead of flashing a badge?

He blinked lazily hooded eyes. 'I believe you have a nine a.m. appointment.'

Miranda ignored him and rounded the desk to place a kiss on her father's cheek. 'Bye, Daddy.'

'Bye sweetheart. Have a good day.'

'You, too,' she replied before lifting her chin as she walked back across the room. 'Now we can leave.'

In a few long strides he'd overtaken her and held open the door but she didn't thank him for the courtesy while she was piqued by his duplicity.

'New bodyguard?' Grace whispered as she handed over her bag and a copy of the day's itinerary.

Miranda crinkled her nose in mock delight. 'Lucky me.'

She led the way down the second-floor landing, past a rare five-seat settee that had been discovered in the basement of City Hall. Despite living in the mansion for the two terms her father had been mayor she never took her surroundings for granted. If anything the combination of rare paintings and antiques interspersed with modern furniture reminded her of what a privilege it was to live in one of the few surviving eighteenth-century mansions in the city. It was something she could appreciate more approaching twenty-five than she had at seventeen. But unlike most mornings she didn't take the time to greet any of her favorite pieces with a smile or to mull over her continuing need to escape such a beautifully gilded cage.

She was too distracted by the man walking behind her, her body highly tuned to his presence.

They were halfway down the carpeted stairs before she lowered her voice to ask, 'Did you know who I was?'

'Yes.'

'Did my father order you to follow me?'

'No.'

She smiled at the woman making her way upstairs. 'Good morning, Dorothy. Is it as beautiful outside as it looks through the window?'

'It is,' the maid replied with an answering smile.

The tension became heavier with each muted downward step while Miranda tried to pretend she couldn't feel an intense gaze following her every move. There was no way she could spend every day in the company of a man she'd pictured naked...and sweaty...and as aroused as he'd left her after one little kiss. She had a reputation for being cool, calm and poised in public. She wasn't about to exchange it for hot, bothered and sexually frustrated. It wasn't as if the discovery he was—technically speaking—a 'good guy' had done anything to dilute her fantasy, either. Even while wearing a dark suit, white shirt and patriotically striped tie he oozed the danger she'd craved since her late teens.

Skydiving, bungee jumping, swimming with sharks—they were all on an ever-growing wish list of forbidden pursuits she'd added to over the years.

Making wild, crazy whoopee with one of her bodyguards had never crossed her mind, until now.

Her heels clicked on the exquisitely refurbished faux marble patterning of the wooden floor in the foyer. In a matter of seconds they would be in the vestibule, away from the constantly moving crowd that never quite managed to make her feel less alone. They could take advantage of the moment and pick up where they'd left off. He would grab her hand and swing her around, press her against the wall with his muscled body, crush her lips beneath his and...

Miranda gave herself a mental smack upside the head. She needed to focus. The brief alone time they had between inner and outer doors should be used to reclaim some of the control over her life she couldn't afford to relinquish. She hadn't been fighting for her freedom so someone new could stride in and clip her wings before she had a chance to stretch them. With that in mind, the second the first door closed behind them she turned to face him.

'As it's your first day I think we should lay out some ground rules....'

'I agree.' He nodded. 'So shut up and listen.'

Miranda gaped at him in disbelief. 'You can't talk to me like that.'

'What you mean is no one else ever has, right?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'I'm willing to bet folks have been kowtowing to you since you were in diapers.' The forwards step he took seemed to suck all the air out of the vestibule. 'What you need to learn quick-smart is I don't kowtow to anyone,' he said in a low, mesmerizing rumble. 'I'm here to do a job. Make that more difficult for me than it needs to be, things will get ugly.' He jerked his brows. 'You feel me?'

Did she—? She blinked. 'I beg your pardon?'

'No begging necessary,' he replied with a small shake of his head. 'Just be a good girl and do as you're told and we'll be golden.'

'You know I can have you removed from this position?'

'Good luck with that. I've been trying to get out of it for a week.' He reached past her, held open the outer door and inclined his head. 'After you, princess.'

A dazed Miranda stepped through the door, her gaze locked on broad shoulders as he overtook her on the gravel driveway. While there was no denying part of her buzzed with the titillating after-effects of his forceful tone, another was mildly outraged. No one had ever spoken to her that way. Who did he think he was?

She narrowed her eyes. It didn't matter who he was. He was about to discover she wouldn't be easily intimidated. She was a politician's daughter. Everything she needed to know about hiding her emotions she'd learned from masters of disguising how they felt. Summoning an air of poise, she reached into her bag for a pair of oversize sunglasses and her cell phone. If he thought he was dealing with a spoilt princess she would give him exactly what he expected. Covering her eyes, she hit speed dial.

'Good morning, darling, how are you?' She purposefully spoke loud enough to be overheard. 'My day has got off to the most dreadful start.'

'The Queen of England called and said she wanted her accent back?' Crystal sighed dramatically. 'You're standing me up for lunch, aren't you?'

Miranda smiled smoothly. 'Absolutely not.'

It didn't matter if he was a walking sex fantasy. She planned on ditching her new bodyguard by noon.

THREE

'I assume Detective isn't your first name.'

Tyler glanced in the rear-view mirror. She'd given him the silent treatment since they left the mayor's residence and he'd have been happy for it to stay that way. He wasn't there to make small talk. He was there to keep her safe and out of trouble; something the guys on her previous detail could have done with remembering more often.

'I'll ask Lou,' her honeyed voice said in a dismissive tone when he didn't reply. 'He's a sweetheart.'

Somehow Tyler doubted she'd think so if she knew the mayor's head of security was a big part of the reason he was there. It had been Lou Mitchell's bright idea to draft in someone who hadn't been doing the job for so long they took things for granted or was easily distracted by a pretty face. That Tyler wasn't prepared to be subtle didn't seem to be a problem, which was just as well considering where he'd been drafted from.

The next time he glanced in the mirror she'd placed her sunglasses on top of her head and was idly twirling a lock of hair as she read the screen of her BlackBerry. She might have been hot while wearing a disguise but without one she was a stone-cold knockout. Her skin-coloured dress left little to the imagination even with a demure neckline and its hem a respectable couple of inches above her knees. Fitted the way it was—to lovingly follow every curve of her damn-near-perfect body—it had drawn his gaze to her more often than he should have allowed.

The hair she was toying with was a particular source of fascination: lustrous, tumbling tresses of flame blended with sunlight. He could have said his interest in it stemmed from curiosity—how had she got that much hair under a short wig?—but he'd have been lying. The truth was he didn't know why he found it so fascinating. He just did.

But the packaging didn't make up for her personality.

A few hours of watching her in action was all it took to confirm what he'd already suspected. What surprised him was how easily she fooled everyone else. When they got to the second hit of the day and she stepped into a community project for the elderly she pulled out all the stops. A flash of her hundred-watt smile, a few carefully chosen sound bites, the brush of elegant hands over selected arms and she was treated like a combination of visiting European royalty and prodigal granddaughter. By the time she left he suspected there wasn't anyone she came into contact with who didn't believe she genuinely cared what they had to say.

The folks out in Hollywood earned a gold statue for that kind of performance.

His next glance in the mirror revealed she'd shifted her attention from her hair to the pearls around her neck. The fine-boned forefinger tracing them stilled and then she blinked darkened lashes, her hazel-eyed gaze crashing into his before he returned his attention to the road.

'What was your last assignment?' she enquired after another moment of silence.

'You want a copy of my CV so you can get your friend Lou to pull my jacket?'

'Your jacket?'

'My file.' He made a turn and merged the Escalade into three lanes of busy traffic when he heard a sound. 'What are you doing?'

'It's unusually stuffy in here.'

'That's why they invented air-con.' Reaching forwards to hit the switch, he frowned when he glanced in the mirror and discovered she was leaning her face towards the open window. 'And that glass is tinted for a reason.'

'As disappointing as I'm sure it is for you,' she replied haughtily, 'I'm not high on anyone's hit list.'

‘You’ve never read any of the letters that land at your father’s office, have you?’ Tyler hit another switch to slide the window shut and waited for the answer he already knew.

‘We have people who do that.’

‘Course you do,’ he said dryly while he steered into the middle lane of traffic on Fifth Avenue.

When he drew to a smooth halt at a crossing there was a gasp from the rear seat. ‘What a gorgeous dress!’

Though he’d been ready for her to try something the sound of a door being opened caught him off guard. He turned around in his seat. ‘Don’t get out of—’

Too late. She smiled brightly as she grabbed her bag. ‘I’ll meet you back here in an hour.’ Next thing he knew the door slammed and she was skipping her light-footed way to the sidewalk.

Tyler’s seat belt was unbuckled when the light changed, the honking of horns forcing him to ram the Escalade back into gear. With one eye on the traffic and another on where she was headed, he cut across a lane and swung around the corner. It might have taken five minutes of screeching tyres to get there but by the time she exited the rear of the store he was casually leaning against the side of the vehicle with his arms crossed.

The victorious smile on her face faded the instant she saw him. ‘How did you—?’

‘Clue’s in the word detective.’ He pushed upright and opened the rear door. As she reached him he swung it shut in her face. ‘Which part of our talk this morning wasn’t clear to you?’

She angled her chin and looked him straight in the eye. ‘Which part of your job description suggested you were the boss in this relationship?’

‘Who exactly is it you think I work for?’

‘You’re my bodyguard.’

‘The city pays my wage.’

‘Is there a bonus for being a pain in the ass?’ She smiled sweetly.

‘Where were you going?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘Yeah, it is.’ He reached into his pocket for a folded piece of paper and held it up in front of her face. ’Cos if it’s not on here, you don’t get to go there....’

‘It’s a free country. I can go where I want.’

Tyler wondered how much effort it had taken not to stamp her foot. ‘Let’s check the schedule, shall we?’

She crossed her arms as he shrugged back the sleeve of his jacket to consult his watch. ‘Eleven fifty-seven.’ He glanced over the sheet of paper and shook his head. ‘Nope, can’t see anything on here about playing hide-and-seek. Maybe yours is different from mine.’ His gaze locked with hers again. ‘Since we’ve established other people do the reading for you, maybe I should check that one, too.’

‘You carry a gun, right?’ she asked with a completely deadpan expression.

Two as it happened but she didn’t need to know that. ‘You gonna make me use it?’

‘I was going to ask if I can borrow it.’

Drawing in a long breath, Tyler refolded the paper and put it back in his pocket. ‘If I were you I wouldn’t waste time thinking up ways to cut me loose. This is strike one. Three strikes and you won’t get to visit a restroom alone.’

‘Your last assignment was at Guantanamo, wasn’t it?’

The old Tyler might have laughed at the comment. The one standing in front of her simply leaned closer and informed her, ‘I’m in your life now. Get used to it.’

The flecks of gold that flared in her eyes hinted at a temper to match her hair. For a split second he wanted her to get mad enough to swing for him—to spit fire and passion and remind him of the woman he’d kissed.

As if sensing a weakness ripe for exploitation she switched tactics. The curve of her full lips became sinful, drawing his gaze to her mouth and calling him to taste her again. She slowly ran the tip of her tongue over the surface, leaving a hypnotically glossy sheen in its wake.

In an instant he remembered how she'd felt when her body was melded to his, how soft her skin had been beneath his fingertips and how badly he'd burned for her. Just as suddenly he was aware of how close they were standing. One more step and their bodies would be touching again.

It took almost as much effort not to frown at his reaction as it did to snap his gaze back up to her eyes. 'That won't work either, so you can forget it.'

'I have no idea what you mean.'

Sure she didn't. He reached for the door handle and jerked his chin. 'Back up a step.'

The order was met with a defiant lack of movement, her luminous eyes narrowed in thought. 'Is my father aware of how you got me out of the nightclub?'

Tyler's arm dropped. He'd wondered how long it would take for her to go there but if she thought she could use it against him, she was wrong. 'You want to tell him where you were?'

'He doesn't know?'

'I thought the mayor was supposed to know everything that goes on in his city.'

'You didn't answer the question.'

'Didn't I?'

The battle of wills made the air between them crackle and when her gaze briefly flickered to his mouth Tyler knew that kiss was as much on her mind as it had been on his. Her awareness of him was in the darkening of her eyes, in the increased rise and fall of her breasts. Any hope he'd had that what happened between them could be blamed on the heat of the moment was gone. But while he'd lost his self-control once he wasn't about to let it happen again.

'You getting in or am I putting you there?'

'You can't manhandle me like a common criminal,' she replied on a note of outrage.

'Try me.'

She glared at him as she took a step back. 'Door.'

Tyler held it open, unable to resist an incline of his head and a sweep of his arm in invitation. 'Your Highness...'

FOUR

His attitude sucked.

'What is his problem?' Miranda asked as she paced her bedroom floor with her cell phone glued to her ear.

'He's rude, overbearing and obviously doesn't know his place,' Crystal replied.

'Obviously, but that's not what I meant. It's like I've done something to him way worse than making him open a stupid door.'

'He's supposed to open doors.'

'He is.' Miranda agreed. 'It's courteous.'

'It is. And how dare he speak to you that way?'

'I know, right?'

Having allowed her the customary five minutes to rant, Crystal called a halt with 'Can we stop being the mean girls from high school now?'

'Do we have to?'

'Yes,' she replied firmly. 'You were never that girl. Now take a deep breath and tell Auntie Crystal what the real problem is.'

Miranda stopped pacing and dropped heavily onto the end of her bed. 'I don't like him.'

'You liked him on Friday night,' Crystal crooned.

'That's when he wasn't a brick wall standing between me and—'

'All those nasty sex fantasies you had about him over the weekend?'

Flopping back onto the soft covers, Miranda blinked at the ceiling and sighed heavily. 'There are at least three people I could have called who'll tell me what I want to hear right now. And yet I still called you. Why is that?'

'I'm your reality check,' she said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'The only reason you don't like him now is because he's switched sides. Up till this morning he was part of your dream to do what—or who—you want, whenever you want. Now he's part of the system keeping you in servitude.'

'I hate that,' Miranda admitted reluctantly.

'Of course you do. No one likes to have a sex fantasy ruined by reality. We all prefer to live in hope.'

'I was really hopeful,' Miranda said wistfully.

'And I really wanted to hear all the sordid details over lunch,' her best friend complained. 'I can't believe you let this guy outwit you.'

'I still have a few tricks up my sleeve.'

'You learnt from the best.'

'You're a bad influence.'

'I am,' Crystal said with pride.

'Which if you recall is part of the reason you're not my father's favourite person.'

'He's just never gonna let that reality-TV-show thing go, is he?' she said in a tone that suggested she'd rolled her eyes. 'You were on camera for like, five seconds.'

'Might have helped if I wasn't dancing on a table at the time.'

'Does he have something against people having fun?'

It was an old debate. One Miranda knew she would never win with Mayor Kravitz. As far as hizzoner was concerned Crystal was a publicity nightmare: rich, overindulged, and for a considerable amount of time, out of control. She might since have moved on to a lucrative career of celebrity endorsements but when her fame stemmed from notoriety...

Frankly Miranda found it a little insulting he thought she could be so easily led. If she chose to she could get into trouble all on her lonesome. She didn't need help. What she needed was the freedom to do what she wanted without her actions becoming fodder for the gossip hungry.

The thought added to her restlessness. She needed to get out for a while before the walls started to close in. Turning her head on the covers, she checked the alarm clock by her bed. 'I'll be at your door in a half hour.'

'Are you going to rant some more when you get here?'

'Probably,' she admitted.

'Awesome. I'll open the wine. By the time you arrive I should be two glasses more sympathetic to your plight.'

Miranda wriggled upright, tucked her phone into the back pocket of her skinny jeans with some cash and pushed her feet into a waiting pair of deck shoes. Twisting her hair into a ponytail, she grabbed a baseball cap from one drawer and sunglasses from the collection in another. Ready for action she opened her bedroom door and checked the hall. Once she confirmed it was empty her lucky music talisman started playing in her head.

It wouldn't be the first time a combination of wits, observation and an extensive study of spy movies was put to good use. As a result she knew to time her progress downstairs; to wait for the turn of the security cameras to take advantage of blind spots. She also knew the best window of opportunity for escape was at shift-change time, when the security details gathered to hand over the baton. At the foot of the stairs she stopped and held her breath, waiting for the last squeaking footsteps to disappear into the back of the house before she jogged across the foyer.

As usual the kitchen was deserted.

A bubble of exhilaration formed in her chest as she made it to the short hallway at the other side of the room. Tantalizingly close to the exit and secure in the knowledge she had an ally on the gate outside, she allowed the music in her head to become a low rhythm on the tip of her tongue. But as she reached for the handle a loud crunch made her still.

When she turned around Detective Party Pooper was leaning against the larder door with an apple in his hand.

'The Mission Impossible theme is appropriate,' he said with his mouth full.

Miranda gritted her teeth. 'What are you doing here?'

'Overtime,' he replied with a nonchalant shrug of broad shoulders. 'Reckoned I'd keep an eye on things till the rest of the new detail is up to speed.'

How diligent of him.

She noted his appearance: the lack of a jacket, the loosened tie below an unbuttoned collar, the rolled up sleeves over tanned muscular forearms. When her pulse sped up she ignored it, refusing to have a physical reaction to his presence when she disliked him so much. Instead she focused on how quickly he'd settled in—standing there as if he owned the place and had been there forever.

'I'm trying to decide if this counts as another strike when you haven't left the building yet.' He nodded firmly. 'I'll get back to you on that.'

When he nudged off the wall and went into the kitchen Miranda fought the need to growl. She hadn't thrown a hissy fit since she was eight and denied a puppy, but it was tempting after a day in his company. Aiming a longing glance at the exit she sighed heavily and retraced her steps. He was standing at the island in the middle of the room when she walked in, casually flipping over the pages of a newspaper.

'No disguise,' he commented without looking at her. 'Means you were going somewhere people know you.' Another page of the newspaper flipped over. 'Narrows it down some...'

Miranda swore she would never kiss another handsome stranger. She'd learned her lesson. They could turn into frogs. Now if her fairy godmother could just drop a bolt of lightning out of the sky

and incinerate him, she promised to be a very good girl for a very long time. Even if she'd already been there and felt she'd earned a break.

In the absence of magical intervention she considered the options left open to her. She'd be damned if she was retreating to her bedroom. Neither was she staying for a friendly chat over coffee the way she used to with the members of the team she'd liked. Giving him anything resembling an order obviously wasn't going to work and she sincerely doubted any attempt at negotiation would end in anything but a migraine.

'I was going to stretch my legs,' she said when the silence began to bother her.

He shook his head as he turned another page. 'Lying sways you closer to strike two.'

'I'm glad the trust part of this relationship is going so well.'

'Stop treating the guys in this unit like idiots and they might trust you a lot quicker.'

Miranda bristled at the accusation. 'You've been here five minutes. You don't know anything about—'

'How many of them do you reckon you got fired?'

'I...' Miranda faltered and frowned at the hesitation. She hadn't got anyone fired. If she had she would have done something to fix it. 'The bodyguards who left the mansion chose to leave.'

'Ever ask yourself why?'

She lifted her chin. 'Mac said he missed riding in a squad car.'

She'd liked Mac. He was a straight-up guy. Happily married with a young family, he'd done a lot of community policing when he left the academy and said he wanted to get back to it. They'd joked around about the squad car but when it came down to it he missed being in a position where he could talk to people. She understood that but was sorry to see him go. Unlike some people, he'd been really good about letting her make unscheduled stops for shopping or lunch when she needed to take a breather. On his last day she'd given him season tickets for the Giants because he loved football so much. She leaned back against the counter and folded her arms. Detective Smarty-pants knew squat.

'Yeah, those things are a real sweet ride compared to the low-spec models you have parked outside.' His gaze lifted. 'Don't know much about guys and cars, do you?'

'I'm reliably informed there's a little more to your job than the toys which go with it.' She nodded at the gun holstered at his lean waist beside his shield. 'It would be nice to think they don't hand those out to everyone who thinks it's cool to carry one.'

When he studied her more intently the memory of how he'd looked at her in the alley that morning entered her mind. For a second she'd thought he was going to kiss her again. A few hours in his company was all it had taken to dissolve her fantasy. At least she'd thought it had. But for that long stretched-out moment—as irritated as she'd been by him—she'd wanted him to kiss her.

He raised his right arm and tossed what was left of the apple through the air. As it dropped neatly into a swing-top trash can at the end of the counter he grabbed his jacket off the countertop. 'Come on, then.'

Miranda's eyes narrowed. 'Where are we going?'

'Said you wanted to go for a walk, didn't you?'

'I don't need your permission.'

'No,' he said in a low voice as he turned towards her. 'But since you don't get to go alone, either I go with you or you go back to your room—your call.'

'Even if it's not on the itinerary?'

'Why do you think we stick to that schedule?'

Miranda lifted her gaze to the ceiling. 'Gee, that's a tough one.' She looked into his eyes again. 'But I'm going to guess it's so I know where I'm supposed to be at certain times of the day.'

'There's another reason.'

She batted her lashes. 'So the people I'm going to see know I'll be there?'

'Try again.'

‘So you know where to drive me?’ She pouted.

She didn’t mention it was the tip of an iceberg that could sink her if she thought about it too much. Every moment of her day was planned to the last detail: when she got up, what she ate for breakfast, the visits she made to places her parents couldn’t slot into their busy days. She clawed back control where she could—getting to choose her own wardrobe had certainly been a leap in the right direction—but it wasn’t enough any more.

It hadn’t been for a long time.

‘Every place on that list is checked by an advance.’

Oh, for goodness’ sake. How long did he think she’d been doing this? ‘They search every room, run any necessary background checks and organize escape routes. When they’re happy they brief the security details who in turn plan the route to and from the venue.’ She raised a brow. ‘Are there bonus points if I can tell you everyone’s call sign?’

‘Don’t take losing well, do you?’

‘If I’m about to go for a walk in the park when I want to, how have I lost anything?’

‘Guess it depends on whether or not that’s where you were headed, doesn’t it?’ he challenged in return. ‘And I didn’t say anything about the park. The grounds of the mansion will do.’ When she didn’t reply he tossed his jacket down. ‘But if you don’t want to go out...’

‘Fine,’ she snapped as she turned on her heel and headed back towards the exit. Getting out of the house was better than nothing. ‘But don’t feel you need to make conversation to pass the time.’

‘Just remember if you rabbit it’ll be the last time we try this,’ his deep voice rumbled in warning behind her.

Miranda looked over her shoulder. ‘Rabbit?’

‘Run,’ he translated as he rolled down a sleeve.

It was as if he spoke a different language. She pushed the door open and stepped outside, the last throes of a humid summer surrendering to the first hints of autumn in the evening air. Where was he from?

The silent question opened the floodgate for a string of others. She wanted to know how long he’d been a cop, where he’d been before he transferred to the Municipal Security Section, what age he was, if he had a family.

As she crossed the gravel to the lawn another thought occurred to her. Since the absence of a wedding ring meant nothing she didn’t even know if he was single. Asking him would be the obvious solution if he was remotely in the region of forthcoming—the fact she still didn’t know his name being a prime example. If she found out he was married she would have several names for him; none of them nice.

Ramming the baseball cap onto her head, she frowned beneath the cover of the peak. Considering how much of her mind was occupied by thoughts of him even when he was right there, she didn’t have a choice. She had to get to know him better. Ordinarily it was something she enjoyed: talking to people, listening to what they had to say and getting small glimpses of lives that were so much freer than hers.

With him it felt different, more necessary to her survival, most likely because the silence was starting to turn her into a crazy person.

She just needed to figure out a way of getting him to start a conversation when she’d told him not to.

Had to pick now to follow an order, didn’t he?

FIVE

At first Miranda's pace was rushed, the irritation she felt at his presence obvious, particularly when he walked beside her instead of taking up the more usual position on point or a few steps behind. When she slowed and started to take everything in Tyler studied her reaction as she breathed deep and a small smile formed on her lips.

Either she'd never walked the grounds before or she was up to something. He assumed it was the latter.

Without warning she changed direction and headed for the river, stopping to look from side to side when she got to the railing. After a couple of minutes of the same thing he inevitably asked, 'What are you looking for?'

'Mmm?' she hummed absent-mindedly.

'You're obviously looking for something.' If it was a place to jump in the river and swim to freedom she could forget it.

'Baby seals.'

'What?'

'Baby seals,' she repeated. 'Fuzzy bundles of joy that mummy and daddy seal made together as a token of their love for one another.' When she shot a sparkle-eyed glance at him from beneath the peak of her baseball cap he got the impression she thought she'd won some kind of victory. 'Didn't they teach you about reproduction in high school?'

Like most teenage boys it hadn't been the reproduction of seals he'd been interested in but Tyler didn't say so out loud. Instead he checked the grounds and the river, the water still busy with tugboats and barges. There was no immediate danger but he couldn't relax. Every muscle in his body was wound tight, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Without a means of release the tension grew, making him hyper-aware of the smallest details.

The name of the tugboat closest to them—the man standing on the prow of a barge—the water lapping against algae-covered rocks—the way a breeze from the river brushed a loose tendril of flame-red hair against the sensitive skin on her neck. He frowned as it swayed back and forth in a whispered touch that made his fingertips itch.

The ability to store large quantities of miscellaneous information in the back of his head until he needed to call on it was something Tyler had always taken for granted. It allowed him to focus his mind and manage the most immediate tasks. In many ways his brain acted like a computer with several open programs, a dozen others working in the background and plenty of spare memory. If that was the case she was messing with his operating system. Every time his eyes opened an image of her the screen froze.

'They're supposed to be around here somewhere,' she continued. 'There was a picture on Twitter.'

'Right,' he said dryly. He'd never been a Twitter fan but he knew she was popular there. It was the one area he hadn't been allowed to suggest changes.

From a protection standpoint he thought regularly reporting her location to all and sundry was an unnecessary risk. From the perspective of the mayor's press office her online presence was a valuable publicity tool. That they wouldn't budge on the subject still bugged him.

But not as much as all the standing around he'd been doing since he reported for duty.

'I don't think they constitute a breach in security if that's what you're worried about.' She glanced up at him again. 'Isn't it supposed to be dolphins they train to carry explosives?' When he didn't say anything, she leaned an elbow on the railing and turned toward him. 'You don't have a sense of humour, do you?'

'Would it save time if I told you I wasn't here to make friends?'

'I'm shocked,' she replied without batting an eye.

Tyler fought his nature. Normally he gave as good as he got; with a woman who looked the way she did it would probably involve a heavy dose of flirting. He could lay on the charm when he set his mind to it. But even if he hadn't been assigned to the position of babysitter his skills were a little rusty. Hadn't had much call to use them when he was buried in work was the easiest explanation. Hadn't met anyone he wanted to use them on was another.

But there was a reason for that.

When the thought conjured an image of long dark hair and soulful brown eyes it didn't improve his mood.

'That's how you got some of the others to turn a blind eye, isn't it?'

She raised an elegantly arched brow. 'What are we talking about now?'

'Your little adventures...'

'What adventures?'

Tyler cut to the chase. 'I do my homework. There isn't anything I don't know about you.'

There was a melodic burst of dismissive laughter. 'I very much doubt that.'

He summoned the necessary information without missing a beat. 'Miranda Eleanor Kravitz, twenty-four, born in Manhattan, raised in Vermont, moved back to New York prior to your father becoming mayor when you were seventeen.'

'Sixteen,' she corrected. 'Elections are in November.'

'He didn't take up office until January. Your birthday is December fourteenth. You were seventeen.' He picked up where he'd left off before she interrupted. 'You were a straight "A" student in high school, made the honour roll and in the final year took one of the leads in a stage production of Twelfth Night.' It was probably where she'd picked up her acting skills. 'Fluent in Spanish and French, studied English literature at NYU. By the time you left you'd danced on a table in a reality TV show and made headlines twice—once when you were caught drunk partying with the same infamous party girl who—'

'Has my bra size made it to Wikipedia yet?'

When the old Tyler made a rare appearance his gaze automatically lowered to the scooped neck of her T-shirt. 'No, but I'm willing to go out on a limb and say you're a—'

'Eyes north, Detective,' she warned in a lower voice.

Irritated he'd stepped over the line again, Tyler snapped his gaze back up. 'The investigation I did before I got here involved more than Googling your name. I talked to every bodyguard assigned to you and know exactly how you roll. There isn't an escape route I haven't plugged or a former cohort who hasn't been reassigned. The guy on the gate tonight is new, too, so you wouldn't have got far. You don't have any friends in the security team any more. What you have is people focused on doing their jobs who'll end up back in uniform if they don't.'

The gold in her eyes flared. 'What is your problem?'

'Until you accept you're not going anywhere without me or one of the other guys on your new detail, it's you.'

'You're not my keeper.'

Tyler stepped around her. 'Well, obviously they figured you needed one or I wouldn't be here.'

'Who are "they"?' she asked as she followed him.

'Who do you think they are?'

She muttered something incoherent below her breath but judging by her tone it wasn't a word she'd picked up from a study of English literature.

When he stopped and turned around she took a step back and frowned at the centre of his chest.

'This close to the election you're a liability,' he told her flatly. 'Three weeks back you were photographed sitting on a bar while some random guy licked salt off your neck before taking a shot of tequila.'

She lifted her chin. ‘Jealous?’

‘Personally I couldn’t give a damn what you do.’ Even if his reaction to seeing the photographs after he kissed her might have suggested otherwise. ‘The only thing that concerns me is making sure it doesn’t happen again. Some major favours were called in to keep those pictures out of the public eye.’

Any surprise she felt was hidden behind a mask of ice. ‘It’s just as well there wasn’t anyone with a camera in a darkened hall on Friday night, then, isn’t it?’

When she turned on her heel and headed back to the mansion Tyler let her get a few steps ahead. He needed to take a beat. Her parting shot had been bang on target but that wasn’t what grated him. What did was the indifference in her voice. He wasn’t the only one who got carried away in that hall. The implication he could have been just another guy lining up to lick salt off her neck bothered him a great deal more than it should.

At a very basic level he wanted to march on over there and demonstrate she was wrong. A Brannigan never backed down from a challenge. Trouble was they were also carved with deep streaks of honour and duty and while he knew how close he was to breaking one code, he had to hang on tight to the other. If he didn’t there would be nothing left of the man he was before everything got so messed up.

‘Go home, Detective,’ she demanded when they were back in the kitchen.

‘No can do,’ he informed her retreating back.

When she turned he got a brief glimpse of how angry she was from the flash of fire in her eyes. Then the ice returned. ‘I’ll make a deal with you.’

‘What kind of deal?’

‘I’ll give you my word I’ll stay in tonight and that way you won’t have to camp outside my door.’ She ran an impassive gaze down the length of his body and back up. ‘A good night’s sleep might help with all the tension you’re carrying around...’

Tyler treated her to his patented interrogation face: the one that said nothing short of a nuclear blast would change his position. ‘What’s the catch?’

She shook her head. ‘No catch.’

‘What do you get out of it?’

‘Apart from a break from you?’

The thought he got to her went a long way towards evening the playing field, but there was more to it than that. ‘You want something.’

‘World peace, an end to poverty, freedom and justice for all... I want a great many things, Detective. But for now I’ll settle for your name.’

What was the big deal with his name? He ran through every possible scam she could be running and came up short. But with his Spidey-senses on alert he knew whatever she was doing was part of something bigger. That was okay, he could play the long game, and if giving her a name was what it took to give him a few hours he could put to better use than standing twiddling his thumbs or sleeping...

‘Tyler.’

‘Tyler,’ she repeated in a lower voice as if savouring how it felt on her tongue.

Hearing her say it had a mesmerizing effect he’d never experienced before. Time stretched inexorably while she stared at him, her chin angled in contemplation. As he tried to figure out why his blood had thickened to the same consistency as magma when she hadn’t done anything overtly seductive, she blinked and turned away.

‘I’ll see you in the morning, Tyler.’

‘You leave this house, I’ll know inside five seconds.’

She raised an arm and waggled her fingers in the air. ‘Nighty-night.’

Tyler stood in the same spot after she left, trying to decide whether he trusted her any further than he could throw her. His word meant something—or at least it used to; he wasn't convinced hers did. Then his cell phone vibrated.

'Brannigan.'

'So what's it like with the city's version of the Secret Service?'

The sound of his partner's voice got him moving again. 'Don't ask,' he said as he left the kitchen and headed for the control room. 'Got anything new for me?'

'There weren't any DNA hits in the database.'

'It took them a month to tell us that?'

'Backed up in the lab...'

'What about the known associates we've been chasing?'

'There I might have better news.'

Tyler nodded brusquely. 'Save it for when I see you. I'll be at O'Malley's by nine.'

'If I end up divorced I'm blaming you.'

'Because all your kids look like me?'

The response made the corner of Tyler's mouth lift. It was the closest he got to a smile any more. Pretending nothing was wrong when he was around the people who knew him was wearing him down. From that point of view his day with the mayor's daughter had been a welcome respite.

He just had to get a handle on his reaction to her while he was still volatile.

There'd been a time when not getting involved had never been a problem for him the way it had for other members of his family. He'd kept his distance and remained detached, gaining a rep for being emotionally unavailable to women along the way. Once he'd made the mistake of thinking he could handle a little attachment he'd fallen flat on his face. To top it off he'd overcompensated and it had cost someone their life.

Sometimes he thought he saw her face in a crowd: dull, lifeless eyes staring at him in silent accusation. She was a ghost who followed him everywhere.

He shouldn't have left her alone.

The thought gave him a moment's pause outside the room that housed the security monitors. From inside he could hear the voices of the men whose presence meant he wasn't leaving the mayor's daughter unprotected even if there was an immediate threat.

There was no reason for him to feel torn.

A small army of people surrounded Miranda Kravitz and, though they might not have kept her out of trouble, they had plenty of practice cushioning her from the world beyond the walls of the mansion. It wasn't as if she didn't have a voice, either. Half her problem with him was he didn't let her get her own way when she was plainly accustomed to getting whatever she wanted.

Tyler stood up for the people who didn't have a voice, who didn't have the opportunities she'd been given or the ability to escape their lives when they felt like it. If she broke her word, she would pay for it. He'd see to that.

She might think he'd been tough on her the first day, but she had no idea how ruthless he could be.

SIX

The small victories gained when she got him to start a conversation and give her the name she so badly wanted to know were enough to allow Miranda to cut him some slack. She wouldn't break her word. What helped him more was that he'd given her somewhere else to focus her ire. After a night of enforced captivity she was determined to fight for her rights.

'Good morning, Miranda.'

'Good morning, Grace.' She saw the surprise in the older woman's eyes when she appeared outside her father's office. 'Is the mayor in?'

'He's having breakfast with the chief of police.'

'Where is my mother?'

'I believe she's still in the morning room.'

When she turned on her heel Grace grabbed her file, rounded her desk and rushed down the hall after her. 'You have a nine a.m. appointment in Brooklyn at—'

'Not now, Grace.' It was rude and she was sorry for that but they both knew the morning briefing was more habit than necessity. Miranda knew where she was going days in advance—weeks for the functions that required more forwards planning. If she didn't how was she supposed to know what to wear or find time to research things she knew nothing about so she could hold a conversation?

Two sets of eyes looked across the morning room as she entered without knocking. 'Could you give us a moment, please, Roger?' Once the door shut behind him Miranda took a deep breath. 'I won't be held prisoner in this house.'

'Sit down, darling.'

'I don't want to sit down,' she said without moving. 'What I want is to be treated like an adult.'

'Start behaving like one and you will,' her mother replied with the infinite patience that drove her daughter insane when she was upset about something. 'Now take a seat and tell me what's wrong.'

'You knew, didn't you?'

'Knew what?'

'About the changes to my security detail.'

'It's hardly the first change of personnel since we took up residence.' Her mother raised a brow. 'Don't you think you're overreacting a little?'

'When they were brought in specifically to keep me out of trouble in case I prove an embarrassment to you during the campaign?'

'Well, obviously we would prefer to avoid any negative publicity this close to—'

'I'm more than aware of the responsibilities forced on me since my teens, Mother. I don't need a reminder.'

'Yet your father and I are being given increasingly regular reports of your acts of rebellion.' She gracefully folded her hands together on her lap. 'We were elected to set an example. People expect more of this family. That's the life we live.'

'We weren't elected,' Miranda reminded her. 'Dad was. I didn't choose to run for office and I wasn't elected to the position of your daughter. Doesn't the fact I've lived someone else's life for half of mine count for anything?'

'Like it or not, you're still the mayor's daughter. This is his last term in office and—'

'If he's elected or are we taking that for granted? Throwing pots of money at the campaign isn't an automatic guarantee of success.'

'We're a family, Miranda. We stick together through everything. Once the election is over—'

A small burst of sarcastic laughter left her lips. 'I'm supposed to do what—wait until he decides whether he wants to confirm the rumours and run for Governor? Why stop there—what about the White House?'

'That's your father's decision.'

'And how I choose to live my life is mine. If you want me to act like a grown-up you have to allow me to be one. How am I supposed to learn from my mistakes if I'm not permitted to make any?'

'Your argument might carry more weight if there was any evidence to support it,' her mother replied. 'We gave you more freedom at NYU and you repaid our trust by having your picture splashed across several tabloids.'

Miranda's frustration grew. 'I love dancing and got drunk when I turned twenty-one—how does that make me worse than any other college student in America? I could have been running around in a wet T-shirt during spring break or got arrested at student protests. I could have experimented with drugs or slept with guys who were happy to make a buck selling all the gory details to the press. I didn't but none of those things matter any more than the long hours I work. Did it occur to either one of you that turning this place into the equivalent of Alcatraz would make the need for escape more necessary? Why do you think Richie chose to attend a college on the other side of the country?'

'There's no need to raise your voice. If you would learn how to state your case calmly and sensibly the way your brother does—'

Miranda shook her head. No matter how often she tried to communicate with her mother every conversation left her feeling like a petulant teenager. The truth was her parents didn't know their son any better than their daughter. While they had disappeared off to countless business meetings, charity benefits and met with people who were keen for her father to launch his political career their daughter had become a surrogate mother.

She'd read her baby brother bedtime stories and made sure he did his homework. She'd put Band-Aids on cuts, watched cartoons when he was sick and held his hand when they'd had to face a world filled with curious eyes.

No one had done those things for her.

'I'm done,' she said flatly. 'I'll stick around for the election but once the votes are counted, I'm out. No more public appearances, no more smiling for photographers and no bodyguards following me everywhere I go. I never wanted one to begin with and I don't see why the taxpayer should suffer because my overprotective parents want to control my every move.'

It meant breaking the pact she'd made with her brother but it couldn't be helped. Not when another eight months felt like a life sentence.

There was a heavy sigh as she turned away. 'Miranda—'

'I'm going to be late for my first appointment.' When she yanked the door open and stepped into the hall her gaze lifted and crashed into cobalt-blue eyes.

Her breath caught. Tyler.

With her heart still beating hard as a result of a long-overdue parental confrontation she experienced the same difficulty she had the last time his name echoed in her mind. She couldn't break eye contact, was frozen in place and her brain seemed to have turned into mush.

He broke the spell with the blink of dense lashes and held out a sheet of paper. 'I told Grace I'd make sure you got this.'

'Thank you.' She took the schedule with one hand and closed the door behind her with the other.

'You ready to go?'

'I need a couple of minutes.'

He nodded. 'I'll be outside.'

Miranda turned the sheet of paper in her hands as they walked down the hall. When she stole an upward glance at his profile she saw the corner of his mouth lift.

'Bye, Grace,' his voice rumbled.

'Bye, Tyler.'

Her gaze shifted in time to catch a glimpse of what looked like a hint of warmth on the older woman's cheeks. In all the years she'd known her, she'd never seen Grace blush. Or be flustered enough to feel the need to shuffle the papers on her desk. Had he just winked at her?

The thought was surreal.

When she stole another glance as they approached the top of the stairs he caught her doing it. Adopting the same impassive expression he was wearing, she simply blinked and looked away. If there was one thing she'd learnt about him it was when he had something to say he didn't have any difficulty opening his mouth. Keeping it shut on the subject of anything he might have heard through the door would be her advice.

When he remained silent she lifted the sheet of paper and glanced over her day.

'You need any help with the big words, let me know.'

The comment made her glare at him in warning before they parted ways but as she continued down the hall to her bedroom something unexpected happened: she smiled.

Unwittingly he'd given her exactly what she needed to face the day. Combined with the knowledge that her release date was closer, it placed a spring in her step that hadn't been there before.

SEVEN

Something was eating at Tyler.

Usually it meant he'd missed something—a random clue or part of the puzzle that didn't quite fit. That Miranda would make another bid for freedom was a given. What he didn't get was why it suddenly felt wrong to stand in her way.

Hearing what he'd heard through the door that morning probably had something to do with it. The knowledge she hadn't wanted a bodyguard helped raise his opinion of her a notch, even if she was under the misconception she didn't need one. But then she didn't know what he knew, did she?

His gaze scanned the room, but with little cause for concern among a bunch of kids and schoolteachers it slid back to his mark. The long legs encased in sharply tailored dark grey trousers were folded elegantly to the side, one high-heeled open-toed white shoe tapping in time to the music while she smiled. Judging by the sparkle in her eyes, she would probably agree calling the recital music was a bit of a stretch but it didn't seem to dilute her enjoyment any.

Maybe that was what was eating him: her mood.

She'd been Little Miss Sunshine since she appeared outside the mansion.

When the cacophony of sound limped its way to an overly enthusiastic end she led the applause and stood up. 'Thank you, that was wonderful. The mayor would have loved this. If you keep practising and get to Radio City Music Hall I'll make sure he has front-row tickets.'

Tyler doubted there was an adult present who didn't think they would need to be practising for a very long time before that happened. Opening the door, he stepped into the empty hall, inhaling the scent he'd had so much difficulty ignoring on the trip over as she passed within inches of him. It was different from the sophisticated perfume she'd worn the day before. Since he wasn't up to date on flowers he couldn't identify what it had been but now he thought about it he reckoned it was probably something like lilies or lilac. The one she was currently wearing was sweeter, more playful and made him wonder if she matched her perfume to where she was going with as much care as her clothes.

If she did it was clever. Even if he could have done without the constant trace of strawberries in the air as a reminder of how she'd tasted on his lips.

He followed a few steps behind as the head teacher and members of the board escorted her along the hall. When his gaze lowered to the feminine sway of her hips he hid a frown of annoyance and forced it elsewhere.

'This next class is made up of children with learning difficulties,' the principal explained. 'The ratio of teacher and classroom assistant to pupil is higher.'

'What is the age range?' Miranda asked.

'Between six and eight...'

When they filed inside Tyler took up position by the door again. After a cursory inventory of his surroundings, the occupants and checking the line of sight through the windows there wasn't much else for him to do but continue watching her. He justified the action by telling himself he was searching for the clue he might have missed, examining everything from her introductory wave to how she interacted with the children as she moved from one small desk to the next. She crouched down to eye level, asked questions and listened carefully to the answers. From time to time she ruffled the odd tousled head of hair, her hundred-watt smile flashing more than once.

It wasn't dissimilar to the act she'd put on with the elderly in the Bronx the day before but Tyler couldn't shake the sensation something was different.

As the principal explained some of the ways they made it easier for the kids to stay focused somewhat ironically Miranda's attention wandered. When her gaze landed on something at his side of the room and she angled her chin with curiosity, Tyler looked to see what it was.

A little girl with blonde hair sat on padded mats on the floor a few feet away, seemingly oblivious to what was happening around her as she swapped one thick crayon for another and continued colouring a sheet of paper.

Miranda crossed the room and hunched down beside her.

'Hello.'

The girl didn't look up.

'Would you mind if I sat with you for a minute? My feet are really starting to hurt in these shoes.'

No reply.

Regardless of her expensive outfit, she sat down and tucked her legs to one side. 'That's a very pretty picture. I love the flowers. Pink is my favorite colour.'

After a moment's hesitation the girl reached for a pink crayon, her chin lifting as she held it up.

The gesture was received with an impossibly soft smile. 'Is that for me?'

There was a nod.

'Are you sure you want me to help? I can never stay between the lines when I'm supposed to.'

Tyler thought it was the most honest statement she'd made since they met. That it was said with a hint of self-recrimination was interesting. For a second he almost believed it was a glimpse of the real her.

Accepting the crayon, she brushed her hair over her shoulder and looked at the picture again. 'Which one do you want me to do?' A small finger pointed at the page. 'Okay. I'll try not to mess it up for you.'

Tyler looked at the captivated audience of adults who were watching what she was doing. He doubted any of them would forget it before they cast their vote in the election. They'd see her father's name on the voting slip and think of her. Maybe even tick the box next to his name if they'd been wavering.

He'd thought New Yorkers were savvier than that.

'You have flowers,' a small voice said.

His gaze was drawn back to Miranda as she glanced down at her blouse. 'I like the ruffles and the layers. They all feel different. Try one and see.'

A small hand reached out to one of the larger grey and white flowers pinned randomly to white linen. Catching a ruffle between a thumb and forefinger, the girl checked out how it felt. 'Soft.'

'Do you like the beads in the middle?'

'They're shiny.'

'Someone has to sew them on with a needle and thread.'

'Did you do it?'

'Nuh-uh,' Miranda sang in reply. 'Needles are pointy. It's not a good idea to play with the things that might hurt you.'

Something she could have done with remembering before she gave a stranger the come-on from a dance floor.

Tyler looked away and found a boy at a nearby desk staring at his waist with wide eyes. Lightly shrugging his shoulders, he tugged the edges of his jacket closer together to cover his sidearm and checked his watch. It was almost time to leave. Shifting his gaze to his mark, he waited for an opening to make eye contact.

'What's your name?'

'Casey.'

'I'm Miranda. Why are you sitting on your own, Casey? Don't you want to sit with your friends?'

'There are boys at my table,' she explained with the typically solid reasoning of most small girls her age.

'Some boys can be nice.'

'Some of them are mean.'

'Believe me, I know.' Obviously stifling amusement, Miranda shot a pointed glance his way.

Cute—with a lazy blink to indicate he'd got the message, Tyler subtly tapped his watch. Tick-tock, princess.

'I have to go now, Casey,' she said with a pout before turning it into a smile. 'But it was very nice to meet you. Thanks for letting me colour with you.'

'Are your feet better?'

'Much better, thank you.' She pushed upright and ran her palms over the seat of her trousers, brows lifting when the sheet of paper was held up in the air. 'I can take it home with me?'

'You can finish it at your house.'

'I will, I promise. Bye, Casey.'

'Bye, Miranda.'

She waved to the rest of the room. 'Bye, kids. Thanks for letting me come visit you today. I can't wait to tell the mayor how great you're all doing in school.'

Tyler stepped into the hall as there was a chorus of goodbyes. Lifting the mike in his closed hand, he spoke into it in a low voice.

'Rand from Brannigan, Phoenix is on the move.'

The reply sounded in his earpiece. 'Roger that—moving to primary.'

As they approached the main entrance Tyler tuned out of the conversation and went on alert. There had been a small gathering of parents outside when they arrived, but, taking into consideration how long they'd been there, the numbers might have grown. When the group in front of him stopped in the foyer he headed for the doors to check it out. What he discovered made him twice as determined to stay focused. He had to hand it to her: whatever else she might be, the woman was a crowd-puller.

When she said her goodbyes, shook hands and headed his way he stepped outside, his eyes on the crowd as he walked a few feet in front of her. What he was looking for as she approached the people yelling for attention was someone who stood out, whose actions and demeanor were different from everyone else's. While she waved and stopped to shake hands on the approach to Officer Rand at the waiting Suburban, Tyler took dozens of mental snapshots. A couple of minutes and an alarm bell went off in his head.

He went back over the last faces he'd seen while she talked to a young woman who followed her on Twitter.

At the back of the crowd there was a man who wasn't smiling or yelling. He was pale and ordinary looking, the kind of guy who normally faded into the background. Dark hair, approximately five feet eight, glasses, baseball cap with a faded lion logo—nothing unusual there. What made him stand out was how he was fixated on Miranda as if she was the only thing he could see.

Suddenly Tyler was aware of every hand reaching out for her, the weight of bodies pressed against the barricade close to where she stood and the flapping greeting banners that could obscure any of the danger behind them.

Adrenaline sped through his veins while his gaze flickered to face after face. With a sickening sense of inevitability heads moved in the crowd and he saw the one face he would never forget. Dull, lifeless eyes filled with accusation stared at him from a face streaked with blood.

It didn't matter that the man at the back of the crowd hadn't moved. He couldn't take a chance.

Stepping towards Miranda, he laid a palm on the inward curve of her spine and leaned close to her ear. 'You need to go now.'

Her body stiffened as she looked into his eyes. 'Why?'

'Just do it.' He added pressure to her spine to move her along.

To her credit she dealt with the situation a lot better than he did, smiling brightly and waving goodbye as he ushered her to safety. If he had time to stop and think about it Tyler might have realized he respected her for that. But since he was too busy getting her the hell out of there he jerked his chin at Rand, who opened the rear door and looked around.

‘Problem?’ he asked when Miranda was inside.

‘Guy on my six at the back of the crowd.’

Rand looked over his shoulder. ‘Which one?’

‘Pale complexion, glasses, baseball cap.’

‘Don’t see him.’

Turning ninety degrees and zeroing in on the position, Tyler frowned when he discovered the man wasn’t there.

‘Let’s go.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Miranda asked when he opened the driver’s door and got behind the wheel.

He watched Rand through the windscreen as he walked around the front of the vehicle to the jump seat. ‘Nothing you need to worry about.’

‘Nice try.’ To his surprise her voice softened. ‘I saw your face, Tyler, and—’

‘We have a schedule to stick to,’ he said tightly as the passenger door opened. When their gazes met in the mirror something resembling understanding passed silently between them before she glanced at Rand.

She shook her head. ‘You’re more obsessed with my schedule than Grace.’

It wasn’t the first time she’d followed his lead. But that she hadn’t pushed on the subject in front of his fellow officer made it feel as if she was protecting him, which was not a pleasant sensation for Tyler. Pulling away from the kerb, he headed them back to Manhattan and took deep, even breaths. That his heart rate still hadn’t returned to normal by the time they got to the Brooklyn Bridge wasn’t unusual—he’d been in plenty of situations where adrenalin continued to course through his body long after the event.

But this time felt different.

He just wasn’t sure he wanted to know why.

EIGHT

As someone who'd been looking forwards to a little one-on-one time with her new prison warden—albeit in the form of a continuing game of one-upmanship—Miranda found the addition of a second bodyguard a tad frustrating. By midafternoon she was glad to see Lewis go, especially when she hadn't been able to get what happened off her mind. They'd barely left the civic reception at City Hall before she focused on what she could see of his reflection in the rear-view mirror and broached the subject with Tyler.

'What happened this morning?'

'I told you it was nothing to worry about.'

She scowled at his eyes when they didn't look at her. The fact he was driving through heavy traffic didn't seem to matter. 'I didn't push the subject when Lewis was here,' she reminded him. 'But I saw the look on your face and there's no way you were that spooked about nothing.'

'I wasn't spooked.'

'Call it what you want, I know what I saw.'

The atmosphere within the cocoon of the SUV grew darker, the lack of a response adding to her frustration. 'The whole mean, moody and mysterious thing you're working so well won't cut it with me. If you want to build a level of trust in this relationship it has to go both ways.'

'When I think you need to know something, you will.'

She tried to figure out why she'd wasted time worrying about him. Despite his denial he'd been spooked, Miranda couldn't think of a better word to describe his reaction. When she'd stolen a glance at him as he watched the crowd he was frozen in place, ramrod straight and the colour seemed to have faded beneath his tan.

Momentarily distracted by the conversation she was having with the person closest to her, she hadn't seen him move. She could still feel the pressure of his large hand on her spine, the heat of his touch branding her through the material of her blouse as an electric current zinged through her body. Adding the deep rumble of his voice so close to her ear she could almost feel his lips move left her skin feeling several sizes too small to fit over her bones. He would never know how much effort it had taken to make it look as if she hadn't been so shaken by it she wouldn't have noticed if the sky had fallen down.

As she turned her head and looked out of the side window she blamed her fantasies. The time she'd spent dreaming about having seriously hot sex with him combined with the forbidden aspect of physical contact with one of her bodyguards had left her body primed in a way it had never been for any other man.

The pang of hurt she felt was harder to justify.

When she'd looked into his eyes in the mirror, she'd thought she felt a flicker of understanding pass between them and dropped the subject until they were alone. It was the same way she'd felt in the school when she teased him about being mean and even made her wonder if giving her what she'd needed after the confrontation with her mother had been unintentional.

She wouldn't make the same mistake again.

By rejecting the olive branch she'd offered him, Detective Brannigan had sealed his fate.

Fishing in her Herrera bag for a pair of sunglasses, she hid behind them while she plotted her revenge.

NINE

Like every other guy on the planet Tyler could think of a million other things he would rather do than sit around waiting while a woman went shopping for clothes. That she felt the need to parade each outfit in front of him wasn't helping any, especially when it gave him an excuse to fill his mind with image after image of her body.

Leaning forwards on a velvet-covered chair, he rested his elbows on his knees, staring at the cream carpet while he crossed his jaw and mentally prepared for the next test of his self-control.

'This neckline might be a little too low,' her voice announced from beyond the curtain.

While he appreciated the warning he still felt the need to take a deep breath and blow it into his cheeks before exhaling. If she started modelling lingerie he would have to take a cold shower. The sound of curtain rings drawing across a rail lifted his gaze for a furtive glimpse of what was headed his way.

A little too low, she'd said?

The damn thing was practically at her navel.

All but painted onto her body, the black floor-length sleeveless dress plunged downwards from two thick straps on her shoulders. The globes of her spectacular breasts were barely contained, leading his gaze over the valley of her cleavage to the minuscule black band beneath and the tempting strip of skin beyond that.

She placed her hands on her hips and struck a come-and-get-me pose. 'What do you think?'

It was a bit difficult to think anything when all the blood had rushed from his brain to a point in his body that was so painfully hard he had to stifle a groan.

Silently clearing his throat, he forced a response through tight lips. 'It's nice.'

She arched a brow. 'Nice?'

Tyler frowned as he raised his chin and looked into her eyes. 'What do you want me to say?'

'Anything other than nice, fine or not bad would make a pleasant change.' She took a deep breath that pushed her breasts forwards and loosened Tyler's grip on his sanity. Then she bent forwards, lowered her gaze and wriggled her shoulders from side to side. 'I'm a bit worried I might pop out of it.'

He sat up and ran his palms over his face. 'How much longer do we have to do this?'

Raising her hands Miranda cupped her breasts as she straightened. By the time she looked at him Tyler had his hands in his lap to hide the evidence of what she was doing to him.

'As long as it takes to get what I want...' A decadent smile formed on her lips as she dropped her hands to her sides. She shrugged. 'There's a reason this is the last appointment on the schedule today. They'll stay open late for me if I need them to. They're awfully good about that and I do love to shop.' Turning, she looked over her shoulder and asked, 'How does it look from the back?'

Like endless miles of flawlessly tanned skin he wanted to touch to discover if it was as soft as it looked. He'd start with his hands, then his mouth, would retrace the path they took with his tongue and blow gently on the wet surface to raise goose-bumps while he raised her skirt and...

'I was worried about lines so I thought it was best not to wear anything underneath it.'

Tyler swore viciously inside his head. Gritting his teeth together hard enough to crack the enamel, he managed to bite, 'Where exactly are you planning on wearing that?'

'You think it's too much for something public?' She stepped over to the mirrors lining one wall so he was treated to a front and back view at the same time. 'You're probably right. Somewhere more intimate would be better. Given the right smoky atmosphere and some sultry music...' She closed her eyes and swayed her hips. 'Mmm...' Her palms followed the curve of her sides from waist to hip. Then she stilled and popped open her eyes. 'I might get this one.'

When she went back into the dressing room Tyler looked at the ceiling and silently asked what he'd done to deserve her. Didn't he have enough to deal with already? He might have miraculously managed to temporarily put his problems to the back of his mind, but it didn't mean they'd gone away. He supposed he should be thankful she hadn't made another escape attempt. But while she was making him suffer for not telling her what had happened outside the school he didn't consider it much of a silver lining.

The door to his left opened and the personal shopper who'd already rolled a rack of clothes into the changing area appeared with another one.

'How is she getting on?' she enquired with a smile as she wheeled it in.

'Slowly.'

His response earned a chuckle of laughter. 'You can't become a fashion icon in this city without putting in long hours of preparation.'

Since he didn't know anything about fashion Tyler would have to take her word for that.

'Is that Janice with the next rack?' a voice called from behind the curtain.

'Yes, I have it here,' Janice replied. 'Is it safe to come in?'

'Absolutely. If you hadn't come back I was going to have to ask Tyler to zip me up.'

While they chatted behind the curtain he pushed to his feet and began pacing the room. After the third lap—and with no new outfit to send him over the edge—he reached into his pocket for his cell phone and called his partner.

'I'm officially in hell,' he said in a low voice.

'The mayor's little girl proving too much of a handful for you?'

'She's shopping.'

'I feel your pain, brother.'

'Could you feel it without sounding so amused?' He walked to the other side of the room and glanced at the curtain. 'Give me some good news about the case and I won't hit you the next time I see you.'

While his partner brought him up to speed he made the mistake of turning his back to the changing room. It was only when he ended the call he realized it had gone quiet.

Immediately crossing the room, he threw caution to the wind and yanked back the curtain.

'Son-of-a—'

TEN

'How pissed do you think he'll be when he tracks you down?'

Miranda shrugged as they relaxed in comfortable chairs in the elegant surroundings of the iconic Waldorf Astoria. 'Don't care. He deserves it.'

She didn't mention she'd never met anyone who could irritate the life out of her one minute and make her so hot it felt as if she had a fever in the next. She'd never behaved so provocatively before, purposefully pushing the boundaries of his control to discover how much he could take. It was a perilous game—one she'd thought she had the sense not to play with a man who oozed danger the way Tyler did—but had that stopped her? Oh, no.

'You don't feel the least little bit guilty he might get in trouble for losing you?'

'I didn't until you mentioned it so thanks for that—I owe you one.'

Crystal lifted one of the porcelain teacups sitting on the round table between them. 'That conscience of yours has always been a problem. We still need to work on that.'

'You wouldn't have got me this far if I didn't have a natural aptitude for courting trouble.'

'I did say I saw potential in you for greatness when we met.'

'Give me a couple of months to shake off my shackles and I promise to spread my wings and soar,' Miranda vowed.

She heard the clink of the teacup touching a saucer as Crystal took a long breath. 'Nothing to tie you down...no one to get in your way...' She hummed as she exhaled. 'Put all that freedom together with the absence of a guilty conscience and I might have to abdicate my notoriety throne in favour of a worthy successor.'

Drumming her fingers on the arms of her chair, Miranda gently swayed her crossed leg while she tried to convince herself she wasn't watching the foyer for Tyler's arrival. If the stupid man could make up his mind what he wanted it would make things a lot easier.

The way he had looked at her set her body alight, her pulse hammering and her breasts aching for attention. If she had any sense she would have toned it down a little. But the more of a reaction she got from him, the hotter he made her feel, and the desire to push him to breaking point grew. She hadn't been able to stop.

She'd wanted him to snap.

If the first time she'd encouraged him with a smile had felt like playing with fire, using her sexuality to get to him was about to turn her into a pyromaniac.

She still didn't like him. She was still mad at him for making her feel like a fool because she'd looked for something that obviously wasn't there. But apparently the thought of angry sex with him did it for her, big time.

'You still confident in your fifty-dollar bet on him finding you inside a couple of hours?' Crystal asked.

'If he was as smart as he likes to think he is he would have found me already.'

'If he was as smart as you say he thinks he is he would have found Jimmy Hoffa by now.'

She turned her head and smiled ruefully at her best friend. 'So much for my great plan... It doesn't take away from the victory of escaping when he was so determined it wasn't possible. But slinking back to the mansion to find him waiting for me like another disgruntled parent takes the shine off it a little.'

Crystal's gaze moved. 'Well you better dig out your sunglasses because if that's who I think it is headed our way the day just got a whole lot brighter.'

Miranda's gaze immediately shifted to the foyer. The sight of him did its usual snatch and grab with her breath. When his gaze sliced through the air and slammed into hers a heady frisson of excitement travelled through her body. He wasn't just mad. He looked as if he was ready to explode.

'Wow.' Crystal sighed dreamily. 'I want to be in as much trouble as you are right now. Do you think he'll spank you? He looks like he's gonna spank you good.'

Her reaction to the suggestion shocked Miranda.

She really was a very bad girl.

Exhaling the breath she'd been holding, she smiled sweetly as he marched straight up to them. 'I don't believe you've been formally introduced. Detective Brannigan, meet Crystal—Crystal, meet Tyler.'

'Well, hello, Tyler. Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just pleased to meet me?'

A low burst of laughter bubbled up from Miranda's chest when he pressed his mouth into a thin line. 'He doesn't have a sense of humour but I thought it was funny.'

'Awesome,' Crystal replied.

His dark gaze remained firmly fixed on the cause of his anger. 'You're leaving now.'

'Excellent timing. I've just finished my tea. If you hadn't got here I would have had to hail another cab.' She lifted her brows. 'Did you park nearby? I can wait for you to bring the car around front.'

Rage rolled off his large body in waves. 'I'll carry you out of here if I have to.'

'How about we save that for next time?' She reached to the side for her bag and unfolded her legs.

As she got to her feet Crystal held up a set of neatly folded bills. 'The fifty dollars I owe you.'

Miranda turned towards her and flashed a grin, 'Why, thank you. It's been a pleasure doing business with you.'

'Any time. Don't forget about that thing at the place we talked about. It should be a blast.'

'I'll see you there.'

'No, she won't,' a deep voice said firmly.

Miranda waved a dismissive hand in his direction. 'Don't listen to him. I never do. Love you.'

'Love you, too.'

Taking the lead, she walked across the foyer with her head held high. When they got to the revolving doors she stopped and angled her chin. 'Oh, dear, this is a bit of a dilemma.' She looked up at him. 'Do you gamble on me going first or risk turning your back on me again? It must be a little like playing roulette for you.'

'Having fun?' he asked through gritted teeth as he captured her elbow in a potentially bruising grasp and bundled them both into a narrow compartment.

'I was till you got here.' But actually, while crushed so tightly against him, she still kinda was.

Wriggling experimentally, she smiled when he tensed.

'You're a piece of work.'

She tugged her elbow free when they hit the sidewalk and he'd pushed her in the right direction. 'You're just upset I slipped through your iron curtain of security. Through a velvet one, no less.'

'Did it ever occur to you if you can find a way out someone can use the same way to get to you?'

'Why would anyone want to get to me?'

'Famous brings out the crazy. I don't even care that you're famous and right this minute I want to kill you.'

'How did you find me?' she enquired as they walked to wherever they were going. She hoped it was far away. She was having entirely too much fun to stop now.

'Your friend Crystal needs to turn off the location option on her Facebook page. And while we're on the subject of the internet any Twittering you do about the places you're going should be done after you've been there.'

'They're called Tweets.'

‘They’re a waving flag that says “come get me, I’m over here.”’ As they stopped at a crossing he flicked a glare at her. ‘Every whack job in the five boroughs could have been waiting for you outside that school.’

‘Is that what spooked you?’

‘I wasn’t spooked.’ His reaction to the word was so vicious the second time around it gave Miranda the distinct impression she’d hit a nerve. He took a long breath and frowned at how long it was taking for the light to change. ‘Someone in the crowd was off.’

Miranda’s eyes narrowed. ‘Define “off.”’

‘Acting odd—hinky—out of place—obsessively watching your every move.’ He captured her elbow again and pushed her across the street.

‘You spend all day watching my every move.’

‘I’m paid to do it and, believe me, it wasn’t my idea.’

‘Whose idea was it?’ She tugged her elbow. ‘You can let go of me now.’

‘Not a chance.’ He navigated their way through the human traffic on the sidewalk. ‘Your head of security used to be my captain’s partner back in the day. When he mentioned he needed an injection of new blood it was my misfortune to be volunteered as the wild card.’

Ah-h-h, so that was what he meant when he said he’d been trying to get out of it for a week. Considering it was the longest conversation they’d ever had, Miranda thought she should make him angry more often. ‘You must have done the close-protection course.’

‘Stop changing the subject.’

She sighed heavily as they rounded a corner. ‘I think you’re overreacting a tad to my having tea at the Waldorf, don’t you? Was I dancing on a table when you got there?’

Tyler stopped so suddenly he had to yank her back into place when she got a couple of steps ahead.

‘Whoopsies.’ Miranda giggled when she almost tripped over, tipsy on the headiness of her success.

He let go of her elbow when she was steady on her feet. ‘You don’t get it, do you?’

‘That this is strike two?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘I heard you. One more strike and—’

His body loomed over her, the tip of his nose barely an inch away from hers as his voice rumbled, ‘Get in the damn car.’

Miranda hadn’t even noticed it was there and, frankly, with his mouth in kissing distance, she couldn’t care less. She angled her head in a move that suggested she was about to fit their lips together and lifted her chin, reducing the gap to millimetres. Then she looked deep into cobalt-blue eyes and whispered, ‘Make. Me.’

The gaze glittering with promise of the danger she so desperately craved wandered lazily over her face. His warm breath mingled with hers while her heart thundered so loudly she could hear it in her ears. It didn’t matter that they were standing in the middle of a street in Manhattan. It didn’t matter that there were people everywhere and dozens of cars driving by and that pretty much everyone in the universe had a camera on their phone. All that mattered was how badly she wanted to be kissed.

There was nothing beyond burning need and him.

When her heavy-lidded gaze lowered to his mouth she saw a corner of it tug upwards.

‘You don’t want to do that,’ he said in a low, husky, unbelievably sexy voice before moving his head so he could whisper in her ear. ‘I’m more trouble than you can handle.’

It was as if he’d placed all of her fantasies within her grasp. Endless possibilities spun around and around in her head in ever decreasing circles with Tyler as the focal point. Miranda blinked at him while he leaned away from her and reached for the door. She turned towards the vehicle and blindly took a step forwards when a thought finally made it through her dizziness. They were just two small words but the weight of their importance felt immense.

‘We’ll see...’

The voice that said them wasn't hers; it was the sultry voice of the siren she'd always suspected lived somewhere deep inside but had been afraid to seek out. Now she realized the temptress had been with her each time she stepped out of the changing room, had fed on his reaction and was gaining the strength she needed to break free.

As Miranda got into the SUV and he slammed the door shut she experienced the crippling fear that stemmed from the threat of its imminent release.

She didn't know what scared her more: having the siren's call answered by someone she would drag to disaster or having it ignored and remaining isolated and alone, endlessly calling out to someone who would sail through her life without stopping to take a second look.

ELEVEN

It took intense concentration for Tyler to focus through a blinding rage so he could drive them back to the mansion.

Discovering she'd slipped out through a hidden door in a mural-covered wall at the back of the changing room meant he didn't have to suffer the humiliation of knowing she'd tiptoed out behind his back. But the thought someone might have taken her made him experience his second wave of unwarranted panic in a handful of hours. The realization she'd stood in front of the hidden door while he checked the space both eased his mind and made him angry as hell.

The latter feeling grew when he had another moment of clarity. He'd been played since the moment they got there.

By the time he'd searched the store, tracked down Janice and interrogated her until she confessed Miranda had left in a cab there wasn't a rock in the state of New York he wouldn't have turned over to find her. The mayor's head of security would rue the day he'd given him the scope to 'do whatever he needed to do' when he locked her in a cell and lost the key. His next move was an attempt to get the cab number off the store's security cameras. When that had failed he'd gone hunting for her partner in crime.

Throughout it all he was battling emotions he'd been unable to control since he'd let them out of the damn box. By challenging him to make a move she'd got a glimpse of him few people on the right side of the law ever saw.

That Tyler came from the dark side. He was the man who had spent so long among the dregs of humanity no amount of scrubbing would ever make him clean. He was the lean and hungry one, the cold one, the one who would devour her until he'd taken all she had to give and left her feeling as empty as he did.

She didn't want to mess with that Tyler.

The silence coming from the back seat was a wise move. She could forget a third strike; there wasn't going to be one. What was more, it was time to play the card he'd been holding close to his chest. If she'd behaved he wouldn't have to use it. Now he didn't have a choice.

When they landed back at the mansion he followed her inside and headed straight for the control room. Yanking open one of the drawers on a filing cabinet, he searched for the file he needed and checked the contents. Then he headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time to speed up the process until he reached the hall and marched to her door.

The three sharp knocks he made on the wood were answered with an invitation to come in.

She frowned when he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. 'You can't come in here.'

'You told me to come in.'

'I thought you were Grace.'

Holding up the file, he stepped across to the small seating area on one side of the room, pointedly ignoring the presence of her large bed. 'Little light reading for you...' Slapping it down on one of the small tables beside a deeply cushioned armchair, he folded his arms and widened his stance to claim the ground he was standing on. 'I'll wait for questions.'

'You can't be here,' she argued as she moved away from the windows. 'What if someone finds you?'

'So long as you don't start another fashion parade we should be fine.'

She scowled at him as she stepped over to pick up the file. 'What is this?'

While she opened the cover and bowed her head to look at the contents he studied her reaction through hooded eyes. Her gaze lifted and sought his before she sat down on the chair farthest away from him. Laying the file on her lap, she turned to the next page.

When she spoke her voice was lower and surprisingly calm. ‘How many of these are there?’

‘They’re the ones we take a closer look at.’

‘Because you consider them a potential threat?’

‘It’s the tone as much as the content. After they’re fingerprinted and tested for DNA, a psychologist looks them over and builds a profile.’ He shrugged. ‘Vast majority of them are sent by fruitcakes still living in the basement of their parents’ house when they’re forty.’

She flicked a brief glance his way. ‘Is that true or are you just saying it to make me feel better?’

‘I’d be willing to bet your picture is pinned to more than one of those walls in this city.’

‘Eww.’ She grimaced.

He didn’t mention there’d be less of them if people got to know her the way he had in the last forty-eight hours. When he questioned why he hadn’t mentioned it, Tyler realized his rage had dissipated. Claiming back a little control probably had something to do with it. Added to the fact they were discussing something that felt closer to police work than babysitting, it was understandable he felt more at ease.

When he noticed the almost imperceptible tremor in her hand as she turned another page Tyler assumed she’d got to one of the more twisted letters.

‘Why have I never been shown this file before?’

‘They probably thought it was better you didn’t know.’

‘You obviously disagree.’

As her gaze flickered towards him again the hint of vulnerability he could see in her eyes made him question if he’d done the right thing. He took a short breath. ‘Figured if you knew what was out there it might help you understand why things have to change around here.’

‘So why not show it to me on the first day?’

Determined he could control her without it would have been the honest answer. But since showing it to her would then be somewhat akin to admitting defeat...

‘Wasn’t time,’ he lied.

She turned her head a little, her gaze searching the air while she gathered her thoughts. As something occurred to her there was a blink of long lashes and she looked him in the eyes again. ‘You think the person you saw in the crowd this morning might have sent one of these letters?’

Tyler nodded. ‘It’s possible. I’ll know if I see him again. I’m good with faces.’

She frowned for a moment before confessing, ‘I can’t believe there are people out there who would write these letters to me. Let alone mail them.’

‘I told you, famous brings out the crazy.’

‘I don’t know how I’m supposed to react to this.’

‘Calm is good. A lot of folks would be nailing boards over the windows and bulk buying pepper spray by now.’

The comment earned a brief if somewhat half-hearted attempt at a smile before she closed the file and stood up. One of her hands rubbed her hip while she stretched out the other. ‘Can you take this with you?’ She avoided his gaze. ‘I don’t want it in here.’

For the first time since he’d entered the room Tyler took a look at his surroundings and realized his mistake. He’d done more than introduce her to the darkness in the world beyond the walls of her cushioned existence—he’d brought some of the sickness he dealt with every day into her haven. But it didn’t stop there—one mistake leading directly to another—not only shouldn’t he have come to her bedroom, he shouldn’t have taken a look around.

It revealed more about her than he’d wanted to know.

Large, bright flowers covered the wallpaper, crystal chandeliers and mirrored glass sparkling in the autumn sunshine pouring through the windows. The furnishings were soft and textured, reminding him what she’d said to a little girl about liking the way things felt.

The penny dropped. She was tactile.

It was why she touched so many arms and ruffled heads of tousled hair. She'd demonstrated the same thing when she traced the pearls around her neck. It was part of her inherent sensuality; as witnessed when he'd watched her cup her breasts and smooth her palms over the curves of her body. With the revelation came a question: How did she deal with being surrounded by people who weren't allowed to make physical contact? The need to touch and be touched had to make her as much of a ticking time bomb as him.

It explained a lot when it came to that kiss.

The file nodded in front of him, her brows lifting.

Unfolding his arms, he stepped forwards and took it from her. As he walked back to the door she followed him.

'Tyler?'

He turned to look at her. 'Yeah?'

'Thank you. You're the first person who thought I could handle this and I appreciate that.'

In fairness he hadn't stopped to consider that any more than he'd thought about the repercussions of charging into her bedroom like the proverbial bull in a china shop. But the knowledge softened his stance a little. 'Does it make more sense as to why I've been so rough on you?'

The question garnered a better attempt at a smile. 'It's not just because you're mean and moody?'

'And mysterious, let's not forget that one.'

The knowing gleam in her eyes placed him about two seconds away from offering to touch and be touched, any time she felt the need. If he didn't think she would come out the other side of it a lot worse off than him, he wouldn't have any qualms about being used that way. He doubted any guy who'd watched her dance would. Though he'd never felt the urge to step on a dance floor, he knew what it meant when a woman moved the way she did.

The sexy rotation of her hips, the back-and-forth movement of her pelvis, the fluid curve of her spine, mile after mile of flawlessly tanned skin with spectacular breasts and long tresses of flame-red hair tumbling over her shoulders and down her back.

Suddenly Tyler could see such a vivid image of her naked he could practically feel her weight on top of him as she hovered on the edge of release.

Time to go.

'I'll see you tomorrow.'

She nodded in reply.

Despite frowning on the way back to the control room he decided—as risky as it was—he would have to pay more attention. He'd missed a lot of clues that had been right in front of his face and that wasn't like him. Prejudice could cloud the evidence, he knew that. But now he knew he didn't have all the answers—he had to take a closer look.

If they could find a way to get along better after the tentative truce they'd struck in her bedroom, maybe things would get better and he could focus on something other than sex with a woman who was out of bounds.

Doubtful, but worth a try.

TWELVE

Miranda was determined not to let it get to her.

By thinking about the contents of the letters she was allowing whoever had written them to occupy a place inside her head. She refused to give them that but to deny she was rattled would have been pointless. In the following busy days the only time she felt secure was with Tyler around, which was a tad ironic considering the danger he posed.

She glanced at him as he completed a check of the room and stopped to run his gaze over the buffet table. 'I'd eat something if I were you. There's not a lot of time for snacks during the speeches stage of the campaign. I think I saw mini-doughnuts somewhere. They're a cop thing, right?'

'Not if the cop wants to stay in shape.'

'You have trouble with your weight?'

'Not everyone is blessed with my godlike physique.'

Miranda stifled a smile as she looked away. It hadn't escaped her attention he'd been working on his sense of humour lately, even if it demonstrated a distinct lack of anything missing in the ego department.

Lifting her bag from the floor beside her chair, she rooted around for the objects she'd brought with her to help pass the time. Her mother liked to sit out front in the audience and listen to the never-ending soliloquies—her daughter, not so much. Since her father was speaking to a pro-Kravitz crowd she didn't see the need to be there until they had to provide a united family front for the press.

With the sheet of paper carefully smoothed out on the table, she reached for the small box sitting beside it as Tyler pulled out a chair and joined her.

'What are you doing?'

'I promised I'd finish it.'

'She won't know if you don't.'

'That's not the point.' Miranda shrugged a shoulder as she selected a slim crayon. 'It's a karma thing.'

'Careful with those lines.'

'Studying me for a test, Detective, or is everything I say and do so memorable you can't get it out of your mind?'

'Been working long on that confidence problem?'

She lifted her chin and raised a brow. 'You're asking me that after the godlike physique comment?'

'That's just stating a fact. You can't argue them.' He selected what looked like a small samosa from the teetering pile on his plate. 'Whereas what you just did? More like wishful thinking.'

When he popped the morsel in his mouth and smirked, Miranda rolled her eyes and continued colouring.

'It's easy to be confident when everything you want gets handed to you,' he said a couple of minutes later.

'I take it we're talking about me again.' She swapped one crayon for another. 'Were you this judgmental with the last person you bodyguarded?'

'I don't think bodyguarded is a word.'

'Is now...'

When she glanced upwards he had his gaze on the open door as an announcement sounded from the auditorium and there was a wave of applause. As he lifted long arms out to his sides in a leisurely stretch the edges of his navy jacket parted, feeding her hungry gaze with the sight of a pale blue shirt stretched taut over his sculpted chest.

Godlike might have been an exaggeration but there was no arguing the man was ripped.

She wondered when he found time to work out and then pictured him hot and sweaty, pumping weights...

'This is my first gig as a bodyguard,' he confessed as he lowered his arms.

Miranda averted her gaze. 'Well, that explains a lot. What did you do before you got here?'

'Police work.'

'What do you call this?'

'Babysitting.'

'I walked right into that one, didn't I?'

'Yup.'

When she glanced upwards again and saw him press his lips together her eyes narrowed. 'Was that a smile?'

'Those little triangle things are spicy.' He tapped a closed fist against his chest. 'Probably indigestion.'

Miranda felt her mouth curve into a smile of her own.

Shifting his weight on the chair, he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a cell phone, frowning down at the screen as it flashed.

'Are you going to answer that?' she asked.

'It'll wait.'

'Player.'

He looked into her eyes. 'What makes you so sure it's a woman?'

'Isn't it?' She blinked innocently. 'For all I know it could be your wife.'

'How long you been waiting to ask that question?' When she didn't reply he rested his left elbow on the table and showed her the back of his hand. 'Do you see a ring?'

'That doesn't mean anything.'

He lowered the hand to lift something else off his plate. 'Does to me.'

Miranda liked that it did. Without saying so in as many words he'd conveyed he was the faithful type. She didn't have any proof of that without taking his word for it but she knew instinctively it was true. After all, she'd met more than her fair share of liars over the years.

People who attempted to befriend her because of what rather than who she was—who thought they could get her to speak on their behalf to her father or that dating her would deliver their five minutes of fame. She'd met them all and knew she had trust issues as a result.

She would never have the same problems with Tyler. He didn't have an agenda other than doing his job.

Knowing that should have made her feel better but, oddly enough, it didn't.

When she returned her attention to what she was doing, he took a short breath. 'Since we're playing the sharing game, how come it took you so long to have that talk with your mother?'

'Congratulations,' Miranda said dryly. 'It took you a whole four days to bring up the subject. I didn't think you'd last that long.'

'Deflection—I invented that.'

She sighed heavily. 'Mothers and daughters often have complicated relationships.'

'My sister gets on fine with our mom now she's got better about calling her.'

The comment lifted her gaze. 'You have a sister?'

'And three brothers.'

'There are three more of you out there?' The thought was a tad too much for her brain to contemplate.

A corner of his mouth lifted and for the first time—while looking directly at him as it happened—she realized the move lowered the other side. It was almost a yin and yang thing, hinting at two sides of his personality.

‘There’s only one of me,’ he said as if denying the thought she hadn’t voiced. ‘The rest of them get to spend their time trying to reach the high bar I set for them.’

‘You’re the eldest?’

‘I’m in the middle.’

‘I might need you to explain to me how the high bar works if there were two born before you.’

‘I raised it,’ he replied without skipping a beat.

Miranda nodded. ‘You tell them that, don’t you?’

‘Repeatedly.’

She tried to imagine what it must have been like to be part of such a large family. Apart from the freedom they had growing up, she envied the company they would have provided for one another. It made her realize how much she missed having Richie around. He’d be joining the campaign soon and they would have to find the time to talk. She just hoped he could forgive her for breaking their pact.

Pushing the thought from her mind, she jumped into the opening Tyler had given her to get to know him better. ‘What do your siblings do?’

‘My sister runs the legal department at her husband’s company. The rest of us are cops.’

Her gaze lifted again. ‘All of your brothers are with the NYPD?’

‘Third generation,’ he said with an obvious note of pride. ‘It’s in the blood.’

‘You never wanted to be anything else?’

‘Nope.’

It explained where some of his confidence came from. He’d known exactly what he wanted, worked towards it and achieved his goal, whereas Miranda’s confidence was born of a need to survive. It wasn’t that she didn’t have it now, but in her teens it was a different story.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ he asked.

Ouch. But considering she probably deserved it after the way she’d been with him, Miranda let it slide. Instead she set down the crayon and pushed her chair back. ‘Do you want something to wash down that mountain of food?’

‘Avoidance—I invented that one, too.’

‘I’m thirsty and a bottle of water might help with your indigestion.’ She felt his gaze on her as she approached the buffet table.

‘You sure you can manage to find it on your own? Don’t you usually have someone to do that for you?’

‘There are several things I’m perfectly capable of doing on my own.’

‘You’re just not given much of a chance to do them...’

‘No,’ she admitted before lifting a bottle of water from a bowl of ice and turning to look at him. ‘You want one of these or not?’

He nodded. ‘Go on.’

There was another announcement as she returned to the table, followed by loud cheering as she stopped by his chair and reached out her arm. Long, warm fingers wrapped around hers as she handed the bottle to him, providing a sharp contrast to its icily dewed surface. Miranda drew in a sharp breath in reaction to the heat travelling up her arm and tingling across her chest to her sensitive breasts. Moving downwards, it pooled low in her abdomen, creating an empty throbbing between her thighs.

When her gaze lifted the intensity in his eyes devoured her, leaving her in no doubt he knew the effect his touch had on her body. What she couldn’t understand was why he hadn’t done something about it. He didn’t strike her as a man who would let something as trivial as boundaries stand in his way.

Part of her was disappointed, another frustrated. But he had no way of knowing she was different with him than she’d ever been with anyone else.

As far as he knew she played the tease with every guy she met, safe in the knowledge if they attempted to cross the line she could simply step behind a protective wall of security personnel and

add another tick to a battle of the sexes scorecard. He didn't know how tough it was to date in high school with a bodyguard present. He couldn't imagine how long it had taken for her to lose her innocence to someone who wouldn't consider the virginity of the mayor's daughter a significant notch on their belt. He would never know how disappointing the experience had been or that even with determination the three other times she'd managed to find enough privacy to have sex with the same guy hadn't been a whole heap better.

In the end it had led to a bitter break-up, which left scars she covered with a veneer of self-assuredness it had taken years to perfect. Appearances could be deceptive.

A police detective should know that.

Slipping her hand free, she turned away and stepped over to her chair, curling her fingers into her palm as if she felt the need to save some of the warmth of his touch for later. While her father began his speech they both twisted the lids off their bottles and took a drink.

'You haven't answered the question,' he said.

Miranda resisted the urge to look at him. 'Because I know what you're doing. You think by sharing things about your life with me, I'll confide in you.'

'Afraid I'll sell the inside story to the press?'

'No,' she answered honestly. 'Just suspicious about your motives.'

'Cops ask questions. It's what we do,' he reasoned before adding, 'isn't sharing stuff and getting them to empathize how you usually persuade your bodyguards to cut you some slack?'

'I think we've already established I have to work harder than that with you.'

'Which is part of the attraction, isn't it?'

Miranda's gaze snapped up. They were actually going there? Before she made a fool of herself again she had to be sure. 'Attraction?'

The cobalt gaze locked to hers remained steady. 'I think you know what I'm talking about.'

'Maybe you should elaborate.'

'How explicit do you want me to be?'

Miranda ran the tip of her tongue over her lips and watched as his gaze lowered for long enough to follow the movement. 'You think I can't handle explicit?'

If he knew the number of times she'd imagined him telling her exactly what he was going to do to her...

'I think you still don't know you're swimming out of your depth.' His tone was suddenly hollow and cold.

Subliminally Miranda responded to the accompanying emptiness she thought she could see behind his eyes with the need to offer comfort and return some of the heat he'd created inside her.

She wanted to be alone with him, really alone. She wanted him to want the same thing; to ask questions because he wanted to get to know her better and not because he was gathering information to make his job easier.

'Miranda—five minutes.'

The sound of another voice drew her gaze to the open door. 'Thanks, Roger.'

As he disappeared she gathered her things together and placed them back in her bag without looking at Tyler. Reaching inside, she produced the prerequisite Vote Kravitz badge and pinned it to the front of her blouse. 'You want one of these? I always carry a few spares.'

'I didn't vote for him last time.'

Miranda smiled. 'You probably don't want to mention that in front of him. Unless you want to hear the one-on-one version of the campaign speech?'

'Any other tips you want to pass on?'

'If he says he'll take it under advisement it means he's going to ignore what you said.'

'Good to know.'

While he cleared the table and walked to the trash can beside the buffet table she checked her appearance in the mirror of a compact and fluffed her hair into place. They met at the door, Tyler waiting silently by her side as she paused to take a breath and fortify herself for the trials ahead. It was time to put on her game face but before she did she allowed him a rare glimpse of a well-kept secret.

As the chill ran down her spine instead of hiding it she shook it off with a shudder of her shoulders. Once she realized what she'd done she glanced sideways and attempted to cover up her vulnerability with a wink. 'Showtime.'

The low huff of amusement seemed to catch him as off guard as it did her, the immediate following need to shift his gaze to the people assembled behind the stage making Miranda's chest expand with what felt a little too close to endearment. She knew he didn't smile much but suddenly she ached with the need to experience it, to see how it changed his face and hear the sound of rumbling male laughter.

'Your mother is making her way up from the audience now,' Roger's voice said, encouraging her to step forwards and focus.

When she got a brief glimpse of the packed auditorium as her mother appeared through the curtain at the side of the stage Miranda experienced a flutter of nerves. In need of reassurance, she glanced over her shoulder at Tyler and as their gazes met she thought she could feel it again: the silent understanding she'd been wrong about before.

The nod he gave her was almost imperceptible.

I'm right here, the unexpected warmth in his eyes said. I've got you.

She flashed a small smile in reply and for the first time in longer than she cared to admit she didn't feel so alone. It was nice to think someone was there just for her.

Any concern she felt about the truth in the second part of his silent message she could examine later.

THIRTEEN

He'd been right about one thing.

Miranda was one hell of an actress.

No one on the outside saw how much effort she put into hiding her emotions. Burying them didn't come naturally to her the way it used to for him. But when it came to the way she looked at him —as if he were some kind of tasty treat she wanted to savour—she needed to knock it off. Add their undeniable sexual chemistry to the flash of vulnerability he saw in her eyes before she faced the public and the draw he felt to her was so overpowering Tyler had to remind himself they weren't alone.

He'd have to be careful when they were. The closer she dragged him to the edge, the more likely he was to lose what was left of his footing.

The next time she glanced his way he pointed at the curtain to let her know he would be out front. She nodded in reply before arching a brow at her mother when the woman reached out to brush her hair away from the badge she'd pinned to her chest.

'Seriously?'

'I'm not permitted to make motherly gestures now?'

'Not if it takes us back to the days when you used to dress me like a Jackie Kennedy doll.'

Content she had something to distract her from any fear she felt of unseen dangers in the auditorium, Tyler moved into position. Standing where he had one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees' coverage from the front of the stage, he checked everyone else on the combined detail was where they were supposed to be before running his gaze over the crowd.

'...and with your help we can finish what we started...'

As the mayor's speech whipped the crowd into a frenzy the cheers became louder, making it difficult for Tyler to hear if anything came through in his earpiece. The ever-present tension in his body coiled tighter as he raised his hand and used his forefinger to push it tighter into place.

'We've come too far to give up now!' the mayor shouted into the microphone. 'Are you with me?'

The crowd yelled, 'Yes!'

'Are you with me?'

'Yes!'

There were too many banners and placards waving wildly in the air to allow him to check every face. It made Tyler antsy, the fingers of his gun hand flexing at his side.

'Then let's do it!'

'Kravitz! Kravitz! Kravitz! Kravitz!'

In the midst of the chanting there was what sounded like popping gunfire. Immediately pushing back his jacket to place a thumb on his service weapon, Tyler snapped his gaze in the direction he thought it came from. There wasn't any screaming; the crowd wasn't panicking—somewhere in his mind he knew they were both indications nothing had happened. But while his body created so much adrenaline it made his heart struggle to pump it through his veins his brain ignored the message.

In the end it took the sight of a woman scolding her son as she confiscated a bunch of balloons for him to avoid calling in the threat and drawing his weapon.

Lowering his arm, he ground his teeth together, self-recrimination searing his throat when he glanced at the stage. Miranda was standing in plain sight, smiling and waving with her parents. As her gaze sought him out the need to go to her and haul her into his arms was crippling.

He didn't want her up there. He wanted her somewhere he knew she was safe. The thing that stopped him from jumping onstage and carrying her away wasn't his job or who her father was; it was the certainty that place of safety wasn't with him.

By the time they were driving back to the mansion through a not-so-safe-after-dark neighbourhood he was strung out and close to breaking point.

'You okay?'

'Yes,' he gritted. But it was a lie. If he didn't find an outlet for some of his tension soon...

When a figure walking down the sidewalk caught his eye Tyler's brain ran through a scrolling roll of faces and hit jackpot. Checking for traffic, he turned the wheel and swung the Escalade around.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

He didn't reply as the figure turned a corner. Instead he followed it, drew to a halt and unbuckled his seat belt. 'Lock the doors and stay inside.'

'What are you—?'

'Keys are in the ignition.' He got out and slammed the door. As the man lit up by the headlights turned and looked over his shoulder he called out, 'Hey, Jimmy, remember me?'

The second he rabbited Tyler gave chase. One wrong turn later the idiot was trapped in a dead-end alley.

'Haven't you learnt you can't run from me?' He slammed him face-first into a wall before patting him down. 'Out doing a little business—what do we have here?' He took a step back and looked down at the clear plastic pouch in his hand. 'Looks like I have you on possession...'

'That's not mine. It belongs to a friend.'

'Do I look like I just got hit by the stupid stick?'

When the idiot made a predictable attempt to escape it was all the incentive Tyler needed to cut his dark side loose. Reaching for a wrist, he twisted the arm, spun him around and slammed him back into the wall. When he leaned closer his voice was purposefully menacing.

'You know what I want.'

'I heard you was off the case.'

'You heard wrong.'

'You can't rough me up. I'll file a complaint.'

'Go ahead,' Tyler told him as he twisted the arm hard enough to dislocate a shoulder and used his other hand on the guy's head to press his cheek to the wall. 'In the meantime here's what's gonna happen. You're gonna take a message to Demietrov for me. I'll keep the sentences nice and short so you can remember them. You tell him I'm coming for him. He won't know where. He won't know when. Tell him to keep looking over his shoulder.'

'You're Dirty Harry now?'

'No.' His mouth curled into a threatening smile. 'I'm his worst nightmare. You don't deliver the message I'll be yours, too. I'll spread the word you're my new best friend.' He felt his hand press harder against the man's skull and ignored the cry of pain while he fought the need to crush bone. 'No witnesses here. It'll be your word against mine and I think we both know you're the weakest link.'

'She's a witness,' Jimmy croaked.

FOURTEEN

Miranda's breath caught when Tyler's gaze snapped towards her. Fear trickled down her spine, creating goosebumps on her skin and chilling her bones. The violent edge to the scene, the savage need for blood pervading the air—they were valid reasons to fear the man she barely recognized.

Somewhere deep in her soul she could hear a voice calling out to him, 'What are you doing? This isn't you.'

But how could she know that for sure?

He released his captive. 'Go.'

As the man ran towards her Miranda took an instinctive step back. By the time she looked at Tyler again she could sense the hostility aimed at her. Tendrils of rage flowed through the air with the oppressive weight of a brewing storm. 'I told you to stay in the car with the doors locked. What part of that didn't you understand?'

'I...uh...' She cleared her throat and tried to find her voice. 'I was never that good at taking orders.'

'I suggest you start.' He stepped forwards and past her, his muscles carrying him with the same fluidity of movement she would have associated with a panther.

Her first impression of him as a predator crouched to spring on its prey had been right. She just hadn't realized how lethal he could be until she saw him in action.

She hesitated before following him, torn between the need to know what had happened and an almost childlike desire to hide. Her gaze darted to the shadows between overflowing Dumpsters, her imagination filling them with everything from rats to Freddie Krueger.

Better the devil—even if it was plainly obvious she didn't know him that well.

'Tyler.' She had to run to catch up. 'Tyler, wait.'

He stopped so abruptly she almost tripped face-first into his back.

'That's the second time you've done that.' She frowned at his chest when he turned around. 'A little warning would be good.'

Chancing an upwards glance at his shadowed face she discovered he was looking at her through dark hooded eyes.

'What just happened?'

'Did you lock the Escalade?'

'Yes.'

'Where are the keys?'

She reached into the scooped neckline of her blouse to retrieve them from her bra, jangled them in front of his face and snatched them away before he lifted his arm.

Tyler waggled his fingers at her. 'Hand them over.'

'I don't think so.' She tucked them back into her bra. 'You want them you're going to have to come get them.'

'You think I won't?'

'I think I'll scream at the top of my lungs if you try.' As far as she was concerned he wasn't getting them back until he gave her an explanation. She folded her arms over her breasts to protect her bargaining tool. 'I'm assuming that man wasn't a friend of yours.'

'Good guess.' The corner of his mouth lifted in a move resembling a sneer. 'I haven't made many friends on the periphery of the Russian mob recently.'

Miranda's jaw dropped. 'That's a joke, right?' A small burst of nervous laughter left her lips. 'Next thing you'll be saying you like your Martinis shaken, not stirred.'

'I'm not a spy.'

'We've already established you weren't a bodyguard until recently. So what are you?'

He shook his head and turned away, glancing at her from the corner of his eye as she unfolded her arms and fell into step beside him. ‘I’m a street cop—narcotics. The bodyguard thing is a temporary gig.’

‘But you’re still working on a case, aren’t you?’

‘Stopping the flow of drugs in any city with a market for them is like trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon. I can’t afford to take time off.’

‘Then why are you babysitting me?’

‘I’ve asked that question several times.’

‘But if you’ve never been a bodyguard?’

‘I took the close protection course a few years ago,’ he told her as they turned a corner. ‘Back in the days when I had a career plan I was gonna spend time in every department and work my way up.’

Naturally she wanted to know what had happened to knock him off course but first things first. ‘How long have you been with Narcotics?’

‘Three years—transferred from Vice.’

‘How long have you been a police officer?’

‘Coming up on twelve years.’

She blinked in surprise. He must be older than he looked. ‘What age are you?’

‘Thirty-two—ask a lot of questions when you’re scared, don’t you?’

‘I’m not scared,’ she lied. ‘I’m...’ Her head nodded a little from side to side as she sought the right words. When none was forthcoming she opted for a smidgeon of truth. ‘Okay, I was scared. I’ve never seen anyone... I mean, not in real life...obviously on TV and in movies but—’

‘View’s not so great away from the ivory tower, is it?’ he said dryly. ‘Down here on street level things can get dirty. I know of at least two cold-case homicides in this area in the last couple of years.’

She glared at his tense profile. ‘Are you trying to scare me again?’

The question made him stop and turn towards her. ‘What you just saw wasn’t enough for you?’

Even in the restricted light Miranda could see his gaze burned with anger. Having faced it before—and with the recent addition of visible proof—she realized how much constraint he exercised when she pushed him. What she found more difficult to understand was how he made her feel and how swiftly it returned to the same unwavering constant over and over again.

She was drawn to him—had been from the start—and even after seeing him at his most dangerous it hadn’t changed.

‘That didn’t look like you,’ she replied.

The man she’d seen in the alley wasn’t the one who had been watching over her.

‘You think you know me after less than a week?’ He jerked his brows. ‘Is this the part where you tell me danger does it for you—that you’re into bad boys and want to be taken on a wild ride?’

Yes, but there was wild and then there was suicidal.

He took an ominous step forwards. ‘That’s what you were looking for from that dance floor. It’s why you responded the way you did when I kissed you. Do you know what happens to women who go looking for trouble? I do. But maybe what you need is a little taste of what you’re getting into.’

Miranda’s breath snagged in her throat as he took another step forwards, her eyes widening as she took a reciprocal step back. ‘Tyler, don’t.’

‘Too late, princess.’

The man obviously had a thing with pinning people to walls because the next thing she knew Miranda had her back to one, the cold dampness of the bricks through the thin material of her blouse making her jump forwards. The move literally played her directly into his hands. Grasping her wrists, he lifted her arms above her head and pushed her back into the wall with his body.

Hard, he was hard everywhere, muscular and tight, his grip on her wrists unyielding as he trapped them in one large hand to free up the other. Miranda struggled against him, the movement merely adding to her problems when her traitorous body responded with a gush of heat to her core.

He angled his head, his lips hovering above hers, tempting, teasing, the muscles in his torso so tense they rippled with each harsh breath.

'You think you can stop me now?' When he spoke his mouth whispered across hers. The hand he'd freed smoothed into the dip of her waist on the side of her body before lowering to her hip and squeezing tight enough to make her feel the imprint of each finger. Moving lower, he fisted a handful of skirt material and slowly dragged it upwards. 'Go ahead and try.'

It was pure hell not to give in to temptation and kiss him. If there was trust between them she wouldn't resist; might even have encouraged him not to stop. But no matter how desperately she clung to the belief he wouldn't hurt her, Miranda couldn't deny her desire was woven with a thread of fear. Her heart pounded painfully against her breastbone, her body shaking from the inside out. He was both stronger and bigger than her—there was no way she could fight him off. She'd never been made so aware of the weakness of her body before.

As the skirt slid higher he forced a leg between her knees and nudged them apart. 'I could take you in this position whether you want me to or not.'

She drew in a ragged breath as she stopped struggling and swore he wouldn't make her cry. 'This isn't you.'

'You don't know that,' he said harshly. 'You could have been sidling up to a monster with that little game of dress up you played. I could have brought you here because I know it's a place where people ignore screams after dark.' His voice lowered. 'I could be inside you right now—taking what I need without caring if you get any pleasure out of it. And when I'm done I could leave your broken body for someone else to find.'

'You wouldn't do that.' The crackle of emotion in her voice was impossible to disguise. Swallowing the sob she didn't want him to hear, she forced her gaze upwards to the fire escape on the wall opposite them, willing her mind to detach from her body so he couldn't touch a part of her that might never heal.

When her vision blurred she blinked rapidly but was unable to stop the tears that spilled over her lower lashes to blaze a heated trail down her cheeks.

'Isn't this what you wanted all along—you and me, together?' he asked in his coarse, cold voice. 'You've been begging for it from the start.'

'Not like this,' she choked.

Whether it was the honesty, the pain in her voice, how badly her body was shaking or that he could taste the tears trickling into her mouth, she didn't know. But suddenly his hand stilled, his fingers loosened and a deathly silence descended. It couldn't have lasted for more than a handful of seconds but felt like an eternity. Then, without warning, he released her and staggered back as if he'd been repelled by an invisible force.

When she looked at him Miranda didn't need better light to see the mixture of fury, self-loathing and guilt on his face; she could feel it swirling in a maelstrom around him. He moved sharply, pacing a restless circle while viciously spitting a litany of self-recrimination that was downright nasty. She winced as she straightened her skirt with shaking hands. The self-hatred was more than obvious and with blinding clarity she got an inkling of what he might have been doing.

It was more than a brutal warning of the consequences her actions could have with the wrong man—it was an attempt to get her to hate him as much as he hated himself.

When he stopped pacing he shook his head. 'You need a new bodyguard. I'm obviously not cut out for this.'

Gathering strength, she took a tentative step forwards and dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue. 'I don't want a new bodyguard. I want you.'

'How can you say that after what I just did to you?'

He snarled like a cornered animal but with new insight Miranda saw him as less of a predator and more of an angry bear with a thorn in his paw.

She took another step. ‘You wouldn’t have hurt me.’

‘You don’t know that!’ His mouth twisted when he saw her hesitate. ‘You gonna try lying to me and telling me you didn’t have a moment of doubt?’

‘I can’t do that,’ she confessed. ‘But I can remember the man you were before you turned the car around.’

His chest heaved as he tried to gain control. ‘What do I have to do to make you realize you’d be better keeping your distance from me?’

‘I don’t know. But this wasn’t it.’

‘I’m not like the other guys you’ve spent time with. There’s nothing polished or refined about me.’

If he was trying to discourage her from reaching out to him, then he wasn’t doing a very good job. The compulsion she’d felt to offer comfort combined with her need for physical contact, drawing her to him with a sense of what felt like inevitability. She took another step forwards and another until she was standing directly in front of him.

‘Right now I need you to hold me for a minute,’ she said softly. ‘Do you think you can do that?’

‘You should be running for the hills,’ he replied in a gruffer voice. ‘Not asking me to get closer.’

‘I need a little shoulder action.’ When she attempted a smile the fear of rejection she’d hidden since her teens made it waver. ‘If you can think of anyone else I can ask for that when everyone who surrounds me isn’t supposed to touch me—’

He reached out and hauled her into his arms.

Miranda gasped at the contact and let out a small sob of relief. Wrapping her arms around his lean waist, she buried her face in his chest and took several breaths of Tyler scented air. She could feel the tension in his body, streams of electricity buzzing beneath his skin. But she’d been right to ask him to hold her. A violent shudder ran through him, his arms tightening as if he couldn’t hold her close enough. After a while he rested his chin on her head and she felt his throat convulse.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said roughly, the impression it wasn’t something he said very often making her heart twist.

‘I know.’ She turned a little and rested her cheek against his tie. ‘It’s okay. I forgive you.’

‘You shouldn’t. I can’t forgive me.’

‘Maybe you should start.’ She took another breath before jumping in with both feet. ‘What happened to make you so angry, Tyler?’

‘How do you know you didn’t just get a glimpse of the real me?’

‘Because you’re holding me right now and giving me what I need.’ She snuggled closer to prove the point before confessing, ‘And because I don’t want to believe it was...’

When he moved his head she felt the whisper of his breath against her hair. ‘You can’t save me, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m beyond saving.’

Leaning back to look up at his face, she discovered he was frowning; his gaze lowered so she couldn’t look into his eyes. The arms holding her loosened as he took a half step back. Unwilling to let him retreat when they’d taken such a major leap forwards, Miranda freed up a hand and raised it to stroke her fingertips along his jaw, her thumb gliding to the edge of his mouth.

Heat resonated from him, seeping into her skin and removing the chill from her bones.

Watching her thumb as it traced his lower lip, she whispered, ‘Kiss me.’

He stood rigidly still.

Moving her hand to wrap her fingers around the thick column of his neck, she pulled his head down to hers and rocked forwards onto her toes. She lifted her chin, closed the last of the distance between them and pressed her lips against his. He stiffened but didn’t jerk away. Miranda took that as a good sign, even if she’d never kissed such an unresponsive partner. Launching a tentative exploration, she kissed a corner of his mouth, willing him to relax.

The thought of him remaining still while she explored every inch of his body was a heady enticement to continue. Emboldened, she traced the valley between his lips with the tip of her tongue. Then she wasn't in control any more.

Long fingers threaded into her hair, his palm cradling the back of her head and holding it still as he sampled her lips in softly sipping kisses that coaxed her into opening her mouth. When his tongue slipped inside Miranda moaned in appreciation, sensation pouring over her like a blanket of warm honey. Another large hand stroked over her shoulder blade as the kiss deepened, smoothing down her spine and dipping to the curve of her rear to draw her closer.

When her abdomen made contact with the evidence that he was as turned on as she was Miranda grabbed the lapels of his jacket between her fingers. He parted their lips and she dropped her head back, eyes closed, as he planted a trail of heated kisses along her neck. He pushed up the hem of her blouse, burrowing his hands underneath to touch the heated skin of her midriff. When she sucked in a breath the movement granted him access to her torso. He traced a finger along the band of her bra, knuckles skimming the lace-covered swell at the underside of her breasts.

'We shouldn't be doing this,' his deep voice rumbled against her neck.

'I'm not sure reminding us both it's forbidden will help,' she answered breathlessly, clinging to him as if he was the only thing holding her upright.

'I'm supposed to keep my distance.'

Her mouth curved into a decadent smile. 'That might sound more convincing if you weren't saying it while you have your hands on me.'

'You're the mayor's daughter,' he said as he kissed his way back up her neck.

'One day I'm hopeful people will think of me as more than that. Using my name would be a great place to start.'

He raised his head and looked down at her. 'I've used your name.'

'No, you haven't.'

'I can't have gone this long without saying it.'

She smiled again. 'Wanna bet?'

'There was that time when I was listing everything I knew about you...'

She shook her head. 'Doesn't count.'

He nudged the tip of her nose with his before lowering his voice. 'Miranda...'

The sound of her name said in the deep rumble of his voice sent a tingle across her sensitive skin.

He placed a light kiss on her lips. 'Miranda...'

She sighed contentedly. It sounded both sexy and reverent when he said it that way. Angling his head, he scrambled her thoughts with a longer, heated kiss. She felt one of his hands move against her breast and then...

He lifted his head and took a step back, his hands dropping from her body.

When Miranda opened her eyes she blinked at the sight of a half smile curving his mouth as he held up the keys.

'Nice move,' she said with begrudging respect.

He clamped his fingers around the keys and lowered his arm. 'I have plenty more where that came from but right now you're going home before we both end up in trouble.'

When he took her hand and led her back to the SUV, her thoughts unscrambled for long enough to allow something she'd overheard in the alley to make its way through to the front of her mind. 'The guy you sent a message to—isn't there a chance he'll come looking for you when he gets it?'

'He won't try anything when I'm on duty.'

'How do you know that?'

‘Not his MO. If he has the stones to come after a cop he’ll do it in the shadows.’ Long fingers flexed around hers. ‘Despite evidence to the contrary I wouldn’t do anything that could place you in danger.’

‘It wasn’t me I was worried about.’

The softly spoken words made Tyler stop dead in his tracks and turn towards her. ‘I won’t let anything happen to you.’ His voice was suddenly deeper, richer and accompanied by what almost felt like déjà vu. ‘You can trust me.’

The level of intensity seemed out of place, even for him. Miranda searched what she could see of his eyes. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’

He shook his head. ‘Nothing.’

A sense of foreboding created an unfamiliar heaviness in her chest. ‘Tyler—’

‘I think we’ve covered enough ground for one night, don’t you?’

He had a point. Suddenly she was exhausted in a way she’d never been before, both physically and emotionally. What worried her was how badly she wanted to draw strength from him and how quickly she’d become reliant on him being there. It wasn’t like her.

From the night they met she’d been following his lead. Even when she’d resisted she’d been caught in the undertow of a wave of attraction, unable to come up for air. At some point she knew she would have to—he wouldn’t be there for ever. But until that day and while there was something that made it feel she should hold on to him, she wrapped a second hand around his and held on tight.

FIFTEEN

‘I’m hearing rumours on the streets there’s a rogue cop gunning for Demietrov. Tell me it’s not you.’

When Tyler silently took the fifth his partner swore in his ear. ‘This isn’t the Wild West where you can clean up the streets with a gun. Hang on.’ He raised his voice to yell at someone who had obviously walked in on his end of the conversation. ‘Anyone wants me I’ll be in the porcelain reading room.’ His voice lowered again. ‘I haven’t been keeping you in on the loop so you can turn vigilante on me. You can’t take on every low life in the city. What difference do you think one man can make?’

‘We think that way we’ve got no business being cops,’ Tyler replied flatly. For him there was more to carrying a shield than family tradition. He’d signed up to make a difference; his lack of success over the years more than half his problem. A little never felt like enough. Textbook overachiever most likely, but the way he saw it there was no point doing something if it wasn’t done right.

‘Do what you’re thinking about doing and you won’t be a cop for much longer,’ his partner replied. There was the sound of a creaking door being opened. ‘You seem to be under the impression ’cos you’re not married with kids it means no one will get hurt if something happens to you. How do you think your family would feel about that?’

Probably the same way they’d feel if they’d had ring seats when he’d treated Miranda the way he had. Like all good Irish boys he’d been raised to be respectful to women. Hadn’t been much indication of that with her, had there? His mother would tear strips off his worthless hide if she knew what he’d done. But when it came to how his family would feel if he became part of the darkness he’d been fighting for so long, Tyler realized he’d convinced himself they would understand. Be disappointed in him—no doubt about that—but they’d get it. Miranda wouldn’t.

Not so long ago what she thought hadn’t mattered.

But it did now.

She’d been worried about him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t wrap his head around that. Being offered forgiveness with soft, sweet kisses he found impossible to resist had been difficult enough for him to understand. But that she’d been worried about him?

‘You listening to me?’

‘I can hear you.’

‘Not what I asked.’

Tyler watched the people going about their business with cell phones pressed to their ears, cups of coffee in their hands, briefcases as extensions of their arms or a combination of all the above. New Yorkers living busy lives and never worrying about crime until something happened to them. It was the way it should be but it took a thin blue line of defence to keep it that way.

He wondered when he’d first thought about crossing it and then questioned for the hundredth time why he’d made the exact same vow to Miranda he’d made to the woman who’d died when he couldn’t live up to his word.

‘Did it occur to you by calling him out he might come gunning for you?’ his partner asked. ‘What am I saying? Course it did. You think by painting a target on your back you’ll force him out of hiding. I thought we had a plan.’

‘We’re barely making a dent in his operation. Every time we take his dealers off the streets he replaces them before we’ve had time to do the paperwork.’

‘What if he puts a price on your head and the mayor’s daughter gets caught in the crossfire?’

It was an unnecessary reminder of his thoughtlessness but in his defence it had been a while since he stopped to consider the effect his job could have on someone else. Once he did he realized his need to protect her had nothing to do with duty any more. It was personal. She made him wish the world were a better place, adding to the dissatisfaction he couldn’t do more to make it that way.

Placing some distance between them was the only way he could focus clearly.

When she was around it had got to the point where every step he took and every thought he had was centred on the knowledge she was nearby. She clouded his judgment and weakened what was left of his resolve not to sleep with her. He couldn't seem to be near her without wanting to touch her. Wherever possible he found himself offering a hand to help her in or out of a vehicle, placing his palm on the inward curve of her spine to guide her in the right direction, handing bottles of water to her or taking them away when she didn't need them any more.

Her reaction to each stolen touch or heated glance made him forget all the reasons he couldn't have her. But he needed to remember them, for his sake as much as hers.

'...till you give me your word you won't do anything stupid,' his partner's voice said.

Tyler frowned. 'Didn't catch all of that.'

'The hell you didn't.'

He stopped in front of a storefront. 'I gotta go. I'll talk to you later.'

'Don't hang up on—'

Hitting the screen to end the call, he pushed through the door, walked to the nearest member of staff and flashed his shield. 'Detective Brannigan—I noticed the lion on your company logo and was wondering if I can take a look at some of your stationery.'

While the woman led the way he checked his watch. Two hours fourteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds until he saw Miranda again. Not that he was counting.

Under normal circumstances they would be locked on a heading he suspected neither of them wanted to change. But kissing her was one thing, taking advantage of their enforced proximity to scratch an itch was another and all it could be. Apart from keeping her safe and being there when she needed him, he had nothing to offer. There'd been a time he'd thought about settling down, getting married, having kids and moving up the ranks so his family could be proud of him. But even if she wanted a commitment from a guy like him, those days were gone.

His partner's concern wasn't misplaced. One way or another there would be a day of reckoning. It had been a long time coming and when it did Tyler wasn't convinced he would do the right thing.

Standing close to one of the windows he looked outside and saw a silent figure standing on the other side of the street, dull, lifeless eyes staring at him with accusation.

He wondered how Miranda would react if he mentioned he could see dead people.

SIXTEEN

She missed him when he wasn't around. That Tyler had become such a strong presence in her daily life concerned Miranda, but not enough to distract her focus from the increased frustration it added to the lack of privacy.

Detective Patty-Fingers was going to drive her insane if she couldn't get him on board with the idea of some quality alone time soon.

Adding the finishing touches to her make-up, she leaned back from the mirror and forced the ever-present thread of worry from her mind. Knowing the work he did allowed her imagination to run riot with dozens of horrific scenarios, all of which resulted in him getting hurt.

That no one would think she needed to know if he was didn't exactly help.

Reaching for an assortment of mismatched gold bangles to accompany the chunky squares dangling from her ears, she stood up, pushed her feet into a pair of waiting Jimmy Choo's and stepped over to the full-length mirror for a final inspection. The fashion police would be out in force on the red carpet but, for the first time since they'd started tearing apart everything she wore, she didn't care what they said. So long as the short shift of cap-sleeved emerald-green material overlaid with fine black lace got Tyler's attention nothing else mattered.

The flutter of tiny wings tickled the inside of her stomach with anticipation as she lifted her purse from the end of the bed and crossed the room. It wasn't a date they were going on but it felt like one.

He was effortlessly taking the stairs two at a time when she walked down the hall, his gaze lifting to tangle with hers. As always, her breath caught. Now it really did feel like a date. He wasn't wearing a suit. Instead his long legs were encased in black jeans and he'd layered the top half of his body with a dark sports jacket worn over a V-necked sweater with a white T-shirt underneath.

They met at the top of the stairs, his gaze slowly caressing her from head to toe before he quirked his brows and rewarded her efforts with, 'Wow.'

A smile blossomed on her lips. 'Exactly the response I was aiming for.' She angled her chin. 'Are both your suits at the dry cleaner's?'

'I heard bodyguards were supposed to blend in at these things. And for the record, I have more than two suits.'

'Are they all navy and black?' She resisted the urge to reach out and brush her fingertips over the lapels of his jacket while they were under the scrutiny of the security cameras. 'Now that I think about it, do you even have any colour in your wardrobe?'

To her delight he looked amused. 'You gonna start dressing me now?'

Au contraire; while he looked as mouth-wateringly good as he did, she was much more interested in undressing him.

When he read the message in her eyes he shook his head and inclined it towards the stairs. 'Let's go, princess.' They were halfway down before he lowered his voice to ask, 'You're wearing underwear under this one, right?'

'Only one way you're going to find out,' she replied in an equally intimate tone. 'And did I mention this is supposed to be kiss-proof lipstick? We might need to conduct a consumer test later.'

As they stepped onto the foyer the weight of a large hand on the inward curve of her spine drew a sharp breath through her lips. She could feel each long finger, her body aching in all the places she wanted him to touch. Then the door to the vestibule opened, her father appeared and Tyler's hand dropped a split second before he took a noticeable step back.

She hated that he had to do that.

'I thought you were speaking at a dinner this evening,' Miranda said to her father with a smile.

'Came back to get your mother,' her father replied. 'Where are you off to?'

‘Movie premiere in Times Square. I’m afraid Detective Brannigan will have to suffer his way through a rom-com.’

Her father leaned in to place a kiss on her cheek. ‘Have fun, sweetheart.’

‘You, too.’

He nodded at Tyler. ‘Detective.’

‘Sir.’ Tyler nodded in reply.

They continued across the foyer and into the vestibule as her father made his way upstairs. When Miranda used one of the tricks she’d learnt and slowed her pace so Tyler would touch her again the outer door opened and Lou Mitchell walked in.

‘Miranda.’ He smiled.

‘Good evening, Lou. How’s the family?’

‘Great, thanks.’ He looked at Tyler. ‘How’d you get on this afternoon?’

‘Might have something,’ Tyler replied. ‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow.’

Miranda lowered her voice as they stepped outside. ‘This place is like Grand Central.’

‘Yeah, I’d noticed that. But at least we’ll get some peace and quiet in Times Square.’

The combination of dry humour and the thought he might be as frustrated by the lack of privacy as she was made her smile. ‘What were you doing this afternoon?’

‘That’s on a need-to-know basis.’ He stopped at the front of the SUV. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘I want to sit up front.’

He shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Have you ever sat in the jump seat?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’re not starting now.’ Raising a hand he beckoned her with a crooked forefinger. ‘Round you come.’

Miranda stood her ground. ‘I thought we were parking at the Hyatt.’

‘We are.’

‘Then it’s not like I’m getting out where anyone can see me, is it?’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘We’ll be late if you don’t open the door.’

Tyler nodded. ‘Best come round here and get in, then, hadn’t you?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I can’t believe we’re arguing about where I sit.’

‘And I can’t believe you’re kicking up such a stink about it when you’ve never sat anywhere else.’

Miranda aimed a mock glare his way. ‘Maybe it might be nice not to feel like I’m being chauffeured everywhere.’

‘You are being chauffeured everywhere.’

‘You could indulge me just this once,’ she cajoled.

‘Not paid to do that.’

She batted her lashes and pouted, ‘Pretty please?’

Tyler sighed heavily before the finger he’d used to beckon her pointed in warning as he moved. ‘No touching anything while I’m driving.’

Why did he think she wanted to sit in the front?

‘I mean it.’

He was still a party pooper but, the way Miranda looked at it, the night was young.

When the locks clicked she opened the door and climbed inside, carefully arranging her dress so it wouldn’t crease and then sliding the skirt a little higher so it revealed a couple more inches of leg. As they reached for their seat belts she glanced surreptitiously at Tyler to see if he’d noticed. Judging by the frown on his face as he turned the ignition key, he had.

She wondered if teasing him would ever get old. He had to know it was foreplay. There was nothing about him that suggested he didn't have skills in that area. When she thought about what he could teach her, she squirmed a little on the seat.

'Quit that,' he said in a rougher voice as the gate raised and they left the compound.

'I'm settling in.' She looked out of the windscreen and stifled a smile. 'It feels different sitting up here.'

'That's not what you're doing.' He checked for traffic before turning onto the street.

'Are you an expert on how a woman's mind works?'

He aimed another heated gaze her way. 'I know getting inside a woman's head can have spectacular results in the bedroom, if that's what you're asking.' When he focused on driving again, he frowned. 'Most cops learn to read body language. It comes in handy.'

Nice attempt at trying to change the subject.

Miranda turned towards him, much more interested in what was happening inside the SUV than she was in anything outside. 'How do you do that?'

'Read body language?'

'Get inside a woman's head.'

'You pay attention.'

'So what have you discovered about me?'

'You're not who I thought you were,' he replied with a hint of uncharacteristic reluctance. 'Not entirely.'

She took a deep breath. 'I'm not sure I'm going to like everything about the answer to this question, but here goes. What do you mean by "not entirely"?'

'You're high-maintenance.'

Miranda disagreed. 'Unless someone is supplying the necessary personal grooming must-haves of a mani-pedi or a fabulous haircut I manage my beauty regime the same way any other woman does.'

'That wasn't what I meant.' He checked the mirrors before changing lanes. 'You're hard work.'

She could see how that would be true from his point of view. 'Do I need to remind you that you weren't exactly Mr Friendly at the start? I might have been nicer to you if you'd been nicer to me.'

'You telling me you don't like getting your own way?'

'Most people do,' Miranda countered. 'Especially if it can mean the difference between surviving in an environment you find suffocating or drowning under the weight of a responsibility you never asked for in the first place.'

When she realized how much she'd revealed she fixed her gaze on the traffic in front of them. She couldn't expect him to understand how she felt. No one could until they'd walked a mile in her shoes.

'I already figured that part out,' his voice rumbled.

'It's not as easy a life as some people might think it is,' she confessed.

'I couldn't do it.'

'You wouldn't have let it continue for so long.'

'I'm surprised you have.'

'As crazy as they can make me, I love my family.' She shrugged a shoulder. 'They're the only one I've got.'

With the reminder she lifted her chin and sat taller. Young ladies didn't slouch; they had poise and composure, even when having a discussion that made them feel exposed and vulnerable to criticism.

'You don't have to do that when we're alone. Save it for the crowd.'

Miranda's startled gaze leapt to his profile.

As he straightened the wheel he glanced at her. 'You thought I didn't know?'

It was difficult to think anything when the sensation he really had stepped inside her head was so...unsettling...

'Everyone has a front,' he continued while she tried to find her voice. 'Work the streets for long enough you learn there's usually a reason for it.'

Having raised the topic, he had to know she would turn it around. 'What do you hide?'

The corner of his mouth lifted. 'If I answered that question it wouldn't be hidden any more, would it?'

'You've spent more than your fair share of time in an interrogation room, haven't you?'

'They're called interview rooms these days.'

When she wondered how much his job affected the rest of his life Miranda decided the easiest way to find out was to open the topic. 'It can't be easy not to bring your work home with you.'

'It's not.'

'So how do you strike a balance?'

A muscle in his jaw clenched. 'You accept the fact you made a vow and live up to it as best you can for as long as you can.'

She understood that better than he probably thought she did. What she didn't understand was how he dedicated so much of his life to his work without needing something for himself. Didn't he have things he enjoyed doing in his downtime—people he wanted to spend time with, places he wanted to see? She couldn't have survived if she didn't have those things, even if some of them were still part of her dreams for the future.

'You remind me a little of my father,' she reluctantly admitted. 'He has the same level of dedication to his job.'

'Public service takes a particular kind of person.'

'Self-sacrificing?' she enquired.

'Mule-headed,' he replied.

'Oh, yes.' She nodded. 'He can be that, too.'

'You ever have the kind of talk with him that you had with your mother?'

Miranda angled her chin. 'Exactly how long were you standing outside that door?'

'Long enough to get the general gist. You'd think the doors in a place that old would be thicker.'

'In fairness to the door my mother does have a knack for getting me to raise my voice.' She rolled her eyes. 'In the olden days she'd have been described as unflappable.'

'Useful trait for a politician's wife.'

'True, but there's nothing worse than someone who won't argue with you when you're itching for a fight.'

'Might help if you were more open with her...'

'Now you're starting to sound like my father,' she complained. 'This is so not the conversation I planned on having with you the next time we were alone.'

'And now you're annoyed because you're not getting your own way,' he stated without missing a beat. 'Like I said—hard work.'

Miranda scowled at his profile. 'Did no one ever tell you it's okay to have the thought but it's not always okay to say it out loud?'

'Not much call for tact in my line of work.'

She shook her head and looked out of the windscreen as he steered them through the narrower side streets that fed into the main artery leading to the heart of Times Square. Speaking her mind wasn't something she'd been encouraged to do, especially when every word she said or Tweeted could be held against her. She'd always struggled with that. But with Tyler she didn't have to fight against her nature. It made sense of several things once she thought about it.

'Do you think if you were given more freedom you'd feel the need to go looking for trouble?'

The question made her sigh. 'I don't go looking for trouble. It has a tendency to find me.'

'Like a drugs raid in a nightclub,' he said dryly.

'How was I supposed to know the place had a drugs problem when I'd never been there before?'

'If you'd had an advance check it out they'd have told you.' When they stopped for a crossing light he looked her in the eye. 'There's an army of people at your disposal twenty-four-seven—never occurred to you to take advantage of their skill set?'

'I'm not going to bother someone every time I get the impulse to go out for ice cream.'

'It's your security detail's job to protect you,' he pointed out as bluntly as she'd learned to expect. 'You go skipping out any time you feel like it or get caught in the middle of a raid it makes both them and the department look bad. Wouldn't look a whole heap better for your father if he let something happen to you, would it?'

She wasn't trying to make anyone look bad. How could he not know that by now?

When the light changed and the last of the pedestrians on the crossing parted to make space for them to move forwards he surmised, 'You didn't think of it that way.'

'I suppose that makes me selfish?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think it's selfish to want time to yourself—I get that's what you were doing now. What I don't get is the reason you've stuck it out for so long if you don't enjoy it.'

Not true. 'There are parts of it I enjoy—meeting people, going places, supporting worthwhile causes.'

'So why not find a job that involves those things without the same restrictions?'

'I intend to. But I made a promise to my brother.'

She blinked. Had she just said that out loud?

'What kind of promise?'

That would be a yes, then. Briefly hiding behind the hand pretending to brush her hair into place, she checked to see how she felt about telling him. On a gut level it didn't feel wrong but there was a limit to how much she could say without delving into her family history. 'After abandoning him five days a week while I was at NYU I said I'd make sure he didn't have to smile for the cameras until the next election—he's due home the week before to help with the run-in. Win or lose, the plan was we'd make a stand together when he finished college.'

'What changed?'

'I did,' she answered truthfully before lowering her chin. 'I've never told anyone that. About the promise to my brother, I mean.'

'What about Crystal?'

'She wouldn't get it.'

'So why tell me?'

'Because I think you do.' Miranda lifted her chin and looked into his eyes as the traffic slowed. 'Like I said not so long ago—no one speaks to me the way you do. Maybe I needed someone to be frank with me so I could learn how to do the same in return.'

'If brutal honesty is what you need you're never gonna have to worry you won't get it from me.'

As much as it ruffled her feathers—particularly when he said something she didn't want to hear—she liked that about him. It was refreshing. 'You're never gonna let me win an argument for the sake of keeping the peace either, are you?'

'Nope,' he answered succinctly as he focused on the road ahead. 'And don't ever take me on in a sport unless you plan on losing.'

It was too good an opportunity to miss. 'Is there anything you're not good at?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?' he drawled.

When he turned his head the smile he flashed was so completely unexpected it stunned Miranda into silence. Enraptured by the sight she stared at the immediate change it brought to his face. His eyes were suddenly dozens of different shades of blue, the lines at the corners of his dense lashes deepening

to give the impression there'd been a time in his life when he'd laughed often and loud. Added to the flash of pearly whites beneath the adorably crooked line of his lips, he wasn't just handsome.

He was irresistible.

Miranda felt her body and heart sway towards him with the same impulse as a flower turning its petals to the sun. She was smiling back at him before she realized she was doing it, her chest expanding with warmth.

But like all good things the moment didn't last.

When the SUV moved forwards again she decided it was probably just as well. She couldn't get more attached to him than she already was. So long as everything they did was treated as nothing more than foreplay she'd be fine.

Until she'd lived a little, explored some and quelled the doubts she had about her capability to do something worthwhile with her life, she couldn't so much as think about making a commitment to someone else.

Tyler Brannigan was a commitment kind of guy; twelve years on the job would have told her that even if he hadn't made the comment about wearing a wedding ring. From that point of view she was glad there wasn't any chance he would get more attached to her.

She just wished she knew why it made her feel so sad.

SEVENTEEN

A life that involved posing on a red carpet wasn't one Tyler could ever see himself living. Considering the number of flashing cameras, it was a miracle she hadn't gone blind.

Posting up a few feet away from the spotlight, he watched her at work with a newfound respect. She seemed to know exactly where each lens was pointed; how to stand to display her stunning figure to its best advantage—though in fairness some folks were probably looking at her clothes—and throughout the test of endurance her smile never faded.

She was a pro. If she ended up supporting worthwhile causes when she had her freedom, they would be lucky to have her. The thought of her putting as much passion into her work as she did when she kissed him...

Well, suffice to say the world had better watch out.

When they stepped inside the movie theatre to make way for the Hollywood stars she was equally adept at working the room. Some of the people she talked to he recognized, some he didn't, but she knew each and every one by name and managed to slip in several mayoral sound bites inside ten minutes. Since it was more than apparent he wasn't the only bodyguard present—some of them standing out like pro-wrestlers in a ballet class—he allowed her a little more space and stepped over to the counter nearby.

Her eyes sparkled when he returned. 'What is that?'

'Can't watch a movie without popcorn,' he reasoned.

'And a bucket of soda, apparently.' She smiled as they lined up to take their seats. 'You bought diet, right?'

'Not in this lifetime.'

Reaching out, she snagged a kernel of popcorn and popped it in her mouth.

'Did I say I'd bought it to share?'

She smiled brightly as she chewed.

It set the tone for the following hour and a handful of minutes. In the darkness of the auditorium, with numerous brushes of their fingertips in the search for popcorn, some of the tension seemed to ease from his body. He might have left the theatre feeling pretty relaxed if it hadn't been for the sex scene in the movie.

As the tension rose onscreen it seemed to coil around them. His senses became sharper and clearer. The seductive scent of her perfume, the contact of their elbows on the armrest between them, the saltiness on his lips he knew he would taste on hers when they kissed.

When his little finger brushed rhythmically into one of the groves between finer-boned fingers he glanced sideways and saw her press her knees together. His gaze lifted to the dark pools of her eyes; the thought her body was preparing for him immediately making his do the same in return. For a moment it felt as if they were the only people there. Then something was said onscreen that made the audience laugh, snapping him out of it and allowing him time to gather what was left of his senses before the credits rolled. But reminding himself of all the reasons he couldn't have her wasn't working. If anything it made the need for mutual release seem as vital as his next breath.

She tugged his sleeve to get his attention when they reached the foyer. 'Last time I was here, Mac thought it was quicker to use the side exit than wade through the mob out front.'

Tyler didn't argue, but when the door opened there were almost as many people in the side street as there had been out front. The barricades were human—a line of uniformed police officers, some of them with outstretched arms, some as interested in who came out of the door as the crowd.

When Miranda appeared people started calling her name.

'I don't like this,' Tyler said tightly.

'It's fine,' she reassured him before pinning a smile in place and stepping forwards. 'Hi, how are you? Yes, it was great, you should go see it.'

While she worked her way down the line every instinct Tyler possessed screamed at him to get her out of there. He glared at one of the uniforms, tempted to get his badge number and report him for not doing his damn job.

As the door opened and a well-known talk-show host stepped outside the crowd yelled louder and moved forwards in a rolling wave that could barely be contained. His gaze immediately darted to Miranda. She'd got a couple of steps ahead and had her back to him. As he moved closer he saw her elbow move in a way that suggested whoever was holding on to her hand wasn't keen to let go. The minute he saw who it was Tyler grabbed the man's arm.

'Back off,' he warned.

'It's okay,' Miranda's voice said. 'I've got this.'

'I said, back off.'

The dark-haired man grimaced behind his glasses but didn't let go. When he raised his other arm and tried to put it around her waist Tyler's most basic instincts kicked in. Nudging her to the side to make room, he grasped fistfuls of sweatshirt and shoved the guy away from her.

'What are you doing?' he heard her say a split second before one the Hollywood stars appeared.

Suddenly the crowd was screaming and surging forwards. The guy he was holding stumbled backwards—was torn from his grasp—and Tyler was surrounded. Whirling around, he searched frantically for Miranda while his muscles clenched with the adrenaline-fuelled need to protect her. When he got a glimpse of her hair a second before her head dropped out of sight the thought of her being crushed almost made him lose his mind.

'Get out of the way!' he roared, shoving bodies aside until he could see her on the ground trying to get to her feet. Dropping down onto his haunches, he placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. 'You okay?'

She looked up at him and nodded, her eyes glittering with fear. 'I'm fine,' she lied.

Tyler pressed his forehead against hers for a moment, relief surging through his body. 'Let's go.'

Helping her upright, he took one of her hands in a firm grasp, his pace not slowing until he'd dragged her across Times Square and into the underground parking of the Hyatt. When they got close to the Escalade he turned around and hauled her into his arms. But instead of holding on to him, she struggled free and took a step back.

'Have you lost your mind?'

Tyler frowned. 'He wouldn't let go of you.'

'I was handling it.'

'It didn't look like you were.'

'You're putting me more on edge than those stupid letters,' she said with exasperation. 'How am I supposed to act normally if every time we go somewhere you freak out like I'm about to be kidnapped?'

'I suppose I should just stand there and let you get sucked into the crowd or crushed.'

She frowned back at him. 'What you should do is what everyone else who has surrounded me for the last eight years never learned to do—ask me if I'm okay.'

For the first time since he'd realized who she was talking to in the crowd Tyler stopped to think. Telling her it was the same guy he'd seen outside the school wouldn't help. He couldn't confess how uncharacteristically scared he'd been when he thought she might be hurt or how relieved he was when she wasn't, either.

So where did that leave him?

'You're right,' he admitted flatly, partly because she was but mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The admission took the wind out of her sails. ‘Thank you.’ She searched his eyes. ‘Now do you want to tell me what happened back there?’ When he didn’t reply she took a short breath. ‘Tyler, I’m trying to make an effort to communicate with you but you’re gonna have to help me out here. I can’t do it alone.’

He popped his jaw and tried to meet her halfway. ‘Maybe I’m having a problem with the crowds.’

‘Why?’

‘Too many people.’

‘We live in New York—it comes with the territory.’ Her expression softened, the warmth of understanding in her eyes making him feel about two feet tall. ‘It’s because everywhere you look you’re seeing potential dangers, isn’t it?’ She smiled. ‘You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve survived this long, haven’t I?’

Tyler ground his teeth together. He’d liked it better when they were arguing.

‘When I’m not appearing at public engagements I barely merit a second look.’

He very much doubted that. The night they met he would have picked her out of the crowd without any difficulty.

Stepping forwards, she took his hands and tangled their fingers together. ‘I’ll prove it to you.’

‘How exactly are you gonna do that?’

‘You have to trust me.’ She lifted their arms out to the sides and briefly rolled her gaze towards the concrete ceiling. ‘And possibly veer off the schedule a little bit...’

He didn’t like where the conversation was headed any better than he liked the sensation he was being managed. ‘Where are we going?’

‘For a walk,’ she replied with the same impossibly soft smile he’d seen her use on a small child.

‘Not in Times Square, we’re not.’

‘I was thinking more along the lines of Carl Schurz Park.’ Rocking forwards, she lifted her chin, her voice taking on the liquid cadence he’d been able to resist not so long ago. ‘Seems to me we could both use the break...’

‘Why there?’ he asked while weighing up the pros and cons in his mind to distract his body from accepting the invitation she’d issued to kiss and make up.

‘Because I’ve never got to see much of it beyond the view from my bedroom window. You can help me change that...’

Tyler finished the sentence for her when he realized what she was doing. ‘And it’s close enough to the mansion to set my mind at ease if you get mobbed.’

‘I won’t get mobbed,’ she promised. ‘You’ll see.’

He’d been right; he was being managed. But while it was laced with thoughtfulness and a shared need to escape...

Flexing his fingers around hers, he lowered their arms to their sides and warned her, ‘If I’m being played again, there’ll be consequences.’

Just because it felt to him as if their relationship had changed didn’t mean she felt the same way. He’d fallen into that trap before.

She fluttered her eyelashes. ‘You promise?’

EIGHTEEN

As they walked side by side along paths that twisted and turned through theatrical staircases Miranda tried to enjoy the surroundings. It probably looked like Narnia in the winter with a blanket of snow on the ground, especially when the paths were lit by old-fashioned lamp posts. But even with her hand held in a reassuringly strong grip as soon as they were out of sight of the mansion, she couldn't relax. The incident outside the movie theatre had shaken her more than she cared to admit.

It magnified the sensation she should hold on to him but when she questioned if it was more than the natural reaction to a second reminder of the frailty of her body in comparison to his strength, she wasn't certain she wanted to know the answer.

They eventually got to the boardwalk where even with the FDR driveway beneath their feet it was easy to forget they were in the city. In silent agreement they headed to the railing. Sharing a few quiet moments of nothing—something she suspected was a rarity for them both—she smiled at the view. The thousands of square and rectangular windows lit up on the buildings across the river, the stars and moon above, the draped twinkling lights of the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge reflected in the moving water below.

It was magical.

Closing her eyes, she breathed in and caught a hint of the sweet scent of pipe smoke coming from some of the old men sitting on a bench to watch the last boats go by. Then—as if someone felt the need to add another layer of fairy dust—a harmonica started playing.

Opening her eyes, she tugged on Tyler's hand to draw him away from the railing. 'Dance with me.'

He shook his head. 'I don't dance.'

'Didn't anyone ever tell you that everyone should dance a little every day?'

'I don't sing into a hairbrush in front of the mirror, either,' he replied dryly as he allowed her to pull him into the centre of the boardwalk.

'How about laughing—you ever try that one?'

As they stilled he looked into her eyes and confessed, 'It's been a while.'

The returning hint of hollowness to his voice made her heart ache. Whatever had happened to him—the thing that made him so angry—wasn't something she could fix. But she could make an attempt at helping him put it to the back of his mind for a while.

'One arm goes around my waist like this...' Stepping forwards she moved the hand she was holding behind her back and released it. 'You hold this hand... I place this one on your shoulder...and we sway...'

She could feel the resistance in his body as she started to move. 'Don't think about it. Listen to the music—let it wash over you—and move your weight from one foot to the other.' When she felt him start to move with her a smile blossomed on her lips. 'It's like the ebb and flow of the tide. You're just a leaf in the wind...' When he lifted his chin her smile grew. 'The leaf was too much, wasn't it?'

'You could enjoy this a little less...'

She chuckled softly. 'I don't think that's possible.'

As they slowly turned in a circle she revelled in the luxury of being close to him and openly studied his face. Despite the times it felt as if she knew him better than she possibly could in such a short space of time there were others—like now—when she found him impossible to read. What was he thinking? Did the closeness feel as good for him as it did for her? Did he want her as much as she wanted him?

While he looked at her in a way that made it feel as if he could see her soul and held her with a gentleness that belied his strength it didn't feel wrong to trust him with her body. But before she did she wanted him to trust her and she wasn't certain he did yet.

Swiping the tip of her tongue over her lips, she took a short breath and decided to broach what she suspected was a difficult subject. ‘If I talk to you about something you have to promise you won’t freak out.’

‘Meaning it’s something I’m not gonna like.’

She searched his eyes before continuing. ‘I think you know you can’t go around intimidating people.’

‘Not much call for good guys in the world I inhabit.’

Meaning he thought he wasn’t one or he’d had to change to survive? She could have pointed out bad guys didn’t come to a girl’s rescue, share popcorn at the movies or dance with her in the moonlight, but instead she said, ‘I’d have thought there was even more call for them there. At times lowering to the level of the people you deal with probably seems like the only way you can make them understand you—it’s dog-eat-dog, right?—but—’

‘It’s not how the people in your world behave.’

‘You make it sound like we live on different planets.’

‘To all intents and purposes we do.’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t begin to imagine some of the things you’ve seen.’

‘You’re not supposed to. It’s why there are people like me doing the job we do. We’re buffers.’

‘Even soldiers in a war zone take the occasional break from the front line. When’s the last time you did that?’

He frowned. ‘That’s been a while, too.’

Having spent more than enough time around people in high pressured jobs to recognize stress when she saw it, she’d thought it might be part of the problem.

‘Taking time for yourself—spending it with the people you love and dancing every now and again—wouldn’t that remind you of what you’re fighting for?’ When some of the tension returned to his body she sought a way to make him understand what she was doing stemmed from the fact she cared, even if it was more than she should. ‘Haven’t you ever had someone in your life you looked forwards to seeing—who made everything you did and all the sacrifices you make worthwhile? You can’t have gone this long without meeting someone like that. Everyone has a one who got away, right?’

The fist of jealousy that gripped her stomach made her hope the answer was no.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

Not that she wanted to know details but, ‘Was your job part of the problem?’

‘We both worked long hours.’

‘What happened?’

‘She married someone else.’

The information made her look at him with new eyes. Had his heart been broken? She wondered what kind of woman he’d fallen for and came to the conclusion she must have been pretty amazing. It left her with the sensation she had a lot to live up to—something her insecurities would play on if she let them. But if the woman had been dumb enough to let him go she couldn’t have been that great. ‘Was that when your work started taking over your life?’ she asked.

‘We’re back to the subject of finding a balance.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not always easy.’

‘You think I don’t know that?’

When he stilled she realized the music had stopped and turned to smile at the musician as he saluted them with his harmonica before walking away.

Tyler removed his arm from her waist and lowered their hands. As he led her back into the park he took a long breath and exhaled before asking, ‘How did you know?’

‘About the discrepancy in your work-life balance?’

‘That I wouldn’t hurt you that night in the alley...’

Miranda answered honestly. ‘I just did. It was a gut-instinct thing. When something feels right it feels right.’

‘You place that kind of faith in everyone?’

She arched a brow at him. ‘After spending a quarter of my life surrounded by people who are never themselves around me— who laugh even when my jokes aren’t funny or pretend to be my friend just so they can say they know me?’

‘I’ll take that as a no.’

Miranda stopped and turned towards him. ‘Wait a minute. Are you telling me you didn’t know?’

‘No one knows what they’re capable of till they’re pushed,’ he said flatly.

‘Something pushed you before me, didn’t it?’

The shadows between arcs of lamplight illuminating the path seemed to close in around him. ‘Yes.’

Despite the dark tone to his deep voice her feet took a step forwards, her hand reaching out to the tense line of his jaw. When a muscle clenched beneath her fingers she wanted to reassure him nothing he said would change how she saw him—that when a person had the kind of faith she had in him it wasn’t just for a minute or a day. She wanted to tell him that she thought he was strong enough to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders but he didn’t have to. Not alone. But when it came down to it all she could manage was his name. ‘Tyler—’

‘Don’t.’ A large hand covered hers and removed it from his face. ‘We can’t do that here.’

The rejection stung but somehow Miranda managed to rise above it and seek a rational explanation when she knew he wasn’t immune to her touch. ‘Has there been a noticeable rush of people who have recognized me? Why do you think so many famous people choose to live in New York?’

‘You’ve made your point,’ he replied. ‘And I’m open to the idea of allowing more off-schedule walks to let you take a break. But we’re still not doing that here.’

Frowning a little at the intimation she still needed permission to do what she wanted, she laid her palm on his chest, sidled up to him and cut her inner siren loose. ‘Then take me somewhere we can be alone...and get naked...’

From her perspective, the sooner they started playing out a few of her fantasies, the better she’d feel.

‘Not gonna happen.’ Suddenly he was standing taller and straighter, his voice edged with fierce determination. ‘I’m not interested in helping you stick a middle finger at your parents before you leave the family business.’

It was the closest she’d ever been to experiencing a slap in the face.

NINETEEN

The second the words left his mouth Tyler regretted them.

When Miranda flinched it wasn't outwardly visible but he could see it in her eyes.

'You're trying to push me away again, aren't you?' she said with a hint of uncertainty that almost broke his resolve. 'It's what you do when someone gets close to you.'

He had to stay strong. Encouraging her anger would be better for both of them. 'I'm on the couch now, am I? Okay. I'll take a seat.' He moved over to one of the benches at the edge of the path, sat down and stretched his arms along the back. 'Don't you need a pen and paper to take notes for the rest of this therapy session?'

Miranda shook her head in a way that suggested she was disappointed in him. 'All you had to do was say you weren't ready to talk about it.'

Reminding him how close he'd come to spilling his guts wasn't the best tactic. 'What makes you think I'd talk to you when you have no idea how the world works?'

'If there weren't so many people trying to protect me from it I might have a better idea.' She arched a brow. 'You think I can't handle whatever you tell me?'

Good question. He knew she had guts and bravado. She'd demonstrated she had compassion, warmth and understanding. When added to her sensuality and the way she could turn him on with just a glance, it made him realize she was exactly the kind of woman a less tainted guy might want to build something with if things went well.

But the truth was it didn't matter if she could handle it. Simple fact was she shouldn't have to try.

Clearly seeking an explanation for what had gone wrong when they'd been getting along better she came up with, 'I'm certain getting personally involved isn't something you're encouraged to do during working hours.'

'What makes you think I find it difficult to avoid?'

She sighed. 'No one is that detached.'

'It's my claim to fame. Kinda like yours is being your father's mouthpiece by day and a closet rebel at night. That's what this is—' he lifted an arm to wave a forefinger between them '—another rule for you to break.'

'Deflection—you invented that, right?'

'I'm sure the mayor would be overjoyed to discover you're doing the nasty with one of your bodyguards.'

'What a delightful way to put it.' She lifted her chin a defiant inch. 'But even if I was, what happens between us has nothing to do with my family. It's not like this could go anywhere. They won't have to size up your suitability for a future son-in-law.'

Just as well, wasn't it? He could imagine how great he'd fit in at fancy dinner parties and how happy he'd be to traipse out his firstborn for the cameras. He'd create more negative publicity inside a couple of appearances than she had in years. 'Which is another part of the attraction, isn't it?'

'Unlike someone I could mention I didn't know who I was kissing that night in the hall. So what's your excuse for breaking the rules?'

'I needed a way to get you out of there before you were identified. It was the first thing that came to mind.' If he'd known how it would feel he might have thought twice, but when he tried to regret it, he couldn't.

'You hate that you're attracted to me, don't you? I'm probably not even your type.' Her chin lifted another, more defensive inch. 'What was she like—your one who got away?'

When the thought she was jealous immediately made him want to reassure her she had nothing to worry about on that score, Tyler frowned. 'Not going there.' He pushed to his feet. 'This is just another example of you getting mad at me because you're not getting your own way.'

‘That’s not why I’m— You know what? I’m not going to be goaded into an argument with you. Back on the boardwalk I thought...’ She clamped her mouth shut and shook her head. ‘Obviously not —my mistake. I get it now.’

Tyler bunched his hands into fists at his sides so he wouldn’t reach out to her.

He couldn’t tell her that she was the first woman he’d danced with or that while he did he’d experienced his first moments of peace in longer than he could remember. He couldn’t tell her when she’d asked if he had someone in his life he looked forward to seeing the first person he’d thought of was her. The number of things he couldn’t say increased with each passing day. But they’d known each other for two weeks. Even if they had a future he wouldn’t be telling her how he felt after two measly weeks.

What was next—a marriage proposal inside a month, quickie ceremony at six weeks and divorce a couple of weeks later? He wasn’t that kind of guy. If he ever got round to putting a ring on a woman’s finger it would stay there.

She rolled her eyes. ‘I mean, how silly of me. You’re obviously totally oblivious to me in that way. I could strip naked right now and you wouldn’t even notice.’

The hell he wouldn’t.

‘I could date a string of guys while you’re forced to watch and you wouldn’t care. Better still, I could spend the night at their apartment while you stand outside the door and listen to every sound.’

The hell she would.

‘Not that it would matter to you if I slept with every guy in the city...’

Something savagely territorial twisted hard in Tyler’s gut. He’d kill every one of them with his bare hands.

‘I could take every sex fantasy I’ve had about you since the night we met and try them out with whoever feels like getting down and dirty—’

That did it.

A single stride took him to where she stood. Then his hands were on her face and his mouth was on hers. There was nothing hesitant about it: a brazen mating of lips and tongues that sent him up in flames. The pent-up frustration of the past week, knowing what it was like to touch her and being unable to do anything about it, was released in a flurry of kisses.

If they’d been within striking distance of a bed she wouldn’t get to leave it until he’d shown her no other man would put as much effort into making her feel better than she’d ever felt before. He would find a way to brand her, bind her to him and make sure the world knew she was his, all the reasons he couldn’t claim her forgotten in a red haze of desire.

‘The things I said,’ she mumbled against his lips. ‘I would never do that to you.’

‘I know,’ he mumbled back.

The suggestion had been enough.

‘I don’t want you to think—’

‘I don’t.’

When he dropped his hands so he could wrap his arms around her waist and fit her soft curves to his body a moan vibrated in the base of her throat. ‘You drive me crazy.’

Then they were even.

As he lifted his mouth to place worshipful kisses on her closed eyes and her forehead in an attempt to slow things down she sighed contentedly. ‘Can we call the “who’ll crack first?” competition a draw now and progress to the kissing marathon?’

Tyler brushed a waving lock of silky hair from her cheek, committing the softness of her skin to his memory. ‘We don’t have that luxury with your schedule.’

‘We could try making time for it,’ she suggested.

‘How about we see how it goes for the next while?’ Having stepped over every line he’d tried to draw between them bar one, it was the only concession he could make.

‘I’m okay with that.’ She rocked forwards onto her toes, crushing her breasts tighter against his chest as she lifted her chin and demanded, ‘More.’

Tyler was happy to oblige, picking her up off her feet as he slanted his mouth over hers.

After several minutes of kiss-filled silence she mumbled, ‘You think I don’t know you’re carrying me back to the house right now?’

‘If you’d shut up I could distract you better.’

‘You can’t carry me the whole way there.’

‘Says who?’

Carrying her he could do. Looking after her while they were together he could do. Touching her and kissing her he could definitely do—wasn’t as if he’d managed to stop himself from doing either one. Making love to her—no matter how desperately he wanted to—he still had to avoid. She’d thank him in the long run, especially if the alternative was living with the fact she’d given herself to a man who became a cold-blooded murderer.

He could protect her from that.

Even if it was the last honourable thing he did.

TWENTY

Either Tyler was more in control of the risk-assessment aspect of her security than she'd given him credit for or he was better at escaping than she'd ever been. Not that it mattered after two of the happiest weeks of her life.

Every time there was so much as the smallest gap in her schedule he would take her somewhere she'd never been. An impromptu concert tour of some of the best musicians performing in subway stations; to partake of lunch from a street vendor and run back to the SUV through the rain when the heavens opened; people-watching in parks where they could pit his detective skills against her imagination in games of 'guess the profession.'

It was a bittersweet romance.

Each place he showed her made her fall deeper in love with the city she called home and broke her heart a little when she realized how much living she'd missed. Add stolen kisses, forbidden touches and lingering heated looks to the mix and her only complaint was he hadn't found a gap in her schedule for sex. It was something she planned on fixing if he wouldn't. A girl had to do what a girl had to do.

When the suggestion was made they spend time together on a rare day off from campaign duties she thought they were finally headed for an afternoon of debauchery. But when they pulled up outside a neatly kept house in Staten Island her rising anticipation was replaced by surprise.

'This is where you live?'

It looked more like a family home than a bachelor pad.

'It's where I grew up.' He switched off the engine and unbuckled his seat belt. 'Hope you're hungry. There's always enough food to feed an army at Sunday lunch.'

Miranda froze. 'Wait. What? I can't meet your family.'

'You can sit out here if you want but you're gonna be here awhile.'

She'd never felt more in need of an escape route. 'I can go for a walk or take a ferry ride. I've always wanted to do that. I'll meet you back here in a couple of hours.'

'In what universe do you think that's likely?'

'It's your family. I can't go in there.'

'You meet people every day. I'm not seeing the problem.' He leaned across and opened her door. 'Out.'

'I can't.'

'Yes, you can.'

'Would it make a difference if I said please?'

'No,' but it earned an all-too-brief brush of his firm mouth across her submissive lips. 'I got a call last night to say there's some big family announcement I'm not to miss and, since I can't get out of it, you get to be here. We'll be an hour, two tops, and then—if you're a very good girl—we can take a ride on the big orange boat.'

When he added a push of encouragement to her shoulder, Miranda chose to get out of the car rather than fall face-first onto the street. She stared at the house as she walked to the sidewalk, anything resembling an appetite replaced by the kind of churning that made her pray she wouldn't throw up on one of his relatives.

'How are you going to introduce me?'

'I don't know how rich folks do it in Manhattan high society.' He reached for the latch on the gate. 'But here on Staten Island we tend to use names.'

'I can't believe you're doing this to me.'

'It's not that big a deal.'

Yes, it was. How could he not know that—did they have to have the relationship definition talk? Maybe she was overthinking it. Maybe he brought dozens of women home.

The thought made her frown.

'Think of them as potential voters if it helps,' he said as they got to the top of the porch steps. 'But I should probably warn you most of them like the look of the other guy.'

She sent him a withering look.

When they stepped into the hall he took her coat, hung it on a rack and called out, 'We've got company.'

Persuaded around the corner with a large palm on the inward curve of her spine, Miranda discovered four pairs of curious eyes studying her. Standing there stark naked couldn't have made her feel more exposed.

'This is Miranda,' Tyler announced.

A woman with long dark hair and soulful brown eyes was the first of them to step forwards and hold out a hand. 'I'm Jo. It's nice to meet you, Miranda.'

'And you.' She smiled apologetically. 'If I'd known where we were going I'd have brought something with me—I feel terribly empty-handed.'

'Soon fix that.' A tall man who was obviously one of Tyler's brothers stepped forwards and shook her hand the second Jo let go. His vivid blue eyes narrowed a little. 'You look familiar.'

'My husband, Danny,' Jo explained before nudging him in the ribs. 'She's the mayor's daughter, you idiot.'

'Nah, that's not where I know her from...' A slow smile spread across his mouth. 'How's your Southern accent?'

It took a second but when she made the connection Miranda's eyes widened. He'd been one of the police officers in the hallway; more specifically one of the officers who had caught her making out with Tyler while pinned against a wall. There was just never a giant hole in the ground when a girl needed one, was there?

Danny winked as he let go of her hand. 'Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. You, on the other hand—' he pointed at his brother '—are gonna have to buy my silence for at least the next decade.'

'You open your pie hole your lovely wife will end up wearing black,' Tyler warned.

Jo linked arms with her husband and patted his chest. 'You can tell me later, babe.'

'You already know.'

'How about you remind me?'

As they moved away Miranda dropped her chin and aimed an accusatory glare at Tyler. 'You didn't mention your brother was there that night.'

'Didn't I?'

'No.'

'Uncle Tyler!'

Her eyes widened as a small child launched herself at him and was swung into the air. 'You have a niece?'

'Indeed I do.' He smiled indulgently. 'Hey, Munchkin, who's the best-looking guy in the room?'

'Daddy,' the girl replied with conviction.

Tyler glanced briefly at Miranda. 'They can get a bit confused at four.' He bounced the child higher in his arms as he walked away. 'Remember we talked about this? Let's go over it again...'

The image provided such a contrast to the dangerous man she'd seen in an alley Miranda couldn't quite equate the two as she watched him disappear into what she assumed was the kitchen. But the reminder of how gentle he could be was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Why weren't they at his place having sex?

'Amy adores him,' Jo's voice said beside her. 'I think it's because at times they're the same mental age.'

Detective-Takes-The-World-Too-Seriously-To-Dance had a Peter Pan side to his personality? Miranda blinked. She really wanted to see that. 'Is she yours?'

'No, we've only been married a few months. She's Johnnie's daughter. He's the eldest. Then—in descending order—there's Reid, Tyler and Danny. Liv is the youngest.' She smiled when Miranda looked at her. 'I know. It can be a lot to take in on the first visit and I'm afraid they're not even all here yet. Liv and Blake are running a little late with their big announcement—my money's on baby news. Reid is undercover so we haven't seen him in a while—makes it twice as important for everyone to be here if it is baby news, y'know? Momma Brannigan is in the kitchen.' She leaned closer and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'But don't be scared. She's lovely.'

While she blinked at the overload of information Jo smiled and linked their arms at the elbows. 'Let's get the rest of the introductions out of the way. It's easier a few at a time.'

After meeting Johnnie and his wife Miranda swiped her palms over her hips and asked, 'Can I help with anything?'

'You can give me a hand setting the table if you tell me where you got those gorgeous shoes.'

A conversation about fashion and Jo's cheery chatter helped distract her until Tyler reappeared with an older woman. 'My mom,' he supplied as he set down a platter of food on the table.

'I guessed.' She stepped forwards and reached out a hand. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Brannigan. Thank you for allowing me to visit your lovely home.'

Sky-blue eyes sparkled with humour as she looked up at her son. 'Is she always this polite?'

'No,' he said flatly.

'How do we get her to stop?'

'Couple of minutes in my company usually does it.'

'Then you'd best stay with her.' She patted his arm. 'With any luck some of it might rub off.'

Tyler nodded firmly. 'Knew that was coming...'

The interaction made Miranda smile. When he smiled crookedly in reply, her heartbeat stuttered and skipped a couple of beats. Dragging her gaze away, she reached out to straighten the cutlery on the place setting closest to her. The desire to ravish him and be ravished in return was at the very least wildly inappropriate in front of his family.

'We're here!' a woman's voice called from the hall.

Another round of introductions ensued and, despite some odd looks when Tyler placed her in the chair next to him for lunch within a short space of time Miranda fell a little in love with the rest of the Brannigans. They interacted like a single unit, at times talked over each other in a way that made it difficult to follow the flow of conversation, but what she found most fascinating was how different Tyler was with them.

She'd never seen him so relaxed, heard him express an educated opinion on so many subjects or realized how funny he could be when he set his mind to it. It gave her a glimpse of how he must have been before he saw too much. For the life of her Miranda couldn't imagine why the woman he loved had let him get away. To be loved by a man like him, to have children with him and spend her life standing by his side, being there when he needed her and knowing he would do the same in return...

A wave of longing overwhelmed her. Nothing had ever seemed more beautiful or more terrifying.

Understandably it made her more aware of the happy couples surrounding them as the meal finished and she helped with the clearing up. She looked at Jo and Danny as he tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. The intimacy of the touch and the heat in his eyes made it obvious Tyler's younger brother was very much in love with his wife. The feeling was just as obviously returned. They made it look as if there were no one else in the room but them. It was incredibly romantic but, since it also made her feel as if she was intruding on something private, Miranda tore her gaze away.

Inevitably it was drawn to where Tyler was leaning against the archway to the kitchen. She smiled as she ran a cloth somewhat aimlessly over the table. Even when sporting a basic blue-jeans-

and-sweater combo he was devastatingly handsome. She watched as he cradled a mug of coffee in his hand, his expression pensive. When he blinked dense lashes she followed his gaze and discovered he was looking where she'd been looking. Jo laughed at something Danny said and as Miranda's gaze returned to Tyler the corner of his mouth lifted and his expression softened.

'What happened?' she'd asked.

'She married someone else,' he'd replied.

Miranda's heart twisted, a brief frown aimed at the woman she'd liked so much. How could she do that to him? Marrying his brother was bad enough, flaunting her happiness in front of him was unforgivable—and she'd seemed so nice.

Immediately crossing the room, she stood close enough to feel the heat radiating from his large body, her back to everyone else as if she could somehow shield him from pain. 'She's your one who got away?' she whispered.

Tyler dropped his chin and frowned, his deep voice equally low. 'Don't make me regret bringing you here.'

'She's your brother's wife.'

'She wasn't always his wife. Leave it alone.'

'But how can you—?'

He shook his head and glanced around. 'Just this once do you think you could do what I tell you to do?'

When he looked into her eyes again what she thought she could read in the cobalt depths made Miranda want to march across the room and give his sister-in-law a piece of her mind. She understood how difficult it was for Tyler to be there even if no one else did. Had he brought her along as back-up or a smokescreen? She was a lot happier with the first option, would have volunteered if she'd known he needed support. Didn't he know that? She wanted to talk to him about it—hear the story from beginning to end in his words—but it was the archetypal wrong time, wrong place.

He lifted his mug and drained the contents. 'You want to take that ferry ride, we best say our goodbyes.'

Miranda acquiesced with a nod. A ferry ride would be the ideal place to talk. She just wished she didn't feel as nervous about hearing what he had to say as she'd been about meeting his family. Gathering herself together, she pinned one of her public-persona smiles in place and turned around. Even if it was more than likely she would never see them again she wanted his family to think well of her.

One by one the people she barely knew said their goodbyes with a hug, a kiss on the cheek or both. At first she felt awkward about hugging them back, her body stiff and unyielding; particularly with Jo. But by the time she got to the eighth person—his mother—she was holding on for a moment longer than strictly necessary, her throat clogged with emotion.

They made her feel so accepted it was all too easy to paint a picture of a fantasy future where she was part of their world. She would sit in the seat next to Tyler every Sunday, at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and be there just for him the way it felt he'd been for her.

She gave herself a mental talking-to as they left the house. If she wasn't careful before she knew it she'd be doodling Miranda Brannigan inside hearts on stationery. The man had been in love with another woman—still was for all she knew. Then there was the small matter of her freedom—she didn't want to trade one form of captivity for another.

Their relationship was about sex and, once they'd had a little chat on the ferry to ensure they were on the same page, they were going to his apartment to have lots of it.

TWENTY-ONE

If pressured Tyler might have admitted taking Miranda home to meet his family wasn't planned. But it would have taken extreme torture for him to confess the reason behind it was that it felt as if she had him on the ropes.

Truth was he doubted taking her to meet the family priest would keep them out of the bedroom for much longer.

As she walked beside him, unruly tresses of flame-red hair tossed by the wind, all he could think about was how it felt to have those silky soft strands sliding over his fingers. He wanted to strip her naked and keep her that way until he'd sated his hunger for her. He wanted to map her body with his mouth and his tongue, taking her close to the edge over and over again without allowing her release until she begged him to take her.

He'd used every trick he could think of to get it off his mind. He'd even summoned random pages of books from his memory and recited them word for word inside his head. When his talent for retaining information chose to remind him of the time he'd furtively flicked through a copy of Lady Chatterley during puberty, he'd stopped.

So much for that great idea...

But there was no point denying there was something else going on that had nothing to do with sex.

He'd watched from the sidelines as she smiled, talked and laughed with his family. She'd looked right there—as if she belonged—and Tyler realized on some level he'd known she would. What he hadn't realized was how much he would like having her there. He'd even looked at Jo and Danny and felt at peace with the past; as if things were the way they were supposed to be.

It felt as if a weight had been lifted.

Studying her from the corner of his eye, he tried to figure out what was different about her—the thing that allowed her to work such a miracle. But when she looked at him and flashed a small smile he was distracted by the sensation something was off.

'You okay?'

She avoided his gaze and nodded. 'I'm fine.'

'Did I ever mention one of my detective skills is the ability to spot a lie?' Tyler raised his hand and waggled a forefinger over his shoulder. 'Hairs on the back of my neck stand up.'

'They all hugged me.' She shrugged a shoulder, her tone deceptively dismissive. 'I'm not used to that.'

It made him want to sit her parents down for a little chat. Didn't they know their daughter at all? Would it be such a damn hardship for them to get to know her?

They obviously needed someone to tell them what they were missing.

Dropping her gaze to the ground for a moment, she took a short breath and asked, 'How long has it been since your father passed away?'

'Nine years. He had a heart attack.'

Her voice softened. 'I'm sorry.'

'It happens.' Tyler shrugged. 'Work hard, play hard—that was his motto. I doubt he had many regrets.'

They crossed the street to the boardwalk before she commented, 'You were different with them.'

'So were you.'

'I don't usually meet families.' She scrunched her nose a little. 'I mean, I do, but...'

'But?' he prompted.

'It was different this time.'

Tyler was about to ask why when he glanced ahead. 'Can you run in those shoes?'

‘They’re not exactly designed for running.’

‘Try.’ He took her hand. ‘Ferry’s in, we gotta move.’

They were the last people to board before it departed. Miranda looked up at him with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, so beautiful she was making it difficult for him to look anywhere else. When she laughed he smiled back at her. Every time she did that it made him want to be a funnier guy so he could coax the sound from her lips.

‘Can we stand outside?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘You’ll get cold.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t care.’

Guiding them to what shelter he could find at the end of the deck, he watched her reaction to the new experience as she caught her breath from the run. He drank in her animated expression, the way her eyes sparkled with delight, and as always wondered how it felt to see the world through her eyes. The little adventures they’d taken might have been an attempt to keep them out of the bedroom but they’d done more than that. At least they had for him.

He saw the city with fresh perspective. It wasn’t tarnished by cynicism or taken for granted the way he normally did. As a result he’d thought about the small part he played in the greater scheme of things and come to the conclusion a little was better than nothing. One less perp on the streets was one less crime—several in the case of repeat offenders. If it meant she was safe when she began to explore on her own he’d arrest each and every one of them in her name.

‘They liked you,’ he told her, in case she didn’t know. ‘That’s why you were treated to the hug-fest.’

‘I got the impression your family would make anyone you brought home feel welcome.’ A soft smile came through in her voice. ‘You’re lucky to have them.’

‘They’re not bad,’ he allowed. ‘Probably a bit late to trade them in.’

‘It can’t have been easy for your mom with five little kids running around.’ She waited until he looked into her eyes. ‘You’re all quite close in age, aren’t you?’

‘Arrived in an eight-year bonanza of adorability.’

‘That kind of time frame would terrify me.’

‘My great-grandmother had eleven.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Seriously?’

‘It’s why the Irish never have to invade a country. We infiltrate.’ The comment had the desired effect: she laughed. But Tyler shook his head when it was followed by an involuntary shudder. ‘I said you’d be cold out here.’

‘I don’t want to go inside.’ When the wind blew a lock of hair across her face, she raised her hand to brush it back and looked over the water again. ‘This is amazing.’

Releasing her hand, Tyler took a step forwards, folded the edges of his jacket around her narrow shoulders and wrapped his arms around her body. ‘Better?’

She settled in as if she’d always been there, her arms around his waist and her cheek against his chest. ‘Much.’

He rested his chin on her head as they sailed past the Statue of Liberty.

‘She’s humongous.’

Tyler looked down at her with amusement. ‘How can you not know that?’

‘She looks smaller from farther away.’

Fair enough.

‘Did you tell her how you felt?’

It didn’t take a genius to work out they weren’t talking about a national monument any more.

‘I thought she knew.’

‘She might not have married Danny if she knew.’

'No.' He'd accepted that long before he came to terms with it. 'Anyone who sees them together knows they're good for each other.'

'Can't be easy to watch.'

'Wasn't for a while...' A guy could come up with a lot of reasons not to attend Sunday lunch when he needed to, but that would change now, thanks to her.

'No one else figured it out?'

He sincerely hoped not—because that wouldn't be at all awkward—but realistically all he knew for certain was, 'You're the first person to bring it up.'

There was a palpable moment of hesitation before she asked, 'Do you still love her?'

Not in that way. He wouldn't be standing there with her if he was in love with someone else. He wasn't wired that way. 'Part of me will always feel something for her. Just because it didn't work out the way I thought it would doesn't make it any less real.'

'Why didn't you tell her?'

And there it was: the million-dollar question.

When he didn't answer she leaned back and looked up at him. 'You don't know?'

'We were friends. I didn't think she was ready to hear it, but the fact is I never knew why until recently.'

'You don't want to tell me,' she surmised.

Considering some of it had to do with his attraction to the woman he was with, not so much.

'Do you regret it?'

He looked into her eyes. 'It's history.'

'You want to change the subject,' she said. 'Okay. What are we doing—you and me, Tyler and Miranda?'

'What do you think we're doing?'

'I thought it was foreplay,' she answered frankly. 'Neither one of us is interested in making a commitment, are we?' There was a beat before she added, 'We enjoy each other's company—most of the time—and you know I want you.'

He did. Even if he couldn't see it in her eyes, he could hear it in her voice. Her tone was liquid as she said the words, thick with sensuality and more potent than any drug. Resisting her was the equivalent of a slow, painful death, every muscle in his body straining towards her.

'I know you want me.' Her lips formed a decadently sinful smile. 'Some things are hard to hide...'

To prove the point she brushed her stomach across his abdomen in a deliberately provocative move. Tyler sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth, unable to stop his body from reacting. She had that effect on him even without trying. When she put effort into it he didn't stand a chance. He dropped his hands to her hips to hold her still.

'What do you want me to say?' he asked tightly.

'I don't want you to say anything. I want you to take me to your apartment, take me to bed and take me.'

He'd never wanted anything more. 'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'It's not that simple.'

'Yes, it is.'

He wished it were. 'You need to think this through.'

'You think I haven't?' Removing one of the arms around his waist, she snaked it between them and raised a hand to set fine-boned fingers against his jaw as she looked deep into his eyes. 'I haven't thought about anything else since the moment I laid eyes on you.'

Utilizing every microscopic fraction of resolve he had left, Tyler removed her fingers. 'We can't do this.'

'Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't want me.'

‘I’m not gonna lie about that.’ Not after she’d so ably demonstrated his weakness.

‘Then what is the problem?’ There was a brief flash of fire in her eyes. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed I’m throwing myself at you. That doesn’t happen very often.’

Some of his frustration bubbled to the surface. ‘Damn it, woman, I’m trying to do the right thing here.’ He glanced over her head to see who was watching what they were doing, his fingers tangling with hers at their side. ‘You’re not making it any easier.’

‘And I’m not going to until you can give me a rational explanation for why this can’t happen when we both want it to,’ she said on a note of exasperation.

‘I won’t take advantage of the situation.’

‘Uh...hello...woman willing to be taken advantage of over here.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I want to have wild, uninhibited sex with you. I want to feel your hands on my body. I want...’ she rocked forward and pressed her breasts against his chest ‘...you to make me scream your name...’

Tyler swore viciously beneath his breath. He’d said he was more trouble than she could handle? Man was he ever outclassed on that score. Every strand of knuckle-dragging caveman that remained in his DNA demanded he tame her and tie her down. But the part of him that had made the mistake of looking for something more meaningful in the wrong place wouldn’t let him take her without it.

He wanted to strip her naked in more ways than one. He wanted to climb inside her mind and discover all her secrets. He wanted her to be more herself with him than she’d ever been with anyone else. He wanted sleeping together to mean something to her because he knew it would mean something to him. But he couldn’t say any of those things without discussing a future he couldn’t plan until after the day of reckoning.

From what she’d said it didn’t even look as if she wanted a future with him. Then he remembered she’d asked about commitment. It hadn’t been a statement of fact. The devil was in the detail. Where there was a loophole, there was a way in. He needed to know how she felt and in the absence of words he knew how to get to the truth.

Making the first connection with their eyes, he dropped his guard and allowed her to see how much he wanted her. It drew a low gasp from her lips, encouraging him to continue despite the glimpse of fear he got in return. Running his hand over her back in a soothing caress, he cradled her close, releasing her hand so he could brush the backs of his fingers over her cheek.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispered.

He angled his head and lowered his mouth to her lips. ‘Don’t speak, just feel.’

Moving his hand, he pushed her hair over her shoulder, changing the direction of his lips at the last possible second to place a kiss on the sensitive skin of her neck. He slid his mouth upwards, circled the shell of her ear with the tip of his tongue and felt a shiver run through her body.

‘Tyler—’

‘Shh...’

He kissed his way down her jaw and captured her mouth, alternating between soft and hard, breathless and slow. While she responded in kind he could sense she was holding back, conflicted by the desire to have him take her hard and fast the way he knew she wanted him to and the warm, cherished feeling he was attempting to convey with tenderness. Then she was leaning into him. The kiss became deeper, richer, full-bodied and intoxicating, creating a haze around them that blocked out everything else.

Something he didn’t recognize expanded in his chest. It pushed the air from his lungs and filled the cavity until it felt as if it would break his ribs and burst free. In seeking out the truth about how she felt he’d touched the edge of something so large within himself he couldn’t see to the other side. But before he could figure out what it was, with no more warning than a low moan she wrenched her mouth free and took a sharp step backwards.

‘Stop.’

When he looked at her Tyler discovered her eyes were wide with anguish. He frowned. What had he done wrong?

She sucked in a sharp breath and shook her head. 'This isn't what we're meant to be doing.'

'I thought you wanted to make love,' he said roughly, the after-effects of the best kiss of his damn life still rippling through his body.

'I want us to have sex.'

'Meaningless sex.' The empty, emotionless joining of bodies that led to a brief, unsatisfying climax held zero appeal for him. He didn't want that with her.

'No.' She frowned back at him. 'I mean, yes, but not totally meaningless...something somewhere in the middle... I don't know... I don't have much—that's not the point!'

A surge of affection lifted the corner of his mouth. 'Might need you to explain that a little better...'

'Don't look at me like that.'

Suddenly she was more scared than he'd ever seen her look before—even when she saw him roughing up a low life in an alley.

'Come here.' He took a step forwards and reached out to draw her back into his arms.

She took a step back and left her hands at her sides. 'We're not dating,' she said firmly. 'You don't have to spoon on the romance to get me into bed.'

'We're not having a quick roll between the sheets, either,' he replied with equal determination. 'If that's what you're looking for it's a deal-breaker. We do this, we do it my way.'

'Which is what, exactly?'

His reply got stuck in his throat, what he wanted to say suppressed by self-doubt. He'd known Jo for years before he thought he felt something more—had debated telling her for months and ultimately was glad he hadn't. If he was wrong again, if he'd misjudged, if the day of reckoning came and he was too far gone to haul himself back from the gates of hell—

'What kind of game are you playing?'

The tremor in her voice tore a hole in his gut.

'I'm not playing a game,' he replied flatly.

'I won't be your rebound.'

'You're not.'

She was clearly confused—and she had every right to be. Her gaze frantically searched the air above his head. Then it slammed into his, her tone heavy with suspicion. 'Are you doing this to control me and keep me in line?'

He flicked a brief glare her way. 'I'm gonna let that one slide 'cos I know you have trust issues.'

'You were given the talk, weren't you?'

Tyler frowned again. 'What talk?'

'The talk Lou Mitchell gives to all the new bodyguards at the mansion about boundaries. It never occurred to me before but now it makes sense...' Fire blazed in her eyes, incinerating her fear. 'What did he say to you?'

Tyler froze when he realized what she meant. He wouldn't lie to her but if it was taken out of context—

'What did he say?'

The rise in her voice drew the attention of some of the people at the other end of the deck.

'You need to calm down,' he said in a lower voice.

'I'll calm down when you tell me what he said.'

No, she wouldn't. Not if she didn't let him get it all out. Hauling in a deep breath, he took a run at it. 'He said to do whatever I had to do to—'

'Wow.'

'I'm not finished.'

She laughed sarcastically. ‘Oh, you’ve said more than enough. Congratulations.’ Her hands lifted in front of her body to reward him with a round of applause. ‘Well played.’

Tyler popped his jaw. ‘Miranda—’

‘How do I get off this damn boat?’

It might have been something that worked in his favour if they hadn’t been so close to Manhattan. When she yanked open the door and headed inside, he followed her. ‘We need to talk about this.’

‘No, we don’t.’ Her gaze searched for exit signs as an announcement was made about their arrival.

‘You haven’t got the full picture.’

‘Believe me, it’s in high definition.’ She spun on her heel and marched towards the other end of the boat. ‘I won’t be manipulated by you or anyone else.’

He reached for her elbow. ‘I’m not manipulating—’

Yanking her arm out of his reach, she swung on him with enough ice to freeze boiling water. ‘Don’t. Touch. Me.’

Tyler was about two seconds away from losing it. ‘We’re gonna talk about this whether you like it or not. But not here.’

‘We’re done talking.’ She angled her chin with blatant contempt. ‘And don’t worry—you won’t have to give up any more of your precious time to amuse me as a reward for good behaviour. Just be thankful you didn’t have to prostitute yourself to get the job done. But then you never intended to cross that line, did you? Everyone has their limits.’

‘Step too far with that one, princess.’

‘You’re fired.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘I just did.’ She smirked and turned away, using her hundred-watt smile to flirt her way through a group of tourists to the front of the line.

When the rest of the passengers moved forwards he had to push his way through, his gaze firmly fixed on a head of flame-red hair. ‘Excuse me. Sorry. Coming through...’ He had to jog a little in the terminal to catch up. ‘Still trying to cut me loose?’

No reply but she picked up the pace.

Tyler simply lengthened his stride. ‘Long walk back to the mansion from here.’ He nodded when she lifted her chin. ‘Okay. Silent treatment is fine with me.’ He held open a glass door for her and followed her outside. ‘I’ll talk. You listen.’

‘Go to hell.’

‘That the best you’ve got?’

She stopped dead in her tracks, turned, took a step forwards and swung a palm at his face. He caught her wrist in midair, glared at her from the corner of his eye in warning and then loosened his grip when he saw the horror of what she’d almost done in her eyes. It was a strategic mistake because the second he did she twisted it free, shoved both hands into his chest and caught him off balance. His heels caught on the kerb behind him and the next thing he knew he was sitting on his ass in wet grass.

Planting her fists on her hips she angled her chin and snapped, ‘Is that better?’

It caused the kind of life-changing epiphany Tyler hadn’t seen coming. For a moment he simply stared at her in shock. Then a vibration started in his chest, moving upwards into the base of his throat. The sound was rusty from lack of use, but familiar.

‘You choose now to laugh?’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘You’re a twisted individual.’

When she spun around and marched to the edge of the road to hail a cab Tyler scrambled to his feet and jogged after her to try a more persuasive tone. ‘If you let me tell you the rest of the sentence we can clear this up.’

‘I don’t want to clear it up,’ she retorted. ‘I want you to stay away from me.’

‘You don’t want that any more than I do.’

The convulsion of her throat gave him an indication of how hurt she was, instantly causing him pain in response. ‘You don’t care what I want.’

‘You couldn’t be more wrong about that.’

It made her glance sideways at him as a cab pulled up but she didn’t look him in the eye. ‘Don’t follow me.’

He frowned. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘Home. Not that it’s your problem any more.’ She lifted her chin again. ‘I have three weeks left to serve on my sentence. Once they’re done I’m going to go out into the big wide world, find the first available guy who’ll spend time with me because he wants to and not because he’s being paid to do it, and I’ll have meaningless sex with him until neither of us can stand up.’

‘No, you won’t,’ he said with conviction while the words stirred another savage streak of territorialism. ‘We’ve already had that talk.’

‘Wind up a mechanized toy, you shouldn’t be surprised when it keeps moving after you set it down.’ She frowned when he placed a palm on the top of the door to stop it from opening. ‘Let me go.’

‘I’m going to,’ he said reluctantly before taking a step closer. ‘But only to give you long enough to calm down. When you’re thinking clearly and have questions you know how to find me.’ He gave her something to mull over. ‘You might want to make one of them why I kissed you the way I did.’

Pushing against his palm, he stood tall, dropped his arm to his side and watched her get into the cab. As it left it felt as if part of him went with it, but he guessed he would have to get used to that.

When his phone rang he waited a few moments before answering it. ‘Brannigan.’

‘You wanna go on a stake-out?’ his partner enquired.

Tyler’s blood chilled. ‘You found him?’

‘Maybe...’ There was a brief pause. ‘Turns out your friend Jimmy has been worrying enough about being seen as a snitch to become one.’

‘I’m on my way.’

TWENTY-TWO

The club encompassed a city block with a dance floor, live DJ and a seating area for private parties at the back. Despite the fact it was a Sunday night and many of them had work in the morning, it was packed with a hip Manhattan crowd of twenty-to-thirty-somethings.

Miranda was at the bar with Crystal. She'd bought the first drink to sip while she tried to calm down. When it had the same medicinal effect associated with a stiff brandy she ordered another. The numbness that set in with her third was more welcome than any of the little umbrellas lined up side by side would ever know.

There were four of them now, not counting the one in her glass. They were pretty. She'd decided to see how many colours she could collect.

'You know what really bugs me?' she yelled over the music. 'By allowing me to throw myself at him like some kind of desperate woman he made me feel needy. I don't do needy. If I was needy I'd sleep with every guy who showed an interest in me.' She waved a limp-wristed hand in the general direction of the man hovering nearby. 'Like that guy over there. He's cute and he's been smiling at me for the last ten minutes.'

'He's the bartender and you've been tipping him the price of your drink every time you buy one,' Crystal said dryly while attempting to take the cocktail glass from her. 'I think that's enough alcohol for you, young lady. You never could hold your liquor.'

When Miranda moved the glass out of her reach some of the liquid splashed over her hand. 'If you weren't trying to take it off me, I wouldn't be spilling it.' She scowled. To solve the problem she downed the colourful contents. 'I love this song. Let's dance. I want to dance.'

'We should probably get you home—or to my place for coffee. Coffee would be good.'

'I don't want coffee and I'm not going home. I want to have fun.' When the screen of her cell phone flashed on the bar beside the empty glass she picked it up and squinted at the caller ID. 'Ugh, he just can't take a hint, can he?'

'He won't be happy when he finds you like this.'

Miranda rejected the call with a flourish and set her phone down. 'I don't care.'

'Yes, you do. That's half the problem.'

'He doesn't care. He's only spending time with me because it's his job.'

'And there's the other half...'

She blinked. 'Is there something wrong with me?'

'Of course there's not,' Crystal said with conviction. 'You're a beautiful, sexy woman. Any guy would want you. Have a glass of water.'

'I thought he wanted me as much as I want him. I mean, when he kisses me—wow—and when he touches me—boom! Fireworks, y'know what I mean? He makes me. So. Hot. But does he follow through, even when he has permission to...' she made speech marks in the air with her fingers '...do whatever he needs to do to keep me out of trouble?' She rocked back and announced, 'He's a tease. I didn't think guys did that.'

'Who knew?' Her best friend nudged the glass a little closer. 'Take a sip, it's very refreshing.'

'It should not be this hard to get laid. Do you know I don't even know what an orgasm feels like with company?'

The comment earned a somewhat blurry-around-the-edges expression of interest. 'I did not know that. And it's a conversation we'll be having when you're sober. One little sip for Auntie Crystal, there's a good girl...'

'I bet when he gives a girl an orgasm it knocks her socks off. Not that I'm likely to find out any time soon. No toe-curling bliss on the horizon for me. Being the mayor's daughter is like wearing a giant chastity belt.'

‘Would you prefer fizzy water?’

‘And what the hell was he thinking taking me home to meet his family?’ She swallowed the lump in her throat. ‘They’re wonderful. Did I tell you how wonderful they are?’

‘About a half-dozen times...’

‘Can I get you ladies another drink?’ a voice said beside them.

Crystal smiled sweetly. ‘I’ll give you twenty bucks to shake your cute little cocktail shaker elsewhere.’

‘They’re exactly the kind of family I’d like to have some day,’ Miranda continued. ‘I love the whole meeting-up-for-Sunday-lunch thing.’ She sat a little straighter. ‘But we’re not a couple. I don’t want to fall in love with him.’

‘Are you?’

‘Am I what?’

‘Falling in love with him...?’

‘No!’ she replied vehemently before taking a beat. ‘Maybe... I don’t know... I don’t want to be.’

‘How come?’

The tears she’d been battling since she left the ferry terminal threatened to break free, forcing her to take several deep breaths before she replied. ‘Because then I’d belong to him and I’d really like him to belong to me for a little while.’ She flicked her hair over her shoulder. ‘I don’t want to talk about this any more. It’s depressing. If you love me, you’ll dance with me.’

‘I do and I would.’ Crystal glanced over her shoulder. ‘But I have a sneaking suspicion you’re about to be carried out of here...’

Miranda twisted around, lifted her gaze and frowned. ‘Go away, Tyler. I don’t like you.’

His gaze shifted. ‘How much has she had?’

‘Too much,’ Crystal replied. ‘Not that it takes much to begin with—she’s always been a cheap date that way. I’ve been trying to get her to go home for the last half hour.’

‘I’ll take it from here.’

‘Go easy on her. She’s hurting for a reason.’

‘I know.’

Miranda shook her head in disbelief and regretted it the second the room began to spin. ‘That’s it—go right ahead and talk about me like I’m not here. Start making decisions for me and you’ll both be like everyone else in my life who doesn’t give a crap about how I feel.’ She raised her arm high above her head and waggled her fingers. ‘Hey, cute guy, drink me!’

‘You’ve reached your limit,’ Tyler said firmly as he lifted her cell phone and took her elbow. ‘And you’re gonna apologize to Crystal for that in the morning. Thanks for the heads up on her location.’

The last part made Miranda gasp. ‘You sent for him? How could you?’ Taught her not to leave her cell phone on the bar when she went to the restroom, didn’t it?

At least Crystal had the decency to look apologetic. ‘Because it’s not me that you need to be talking to right now and you’d never forgive yourself if you made it into the papers this close to Election Day.’

‘Up you get,’ Tyler ordered.

‘I’m not leaving.’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘Make me.’

‘Okay.’

When he bent down and tossed her effortlessly over her shoulder, Miranda struggled. ‘Put me down!’

‘Bye, Crystal.’

‘Bye, Tyler.’

'Stop him!' she yelled at the bouncer on the door before hiccupping. 'I'm being kidnapped!'

'No, she's not.' Tyler simply rearranged her weight to flash his shield. 'NYPD.'

'Isn't that the mayor's daughter?' the bouncer asked.

'She's one of those lookalikes,' Tyler said as he walked away. 'Been conning free drinks all over town...'

'Put me down!' Miranda repeated while she was carried down the sidewalk. 'Women hate it when guys do this.'

He muttered a reply that sounded as if it included the words 'worked for' and 'Brannigan' and 'when he did' before raising his voice to inform her, 'You're gonna have the hangover from hell in the morning.'

'Why should you care?' she asked his broad back.

'The thought I might scares the life out of you, doesn't it?'

She lifted her chin. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You're a flight risk. I knew that at the start. What I didn't know was why.'

'But you think you do now?'

His head nodded against her flank. 'This is what you do when things get too much—you run away to find solace in having fun. Up till now it's been the life you didn't want and how claustrophobic you felt. This time it's me.'

Miranda spluttered, 'Arrogant much?'

'This isn't you. You're more than this.'

'You don't know me.'

He took a deep breath she felt against her legs. 'You're an amazing woman with the potential to do equally amazing things with her life. Is this how you're gonna deal with your problems when you're forty? Whether you like it or not I do care so when you're ready to talk about what's bothering you let me know.'

'I already tried that,' she said in a smaller voice.

'No, you didn't. You ran away.'

The truth silenced her while he set her on her feet. Swaying a little she pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked up at him. Damn him for being so big and strong and bulletproof. She hated that he could make her feel so small and weak and vulnerable. She didn't want to fall for him.

It would be so much simpler if she wasn't.

When her lower lip trembled she bit down on it.

The pad of a thumb stilled the movement. 'Don't do that. You'll make it bleed.'

The husky edge to his voice twisted her heart into a tight little ball. She didn't want tenderness from him. Not if he was going to take it with him when he left. 'You're looking at me the way I don't like again,' she complained.

He shouldn't make promises with his eyes he wasn't prepared to keep. But what was worse was how it made her feel. At the beginning he excited her—he still did—but along the way he also surprised and challenged her, making her re-evaluate her life and what she wanted from it. She would do it—she would give up her freedom to be with him.

She would give up everything.

How had he made her feel that way in just a few weeks?

His thumb brushed across her cheek before he dropped his hand to his side. 'Let's get you home.'

Miranda allowed him to move her around so he could open the door and help her inside. She gazed at his profile as he leaned in to click her seat belt into place, saw him glance at her from the corner of his eye and wished she knew what to say. How was she supposed to tell him what she'd felt when he kissed her—lost and found, hopeful and hopeless, joyous and afraid? It was so many things at once.

It felt as if she belonged in his arms. But he'd had an opportunity to correct her when she said neither of them wanted to make a commitment and he hadn't. It wasn't his fault she'd discovered she wanted something more. The thought of her life without him in it sucked. When she'd thought he was only spending time with her because he had to the ground dropped out from under her feet.

It had hurt. So. Much.

She hauled in a ragged breath and blinked when her vision blurred. As she did long fingers closed around the hand in her lap and she lowered her chin, watching as she turned her palm into his. She loved holding his hand but if she had one wish it would be to hear him laugh again so she could take the time to appreciate the sound. She'd waited so long to hear it. What if it never happened again?

If they just had a little more time...

'Will you tell me the rest of the sentence?' she asked in the same small voice as before.

Tyler didn't need an explanation, the deep rumble of his voice washing over her in a soothing caress. 'He said to do whatever I had to do to keep you safe because you don't know how vulnerable you are in the spotlight.'

'That's not true.' She attempted to smile through her tears. 'I've always been vulnerable in the spotlight. I used to get stage fright. Threw up every time I had to appear in public—got reminded of it when we went to lunch today. I was scared people would find me lacking in any one of a dozen different ways. Not smart enough, funny enough, pretty enough or dressed well enough. It's why I took the part in the play during senior year in high school. I figured if I tackled my confidence issues head on...'

When her voice trailed off he squeezed her hand. 'People love you within minutes of meeting you. I've watched it happen.'

'They don't have to spend much time with me.'

'Well, there is that.'

Miranda chuckled, hiccupped and then sniffled before leaning back against the headrest. She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she was being carried up the stairs of the mansion in a much more romantic position. Snuggling closer to his neck, she took a long breath of Tyler-scented air and sighed contentedly. This she could definitely learn to live with. Being protected from the world wasn't so bad the way he did it. He even took her shoes off and tucked her into bed.

When he disappeared without saying anything she tried to lift her heavy head to see where he'd gone. Then the mattress dipped beside her, a fingertip brushed her hair off her forehead and he was leaning over her.

Looking deep into his eyes, she tried to remember what her life was like before he walked into it. Considering it hadn't been that long ago, it shouldn't have been difficult, but all she knew was how alone she'd felt without him, how overly defensive she'd been when she discovered he was her bodyguard, how much she'd loved their little adventures and that she owed him an apology for knocking him on his ass. She couldn't believe she'd been angry enough to hit him.

What must he think of her?

'Why do you put up with me?' she asked.

'You're cute when you're drunk.'

'I'm more trouble than I'm worth.'

'We'll debate that one another time.' He trailed his fingers along her cheek and watched the movement with one of his more intense gazes. 'Go back to sleep.'

'Stay with me?' she whispered. It was a loaded request but she couldn't stop herself making it.

'I can't. Even if we weren't in the mayor's house, I had to leave a stake-out to come rescue you.' He drew in a long, measured breath and slowly exhaled. 'I gotta go back. There's something I have to do. If it doesn't turn out so great...' He frowned before looking into her eyes. 'Just remember if I had a choice, things would be different.'

Miranda smiled sadly. It felt like a goodbye.

She didn't want him to go.

'Don't forget that,' he insisted.

'I won't,' she promised.

His gaze roamed over her face before he leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. 'Go back to sleep.'

Miranda ran her palm up over his chest. 'I'll see you tomorrow, won't I?'

He smiled the crooked smile she loved so much. 'You fired me, remember?'

'You're rehired.'

'Go to sleep.'

Stretching upwards, she wound her arm around his neck and lifted her chin. 'I'm not sleepy any more.'

Tyler sighed heavily, his voice laced with regret. 'I was hoping you wouldn't say that.'

Something cold and metallic snapped around her wrist.

Miranda twisted her head on the pillow so she could see what he was doing. 'What is that?'

The restraint was unyielding as he closed a second loop around one of the iron rungs on her bedstead.

'If you'd fallen asleep I wouldn't have to do this.' He got to his feet. 'Water's beside you. I don't have any aspirin or I'd leave that, too. You're gonna need it when you wake up.' He bent over and lifted a washbowl off the floor to wave it at her. 'You can use this if you need to be sick or feel the call of nature.'

'It's an antique.'

'Then you better not break it.'

The outrage she felt was the equivalent of downing a dozen cups of espresso, the effects of the alcohol wearing off pretty damn fast as he walked away.

'You can't leave me like this.' She lowered her voice to snap, 'Tyler!'

'I'll leave the key for Grace. She's usually in before everyone else.'

And then he was gone.

Flumping back onto the pillow, she lifted her chin to glare at the handcuffs and rattled stainless steel against iron. How was she supposed to explain that in the morning?

She was going to kill him the next time she saw him.

TWENTY-THREE

By the time Tyler returned to his partner and the rookie detective who'd been attempting to fill his shoes, the stake-out wasn't a stake-out any more. 'Can't believe you were gonna start the party without me...'

'ESU just got here. You haven't missed anything.' He frowned. 'Where's your vest?'

'In my locker,' Tyler replied. 'Tell me it's him.'

He wanted the day of reckoning out of the way so he knew if he had a future to plan.

'Arrived on the heels of a large shipment—we've got him this time. There's nowhere to go.'

As they silently approached the warehouse with their weapons drawn Tyler forced any thoughts of Miranda to the back of his mind. He knew she was safe, that had to be enough, even if he regretted not telling her how he felt when he had the chance. It was better he hadn't, he reasoned, especially now.

The raid was textbook, communication made with hand signals to place everyone in position before a countdown of fingers indicated when ESU would break down the door. Once they were inside it went equally smoothly—Tyler's voice joining the others to identify them as cops to the gang of men unpacking boxes. As they raised their hands in the air his gaze searched their faces and shifted in time to see a couple of men disappearing into the back.

Tyler ran after them, slowing his pace when the chase led into abandoned machinery and piles of empty crates.

His partner caught up to him. 'You see them?'

'Not yet.'

They split up, working as one to search high and low.

'One over there.' Tyler pointed when he heard a noise and saw a figure too short and stocky to be the man he was after. 'I've got the other one.'

'Don't do anything stupid.'

The warning fell on deaf ears, the dark side to his nature taking over as he stalked his prey. Tyler didn't fight it. He welcomed its arrival, embraced it and challenged it to do its worst. It was the only way he would know how far he could go. To fuel the need for revenge he summoned the image of a broken body to the front of his mind, saw the unnatural position of her limbs and thought about how much she'd suffered.

Then he rounded a corner into a narrow alley of crates and saw Demietrov standing a few feet away.

A slow, cold smile appeared on the man's face.

Tyler frowned, the gun wavering a little in front of him. Restlessly shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he locked his arms into place and looked down the barrel with determination. He could feel the weight of his finger resting on the trigger, but even when looking his nemesis straight in the eye he couldn't take the shot.

Something wouldn't let him.

When he spoke his voice rang around the empty space with the kind of conviction that came from doing the right thing. 'Andrei Demietrov, I'm placing you under arrest for the trafficking of illegal substances and the suspected murder of Candice James.' The darkness shrank within him, folding in on itself until it became the manageable part of his personality it had been before his life got so screwed up. 'You have the right to remain silent—'

As he stepped forwards the man reached out and tumbled the nearest pile of crates to the ground, creating a domino effect that forced Tyler to jump out of the way before he continued the chase. There was the sound of a door slamming shut. When he got to it and swung it open he discovered it was raining outside. He checked each side of an arch of security lighting and took a step forwards...

The impact knocked him backwards a second before he heard the shot and felt a searing heat blaze through his shoulder. There was another shot in quick succession—he felt a second burn in his upper arm—and then there was a hail of gunfire and a body slumped onto the ground. As he staggered backwards Tyler knew he hadn't fired his weapon. The ESU guys had done what he couldn't.

Sickly warmth soaked his shirt as his back hit the wall beside the door and his knees gave out.

He stared at the body as his partner appeared and swore succinctly while prying the gun from his hand. 'This is Detective Ramirez, we have an officer down—I repeat, officer down. I need a bus at—'

As he rhymed off the address—presumably over the phone—Tyler felt a sense of peace wash over him. When it came down to the wire he didn't have it in him to murder a man in cold blood. Maybe he wasn't as far gone as he'd thought. Maybe Miranda had pulled him back from the edge. He tried to focus past the pain while the warmth drained from his body. Getting shot hurt like a bitch. And he'd left Miranda handcuffed to her bed.

A rumble of laughter made him groan.

'You want to share the joke?' his partner asked as he took a look at the damage.

'The one time I don't wear a vest...' he mumbled back.

'Murphy's Law...you're Irish...work it out.'

Tyler swore when he added pressure to the wound on his shoulder. 'Don't think that'll help,' he gritted through clenched teeth as his vision blurred. 'I think that one went through.'

'Here's hoping. If it's gone through they won't have to dig it out. What about your arm?'

'That one they'll have to dig out.'

'Just as well you're right-handed, isn't it?'

Tyler frowned. A few feet back, to the side of the ESU's tactical guys as they checked the body lying on the ground, a silent figure stood in the pouring rain. Her face wasn't covered in blood any more and she was smiling at him. How could she be happy he'd failed her—wasn't the whole point of haunting him to keep him focused on avenging her death? 'I'm sorry.' It was the first time he'd told her that. 'I screwed up.'

'You've got nothing to apologize for,' his partner replied, obviously under the impression Tyler was talking to him. 'Can happen to the best of us.'

When he blinked the raindrops off his lashes Candice was replaced by another woman with long dark hair and while she was smiling, too, she was also shaking her head. Why was he seeing Jo? She wasn't dead. He blinked again, the movement taking more effort than it had before.

'Stay with me,' his partner's voice said.

A woman with tumbling tresses of flame-red hair appeared in Jo's place and even in the rain Tyler could see she was crying. His heart twisted. She should never have to cry because of him, even if part of it was alcohol related. He wanted to make her happy, hear her laugh every day and see the fire in her eyes when they argued. He didn't have to keep his foot on the brake any more. The obstacles standing in their way weren't insurmountable. If they were then he wouldn't feel the way he did.

Not that he had any control over it.

'Stay with me.'

She'd said that, too, and he'd never wanted anything more. If they'd been born in an earlier time he'd happily keep her barefoot and pregnant and protect what was his, keeping them safe from marauders. He'd have been good at that. All the touchy-feely modern-day stuff that said a guy was supposed to embrace his feminine side and emote, not so damn much. Tyler didn't have a feminine side. Karl Jung could take his theories on human psychology and—

'Ty, snap out of it.' A hand smacked his cheek a few times. 'You gotta stay awake.'

Damn, it was cold. He should have worn a jacket. Screw the jacket, he should have worn his damn vest and then he wouldn't be ruining a perfectly good sweater.

'Anyone on your team an EMT?' his partner yelled at the ESU guys. 'Get him over here!'

Excellent—someone else to fuss over him. Anyone would think he was the first person in the world to get shot.

'I'll call your family when we get to the emergency room,' his partner said in a lower voice.

'You do that I'll kick your ass.'

'Anyone you do want me to call?'

'No.' Since shaking his head took too much effort, he frowned again. 'Don't want to worry her.'

'We all need someone who does that.'

'You'd like her.' His voice slurred.

'Can't be that good a judge of character if she likes you...' His partner moved to make room for someone else. 'We need to stop the bleeding.'

'I'm on it,' a voice he didn't recognize said. 'Stay with us, brother.'

With his eyelids growing heavy Tyler used up some of his waning energy on what probably looked like a sappy smile. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve it but she did like him. Unless he was very much mistaken—and he prayed he wasn't—she liked him a whole heap. Way he saw it she was his—he just had to find a way to make her believe it, too. Jo hadn't been his one who got away. But if he was dumb enough to let Miranda go without putting up one hell of a fight she would be.

They just needed a little more time....

'Stay awake, Ty. Where the hell's that bus?'

It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours he found his ass on wet ground while he wondered when he'd fallen for her. The first had been the 'there you are' moment that identified her as the one he'd been waiting for all along. He'd even laughed with joy. She was the reason he'd been emotionally unavailable to other women. She was the reason he hadn't told Jo how he'd thought he felt. At times she drove him nuts but she was smart and funny and gutsy and sexy as hell. It shouldn't have been such a great surprise he wanted to hold on to her. Any guy would. But they could forget it. She was his.

'Tell her,' he mumbled.

'Tell her what?'

Somewhere along the way she'd got under his skin and crawled inside, filling him up until everything else was pushed out. It didn't matter if it was too soon or that there was still so much for him to learn about her. It was just there...like air...without it...

He couldn't breathe.

'Ty, come on, man, you gotta hold on.'

He hadn't known love could be so...big. He felt crushed under the weight of it. If he knew she could feel the same way it would lift him up higher than he'd ever been before. But until they got a chance to talk he just needed a little nap—he had to be at full strength to fight for her. Forty winks should do it.

With sirens sounding in the distance she was the last thought on his mind as he passed out.

TWENTY-FOUR

Miranda opened her eyes and groaned as she squinted at the bright light shining through a crack in the curtains. When she turned over to check the time on the alarm clock the handcuffs snagged her wrist.

'Damn it, Tyler.'

The three gentle knocks on her bedroom door echoed inside her head as if they'd been made with a demolition ball. 'Grace?' she asked tentatively.

The door opened a crack. 'Can I come in?'

'Yes.' Miranda fought embarrassment as the older woman crossed the room. 'Tell me there's a key in that envelope.'

'With a note which said to bring this...' she held out a bottle of aspirin '...and that you'd probably want a bucket of coffee...'

'You have no idea.' She took a deep breath while Grace negotiated the lock on the loop above her head. 'You're probably wondering what's going on.'

'I don't need an explanation.'

Miranda held up her arm when it was freed from the bed. 'You have a soft spot for him, don't you?'

'Well, he is handsome...'

'Yes, he is.'

'And you have been happier in the last few weeks...'

When the second loop opened she rubbed her wrist. 'Yes, I was.'

Grace studied her face with knowing eyes. 'I wouldn't give up on him yet. A man doesn't handcuff a woman to a bed to keep her safe if he doesn't care.' Setting the handcuffs on the bedside cabinet, she lowered her voice and smiled with a rare glimpse of mischievousness. 'Not that there aren't other things you could do with them...'

'Grace.' Miranda gasped. 'I'm shocked.'

'No, you're not.' She chuckled as she turned away. 'I'll have them bring breakfast to your room.'

'Wait.' Swinging her legs off the bed Miranda stood up to fold her in a grateful hug. 'You know I love you, right? I don't say it enough.'

Having been—what had he called it, treated to a hug-fest?—she wanted more hugs in her life. When Tyler was gone she would need them.

'You don't have to say it. You're the daughter I never had.' Grace leaned back and winked. 'Now make me proud and go give that handsome devil hell for what he did to you.'

'I will.'

The thought lifted her spirits a little and by the time she'd showered, had breakfast and was feeling more human she'd made a decision. There was no point dwelling over how little time they had left. If all they had was a few more weeks she was going to make the most of them. He did care—if she'd been thinking sensibly she'd have known that without him saying it. She had to accept that was enough, even if she struggled with it. But she didn't want a marriage proposal or a drawer at his apartment or even to keep a toothbrush in his bathroom. All she wanted was to continue seeing him. Maybe she should tell him that?

If it didn't feel like the biggest step she'd ever taken with the most massive gaping cavern for her to fall into if he didn't feel the same way, she might consider it.

She checked her watch and frowned. Grace was late with the itinerary. It wasn't like her. Lifting her things, she decided to meet her at her desk, the sight of someone she hadn't expected making her footsteps falter when she got there. 'Lewis. I didn't think you were working today.'

'I wasn't.'

Miranda's gaze shifted when Grace appeared from her father's office, the grim expression on her face creating a sense of foreboding. 'What's going on?'

'We don't know much yet,' she replied in a low voice. 'But it's all over the news. Apparently Detective Brannigan was on some kind of drugs raid last night and—'

'No.' The word parted her lips on a tortured whisper.

Grace reached out a hand and squeezed her arm. 'He's all right. Your father has asked me to find out what hospital he's in so we can send a gift.'

'What happened?'

It earned another squeeze—one that didn't loosen—which suggested she knew Miranda would need the support.

'He was shot.'

Grace had been right; she did need the support. Her body swayed, a wave of nausea rising in her throat. It was her worst nightmare. She couldn't bear the thought of him lying bleeding somewhere while she'd been sleeping. But falling apart wasn't going to help.

The only thing that would was seeing him.

Making a conscious effort to prick the bubble of shock surrounding her body, she summoned strength she didn't know she possessed and took charge. 'Lewis, bring the car to the door and use your connections in the department to find out what hospital he's in. You'll find out quicker than Grace.'

He nodded as he left.

'I need you to reorganize today's itinerary,' she told Grace. 'Most of the morning involves listening to speeches so they can do without me but there's a scheduled visit to a veterans' association before lunch. Give them a call and see if we can move it back a couple of hours. If we can't extend my apologies and see if we can reschedule for later in the week—tell them I'm sick if you need to.'

'I'll see to it. What do you want me to tell your father if he asks where you are?'

'Tell him the truth. If he has a problem he can discuss it with me later.'

'I'll call you with an update.'

Between several calls, a check on the internet for what little news there was and with Lewis driving with the lights flashing on the front grill of the SUV, they reached their destination in relatively good time.

Standing at a nurse's station, she announced, 'I'm looking for Detective Brannigan's room. I was told it's on the fifth floor.'

'Are you family?'

'He's my bodyguard.' She lifted her chin. 'I'm Miranda Kravitz. My father is the mayor.'

Meaning if the woman got in her way she would have a fight on her hands...

'Do you think you can get him to stay in bed?'

The question made her sag with relief. If they were having difficulty keeping him in bed it was a good sign. 'Point me in the right direction and I'll give it a try.'

'Third door on the left,' the woman replied. 'Good luck. You're going to need it.'

After pausing beside the open door to draw a deep breath of air into her lungs, Miranda crossed the threshold and took an inventory with her eyes. He was sitting on the end of the bed, frowning at a navy T-shirt as he tried to find a way of putting it on one-handed. Under normal circumstances her gaze would have snagged on his bare chest and marvelled at the sight of smooth skin stretched over taut muscle. Instead it was drawn to the squares of gauze taped to his upper arm and below his shoulder. If the second square had been a few inches lower the bullet would have punctured a lung.

She swallowed the jagged lump in her throat to ask, 'What do you think you're doing?'

His gaze lifted, a brief flash of surprise crossing his face before his voice rumbled, 'It's called escaping. You of all people should know that. How did you get here?'

'Lewis brought me. I didn't give him a choice.' She crossed the room and set her bag down on an empty chair. 'And you're not going anywhere. What did the doctor say?'

‘That they dug out the bullet, replaced the blood I lost and stitched up the holes.’

‘And that you should rest, right?’

‘Look, I get what you’re doing but if you want to do something useful you can get me the hell out of here before my family comes back. If I have to endure another candlelit vigil around this bed I’m gonna jump out that window. My mother is this far away...’ he raised the hand holding the T-shirt to demonstrate the distance with a small gap between his thumb and finger ‘...from getting Father Mike to drop by and bless me.’

‘They’re worried about you,’ Miranda argued in their defence, ignoring his obvious frustration.

Tyler lowered his hand, frowning at the T-shirt again as he held it at arm’s length and tried to shake it straight. ‘If it wasn’t for one of Danny’s ESU buddies flapping his jaw none of them would have known.’

‘Well, it’s nice to know I wasn’t the only person you didn’t think merited a phone call.’

His hand dropped onto his lap. ‘Miranda—’

‘If the doctor says you’re supposed to stay in bed—’

‘I can do it at home.’ He looked up into her eyes. ‘I don’t need anyone’s approval to check out. They can put a note on the form to say it’s against medical advice if they’re worried about covering their asses.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Why do I get the impression this isn’t your first visit to a hospital?’

‘Me and Father Mike go way back—broken leg when I was nine, first concussion when I was twelve...’

She arched a brow. ‘First concussion?’

‘I read a lot. When I was a kid it made it feel like I had something to prove when it came to sports. Get me out of here and you can examine every inch of me for scars.’

‘Promises, promises,’ she muttered before accepting the inevitable. There was no way he was staying put, but if she couldn’t stop him leaving she could make sure they took every possible precaution. ‘You’re not leaving until I’ve talked to your doctor and he’s prescribed pain medication.’

Tyler stood up. ‘I don’t need any.’

Again with the something to prove, but the lines of strain at the corners of his eyes and the rigid set of his jaw suggested otherwise. She folded her arms. ‘I have a vehicle and a driver who can take you straight home. Do you want help to escape or not?’

Surprisingly he took a moment to mull it over, his gaze searching the air before he lifted his hand. ‘You can start with helping me put on a T-shirt. I’ve been swearing at this thing for the last five minutes.’

Miranda noted the way he avoided looking at her and got the sense he wasn’t happy with her being there. It hurt that he wasn’t—especially when she’d been so desperate to see him. But she wasn’t there for totally selfish reasons—she wanted to be there for him. If he’d let her...

‘In order for me to do that you have to sit back down...’ She looked at the T-shirt as she took it from him, noticed something behind it and shook her head. ‘Let me guess. You gave up swearing at the button on your jeans five minutes ago.’

Determined she could touch him impassively while he was injured, she stepped forwards and folded the T-shirt over her forearm to free up her hands. But it wasn’t her reaction she should have worried about. The second her fingers folded around the waistband of his jeans—the backs of her fingers brushing against warm skin—he sucked in a sharp breath and tensed. Her gaze darted upwards and tangled with his, the mixture of heat and pain in his eyes making her grimace.

‘Sorry,’ she whispered.

‘Don’t be,’ he gritted back before the heat in his eyes intensified to drown out the pain.

Miranda slipped the button into the loop and removed her hands. ‘Sit.’ She lifted the T-shirt. ‘Bad arm first...’

The eye contact was broken to allow her to negotiate dressing him with as little discomfort as possible, but when the task was complete he forced her gaze back to his by capturing her wrist.

'I'm fine,' he said firmly.

'No, you're not.' Her voice trembled a little on the words. 'You got shot. With a gun.'

'Technically speaking I got shot with bullets fired from a gun.' A corner of his mouth tugged when she frowned. 'Still here, aren't I?'

A landslide of the emotions she'd been burying tumbled down on her, hammering her heart into a bruised ball of pulp. She'd known he would leave soon but if he'd died...

He was so much more than she was. While she'd slept off the alcohol she'd consumed in a bid to escape reality he'd been on the front line, protecting the city. He'd dedicated his life to making the world a safer place without seeking anything in return. How could a man like him ever love a woman like her? He deserved so much better.

Lifting her free hand, she ran trembling fingers over his short hair and down the back of his neck. He closed his eyes in response—what looked like agony crossing his face before he opened them. She wanted to take away his pain and soothe the tension from his body. She wanted to take care of him, listen to the things that troubled him and put his needs above her own. She wasn't any good at cooking or cleaning or doing laundry—doubted she would ever fill the role of domestic goddess—but she was willing to try. If there was anything she could do to make his life easier she would put her heart and soul into it. She just wished she thought she could be happy that way.

Even if she hadn't already planned to find something that could allow her to make a difference to people's lives, getting to know him would have inspired her. The irony was they could probably have teamed up. One of the charities on her shortlist dealt with victim support...

'You know this means I'm not your bodyguard any more.'

She stared at him. The thought hadn't occurred to her.

As her hand lowered to her side he explained, 'They'll make me take time off. If I'm lucky I'll get desk duty in a week but I won't be back on tour until after the election.'

Miranda felt the time that had meant so much to her slipping through her fingers. She twisted her wrist free and took a step back, turning away to pack what few things he had into the open sports bag on the bed beside him. His family must have brought what they thought he needed. They had the right to do that. She probably shouldn't even be there. Purposefully keeping her tone light, she told him, 'You'll heal quicker that way.'

'And you'll be busy with the campaign.'

'I will.' If he was trying to let her down easy there wasn't any need. She'd known a day would come when he wouldn't be there any more. She was just thankful he would be somewhere—could take comfort from that while spending the rest of her life trying to make him proud to say he'd known her. 'It can get hectic in the last few weeks.'

'When it's over you'll be free.'

'I'm looking forward to it. I've made a lot of plans—things I want to do, places I want to see.' Silently clearing her throat, she lifted her chin and informed him, 'I'm going to check in with your doctor. Lewis should be up in a minute. Then we'll take you home.'

She headed for the door.

'Miranda, stop.' The forceful edge to his rough voice froze her feet to the ground. 'Don't run away this time.'

Pinning a bright smile in place, she turned around to give the performance of a lifetime. 'If I was running away I'd take my bag. It's Gucci.'

Tyler frowned and angled his head a little to study her from the corner of his eye. 'Are you still mad at me for the handcuffs?'

'You did what you felt you had to do.' She shrugged. 'I'd probably have done the same thing in your shoes.'

He opened his mouth, sucked in a breath and hesitated. It wasn't like him but in the blink of an eye he recovered, his voice laced with determination. 'We need to talk.'

'Now?' she asked with as innocent an expression as she could muster. 'I thought you wanted to leave?'

'You rearranged your schedule to be here, right?'

'Grace did.'

'How much time did she get you?'

'I'm visiting veterans after lunch.'

'What about tonight?'

Since she wasn't convinced prolonging the agony would make it feel any better Miranda lied. 'I'm pretty solidly booked for the next few weeks. We could meet up for coffee after the election if you like. You have my number.'

'Still trying to cut me loose, aren't you?'

'You're not my bodyguard any more.'

'So that's it. There's nothing you want to say to me.'

'Of course there is.' She sighed, struggling to keep up the pretence. 'You've watched over me all this time, put up with a lot and I've enjoyed our time together. I can never begin to repay you for—'

Tyler shook his head. 'I shouldn't have left the keys with Grace. That was a mistake. Go find the damn doctor so I can blow this joint. But if you think we're done here you can forget it.' He pushed to his feet. 'Just be thankful I'm not in any shape to toss you over my shoulder again.'

She blinked. 'I don't get why you're angry.'

'Well, when you figure it out let me know.'

When he turned and started an argument with the zipper on the sports bag, Miranda took a step forwards. 'Tyler—'

He lifted the bag and marched past her. 'I'm going to sign the paperwork.'

The silence in the car on the journey to his apartment was deafening. He left with a curt 'thanks' and not so much as a sideways glance at her. It was awful. She'd never felt worse—empty and alone and facing an endlessly long Tyler-less future. It was over. He was gone.

Miranda would never know how she kept her facade in place for the rest of the scheduled itinerary. But at the end of an interminably long day it took its toll.

She dropped onto the edge of her bed, deflating like a balloon losing air. When the tears came she didn't stop them. There was nothing remotely dainty or feminine about it when the floodgates opened, either. When she lay down on the covers heaving sobs racked her body until her face was mottled and her eyes were red and swollen. Later, when she hauled herself upright and made it under a hot shower, she turned the water on to high and cried some more while its warmth did nothing to remove the chill from her body.

It was late when she was reduced to sniffling into her pillow. Staring into the darkness, she started to think things through. She thought about the first time he took her hand; how big a pain in the ass he'd been when he blocked her escape attempts; how he'd been the first person to be brutally honest with her; how the most dangerous man she'd ever met could make her feel safe and protected. Then she thought about the night in the alley, the shudder that ran through his body when he held her, how he resisted the kiss but wrestled control from her. From that point of view he'd always had the upper hand. When he kissed her nothing else mattered but kissing him back. At least it hadn't until her heart got involved.

Then something happened. Somewhere in the middle of her sentimental journey to revisit each landmark in their relationship a spark of hope ignited, the flame flickering defiantly in the midst of her doubt she could ever be enough for him.

'I want you to stay away from me,' she'd lied.

'You don't want that any more than I do,' he'd replied.

Her heart tripped and picked up speed.

Unless he was trying to push her away Tyler didn't say things he didn't mean. But what if he'd been saying more than she'd heard? What if she'd been so wrapped up in how she felt—for a change—she'd missed how he felt?

She hadn't gone looking for it until she needed it to be there, but once she did...

'I'm supposed to keep my distance,' he'd said. But he couldn't do that any more than she could.

Surely that meant something—what if he felt the same draw to her that she felt to him?

He'd said when she had questions, 'You might want to make one of them why I kissed you the way I did...'

What if everything she'd felt in that kiss hadn't come from her? She'd felt lost but he'd found her. She'd been hopeful but he'd lost hope. He'd said he was beyond saving. Did he really believe that—what if he thought she couldn't love him the way he was? He'd told her if he had a choice things would be different. 'Don't forget that.'

Why had she forgotten that?

Even with her confidence battered by waves of fear and self-doubt the flame of hope continued to burn. The truth was she was more frightened of losing him than taking a leap of faith for the man she believed in more than she believed in herself. She'd thought he couldn't love her but if one day he could...

'When you figure it out let me know.'

Heart pounding rapidly, she jumped off the bed, grabbed the essentials and ran downstairs. Nothing on earth would stop her from going to him. She couldn't spend the rest of her life wondering what might have happened if she'd taken a chance. If the freedom she'd been dreaming of for her entire adult life was all about choice, then she chose him.

All he had to do was choose her back.

TWENTY-FIVE

He should have kissed some sense into her. There was nothing wrong with his mouth.

But when Miranda was so nonchalant about never seeing him again it had knocked Tyler back. He couldn't even put on a damn T-shirt alone—how was he supposed to convince her that he would look after her for the rest of her life when he couldn't dress himself?

After a day spent fending off calls from his family, his partner, his captain, some moron from the press who wanted to paint him as a hero and a woman trying to sell him life insurance, Tyler paced the floor of his apartment like a caged animal. He reckoned Miranda had about twenty-four hours before he switched from the role of bodyguard to stalker. If he had to kidnap her and spend the next week demonstrating how much he wanted her then so be it. The physical pain he was experiencing from a couple of run-of-the-mill gunshot wounds was nothing compared to the agony he felt when he thought about losing her.

Now he'd risen from the ashes of his messed up life like the mythical phoenix of her code-name, he could plan a future. One he wanted to share with her.

But had he told her that?

He'd come to the sad conclusion he was a pathetic, cowardly weakling when there was a frantic knocking on the door of his apartment. At a little before midnight the last thing he expected on the other side was a breathless, wide-eyed Miranda. It was obviously raining again—the shoulders of her coat sparkling with silvery raindrops and her hair a shade darker. With her face flushed and devoid of make-up he thought she'd never looked more beautiful.

'Figured it out, did you?' he asked roughly.

Her brows wavered with uncertainty.

'Give it another minute.'

When she attempted to smile it wavered, too—her eyes shimmering with emotion as her breasts rose and fell with each rapid breath.

'Almost there...' The corner of his mouth lifted with the affection he didn't try to disguise.

Her smile was more convincing the second time, growing in direct relation to the dawning realization in her eyes.

Tyler nodded. 'Took you long enough.'

As she made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob he reached for her hand to draw her inside and kicked the door shut with his foot.

'Coat off.' He led her into the kitchen and jerked his chin at the counter. 'Sit up there. I'll be right back.'

When he returned from the bathroom with as many towels as he could carry in one hand she'd done what she was told without putting up a fight. That was a first.

'Why didn't you say something?' she asked.

Tyler tossed the towels down, selected one and stepped in front of her. 'When you were playing the role of Little Miss Don't-Give-A-Damn? Close your eyes.'

As she did he dried her face, her eyes opening again when he progressed to her hair.

'I was going to let you go.' The words were said in the small, vulnerable voice that turned him inside out.

'Too bad. I told you a while back—I'm in your life now. Get used to it.'

She blinked. 'Are you telling me you knew then?'

'No. I knew when you knocked me on my ass.'

'I knew when you kissed me on the ferry.'

He nodded. 'That's why you got scared.'

‘Yes.’ She frowned and reached for the towel. ‘You shouldn’t be doing that. You’re hurt. I should be taking care of you. Not the other way around.’

Tyler allowed her to take it and watched as she set it aside. ‘If we’re gonna make this work there has to be a little of both—not that I’ll make it easy for you.’ His mouth curved into a wry smile. ‘In case you hadn’t got it already, I’m not a very good patient. I like to think I’m better at taking care of other people, if they’ll let me.’

‘No one’s ever been there just for me,’ she confessed. ‘Not the way it felt you were in the last few weeks...’

‘And that’s never gonna change.’ Not when it felt as if he’d been born to be with her. He watched as she blinked a tear from her lower lashes and dashed it away with the back of her hand. ‘Can you tell me why you were scared?’

‘It was too much and not enough.’ She searched for a way to explain it. ‘What your eyes were saying—I didn’t want to hear if you were planning on walking away, but if you’re not—’

‘I’m not,’ he stated firmly. ‘But there are a couple of things we need to get straight before we go any further. Starting with your father.’

Her expression questioned where he was going.

‘I won’t let him fast-track me up the food chain to make me more suitable for you,’ Tyler continued. ‘When I get my career back on track it won’t be for him, it’ll be for us. I passed the sergeants exam six years ago—can ace the lieutenant one the same way, but when the time comes to aim higher if I hear so much as a rumour of whispers in the right ears there’ll be trouble.’

She listened intently while tears filled her eyes but, as hard as they were to see, he couldn’t stop to do anything about them until he’d said his piece. ‘I’m an expert on interfering families—did some interfering of my own in return—so I know how it works. Being in love with his daughter doesn’t make me a soft target for manipulation. He ever tries it with you again we’ll be having words on the subject. You’ve sacrificed enough for the family business. From here on in your needs come first. It’s already been tempting to tell your parents that to their faces. If they knew you the way I’ve started to—why are you smiling?’

It was bright enough to compete with the sun.

‘You’re in love with me?’

‘That’s the only thing you got from all that?’

‘It’s the only thing that matters.’

If it was they would never run into any problems but... ‘Being a cop’s wife isn’t easy.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You’re proposing now?’

‘I like to think when I’m proposing you’ll know I’m doing it.’ Nudging her knees apart to make space to step closer, he laid a possessive palm on her hip. ‘What I’m saying is we’ve got time—take as much of it as you need and talk to as many members of my family as you want. I can’t change who I am for you or keep you in the lifestyle you’ve been accustomed to but—’

She shook her head. ‘You don’t have to. I have money. That’s not an issue.’

‘It is if you think we’re living off a trust fund.’

‘It’s not a trust fund. Well, it is until I turn twenty-five, but my parents didn’t set it up. It’s an inheritance from my grandfather.’

Tyler’s eyes narrowed at the offhand tone to her voice. ‘Are you telling me you’re rich?’

‘I’m afraid so. You’ll have to learn to live with it.’

The words left his mouth before he could stop them. ‘Even if it begs the question of what I can offer you?’

She ignored the question. ‘You’re in love with me?’

‘Are you listening to anything I’m saying?’

‘Yes.’ She blinked a couple of times. ‘I just seem to be a little stuck on that one...’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t think... I mean I thought I’d have to...’ The uncharacteristic lack of something to say removed the frown from his face as she took a short breath. ‘I haven’t done anything to deserve it. I was awful to you at the start and then I was difficult. You were right—I’m hard work.’

‘And I’m not?’

When he searched her eyes he found wonder mixed with the vulnerability she kept hidden from everyone else. Added to the insight he’d gained when she’d talked about her fear of not being enough, it felt as if the final piece of the puzzle had slotted into place. The need to reassure her made him reach out so he could hold her while he admitted there had been plenty of times she was more than he could handle. But when the sharp pain in his shoulder made him grit his teeth to stifle a groan a second possessive palm on her other hip was as close as he got.

‘I’m no angel and I don’t want to end up married to a saint, either.’ He leaned closer. ‘So if you think you have to be anything more than you already are you’re wrong. You pulled me back from the edge. No one else could have done that. Last night—’ he cleared his throat ‘—I went there to kill him.’

As he stood tall and waited for her judgment Miranda frowned. What was he talking about? Then it clicked. ‘He was the guy you sent a message to.’

‘Yes.’

Not that she believed it for a second. ‘Why were you going to kill him?’

‘He made it personal.’

‘How?’

His gaze lowered to one of her hands when she set them on his forearms. ‘Her name was Candice.’

Miranda felt an immediate surge of jealousy.

‘I busted her a few times when I was with Vice.’

She exhaled the breath she was holding.

‘When she fed me some useful pieces of information I put her on the payroll—one of them led to a drugs bust that took me to Narcotics.’ He took a long, controlled breath. ‘A month before I got assigned to Municipal Security her dealer changed and she witnessed something that could have put a major player behind bars. I said I’d protect her if she agreed to give evidence in court but left her alone to chase the lead. By the time I got back she was dead.’

‘What happened?’

‘He beat her to death with a baseball bat.’ The hand at the end of his good arm moved from her hip to tunnel underneath her sweater in a way that suggested he needed to feel the warmth of her skin. ‘I recruited her. I ignored the danger she was in and it got her killed. To him it was business. To me it was personal.’

With the explanation, how seriously he’d taken her safety made perfect sense to Miranda. She ran a palm up his arm, across his shoulder and raised it to his jaw, waiting for him to look into her eyes before she spoke. ‘I know you well enough to know if you thought something might happen to her you would never have left her alone. You’d have fought for her, Tyler—taken the beating for her if you could, died if it meant saving her life.’

While trying to bring her murderer to justice he almost had.

‘I should have known the risk.’

‘If you think worst-case scenario in every situation...’ The realization it was exactly what he’d been doing twisted her heart. ‘That’s why you saw potential threats everywhere you looked when you became my bodyguard, isn’t it?’

‘Partly,’ he admitted reluctantly, before pressing his mouth into a thin line. ‘If I tell you something you have to promise not to freak out.’

Meaning she wasn’t going to like it...

‘The guy outside the movie theatre was the one I saw outside the school.’ Long fingers flexed against her skin in reassurance. ‘Lewis Rand was briefed but I need you to be careful until I track down the rest of the letter writers. There’s only a couple more to go so—’

‘Wait.’ She interrupted. ‘Are you talking about Paul?’

He frowned. ‘Who the hell is Paul?’

‘Dark hair, glasses, has a problem with the three-second handshake rule.’

‘You know him?’

Miranda nodded. ‘He’s a self-professed superfan. Re-Tweets everything I say on Twitter and tries to see me in the real world as often as he can. He’s quite sweet really. His mother died a few years ago and I think he’s lonely.’

‘Great,’ Tyler said flatly. ‘I threatened Bambi.’

‘You can apologize the next time you see him. If we get married he’ll probably be outside the church...’

‘If we get married?’

‘We’ll get to that in a minute.’ Sliding her hand from his jaw to the back of his neck, she wriggled closer to the edge of the counter and locked her legs around the backs of his knees. ‘Tell me about last night.’

‘I couldn’t take the shot.’

‘Because you’re not a murderer,’ she said firmly.

‘I wasn’t sure any more. Was starting to forget who I was until I met you...’ A corner of his mouth lifted to form another wry smile. ‘It was part of the reason I told myself I couldn’t sleep with you. Believe me when I say it had squat to do with not wanting you.’ As if to prove the point his hand moved, the tip of his thumb grazing the lace on the underside of her breast while his eyes darkened. ‘I got hooked with dance moves—wanted to take you hard and fast in the hall that night. There isn’t a single inch of your body I don’t want to kiss.’ When his smile changed the returning hint of predator sent a sizzle of heat through her veins. ‘You’re gonna be spending a lot of time naked.’

Miranda blinked, consumed by the hunger in his eyes. ‘You’re wounded...’

The protest sounded unconvincing, even to her.

‘I’m not that wounded,’ he replied with conviction. ‘Where you are right now works for me—or you on top, that would work, too... I’ve had a mental image of that one for a while now.’

Not that it had ever taken much but in a heartbeat her body was ready for him, the squirming movement she made on the counter creating a knowing gleam in his eyes.

‘And now you’re picturing it, aren’t you?’

‘I have a lot of those mental images,’ she confessed. ‘But before we start swapping them, I should warn you being the husband of a politician’s daughter won’t be easy.’

‘If we get married?’ he repeated in a lower, rougher, unbelievably seductive voice.

‘You haven’t proposed yet,’ she pointed out as she ran her fingertips over the short hair at the back of his neck. ‘What I’m saying is we’ve got time for you to ease into it. Knowing my father, he’ll run for governor in a few years and when he does we’ll be asked to stand onstage with him to show our support.’

‘You’ll still do that?’

‘Not full time.’

‘Gonna have to vote for him, aren’t I?’ Tyler asked as he focused his intense gaze on her mouth and leaned closer.

The tip of her tongue flicked over her lips. ‘I won’t tell if you don’t. I’m Team Tyler all the way.’

‘No, you’re not. We’re Team Us.’ He stilled and leaned back to look into her eyes. ‘At least we would be if you’d ever get around to saying you love me back.’

She fluttered her eyelashes in response. ‘You hadn’t figured it out already?’

When he raised his hand from her hip the grimace of pain was impossible to hide.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m moving into position to kiss it out of you. It’s just not gonna be with this hand.’

‘When’s the last time you took pain meds?’

Lowering his bad arm, he freed the hand beneath her sweater so he could push aside damp tendrils of hair and wrap long fingers around the nape of her neck. ‘Kissing you will take my mind off it.’

Before he turned her brain to mush Miranda framed his face in her hands and looked deep into his eyes so he could hear her loud and clear. ‘Of course I love you. How could I not? I believe in you more than I’ve ever believed in anyone. I may have questioned why but it never felt wrong. The only thing that did was fighting how I felt.’

Something endearingly close to relief crossed his eyes before they darkened to the colour of stormy seas. ‘That guy you talked about finding when you have your freedom—the one who’ll spend time with you because he wants to and not because he’s paid to do it? It’s me.’

The depth of emotion he projected with his eyes combined with the strength of conviction in his deep voice removed any lingering doubt she had left about being enough for him. He wouldn’t love her that much, want her that badly or bare his soul to someone he considered unworthy.

‘It feels like I belong here,’ she said in a voice thick with the same depth of emotion. ‘There’s something about you that makes me want to hold on and never let go. When I thought this was over—’

‘We’re just getting started,’ he argued. ‘You can make me angrier than any woman I’ve ever known but I’d still rather fight with you than make love with anyone else.’

‘Ooh...that was good...’ She raised her brows. ‘Do you have more of those?’

When he laughed it was the most glorious, uplifting sound she’d ever heard. ‘You have no idea how much I wanted to hear that again. You have a great laugh. You should do it more often.’

‘You know you’re not going home tonight, right?’

‘I am home.’ She tore her gaze away to flick a brief glance over his shoulder. ‘But you might need more closet space before I move in. Wow. You have a lot of books.’

A light kiss was placed on the corner of her mouth. ‘I like to read.’

‘You can’t have read all of them.’

‘Yes, I can, and you could sound less surprised.’ He bestowed another kiss on her eager lips. ‘What’s more I remember them word for word. You can pick a page later.’

Miranda felt the heat coiling low in her abdomen. ‘You have a photographic memory?’

‘The term is didactic and I plan to rewrite the rules by filling my memory with images of you. The look on your face when I propose...’ Kiss. ‘How beautiful you are when you walk down the aisle...’ Kiss. ‘When you hold our first child...’ Kiss. ‘Wiping away your tears when we attend their graduation...’ Kiss. ‘We’re gonna make a lifetime of memories and when it’s my time I’ll take every one of them with me and die a happy man.’

The demonstration of how much he’d been holding back created a swell of emotion it was impossible to contain, joy leaking from the corners of her closed eyes as she leaned her forehead against his. ‘I love you so much.’

‘And I love you. Don’t ever doubt that.’ He leaned back and waited for her to open her eyes before adding, ‘Still questioning what I did to deserve you but I reckon I’ve got at least sixty years to figure it out.’

When he winked, Miranda grinned. He was all the fun she would ever need. As he went to work with remarkable one-handed dexterity on the buttons down the centre of her sweater she answered his question in a way that made perfect sense to a woman whose childhood belief in happily-ever-after had been renewed.

‘That’s the thing about rescuing the princess from her ivory tower.’ She kissed his crooked smile. ‘Once he does, the hero of the story is kinda stuck with her after that.’

* * * * *

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PROLOGUE

30 September

CASSIDY raised her hand and knocked on the dilapidated door. Behind her Lucy giggled nervously. 'Are you sure this is the right address?'

Cassidy turned to stare at her. 'You arranged this. How should I know?' She glanced at the crumpled piece of paper in her hand. 'This is definitely number seventeen.' She leaned backwards, looking at the 1960s curtains hanging in the secondary glazed double windows that rattled every time a bus went past. 'Maybe nobody's home?' she said hopefully.

This had to be the worst idea she'd ever had. No. Correction. It hadn't been her idea. In a moment of weakness she'd just agreed to come along with her colleagues to see what all the fuss was about.

'Where did you find this one, Lucy?'

Lucy had spent the past year whisking her friends off to as many different fortune-tellers as possible. By all accounts, some were good, some were bad and some were just downright scary. Cassidy had always managed to wriggle out of it—until now.

'This is the one my cousin Fran came to. She said she was fab.'

Cassidy raised her eyebrows. 'Cousin Fran who went on the reality TV show and then spent the next week hiding in the cupboard?'

Lucy nodded. 'Oh, great,' sighed Cass.

'I wonder if she'll tell me how many children I'll have,' murmured Lynn dreamily. She stuck her pointed elbow into Cassidy's ribs. 'She told Lizzie King she'd have twins and she's due any day now.'

'I just want to know if Frank is ever going to propose,' sighed Tamsin. 'If she doesn't see it in the future then I'm dumping him. Five years is long enough.'

Cassidy screwed up her nose and shook her head. 'You can't dump Frank because of something a fortune-teller says.'

But Tamsin had that expression on her face—the one that said, *Don't mess with me*. 'Watch me.'

There was a shuffle behind the door then a creak and the door swung open. 'Hello, ladies, come on in.'

Cassidy blinked. The smell of cats hit her in the face like a steamroller.

She allowed the stampede behind her to thunder inside then took a deep breath of clean outside air, before pulling the door closed behind her. A mangy-looking cat wound its way around her legs. 'Shoo!' she hissed.

'Come on, Cassidy!'

She plastered a smile on her face and joined her colleagues in smelly-cat-woman's front room. The peeling noise beneath the soles of her feet told her that the carpet was sticky. She dreaded to think what with.

Her three friends were crowded onto the brown sofa. Another cat was crawling across the back of the sofa behind their heads. Cassidy's eyes started to stream and she resisted the temptation to start rubbing them. Once she started, she couldn't stop. Cat allergies did that to you.

'So who wants to go first?'

Cassidy glanced at her watch. How had she got roped into this?

'You go first, Cass,' said Lucy, who turned to smelly-cat woman. 'You'll have to do a good job, Belinda. Our Cassidy's a non-believer.'

The small, rotund woman eyed Cassidy up and down. Her brow was as wrinkled as her clothes. 'This way, dear,' she muttered, wandering down the hallway to another room.

Cassidy swallowed nervously. Maybe it would be easier to get this over and done with. Then at least she could wait outside in the car for the others.

The room was full of clutter. And cats.

As Belinda settled herself at one side of the table and shuffled some cards, Cassidy eyed the squashed easy chair on the other side. A huge marmalade cat was sitting in pride of place, blinking at her, daring her to move him.

Her gorgeous turquoise-blue velvet pea coat would attract cat hairs like teenage girls to a Bieber concert. She should just kiss it goodbye now.

'Move, Lightning!' Belinda kicked the chair and the cat gave her a hard stare before stretching on his legs and jumping from the seat, settling at her feet.

Cassidy couldn't hide the smile from her face. It had to be the most inappropriately named cat —ever.

Belinda fixed her eyes on her. How could such a soft, round woman have such a steely glare? Her eyes weren't even blinking. She was staring so hard Cass thought she would bore a hole through her skull.

She looked around her. Books everywhere. Piles of magazines. Shelves and shelves of ornaments, all looking as though they could do with a good dust. Another allergy to set off. One, two, no, three … no, there was another one hiding in the corner. Four cats in the room. All looking at her as if she shouldn't be there. Maybe they knew something that she didn't.

'So, what do we do?' she asked quickly.

Belinda's face had appeared kindly, homely when she'd answered the door. But in here, when it was just the two of them, she looked like a cold and shrewd businesswoman. Cassidy wondered if she could read the thoughts currently in her head. That would account for the light-sabre stare.

Belinda shuffled the cards again. 'We can do whatever you prefer.' She spread the cards face down on the table. 'I can read your cards.' She reached over and grabbed hold of Cassidy's hand. 'I can read your palm. Or …' she glanced around the room '… I can channel some spirits and see what they've got to say.'

The thought sent a chill down Cassidy's spine. She wasn't sure she believed any of this. But she certainly didn't want to take the risk of channelling any unwanted spirits.

The TV special she'd watched the other day had claimed that all of this was based on reading people. Seeing the tiny, almost imperceptible reactions they had to certain words, certain gestures. Cassidy had come here tonight determined not to move a muscle, not even to blink. But her cat allergy seemed to have got the better of her, and her eyes were a red, blinking, streaming mess. So much for not moving.

She didn't like the look of the cards either. Knowing her luck, she'd turn over the death card —or the equivalent of the Joker.

'Let's just do the palm, please.' It seemed the simplest option. How much could anyone get from some lines on a palm?

Belinda leaned across the table, taking Cassidy's slim hand and wrist and encapsulating them in her pudgy fingers. There was something quite soothing about it. She wasn't examining Cassidy's palm —just holding her hand. Stroking her fingers across the back of her hand for a few silent minutes, then turning her hand over and touching the inside of her palm.

A large smile grew across her face.

The suspense was killing her. Cassidy didn't like long silences. 'What is it?'

Belinda released her hand. 'You're quite the little misery guts, aren't you?'

'What?' Cassidy was stunned. The last she'd heard, these people were only supposed to tell you good things. And certainly not assassinate your character.

Belinda nodded. 'On the surface you're quite the joker with your friends at work. On the other hand, you always see the glass half-empty. Very self-deprecating. All signs of insecurity.' She took a deep breath. 'But very particular at work. Your attention to detail makes you hard to work with. Some of your colleagues just don't know how to take you. And as for men …'

‘What?’ Right now, men were the last thing on her mind. And the word ‘insecurity’ had hit a nerve she didn’t want to acknowledge. It was bad enough having parents who jet-setted around the world, without having a fiancé who’d upped and left. The last thing she wanted was some random stranger pointing it out to her.

‘You’re a clever girl, but sometimes you can’t see what’s right at the end of your nose.’ She shook her head. ‘You’ve got some very fixed ideas, and you’re not very good at the art of compromise. Just as well Christmas is coming up.’

Cassidy was mad now. ‘What’s that got to do with anything? Christmas is still three months away.’

Belinda folded her arms across her chest, a smug expression on her face. ‘You’re going to be a Christmas bride.’

‘What?’

The woman had clearly lost her cat-brained mind.

‘How on earth can I be a Christmas bride? It’s October tomorrow, and I don’t have a boyfriend. And there’s nobody I’m even remotely interested in.’

Belinda tapped the side of her nose, giving her shoulders an annoying little shrug. ‘I only see the future. I don’t tell you how you’re going to get there.’ She leaned over and touched the inside of Cassidy’s palm. ‘I can see you as a Christmas bride, along with a very handsome groom—not from around these parts either. Lucky you.’

Cassidy shook her head firmly. It had taken her months to get over her broken engagement to her Spanish fiancé—and it had not been an experience she wanted to repeat. ‘You’re absolutely wrong. There’s no way I’m going to be a Christmas bride. And particularly not with a groom from elsewhere. I’ve had it with foreign men. The next man I hook up with will be a true fellow Scot, through and through.’

Belinda gave her *the look*. The look that said, *You’ve no idea what you’re talking about.*

‘That’s us, then.’

Cassidy was aghast. Twenty quid for that? ‘That’s it?’

Belinda nodded and waved her hand. ‘Send the next one in.’

Cassidy hesitated for a second, steeling herself to argue with the woman. But then the fat orange cat brushed against her legs and leapt up onto the chair beside her, determined to shed its thousands of orange cat hairs over her velvet coat. She jumped up. At least she was over and done with. She could wait outside in the car. It was almost worth the twenty quid for that alone.

She walked along the corridor, mumbling to herself, attempting to brush a big wad of clumped cat hair from her coat.

‘Are you done already? What did she tell you?’

Cassidy rolled her eyes. ‘It’s not even worth repeating.’ She jerked her head down the corridor. ‘Go on, Tamsin. Go and find out when you’re getting your proposal.’

Tamsin still had that determined look on her face. She stood up and straightened her pristine black mac—no orange cat hairs for her. ‘You mean *if* I’m getting my proposal.’ She swept down the corridor and banged the door closed behind her.

Lucy raised her eyebrows. ‘Heaven help Belinda if she doesn’t tell Tam what she wants to hear.’ She turned back to Cassidy. ‘Come on, then, spill. What did she say?’

Cassidy blew out a long, slow breath through pursed lips. She was annoyed at being called a ‘misery guts.’ And she was beyond irritated at being called insecure. ‘I’m apparently going to be a Christmas bride.’

‘What?’ Lucy’s and Lynn’s voices were in perfect tandem with their matching shocked expressions.

‘Just as well Tamsin didn’t hear that,’ Lucy muttered.

‘Oh, it gets worse. Apparently my groom is from foreign climes.’ She rolled her eyes again. ‘As if.’

But Lucy’s and Lynn’s expressions had changed, smiles creeping across their faces as their eyes met.

‘Told you.’

‘No way.’

Cassidy watched in bewilderment as they high-fived each other in the dingy sitting room.

‘What’s with you two? You know the whole thing’s ridiculous. As if *I’m* going to date another foreign doctor.’

Lynn folded her arms across her chest. ‘Stranger things have happened.’ She had a weird look on her face. As if she knew something that Cassidy didn’t.

Lucy adopted the same pose, shoulder to shoulder with Lynn. Almost as if they were ganging up on her.

Her gaze narrowed. ‘I’m willing to place a bet that Belinda could be right.’

Cassidy couldn’t believe what was happening. The crazy-cat-woman’s disease was obviously contagious. A little seed planted in her brain. She could use this to her advantage. ‘What’s it worth?’

Lucy frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Cassidy smiled. ‘I’ll take that bet. But what’s it worth?’

‘Night shift Christmas Eve. Oh.’ The words were out before Lucy had had time to think about them. She had her hand across her mouth. It was the most hated shift on the planet. Every year they had to draw straws to see who would take it.

‘You’re on.’ Cassidy held out her hand towards Lucy, who nodded and shook it firmly. She had no chance of losing this bet. No chance at all.

CHAPTER ONE

1 October

CASSIDY pulled the navy-blue tunic over her head. These new-style NHS uniforms were supposed to be made from a revolutionary lightweight fabric, designed for comfort and ease of fit. The reality was they were freezing and not designed for Scottish winters in a draughty old hospital. She pulled a cardigan from her locker and headed for the stairs. Maybe running up three flights would take the chill out of her bones.

Two minutes later she arrived in the medical ward. She took a deep breath. There it was. The hospital smell. Some people hated it and shuddered walking through the very doors of the hospital. But Cassidy loved it—it was like a big security blanket, and she'd missed it. It was just before seven and the lights were still dimmed. Ruby, the night nurse, gave her a smile. 'Nice to see you back, Cassidy. How was the secondment?'

Cassidy nodded, wrapping her cardigan further around her torso. Her temperature was still barely above freezing. 'It was fine, but three months was long enough. The new community warfarin clinic is set up—all the teething problems ironed out. To be honest, though, I'm glad to be back. I missed this place.'

And she had. But at the time the three-month secondment had been perfect for her. It had given her the chance to sort out all the hassles with her gran, work regular hours and get her settled into the new nursing home—the second in a year. Her eyes swept over the whiteboard on the wall, displaying all the patient names, room numbers and named nurses. 'No beds?' She raised her eyebrows.

'Actually, we've got one. But A and E just phoned to say they're sending us an elderly lady with a chest infection, so I've put her name up on the board already. She should be up in the next ten minutes.'

Cassidy gave a nod as the rest of the day-shift staff appeared, gathering around the nurses' station for the handover report. She waited patiently, listening to the rundown of the thirty patients currently in her general medical ward, before assigning the patients to the nurses on duty and accepting the keys for the medicine and drugs cabinets.

She heard the ominous trundle of a trolley behind her. 'I'll admit this patient,' she told her staff. 'It'll get me back into the swing of things.'

She looked up as Bill, one of the porters, arrived, pulling the trolley with the elderly woman lying on top. A doctor was walking alongside them, carrying some notes and chatting to the elderly lady as they wheeled her into one of the side rooms. He gave her a smile—one that could have launched a thousand toothpaste campaigns. 'This is Mrs Elizabeth Kelly. She's eighty-four and has a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She's had a chest infection for the last seven days that hasn't responded to oral antibiotics. Her oxygen saturation is down at eighty-two and she's tachycardic. The doctor on call wanted her admitted for IV antibiotics.'

For a moment the strong Australian accent threw her—she hadn't been expecting it. Though goodness knows why not. Her hospital in the middle of Glasgow attracted staff from all over the world. His crumpled blue scrubs and even more crumpled white coat looked as though he'd slept in them—and judging by his blond hair, sticking up in every direction but the right one, he probably had.

She didn't recognise him, which meant he must be one of the new doctors who had started while she was away on secondment. And he was too handsome by far. And that cheeky twinkle in his eye was already annoying her.

After three months away, some things appeared to have changed around the hospital. It was usually one of the A and E nurses who accompanied the patient up to the ward.

Cassidy pumped up the bed and removed the headboard, pulling the patslide from the wall and sliding the patient over into the bed. The doctor helped her put the headboard back on and adjusted

the backrest, rearranging the pillows so Mrs Kelly could sit upright. Cassidy attached the monitoring equipment and changed the oxygen supply over to the wall. The doctor was still standing looking at her.

For a second she almost thought he was peering at her breasts, but as she followed his gaze downwards she realised her name and designation was stitched on the front of her new tunics.

She held out her hand towards him. 'Cassidy Rae. Sister of the medical receiving unit. Though from the way you're staring at my breasts, I take it you've gathered that.'

His warm hand caught her cold one, his eyes twinkling. 'Pleased to meet you, Dragon Lady. I hope your heart isn't as cold as your hands.'

She pulled her hand away from his. 'What did you call me?'

'Dragon Lady.' He looked unashamed by the remark. 'Your reputation precedes you. I've been looking forward to meeting you, although from what I hear it's usually you who does the name-calling.'

She folded her arms across her chest, trying to stop the edges of her mouth turning upwards. 'I've no idea what you're talking about.' She picked up the patient clothing bag and bent down, starting to unpack Mrs Kelly's belongings into the cabinet next to her bed.

'I heard you called the last lot Needy, Greedy and Seedy.'

She jumped. She could feel his warm breath on her neck. He'd bent forward and whispered in her ear.

'Who told you that?' she asked incredulously. She glanced at her watch. Ten past seven on her first morning back, and already some smart-alec doc was trying to get the better of her.

'Oh, give me a minute.' The mystery doctor ducked out of the room.

It was true. She had nicknamed the last three registrars—all for obvious reasons. One had spent every waking minute eating, the other hadn't seen a patient without someone holding his hand, and as for the last one, he'd spent his year sleazing over all the female staff. And while the nursing staff knew the nicknames she'd given them, she'd no idea who'd told one of the new docs. She'd need to investigate that later.

She stood up and adjusted Mrs Kelly's venturi mask, taking a note of her thin frame and pale, papery skin. Another frail, elderly patient, just like her gran. She altered the alarms on the monitor —at their present setting they would sound every few minutes. With a history of COPD, Mrs Kelly had lower than normal oxygen levels.

'How are you feeling?' She picked up the tympanic thermometer and placed it in Mrs Kelly's ear, pressing the button to read her temperature then recording her observations in the chart. Mrs Kelly shook her pale head.

She sat down at the side of the bed. 'I need to take some details from you, Mrs Kelly. But how about I get you something to eat and drink first? I imagine you were stuck down in A and E for hours. Would you like some tea? Some toast?'

'Your wish is my command.' The steaming cup of tea and plate of buttered toast thudded down on the bedside table. 'See, Mrs Kelly? I make good on my promises.' He shook his head at Cassidy. 'There was *nothing* to eat down in A and E and I promised I'd get her some tea once we got up here.'

'Thank you, son,' Mrs Kelly said, shifting her mask and lifting the cup to her lips, 'My throat is so dry.'

He nodded slowly. Oxygen therapy frequently made patients' mouths dry and it was important to keep them hydrated.

Cassidy stared at him. Things had changed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a doctor make a patient a cup of tea. It was almost unheard of.

She smiled at him. 'Makes me almost wish we could keep you,' she said quietly. 'You've obviously been well trained.'

His blue eyes glinted. 'And what makes you think you can't keep me?'

‘I imagine A and E will have a whole load of patients waiting for you. Why did you come up here anyway? Was it to steal our chocolates?’ She nodded towards the nursing station. The medical receiving unit was never short of chocolates, and it wasn’t unknown for the doctors from other departments to sneak past and steal some.

He shook his head, the smile still stuck on his face. He held out his hand towards her. ‘I forgot to introduce myself earlier. I’m one of yours—though I dread to think what nickname you’ll give me. Brad Donovan, medical registrar.’

Cassidy felt herself jerk backwards in surprise. He looked too young to be a medical registrar. Maybe it was the scruffy hair? Or the Australian tan? Or maybe it was that earring glinting in his ear, along with the super-white teeth? He didn’t look like any registrar she’d ever met before.

Something twisted inside her gut. No, that wasn’t quite true. Bobby. For a tiny second he reminded her of Bobby. But Bobby’s hair had been dark, not blond, and he’d worn it in a similar scruffy style and had the same glistening white teeth. She pushed all thoughts away. She hadn’t thought about him in months. Where had that come from?

She focused her mind. This was a work colleague—albeit a cheeky one. She shook his hand firmly. ‘Well, Dr Donovan, if you’re one of mine then maybe I should tell you the rules in my ward.’

His eyebrows rose, an amused expression on his face. ‘You really are the Dragon Lady, aren’t you?’

She ignored him. ‘When you finally manage to put some clothes on, no silly ties. In fact, no ties at all and no long sleeves. They’re an infection-control hazard.’ She ran her eyes up and down his crumpled scrubs, ‘Though from the look of you, that doesn’t seem to be a problem. Always use the gel outside the patients’ rooms before you touch them. And pay attention to what my nurses tell you—they spend most of their day with the patients and will generally know the patients ten times better than you will.’

His blue eyes fixed on hers. Quite unnerving for this time in the morning. His gaze was straight and didn’t falter. The guy was completely unfazed by her. He seemed confident, self-assured. She would have to wait and see if his clinical competence matched his demeanour.

‘I have been working here for the last two months without your rulebook. I’m sure your staff will give me a good report.’ She resisted the temptation to reply. Of course her staff would give him a good report. He was like a poster boy for Surfers’ Central. She could put money on it that he’d spent the last two months charming her staff with his lazy accent, straight white teeth and twinkling eyes. He handed her Mrs Kelly’s case notes and prescription chart.

‘I’ve written Mrs Kelly up for some IV antibiotics, some oral steroids and some bronchodilators. She had her arterial blood gases done in A and E and I’ll check them again in a few hours. I’d like her on four-hourly obs in the meantime.’ He glanced at the oxygen supply, currently running at four litres. ‘Make sure she stays on the twenty-eight per cent venturi mask. One of the students in A and E didn’t understand the complications of COPD and put her on ten litres of straight oxygen.’

Cassidy’s mouth fell open. ‘Please tell me you’re joking.’

He shook his head. The effects could have been devastating. ‘Her intentions were good. Mrs Kelly’s lips were blue from lack of oxygen when she was admitted. The student just did what seemed natural. Luckily one of the other staff spotted her mistake quickly.’

Cassidy looked over at the frail, elderly lady on the bed, her oxygen mask currently dangling around her neck as she munched the toast from the plate in front of her. The blue tinge had obviously disappeared from her lips, but even eating the toast was adding to her breathlessness. She turned back to face Brad. ‘Any relatives?’

He shook his head. ‘Her husband died a few years ago and her daughter emigrated to my neck of the woods ten years before that.’ He pointed to a phone number in the records. ‘Do you want me to phone her, or do you want to do that?’

Cassidy felt a little pang. This poor woman must be lonely. She'd lost her husband, and her daughter lived thousands of miles away. Who did she speak to every day? One of the last elderly patients admitted to her ward had disclosed that often he went for days without a single person to speak to. Loneliness could be a terrible burden.

The doctor passed in front of her vision again, trying to catch her attention, and she pushed the uncomfortable thoughts from her head. This one was definitely too good to be true. Bringing up a patient, making tea and toast, and offering to phone relatives?

Her internal radar started to ping. She turned to Mrs Kelly. 'I'll let you finish your tea and come back in a few minutes.

'What are you up to?' She headed out the door towards the nursing station.

He fell into step beside her. 'What do you mean?'

She paused in the corridor, looking him up and down. 'You're too good to be true. Which means alarm bells are ringing in my head. What's with the nice-boy act?'

She pulled up the laptop from the nurses' station and started to input some of Mrs Kelly's details.

'Who says it's an act?'

Her eyes swept down the corridor. The case-note trolley had been pulled to the end of the corridor. Two other doctors in white coats were standing, talking over some notes. She looked at her watch—not even eight o'clock. 'And who are they?'

Brad smiled. 'That's the other registrars. Luca is from Italy, and Franco is from Hungary. They must have wanted to get a head start on the ward round.' He gave her a brazen wink. 'I guess they heard the Dragon Lady was on duty today.'

She shook her head in bewilderment. 'I go on secondment for three months, come back and I've got the poster boy for Surfers' Paradise making tea and toast for patients and two other registrars in the ward before eight a.m. Am I still dreaming? Have I woken up yet?'

'Why?' As quick as a flash he'd moved around beside her. 'Am I the kind of guy you dream about?'

'Get lost, flyboy.' She pushed Mrs Kelly's case notes back into his hands. 'You've got a patient's daughter in Australia to go and phone. Make yourself useful while I go and find out what kind of support system she has at home.'

He paused for a second, his eyes narrowing. 'She's not even heated up the bed yet and you're planning on throwing her back out?'

Cassidy frowned. 'It's the basic principle of the receiving unit. Our first duty is to find out what systems are in place for our patients. Believe it or not, most of them don't like staying here. And if we plan ahead it means there's less chance of a delayed discharge. Sometimes it can take a few days to set up support systems to get someone home again.' She raised her hand to the whiteboard with patient names. 'In theory, we're planning for their discharge as soon as they enter A and E.'

The look on his face softened. 'In that case, I'll let you off.' He nodded towards his fellow doctors. 'Maybe they got the same alarm call that I did. Beware the Dragon!' He headed towards the doctors' office to make his call.

Dragon Lady was much more interesting than he'd been led to believe. He'd expected a sixty-year-old, grey-haired schoolmarm. Instead he'd got a young woman with a slim, curvy figure, chestnut curls and deep brown eyes. And she was feisty. He liked that.

Cassidy Rae could be fun. There it was, that strange, almost unfamiliar feeling. That first glimmer of interest in a woman. That tiny little thought that something could spark between them given half a chance. It had been so long since he'd felt it that he almost didn't know what to do about it.

He'd been here a few months, and while his colleagues were friendly, they weren't his 'friends'. And he didn't want to hang around with the female junior doctors currently batting their eyelids at him. Experience had taught him it was more trouble than it was worth.

Distraction. The word echoed around his head again as he leaned against the cold concrete wall.

Exactly what he needed. Something to keep his mind from other things—like another Christmas Day currently looming on the horizon with a huge black storm-cloud hovering over it. He'd even tried to juggle the schedules so he could be working on Christmas Day. But no such luck. His Italian colleague had beat him to it, and right now he couldn't bear the thought of an empty Christmas Day in strange surroundings with no real friends or family.

Another Christmas spent wondering where his little girl was, if she was enjoying her joint birthday and Christmas Day celebrations. Wondering if she even remembered he existed.

He had no idea what she'd been told about him. The fact he'd spent the last eighteen months trying to track down his daughter at great time and expense killed him—especially in the run-up to her birthday. Everyone else around him was always full of festive spirit and fun, and no matter how hard he tried not to be the local misery guts, something inside him just felt dead.

Christmas was about families and children. And the one thing he wanted to do was sit his little girl on his knee and get her the biggest birthday and Christmas present in the world. If only he knew where she was …

There was that fist again, hovering around his stomach, tightly clenched. Every time he thought of his daughter, Melody, the visions of her mother, Alison, a junior doctor he'd worked with, appeared in his head. Alison, the woman who only liked things her way or no way at all. No negotiation. No compromise.

More importantly, no communication.

The woman who'd left a bitter taste in his mouth for the last eighteen months. Blighting every other relationship he'd tried to have. The woman who'd wrangled over every custody arrangement, telling him he was impinging on her life. Then one day that had been it. Nothing. He'd gone to pick up two-year-old Melody as planned and had turned up at an empty house. No forwarding address. Nothing.

The colleagues at the hospital where Alison had worked said she'd thought about going to America—apparently she'd fallen head over heels in love with some American doctor. But no one knew where. And he'd spent the last few years getting his solicitor to chase false leads halfway around the world. It had taken over his whole world. Every second of every day had revolved around finding his daughter. Until he'd finally cracked and some good friends had sat him down firmly and spoken to him.

It had only been in the last few months, since moving to Scotland, that he'd finally started to feel like himself again. His laid-back manner had returned, and he'd finally started to relax and be comfortable in his own skin again.

While he would still do everything in his power to find his daughter, he had to realise his limitations. He had to accept the fact he hadn't done anything wrong and he still deserved to live a life.

And while the gaggle of nurses and female junior doctors didn't appeal to him, Cassidy Rae did. She was a different kettle of fish altogether. A fierce, sassy woman who could help him make some sparks fly. A smile crept over his face. Now there was just the small matter of the duty room to break to her. How would she react to that?

Cassidy went back to Mrs Kelly and finished her admission paperwork, rechecked her obs and helped her wash and change into a clean nightdress. By the time she'd finished, Mrs Kelly was clearly out of breath again. Even the slightest exertion seemed to fatigue her.

Cassidy hung the IV antibiotics from the drip stand and connected up the IV. 'These will take half an hour to go through. The doctor has changed the type of antibiotic that you're on so hopefully they'll be more effective than the ones you were taking at home.'

Mrs Kelly nodded. 'Thanks, love. He's a nice one, isn't he?' There was a little pause. 'And he's single. Told me so himself.'

'Who?' Cassidy had started to tidy up around about her, putting away the toilet bag and basin.

‘That handsome young doctor. Reminds of that guy on TV. You know, the one from the soap opera.’

Cassidy shook her head. ‘I don’t watch soap operas. And anyway …’ she bundled up the used towels and sheets to put in the laundry trolley ‘… I’m looking for a handsome Scotsman. Not someone from the other side of the world.’

She walked over to the window. The old hospital building was several storeys high, on the edge of the city. The grey clouds were hanging low this morning and some drizzly rain was falling outside, but she could still see some greenery in the distance.

‘Why on earth would anyone want to leave all this behind?’ she joked.

Mrs Kelly raised her eyebrows. ‘Why indeed?’

Cassidy spent the rest of the morning finding her feet again in the ward. The hospital computer system had been updated, causing her to lose half her patients at the touch of a button. And the automated pharmacy delivery seemed to be on the blink again. Some poor patients’ medicines would be lost in a pod stuck in a tube somewhere.

Lucy appeared from the ward next door, clutching a cup of tea, and tapped her on the shoulder. ‘How does it feel to be back?’

Cassidy gave her friend a smile. ‘It’s good.’ She picked up the off-duty book. ‘I just need to get my head around the rosters again.’ Her eyes fell on the sticky notes inside the book and she rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, great. Seven members of staff want the same weekend off.’

Lucy laughed. ‘That’s nothing. One of our girls got married last weekend and I had to rope in two staff from the next ward to cover the night shift. Got time for a tea break?’

She shook her head and pointed down the corridor. ‘The consultant’s just about to arrive for the ward round.’

Lucy crossed her arms across her chest as she followed Cassidy’s gaze to the three registrars at the bottom of the corridor. ‘So what do you make of our new docs?’

Cassidy never even lifted her head. ‘Funky, Chunky and Hunky?’

Lucy spluttered tea all down the front of her uniform. She looked at her watch. ‘Less than two hours and you’ve got nicknames for them already?’

Cassidy lifted her eyebrows. ‘It wasn’t hard. Although Luca is drop-dead gorgeous, he’s more interested in his own reflection than any of the patients. And Franco has finished off two rolls with sausages and half a box of chocolates in the last half hour.’

‘So none of them have caught your eye, then?’

Cassidy turned her head at the tone in her friend’s voice. She looked at her suspiciously. ‘Why? What are you up to?’

Lucy’s gaze was still fixed down the corridor. ‘Nothing. I just wondered what you thought of them.’ She started to shake her behind as she wiggled past, singing along about single ladies.

Cassidy looked back down the corridor. Her eyes were drawn in one direction. Brad’s appearance hadn’t improved. He was still wearing his crumpled scrubs and coat. His hair was still untamed and she could see a shadow around his jaw.

But he had spent nearly half an hour talking to Mrs Kelly’s daughter and then another half hour talking Mrs Kelly through her treatment for the next few days. Then trying to persuade her that once she was fit and well, she might want to take up her daughter’s offer of a visit to Australia.

Most doctors she worked with weren’t that interested in their patients’ holistic care. Their radar seemed to switch off as soon as they’d made a clinical diagnosis.

There was the sound of raucous laughter at the end of the corridor, and Cassidy looked up to see Brad almost bent double, talking to one of the male physios.

She shook her head and scoured the ward, looking for one of the student nurses. ‘Karen?’

The student scuttled over. ‘Yes, Sister?’

‘Do you know how to assess a patient for the risk of pressure ulcers?’

The student nodded quickly as Cassidy handed her a plastic card with the Waterlow scale on it. ‘I want you to do Mrs Kelly’s assessment then come back and we’ll go over it together.’

Karen nodded and hurried off down the corridor. Cassidy watched for a second. With her paper-thin skin, poor nutrition and lack of circulating oxygen, Mrs Kelly was at real risk of developing pressure sores on her body. For Cassidy, the teaching element was one of the reasons she did this job. She wanted all the students who came through her ward to understand the importance of considering all aspects of their patients’ care.

There was a thud beside her. Brad was in the chair next to her, his head leaning on one hand, staring at her again with those blue eyes. He couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. ‘So, which one am I?’

Cassidy blew a wayward chestnut curl out of her face. ‘What are you talking about now?’

He moved closer. ‘Hunky, Chunky or Funky? Which one am I?’ He put his hands together and pleaded in front of her. ‘Please tell me I’m Hunky.’

‘How on earth did you …?’ Her eyes looked down the corridor to where Pete, the physio, was in conversation with one of the other doctors. He must have overheard her. ‘Oh, forget it.’

She wrinkled her nose at him, leaning forward wickedly so nobody could hear. ‘No way are you Hunky. That’s reserved for the Italian god named Luca.’ Her eyes fell on Luca, standing talking to one of her nurses. She whispered in Brad’s ear, ‘Have you noticed how he keeps checking out his own reflection in those highly polished Italian shoes of his?’

Brad’s shoulders started to shake.

She prodded him on the shoulder. ‘No. With that excuse of a haircut and that strange earring, you’re definitely Funky.’ She pointed at his ear. ‘What is that anyway?’

Her head came forward, her nose just a few inches off his ear as she studied the twisted bit of gold in his ear. ‘Is it a squashed kangaroo? Or a surfboard?’

‘Neither.’ He grinned at her, turning his head so their noses nearly touched. ‘Believe it or not, it used to be a boomerang. My mum bought it for me when I was a teenager and I won a competition.’ He touched it with his finger. ‘It’s a little bent out of shape now.’

Her face was serious and he could smell her per-fume—or her shampoo. She smelled of strawberries. A summer smell, even though it was the middle of winter in Glasgow. He was almost tempted to reach out and touch her chestnut curls, resting just above her collarbone. But she was staring at him with those big chocolate-brown eyes. And he didn’t want to move.

If this was the Dragon Lady of the medical receiving unit, he wondered if he could be her St George and try to tame her. No. That was the English patron saint and he was in Scotland. He’d learned quickly not to muddle things up around here. The Scots he’d met were wildly patriotic.

Her face broke into a smile again. Interesting. She hadn’t pulled back, even though they were just inches from each other. She didn’t seem intimidated by his closeness. In any other circumstances he could have leaned forward and given her a kiss. A perfect example of the sort of distraction he needed.

‘Come to think of it, though …’ She glanced up and down his crumpled clothes. How could she ever have thought he reminded her of Bobby? Bobby wouldn’t have been seen dead in crumpled clothes. He’d always been immaculate—Brad was an entirely different kettle of fish. ‘If you keep coming into my ward dressed like that, I’ll have to change your name from Funky to Skunky.’

Brad automatically sat backwards in his chair, lowering his chin and sniffing. ‘Why, do I smell? I was on call last night and I haven’t been in the shower yet.’ He started to pull at his scrub top.

She loved it. The expression of worry on his face. The way she could so easily wind him up. And the fact he had a good demeanour with the patients and staff. This guy might even be a little fun to have around. Even if he was from the other side of the world.

She shook her head. ‘Stop panicking, Brad. You don’t smell.’ She rested her head on her hands for a second, fixing him with her eyes. Mornings on the medical receiving unit were always chaotic.

Patients to be moved to other wards, new admissions and usually a huge battery of tests to be arranged. Sometimes it was nice just to take a few seconds of calm, before chaos erupted all around you.

He reached over and touched her hand, resting on top of the off-duty book. The invisible electric jolt that shot up her arm was instantaneous.

'I could help you with those. The last place I worked in Australia had a computer system for duty rosters.

You just put in the names, your shift patterns and the requests. It worked like a charm.'

Her eyes hadn't left where his hand was still touching hers. It was definitely lingering there. She'd just met this guy.

'You're going to be a pest, aren't you?' Her voice was low. For some reason she couldn't stop staring at him. It didn't help that he was easy on the eye. And that scraggy hair was kind of growing on her.

He leaned forward again. 'Is that going to be a problem?' His eyes were saying a thousand different words from his mouth. Something was in the air between them. She could practically feel the air around her crackle. This was ridiculous. She felt like a swooning teenager.

'My gran had a name for people like you.'

He moved even closer. 'And what was that?' He tilted his head to one side. 'Handsome? Clever? Smart?'

She shook her head and stood up, straightening her tunic. 'Oh, no. It was much more fitting. My gran would have called you a "wee scunner".'

His brow wrinkled. 'What on earth does that mean?'

'Just like I told you. A nuisance. A pest. But it's a much more accurate description.' She headed towards the duty room, with the off-duty book in her hand. She had to get away from him. Her brain had taken leave of her senses. She should have taken Lucy up on that offer of tea.

Brad caught her elbow. 'Actually, Cassidy, about your duty room …'

He stopped as she pushed the door open and automatically stepped inside, her foot catching on something.

'Wh-h-a-a-t?'

CHAPTER TWO

CASSIDY stared up at the white ceiling of her duty room, the wind knocked clean out of her. Something was sticking into her ribcage and she squirmed, causing an array of perilously perched cardboard boxes to topple over her head. She squealed again, batting her hands in front of her face.

A strong pair of arms grabbed her wrists and yanked her upwards, standing her on the only visible bit of carpet in the room—right at the doorway.

Brad was squirming. 'Sorry about that, Cassidy. I was trying to warn you but …'

He stopped in mid-sentence. She looked mad. She looked *really* mad. Her chestnut curls were in complete disarray, falling over her face and hiding her angry eyes. 'What is all this rubbish?' she snapped.

Brad cleared his throat. 'Well, actually, it's not "rubbish", as you put it. It's mine.' He bent over and started pushing some files back into an overturned box. They were the last thing he wanted anyone to see.

Her face was growing redder by the second. She looked down at her empty hand—obviously wondering where the off-duty book she'd been holding had got to. She bent forward to look among the upturned boxes then straightened up, shaking her head in disgust.

She planted her hands on her hips. 'You'd better have a good explanation for this. No wonder you were giving me the treatment.'

'What treatment?'

She waved her hand in dismissal. 'You know. The smiles. The whispers. The big blue eyes.' She looked at him mockingly. 'You must take me for a right sap.'

All of a sudden Brad understood the Dragon Lady label. When she was mad, she was *mad*. Heaven help the doctor who messed up on her watch.

He leaned against the doorjamb. 'I wasn't giving you the *treatment*, as you put it, Cassidy. I was trying to connect with the sister of the ward I work in. We're going to have to work closely together, and I'd like it if we were friends.'

Her face softened ever so slightly. She looked at the towering piles of boxes obliterating her duty room. 'And all this?'

He shot her a smile. 'Yes, well, there's a story about all that.'

She ran her fingers through her hair, obviously attempting to re-tame it. He almost wished he could do it for her. 'Please don't tell me you've moved in.'

He laughed. 'No. It's not that desperate. I got caught short last night and was flung out of my flat, so I had to bring all my stuff here rather than leave it all sitting in the street.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'What do you mean, you got caught short? That sounds suspiciously like you were having a party at five in the morning and the landlord threw you out.'

Brad nodded slowly. 'Let's just say I broke one of the rules of my tenancy.'

'Which one?'

'Now, that would be telling.' He pulled a set of keys from his pocket with a brown tag attached. 'But help is at hand. I've got a new flat I can move into tonight—if I can find it.'

'What do you mean—if you can find it?' Cassidy bent over and read the squiggly writing on the tag.

Brad shrugged his shoulders. 'Dowangate Lane. I'm not entirely sure where it is. One of the porters put me onto it at short notice. I needed somewhere that was furnished and was available at short notice. He says its only five minutes away from here, but I don't recognise the street name.'

Cassidy gave him a suspicious look. 'I don't suppose anyone told you that I live near there.'

'Really? No, I'd no idea. Can you give me some directions?'

Cassidy sighed. ‘Sure. Go out the front of the hospital, take a left, walk a few hundred yards down the road, take a right, go halfway down the street and go down the nearby close. Dowangate Lane runs diagonally off it. But the street name fell off years ago.’

Cassidy had a far-away look in her eyes and was gesturing with her arms. Her voice got quicker and quicker as she spoke, her Scottish accent getting thicker by the second.

‘I have no idea what you just said.’

Cassidy stared at him—hard. ‘It would probably be easier if I just showed you.’

‘Really? Would you?’

‘If it means you’ll get all this rubbish out of my duty room, it will be worth it.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘Do you want my help or not?’

He bent forward and caught her gesturing arms. ‘I would love your help, Cassidy Rae. How does six o’clock sound?’ There it was again—that strawberry scent from her hair. That could become addictive.

She stopped talking. He could feel the little goose-bumps on her bare arms. Was she cold? Or was it something else?

Whatever it was, he was feeling it, too. Not some wild, throw-her-against-the-wall attraction, although he wouldn’t mind doing that. It was weird. Some kind of connection.

Maybe he wasn’t the only person looking for a Christmastime distraction.

She was staring at him with those big brown eyes again. Only a few seconds must have passed but it felt like minutes.

He could almost hear her thought processes. As if she was wondering what was happening between them, too.

‘Six o’clock will be fine,’ she said finally, as she lowered her eyes and brushed past him.

Brad hung his white coat up behind the door and pulled his shirt over his head. He paused midway. What was he going to do with it?

Cass stuck her head around the door. ‘Are you ready yet?’ Her eyes caught the tanned, taut abdomen and the words stuck in her throat. She felt the colour rush into her cheeks. ‘Oops, sorry.’ She pulled back from the door.

All of a sudden she felt like a teenager again. And trust him to have a set of to-die-for abs. Typical. There was no way she was ever taking her clothes off in front of Mr Ripped Body.

Where had that come from? Why on earth would she ever take her clothes off in front of him? That was it. She was clearly losing her marbles.

Almost automatically, she sucked in her stomach and looked downwards. Her pink jumper hid a multitude of sins, so why on earth was she bothering?

Brad’s hand rested on the edge of the door as he stuck his head back round. ‘Don’t be so silly, Cassidy. You’re a nurse. It’s not like you haven’t seen it all before. Come back in. I’ll be ready in a second.’

She swallowed the huge lump at the back of her throat. His shoulder was still bare. He was obviously used to stripping off in front of women and was completely uninhibited.

So why did that thought rankle her?

She took a deep breath and stepped back into the room, trying to avert her eyes without being obvious. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was embarrassed. With an attitude like his, she’d never live it down.

He was rummaging in a black holdall. Now she could see the muscles across his back. No love handles for him. He yanked a pale blue T-shirt from the bag and pulled it over his head, turning round and tugging it down over his washboard stomach.

‘Ready. Can we go?’

Cassidy had a strange expression on her face. Brad automatically looked down. Did he have a huge ketchup stain on his T-shirt? Not that he could see. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, matching the soft pink jumper she was wearing. A jumper that hugged the shape of her breasts very nicely. Pink was a good colour on her. It brought out the warm tones in her face and hair that had sometimes been lost in the navy-blue tunic she'd been wearing earlier. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a short ponytail, with a few wayward curls escaping. She was obviously serious about helping him move. No fancy coats and stiletto heels for her. Which was just as well as there were around fifty boxes to lug over to his new flat.

'Will you manage to carry some of these boxes down to my car?'

'I'll do better than that.' She opened the door to reveal one of the porters' trolleys for transporting boxes of equipment around the hospital. The huge metal cage could probably take half of his boxes in one run.

'Genius. You might be even more useful than I thought.'

'See, I'm not just a pretty face,' she shot back, to his cheeky remark. 'You do realise this is going to cost you, don't you?' She pulled the cage towards the duty room, letting him stand in the doorway and toss out boxes that she piled up methodically.

'How much?' As he tossed one of the boxes, the cardboard flaps sprang open, spilling his boxers and socks all over the floor.

Cassidy couldn't resist. The colours of every imagination caught her eyes and she lifted up a pair with Elmo from *Sesame Street* emblazoned on the front. 'Yours?' she asked, allowing them to dangle from one finger.

He grabbed them. 'Stop it.' He started ramming them back into the box, before raising his eyebrows at her. 'I'll decide when you get to see my underwear.'

When. Not if. The thought catapulted through her brain as she tried to keep her mind on the job at hand. The boxes weren't neatly packed or taped shut. And the way he kept throwing them at her was ruining her precision stacking in the metal cage.

'Slow down,' she muttered. 'The more you irritate me, the more my price goes up. You're currently hovering around a large pizza or a sweet-and-sour chicken. Keep going like this and you'll owe me a beer as well.'

The cheeky grin appeared at her shoulder in an instant. 'You think I won't buy you a beer?' He stared at the neatly stacked boxes. 'Uh-oh. I sense a little obsessive behaviour. One of your staff warned me about wrecking the neatly packed boxes of gloves in the treatment room. I can see why.'

'Nothing wrong with being neat and tidy.' Cassidy straightened the last box. 'Okay, I think that's enough for now. We can take the rest downstairs on the second trip.'

Something flashed in front of his eyes. Something wicked. 'You think so?'

He waited while she nodded, then as quick as a flash he shoved her in the cage, clicking the door behind her and pushing the cage down the corridor.

Cassidy let out a squeal. For the second time today she was surrounded by piles of toppling boxes. 'Let me out!' She got to her knees in the cage as he stopped in front of the lifts and pushed the 'down' button.

His shoulders were shaking with laughter as he pulled a key from his pocket for the 'Supplies Only' lift and opened the door. 'What can I say? You bring out the wicked side in me. I couldn't resist wrecking your neat display.'

He pulled the cage into the lift and sprang the lock free, holding out his hands to steady her step. The lift started with a judder, and as she was in midstep—it sent her straight into his arms. 'Ow-w!

The lift was small. Even smaller with the large storage cage and two people crammed inside. And as Brad had pressed the ground-floor button as he'd pulled the cage inside, they were now trapped at the back of the lift together.

She was pressed against him. He could feel the ample swell of her breasts against his chest, her soft pink jumper tickling his skin. His hands had fallen naturally to her waist, one finger touching a little bit of soft flesh. Had she noticed?

Her curls were under his nose, but there was no way he was moving his hands to scratch the itch. She lifted her head, capturing him with her big brown eyes again.

This was crazy. This was madness.

This was someone he'd just met today. It didn't matter that he felt a pull towards her. It didn't matter that she'd offered to help him. It didn't matter that for some strange reason he liked to be close to her. It didn't matter that his eyes were currently fixed on her plump lips. He knew nothing about her.

Her reputation had preceded her. According to her colleagues she was a great nurse and a huge advocate for her patients, but her attention to detail and rulebook for the ward had become notorious.

More importantly, she knew nothing about him. She had no idea about his history, his family, his little girl out there in the world somewhere. She had no idea how the whole thing had come close to breaking him. And for some reason he didn't want to tell her.

He wanted this to be separate. A flirtation. A distraction. Something playful. With no consequences. Even if it only lasted a few weeks.

At least that would get him past Christmas.

'You can let me go now.' Her voice was quiet, her hands resting on his upper arms sending warm waves through his bare skin.

But for a second they just stood there. Unmoving.

The door pinged open and they turned their heads. His hands fell from her waist. She turned and automatically pushed the cage through the lift doors, and he fell into step next to her.

The tone and mood were broken.

'Are you sure you don't mind helping me with this? You could always just draw me a map.'

She stuck her elbow in his ribs. 'Stop trying to get out of buying me dinner. What number did you say the flat was? If I find out I've got to carry all these boxes up four flights of stairs I *won't* be happy.'

They crossed the car park and reached his car. She blinked. A Mini. For a guy that was over six feet tall.

'This is your car?'

'Do you like it?' He opened the front passenger door, moved the seat forward and started throwing boxes in the back. 'It's bigger than you think.'

'Why on earth didn't you just leave some stuff in the car?'

Brad shrugged. 'Luca borrowed my car last night after he helped me move my stuff. I think he had a date.' And some of his boxes were far too personal to be left unguarded in a car.

Cassidy shook her head and opened the boot, trying to cram as many of the boxes in there as possible. She was left with two of the larger ones still sitting on the ground.

She watched as he put the passenger seat back into place and shrugged her shoulders. 'I can just put these two on my lap. It's only a five-minute drive. It'll be fine.'

Brad pulled a face. 'You might need to put something else on your lap instead.'

She felt her stomach turn over. What now?

'Why do I get the distinct impression that nothing is straightforward with you?'

He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the porter's lodge at the hospital gate, leaving the two boxes next to his unlocked car. 'Come on.'

'Where on earth are we going?'

'I've got something else to pick up.'

He pushed open the door to the lodge. Usually used for deliveries and collections, occasionally used by the porters who were trying to duck out of sight for five minutes, it was an old-fashioned solid stone building. The front door squeaked loudly. 'Frank? Are you there?'

Frank Wallace appeared. All twenty-five stone of him, carrying a pile of white-and-black fur in his hands. ‘There you are, Dr Donovan. He’s been as good as gold. Not a bit of bother. Bring him back any time.’

Frank handed over the bundle of black and white, and it took a few seconds for Cassidy to realise the shaggy bundle was a dog with a bright red collar and lead.

Brad bent down and placed the dog on the floor at their feet. It seemed to spring to life, the head coming up sharply and a little tail wagging furiously. Bright black eyes and a pink panting tongue.

‘Cassidy, meet Bert. *This* is the reason I lost my tenancy.’

Cassidy watched in amazement. Bert seemed delighted to see him, jumping his paws up onto Brad’s shoulders and licking at his hands furiously. His gruff little barks reverberated around the stone cottage.

He was a scruffy little mutt—with no obvious lineage or pedigree. A mongrel, by the look of him.

‘Why on earth would you have a dog?’ she asked incredulously. ‘You live in Australia. You can’t possibly have brought him with you.’ Dogs she could deal with. It was cats that caused her allergies. She’d often thought about getting a pet for company—a friendly face to come home to. But long shifts weren’t conducive to having a pet. She knelt on the floor next to Brad, holding her hand out cautiously while Bert took a few seconds to sniff her, before licking her with the same enthusiasm he’d shown Brad.

‘I found him. A few weeks ago, in the street outside my flat. He looked emaciated and was crouched in a doorway. There was no way I could leave him alone.’ *And to be honest, I needed him as much as he needed me*. Brad let the scruffy dog lick his hands. Melody would love this little dog.

‘So what did you do?’

‘I took him to the emergency vet, who checked him over, gave me some instructions, then I took him home.’

‘And *this* is why you got flung out your flat?’ There was an instant feeling of relief. He hadn’t been thrown out for non-payment of rent, wild parties or dubious women. He’d been thrown out because of a dog. She glanced at his face as he continued to talk to Bert. The mutual admiration was obvious.

The rat. He must have known that a dog would have scored him brownie points. No wonder he’d kept it quiet earlier. She would have taken him for a soft touch.

She started to laugh. ‘Bert? You called your dog Bert?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘What’s wrong with Bert? It’s a perfectly good name.’

‘What’s wrong with Rocky or Buster or Duke?’

He waved his hand at her. ‘Look at him. Does he look like Rocky, Buster or Duke?’

He waited a few seconds, and Bert obligingly tipped his head to one side, as if he enjoyed the admiration.

Brad was decisive. ‘No way. He’s a Bert. No doubt about it.’

Cassidy couldn’t stop the laugh that had built up in her chest. Bert wasn’t a big dog and his white hair with black patches had definitely seen better days. But his soft eyes and panting tongue were cute. And Brad was right. He looked like a Bert—it suited him. She bent down and started rubbing his ears.

‘See—you like him. Everyone should. He’s a good dog. Not been a bit of bother since I found him.’

‘So how come you got flung out the flat? And what about the new one? I take it they’re happy for you to have a dog?’

Brad pulled a face. ‘One of my neighbours reported me for having a dog. And the landlord was swift and ruthless, even though you honestly wouldn’t have known he was there. And it was Frank, the porter, who put me onto the new flat. So I’m sorted. They’re happy for me to have a dog.’

Cassidy held out her arms to pick up the dog. 'I take it this is what I'm supposed to have on my lap in the car?'

Brad nodded. 'Thank goodness you like dogs. This could have all turned ugly.'

She shook her head, still rubbing Bert's ears. 'I'm sure it will be fine. But let's go. It's getting late and I'm starving.'

They headed back to the car and drove down the road past Glasgow University and into the west end of Glasgow. Lots of the younger hospital staff stayed in the flats around here. It wasn't really designed for kids and families, but for younger folks it was perfect, with the shops, restaurants and nightlife right at their fingertips.

'So what do you like best about staying around here?'

Cassidy glanced around about her as they drove along Byres Road. She pointed to the top of the road. 'If you go up there onto Western Road and cross the road, you get to Glasgow's Botanic Gardens. Peace, perfect peace.'

Brad looked at her in surprise. 'Really? That's a bit unusual for someone your age.'

'Why would you think that? Is it only pensioners and kids that can visit?' She gestured her thumb over her shoulder. 'Or if you go back that way, my other favourite is the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum—as long as the school trips aren't there! There's even a little secret church just around the corner with an ancient cemetery—perfect for quiet book reading in the summer. Gorgeous at Christmastime.'

Brad stared at her. 'You're a dark horse, aren't you? I never figured you for a museum type.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'It's the peace and quiet really. The ward can be pretty hectic. Some days when I come out I'm just looking for somewhere to chill. I can be just as happy curled up with a good book or in the dark at the cinema.'

'You go to the cinema alone?'

She nodded. 'All the time. I love sci-fi. My friends all love romcoms. So I do some with my friends and some on my own.' She pointed her arm in front of them. 'Turn left here, then turn right and slow down.'

The car pulled to a halt at the side of the road next to some bollards. Cassidy looked downwards. Bert had fallen asleep in her lap. 'Looks like it's been a big day for the little guy.'

Brad jumped out of and around the car and opened the passenger door. He picked up the sleeping dog. 'Let's go up and have a look at the flat before I start to unpack the boxes.'

'You haven't seen it yet?'

He shook his head. 'How could I? I was on call last night and just had to take whatever I could get. I told you I'd no idea where this place was.'

Cassidy smiled. 'So you did. Silly me. Now, give me the key and we'll see what you've got.'

They climbed up the stairs in the old-style tenement building, onto the first floor, where number five was in front of them. Cassidy looked around. 'Well, this is better than some flats I've seen around here.' She ran her hand along the wall. 'The walls have been painted, the floors are clean, and …' she pointed to the door across the hallway '… your neighbour has some plants outside his flat. This place must be okay.'

She turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Silently praying that she wouldn't be hit with the smell of cats, mould or dead bodies.

Brad flicked the light switch next to the door and stepped inside. He was trying to stop his gut from twisting. Getting a flat that accepted dogs at short notice—and five minutes away from the hospital—seemed almost too good to be true. There had to be a catch somewhere.

The catch was obvious. Cassidy burst into fits of laughter.

'No way! It's like stepping back in time. Have we just transported into the 1960s?' She turned to face him. 'That happened once in an old *Star Trek* episode. I think we're just reliving it.'

Brad was frozen. The wallpaper could set off a whole array of seizures. He couldn't even make out the individual colours, the purples and oranges all seemed to merge into one. As for the shag-pile brown carpet …

Cassidy was having the time of her life. She dashed through one of the open doors and let out a shriek. 'Avacado! It's avocado. You have an avocado bathroom! Does that colour even exist any more?' Seconds later he heard the sounds of running water before she appeared again, tears flowing down her cheeks. 'I love this place. You have to have a 1960s-style party.'

She ducked into another room then swept past him into the kitchen, while Brad tried to keep his breathing under control. Could he really live in this?

He set down the dog basket on the floor and placed the sleeping Bert inside. His quiet, peaceful dog would probably turn into a possessed, rabid monster in this place.

He sagged down onto the purple sofa that clashed hideously with the brown shag-pile carpet. No wonder this place had been available at a moment's notice.

He could hear banging and clattering from next door—Cassidy had obviously found the kitchen. He cringed. What colour was avocado anyway? He was too scared to look.

Cassidy reappeared, one of her hands dripping wet, both perched at her waist. 'Kitchen's not too bad.' She swept her eyes around the room again, the smile automatically reappearing on her face. She walked over and sat down on the sofa next to Brad, giving his knee a friendly tap. 'Well, it has to be said, this place is spotlessly clean. And the shower's working.' She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. 'And it smells as if the carpets have just been cleaned. See—it's not so bad.'

Not so bad. She had to be joking.

And she was. He could see her shoulders start to shake again. She lifted her hands to cover her face, obviously trying to block out the laughter. His stomach fell even further.

'What is it?'

He could tell she was trying not to meet his gaze. 'Go on. What else have you discovered in this psychedelic temple of doom?' He threw up his hands.

Cassidy stood up and grabbed his hand, pulling him towards her. For a second he was confused. What was she doing? Sure, this had crossed his mind, but what did she have in mind?

She pulled him towards the other room he hadn't looked at yet—the bedroom. Surely not? He felt a rush of blood to the head and rush of something else to the groin. This couldn't be happening.

She pushed open the door to the room, turning and giving him another smile. But the glint in her eyes was something else entirely. This was no moment of seduction. This was comedy, through and through.

He stepped inside the bedroom.

Pink. Everywhere and everything. Pink.

Rose-covered walls. A shiny, *satin* bedspread. Pink lampshades giving off a strange rose-coloured hue around the room. Pink carpet. Dark teak furniture and dressing table. He almost expected to see an eighty-year-old woman perched under the covers, staring at them.

Cassidy's laughter was building by the second. She couldn't contain herself. She spun round, her hands on his chest. 'Well, what do you think? How's this for a playboy palace?'

His reaction was instantaneous. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her with him, toppling onto the bed, the satin bedspread sliding them along. He couldn't help it. It was too much for him and for the next few minutes they laughed so hard his belly was aching.

They lay there for a few seconds after the laughter finally subsided. Brad's eyes were fixed on the ceiling, staring at yet another rose-coloured light shade.

He turned his head to face Cassidy's. 'So, tell me truthfully. Do you think this flat will affect my pulling power?'

Cassidy straightened her face, the laughter still apparent in her eyes. She wondered how to answer the question. Something squeezed deep inside her. She didn't want Brad to have pulling power.

She didn't want Brad to even consider pulling. What on earth was wrong with her? She'd only met this guy today. Her naughty streak came out. 'Put it this way. This is the first time I've lain on a bed with a man, panting like this, and still been fully dressed.'

His eyebrows arched and he flipped round onto his side to face her. 'Well, Sister Rae, that almost sounds like a challenge. And I like a challenge.'

Cassidy attempted to change position, the satin bedspread confounding her and causing her to slide to the floor with a heavy thud.

Brad stuck his head over the edge of the bed. 'Cass, are you okay?'

She held up her hand towards him and shook her head. 'Just feed me.'

Fifty boxes later and another trip back to the hospital, they both sagged on the sofa. Brad pulled a bunch of take-away menus from a plastic bag. 'I'd take you out for dinner but I don't think either of us could face sitting across a table right now.'

Cassidy nodded. She flicked through the menus, picking up her favourite. 'This pizza place is just around the corner and it's great. They don't take long to deliver. Will we go for this?'

'What's your favourite?'

'Thin crust. Hawaiian.'

'Pineapple—on a pizza? Sacrilege. Woman, what's wrong with you?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Don't tell me—you're a meat-feast, thick-crust man?'

He sat back, looking surprised. 'How did you know?'

'Because you're the same as ninety per cent of the other males on the planet. Let's just order two.' She picked up the phone, giving it a second glance. 'Wow, my parents had one of these in the seventies.' She listened for a dial tone. 'Never mind, it works.' She dialled the number and placed the order.

'So, what do you think of your new home? Will you still be talking to Frank in the morning?'

Brad sighed. 'I think I should be grateful, no matter how bad the décor is. I needed a furnished flat close by—it's not like I had any furniture to bring with me—so this will be fine.' He took another look around. 'You're right—it's clean. That's the most important thing.' Then he pointed to Bert in the corner. 'And if he's happy, I'm happy.' The wicked glint appeared in his eyes again. 'I can always buy a new bedspread—one that keeps the ladies on, instead of sliding them off.'

There it was again. That little twisting feeling in her gut whenever he cracked a joke about other women. For the first time in a lifetime she was feeling cave-woman primal urges. She wanted to shout, *Don't you dare!* But that would only reveal her to be a mad, crazy person, instead of the consummate professional she wanted him to think she was.

He rummaged around in a plastic bag at his feet. 'I'm afraid I can't offer you any fancy wine to drink. I've got orange or blackcurrant cordial.' He pulled the bottles from the bag. 'And I've got glasses in one of those boxes over there.'

Cassidy reached over and opened the box, grabbing two glasses and setting them on the table. 'So what's your story? What are you doing in Scotland?' *And why hasn't some woman snapped you up already?*

'You mean, what's a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?' He gestured at the psychedelic walls.

She shrugged. 'I just wondered why you'd left Australia. Do you have family there? A girlfriend?' She couldn't help it. She really, really wanted to know. She'd wanted to ask if he had a wife or children, but that had seemed a bit too forward. He wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and he hadn't mentioned any significant other. And he'd been flirting with her. Definitely flirting with her. And for the first time in ages she felt like responding.

'I fancied a change. It seemed like a good opportunity to expand my experience. Scottish winters are notorious for medical admissions, particularly around old mining communities.' He paused for a second and then added, 'And, no, there's no wife.' He prayed she hadn't noticed the hesitation. He

couldn't say the words 'no children'. He wouldn't lie about his daughter. But he just didn't want to go there right now. Not with someone he barely knew.

Cassidy nodded, sending silent prayers upwards for his last words, but fixed her expression, 'There's around two and half thousand extra deaths every winter. They can't directly link them to the cold. Only a few are from hypothermia, most are from pneumonia, heart disease or stroke. And last year was the worst. They estimated nine pensioners died every hour related to the effects of the cold. Fuel payments are through the roof right now. People just can't afford to heat their homes. Some of the cases we had last year broke my heart.'

Brad was watching her carefully. Her eyes were looking off into the distance—as if she didn't want him to notice the sheen across her eyes when she spoke. He wondered if she knew how she looked. Her soft curls shining in the dim flat light, most of them escaping from the ponytail band at the nape of her neck. It was clear this was a subject close to her heart—she knew her stuff, but as a sister on a medical receiving unit he would have expected her to.

What he hadn't expected was to see the compassion in her eyes. Her reputation was as an excellent clinician, with high standards and a strict rulebook for the staff on her ward. But this was a whole other side to her. A side he happened to like. A side he wanted to know more about.

'So, what's the story with you, then?'

She narrowed her eyes, as if startled he'd turned the question round on her. 'What do you mean?'

'What age are you, Cassidy? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?' He pointed to her left hand. 'Where's your other half? Here you are, on a Monday night at …' he looked at his watch '… nearly nine o'clock, helping an orphaned colleague move into his new flat. Don't you have someone to go to home to?'

Cassidy shifted uncomfortably. She didn't like being put on the spot. She didn't like the fact that in a few moments he'd stripped her bare. Nearly thirty, single and no one to go home to. Hardly an ad for Mrs Wonderful.

'I'm twenty-nine, and I was engaged a few years ago, but we split up and I'm happy on my own.' It sounded so simple when she put it like that. Leaving out the part about her not wanting to get out of bed for a month after Bobby had left. Or drinking herself into oblivion the month after that.

His eyebrows rose, his attention obviously grabbed. 'So, who was he?'

'My fiancé? He was a Spanish registrar I worked with.'

'Did you break up with him?'

The million-dollar question. The one that made you look sad and pathetic if you said no. Had she broken up with him? Or had Bobby just told her he was returning to Spain, with no real thought to how she would feel about it? And no real distress when she'd told him she wouldn't go with him.

Looking back she wondered if he'd always known she wouldn't go. And if being with her in Scotland had just been convenient for him—a distraction even.

She took a deep breath. 'What's with the questions, nosy parker? He wanted to go home to Spain. I wanted to stay in Scotland. End of story. We broke up. He's back working in Madrid now.' She made it sound so simple. She didn't tell him how much she hated coming home to an empty house and having nobody to share her day with. She didn't say how whenever she set her single place at the table she felt a little sad. She didn't tell him how much she hated buying convenience meals for one.

'Bet he's sorry he didn't stay.'

Cassidy's face broke into a rueful smile and she shook her head. 'Oh, I don't think so. He went home, had a whirlwind romance and a few months later married that year's Miss Spain. They've got a little son now.'

She didn't want to reveal how hurt she'd been by her rapid replacement.

He moved a little closer to her. 'Didn't that make you mad? He left and played happy families with someone else?'

Cassidy shook her head determinedly. She'd had a long time to think about all this. 'No. Not really. I could have been but we obviously weren't right for each other. When we got engaged he said he would stay in Scotland, but over time he changed his mind. His heart was in Spain.'

Her eyes fell downwards for a few seconds as she drew in a sharp breath, 'And I'd made it clear I didn't want to move away. I'm a Scottish girl through and through. I don't want to move.'

Brad placed his hand on her shoulder. 'But that seems a bit off. Spain's only a few hours away on a plane. What's the big deal?'

Cassidy looked cross. He made it all sound so simple. 'I like it here. I like it where I live. I don't want to move to …' she lifted her fingers in the air '… *sunnier climes*. I want to stay here …' she pointed her finger to the floor '… in Scotland, the country that I love. And I have priorities here—responsibilities—that I couldn't take care of in another country.' She folded her arms across her chest.

'So I made myself a rule. My next other half will be a big, handsome fellow Scot. Someone who wants to stay where I do. Not someone from the other side of the planet.'

The words hung between them. Almost as if she was drawing a line in the sand. Brad paused for a second, trying to stop himself from saying what he really thought. Should he say straight away that he would never stay in Scotland either? That he wanted his life to be wherever his daughter was—and he was prepared to up sticks and go at a moment's notice?

No. He couldn't. That would instantly kill this flirtation stone dead. And that's all this would ever be—a mild flirtation. Why on earth would what she'd just said bother him? He was merely looking for a distraction—nothing more. Something to take his mind off another Christmas without his daughter.

'Just because someone is from Scotland it doesn't mean they'll want to stay here. There have been lots of famous Scots explorers—David Livingstone, for example.' He moved forward, leaning in next to her. 'Anyway, that's a pretty big statement, Cassidy. You're ruling out ninety-nine per cent of the population of the world in your search for Mr Right. Hardly seems fair to the rest of us.' He shot her a cheeky grin. 'Some people might even call that a bit of prejudice.'

'Yeah, well, at least if I think about it this way, it saves any problems later on. I don't want to meet someone, hook up with them and fall in love, only to have my heart broken when they tell me their life's on the other side of the planet from me.' *Been there. Done that.* 'Why set myself up for a fall like that?'

'Why indeed?' He'd moved right next to her, his blue eyes fixed on hers. She was right. Cassidy wanted to stay in Scotland. Brad wanted to go wherever in the world his little girl was. A little girl he hadn't even told her about. Anything between them would be an absolute disaster. But somehow he couldn't stop the words forming on his lips.

'But what happens if your heart rules your head?' Because try as he may to think of her as a distraction, the attraction between them was real. And it had been a long time since he'd felt like this.

She could see every tiny line on his face from hours in the Australian sun, every laughter line around the corners of his eyes. His hand was still resting on her arm, and it was making her tingle. Everything about this was wrong.

She'd just spelled out all the reasons why this was so wrong. He was from Australia. The other side of the planet. He was the worst possible option for her. So why, in the space of a day, was he already getting under her skin? Why did she want to lean forward towards his lips? Why did she want to feel the muscles of his chest under the palms of her hands? He was so close right now she could feel his warm breath on her neck. It was sending shivers down her spine.

She didn't want this to be happening. She didn't want to be attracted to a man there was no future with. So why couldn't she stop this? Why couldn't she just pull away?

Ding-dong.

Both jumped backwards, startled by the noise of the bell ringing loudly. Even Bert awoke from his slumber and started barking.

Cassidy was still fixed by his eyes, the shiver continuing down her spine. A feeling of awakening. ‘Pizza,’ she whispered. ‘It must be the pizza.’

‘Saved by the bell,’ murmured Brad as he stood up to answer the door. At the last second he turned back to her. A tiny little part of him was feeling guilty—guilty about the attraction between them, guilty about not mentioning his daughter, and completely irritated by her disregard for most of the men in the world.

Her mobile sounded, and Cassidy fumbled in her bag. ‘Excuse me,’ she murmured, glancing at the number on the screen.

She stepped outside as he was paying for the pizzas and pressed the phone to her ear. ‘Hi, it’s Cassidy Rae. Is something wrong with my grandmother?’

‘Hi, Cassidy. It’s Staff Nurse Hughes here. Sorry to call, but your gran’s really agitated tonight.’

Cassidy sighed. ‘What do you need me to do?’ This was happening more and more. Her good-natured, placid gran was being taken over by Alzheimer’s disease, at times becoming confused and agitated, leading to outbursts of aggression that were totally at odds with her normal nature. The one thing that seemed to calm her down was hearing Cassidy’s voice—whether over the phone or in person.

‘Can you talk to her for a few minutes? I’ll hold the phone next to her.

‘Of course I will.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Hi, Gran, it’s Cassidy. How are you feeling?’ Her words didn’t matter. It was the sound and tone of her voice that was important. So she kept talking, telling her gran about her day and her plans for the week.

And leaving out the thoughts about the new doctor that were currently dancing around in her brain.

Brad sat waiting patiently. What was she doing? Who was she talking to outside in that low, calm voice? And why couldn’t she have taken the call in here?

More importantly, what was *he* doing?

Getting involved with someone he worked with hadn’t worked out too great for him the last time. He’d had a few casual dates in the last year with work colleagues, but nothing serious. He really didn’t want to go down that road again.

So what on earth was wrong with him? His attraction to this woman had totally knocked him sideways. Alison had been nothing like this. A few weeks together had proved they weren’t compatible. And the pregnancy had taken them both by surprise. And although his thoughts had constantly been with his daughter, this was the first time that a woman had started to invade his mind.

His brain wasn’t working properly, but his libido was firing on multiple cylinders. Which one would win the battle?

CHAPTER THREE

11 October

CASSIDY'S fingers hammered on the keyboard, responding to yet another bureaucratic email.

'What's up, girl?' As if by magic, Brad was leaning across the desk towards her. 'You've got that ugly frown on your face again. That usually spells trouble for the rest of us.'

Cassidy smiled. For the last ten days, every time she'd turned around he'd been at her elbow. His mood was generally laid-back and carefree, though a couple of times she'd thought he was going to steer a conversation toward something more serious. She turned the computer monitor towards him. 'Look at this. According to "customer care" principles, we've got to answer the ward phone on the third ring.'

'Since when did our patients become "customers"?'

'Oh, don't get me started. I just replied, pointing out that patients are our first priority on the medical unit and I won't be leaving a patient's bedside to answer the phone in three rings.'

'Are you still short-staffed?' Brad looked around the ward, noting the figures on the ward and trying to work out if everyone was there.

Cassidy pointed to the board. 'There were seven staff sick last week, but they should all be back on duty either today or tomorrow.' Her frown reappeared. 'Why, what are you about to tell me?'

Brad walked around to her side of the desk and wheeled her chair towards him. 'I was going to invite you to breakfast. It's Saturday morning, the ward's pretty quiet, so it seemed like a good time.' He pulled a face. 'Plus, those five empty beds you've got are about to be filled. I've got five patients coming into A and E via the GP on-call service who will all need to be admitted.'

Cassidy stood up. 'So what's this, the calm before the storm?'

'Something like that. Come on.' He stuck his elbow out towards her. 'You'll probably not get time for lunch later.'

Cassidy handed over the keys to one of her staff nurses and headed down to the canteen with Brad.

There was something nice about this. The easy way they'd fallen into a friendship. She'd mentioned her front door was jamming and he'd appeared around at her flat to fix it. Then they'd walked to the Botanic Gardens a few times on days off and taken Bert out in the evenings. Even though they were tiptoeing around the edges of friendship, there was still that simmering 'something' underneath.

'I see you actually managed to put some clothes on today.' She ran her eyes up and down his lean frame, taking in his trousers and casual polo shirt. 'I was beginning to wonder if you actually owned any clothes.'

They'd reached the canteen and Brad picked up a tray. 'It's a deliberate ploy. If I live my life in scrubs then the hospital does my laundry for me. And I haven't got my washing machine yet.'

Cassidy nodded. 'Ah … the truth comes out.' She walked over to the hot food and lifted a plate. 'Why didn't you just say? You could have used my washing machine.'

'You'd do my washing for me?'

Cassidy shuddered. 'No. I said you could *use* my washing machine. I didn't say *I* would do it for you. Anyway, that's one of my rules.'

He watched as she selected a roll, put something inside and picked up a sachet of ketchup.

'What do you mean—one of your rules?'

She lifted a mug and pressed the button for tea. 'I have rules. Rules for the ward, rules for life, rules for men and rules for Christmas.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Okay, now you've intrigued me. Either that, or you're a total crank—which is a distinct possibility.' He picked up his coffee. 'So, I'm interested. I know about the rules for the ward but tell me about these rules for men.'

She handed over her money to the cashier and sat down at a nearby table. 'They're simple. No overseas men.'

'Yeah, yeah. I've heard that one. And I'm not impressed. What else?'

'No washing. No ironing. No picking up after them. I'm not their mother. Do it a few times and they start to expect it. I get annoyed, then I start picturing them as Jabba the Hut, the fat, lazy monster from *Star Wars*, and yadda, yadda, yadda.' She waved her hand in the air.

'I was right. You *are* a crank.' He prodded her roll. 'And what is that? Everyone around here seems to eat it and I've no idea what it is.'

'It's slice.'

'Slice? A slice of what?'

'No. That's what it's called—slice. It's square sausage.

A Scottish delicacy.'

'That's not a sausage. That looks nothing like a sausage.'

'Well, it is. Want to try a bit?' She held up her roll towards him.

He shook his head. 'That doesn't look too healthy. Apart from the pizza the first night I met you, you seem to spend your life eating salads or apples. I've never even seen you eat the sweets on the ward.'

'But this is different. This is Saturday morning. This is the bad-girl breakfast.' She had a twinkle in her eye as she said it.

Brad moved closer, his eggs abandoned. 'Should I keep a note of this for future reference?'

There it was again—that weird little hum that seemed to hang in the air between them. Making the rest of the room fall silent and fade away into the background. Making the seconds that they held each other's gaze seem like for ever.

But he kind of liked that. He kind of liked the fact that she didn't seem to be able to pull her gaze away any more than he could. He kind of liked the fact that once he was in the vicinity of Cassidy, his brain didn't seem to be able to focus on anything else. And from right here he could study the different shades of brown in her eyes—some chocolate, some caramel, some that matched her chestnut hair perfectly.

Whoa! Since when had he, Brad Donovan, ever thought about the different shades of colour in a woman's eyes? Not once. Not ever. Until now. Where had his brain found the words 'chocolate', 'caramel' and 'chestnut'?

'Maybe you should.' The words startled him. There it was again, something in the air. The way at times her voice seemed deeper, huskier, as if she was having the same sort of thoughts that he was.

But what did she think about all this? Was he merely a distraction? After all, she didn't want a man from the other side of the world; she wanted a Scotsman. And he clearly wasn't that. So why was she even flirting with him?

But now her eyes were cast downwards, breaking his train of thought. There was a slight flush in her cheeks. Was she embarrassed? Cassidy didn't seem the bashful type. Maybe she was having the same trouble he was—trying to make sense of the thoughts that seemed to appear as soon as they were together.

He didn't like silence between them. It seemed awkward, unnatural for two people who seemed to fit so well together.

He picked up his fork and started eating his eggs. 'So, tell me about the Christmas rules?'

Cassidy sat back in her chair, a huge smile appearing on her face in an instant. Her eyes went up towards the ceiling. 'Ah, Christmas, best time of year. I love it, absolutely love it.' She counted on her fingers. 'There are lots of rules for Christmas. You need to have a proper advent calendar, not

the rubbish chocolate kind. You need the old-fashioned kind with little doors that open to pictures of mistletoe and holly, sleighs, presents and reindeer. Then your Christmas tree needs to go up on the first of December.' She pointed her finger at him. 'Not on the twelfth or Christmas Eve, like some people do. You need to get into the spirit of things.'

'Should I be writing all this down?'

'Don't be sarcastic. Then there's the presents. You don't put them under the tree. That's a disaster. You bring them out on Christmas Eve.'

Brad was starting to laugh now. The enthusiasm in her face was brimming over, but she was deadly serious. 'Cassidy, do you still believe in Santa Claus?'

She sighed. 'Don't tell me you're a Christmas Grinch. There's no room for them in my ward.'

The Christmas Grinch. Actually, for the last few years, it would have been the perfect name for him. It was hard to get into the spirit of Christmas when you didn't know where your little girl was. Whether she was safe. Whether she was well. Whether she was happy. Cassidy did look literally like a child at Christmas. This was obviously her thing.

He tried to push the other thoughts from his mind. He was trying to be positive. This year he wasn't going to fall into the black hole he'd found himself in last year, dragged down by the parts of his life he couldn't control.

'Any other Christmas rules you need to tell me?'

'Well, there's all the fun stuff. Like trying to spot the first Christmas tree someone puts up in their window. I usually like to try and count them as I walk home from work every day. Then trying to guess who has got your name for the secret Santa at work. And the shops—I love the shops at Christmas. The big department store on Buchanan Street has the most gorgeous tree and decorations. They'll be up in a few weeks. You have to go and see them. And there will be ice skating in George Square. We have to go to that!'

'But it's still only October. We haven't had Hallowe'en yet.' Brad took a deep breath. He had an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach.

'We celebrate Christmas in Australia, too, you know. It might be a little different, but it's every bit as good as it sounds here. Where I live in Perth, everyone has Christmas lights on their houses. We have a huge Christmas tree in Forrest Place that gets turned on every November. Okay—maybe the temperature is around forty degrees and we might spend part of the day on the beach. But it's still a fabulous time. I'm gutted I won't be there this year.'

He was pushing his Christmas memories aside, and curiosity was curling at the bottom of his stomach. Little pieces of the puzzle that was Cassidy Rae were clicking into place. 'Have you ever celebrated Christmas anywhere else?'

Cassidy shook her head fiercely. 'I couldn't for a minute imagine being anywhere other than here at Christmas. Sometimes it even snows on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Then it's really magical.'

Brad frowned. 'Didn't you even celebrate Christmas in Spain with your fiancé?'

Cassidy looked at him as if he had horns on his head. 'Absolutely not.'

He folded his arms across his chest. 'Surely it doesn't matter where you celebrate Christmas—it's about who you celebrate with. It's the people, Cass, not the place.' He willed his voice not to break as he said the words. She would have no idea how much all this hurt him.

Cassidy was still shaking her head, and Brad had the distinct feeling he'd just tiptoed around the heart of the matter. She didn't want to move. She didn't want to leave. She wouldn't even consider moving anywhere else.

In some circumstances it might seem fine, patriotic even. But it irritated Brad more than he wanted to admit. How could Cass be so closed-minded? Was this really why she wouldn't even consider a relationship with him? Not that he'd asked her. But every day they were growing closer and closer.

Why hadn't he told her about Melody yet? The most important person in his life and he hadn't even mentioned her existence. He'd heard from his lawyer yesterday. Still no news. Still no sign. America was a big place. They were searching every state to see if Alison had registered as a doctor, though by now she could be married and working under a different name. If that was the case, they might never find her. And that thought made him feel physically sick.

His brain was almost trying to be rational now. Trying to figure out why Alison hadn't contacted him.

He was a good father—committed to Melody and her upbringing. He'd wanted a say in everything and that had kind of spooked Alison, who liked to be in control. And if she'd really met someone and fallen in love, he could almost figure out why she'd done things this way.

If she'd told him she wanted to move to the US, there would have been a huge custody battle. But to steal his daughter away and let eighteen months pass with no contact? That, he couldn't understand —no matter what.

He almost wanted to shout at Cassidy, *It's the people, Cass—always the people*. He couldn't care less where he was in this world, as long as he was near his daughter.

His mind flickered back to the four tightly packed boxes stuffed in the bottom of the wardrobe in his bedroom. Eighteen months of his life, with a private investigator in Australia and one in the US. Eighteen months when almost all his salary had gone on paying their fees and jumping out of his skin every time the phone rang.

No one could keep living like that. Not even him. It destroyed your physical and mental health. So he'd tried to take a step back, get some normality back into his life. He was still looking for his daughter and still had a private investigator in the US. But now he didn't require a daily update —an email once a week was enough. And the PI was under strict instructions to phone only in an emergency.

He looked at the woman across the table. He still couldn't get to the bottom of Cassidy Rae. She'd received another one of those phone calls the other day and had ducked out the ward, talking in a low, calm voice.

What on earth was going on?

Cassidy stared across the table. Maybe she'd gone a little overboard with the Christmas stuff. She always seemed to get carried away when the subject came up. It looked as if a shadow had passed across Brad's eyes. Something strange. Something she didn't recognise. Was it disappointment? She drew her breath in, leaving a tight feeling in her chest. She didn't like this.

But she didn't know him that well yet. She didn't feel as if she could share that it was just her and her gran left. And she wanted to hold on to what little family she had left. Of course Christmas was about people—even if they didn't know you were there.

She reached across the table and touched his hand. Every single time she touched him it felt like this. A tingle. Hairs standing on end. Delicious feelings creeping down her spine. The warmth of his hand was spreading through her.

He looked up and gave her a rueful smile, a little sad maybe but still a smile.

'Let's talk about something else. Like Hallowe'en. We usually have a party for the staff on the ward. I had it in my flat last year, but I think yours would be the perfect venue this time.'

Brad's smile widened. He looked relieved by the change of subject. 'I guess a Hallowe'en party wouldn't be out of the question in the House of Horrors.'

'It's not a House of Horrors. Why don't we just tell people we've got a theme for the year? It could be Hallowe'en-slash-fancy-dress, 1960s-style?'

He nodded slowly. 'I suppose we could do that. Are you going to help me with the planning?'

'Of course.' Cassidy stood up and picked up her plate and mug, 'Come on, it's time to go back upstairs. We can talk about it as we go.'

He watched her retreating back and curvy behind. One thing was crystal clear. This woman was going to drive him crazy.

30 October

Brad opened the door as yet another party reveller arrived. Bert had retreated to his basket, now in Brad's pink bedroom, in sheer horror at the number of people in the small flat. It seemed that inviting the 'medical receiving unit' to a party also included anyone who worked there, used to work there or had once thought about working there.

It also included anyone who'd ever passed through or seen the sign for the unit.

'Love the outfit!' one of the junior doctors shouted at Brad. He looked down. Cassidy had persuaded him to go all out, and his outfit certainly reflected that. The room was filled with kipper ties, psychedelic swirls, paisley patterns, and mini-skirts and beehives. For the men, stick-on beards seemed to be the most popular choice, with lots of them now sticking to arms, foreheads and chests.

Brad pushed through the crowd to the kitchen, finding an empty glass and getting some water. It was freezing outside, but inside the flat he almost felt as if he were back in Perth. He'd turned the cast-iron radiators off, but the place was still steaming, even with the windows prised open to let the cold air circulate.

He felt someone press at his back. 'Sorry, it's a bit of a squash in here.' He recognised the voice instantly.

'Where have you been? Wow!' Cassidy had helped him carry all the food and drink for the party up to the flat. Then she'd disappeared to get changed. His eyes took in her short red *Star Trek* dress, complete with black knee-high boots and gold communicator pinned to her chest. She pressed the button. *'How many to beam aboard?'*

'You didn't tell me we were doing TV. Not fair. How come you get to look smart and sexy and I get to look like some flea-bitten wino?'

She laughed and moved forward. 'I'm still in the sixties. The first episode of *Star Trek* was screened in 1966. I'm in perfect time.'

Someone pressed past her and she struggled to keep her glass of wine straight, moving so close to Brad that their entire bodies were touching. Her eyes tilted upwards towards him. 'I kind of like your too-tight shirt and shaggy wig. It suits you in a funny way.'

'Well, that outfit definitely suits you. But I feel as if you've fitted me up. I bet you had that sexy fancy-dress outfit stashed somewhere and were just looking for an excuse to give it an outing.' His broad chest could feel her warm curves pushing against him.

'You think I look sexy?' Her voice was low again and husky. Her words only heard by him. Someone else pushed past and she moved even closer in the tiny kitchen. *'How many to beam aboard?'*

They jumped. Startled by the noise. Brad grabbed her hand and pulled her through the door, past the people in the sitting room dancing to Tom Jones and the Beatles, and into the pink bedroom, pushing the door closed behind them.

Cassidy let out a little gasp. The pink shiny bedspread was gone, replaced by a plain cotton cream cover and pillowcases. But the dark pink lampshades hadn't been replaced, leaving a pink glow around the room. 'Too many people falling off your bed?'

He pulled the wig from his head, revealing his hair sticking up in all directions. 'Now, why would you think that?' There was a smile on his face as he stepped closer, pushing her against the door. His eyes were fixed on hers. His hand ran up her body, from the top of her boot, touching the bare skin on her legs, past the edge of her dress to her waist.

'Why would something like that even occur to you, Cass? Why would it even enter your mind? Because you keep telling me that we're friends. Just friends. You don't want anything more—not with someone like me, someone from Australia.' *Or someone with a missing child.*

Cassidy's heart was thudding against the inside of her chest. From the second he'd closed the door behind them she'd been picturing this in her head. No. Not true. From the first day that she'd

met him she'd been picturing this in her head. It had taken her two glasses of wine to have the courage to come back to his flat tonight.

The tension had built in the last few weeks. Every lingering glance. Every fleeting touch sending sparks fluttering between them. It didn't matter how much her brain kept telling her he was the wrong fit. Her body didn't know that. And it craved his touch.

This wasn't meant to be serious. Serious had been the last thing on her mind—particularly with a man from overseas. But even though she tried to push the thoughts aside, Brad was rapidly becoming more than just a friend. She loved the sexual undercurrent between them, and the truth was she wanted to act on it. Now.

She leaned forward, just a little. Just enough to push her breasts even closer to him. If he looked down, all he would be able to see now was cleavage. *'How many to beam aboard?'* The noise startled both of them, but Brad only pulled her closer. She reached up and pulled the communicator badge from her dress, tossing it onto the bed behind them. 'I hate it when the costume takes away from the main event.'

She could see the surprise in his eyes. He'd expected a fight. He'd expected her to give him a reason why he shouldn't be having the same thoughts she was.

She smiled, her hand reaching out and resting on his waist. 'Sometimes my body sends me different messages from my brain.'

Brad lifted a finger, running it down the side of her cheek. The lightest touch. Her response was immediate. Her face turned towards his hand, and his fingers caught the back of her head, intertwining with her hair. She leaned back into his touch, letting out a little sigh. Her eyes were closed, and she could feel his stubble scraping her chin, his warm breath near her ear. 'And which message are you listening to?' he whispered as his other hand slid under her dress.

'Which one do you think?'

She caught his head in her hands and pulled his lips towards hers. This was what she'd been waiting for.

His lips touched hers hungrily, parting quickly, his tongue pushing against hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

This was it. Stars were going off in her head. If he didn't keep doing this she would explode. Because everything about this felt right. And it was just a kiss—right? Where was the harm in that?

'I've waited a whole month to kiss you,' he whispered in her ear.

'Then I've only got one thing to say—don't stop.'

CHAPTER FOUR

2 November

'WHAT are you doing here?'

It was three o'clock in the morning, and the voice should have startled her, but it didn't; it washed over her like warm treacle.

She turned her head in the darkened room where she was checking a patient's obs, an automatic smile appearing on her face. 'I got called in at eleven o'clock. Two of the night-shift staff had to go home sick, and it was too late to call in any agency staff.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Sickness bug again. What are you doing here? I thought Franco was on call.'

Brad rolled his tired eyes. 'Snap. Sickness bug, Franco phoned me half an hour ago with his head stuck down a toilet.'

Cassidy nodded. 'Figures. This bug seems to hit people really quickly. Loads of the staff are down with it. Let's just hope we manage to avoid it.' She finished recording the obs in the patients chart and started walking towards the door. Brad's arm rested lightly on her waist, and although she wanted to welcome the feel of his touch, it just didn't seem right.

'No touching at work,' she whispered.

His eyes swept up and down the dimly lit corridor. 'Even when there's no one about? Where's the fun in that?' His eyes were twinkling again, and it was doing untold damage to her flip-flopping stomach. She stopped walking and leaned against the wall.

'It's like this, Dr Donovan.' She moved her arm in a circular motion. 'I'm the master of all you can survey right now, and it wouldn't do to be caught in a compromising position with one of the doctors. That would give the hospital gossips enough ammunition for the rest of the year.' She looked down the corridor again, straightening herself up, her breasts brushing against his chest.

'I may well be the only nurse on duty in this ward right now, but I've got a reputation to maintain.' She tapped her finger on his chest. 'No matter how much men of a dubious nature try to waylay me.'

Brad kept his hands lightly resting on her waist. 'Hmm, I'm liking three o'clock in the morning, Cassidy Rae. It sounds as if there might be a bit of a bad girl in there.' He had that look in his eye again —the one he'd had when he'd finally stopped kissing her a few nights ago. The one that suggested a thousand other things they could be doing if they weren't in the wrong place at the wrong time. 'We really need to improve our timing.'

He was grinning at her now. The tiny hairs on her arms were starting to stand on end. This man was infectious. Much more dangerous than any sickness bug currently sweeping the ward.

She could feel the pressure rising in her chest. How easy would it be right now for them to kiss? And how much did she want to? But it went against all her principles for conduct and professional behaviour. So why did they currently feel as if they were flying out the window?

No matter how she tried to prevent it, this man had got totally under her skin. She was falling for him hook, line and sinker. No matter how much her brain told her not to.

She tried to break the tension between them. 'What do you want, anyway? I didn't page you. Shouldn't you be in bed?' The irony of the words hit her as soon as they left her mouth, her cheeks automatically flushing. Brad and bed. Two words that should never be together in a sentence. The images had haunted her dreams for the last few nights. And she had a very *active* imagination.

His fingers tugged her just a little closer so he could whisper in her ear. 'Bed is exactly where I'm planning on being. But not here. And not alone.'

Cassidy felt her blush intensify. Was she going to deny what had been on her mind? She wasn't normally shy around men. But something about Brad was different. Something was making her cautious.

And she wasn't sure what it was. She couldn't quite put her finger on it yet. But as long as she had the slightest inclination what it was, she didn't want to lose her heart to this guy. No matter how irresistible he was.

'I've got two patients coming up. Two young guys who've—what is it you call it here?—been out on the lash?'

Cassidy laughed and nodded at his phrasing. He really was trying to embrace the Scottish words and phrases around him. She raised her eyebrows, 'Or you could call them *blootered*.'

Brad shook his head. 'I think you all deliberately wait until I'm around and start using all these words to confuse me.' He looked out the window into the night at the pouring rain. 'One of the other nurses down in A and E called the two young guys *drookit* and *mauchit*. I have no idea what she was talking about.'

Cassidy laughed even harder. 'Look outside, that will give you a clue. *Drookit* is absolutely soaking. *Mauchit* means really dirty. I take it the guys were found lying on the street?'

Brad nodded. 'I'm getting the hang of this, though. It's …' he lifted his fingers in the air '… going like a fair down there.'

She laughed. 'See—you're learning. Bet you hadn't heard that expression before you came to Scotland.' Her brow wrinkled. 'Hang on, where is it going like a fair? In A and E?'

'The short-stay ward is full already. That's why you're getting these two. They'll need Glasgow coma scale obs done. Are you okay with that?'

Cassidy smiled. 'Of course I am. We're used to getting some minor head injuries on the ward on a Saturday night.' She walked over to the filing cabinet and pulled out the printed sheets, attaching them to two clipboards for the bottom of the beds. She turned to face him. 'You know a group of doctors at one of the local hospitals invented this over thirty years ago.' She waved the chart at him. 'Now it's used the whole world over. One of the doctors is still there. He's a professor now.'

Brad raised his eyebrows. 'Aren't you just the little fund of information at three in the morning?' He looked around again. 'Haven't you got some help? I'm not happy about you being here alone with two drunks.

There's no telling how they'll react when they finally come round.'

Cassidy pointed to a figure coming down the corridor. 'Claire, the nursing auxiliary, is on duty with me. She was just away for a break. And if I need help from another staff nurse, I can call through to next door.'

She turned her head as she heard the lift doors opening and the first of the trolleys being pulled towards the ward. 'Here they come.' She scooted into the nearby six-bedded ward and pulled the curtains around one of the beds.

Five minutes later a very young, very drunk man was positioned in the bed, wearing a pair of hospital-issue granddad pyjamas. Cassidy wrinkled her nose at the vapours emanating from him. 'Phew! He smells like a brewery. I could get anaesthetised by these fumes.' She spent a few moments checking his blood pressure and pulse, checking his limb movements and trying to elicit a verbal and motor response from him. Finally she drew her pen torch from her pocket and checked his pupil reactions.

She shook her head as she marked the observations on the chart. 'At least his pupils are equal and reactive. He's reacting to pain, but apart from that he's completely out of it.' She checked the notes from A and E. 'Any idea of a next of kin?'

Brad shook his head. 'Neither of the guys had wallets on them. This one had a student card in his pocket but that was it.'

He raised his head as the rattle of the second trolley sounded simultaneously to his pager going off. He glanced downwards at the number. 'It's A and E again. Are you sure you're okay?'

Claire had joined her at the side of the bed. 'We'll be fine, but just remember, there are no beds left up here.'

Brad nodded. ‘I’ll try to come back up later,’ he said as he walked down the corridor towards the lift.

Cassidy spent the next hour doing neurological observations on the two patients every fifteen minutes. Both of them started to respond a little better, even if it was belligerently. It was four o’clock in the morning now—that horrible time of night for the night shift where the need to sleep seemed to smack them straight in the head. Her eyes were beginning to droop even as she walked the length of the corridor to check on her patients. Sitting down right now would be lethal—she had to keep on the move to stay awake.

A monitor started pinging in one of the nearby rooms. ‘I’ll get it,’ she shouted to Claire. ‘The leads have probably detached again.’

She walked into the room of Mr Fletcher, a man in his sixties admitted with angina. Every time he’d turned over in his sleep tonight, one of the leads attached to his chest had moved out of place.

Cassidy flicked on the light, ready to silence the alarms on the monitor. But Mr Fletcher’s leads were intact. His skin was white and drawn, his lips blue and his body rigid on the bed. The monitor showed a rapid, flickering electrical line. Ventricular fibrillation. His heart wasn’t beating properly at all. Even though the monitor told her what she needed to know, she took a few seconds to check for a pulse and listen for breathing.

‘Claire!’ She pulled the red alarm on the wall, setting off the cardiac-arrest procedure as she released the brake on the bottom of the bed and pulled the bed out from the wall. She removed the headrest from the top of the bed and pulled out the pillows. Claire appeared at her side, pulling the cardiac-arrest trolley behind her. ‘I’ve put out the call.’ She was breathing heavily.

Cassidy took a deep breath. Brad was the senior doctor carrying the arrest page tonight. If he was still down in A and E, it would take him at least five minutes to get up here. Glasgow City Hospital was an old, sprawling building, with bits added on over time. It hadn’t been designed with emergencies in mind, like some of the modern, newly built hospitals were. The anaesthetist would probably take five minutes to get here, too.

It didn’t matter what the monitor said. Cassidy took a few seconds to do the old-fashioned assessment of the patient. Airway. Breathing. Circulation. No pulse. No breathing.

‘Start bagging,’ she instructed Claire, pointing her to the head of the bed and handing her an airway as she connected up the oxygen supply to the ambu-bag. She turned the dial on the defibrillator, slapping the pads on Mr Fletcher’s chest and giving it a few seconds to pick up and confirm his rhythm.

‘Stand clear,’ she shouted to Claire, waiting a few seconds to check she’d stood back then looking downwards to make sure she wasn’t touching the collapsed metal side rails. She pressed the button and Mr Fletcher’s back arched upwards as the jolt went through his body.

Her adrenaline had kicked in now. She didn’t feel sleepy or tired any more. She was wide awake and on alert, watching the monitor closely for a few seconds to see if the shock had made any impact on his heart rhythm. Nothing. Still VF.

The sound of feet thudded down the corridor as Brad appeared, closely followed by one of the anaesthetists. Brad’s eyes widened as he realised who the patient was. ‘VF,’ she said as they entered the room. ‘I’ve shocked him once at one hundred and twenty joules.’ Even though she had only been back on the ward for a month, she was on autopilot.

‘What happened?’ asked Brad. ‘He was pain free earlier and we had him scheduled for an angiogram tomorrow.’

‘Alarm sounded and I found him like this,’ she said. ‘He hadn’t complained of chest pain at all.’ She raised her knee on the bed and positioned her hands, starting the chest compressions. The anaesthetist took over from Claire and within a few seconds inserted an endotracheal tube. Cassidy continued the cycles of compressions as Brad pulled the pre-loaded syringes from the crash cart. After five cycles she stopped and their heads turned to the monitor again to check the rhythm.

'I'm giving him some epinephrine,' Brad said as he squirted it into the cannula in the back of Mr Fletcher's hand. 'Let's shock him again.' He lifted the defibrillator paddles. 'Stand clear, everyone. Shocking at two hundred joules.'

Everyone stood back as Mr Fletcher's body arched again. Cassidy went to resume the compressions. They continued for the next ten minutes with cycles of compressions, drugs and shocking. Cassidy's arms were starting to ache. It was amazing how quickly the strain of doing cardiac massage told on shoulders and arms.

'Stop!' shouted Brad. 'We've got a rhythm.' He waited a few seconds as he watched the green line on the monitor. 'Sinus bradycardia.'

He raised his eyes from the bed. 'Cassidy, go and tell Coronary Care we're transferring a patient to them.'

She ran next door to the coronary care unit, and one of their staff members came back through with her, propping the doors open for easy transfer. They wheeled the bed through to the unit and hooked Mr Fletcher up to the monitors in the specially designed rooms. In a matter of a few moments, he was safely installed next door.

Cassidy nodded at Brad as she left him there to continue Mr Fletcher's care. Claire gathered up his belongings and took them next door while Cassidy quickly transferred him on the computer system.

She took a deep breath and heaved a sigh of relief. The adrenaline was still flooding through her system, her arms ached and her back was sore.

Claire appeared with a cup of steaming tea, which she put on the desk in front of her. 'Okay, Cassidy? I nearly jumped out of my skin when that alarm sounded. He'd been fine all night.'

Cassidy nodded. 'I hate it when that happens. Thank goodness he was attached to a cardiac monitor. I dread to think what would have happened if he hadn't been.'

A loud groan sounded from the room opposite the nurses' station. Cassidy stood back up. 'No rest for the wicked. That will be one of our head-injury patients.'

Sure enough, one of the young men was starting to come round. Cassidy started checking his obs again, pulling her pen torch from her pocket to make sure his pupils were equal and reactive. His score had gradually started to improve as he could obey simple instructions and respond—albeit grudgingly. Hangovers didn't seem to agree with him.

She moved on to the patient next door, who still appeared to be sleeping it off. As she leaned over to check his pupils, his hand reached up and grabbed her tunic. 'Get me some water,' he growled, his breath reeking of alcohol and his eyes bloodshot.

Cassidy reacted instantly, pushing him backwards with her hands to get out of his grasp. 'Don't you dare put a hand on me,' she snarled.

'Cass.' The voice was instant, sounding behind her as Brad sidestepped around her, filling the gap between her and the patient.

The sunny surfer boy with cheerful demeanour was lost. 'Don't you dare touch my staff.' He was furious, leaning over the patient.

The drunken young man slumped back against the pillows, all energy expended. 'I need some water,' he mumbled.

Brad grabbed hold of Cassidy's hand and pulled her beyond the curtains. He ran his fingers through his hair. 'He still requires neuro obs, doesn't he?'

Cassidy nodded. 'That's the first time he's woken up. His neuro obs are scheduled to continue for the next few hours.'

Brad marched over to the phone and spoke for a few moments before putting it back down. 'I don't want you or Claire going in there on your own. Not while there's a chance he's still under the influence of alcohol and might behave inappropriately. Somebody from Security will be up in a few minutes and will stay for the rest of the shift.'

He walked into the kitchen and picked up a plastic jug and cup, running the tap to fill them with water. 'I'll take him these. You sit down.'

Cassidy didn't like anyone telling her what to do, especially in her ward. But for some reason she was quite glad that Brad had been around. It wasn't the first time a patient had manhandled her —and she was quite sure it wouldn't be the last. But there was something about it happening in the dead of night, when there weren't many other people around, that unsettled her.

And as much as she wanted to fly the flag for independence and being able to handle everything on her own, she was quite glad one of the security staff was coming up to the ward.

Brad appeared a moment later, walking behind her and putting his hands on her taut neck and shoulders. He automatically started kneading them with his warm hands. 'You okay, Cass?'

For a second she was still tense, wondering what Claire might think if she saw him touching her, but then relaxing at his touch. Her insides felt as tight as a coiled spring. What with the cardiac massage and the reaction of her patient, this was exactly what she needed. She leaned backwards a little into his touch.

'Right there,' she murmured as he hit a nerve. 'How's Mr Fletcher doing?'

Brad's voice was calm and soothing. 'He's in the right place. The staff in Coronary Care can monitor him more easily, his bradycardia stabilised with a little atropine and his blood pressure is good. We've contacted his family, and he'll be first on the list in the morning. He'll probably need a stent put in place to clear his blocked artery.'

'That's good. Mmm … keep going.'

'Your muscles are like coiled springs. Is this because of what just happened?'

She could hear the agitation in his voice.

'I hate people who react like that. How dare they when all we're trying to do is help them? He could have died out there, lying on the street with a head injury, getting battered by the elements. It makes my blood boil. If I hadn't come in when I did …' His voice tailed off then he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her neck—just for a second—brushing a light kiss on her cheek.

It was the briefest of contacts before he straightened up, reaching for the cup of tea Claire had made a few minutes earlier and setting it down on the desk in front of her. 'Drink this.' He folded his arms and sat down in the chair next to her, perching on the edge. 'I need to go back to Coronary Care. What are you doing on Sunday? Want to grab some lunch?'

Cassidy hesitated, her stomach plunging. She had plans on Sunday. Ones she wasn't sure about including Brad in. After all, he was just a fleeting moment in her life, a 'passing fancy', her gran would have said. She wasn't ready to introduce him to her family yet. Especially in her current circumstances.

But the hesitation wasn't lost on Brad. 'What's up? Meeting your other boyfriend?' he quipped.

Her head shook automatically. 'No, no.' Then a smile appeared. 'What do you mean, my *other boyfriend*? I wasn't aware I had a boyfriend right now.' Why did those words set her heart aflutter? This wasn't what she wanted. Not with a man from thousands of miles away. Not with someone who would leave in less than a year. So why couldn't she wipe the smile off her face?

He could see the smile. *Distraction*. Was that all that Cass was? What about how'd he had felt a few minutes ago when that drunk had touched her? The guy was lucky there hadn't been a baseball bat around. Cass was getting under his skin. In more ways than one. And it was time. Time to tell her about Melody.

It would be fine. He'd tell her on Sunday. She would understand. She would get it. He had other priorities. He wanted to find his daughter, and that could take him anywhere in the world. Cassidy would be fine about it. She didn't want a serious relationship with an Australian. She obviously didn't mind the flirtation and distraction. Maybe she wouldn't even mind a little more. Something more inevitable between them.

This wasn't anything serious—she would know that. But he just didn't want anyone else near her right now.

Brad stood back up. ‘Well, you do. So there.’ He planted another kiss firmly on her cheek. ‘And whatever you’re doing on Sunday, plan on me doing it with you.’ And with those words he strode down the corridor, whistling.

7 November

‘We seem to be making a habit of this.’ Brad smiled at Cassidy, his mouth half-hidden by the scarf wrapped around his neck, as she turned the key in the lock of the little terraced house in the East End of Glasgow.

His leather-gloved hand was at her waist and his body huddled against hers. It was freezing cold and the pavements already glistening with frost. Cassidy pushed the door open and stepped inside. ‘I’m afraid it’s not much warmer inside. Gran hasn’t lived here for over a year, and I have the heating on a timer at minimum to stop the pipes from freezing.’

Brad pushed the door shut behind him, closing out the biting wind. ‘I can’t believe how quickly the temperature’s dropped in the last few days. I’ve had to buy a coat, a hat and a scarf.’

Cassidy stepped right in front of him, her chestnut curls tickling his nose. ‘And very nice you look, too.’

He leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose, before rubbing his gloved hands together. ‘So what happens now?’

She led him into the main room of the house and pointed at some dark teak furniture. ‘The van should be here any time. It’s taking the chest of drawers and sideboard in here, the wardrobe in Gran’s bedroom and the refrigerator from the kitchen. The furniture goes to someone from the local homeless unit who’s just been rehoused.’

‘I take it there’s no chance your gran will ever come home.’

Cassidy shook her head fiercely, and he could see a sheen cross her eyes. ‘No. She fell and broke her arm last year. It was quite a bad break—she needed a pin inserted. She’s already suffered from Alzheimer’s for the past few years. I’d helped with some adaptations to her home and memory aids, but I guess I didn’t really understand how bad she was.’

Cassidy lifted her hands. ‘Here, in her own environment, she seemed to be coping, but once she broke her arm and ended up in hospital …’ Her voice trailed off and Brad wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

‘So where is she now? Was there no one else to help her? Where are your mum and dad?’

‘She’s in a nursing home just a few miles away. And it’s the second one. The first?’ She shuddered, ‘Don’t even ask. That’s why I agreed to the secondment. It meant I could spend a bit more time helping her get settled this time. Her mobility is good, but her memory is a different story—some days she doesn’t even know who I am. Other days she thinks I’m my mother. I can’t remember the last time she knew I was Cassidy. And now she’s started to get aggressive sometimes. It’s just not her at all. The only thing that helps is hearing my voice.’

The tears started to spill down her cheeks. ‘I know I’m a nurse and everything but I just hate it.’ Brad pulled his hand from his glove and wiped away her tears with his fingers.

He nodded slowly. So that’s what the telephone calls had been about. No wonder she’d wanted some privacy to take them. ‘So where’s your mum and dad? Can’t they help with your gran?’

Cassidy rolled her eyes. ‘My mum and dad are the total opposite of me. Sometimes I feel as if I’m the parent and they’re the children in this relationship. Last I heard, they were in Malaysia. They’re engineers, dealing with water-pumping stations and pipelines. They basically work all over the world and hardly spend any time back here.’

His brow furrowed. He was starting to understand Cassidy a little better. Her firm stance about staying in Scotland was obviously tied into feeling responsible for her gran. ‘So you don’t get much support?’

She shook her head.

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

Cassidy looked around her. The pain was written all over her face. ‘Everything in this house reminds me of Gran. I packed up her clothes last month and took them to the Age Concern shop.’ She walked over to a cardboard box in the corner of the room, filled with ornaments wrapped in paper, crinkling the tissue paper between her fingers. ‘This all seems so final.’

The knock at the door was sharp, startling them both. Ten minutes later almost all the heavy furniture had been loaded onto the van by two burly volunteers. ‘The last thing is in here.’ Cassidy led them into the bedroom and pointed at the wardrobe. She stood back as the two men tilted the wardrobe on its side to get it through the narrow door. There was a clunk and a strange sliding noise.

Brad jumped forward. ‘What was that? You emptied the wardrobe, didn’t you, Cassidy?’

She nodded. ‘I thought I had.’

He pulled open the uptilted wardrobe door and lifted up a black plastic-wrapped package that had fallen to the floor. ‘You must have missed this.’

Cassidy stepped towards him and peered inside the wardrobe. ‘I can’t imagine how. I emptied out all the clothes last month. I was sure I got everything.’ She turned the bulky package over in her hands. ‘I don’t know how I managed to miss this.’ She gave the men a nod, and they continued out the door towards the van.

Brad thanked the men and walked back through to the bedroom. Cassidy was sitting on the bed, pulling at the plastic wrapper. There was a tiny flash of red and she gave a little gasp.

‘Wow! I would never have expected this.’ She shook out the tightly wrapped red wool coat and another little bundle fell to the floor. Cassidy swung the coat in front of the mirror. The coat was 1940s-style, the colour much brighter than she would have expected, with black buttons and a nipped-in waist.

‘This coat is gorgeous. But I can’t *ever* remember Gran wearing it. I don’t even think I’ve seen a picture of her in it. Why on earth would she have it wrapped up at the back of her wardrobe? It looks brand new.’

Brad knelt on the floor and picked up the other package wrapped in brown paper. ‘This was in there, too. Maybe you should have a look at them?’

Cassidy nodded and then gave a little shiver.

‘Let’s go to the coffee shop at the bottom of the road. It’s too cold in here. We’ll take the coat with us,’ he said.

She headed through to the kitchen and pulled a plastic bag from under the sink, carefully folding the red coat and putting it inside. ‘This coat feels gorgeous.’ She held the edge of it up again, looking in the mirror at the door. ‘And I love the colour.’

‘Why don’t you wear it?’ Brad could see her pupils dilate, just for a second, as if she was considering the idea.

She shook her head. ‘No. No, I can’t. I don’t know anything about it. I don’t even know if it belonged to Gran.’

‘Well, I think it would look perfect on you, with your dark hair and brown eyes. Red’s a good colour for you. Did you inherit your colouring from your gran?’

Cassidy still had her fingers on the coat, touching it with a look of wistfulness in her eyes. ‘I think so. I’ve only ever seen a few photos of her when she was a young girl. She was much more glamorous than me.’

Brad opened the front door as the biting wind whirled around them. He grabbed her hand. ‘I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t we get a coffee to go and just head back to my flat? It’s freezing.’

Cassidy nodded as she pulled the door closed behind them and checked it was secure. They hurried over to the car and reached his flat ten minutes later, with coffee and cakes from the shop round the corner from him.

Although it was only four o’clock, the light had faded quickly and the street was already dark. ‘Look!’ screamed Cass. ‘It’s the first one!’

Brad dived to rescue the toppling coffee cups from her grasp. ‘What is it?’ His head flicked from side to side. ‘What on earth are you talking about?’

‘There!’ Her eyes were lit up and her smile reached from ear to ear. He followed Cassidy’s outstretched finger pointing to a flat positioned across the street above one of the shops. There, proudly displayed in the window, was a slightly bent, brightly lit-up Christmas tree.

‘You have got to be joking. It’s only the seventh of November. Why on earth would someone have their Christmas tree up?’

He couldn’t believe the expression of absolute glee on her face. She looked like a child that had spotted Santa. ‘Isn’t it gorgeous?’

And there it was. That horrible twisting feeling inside his stomach. The one he was absolutely determined to avoid this year. That same empty feeling that he felt every year when he spent the whole of the Christmas season thinking about what he’d lost, what had slipped through his fingers.

He felt the wind biting at his cheek. Almost like a cold slap. Just what he needed. This year was going to be different. He’d done everything he possibly could. It was time to try and get rid of this horrible empty feeling. He’d spent last Christmas in Australia, the one before that in the US, following up some useless leads as to Alison and Melody’s whereabouts.

This year would be different. That was part of the reason he’d come to Scotland. A country that had no bad memories for him. A chance to think of something new.

Cassidy’s big brown eyes blinked at him in the orange lamplight. She’d pulled a hat over her curls and it suited her perfectly. ‘I really want to put my tree up,’ she murmured. ‘But it’s just too early.’ She looked down at the bustling street. ‘Only some of the shops have their decorations up. I wish they all had.’

This was it. This was where it started. ‘Christmas means different things to different people, Cass. Not everyone loves Christmas, you know?’

He saw her flinch and pull back, confusion in her eyes. There was hesitation in her voice. ‘What do you mean? Is something wrong? Did something happen to you at Christmas?’

He hesitated. How could he tell her what was currently circulating in his mind? He wasn’t even sure he could put it into coherent words. Melody hadn’t disappeared at Christmas, but everything about the season and the time of year just seemed to amplify the feelings, make them stronger. Most importantly, it made the yearning to see his daughter almost consume him. He blinked. She was standing in the dimmed light, her big brown eyes staring up at him with a whole host of questions.

He should tell her about Melody, he really should. But now wasn’t the time or the place. A shiver crept down his spine as the cold Scottish winter crept through his clothes. A busy street filled with early festive shoppers wasn’t the place to talk about his missing daughter.

And no matter how this woman was currently sending electric pulses along his skin, he wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted to share. He wasn’t sure he was ready.

‘Brad?’ Her voice cut through his thoughts, jerking him back to the passing traffic and darkened night.

He bent forward and kissed the tip of her nose, sliding his arm around her shoulders. ‘Don’t be silly, Cass. Nothing happened to me at Christmas.’ He shrugged his shoulders as he pulled her towards him, guiding her down the street towards his flat. ‘I’m just mindful that lots of the people we see in the hospital over Christmas don’t have the happy stories to share that you do.’

She bit her lip, cradling the coffee cups and cakes in her arms as she matched his steps along the busy street. ‘I know that. I didn’t just materialise onto the medical unit from a planet far away. I’ve worked there a long time.’

But her words seemed lost as his steps lengthened and he pushed open the door to the close ahead of them.

Cassidy took off her bright blue parka and put it on the sofa. She'd seen something in his eyes. Almost as if a shadow had passed over them, and it had made her stomach coil. Was there something he wasn't telling her?

She pulled the coffee cups from their holder and opened the bag with the carrot cake inside. This was exactly what she needed right now. The sofa sagged next to her as Brad sat down. He was still rubbing his hands together.

'I can't believe how cold it is out there.'

She smiled at him. 'Get used to it—this is only the start. Last year it was minus twelve on Christmas Day. My next-door neighbour is a gas engineer and his phone was ringing constantly with people's boilers breaking down.' She picked up the cup and inhaled deeply. 'Mmm. Skinny caramel latte. My favourite in the world. I haven't had one of these in ages.' She took a tiny sip then reached for the moist carrot cake.

'So I take it the fact you have a *skinny* caramel latte counteracts the effects of the carrot cake?'

She winked at him. 'Exactly.' She raised her eyes skywards. 'Finally, a man on my wavelength. They cancel each other out. And it's a skinny caramel latte with sugar-free syrup. Which means I can enjoy this all the more.' She licked the frosting from the carrot cake off the tips of her fingers.

'With this …' she nibbled a bit from the corner. '… a girl could think she was in heaven.'

'I can think of lots of other ways to put a girl in heaven,' the voice next to her mumbled.

Cassidy froze. Her second sip of coffee was currently stuck in her throat. You couldn't get much more innuendo than that. Should she respond? Or pretend she hadn't heard?

There was no denying the attraction between them. But did she really want to act on it? After a month in his company, what did she really know about Brad Donovan? She could give testimony to his medical skills and his patient care. He was amenable, well mannered and supportive to the staff.

But what did she really know about him? Only little snippets of information that he'd told her in passing. Stories about home in Australia, living in Perth and his training as a doctor. Passing remarks about childhood friends. He'd told her he had no wife or girlfriend.

So what else was it? What had made that dark shadow pass in front of his eyes? Why had he hesitated before answering the question? Or had she just imagined it all? Maybe there was nothing wrong, maybe something had caught his eye at the other side of the road, momentarily distracting him and stopping him from answering the question.

In the meantime, she could still feel that underlying buzz between them. Whenever he was near, she had visions of that night in his flat, pressed up against the wall in her sci-fi costume, wishing things could go further than they had.

Every time he touched her at work, even the merest brush of a hand was enough to set off the currents between them. It didn't matter that her head told her this wasn't sensible—he came from the other side of the world and would likely return there; her body was telling her something entirely different. Her imagination was telling her a whole host of other things …

He gave her a nudge, passing her the package he'd wedged under his jacket.

She stared down at the still-wrapped parcel in her hands, turning the brown paper package over and over.

'Are you going to open it?'

She picked at the tape in one corner. It was old, the stickiness long vanished, and it literally fell apart in her hands, revealing some white envelopes underneath. She pulled them out. Only they weren't white, they had yellowed with age, all with US postal stamps.

Her eyes lifted to meet his. Brad leaned forward, touching the pile of envelopes and spreading them out across the table. 'There must be at least twenty of them,' he said quietly. His fingers stopped at something. There, among the envelopes, was something else. A photograph. Brad slid the envelope that was covering it away and Cassidy let out a little gasp.

She leaned forward and picked up the black-and-white print. ‘It’s my gran!’ she gasped. His head met hers as they stared at the photograph of a beautiful young woman with a smile that spread from ear to ear, wearing a beautiful coat with a nipped-in waist. Her head was turned to the side and her eyes were sparkling as she looked at the man standing next to her in a US army uniform.

Cassidy was stunned. There were a million thoughts that crowded into her mind. A million conclusions that she could jump to. But one thing stood out above all the rest. ‘I’ve never seen her look so happy,’ she whispered. ‘Gran never looked like that.’

She turned to face Brad. ‘I don’t mean she was miserable—she was fine.’ She pointed at the photograph. ‘But I can’t ever remember her looking like *that*.’

She didn’t want to say anything else. She didn’t know what to think. She’d just glimpsed a moment from the past, and it almost seemed sacred. The coat and letters had been hidden a long time ago by a woman who obviously hadn’t wanted to throw them away but hadn’t wanted them to be found. In a way, it almost felt like a betrayal.

She ran her finger over the photograph. ‘I don’t think I can even ask Gran about this. She’s too far gone. I can’t even remember the last time that she recognised me.’

Brad’s arm wrapped around her shoulder. She could feel his breath at her neck. What would he be thinking?

The same kind of thing that she was? That her gran had lost her heart to some US soldier?

She didn’t want to think like that. It seemed almost judgemental. And it seemed wrong that Brad’s first glimpse into her family was revealing something she hadn’t known herself.

And she couldn’t pretend that it didn’t hurt a little. It had been just her and Gran for the last ten years but she’d never told Cassidy anything about this. She’d been a modern woman, liberal-minded and easy to talk to. Why had she kept this to herself?

His voice was quiet and steady as he whispered in her ear. ‘Don’t even think about asking her about it, Cass.’ He lifted the photograph from her hand and sat it back down on the table. ‘Take it as it is. A happy memory from your gran’s life. She’s beautiful in that picture. You can see the happiness in her eyes. Why shouldn’t she have had a time like that?’ His finger ran down the side of her cheek. ‘She looks a lot like you.’

Cassidy turned to face him. His mouth was only inches from hers and she subconsciously licked her lips. This was it. The moment she’d been waiting for.

It had taken him so long to kiss her again after the party. She didn’t want to wait any longer. She didn’t want to imagine any longer. She wanted to feel.

Her hands slid up around his neck as she pulled him closer. His mouth was on hers instantly, just the way she’d imagined. He pushed her backwards on the sofa, his hands on either side of her head as he kissed her, gently at first, before working his way down her neck, pushing her shirt open.

His body was warm, heating hers instantly. She could feel his whole length above her, and her hands moved from around his neck, down his back and towards his hips, pulling him closer to her.

This time there was no one else in the flat. This time they wouldn’t need to stop. This time they could do what they wanted.

She pushed aside the rational side of her brain that was clamouring to be heard. She could worry about all that later. Her body was responding to him with an intensity she’d never experienced before. She’d already had a glimpse of the washboard abs when he’d changed in the doctors’ office. Now she didn’t just want to look—she wanted to touch, to feel, to taste.

He lifted his head, pushing himself back a little. His voice was little above a groan. ‘Cass?’

The question only hung in the air for a fraction of a second. She didn’t want to think about this. Right now she didn’t care that he was from Australia and would probably go back there. Right now all she cared about was that he was here, *now*, with *her*.

A slow smile appeared on his face. ‘Wanna stay over?’

He had no idea how sexy he was right now. His clear blue eyes were hooded with desire. She could feel his heart thudding against his chest. All for her.

She pressed herself against him again. 'I thought you'd never ask.'

He pulled her to her feet and led her towards his bedroom door, undoing the buttons on her shirt as they went. Her legs were on autopilot and she couldn't wipe the smile from her face.

He pressed her against the wall. 'I seem to remember being in this position with you before, Cassidy Rae.' His voice was deep, throaty, turning her on even more.

'I was playing hard to get,' she whispered in his ear. 'Did it work?'

He turned her around and pushed her onto the bed. 'Oh, yes.' He crawled towards her, poising himself above her. Her shirt was open now, leaving her breasts exposed in their black satin push-up bra. He bit at the edge with his teeth. 'Now, this doesn't look like ordinary underwear.' His fingers dug around her hips, sliding down the back of her jeans and finding the edge of her matching black g-string. 'Did you have something in mind when you got dressed this morning, Cass?' His low, sexy laugh sent shivers of delight down her spine.

It wasn't her normal underwear. But she could hardly even remember getting dressed this morning. Had she done this subconsciously, hoping she would end up in this position?

'Let's just say I'm a girl of many secrets.' She pulled his T-shirt over his head, revealing his pecs and tanned abdomen. If she hadn't been so turned on, she might have pulled in her stomach and worried about him seeing her curves. But from the look on his face, he liked what he was seeing. 'I have lots of gorgeous sets of underwear. If you're lucky, I'll let you see the red set,' she moaned as he started to kiss her neck, 'or the blue set …' Her hands were dipping lower on his body, to the front of his jeans where she could feel him throbbing against her. 'Or, if you're really lucky, I'll let you see the green set.'

He let out a groan. 'I can guarantee I'll love the under wear—no matter what colour. But what I love most is what's underneath. He traced his fingers down her throat as she arched her back in response. Then slid his hand underneath her, unfastening her bra strap and leaving her breasts exposed. 'Now, what can I do with these?' he murmured.

Cass pushed herself upwards, her breasts towards his mouth. 'You can start by getting rid of the rest of these clothes,' she commanded as she undid the buttons on his jeans, before wriggling out of her own. She waited as he discarded his jeans and underwear, before pushing him down on the bed and setting her legs astride him.

'I like this,' he murmured. 'A woman who likes to be in charge.'

'Oh, I'm always in charge,' she breathed in his ear as she ran her hands down his chest. 'And anyway, I'm examining your skin. You're way too tanned.' Her hands stopped at his nipples, brushing around them onto the fine hair on his chest. 'I feel it's my duty to check you for any areas of concern.' She lifted her hips and rubbed against him again.

He groaned. 'Anywhere in particular you'd like to start?'

She smiled and leaned over him again, her hardened nipples brushing against the skin on his chest. She swayed against him. 'I'll need to think about that.'

Brad let out a primal roar. He grabbed her and flipped her around on the bed so he was poised above her. 'Enough teasing. You're going to be the death of me.'

His fingers reached down and dispensed with her g-string. She could feel the heat rise inside her. She was aching for him. He touched her and she gasped, tilting her hips upwards to him. 'Oh … this is going to be so good.'

'You bet it is,' he whispered in her ear, the stubble on his jaw scraping her shoulder.

'Mmm … Where else am I going to feel that?'

'Wherever you like.'

He moved for a second, reaching into the nearby drawer, and she heard the rustle of a condom wrapper being opened. Ten seconds later he was above her again. 'Are you ready?' he whispered.

‘Oh, yes …’ She opened her legs further and gasped as he plunged inside her.

He stopped, just for a second. ‘Okay?’

She took a deep breath, while the full sensation surrounded her. Then she pulled his hips even closer, taking him deeper inside. ‘Don’t you dare stop,’ she groaned. ‘I’ve got you just where I want you.’

‘Ditto.’ He smiled again as he moved slowly, building momentum between them as he trailed a line of kisses down the side of her face and throat.

And there it was—the fever that had been building between them for weeks. All the looks and lingering glances. All the brief touches. All the electricity buzzing around them like fireflies. The first kiss, with its strained finish. All building to this crescendo, where nothing and no one could get between them.

Cassidy could feel her skin start to tingle. Nothing else was more important than this. Nothing else had ever felt as good as this. Nothing else had ever felt this *right*. This was perfect.

She let herself go, throwing her head back and crying out his name, as she felt him stiffen at the same time.

She felt her body turn to jelly, the air whooshing out from her lungs. Brad was still above her, his whole body weight now resting on her, his heart thudding against her chest.

She let out a laugh. Sweat slicked them together as she gave him a playful push. ‘Move, mister, I can hardly breathe.’

He pushed himself up and sagged down beside her.

‘Wow.’

Cassidy was breathing heavily, her eyes staring up at the ceiling and fixing on the still-pink light shade above her. She turned to the sandy-blond head on the pillow beside her, a smile creeping across her face. ‘Yeah, wow,’ she murmured.

CHAPTER FIVE

8 November

THE early-morning Scottish light crept across the room. Even on the greyest days the sun's rays sneaked through the clouds and scattered this room with light. Brad's brain was fuzzy. Something was different. Something had changed.

Then he felt a movement beside him, and the memories of the night before crowded into his brain. Cassidy. Wow.

Then something else hit him, charging from the dark recesses of his brain, and he stifled the groan in his throat. Melody. He hadn't told her about Melody.

He turned around in the bed, resting his hand on his arm, staring at the sleeping figure beside him. Her chestnut curls spilled across the pillow that she had wedged half under her arm as she slept on her side, facing him.

She looked beautiful. Her fair skin was smooth and unlined. Cassidy. His distraction. The woman he'd lusted after for the last month.

But his stomach clenched. He was cringing. Things in his brain just didn't add up. If Cassidy was only a distraction, why should he tell her about Melody? There should be no need.

But he knew better than that. No matter how many times he tried to use the word 'distraction' for Cassidy, she was much more than that.

In the last few weeks she had crept under his skin. Hearing her voice brought a smile to his face. Knowing she was working the same shift made his whole day seem brighter. And spending time with her outside work made the days speed past. He knew her habits—she liked to take her shoes off at the door, she sat on the left-hand side of the sofa, she only watched the news on one TV channel. His mood had lifted just by being around her.

His thoughts were always with his daughter but they didn't consume every spare second of every day.

She made him happy. Cassidy made him happy. And he was about to jeopardise all that. He knew he should have told her about Melody. He'd meant to but just hadn't found the appropriate time.

And now, after he'd slept with her, it seemed like a dirty secret. He almost wished he'd put a photo in the doctors' office in the ward as soon as he'd started there. But the truth was that office was used by lots of doctors and it wasn't appropriate to put a family picture in there. And he just hadn't been ready to answer any difficult questions about his daughter.

But now? He sagged back against the pillows. It looked as though he was hiding something. It looked as though he deliberately hadn't trusted Cassidy enough to tell her about Melody. How awkward was this conversation going to be?

He turned his head sideways to look at her again, to look at that perfect face before he ruined everything. A tiny part of him hoped that she wouldn't be annoyed at all. Maybe she would shrug her shoulders and tell him that it was fine?

Who was he kidding? How would he feel if the shoe was on the other foot? If Cassidy had a child she hadn't told him about? The thought was unimaginable. He could feel himself automatically shaking his head at the idea.

Things would be perfect if he could just freeze this moment in time. Keep everything just the way it was right now. Or, even better, just the way they'd been last night. That thought sent a smile across his face. If only …

A frown appeared on Cassidy's brow then her eyelids flickered open. Those big brown eyes that pulled him in every time. A smile appeared on her face instantly. 'Morning,' she whispered.

Relief flooded through him. She hadn't woken up and panicked. She seemed happy and comfortable around him. She obviously had no regrets about the night before. Not yet, anyway.

'Morning,' he whispered back. He couldn't help it. He was immediately drawn to her. He wanted to touch her, taste her skin again. He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose.

A glint appeared in her eyes. Memories of last night? 'Wow,' she whispered again, her soft breath on his face.

Brad couldn't hide the smile. Her memories were obviously as good as his. If only every morning could be like this.

Her hand crept around his neck, and as much as he wanted to pull her closer and forget about everything else, he just couldn't. He had to get this over and done with.

He shifted backwards in the bed. 'How about I make you some breakfast?' His legs hit the floor before she had a chance to answer, and he pulled his underwear and jeans on rapidly. 'What would you like? Toast? Eggs? Bacon?'

Cassidy looked confused. She pushed herself upwards in the bed and adjusted the pillows behind her. 'I'll have whatever you're making,' she said quietly.

'Great. Give me five minutes and I'll give you a shout. Feel free to take a shower and freshen up.' He leaned forwards and planted another kiss on her forehead before disappearing out of the door.

Cassidy sat for a few minutes, taking deep breaths. What just happened? They'd had a fabulous night, and he'd asked her to stay over. And for a few seconds this morning when she'd woken up, everything had seemed fine. So what had made him jump out of bed like a scalded cat?

She flung back the duvet and swung her legs out of bed, wincing at the cold air in the room. There was a navy-blue dressing gown hanging up behind the bedroom door, and she wrapped it around herself, then headed to the bathroom.

She flicked the switch for the shower, grabbing an elastic band that was sitting on top of the bathroom cabinet and twisting her hair back from her face as she sat at the edge of the bath for a few moments, trying to fathom what was going on.

Was Brad regretting their night together? The thought almost made her belly ache. She couldn't imagine anything worse. Maybe he was only interested in the thrill of the chase and once that was over …

No. No, it couldn't be that. She'd got to know him over the last few weeks, and he didn't seem to be like that at all. Maybe he just felt awkward because it was the first time they'd woken up together?

Yes, that could be it. Her eyes fell to the sink. Brad had obviously been in here first as he'd left her a new toothbrush and toothpaste and a huge white soft towel. She stuck her hand under the shower. It had heated up perfectly, so she stepped into the steaming water.

There was almost a tremor on her skin. Her insides were coiling, to the point of almost feeling pain. She couldn't bear the thought of Brad wanting to walk away after their night together. And it wasn't about the humiliation or about being used. Although those things would be bad enough.

It would be the fact he didn't feel the same connection that she did. The fact that his thoughts didn't wander to her about a million times a day—the way hers did to him. It would be the fact he didn't feel the constant zing between them. Those were the things she couldn't bear.

She could still smell him on her skin and almost regretted having to wash it away, but the blue shower gel with its ocean scent reminded her of him again. She rubbed it into her body even harder, then a few minutes later stepped out of the shower and dried herself rapidly. It only took a few moments to realise she'd nothing to wear, so she padded back through to the bedroom and rummaged in a few of his drawers.

'Cassidy! Breakfast!'

The smell was drifting through the house. Eggs, bacon and tea. Perfect.

'Hey.'

She was standing in the doorway dressed in a pair of his grey jogging trousers and an oversized pale blue T-shirt. His clothes had never looked so sexy. Her hair was ruffled, some little strands around her neck still wet from the shower.

He pulled out a chair for her. ‘Have a seat.’ All Brad could think about right now was getting this over and done with. He had to come clean. Easier said than done.

He put the plates on the table and poured the tea while Cassidy watched him carefully. She wasn’t stupid. She knew something was going on.

She took a sip of her tea, chasing her eggs around the plate with her fork. Watching. Waiting.

Brad pressed his lips together. He reached across the table and took her hand. ‘Cass, there’s something I need to tell you.’

He could see the tiny flare of panic in her eyes that she was trying to control. She set her tea back down on the table. Her voice was steady. ‘So, what is it you want to tell me “the morning after the night before”, Brad?’

He winced. There was no getting around this. Cassidy didn’t even know what ‘it’ was—but the implication was there. If this was something important, he should have told her before he’d taken this relationship to the next level.

‘I have a daughter.’ The words were blurted out before he had a chance to think about it any longer.

‘What?’ The shocked expression on her face was very real. This was the last thing she’d expected to hear.

Brad took a deep breath. ‘I have a daughter, Melody. She’s nearly four.’ His heart was beating against his chest, the words clambering to his mouth—he just couldn’t speak quickly enough right now. ‘I haven’t seen in her over two years. Her mother, Alison, disappeared with her. We had a …’ he flung his hands in the air ‘… sort of informal custody arrangement. Alison was a doctor as well, and we looked after Melody between us.’

Cassidy’s face looked set in stone. ‘She was your wife? Your girlfriend? The one you told me you didn’t have?’ Her tone said it all.

Brad spoke firmly. ‘She wasn’t my wife and she wasn’t my girlfriend, well, not after a few months. We had a very short-lived fling that resulted in Melody. We’d broken up by the time Alison discovered she was pregnant, and neither of us were interested in getting back together.’

He leaned back in the chair, wishing he could tell the whole story in the blink of an eye. Everything about this was painful to him. Every time he spoke about things, he thought about the mistakes he had made and what he could have done differently.

Anything that could have affected the eventual outcome.

Cassidy hadn’t moved. Her face was expressionless and her breakfast lay untouched in front of her.

‘I don’t really know what happened, Cass. I went to pick up Melody as arranged one day, and they were gone.’ He flicked his hand in the air. ‘Just like that.

Vanished. I was frantic. I went to Alison’s work and found out she’d resigned and no one knew where she’d gone. Some of her colleagues said she’d met a doctor from the US and been head over heels in love. They thought she might have gone to the US with him.’ He shook his head as a wave of desperation swept over him. It was the same every time he spoke about this.

‘I hired a lawyer and two private investigators and tried to track her down. I’ve been trying to track her down for the last two years—with no success. I haven’t seen or heard from her in two years. Right now, I have no idea how my little girl is, where she is or if she even remembers me.’ His eyes were fixed on the window, staring out into space.

Cassidy felt numb. ‘You have a daughter,’ she said.

He nodded, it appeared, almost unconsciously.

‘You have a daughter you “forgot” to tell me about?’ She couldn’t help it—she raised her hands in the air and made the sign of quotation marks.

She could feel rage and anger bubbling beneath the surface, ready to erupt at any moment. She hadn't imagined anything the other night. It hadn't been all in her head. It had been right before her eyes—or it should have been.

Brad looked in pain. He may have been gazing outside, but the look in his eyes was haunted. A father who had lost his child. She couldn't begin to imagine the pain that would cause. But right now she couldn't contain her anger.

'Why didn't you mention this before?'

He sighed. A huge sigh, as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. His gaze went to his hands that were clenched in his lap. 'I know, I know, I should have. But it just never felt like the right time.'

'How about as soon as you met me?'

His brow wrinkled. 'Oh, yeah. Right. Pleased to meet you, I'm Brad Donovan. I've got a missing daughter, Melody, that I've been searching for the last two years. And before you ask—no—I've no idea why her mother disappeared with her. No—I didn't do anything wrong or mistreat my child. Yes—I've spent an absolute fortune trying to find her and I've been on two wild-goose chases to the US.' He waved his hand in frustration. 'Is that how you wanted me to tell you?'

Cassidy took a deep breath. She wanted to yell. She wanted to scream. She could see how damaged he was by all this. But she couldn't see past how hurt she felt. Hadn't he trusted her enough to tell her? He trusted her enough to sleep with her—but not to tell her about his daughter? It seemed unreal.

She looked around, her eyes scanning the walls. 'So where are they?'

His brow furrowed. 'Where are what?'

She threw her hands up in frustration. 'The photos of your daughter. I've never seen a single one. Where do you keep them?'

He grimaced and stood up. She could hear him walking through to the living room and opening a drawer. He walked through and sat a wooden framed photograph down on the table.

Cassidy felt her heart jump into her mouth as she stared at the image in front of her. The gorgeous toddler with blonde ringlets and Brad's eyes was as pretty as a picture. She felt her lip tremble and she lifted her eyes to meet his. 'You put these away when you knew I would be here?'

He nodded. 'I planned to tell you.' He hesitated, having the good grace to look shamefaced. 'I just hadn't got around to it.'

'Why didn't you tell me when I first asked you about your family? When I asked you if you had a wife or a girlfriend? When I told you about my ex-fiancé and his new Miss Spain wife? How about telling me then? Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't that your ideal opportunity?'

She folded her arms across her chest. It didn't matter that she'd tried to play down how hurt she'd been over her breakup with her fiancé. The fact was she'd *told* him about it—albeit in sparing detail. There was no way he was getting away with this. She didn't care about the wonderful night before. She didn't care how many times he'd taken her to heaven and back.

This was about trust. This was about honesty. This was about the things you *should* tell someone before you slept with them.

Brad shook his head. 'You make it all sound so simple, Cass.'

She cringed. The exact thought she'd had when he'd asked her about Bobby. 'It is.'

'No. It's not.' His voice was determined. 'Okay, so you may have asked me about a wife or girlfriend—and I didn't have either, so I didn't tell you any lies. And I'd only just met you then, Cass. I don't want everyone to know my business, and this isn't the easiest thing to talk about. People talk. People make judgements.' He pressed his fingers against his temples.

'When Alison and Melody vanished at first, people were suspicious about me in Australia. People, colleagues even, wondered if I'd done something to them. It was only after the Australian

police confirmed they'd left on an international flight that people stopped assuming I'd done something awful.'

Cassidy felt her heart constrict. It was something she hadn't even considered. It hadn't even entered her mind that someone would think like that about Brad. How could friends or colleagues have done that?

Her head was instantly filled with stories in the media, and after only a few seconds she realised it was true. As soon as anyone went missing, suspicion was generally directed at those around them. What on earth would that feel like?

She could only imagine the worst. The frustration of not knowing where your child was. Continually shouting but not being heard. It must have been excruciating.

He leaned his elbows on the table. His fingers moved in small circles at the side of his head. 'It didn't stop there either.' He lifted his head and stared at Cassidy. 'Once people realised I hadn't done something unmentionable to them, they started to say that Alison must have done a runner with Melody to get away from me. As if I'd done something to my child.'

The words hung in the air. Too hideous for thoughts even to form.

'Oh, Brad,' she breathed. Now she understood. Now she understood the pain in his eyes. 'That's awful.'

'You bet it is.'

A lump stuck in her throat. She was angry. She was hurt. And she had no idea what this could mean for them. But right now she had to show some compassion. She stood up, the chair scraping along the kitchen floor, and walked around to the other side of the table.

Brad looked as if he was in shock. As if he was wondering what she might do next.

She might never have had a child stolen from her, but she knew what it was like to be left.

Her parents had done it. Bobby had done it.

But she was calm and lifted his hands from the table, sitting down on his knee and wrapping her hands around his neck, hugging him closely. She could feel his tense muscles beneath her fingers, and she rubbed her hand across his back, waiting for a few moments until he relaxed and the pent-up strain had started to abate.

After a few minutes she leaned back, watching him carefully.

'I'm not happy, Brad. I can't believe you didn't tell me something as important as this.'

She felt him take a deep breath. Right now his blue eyes were almost a window into his soul. She could see his regret. She could see his pain. And although hers could only pale in comparison, she wondered if he could see hers.

'I didn't mean things to turn out like this. This wasn't in my plans.'

In an instant she could almost feel his withdrawal. The hackles rose at the back of her neck. 'What do you mean?'

His hands touched her waist. 'This. Us. I didn't realise things would get so serious.'

'What did you expect? You've practically spent the last five weeks by my side. Every time I turn around, you're right there next to me. If you didn't want us to be more than friends, you should have stayed away.'

She hated how she sounded. She hated the tone of her voice, but she just couldn't help it.

The muscles on his shoulders tensed again and he blew some hair from his forehead, obviously in exasperation. What on earth was he thinking? She had a hollow feeling in her stomach. After the wonderful night before, did he want to walk away?

Everything about this was confusing. She didn't even know how she felt about the fact he had a daughter—she hadn't had time to process those thoughts. Why was she even considering any of this? Her head had always told her this relationship was a bad idea. She wanted someone who would stay in Scotland with her, and the sinking feeling in her stomach told her Brad could obviously never do that.

But her body and soul told her something else entirely. Brad was the first man in a long time that she'd been attracted to—that she'd even been interested in. She loved spending time in his company. She loved his normally easygoing manner. She loved the fact she could depend on him at work—his clinical skills and judgement were excellent.

But most of all she loved the way she felt around him. Even yesterday, in her grandmother's house, doing a task that should have made her feel sad and depressed, there had been so much comfort from having Brad around.

And as for how her body reacted to him … that was something else entirely.

Brad reached up and touched her hair, winding his fingers through one of her curls. Her head tilted instantly—an automatic response—towards the palm of his hand. His eyes were closed. 'How could I stay away from this, Cass?'

He pulled her head down and touched a gentle kiss to her lips. 'You're like a drug to me, Cassidy Rae. Apart from Melody, you're the first thing I think about when I get up in the morning and the last thing I think about when I fall asleep at night.' His eyes opened and she could tell instantly he meant every word.

This was no gentle let-down. This was no attempt to look for an excuse to end their relationship. He was every bit as confused as she was.

She pulled back. This was too much. She was getting in too deep. She pushed herself upwards, her legs trembling as she walked around to the other side of the table and pushed her untouched plate of food away.

'I can't think when you do that. I can't think straight when you touch me. It's too distracting.'

Brad let out a short laugh, shaking his head.

'What? What is it?'

'That word, Cass—distraction. That's what I thought about you at first.'

Cassidy frowned. A distraction. Hardly a flattering description. But he reached across the table and touched her hand again.

'You have no idea how I was feeling when I got here. I'd just had the year from hell in Australia. I'd been to the US twice, chasing false leads trying to find Melody. None of them worked. I'd spent a fortune and still had no idea about my daughter. Last Christmas …' He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

'Let's just say it was the worst ever. Then a few of my friends sat me down and had a conversation with me that was hard for all us. They told me I should never give up looking for Melody, but I had to accept I had a life of my own to live. And they came prepared—they had an armful of job ads for all over the world. I'd let my career slide. I'd been consumed by doing everything I could to find my daughter. The job I'd always loved had become a noose around my neck. I didn't make any mistakes but I'd lost the enthusiasm and passion for the job.

'My friends knew the career paths I'd been interested in before, and they convinced me it was the right time for a break—a change of scenery and a time for new horizons.'

He gave her a rueful smile. 'I didn't come to Scotland with the intention of meeting anyone. I came to Scotland to experience the infamous Scottish winter and the ream of medical admissions that always follow. I planned to just immerse myself in work. To try and give myself a break from constantly checking my emails and phoning the private investigator in the US.'

Cassidy didn't know what to think. A distraction. That's what he'd just called her. She couldn't stop herself from fixating on it. And it gave her the strangest sensation—a feeling of panic.

Maybe this was it. Maybe she should grab her clothes—wherever they were—and get out of here. She needed time to think. She needed a chance to get her head around what he'd just told her. Right now she was suffering from information overload.

Her gaze drifted out the kitchen and onto the coffee table in the living room. She hated that word. It made her feel worthless. As if he didn't value her. The way Bobby had made her feel when he'd left. He'd never used that word, but that's the way she'd felt—as if he'd used her as a distraction,

as if he hadn't valued her enough to stay. The same way her parents had made her feel. As if she wasn't worth coming home for.

The only person who hadn't made her feel like that had been Gran. Solid. Dependable. Warm and loving. But even that had changed now. Her gran was a mere shadow of her former self. And what about those letters? She really needed to sit down and decide what she wanted to do with them.

'Cass?'

She was startled. Brad's forehead was wrinkled. He'd still been talking to her, and she'd been lost in her own thoughts. 'What?' she answered quickly.

'You didn't hear me, did you?'

She shook her head. 'You've given me a lot to think about. Maybe I should leave? Maybe you don't need any more distractions.' Her mind could only focus on one thing and she stood up again, ready to leave.

But he was quicker than her, and it took him less than a second to have her in his arms. His face was just above hers. His stubbled jaw, tanned skin and blue eyes definitely distracted *her*.

'I said it was nice to meet someone who enjoyed Christmas so much. Last year is something I don't want to repeat. I was hoping you would help try to get me into the spirit.'

She blinked. He was using her weak spot. Her Christmas rush. And he was doing it with that lazy smile on his face and his fingers winding under her T-shirt.

She sighed. 'This isn't all just going to be okay. I'm going to need some time—to see how I feel.' Then the sticking point came to the forefront of her brain. 'And are you still just using me as a distraction?'

His head moved slowly from side to side. 'I'm not using you as anything. I just want to be around you, Cass. I have no idea where this is going to go. I have no idea what's going to happen between us. But I'd like to find out. What do you say?'

There it was. That feeling. For five weeks he'd made her feel special. Made her feel wanted and important—as if she were the centre of his life. She wanted to say a hundred things. She wanted to sit him down and ask more questions. But his fingers were trailing up her side …

'I need some time to think about all this, Brad. You certainly know how to spring something on a girl.'

He pulled back a little. 'I know, and I'm sorry. I should have told you about Melody.'

Right now she didn't know what to do. She'd learned more about Brad in the last fifteen minutes than she had in the last five weeks. He was hurt, he was damaged. She had seen that in his eyes. And for the last five weeks he'd come to work every day and been a conscientious and proficient doctor. Could she have done the same?

Who did he really have here as a friend? Who was there for him to talk to, to share with, apart from her?

More importantly, did she really want to walk away right now?

It would be the sensible thing to do. She was already feeling hurt, and walking away now could save her from any more heartache in the future. But she'd still need to work with him, she'd still see him at work every single day. How would she cope then? And how would she feel if she saw him with anyone else?

The thought sent a chill down her spine. She didn't want to see him with anyone else. In her head he was already *hers*. And even if this didn't go anywhere, why shouldn't she enjoy what they had right now? She certainly wouldn't mind a repeat of last night. The sooner, the better.

Her hands wound around his neck. 'How about we try to create some new Christmas memories—some nice ones—ones that you could only experience here with me in Scotland?'

He nodded his head slowly. 'That sounds like a plan. What do I have to do in return?'

A thousand suggestions sprang to mind—most of them X-rated. She couldn't stand the pain she'd seen in his eyes earlier. But this definitely wasn't what she'd signed up for. She had to think about herself. She didn't want to end up hurt and alone. She didn't want to end up without Brad.

'I'm sure I'll think of something,' she murmured as she took him by the hand and led him back to the bedroom.

CHAPTER SIX

15 November

CASSIDY hurried up the stairs. Her cardigan was useless this morning, and her new-style uniform wasn't keeping out the freezing temperatures. She touched one of the old-fashioned radiators positioned nearby the hallway. Barely lukewarm. That was the trouble in old stone buildings with antiquated heating systems; the temperature barely rose to anything resembling normal.

The true Scottish winter had hit with a blast over the last few days. This morning, on the way to work Cassidy had slipped and skidded twice on the glistening pavements. She dreaded to think what A and E had been like last night.

Brad had been on call, so she hadn't seen him. He'd phoned her once, around midnight, to say he was expecting a few admissions and to chat for a few minutes. But things had felt a little strained —just as they had for the last week. She still couldn't get her head around all this. Not least the part he hadn't told her he had a daughter.

But the thing she was struggling with most was how much she actually liked him. It didn't matter her head had told her he was ultimately unsuitable. For the last few weeks she'd spent every minute with him. And no matter how confused she was, one emotion topped the rest. She was happy.

Brad made her happy. Spending time with him made her happy. Talking to him every day made her happy. Working with him made her happy. Cuddling up on the sofa with him made her happy. Kissing made her *very* happy, and anything else …

Her heart sank as she saw the bright lights and bustling figures at the end of the corridor. It wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning and her normally darkened ward was going like a fair.

She strode into the ward, glancing at the board. Jackie, one of her nurses, came out of the treatment room, holding a medicine cup with pills and clutching an electronic chart.

'What's going on, Jackie?' She could see instantly that the normally cool and reliable member of staff looked frazzled. Jackie had worked nights here for over twenty years—it took a lot to frazzle her.

Jackie looked pale and tired, and she had two cardigans wrapped around her. 'What do you think?' She pointed at the board. 'I'll give you a full report in a few minutes, but we've had six admissions in the last few hours and we need to clear some beds—there are another four in A and E waiting to come up.'

Cassidy nodded quickly. 'What kind of admissions?'

Jackie pointed at the window to the still-dark view outside. 'All elderly, all undernourished, two with hypothermia and the other four all with ailments affected by the cold. Just what we always see this time of year.'

The stream of elderly, vulnerable patients reminded Cassidy of her gran.

'You rang?' Lucy appeared at Cassidy's side.

'I heard you needed to transfer four patients to my ward. Thought it would be easier if I just came along, got the report and then transferred them along myself.'

Cassidy nodded. 'Perfect.' She walked over to Jackie and took the medicine cup and electronic chart from her hands. 'Introduce me to this patient and I'll take over from you, then you can hand over to Lucy before we do the report this morning.'

Jackie nodded happily. 'That's great. If we get these patients transferred, I'll give you a proper handover before the beds get filled again.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Brad's around here somewhere. I saw him a few moments ago. He hasn't stopped all night and …' she smiled '… our normally tanned doctor is looking distinctly pale this morning.' She winked at Cass. 'I hope he hasn't been having too many late nights.'

Cassidy froze. The words sank in quickly. She didn't think that anyone knew about Brad and herself. But she should have known better. Word always spread quickly in a hospital like this.

She tried to regain her composure and pretend she hadn't heard the comment—best not to make a big deal of these things and hope the gossip would disperse quickly.

Half an hour later, with the report given and Jackie quickly leaving to go home, Cassidy gave a sigh and went to make a cup of tea. The breakfast trolley had just rolled onto the ward. The auxiliary nurses and domestics were helping the patients, and her two staff nurses had started the morning drug round.

Lucy appeared at her side. 'Make one for me, too, please. I've just taken the last patient round to my ward.'

Cassidy nodded and put two tea bags into mugs. She could kill for a skinny caramel latte right now.

Lucy nudged her. 'So, spill. What's happening with you and Dr Wonderful? I haven't seen you for over a week.'

Cassidy bit the inside of her lip. There was no point beating around the bush. Lucy would only pester her until she told anyway. She poured the boiling water into the cups.

Lucy nudged her again. 'Come on. Is the prediction going to come true? Are you going to be a Christmas bride?'

Cassidy dropped her teaspoon into the sink. 'What? Are you mad?' She'd forgotten all about smelly-cat woman and her mad predictions.

'What's wrong? I thought things were going swimmingly between you and surf boy. Come on, you must have done the dirty deed by now—surely?'

Cassidy felt the instant flush as the heat spilled into her cheeks. It was just a pity her body didn't know how to tell lies.

'I knew it! Well—tell all. Is he wonderful?'

She took a deep breath. 'Do you want me to answer everything at once?'

'I just want you to say something. Anything. What's wrong, Cass?'

'Well, in that case …' She counted off on her fingers. 'No, I definitely won't be a Christmas bride—and I'd forgotten all about that rubbish. Yes, I've done the dirty deed. Yes, it was wonderful—or it was until the next day when he told me he had a daughter.'

'A daughter? Brad has a daughter?'

Cassidy nodded slowly.

'Why hasn't he ever mentioned her? What's the big secret?'

Cassidy picked up her tea and leaned back against the sink. 'The big secret is he doesn't know where she is. Her mother vanished with her two years ago. Apparently she fell in love with some doctor from the US and didn't tell Brad anything about it. He thinks she didn't want to get into a custody battle with him, so basically she did a moonlight flit.'

Lucy looked stunned and shook her head slowly. 'Wow, he's a dark horse, isn't he? I would never have guessed.'

Cassidy sighed again. 'Neither would I.'

There was silence for a few seconds. Lucy touched her arm. 'Whoa, you've got it bad, girl, haven't you?'

Cassidy closed her eyes. 'You could say that.'

Lucy stepped in front of her, clutching her steaming cup of tea with one hand and wagging her finger with the other. 'What happened to Cassidy Rae and *"I'm never going to fall in love with another foreign doctor"*? Where did she go? And what's the big deal about Brad having a daughter? She's lost. The US is a big place, and chances are she might never be found.'

'Cassidy Rae met Brad Donovan. That's what happened. And as for his daughter, I've no idea what will happen. But one thing is for sure—ultimately he won't stay in Scotland with me.'

Lucy leaned forward and gave her a hug. 'Cassidy, you might be making a whole lot of something out of nothing.'

Cassidy stopped for a few moments. Maybe Lucy was right. He hadn't managed to find Melody so far—and that was with a private investigator working for him. Maybe he would never find her? Maybe she could just forget about Melody and start to focus on them again?

But she still had an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Brad wouldn't stay in Scotland—whether he found his daughter or not. Why on earth was she pursuing a relationship with a man who wasn't right for her?

She shook her head. 'A daughter isn't nothing, Lucy. It's a whole big something. What happens if we get serious, and then he gets a call to say his daughter has been found? I'll be left high and dry while he jets off somewhere to find his lost child. It's hardly the ideal setup for a lasting relationship.'

Lucy took a sip of her tea, watching Cassidy carefully. 'That's the first time I've ever heard you say anything like that.'

'Like what?'

'The whole words—"lasting relationship". I never even heard you say that about Mr Spain. You must really like our Dr Donovan.'

'I guess I do.' There. She'd said the words out loud. And to someone other than herself. It almost felt like a confession.

A little smile appeared at the corner of Lucy's mouth. 'That's what Lynn and I were talking about at Belinda the fortune-teller's house. We'd already pegged Brad for you and thought you'd make a nice couple.'

Cassidy stared at her as memories of that night and their knowing nods sprang up in her brain. 'You've got to be joking.'

Lucy shook her head, looking quite pleased with herself. 'No. We thought you'd be a good fit together. And we were right.'

Cassidy put down her mug and started to fiddle with her hair clip. 'Well, you can't exactly say that now, can you?'

'Yes, I can. I still think you're a good fit.' She folded her arms across her chest. 'So what's been the outcome of Brad's big disclosure? Did you run screaming from the room? Have a tantrum? Go off in a huff?'

Cassidy lowered her head. 'That's just it. There's not really been an outcome. I'm still seeing him and we've talked about it a few times—but we've really only skirted around the edges.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'I've no idea what the big outcome will be.' She shook her head, 'I don't think he knows either.'

Lucy's brow puckered. She nipped Cassidy's arm. 'Who are you, and what have you done with the real Cassidy Rae? The one that always knows precisely what she, and everyone around about her, is doing?'

'Don't, Lucy. Don't remind me how much of an idiot I'm being.'

Lucy's face broke into a smile as she tipped the rest of her tea down the sink and rinsed her cup. 'I don't think you're being an idiot, Cass. For the first time in your life I think you are head over heels in love.' And with that comment she walked out the ward, leaving a shocked Cass still standing at the sink.

The rest of Cassidy's shift was bedlam. Every patient that was admitted was elderly and suffering from effects of the cold. It broke her heart.

'Is this the last one?' she asked as Brad appeared next to another patient being wheeled onto the ward.

He shook his head and ran his hand through his rumpled hair. 'Nope. I've just been paged by the doctor on-call service. They're sending another one in. Ten patients in the last twenty-four hours, all suffering from some effects of cold.' He shook his head in disbelief. 'You don't see this often in Australia. I think I've only ever looked after one case of hypothermia before. Today has been a huge learning curve.'

'Why so many?'

'The temperature apparently dropped to minus twenty last night. Some of these patients only get social-care services during the week—so some of them weren't discovered until this morning. The sad thing is, only two had heating systems that weren't working. The rest were just too scared to put them on because of the huge rise in their heating bills.'

Cassidy waited as they moved their patient over into the hospital bed. He was very frail, hardly any muscle tone at all, his skin hanging in folds around his thin frame. She bundled the covers around him. 'Go and see if you can find any spare duvets or blankets,' she asked one of the nursing auxiliaries.

Brad handed over his chart. 'Frank Johnson is eighty, lives alone and has a past history of COPD and heart disease. You can see he's underweight. He hasn't been eating, and when he was admitted his temperature was thirty-four degrees centigrade. He'd got so confused he'd actually started taking his clothes off, as he thought he was overheating. He was barely conscious when the social-care staff found him this morning.'

Cassidy nodded. It wasn't the first time she'd heard this. She looked at the IV fluids currently connected—often the patients admitted with hypothermia were also dehydrated. 'What's the plan for him?'

Brad pointed to the chart. 'He's been in A and E for a few hours, and his temperature is gradually climbing. It's thirty-six now, still below normal, but he's certainly less confused. Try and get some more fluids and some food into him. I want four-hourly obs and refer him to Social Services and Dietetics. We've got to try and get him some better assistance.' He waved his hand around the ward.

'In fact, those rules apply to just about everyone that's been admitted in the last twenty-four hours.' He looked down at his own bare arms, where his hairs were practically standing on end. 'It doesn't help that this place is freezing, too. What's going on?'

Cassidy gave him a weary smile. 'Old hospital, old heating system. This place is always like this in winter.'

'Tomorrow I'm going to bring in a sleeping bag and walk about in it. Do you think they'll get the hint and try to sort this place out?'

She laughed. 'That would be a sight to see. But good luck. Look at all the staff on the ward—all wearing two cardigans over their uniforms. I hate long sleeves—it's an infection-control hazard. But the temperature in this place is ridiculous. I can hardly tell them to take them off.'

'If you come into my office, I can think of an alternative way to heat you up.'

Cassidy's cheeks instantly flushed and she looked around to check no one had heard his comment. 'Brad!'

He gave her a wicked smile. 'We both know cold temperatures can cause confusion, and it wouldn't do for the doctors and nurses to be confused. I'm just trying to keep us at the top of our game.'

She titled her head to one side. 'Dr Donovan, if the cold is getting to you, I'll even go so far as to make you a cup of coffee. That should heat you up.'

'And if I'd prefer something else?'

'Then you'll just have to wait.' She folded her arms across her chest. It was almost time for the shift change—time to go home. And Brad must be due to finish as he'd been on call the night before. He looked knackered. As if he could keel over at any moment. But he could still manage to give her that sexy smile and those come-to-bed eyes. And no matter how much she told herself she should walk away, she just couldn't.

'I have something for you.'

'What?'

He pulled something from the pocket of his pale blue scrubs. A pair of rumpled tickets. Cassidy recognised the insignia on them instantly. Her mouth fell open. 'The skating rink! You remembered.'

‘Of course I remembered. You said you wanted to go skating the night the ice rink opened in George Square so I bought us some tickets.’

She stared at the tickets. There it was again. Just when everything in her head was giving her lots of reasons to end this relationship. Just when she hadn’t been alone with him for a few days and felt as though she was starting to shake him out her system—he did something like this.

Something thoughtful. Something kind. Something that would matter only to her. He’d even managed to plan ahead—a trait distinctly lacking in most men she knew.

‘So are we going to capture the spirit of Christmas?’ he whispered in her ear.

One look from those big blue eyes and he was instantly back in her system. Like a double-shot espresso. ‘You bet ya!’ She smiled at him.

20 November

‘I don’t think we need an ice rink. These pavements are bad enough,’ Brad grumbled as he grabbed hold of Cassidy’s waist to stop her skidding one more time.

She slid her hand, encased in a red leather glove, into his. ‘Don’t be such a grump. And look at this place, it’s buzzing! Isn’t it great?’

Brad looked around. He had to admit Glasgow did the whole Christmas-decoration thing well. There were gold and red Christmas lights strung along the length of Buchanan Street, twinkling against the dark night sky, trying to keep the late-night shoppers in the mood for Christmas. The street was thronged with hundreds of people, all wrapped against the bitter-cold weather, their warm breath visible in the cold night air.

But even though the lights were impressive, he couldn’t take his eyes off Cassidy. She seemed to have a coat for every colour of the rainbow. And in the last few days he had seen them all.

But it was her grandmother’s red wool coat that suited her most, even though it probably wouldn’t withstand the freezing temperatures of tonight.

This evening Cassidy had layered up with two cardigans beneath the slim-fitting coat. She had accessorised with a black hat and scarf and red leather gloves, with a pair of thick black boots on her feet. But even in all those clothes it was her eyes that sparkled most.

As they turned the corner into George Square, the lights were even brighter.

An international Christmas market filled the edges of the square, immediately swamping them in a delicious array of smells. The ice rink took up the middle of the square, with a huge Christmas tree—still to be lit—at one end and an observation wheel at the other. Around the edges were an old-fashioned helter-skelter, a café/bar and a merry-go-round. Families were everywhere, children chattering with excitement about the lights being switched on.

For a second Brad felt something twisting around his heart. He wished more than anything that Melody could be here with him now. He’d never experienced Christmas in a cold climate, and he’d love it if his daughter could see this with him. He’d even seen an ad posted on the hospital notice-board the other day about a Santa’s grotto with real, live reindeer down on the Ayrshire coast. If only he could take Melody to see something like that. The thought instantly clouded his head with difficult memories and yearnings.

He watched as a father lifted his daughter up onto one of the huge white horses with red reins on the merry-go-round. As the music started and the ride slowly began to move, he could see the father standing next to the horse, holding his daughter safely in place as her face glowed with excitement.

‘Brad?’

He turned abruptly. Cassidy was watching him with her all-seeing, all-knowing brown eyes. She gave his arm a little tug. ‘Are you okay?’

She followed his eyes to the merry-go-round, the question hesitating on her lips.

This wasn’t the time to be melancholy. This was the time to be positive and thankful that he could create new memories with someone who tugged at his heartstrings. He reached out and grabbed

her leather-gloved hand. ‘Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight in your grandmother’s coat? That red suits you perfectly.’

He pulled her forward for a kiss, ducking underneath the black furred hat that was currently containing her wayward curls. ‘Do you remember those little girls who used to be on top of the chocolate boxes at Christmas? That’s just what you look like.’

‘Welcome, everyone.’ The compère’s voice echoed around the square and they turned to face him.

‘Who is he?’ Brad whispered.

‘Some reality TV star,’ she whispered back, ‘but I’ve no idea which one.’

The guy was swamped in the biggest coat Brad had even seen. He obviously wasn’t from around these parts. ‘We’re here in Glasgow tonight to light up our Christmas tree.’

There was a cheer around about them.

‘Can anyone guess what colour the tree lights will be this year?’

He waited as the crowd shouted out around him. ‘Let’s count down and see. Altogether now, ten, nine, eight …’

Cassidy started to join in, shouting down the numbers with rest of the crowd. ‘Come on, you.’ She nudged him.

Brad smiled and started chanting with people around them. ‘Five, four, three, two, *one*!’

There was a gasp as the tree lit up instantly with a whole host of red lights, like winter berries on the tree. A few seconds later they were joined by some tiny silver twinkling stars. A round of applause went up then, and only a few seconds later, Brad noticed Cassidy blink as a cheer erupted all around them. People were holding their hands out and laughing as the first smattering of snow appeared in tiny flakes around them. It only took a few seconds for some to land in the curls of her hair and on her cheeks. She gave a big smile, looking upwards to the dark sky. ‘Nothing like a little dusting of snow for the occasion.’

Brad pulled his hand out of his thermal glove and held it out like the people around them. ‘First time I’ve been snowed on,’ he said, watching as the tiny flakes melted instantly as they touched his hand. ‘This is fabulous.’

Cassidy sighed. ‘Wait until the morning. If the snow lies on the roads and streets, it will be even more treacherous than before. In my experience snow generally means we’ll be more busy at work.’

Brad grabbed her waist again. ‘Work? Let’s not talk about work. Let’s go and have some fun.’

They walked around some of the nearby market stalls. Cassidy sampled some sautéed potatoes with onions and bacon then moved on to the next stall to try their vast array of chocolates. ‘What’s your favourite?’ Brad asked. ‘I’ll buy you some.’

Cassidy’s nose wrinkled and she glanced over her shoulder. ‘Actually, I’m a tat collector. I’d prefer another ornament for my Christmas tree.’

He gave her a surprised look. ‘A tree ornament instead of chocolate? I would never have guessed. Well, let’s see what they’ve got.’

She was like a child in the proverbial sweetie shop as she oohed and aahed over tiny green sequin trees, little white angels and traditional wooden crafted Santa Claus ornaments. A few moments later Cassidy had selected a Russian doll for her tree with red and gold zigzags adorning its tiny wooden frame. ‘This is perfect,’ she said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before.’

Brad smiled and handed over some money, but not before picking up a second one for Melody. She would have loved this stall, too.

They walked over to the nearby booth to collect their skates and spent a few minutes sitting at the side, lacing them up. Cassidy stood up, wobbling around as she tried to gain her balance. Brad appeared at her side, equally unsteady. ‘Are we ready for this?’ He held out his hand towards her.

They stepped onto the ice together. It was busy, families skating and wobbling with interlinked hands as they tried to find their way around the ice. Brad took a few moments to get his balance—

he'd only ever skated a few times in his life but had always managed to stay upright. Cassidy, however, took him completely by surprise.

She let go of his hand and within seconds was gliding over the ice as if it was something she did every day. Her paces were long and even as she bobbed and weaved through the crowd of people on the ice. She spun round, her red coat swinging out around her. Brad held on to the side rail for a few more seconds.

'Come on, Dr Donovan, show us what you're made of!' she shouted from the middle of the rink.

She looked gorgeous. Her cheeks were flushed with colour, and the red coat with its nipped-in waist highlighted her figure perfectly. The perfect Christmas picture.

Her words were like a challenge. And no matter how unsteady he was on the ice, Brad wasn't one to ignore a challenge. He pushed himself off as best he could towards her, nearly taking out a few children in the process. He reached her in a few seconds with only a few unsteady steps and wrapped his arms around her in the middle of the rink. 'You're a scammer, Cassidy Rae. You didn't say you knew how to ice skate.'

'You didn't ask.' Her eyes were twinkling as she pushed off and spun around him again, skating backwards for a few seconds before ending in an Olympic-style twirl.

'Show-off,' he growled. 'Where on earth did you learn how to do that?'

She started skating backwards around him. 'In Australia you surf—in Scotland you skate!' She reversed into him, allowing him to collapse his arms around her waist. 'That's not strictly true,' she said. 'I skated for around five years but, to be honest, as a young girl I was a bit flighty. I tried ballet, majorettes, country dancing and horse riding before I started skating.'

His head rested on her shoulder, his nose touching her pink flushed cheek. 'I like the sound of a flighty Cassidy Rae. She sounds like fun.'

Cassidy pushed off and turned to face him again, tilting her head to one side. 'Are you trying to say I'm not fun now, Dr Donovan?'

'Oh, you're lots of fun, Ms Rae.' He tried to take a grab at her, but his unsteady gait sent him wobbling across the ice. 'Help!'

She skated alongside him and slotted her hand into his. 'Let's just take things easy. We'll just skate around in a simple circle like the rest of the people are doing.' She pointed at some kids teetering past them. 'See? Anyone can do it.'

Brad groaned and tried to push more firmly on the ice. It was easier while Cassidy was gripping his hand, and he gained confidence as they circled round and round the rink. By the time the old-fashioned klaxon sounded, signalling the end of their session, Brad felt as though he could finally stand upright with some confidence.

'Is that an hour already? I can't believe it. I was finally starting to get the hang of this.'

'We can come back again,' said Cassidy with a smile as she skated around him again. The rink was starting to empty as people crowded toward the small exit. He watched for a few seconds as Cassidy took advantage of the now-empty ice and did a few twirls. A squeal stopped her in her tracks.

Brad pushed through the throng, reaching a little girl who was being pulled up by her father and clutching her hand to her chest. Her face was pale and Brad could see a few drips of crimson blood on the ice at her feet.

'Let me have a look at her,' he said, lifting her up in his strong arms. 'I'm a doctor.' He turned his head towards Cassidy, who had appeared at his back. 'Can you ask the booth if they have a first-aid kit?'

The crowd parted easily, concerned by the cries of a child, and he walked unsteadily to the adjacent wooden bench at the side of the rink. He positioned the child underneath the nearest light and held her hand tightly for a few seconds.

'What's your name?' he asked the pale-faced, trembling little girl.

‘Victoria,’ she whispered. Brad smiled. It was clear she was trying very hard not to cry. Her father had his arms wrapped around her shoulders.

‘She just fell over as we were waiting to get off the ice. Someone must have caught her hand with their skate.’

Cassidy appeared with the first-aid kit and opened it quickly, pulling out some gloves, antiseptic wipes, sterile dressings and elastic bandages.

Brad got off the bench and lowered himself near the ground, his face parallel with Victoria’s. ‘I’m just going to have a little look at your hand—just for a second. Is that okay?’

She nodded but clutched her hand even closer to her chest.

He pulled off his gloves and held his hand at the side of her face. ‘Can you feel how cold my fingers are?’ He touched her cheek and she flinched a little, before smiling and nodding.

He picked up the gloves. ‘I’m going to put these really funky blue gloves on before I have a little look. I might want to put a special bandage on your hand—is that okay?’

Victoria nodded, still looking tearful, but held her hand out tremulously to Brad.

Brad worked swiftly. He cleared her hand from her anorak sleeve and had a quick glance at the cut before stemming the flow of blood with a sterile pad. ‘I’m going to give this a quick clean and bandage it up for you.’ He nodded at Cassidy as she ripped open the antiseptic wipes for him.

‘Ouch!’ squealed Victoria, as the wipe lightly touched her skin.

‘All done,’ said Brad almost simultaneously. He took one more look now that the blood was clear, then applied another sterile non-adherent pad and elastic bandage to put a little pressure on the wound. He looked at Cassidy. ‘Which hospital is nearest to here?’

‘The Royal Infirmary,’ she answered. ‘Less than five minutes in a taxi.’

Brad gave the anxious father a smile. ‘I’m afraid she’s going to need some stitches and the wound cleaned properly. The pad shouldn’t stick to her skin and the elastic bandage gives a little pressure to stem the flow of blood before you get to the hospital. But it’s not a long-term solution. Are you able to take her up to the A and E unit?’

The father nodded. He pulled a phone from his pocket and started pressing buttons. ‘I have a friend who’s a taxi driver in the city centre. He’ll come and get us.’

Brad leaned forward and whispered in Victoria’s ear. ‘You’re a very brave girl. And do you know what brave girls get?’ He reached into his pocket and pulled out his little Russian doll. It was almost identical to the one he’d just bought for Cassidy, but this one had silver and pink zigzags and a long silver string to hang it from the tree.

‘This is a special Christmas-tree decoration—just for you.’

Victoria’s eyes lit up, his distraction technique working like a charm. Cassidy’s felt a lump at the back of her throat that she tried to swallow. He must have bought an extra ornament when he’d paid for hers earlier. And it didn’t take much imagination to know who he’d bought it for.

There it was.

Right in front of her, glowing like a beacon. All the reasons why Brad shouldn’t be without his daughter. She gathered up the remnants of the first-aid kit, stuffing them back inside, and disappeared back to the booth.

She couldn’t watch that. She couldn’t watch him interact with a child in such an easy and relaxed manner. It showed what she already knew deep down but hadn’t wanted to admit.

Brad was good with kids. No, Brad was *great* with kids. He knew just when to act and what to say. He deserved to have kids. He deserved to be with his daughter. He deserved to know where she was and play a part in her life.

And even though he hadn’t said much around her over the last few days, it was clear that Melody was in the forefront of his mind.

She felt ashamed. Ashamed of the words she'd uttered and the thoughts she'd had while she'd been talking to Lucy. Thoughts that he might be willing to forget about his daughter and just have a life with her. What kind of person was she?

She'd seen the haunted look in his eyes earlier when he'd been watching the father and daughter on the merry-go-round. But she hadn't been able to say the words—to ask him if he was hurting and what she could do to help.

She looked over at him now, and he gave her a wave as he walked with Victoria and her father to a black cab parked at the side of the square. Her hand lifted automatically in response, but it was the expression on his face that was killing her.

She'd never seen Brad look so comfortable and so at ease.

She knew what he needed more than anything. He needed to find his daughter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

29 November

'HI, Cassidy, nice to see you.'

'Hi, Grace, how's Gran today?'

The nurse walked around the desk and joined Cassidy. 'She's in here today,' she said as she walked into a large sitting room looking out over well-tended gardens. 'She's been really confused these last few days, but unusually quiet, too.'

'Is she eating okay?'

Grace nodded. 'She's eating well. She seems quite focused when she gets her meals. But as soon as she's finished, she's off wandering.' She walked over and touched Cassidy's gran on her shoulder. 'Tillie, your granddaughter is here to see you again.'

Cassidy's heart fell as her gran barely even looked up, her eyes still fixed on the garden. She gave Grace a half-hearted smile. 'Thank you, Grace.'

'No problem. Give me a shout if you need anything.'

Cassidy sat down in the chair opposite her gran. Her heart was fluttering in her chest. She was wearing her gran's red wool coat and she wondered if she would notice.

She pulled off her leather gloves and reached over and took her gran's hand.

'Hi, Gran.' She brushed a kiss on her cheek.

Tillie looked at her only for a second, her confusion immediately evident. She didn't recognise Cassidy.

Cassidy took a deep breath. It had been like this for the last few months. The little spells of recognition and memory were becoming fewer and fewer. She'd had some episodes where she'd mistaken Cassidy for her mother, but it had been over a year since she'd recognised Cassidy for herself.

This was the part that broke her heart. Her gran had always been her confidante, her go-to person. The person who gave her the best advice in the world—something she badly needed right now.

She opened her bag and stared at the pile of envelopes inside. They'd revealed more than she wanted to know. But it was the photograph that haunted her most. Her gran had always been warm and caring towards her. But she couldn't remember ever seeing her gran like she was in that photograph—her eyes filled with adoration for the man standing by her side. Her whole face glowing with happiness. Had she really known her gran at all?

'I've been at the house, Gran. Everything's fine.' Her fingers caught the edge of the collar of her coat and she bit her lip nervously. 'I found this beautiful coat in the one of the cupboards. It was wrapped up with some letters.' She pulled the bundle from her bag, But Tillie's eyes were still fixed on the garden. Cassidy swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat.

The garden was covered in frost and a light dusting of snow, but the beds in front of the window brimmed with life. They were filled with evergreen bushes with red berries, coloured heather plants and deep pink pernettya plants. The planters around the edges had an eruption of coloured cyclamen and white heathers. It was beautiful.

Cassidy looked out over the horizon. Everything about this spelled Christmas to her. She wondered what plants they had in Australia at this time of year. Would there be anything as nice as this? How could anyone feel festive in a baking-hot climate?

She'd thought about that often over the last few days, the thoughts just drifting into her mind when she least expected them. She'd had numerous friends who'd emigrated and they all raved about it, saying it had been the best move of their lives. They sent her pictures of spending Christmas Day on the beach, cooking on the barbeque or having dinner in the sunshine next to the pool.

But Christmas always meant cold weather, frost and snow to Cassidy. She just couldn't imagine it any other way. Could she really feel festive in a bikini?

'Hello, dear. Who are you?'

Cassidy flinched and pushed the thoughts from her mind as her gran spoke to her, her eyes suddenly bright with life.

'I'm Cassidy, your granddaughter. I've come for a visit, Gran.'

'How lovely. Do you have any tea?'

Cassidy smiled. Her gran was a true tea genie and could drink twenty cups a day. She slid her hand into her gran's. 'I've come to tell you that I've met a nice man, Gran. One who's making me think about a lot of things.'

Tillie nodded but didn't say anything. Cassidy took a deep breath. 'When I found your coat, I also found a parcel of letters.' She hesitated for a second. 'I hope you don't mind, but I read them, Gran. The ones from Peter Johnson, your US Air Force friend.'

She paused, waiting to see if would get any reaction. She knew some people would think she was strange, trying to have a normal conversation with a confused old lady, but to Cassidy she couldn't communicate any other way. She loved and respected her gran, and she hoped beyond hope that some of what she said might get through. 'He looked lovely, Gran.'

She pulled out the black-and-white photograph. 'I found a picture of you—you look so happy.' She couldn't help the forlorn sound to her voice as she handed the photo to her gran.

Tillie took it in her frail fingers and touched the surface of the photograph. 'So pretty,' she murmured, before handing it back.

Cassidy sat backwards in her chair. 'He wrote you some lovely letters. You never told me about him—I wish you had.' She stared out the windows, lost in thought.

She'd read the letters the night before, tears rolling down her face. Peter Johnson had met her gran while he'd been stationed in Prestwick with the US Army Air Force. His letters were full of young love and hope for the future. Filled with promises of a life in the US. Most had come from Prestwick, with a few from Indiana at a later date.

Had he been her gran's first love? What had happened to him? Had he gone back to the US and forgotten about her? Her gran could have had the chance of another life, on another continent. Had she wanted to go to the US? What had stopped her? Had she suffered from any of the doubts and confusion that she herself was feeling right now?

She looked back at her gran, who was running her fingers over the sleeve of her coat. 'I wish you could tell me, Gran.' Tears were threatening to spill down her cheeks. 'I really need some advice. I need you to tell me what I should do.'

'What a lovely colour,' her gran said suddenly, before sitting back in her chair. 'Did you bring tea?' she asked.

Cassidy gave Tillie's hand a squeeze. 'I'll go and get you some tea, Gran,' she said, standing up and heading over to the kitchen. She'd been here often enough to know where everything was kept.

The girl in the kitchen gave her a nod and handed over a teapot and two cups. She glanced at her watch. 'I thought it was about that time for your gran. I was just about to bring this over.' She smiled as Cassidy lifted up the tray, before reaching over and touching the shoulder of her coat. 'What a beautiful coat, Cassidy. It's a really nice style. It suits you.'

Cassidy blushed. 'Thank you. I found it the other day.' She nodded over her shoulder. 'It was Gran's.'

'Really? I'm surprised. It looks brand new.' She raised her eyebrows. 'I bet she cut up a storm in that coat a few years ago.'

Cassidy's felt her shoulders sag. 'I don't know, Karen. Truth is, I never saw my gran wear this coat. But I found a picture of her in it and she looked amazing.'

‘I bet she did.’ Karen gave her a smile. ‘You know, Cassidy, I know it’s hard seeing your gran like this, but you’ve got to remember that she’s happy here. Although she’s frail, her physical health is good for someone her age and most days she seems really content.’

Cassidy nodded gratefully. ‘I know, Karen.’ She looked over to where her gran was sitting, staring out the window again. ‘I just wish I could have the old her back sometimes—even for just a few minutes.’

Karen gave her arm a squeeze. ‘I know, honey.’

Cassidy carried the tea tray over and waited a few minutes before pouring a cup for her gran. She was fussy about her tea—not too weak, not too strong, with just the right amount of milk.

Cassidy kept chatting as she sat next to her. It didn’t matter to her that her gran didn’t understand or acknowledge what she was saying. It felt better just telling her things. In the last year she’d found that just knowing she’d told her gran something could make her feel a million times better—sometimes even help her work things out in her head.

‘I’ve met a nice Australian man. He’s a doctor who’s working with me right now.’ Her gran nodded and smiled. Often it seemed as if she liked to hear the music and tone of Cassidy’s voice. ‘The only thing is, he has a little girl who is missing right now. He really wants to find her. And when he does …’ she took a deep breath ‘… he’ll go.’

The words sounded so painful when she said them out loud.

And for a second they stopped her in her tracks.

What would she do if Brad just upped and disappeared? How would she feel if she could never see him again?

It didn’t take long for the little part of her she didn’t like to creep into her brain again. Chances were Melody might never be found. Brad might decide to stay in Scotland for a while longer.

She felt a wave of heat wash over her like a comfort blanket. That would be perfect. Maybe she could consider a trip to Australia? That wouldn’t be so hard. It was a beautiful country and it might even be interesting to see the differences in nursing in another country.

She looked outside at the frosty weather. Her gran had started singing under her breath. A sweet lullaby that she used to sing to Cassidy as a child. Memories came flooding back, of dark nights in front of the fire cuddled up on Gran’s couch.

Part of the issue for Cassidy was that she loved the Scottish winters and cold weather. As a pale-skinned Scot, she’d never been a fan of the blazing-hot sunshine. And even when she’d gone on holiday, she hadn’t lain beside the pool for a fortnight; she’d needed to be up and about doing things.

Most people she knew would love the opportunity to live in a warmer climate but Cassidy had never even considered it. Not for a second.

Could she really start to consider something like that now?

Everything was making her head spin. Her relationship with Brad was becoming serious. She really needed to sit down and talk to him again.

She looked at her gran, who was sipping her tea delicately, trying to hear the words she thought her gran might say in her head.

She could imagine the elderly lady telling her not to be so pathetic. To make up her mind about what she wanted and to go get it. She could also sense the old-fashioned disapproval her gran might have about the fact Brad had a child with someone else. A child he wasn’t being allowed to fulfil his parental duties towards. Her gran would certainly have had something to say about that.

But would she have been suspicious like some of Brad’s colleagues in Australia? Or would she have been sympathetic towards him?

Cassidy just wasn’t sure. And finding the letters and photographs made her even less sure. She’d thought she’d known everything about her gran. Turned out she hadn’t. And now she’d no way of picking up those lost strands of her life.

She heaved a sigh and looked out over the garden again. She was going to have to sort this out for herself.

30 November

Brad came rushing into the restaurant ten minutes late, with his tie skewed to one side and his top button still undone. 'I'm so sorry,' he gasped as he sat down opposite her. 'There was a last-minute admission just before I left, and Luca was at a cardiac arrest so I couldn't leave.'

Cassidy gave him a smile and lifted her glass of wine towards him. 'No worries, Brad, I started without you.'

He reached over and pulled the bottle of wine from the cooler at the side of the table and filled his glass. She leaned across the table. 'Here, let me,' she said as her deft fingers did up his top button and straightened his tie.

She didn't care that he'd been late. His conscientiousness at work was one of the reasons she liked him so much.

He raised his glass to her. 'Cheers.' The glasses clinked together and Cassidy relaxed back into her chair.

Brad ducked under the table. 'Here, I bought you something.' He handed a plastic bag over to Cassidy.

She raised her eyebrows. 'Did you wrap it yourself?' she quipped.

'Ha, ha. Just look and see what it is.'

Cassidy peeked inside the plastic bag and gingerly put her hand inside—all she could see was a mixture of red and green felt. She pulled out her present and felt a mixture of surprise and a tiny bit of disappointment. It was an advent calendar, the fabric kind with pockets for each of the twenty-four days. The kind she'd told Brad she didn't like.

She looked over at him and he gave her a beaming smile. 'I thought in the spirit of making some nice Christmas memories I would try and convert you.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Convert me? Why?'

He shrugged. 'You like the paper-type advent calendar. I always had one of these in Australia that my mum made for me. She used to put something in the pockets for only a few days at a time because she knew I would have looked ahead otherwise.' He touched the first few pockets and she heard a rustling sound. 'And they're *not* all chocolates.'

She nodded and gave him a smile. 'So, you're trying to convert me, are you? Well, I'm willing to give it a go. But how do you plan on filling up the other pockets?'

There it was. That little twinkle in his eye as he took a sip of his wine. 'That's the thing. If you want your calendar filled, you'll have to keep letting me into your flat. In fact, I'll need unlimited access.'

She loved the way his smile stretched from ear to ear. The restaurant was dim, with subdued lighting and flickering candlelight. His eyes seemed even bluer than normal, their colour amplified as they reflected off his pale blue shirt.

'Did you plan this just so you could get into my flat?'

He shook his head, his face becoming a little more serious. 'I just think you've been a little quiet these past few days. As if something was on your mind.' His fingers reached across the table and intertwined with hers. 'I'm just trying to find a way to stay in your life.'

She felt shocked by the openness and honesty of his words. She kept her gaze stuck on the advent calendar as she tried to think of what to say. Things had been a little unsettled between them.

'I'm just a little unsure of what's happening between us,' she started slowly. She lifted her eyes. 'I like you, Brad.'

'And I like you, too, Cassidy. You know that.'

He wasn't making this any easier. It was hard enough, trying to get the words out. His fingers were tracing little circles on the palm of her hand. Just like he did after they'd made love together.

'I'm just worried that I'm getting in too deep and before we know it you'll be gone.'

His brow creased. 'Why would you think that?'

She pulled her hand away from his. It was too distracting. 'I don't know. I just think that I'm from Scotland, you're from Australia …' She threw her hands up in frustration, then levelled her gaze at him. 'I know you don't want to stay here and I don't want to move away. So where does that leave us?'

She could feel tears nestling behind her eyes. That was the last thing she wanted to happen. She didn't want to cry.

Her mind was flooded with thoughts of her gran. Truth was, she would never find out what happened between her gran and Peter Johnson. Maybe it had only been a wartime fling, with no substance behind it. Or maybe her gran had given up the chance of a lifetime to go and live abroad with the man who'd made her face sparkle.

What Cassidy would never know was whether her gran regretted her decisions. If she could go back, would she do something different?

Was *she* about to make the same mistake?

Brad reached back over and took her hand again. 'Cassidy, I have no idea what's going to happen. All I know is I love spending time with you and I don't want it to end. I've no idea what will happen in the next few years—I've been offered an extension to my job here for another six months, and I've decided to take it. You know I'm not going to stop looking for my daughter. Is that what this is all about? Melody?'

Cassidy shook her head. 'No, it's not about Melody.' Then she hesitated. 'But I don't know what to think about all that. At the end of the day, Brad, we could continue to have a relationship for the next few months and then you could get a call one day about Melody and just disappear. I don't think I could handle that.'

And there it was, staring him in the face. All the while he was practically telling her she was bullheaded and stubborn, her biggest vulnerability lay on the table between them. Abandonment.

He'd sensed it in her for a while. When she'd mentioned her ex-fiancé, her parents or her ill grandmother. That fear of being alone.

He shook his head, the expression on his face pained. 'Remember, Cassidy, I've been on the other side of this fence. I've had someone disappear out of my life with no warning. And I know how much it hurts. I would never do that to another human being.'

She could tell her words had stung, and she hadn't meant them to. It was just so difficult to describe the mishmash of emotions in her head. Even she couldn't understand them, so how could she expect Brad to?

The waiter appeared at their side with some menus, and Cassidy pulled her hand from Brad's to take one. Her eyes ran up and down the menu quickly before Brad lifted it from her hands.

'Don't tell me, you'll have the mushrooms and the chicken.'

Cassidy groaned. 'Don't tell me I'm that predictable.' She grabbed the menu back and ran her eyes along the text again with a sinking realisation that Brad was right. She *did* always have the mushrooms and the chicken. The only time she ever deviated was if neither was on the menu.

He leaned forward, giving her that smile again. 'Why don't you surprise us both and pick something totally different? In fact, close your eyes and just point at something and order that.'

Cassidy shivered. 'Yuck.' Even the thought of doing that was too much for her. Imagine if she ended up with something she didn't like—or never ate? That would be hideous. 'I can't do that, Brad, I might get seaweed or fillet steak.'

His eyes gleamed as he did a pretend shudder.

'Mmm, and that would be awful, wouldn't it? Take this as a test, Cassidy.'

'A test for what?'

He folded his napkin in his lap, as if he was choosing his words carefully. 'For a thoroughly modern woman, you can be pretty closed-minded about some things.'

An uncomfortable feeling crept down her spine. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You can have some pretty fixed ideas.’

Cassidy shook her head. ‘I just know my own mind. There’s nothing wrong with that.’

He paused. ‘I didn’t say there was. But sometimes you make your mind up about things without looking at the whole picture.’

Cassidy was feeling rattled now and a little irritated. So much for a romantic dinner. ‘What do you mean exactly?’

He licked his lips and she saw him take a deep breath. There was something different in his eyes. The normal laid-back look was gone. ‘What I mean, Cassidy, is that you’ve written me—and others—off with no thought or regard for our feelings, just because we live in a different country. Now, if you’d been abroad and stayed there for a while and didn’t enjoy it, it might seem a reasonable conclusion to have come to. But you haven’t. You’ve never done it. You’ve never even tried. And what’s more—you won’t even consider it.’

He looked frustrated by her, angry even, and she felt a tight feeling spread across her chest. Not even Bobby, her Spanish fiancé, had called her like this. She’d just refused to go with him and that had been that. He hadn’t questioned her reasoning behind her decision. He hadn’t made *her* question her reasoning behind the decision.

But Brad hadn’t finished. He was on a roll. ‘It’s the same with your menu choices and your Christmas traditions.’ He leaned over and picked up the advent calendar. ‘You say you only like the picture calendars but you’ve never even tried one of these, have you?’ She saw his shoulders sag, tension easing out of them, and the tone of his voice altered.

‘All I’m trying to do is get you to look outside your box. To look at the world that surrounds you and open your mind to other ideas, other experiences, other …’ he paused before ending ‘… possibilities.’

He was holding his breath, waiting to see what she would say. She should stop, she should think and ponder what he was saying to her and why. But Cassidy went with her first instinct. She was mad.

She flung her napkin on the table. ‘So why are you bothering with me, Brad? You don’t date someone with the idea of changing them. You date someone because you like them the way they are, not the way *you* want them to be.’ She spat the words at him.

‘I’m not trying to change you. I like you, everything about you. But if we have any hope of a future together, you’re going to have to learn to bend a little.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning that I would love to promise to stay with you in Scotland for the next thirty years, but what if I do get that call about my daughter? What if I do need to go to the States? That’s it for us? Just like that—because you won’t even consider any other possibility?’

He made it all sound so unreasonable. So closed-minded. But inside she didn’t feel like that.

‘Or what if I get a great opportunity to work in another country? You won’t even consider coming with me? Because you can’t leave Scotland?’

‘But my gran, I can’t leave my gran.’ It was the first thing that sprang to mind. The first brick in her feeble wall of defence.

Brad shook his head. ‘I’m not asking you to leave your gran, Cassidy. Even though you know she’s somewhere she’s been taken care of. I’m just trying to see if you’ll at least *consider* the possibility.’

Silence hung in the air between them. Her temper had dissipated as quickly as it had arisen.

He was making sense. Inside she knew he was making sense. But to admit it made her seem so petty.

The waiter appeared at their side again. ‘Are you ready to order?’

Cassidy didn’t even glance at the menu, she just thrust it back at the waiter. ‘I’ll have the chilli prawns and the Cajun salmon,’ she said as she looked Brad square in the eye.

She could see the pulse at the side of his neck flickering furiously. How long had he been holding all this in? Chances were he'd been waiting to say this to her for the last few weeks. And he was right.

Although there was no way she was going to admit it right now.

Tiny little thoughts of Australia had started to penetrate her brain. Little sparks, curiosity and wonder had been creeping in over the last few weeks. Would she like it there? What would it be like to be in a different country for more than a two-week holiday?

It wasn't as if she'd never left the sunny shores of Scotland. She'd been all over the world—Spain, Italy, the US, even the Bahamas. But only for two weeks at a time. And by the time the plane had hit the tarmac back at Glasgow Airport, she'd always been glad to get back home.

But she had lots of friends who'd gone to other countries to work. The most popular place lately had been Dubai. Five of the nurses she'd worked with in Glasgow City Hospital had all upped sticks and gone to work there. All of them loved it and most had no intention of coming back to Glasgow. Two other members of staff had gone to work for aid organisations—one to Africa and one to Médecins Sans Frontières.

Why was she so different? Why had she never wanted to go and work somewhere else? Why did she feel as if her roots were firmly planted in Scottish soil?

Brad lifted the wine bottle and topped up her glass. She hadn't even heard what he'd ordered. She only hoped it was chicken so she could swap her salmon for it.

He lifted his glass to her. 'So, what do you say, Cassidy? Can we raise a toast to trying new things?'

She swallowed hard, her fingers brushing the tiny pockets of the advent calendar on the table in front of her. This couldn't be too hard. She could try this, couldn't she?

He was staring across the table at her, with those big blue eyes, tanned skin and perfect smile. Everything about him made her stomach still lurch. She'd never felt like this before. Could she honestly just walk away?

This had to be worth fighting for.

CHAPTER EIGHT

4 December

CASSIDY woke up with a smile on her face. She glanced at the calendar hanging on her wall. Maybe embracing new change wasn't such a bad thing.

Brad's gifts had proved personal and thoughtful. She'd found an orange Belgian chocolate in the first pocket—one that she'd remarked on that night at the George Square market. For once she hadn't been instantly offended by the thought of a chocolate-filled calendar.

Next had been a tiny green sequin Christmas tree complete with red string, and in the third pocket she'd found a sprig of mistletoe.

It only took her seconds to push her feet into her red slippers and wrap her dressing gown around her shoulders. Brad had been on call again last night, so she hadn't seen him.

Her brow wrinkled. Pocket number four looked distinctly flat—maybe he hadn't had time to put something in there yet? She flicked the switch on the kettle and pulled a cup from the cupboard, before finally touching the pocket. There was a faint rustling noise. She pulled a piece of paper from the pocket and unfolded it.

It said, *'Look under the tree—not everything can fit in these tiny pockets!'*

She left the kettle boiling and walked through to her living room. There, under the tree he'd helped her decorate a few days before, was a red, glistening parcel. She couldn't wipe the smile from her face as she unwrapped the paper. It was a book. But not just any book. It was the latest thriller from her favourite Glasgow author—one she'd been meaning to buy herself.

Cassidy sagged back against the cushions on her sofa. Yet another thoughtful gift. One that meant something to her. Picked up from a chance conversation they'd had in the middle of the night on one shift.

She looked out at the overcast sky. It was going to be another miserable day. Time to wrap up warmly and head up the frosty hill to the hospital. She heard a noise at her door—a key turning in the lock and a whoosh of cold air blasting across the room.

'Brad, what are you doing here?'

Brad was barely recognisable among the layers of clothing he was wearing. All she could really see clearly were his blue eyes peering out from the balaclava-type headwear he'd started wearing to protect himself from the cold. He was brandishing some cups. 'A skinny caramel latte for my favourite woman.'

She smiled. 'I'd hug you, but you're too cold.'

He sat down next to her, hands clenched around his cup. 'I'd take off my jacket but let me heat up first. It's Baltic out there.'

She laughed. 'So, you're finally connecting with our language. That's something I would normally say—not you.'

He nudged her. 'You must be rubbing off on me.' He bent over, his cold nose brushing against her, and she let out a squeal.

'Get away, ice man!' He wrapped his arms around her, trapping her on the sofa.

'This is an emergency. I need some body heat. I can't take these cold winters!'

She pretended to squirm as he held her tight. 'Drink your coffee. That will heat you up.'

'I can think of a better way to heat up,' he whispered as he grabbed her hand and led her back through to her warm bed.

10 December

Today she had a magic wand. Pocket ten had held another little note that had led her to find it wrapped in silver paper, balanced on the branches of the tree.

He'd asked her favourite film character the other night and she'd declared she'd always wanted to be Glinda, the good witch of the north, from *The Wizard of Oz*. So he'd bought her a magic wand. And right now she really wanted to wave it above her medical receiving unit.

In the last twenty-four hours every single one of the thirty beds in the unit had been emptied and refilled. Patients were never supposed to stay in the medical receiving unit. Patients were supposed to be assessed and transferred to one of the other wards, but the current rate of transfer was ridiculous, for both the staff and the patients.

She replaced the phone receiver. Her staff was run ragged. The bed manager was getting snarky —she had patients in A and E waiting to be admitted. The normally pristine ward looked chaotic. There were a few random patient belonging bags sitting at the nurses' station, obviously misplaced or forgotten in the preceding few hours. And as for the ward clerk—she'd disappeared in tears five minutes ago.

Cassidy took a deep breath. This was the story of Scottish hospitals in the middle of an icy winter. It was only eight o'clock in the morning. She had to take control of this situation. Something was going to give. And she didn't want it to be her—or her staff.

She lifted her hands above her head. 'Everyone, stop!'

For a second there was silence. Cassidy never raised her voice on the ward and her staff looked startled. A few heads stuck out from doors down the corridor.

'Everyone …' she gestured her hands towards the desk '… come here. This will take five minutes.'

Her bewildered staff walked towards the nursing station. Some were carrying electronic nursing notes, some bed linen and towels.

Cassidy waited until they'd all assembled. One of the phlebotomists and ECG technicians appeared, too. She took another deep breath.

'Everyone, let's calm down. I want you all to take a deep breath and tell me calmly what help you need.' She laid one hand on the desk. 'I can tell you that right now, no matter what the bed manager says, we will not move another patient until after lunchtime today. We need time to assess these patients properly.'

She gestured to the bags on the floor. 'We need to make sure that patients' belongings don't go astray.' She lowered her voice. 'More importantly, I need my team to know that they do a good job.'

She could see the visible calm descending on the ward as the rumble of the meal trolley could be heard approaching. 'What about the patients in A and E?' asked one of the younger staff nurses.

Cassidy shook her head. 'A and E is full of competent nursing staff. They are more than capable of starting the assessments for their patients. I'm going to phone them now and tell them to arrange breakfast and lunch for those patients. They won't be moving any more up here until after lunchtime.'

A number of shoulders relaxed around her.

'What about the bed manager?'

Cassidy smiled. 'Let me deal with her. Now …' she looked over at the staff surrounding her '… Fiona and Claire, go for your tea break. Michael …' she nodded to the tall, dark-haired nurse beside her '… you start the drug round. Linda and Ann, you help Joanne, the domestic, with the breakfasts.' The two auxiliaries scurried off, glad to have a simple task to perform.

Cassidy noticed Janice, the ward clerk, sniffing at her side. 'What's wrong, Janice?'

'It's the off-duty. It was supposed to be in for yesterday. But there's still a few shifts that need to be covered.'

Cassidy's eyes swept over the blank spaces in the book. Her brain shifted into gear. One of her senior staff nurses had asked if she could start taking over the off-duty rota. And she'd made an absolute mess of it, something Cassidy would have to deal with at a later date.

Just what she would have expected. One short for the night shift on Christmas Eve. The same thing happened every year without fail.

Her mind drifted back to the night at smelly-cat-woman's house. She almost cringed as she remembered she'd offered to do the night shift if she was a Christmas bride.

She could almost laugh out loud. Although the thought didn't seem anything like as ridiculous as it had before.

Things between her and Brad were good—better than good. Her brain had started to rationalise things for her. Australia was one day away. All twenty-four hours of one day, but still only one day away from Scotland.

The more stories he told her about his life there, the more curious she became. But something else was becoming clearer to her. Just like it had when Brad had naturally came home to her flat the other day after his shift had finished.

She wanted to see him all the time. She wanted to be with him all the time. If he was on call and she didn't see him one day, she missed him. Something that had hit her like a bolt out of the blue.

Cassidy had spent the last two years living life on her own. Her gran's memory had deteriorated to the point she didn't recognise Cassidy, and it had left her feeling even more alone than before. She rarely heard from her parents. But all of sudden it felt as if she had family again.

And having Brad around just felt so *right*.

She didn't expect to be a Christmas bride, but she did expect to have Brad in her future.

She pointed. 'Swap these two around. Lorna prefers her night shifts together. And I'll cover the night shift on Christmas Eve. Okay?'

'Are you sure?' The clerk was looking at her through red-rimmed eyes.

She gave her shoulder a squeeze. 'Yes, I'm sure. Now, just send it in and go make yourself a cup of tea.'

She went through to her office and made an uncomfortable call to the bed manager then walked quickly through the ward, helping the auxiliaries sit some patients up in bed for breakfast and helping another few patients into chairs. Luca appeared at her side and started reviewing some of the patients who had been admitted overnight. He gave her a smile. 'I hear you're leading a revolt up here this morning.'

She nodded. 'Happy to join in?'

'Absolutely. I feel as if I hardly got to see some of these patients in A and E.'

'It was the same for my staff. We weren't getting the chance to assess the patients properly before we sent them on.' She looked up and down the length of the ward, which seemed much calmer. 'I'm not allowing that to happen. We have a duty of care to these patients and I won't compromise.'

'Tell that to the bed manager.'

'I just did.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Although she hates me right now, first and foremost she is a nurse, so she does understand the issues.'

The phone started ringing again, and since she'd sent the ward clerk off for tea, Cassidy leaned forward and picked it up. 'Medical receiving unit, Sister Rae speaking. Can I help you?'

The words she heard chilled her to the bone, and she gestured frantically to Luca for a piece of paper and then started scribbling furiously.

'What's wrong?' he asked as she replaced the phone.

'It's my grandmother. She's had a fall at the nursing home—they think she might have broken her hip.' She started to look around about her, searching for her bag. 'I need to go. They've taken her to another hospital at the other side of the city.'

Luca stood up. 'What can I do?'

Cassidy started pulling on the cardigan that was draped over her chair. She couldn't think straight. She couldn't think at all. The rational parts of her brain had stopped working. Gran was in her eighties and had chest problems. How often did an elderly person have problems with the anaesthetic? What if this was the last time she'd ever see her gran again?

She started to pace up the corridor. 'Michael, are you there?'

His head ducked out from behind a set of curtains.

'I'm really sorry but I need to go. It's an emergency—my gran. They think she might have broken her hip.'

'Of course, Cassidy. No problem.'

'You've got the keys to the drug trolley, haven't you? Here's the controlled-drug key.' She unpinned it from inside her uniform pocket. 'Can you let Lucy, Sister Burns from next door, know that I've had to leave?' She was babbling and she knew it.

'Cassidy, we'll be fine. I'll get some help from next door if we need it. And I won't start transferring any patients until after lunch.' He gave her a quick hug, then placed a hand firmly at her back. 'Now, go.'

His pager sounded again, and Brad growled and rolled over. 'I'm sleeping. I'm not on call any more. Leave me alone,' he groaned.

But the pager wasn't listening. It sounded again. And again. And again.

Brad was mad. Last night had been ridiculous. He hadn't stopped—not even for a minute. And on the way to work last night his Mini had made the strangest sound then phutted to a stop at the side of the road. And all he wanted to do this morning was lie in his bed and vegetate.

He flung back the covers, squinting at the light coming through the blinds, and lifted the pager to his scrunched-up eyes.

'Call Joe immediately.'

All of a sudden he was wide awake, his heart thumping in his chest. Joe Scott was his very expensive, US private investigator. He emailed Brad every few weeks, telling him any leads he was following and how he was getting on.

They had an understanding. Joe knew that Brad was a doctor, frequently on call, and had agreed that Joe would only contact Brad via his pager if something significant turned up. It had seemed the easiest solution as messages to a busy hospital could be lost, and depending on his rota sometimes Brad could be away from his house and normal emails for a few days at a time.

He reached for his phone, pushing in the number that was ingrained there.

'Joe, it's Brad Donovan. What have you found?'

'Haven't you read the email I sent you? I sent you some photographs.'

It took a few seconds for Brad's ears to adjust to the American accent. Email. He hadn't looked at his emails for two days.

He moved automatically to his laptop, his bare feet padding across the floor. It took for ever to boot up.

'I'm just opening the email now, Joe,' he said. 'Give me a few minutes.' He wasn't sure what was waking him up more quickly—the shock phone call or the cold air.

The email took for ever to open. He could sense Joe waiting impatiently at the other end of the phone. He didn't even read the content, just clicked on one of the attached photographs.

There she was. Blonde ringlets framing her face, dressed in a green puffy coat, throwing back her head and laughing. It was a beautiful sight.

'Is it her?' The US voice cut into his thoughts.

For a moment he couldn't speak. She'd grown so much. She looked like a proper little girl now—a little lady even, rather than a toddler. His eyes swept the surrounding area. Alison was standing in the background, holding a baby. She was laughing, too. Melody was positioned on the pebbled shoreline of a lake and was clutching stones in her hands.

He tried not to let the rage overwhelm him. He couldn't let that get in the way right now. This was the first time he'd laid eyes on his little girl in nearly two years.

'Brad? Are you there?' The voice was strained now, obviously worried by his lack of response.

'Yes,' he croaked. 'It's Melody.' There was an unfamiliar sensation overwhelming him right now. It was a mixture of relief, joy, bitterness and excitement.

'Great. I was sure I'd found them, but needed you to confirm it.'

Brad's mind started to race. His eyes couldn't move from the photograph. They looked to be out in the middle of nowhere.

'Where are they?'

'North Woods, Wisconsin. Lots of hills and dense woods, terrible phone and internet reception. Took the photo two days ago. You were right about Alison, she got married. Her name is now Alison Johnson. Married to Blane Johnson—a paediatrician in Wisconsin—and they have a baby daughter, Temperance.'

Brad could tell he was reading from the notes in front of him. But he didn't care. He still couldn't believe it. And the picture was crystal clear. Not some blurry snap, which he might have expected. He could almost reach out and touch her. Did she remember him? Did she remember she had a dad who loved her very much?

His fingers brushed the screen. She looked happy. She looked healthy. Part of him gave a little sigh of relief. His daughter was alive, happy and healthy. For any parent, that should be the most important thing.

He was trying so hard to keep a lid on his feelings. He'd spent the last two years thinking about what he'd do when he found her. Thoughts of taking his time and trying to contact Alison separately, engaging a lawyer, getting advice on his legal rights in another country, finding out about extradition from that particular state in the US. And now all those rational, sensible thoughts were flying out the window.

Something registered in his brain—geography had never been his strong point. 'Where is it? Where's North Woods, Wisconsin?'

He heard Joe let out a guffaw. 'I thought you might ask that. Not the most straightforward place to get to. For you, the nearest international airports are Minnesota or Chicago. I don't think you can get a flight from Glasgow to either of them direct. Probably best to fly from Glasgow via Amsterdam and then Chicago. I'll make arrangements for you from there. Just let me know if you're coming into O'Hare or Midway International.'

Brad nodded. Chicago—some place that he'd heard of. He'd be able to find a flight there. 'I'll get online now. I'll get the quickest flight out that I can. Give me a couple of hours and I'll email you back the details.'

'No problem, son. See you soon.'

Brad put down the phone. His hands were shaking. He clicked into the rest of the email. There were four photographs. Two pictures of Alison with her baby and two of Melody. She was still his little girl. She had his blond hair and blue eyes. She even had his smile. And if he played his cards right, he would get to see her again.

He quickly dialled another number he had in his phone. A US attorney he'd been put in touch with who specialised in family law. Best to get some advice before he set foot on US soil. The last thing he wanted to do was cause a scene and get deported.

His brain whirring, he opened a travel website to search for flights. Only one from Glasgow. Leaving in six hours. He didn't hesitate. A few clicks and he was booked. He'd already been to the US in the last two years and knew his machine-readable passport meant he didn't need a visa.

This was it—he was finally going to see his daughter again.

Then something else hit him. Cassidy. He had to tell Cassidy.

He looked at the clock. It wouldn't take him long to pack. He groaned as he remembered his Mini still abandoned at the side of the road. He could get a taxi to the airport. But he couldn't leave without speaking to Cassidy first. It took a few minutes to wrap up his call to the lawyer then he pulled on his jogging trousers and trainers. He could run up the hill to the hospital. Cassidy would be on the ward. He could speak to her there.

He remembered that look on her face in the restaurant. She'd worried about this moment. And to be honest, he'd reached the stage that he'd wondered if this would ever happen.

And now it had.

And he had to go.

But he wouldn't go without speaking to Cassidy. Without reassuring her that he would come back for her. He loved his daughter with his whole heart. But he loved Cassidy, too, and he wanted her to be a part of his life. He looked over to the table where he had an array of little gifts organised for her—all to be placed in the pockets of the calendar. He would do that once he got back from the hospital.

First he had to reassure her. First, he had to tell her that he loved her.

'Where is she?'

'Where's who?' Michael was in the middle of drawing up some heparin. 'Who are you looking for?'

'Cassidy, of course!' Who did that big oaf think he would be looking for? He was out of breath, panting.

He wasn't really dressed for the cold, with just a T-shirt and tracksuit top in place, and the run up the hill in the biting cold hadn't helped.

Michael's face paled a little. 'Oh, I take it you haven't heard?'

'Haven't heard what?' Brad's frustration was growing by the second.

'Cassidy had to leave. Her gran had a fall in the nursing home and they thought she might have broken her hip. They are taking her to the Wallace Hospital—on the other side of the city. Cassidy left about an hour ago.'

Brad felt the air whoosh out from him. He pulled out his phone and started dialling her number. But it connected directly to her voice mail.

'Not supposed to use that in here,' muttered Michael.

Brad grabbed his arm. 'How far away is the Wallace? How would I get there at this time of day?' This was the worst possible time for his car to die.

Michael frowned. 'You in a hurry?'

Brad nodded. 'I need to see Cassidy, speak to the boss and arrange a few days off, then get to the airport.'

'You are joking, aren't you?' Michael's eyebrows were raised.

'No. No, I'm not. Give me some directions.'

Michael shook his head. 'At this time of day it will be a bit of a nightmare. You'd need to take the clockwork orange …'

'The what?'

'The underground. That's what we call it around here. You'd need to take the clockwork orange to Cessnock and then get the bus to the hospital. It'll take you about an hour.' He looked at the clock on the wall opposite. 'What time do you need to get to the airport?

Because you'll need to get a train to Paisley for that. Then a bus to the airport.'

Brad's head was currently mush. There was no way he was going to get across the city—find Cassidy in a strange hospital, get back, pack and get to the airport in time.

He threw up his hands in frustration and left the hospital, walking back down the hill towards his flat.

He tried her phone again three times and sent her two text messages—but it was obvious she had her phone switched off. What could he do?

He got back home and pulled the biggest suitcase he had from the wardrobe and started throwing things inside. Jeans, jumpers, boots, T-shirts—anything he could think of.

He sat down and tried her phone again. Straight to voice mail. 'Cassidy—it's Brad. I heard about your gran. I'm really sorry and I hope she's okay. I really, really need to speak to you and I

don't want to do it over the phone. Please phone me back as soon as you get this message. Please …' He hesitated for a second. 'I love you, Cass.'

He put the phone down. A wave of regret was washing over him. The first time he told her he loved her should have been when he was staring into her big brown eyes—not leaving a message on a phone. But he needed to let her know how he felt. She had to know how much she meant to him.

He looked at the rest of the items on the table. Her flat was only five minutes away—he could go around now and put them in the calendar for her. He could also take some time to write her a letter and explain what had happened. That way, if he didn't get to speak to her, she'd know he'd never meant to leave like this.

He looked at the clock again. Did he really not have the time to get to the other side of the city and back? His heart fell. He knew he didn't. Latest check-in time at the airport was two hours before his flight left. He would never make it. This was the only flight to Chicago that left in the next three days. He had to be on it. The chance to see his daughter again was just too important. He'd waited too long for this moment. He couldn't put this off, no matter how much he wanted to see Cassidy.

He picked up the items from the table and grabbed his keys. He had to try and make this right.

Cassidy leaned back against the wall. The cool hospital concrete was freezing, cutting straight through her thin top, but she welcomed it as she felt completely frazzled. Six hours after she'd got here, her gran was finally being wheeled to Theatre. Her hip was definitely fractured and she was in pain. The orthopaedic surgeon had tried to put her off until the next day, but he hadn't met Cassidy Rae before.

She'd waited until she was sure her gran had disappeared along the corridor to Theatre before she started rummaging around her bag. She badly needed a coffee. Her mobile clattered to the floor as she tried to find her purse.

She picked it up and switched it back on. It had sounded earlier in the A and E department and one of the staff had told her to switch it off. The phone buzzed back into life and started to beep constantly.

Text message from Brad. *'Phone me.'*

Another text message from Brad. *'Phone me as soon as you get this.'*

Text message. *Two voice-mail messages.*

Cassidy felt her heart start to flutter in her chest. She hadn't managed to phone Brad since her gran's accident. Was he worried about her? Or was it something else?

She walked along the corridor and out of the main door, standing to one side and pressing the phone to her ear. She listened to the first message. What on earth was wrong? What didn't he want to say on the phone? Her brain started to panic so much she almost missed the end of the message. *'I love you.'*

Brad had just told her he loved her. On the phone. And while she wanted the warm feeling to spread throughout her body, she couldn't help feeling something was wrong. His voice—the tone of it.

Had something happened to him? She pressed for the next message.

'Cassidy, honey, I'm so sorry. I really wanted to speak to you. I've left you a letter at home—it explains everything. I will be back, I promise. And I'll phone you as soon as I get there. And I'll email you as soon as I get near a computer. I love you, Cassidy.'

Get back from where? Her fingers scrolled for his name and pressed 'dial'. It rang and then diverted to voice mail. His phone must be switched off.

Where was he?

Her agitation was rising. She didn't need this right now. Her gran was in Theatre. She should be concentrating on that. And he should be here with her, helping her through this. Where was he?

She sent him a quick text. *'Still at hospital with Gran. What's going on? Won't be home for a few hours.'*

Maybe he'd been called into work again? Maybe that was it. But something inside her didn't agree.

She walked back inside. There was nothing she could do right now. She had to stay here and be with her gran. There was no telling how she'd be when she woke from her anaesthetic. Cassidy wanted to be close.

And no matter how much she wanted to know what was going on with Brad, he'd just have to wait.

CHAPTER NINE

20 December

THE alarm sounded and Cassidy groaned and thumped the reset button with her hand. Even stretching out from under the warm duvet for a second was too cold. She heard a little muffled sound and seconds later felt a little draught at the bottom of the duvet.

Bert. The alarm had woken him and he was cold, too, so he'd sneaked into the bottom of her bed just as he'd done for the last ten days.

Ten days. Two hundred and forty hours—no, it had actually been forty-seven hours since she'd last spoken to Brad.

Sometimes when she woke in the morning—just for a millisecond—she thought everything was all right again. But then she remembered he was gone, searching for his daughter in North-blooming-Woods, Wisconsin. She'd had to look the place up on the internet—she didn't even know where it was.

By the time she'd got back from the hospital that night, Brad's flight had been in the air for four hours. He was long gone.

And although it helped just a little that he'd tried to contact her and that he'd left her a letter, it didn't take away from the fact that he'd gone. Just like that. At the drop of a hat.

She knew she was being unreasonable. He'd waited nearly two years to find his daughter—of course he should go. But her heart wasn't as rational as her head tried to be.

Her heart was broken in two.

What if he never came back? What if the only way he could have contact with his daughter was to stay in Wisconsin? What if he fell back in love with Melody's mother?

Every irrational thought in the world had circulated in her mind constantly for the last ten days and nights. Even Bert wasn't helping.

He kept looking at the door and sniffing around Brad's shoes in the hope he would reappear again.

She had to be the unluckiest woman in the world. Twice Brad had phoned her mobile—and both times she had missed his call. Both times she'd been working and both times she'd been with a patient.

He'd phoned the ward one day but she hadn't been on duty. And when he'd phoned the flat she'd been visiting her gran, who was still in hospital.

Every time she tried to call him back she'd received an 'unobtainable' signal.

He'd warned her. He'd warned her that North Woods was aptly named, surrounded by thick woods and hills with poor reception for mobiles and internet connections.

He'd sent two emails letting her know that he'd contacted a family lawyer and made contact with Alison. After some fraught negotiations he'd been allowed supervised access to see Melody twice. They were currently stuck in the land of legal mumbo-jumbo, trying to figure out the parental rights of two Australians in the US. Alison was covered—she'd married an American. But Brad's position was more difficult, particularly when he was officially only on 'holiday'.

It didn't help that his lawyer was advising him to look at extradition since Melody had been removed from Australia without permission.

She really, really wanted to talk to him.

She wanted to hear his voice, feel his arms around her, feel his body pressed next to hers. Particularly now. A warm dog around her feet might be nice, but it just didn't cut it.

She didn't even feel festive any more. Her favourite time of year had been blighted by the fact the man she loved was on the other side of the Atlantic. The flight had taken fourteen hours to reach Chicago, and then another few for the air transfer to North Woods. It wasn't exactly the easiest place to get to. And it wouldn't be the easiest place to get home from either.

But as soon as he did, she knew what she was going to do. She knew what she was going to say. This forced separation had clarified everything for her. She'd made up her mind.

Now all she could do was wait.

Brad's heart was in his mouth. His little girl seemed completely unfazed by him. Alison was another matter entirely.

Ten days of trying to keep his temper in check. Ten days of biting back all the things he really, really wanted to say.

Once she'd got over the initial shock, Alison had been shamed into a visit at his lawyer's office. She'd brought her husband along, who seemed equally outraged that Brad had dared to appear into their lives in North Woods, Wisconsin.

It hadn't taken long for his lawyer to go through the legal aspects of removing a child from another country without parental consent. Alison's lawyer had been surprisingly quiet and encouraged his client to agree in principle to some short supervised access spells.

He'd been here ten days and had spent three hours with his daughter.

He'd also spent innumerable hours trying to contact Cassidy back home.

Home? Scotland?

In Brad's mind right now, home was wherever Cassidy was. Wherever they could be together. He wanted to spend hours on the phone to her, talking through things with her and telling her how he felt.

But North Woods didn't seem to be a place with normal communication methods in mind—and to be fair, Joe, his private detective, had warned him about this. In theory, he would have managed to co-ordinate time differences, shift patterns and visiting schedules. But reality was much harder. Right now it seemed as if an old-fashioned carrier pigeon would be more effective than modern-day technology.

He glanced at his watch. Time for another visit. Time to see his gorgeous blonde, curly-headed daughter, who could skim stones across the lake like a professional. Time to get the wheels in motion to learn about more permanent types of access. Time to set up an agreed method of communication between them all. One that meant he could talk to his beautiful daughter without having to face the minefield that was her mother.

Time to get his life in order.

22 December

A Christmas bride. That's what smelly-cat woman had told her. Was there any chance she could go and demand her twenty quid back?

Right now it felt as if she'd been conned. False pretences. That's what they called it. But she'd never heard of a fortune-teller being sued. Just as well she'd never believed any of it.

Cassidy tugged her thick black boots on, trying to ignore the trickle of water inside that instantly soaked through her sock. There was about three feet of snow outside. It had been the same last night when she'd come home from work.

If she'd been organised—or cared enough—she would have stuffed her already soaked boots with newspaper and stuck them under the radiator. Instead, she'd flung them across the room and fallen into bed instantly.

She couldn't even be bothered to prepare something to eat. Her cupboards were a disgrace. Oh, if she wanted chocolate or crisps or bakery items like chocolate éclairs or cupcakes, she was fine. If she wanted anything substantial to eat, she was well and truly snookered.

Cassidy pulled on a cardigan, her gran's red wool coat and a black furry hat. It shouldn't take too long to get up the hill to the hospital. Her only problem would be if the pavement hadn't been gritted. Yesterday she'd picked up three people who'd slipped, trying to climb the hill, and caught another as he'd almost slid past her.

Maybe a coffee would help? A skinny caramel latte would be perfect.

She gave Bert a pat on the way out—even he was too intelligent to want to go out in this weather.

The cold air instantly stung her cheeks. Snow was starting to fall again already. Within a few hours there could easily be another few feet on the ground. Getting home again would be a nightmare.

The aroma caught her. The smell of a freshly prepared caramel latte. She closed her eyes. Heaven on earth.

'Cassidy?'

The voice stopped her in her tracks. It was quiet. Like a question. Unsure, uncertain.

'Brad!'

She didn't hesitate. She didn't care who was in the street around them. She didn't worry about the slippery pavement covered in snow beneath her feet. She launched herself at him.

'Oof …'

He fell backwards and the latte he'd been carrying toppled, leaving a trail of pale brown on the white snow.

'Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? When did you arrive? Do you know how many times I tried to phone you? What on earth is wrong with that place? Why can't you get a decent signal there? And how dare you tell me you love me in a message?' She finished by slapping her gloved hand on his chest. Her knees pinned him to the ground beneath her.

All he could see was her face. Her curls were escaping from the sides of the black furry hat and her cheeks were tinged with red. A face that he'd longed to see for the last twelve days. It looked perfect.

He lifted his head from the snow. 'Is this a happy-to-see-me greeting or a mad-as-hell greeting?'

She furrowed her brow for a second then she broke into a smile and bent towards him, kissing the tip of his nose. 'What do you think?'

His head sagged back against the snow. 'Thank goodness.' He moved underneath her. 'Can I get up now?'

Her grin spread from ear to ear as she turned her head sideways and noticed people staring at them lying on the pavement. 'I suppose so.'

He stood up and brushed the snow from his back. 'I've missed you,' he said as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

'Me, too.'

'Can we go inside?'

'Yes, I mean no. I want to do something first. I promised myself I would do something the next time I saw you. Come with me.' She grabbed his hand, waiting until he'd grabbed the handle of his wheeled suitcase and pulled him across the road.

'Sounds ominous. Where are we going?'

'You'll see.'

She walked quickly along the road, in her excitement almost forgetting he was pulling a heavy suitcase through snow. But in a few moments she stopped and smiled. 'In here,' she said.

He looked around him, puzzled by the surroundings. They'd moved away from the busy street to a small church with an even smaller cemetery, virtually hidden from the road. Its tiny spire was the only thing that made it noticeable among the surrounding buildings.

'I didn't even know this was here.'

'Lots of people don't. But two hundred years ago this was one of the main roads into Glasgow.'

He waited while she pushed open an iron gate and walked behind the railings. He followed her in, totally bemused.

'What on earth are we doing here? Is this the church you normally go to? You've never mentioned it.' He looked around at the old worn gravestones. Some of the writing was barely visible now, washed away through time, wind, rain and grime. 'Looks like no one's been buried here in a very long time.'

Cassidy nodded and pulled him under one of the trees. All of a sudden her rose-tinged cheeks looked pale. He could feel the tremors in her skin under her coat. The snow was starting to coat the fur on her hat in a white haze.

Her voice was shaking as she started to speak. 'You told me you loved me.'

He clasped his hands around her. 'And I do, Cassidy. I didn't want to tell you like that, but things happened so quickly and I didn't want you to think I'd just walked away. I wanted you to know how I felt about you. I wanted you to know that I was definitely coming back.' His voice tailed off.

'I didn't want you to think I was abandoning you.' It was so important to him. To tell her that he wasn't like Bobby or her parents. To tell her that he would never abandon her. That he wanted to be with her for ever.

Her eyes were glazed with hidden tears, but she didn't look unhappy. Just very determined.

'What is it, Cassidy? What's wrong?'

'I was wrong. When I spoke to you about Christmas and its traditions and not leaving Scotland —I was wrong.'

The cold air was making her breath come out in a steam. Short blasts.

'You were right when you said it was about the people—or person—you spend it with.' Her eyes swept around them, taking in the ancient church and graveyard. 'I love Scotland. You know I love Scotland. But I love you more and I want to be wherever you are.'

Brad blinked, snowflakes getting in his eyes. A two-hour flight, followed by another fourteen-hour flight, all worrying about Cassidy. How she would be, whether she would forgive him for leaving without saying goodbye, whether she would be angry with him. 'You love me,' he said slowly, his sense of relief sending a flood of warm blood through his chilled skin.

She nodded, the smile on her face reaching right up into her brown eyes.

'You love me,' he said again.

'Yes, yes, I love you. Do you want me to shout it out loud?' Her voice rose, sending some birds fluttering from the tree above.

He bent his head and kissed her. Taking her sweet lips against his own, pulling her close to him, keeping out all the cold that surrounded them. He'd wanted to do nothing else for the last twelve days. Twelve days and twelve long nights without Cassidy in his arms had driven him crazy.

'How do you feel about fourteen-hour flights?' he whispered.

She pulled backwards a little, nodding slowly. 'To North Woods, Wisconsin?' She reached up, pulling her hand from her red leather glove and running her finger down the side of his cheek. 'I think that's something we can do together.'

He sucked in a breath. She was prepared to go with him to see his daughter. She was prepared to meet the challenge of their life together. She'd come full circle. Just like he had. Eighteen months ago he couldn't have been lower. Cassidy had lit up his world in every way possible. He couldn't imagine life without her.

A shiver stole down his spine. He nuzzled into her neck. 'You've still not told me, what are we doing here, Cass?'

He watched her take a deep breath. She looked at him steadily. 'I've decided I'm a modern woman and want to embrace life—in every way possible. I've always loved this place—especially in the winter.' She swept her arm across the scene. 'How do you feel about this as a wedding setting?'

Brad froze. She hadn't. She hadn't just said that, had she?

She looked terrified. Now that the words were out, she looked as if she could faint on the spot.

'Did you just propose?' He lifted his eyebrow at her in disbelief.

'I think so.' She trembled.

He picked her up and spun her around. 'Isn't this supposed to be my job? Aren't I supposed to go down on one knee and propose to you with a single red rose and a diamond ring?' He pressed his face next to hers, his lips connecting with hers again.

‘You were taking too long,’ she mumbled. ‘It took you a full month to kiss me. What chance did I have?’ She hesitated. ‘So what do you think?’ There was fear in her voice, still that little piece of uncertainty.

‘I think you should look in pocket twenty-four of your calendar.’

‘What?’ She looked momentarily stunned. Not the answer she was expecting.

Cassidy’s brain was desperately trying to click into gear. She’d just asked the biggest question in her life. What kind of an answer was that? She hadn’t looked at the calendar since the night Brad had left—she’d just assumed he wouldn’t have had a chance to fill it before he’d gone.

He set her feet down on the ground. The grin on his face spread from ear to ear, his head, shoulders and eyelashes covered in snowflakes. ‘Well, I’m not entirely a modern man. This is my job.’ He dropped to one knee on the snow-covered grass. ‘So much for taking too long—let’s just cut right to the chase. Cassidy Rae, will you do me the honour of being my wife? Will you promise to love, honour and keep me, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live?’

She dropped to her knees beside him. ‘That’s not a proposal.’ She looked stunned. ‘That’s a wedding vow.’

‘That’s okay,’ he whispered, pulling her even closer. ‘I’ve already got the wedding ring.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Pocket twenty-four?’

He nodded. ‘Pocket twenty-four. I didn’t know there was a church around here. I was hoping that we could say our own vows.’

She giggled. ‘Looks like I’m going to be a Christmas bride after all.’

He looked completely confused. ‘What on earth are you talking about?’

She smiled. ‘Well, one day I might tell you a little story …’

EPILOGUE

One year later

'YOU'VE got to pick the best stones, Cassidy. They need to be flat on both sides.' The blue eyes regarded her seriously before the little face broke into a broad smile. 'That's why I always win,' she whispered, giving a conspiratorial glance over her shoulder towards Brad, who was standing at the lakeside waiting for them both.

'What's going on with my girls?' he shouted.

Melody held her gloved hand out towards Cassidy as they walked back over to Brad.

Cassidy looked down at the blonde curls spilling out from the green woolly hat. She gave Brad a smile. This was their third visit to North Woods, Wisconsin, and Brad had finally been allowed some unsupervised access to his child. Melody was a loving, easy child who, luckily enough, seemed totally oblivious to the tensions between her natural parents.

She spoke to Brad online every week and had been happy to meet Cassidy, loving the fact that her dad had a Scottish wife. She'd even painted Cassidy a picture of them all living in a Scottish castle.

Cassidy winked at Brad. 'Melody and I needed some time to make our plan. We think we've found a sixer.'

'A sixer? What on earth is that?' He shook his head in amusement at them both.

Melody's voice piped up. 'You should know what a sixer is, Daddy.' The stone-skimming champion looked at him seriously, holding up the flat grey stone in her hand like an winning prize. 'This stone will skim across the water *six* times before it goes under.'

'Aha.' He knelt down beside her, touching the stone with his finger, 'A sixer? Really?' He shook his head and folded him arm across his chest. 'No way. Not that stone.'

'It really is, Daddy.'

Brad's face broke into a big smile as he straightened up and slung his arm around Cassidy's shoulder. 'Prove it.'

They watched as Melody took her position at the lakeside edge, narrowing her gaze and pulling her hand back to her shoulder. She let out a yell as she released the stone, sending it skimming over the flat water, bouncing across the lake.

Cassidy leaned against Brad's shoulder. 'One, two, three, four, five, six. Your daughter was absolutely right. It was a sixer. Now, where does she get that skill from, I wonder?'

He laughed. 'Her dad, definitely her dad. I could throw a mean ball as a kid.'

He picked up Melody, who was shrieking over her success. 'What a star!' he shouted as he threw her into the air, catching her in his arms and spinning her round.

Cassidy pulled her red wool coat further around her, trying to ward off the biting cold. North Woods was nearly as cold as Glasgow at this time of year.

Brad came over and whispered in her ear. 'Happy anniversary, Mrs Donovan.' His cold nose was pressed against her cheek as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Cassidy felt herself relax against him. After all her worries, all her stresses, things had worked out just fine. They'd married two weeks after his proposal in the churchyard—as quickly as they legally could.

Her gran had recovered quickly from her broken hip and recuperated back in the nursing home with some expert care. She was on a new drug trial, and although her Alzheimer's hadn't improved, it certainly hadn't got any worse. The relief for Cassidy was that the episodes of aggression seemed to have abated. She still visited her gran as often as possible but she was confident in the care the nursing home provided.

That had given her the freedom she'd needed to join Brad on a two-month visit to Australia and on three trips to the States to see Melody.

After a few tense months, Alison's lawyer had finally talked some sense into his client and visiting rights had been sorted out. It meant that every few months they could have Melody for a week at a time to stay with them.

Brad had looked at a few jobs nearby and been interviewed for a position at the local hospital. Cassidy had just seen an ad for a specialist nurse to help set up an anticoagulant clinic and knew it was just what she was looking for. There was only one more thing that could make this perfect.

She turned round and put her arms around his neck. 'Happy anniversary, Dr Donovan.' She kissed him on his cold lips.

'So how do you feel about North Woods, Wisconsin?' he asked, his smile reaching from one ear to the other.

Cassidy looked over her shoulder at the lake with ice around the edges and thick trees surrounding it. 'I think it has potential.' She smiled.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Potential? Potential for what?'

He was waiting. Waiting to see what she would say. He didn't know she'd just found an ad for her dream job. He didn't know that there had been a message from the hospital after he'd left to collect Melody, offering him the job he'd just been interviewed for. But all of that could wait. Right now she wanted the chance to still surprise her new husband.

She rose up on the tips of her toes and whispered in his ear, 'I think North Woods, Wisconsin might be a nice place to make a baby.'

His jaw dropped and his eyes twinkled as he picked her up and spun her round. 'You know, Mrs Donovan, I think you could be right.'

The Holiday Gift

RaeAnne Thayne

A Cowboy for Christmas

With two kids and an active life, widow Faith Dustin only wants peace and quiet for Christmas. But her snowy Pine Gulch ranch is nothing but chaotic. All that keeps Faith going is her helpful neighbor, cowboy Chase Brannon. He's always been "good ol' Chase," her faithful friend. Until he kisses her under the mistletoe...

Years ago Chase blew his chance with the woman he's loved since childhood. Now he's determined to step out of the friend zone...and into the role of husband. But the scared and stubborn Faith won't let herself fall. With Christmas just days away, Chase will need all the magic of the season —and the help of her two matchmaking children—to unwrap a second chance at love.

To Lisa Townsend, trainer extraordinaire, who is gorgeous inside and out. And to Jennie, Trudy, Karen, Becky, Jill and everyone else in our group for your example, your encouragement, your friendship, your laughter—and especially for making me look forward to workouts (except the burpees—I'll never look forward to those!).

Chapter One

Something was wrong, but Faith Dustin didn't have the first idea what.

She glanced at Chase Brannon again, behind the wheel of his pickup truck. Sunglasses shielded his eyes but his strong jaw was still flexed, his shoulders tense.

Since they had left the Idaho Falls livestock auction forty-five minutes earlier, heading back to Cold Creek Canyon, the big rancher hadn't smiled once and had answered most of her questions in monosyllables, his mind clearly a million miles away.

Faith frowned. He wasn't acting at all like himself. They were frequent travel companions, visiting various livestock auctions around the region at least once or twice a month for the last few years. They had even gone on a few buying trips to Denver together, an eight-hour drive from their little corner of eastern Idaho. He was her oldest friend—and had been since she and her sisters came to live with their aunt and uncle nearly two decades ago.

In many ways, she and Chase were really a team and comingled their ranch operations, since his ranch, Brannon Ridge, bordered the Star N on two sides.

Usually when they traveled, they never ran out of things to talk about. Her kids and their current dramas, real or imagined; his daughter, Addie, who lived with her mother in Boise; Faith's sisters and their growing families. Their ranches, the community, the price of beef, their future plans. It was all grist for their conversational mill. She valued his opinion—often she would run ideas past him—and she wanted to think he rated hers as highly.

The drive to Idaho Falls earlier that morning had seemed just like usual, filled with conversation and their usual banter. Everything had seemed normal during the auction. He had stayed right by her side, a quiet, steady support, while she engaged in—and eventually won—a fierce bidding war for a beautiful paint filly with excellent barrel racing bloodlines.

That horse, intended as a Christmas gift for her twelve-year-old daughter, Louisa, was the whole reason they had gone to the auction. Yes, she'd been a little carried away by winning the auction so that she'd hugged him hard and kissed him smack on the lips, but surely that wasn't what was bothering him. She'd kissed and hugged him tons of times.

Okay, maybe she had been careful not to be so casual with her affection for him the last six or seven months, for reasons she didn't want to explore, but she couldn't imagine he would go all cold and cranky over something as simple as a little kiss.

No. His mood had shifted after that, but all her subtle efforts to wiggle out what was wrong had been for nothing.

His mood certainly matched the afternoon. Faith glanced out at the uniformly gray sky and the few random, hard-edged snowflakes clicking against the windshield. The weather wasn't pleasant but it wasn't horrible either. The snowflakes weren't sticking to the road yet, anyway, though she expected they would see at least a few inches on the ground by morning.

Even the familiar festive streets of Pine Gulch—wreaths hanging on the streetlamps and each downtown business decorated with lights and window dressings—didn't seem to lift his dark mood.

When he hit the edge of town and turned into Cold Creek Canyon toward home, she decided to try one last time to figure out what might be bothering him.

"Did something happen at the auction?"

He glanced away from the road briefly, the expression in his silver-blue eyes shielded by the amber lenses of his sunglasses. "Why would you think that?"

She studied his dearly familiar profile, struck by his full mouth and his tanned, chiseled features —covered now with just a hint of dark afternoon shadow. Funny, how she saw him just about every single day but was sometimes taken by surprise all over again by how great-looking he was.

With his dark, wavy hair covered by the black Stetson he wore, that slow, sexy smile, and his broad shoulders and slim hips, he looked rugged and dangerous and completely male. It was no wonder the waitresses at the café next to the auction house always fought each other to serve their table.

She shifted her attention away from such ridiculous things and back to the conversation. “I don’t know. Maybe because that’s the longest sentence you’ve given me since we left Idaho Falls. You’ve replied to everything else with either a grunt or a monosyllable.”

Beneath that afternoon shadow, a muscle clenched in his jaw. “That doesn’t mean anything happened. Maybe I’m just not in a chatty mood.”

She certainly had days like that. Heaven knew she’d had her share of blue days over the last two and a half years. Through every one of them, Chase had been her rock.

“Nothing wrong with that, I guess. Are you sure that’s all? Was it something Beckett McKinley said? I saw him corner you at lunch.”

He glanced over at her briefly and again she wished she could see the expression behind his sunglasses. “He wanted to know how I like the new baler I bought this year and he also wanted my opinion on a...personal matter. I told him I liked the baler fine but told him the other thing wasn’t any of my damn business.”

She blinked at both his clipped tone and the language. Chase didn’t swear very often. When he did, there was usually a good reason.

“Now you’ve got my curiosity going. What kind of personal matter would Beck want your opinion about? The only thing I can think the man needs is a nanny for those hellion boys of his.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, just watched the road and those snowflakes spitting against windshield. When he finally spoke, his voice was clipped. “It was about you.”

She stared. “Me?”

Chase’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “He wants to ask you out, specifically to go as his date to the stockgrowers association’s Christmas party on Friday.”

If he had just told her Beck wanted her to dress up like a Christmas angel and jump from his barn roof, she wouldn’t have been more surprised—and likely would have been far less panicky.

“I... He...what?”

“Beck wants to take you to the Christmas party this weekend. I understand there’s going to be dancing and a full dinner this year.”

Beck McKinley. The idea of dating the man took her by complete surprise. Yes, he was a great guy, with a prosperous ranch on the other side of Pine Gulch. She considered him a good friend but she had never once thought of him in romantic terms.

The unexpected paradigm shift wasn’t the only thing bothering her about what Chase had just said.

“Hold on. If he wanted to take me to the party, why wouldn’t Beck just ask me himself instead of feeling like he has to go through you first?”

That muscle flexed in his jaw again. “You’ll have to ask him that.”

The things he wasn’t saying in this conversation would fill a radio broadcast. She frowned as Chase pulled into the drive leading to his ranch. “You told him I’m already going with you, didn’t you?”

He didn’t answer for a long moment. “No,” he finally said. “I didn’t.”

Unease twanged through her, the same vague sense that had haunted her at stray moments for several months. Something was off between her and Chase and, for the life of her, she couldn’t put a finger on it.

“Oh. Did you already make plans?” She forced a cheerful smile. “We’ve gone together the last few years so I just sort of assumed we would go together again this year but I guess we should have talked about it. If you already have something going, don’t worry about me. Seriously. I don’t mind going by myself. I’ll have plenty of other friends there I can sit with. Or I could always skip it and

stay home with the kids. Jenna McRaven does a fantastic job with the food and I always enjoy the company of other grown-ups, but if you've got a hot date lined up, I'm perfectly fine."

As she said the words, she tasted the lie in them. Was this weird ache in her stomach because she had been looking forward to the evening out—or because she didn't like the idea of him with a hot date?

"I don't have a date, hot or otherwise," he growled as he pulled the pickup and trailer to a stop next to a small paddock near the barn of the Brannon Ridge Ranch.

She eased back in the bench seat, a curious relief seeping through her. "Good. That's that. We can go together, just like always. It will be a fun night out for us."

Though she knew him well enough to know something was still on his mind, he said nothing as he pulled off his sunglasses and hooked them on the rearview mirror. What did his silence mean? Didn't he want to go with her?

"Faith," he began, but suddenly she didn't want to hear what he had to say.

"We'd better get the beautiful girl in your trailer unloaded before the kids get home."

She opened her door and jumped out before he could answer her. Yes, sometimes she was like her son, Barrett, who would rather hide out in his room all day and miss dinner than be scolded for something he'd done. She didn't like to face bad things. It was a normal reaction, she told herself. Hadn't she already had to face enough bad things in her life?

After a moment, Chase climbed out after her and came around to unhook the back of the trailer. The striking black-and-white paint yearling whinnied as he led her out into the patchy snow.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Faith said, struck all over again by the horse's elegant lines.

"Yeah," Chase said. Again with the monosyllables. She sighed.

"Thanks for letting me keep her here for a couple of weeks. Louisa will be so shocked on Christmas morning."

"Shouldn't be a problem."

He guided the horse into the pasture, where his own favorite horse, Tor, immediately trotted over as Faith closed the gate behind them. As soon as Chase unhooked the young horse from her lead line, she raced to the other side of the pasture, mane and tail flying out behind her.

She was fast. That was the truth. Grateful for her own cowboy hat that shielded her face from the worst of the frost-tipped snowflakes, Faith watched the horse race to the other corner of the pasture and back, obviously overflowing with energy after the stress of a day at the auction and then a trailer ride with strangers.

"Do you think she's too much horse for Lou?" she asked while Chase patted Tor beside her.

He looked at the paint and then down at Faith. "She comes from prime barrel racing stock. That's what Lou wants to do. For twelve, she's a strong rider. Yeah, the horse is only green broke but Seth Dalton can train a horse to do just about anything but recite its ABCs."

"I guess that's true. It was nice of him to agree to take her, with his crazy training schedule."

"He's a good friend."

"He is," she agreed. "Though I know he only agreed to do it as a favor to you."

"Maybe it was a favor to you," he commented as he pulled a bale of hay over and opened it inside the pasture for the horses.

"Maybe," she answered. All three Dalton brothers had been wonderful neighbors and good friends to her. They and others in the close-knit ranching community in Cold Creek Canyon and around Pine Gulch had stepped up in a hundred different ways over the last two and a half years since Travis died.

She would have been lost without any of them, but especially without Chase.

That vague unease slithered through her again. What was wrong between them? And how could she fix it?

She didn't have the first clue.

❄ ❄ ❄

What was a guy supposed to do?

Ever since Beck McKinley cornered him at the diner to talk about taking Faith to the stockgrowers' holiday party, Chase hadn't been able to think straight. He felt like the other guy had grabbed his face and dunked it in an ice-cold water trough, then kicked him in the gut for good measure.

For a full ten seconds, he had stared at Beck as a host of emotions galloped through him faster than a pack of wild horses spooked by a thunderstorm.

Beckett McKinley wanted to date Faith. Chase's Faith.

"She's great. That's all," Beck had said into the suddenly tense silence. "It's been more than two years since Travis died, right? I just thought maybe she'd be ready to start getting out there."

Chase had thought for a minute his whole face had turned numb, especially his tongue. It made it tough for him to get any words out at all—or maybe that was the ice-cold coating around his brain.

"Why are you asking me?" he had finally managed to say.

If possible, Beck had looked even more uncomfortable. "The two of you are always together. Here at the auction, at the feed store, at the diner in town. I know you're neighbors and you've been friends for a long time. But if there's something more than that, I don't want to be an ass and step on toes. You don't have to tell me what happens to bulls who wander into somebody else's pen."

It was all he could do not to haul off and deck the guy for the implied comparison that Faith was just some lonely heifer, waiting for some smooth-talking bull to wander by.

Instead, he had managed to grip his hands into fists, all while one thought kept echoing through his head.

Not again.

He thought he was giving her time to grieve, to make room in her heart for someone else besides Travis Dustin, the man she had loved since she was a traumatized girl trying to carve out a new home for her and her sisters.

Chase had been too slow once before. He had been a steady friend and confidant from the beginning. He figured he had all the time in the world as he waited for her to heal and to settle into life in Pine Gulch. She had been so young, barely sixteen. He wasn't much older, not yet nineteen, and had been busy with his own struggles. Even then, he had been running his family's ranch on his own while his father lay dying.

For six months, he offered friendship to Faith, fully expecting that one day when both of them were in a better place, he could start moving things to a different level.

And then Travis Dustin came home for the summer to help out Claude and Mary, the distant relatives who had raised him his last few years of high school.

Chase's father was in his last few agonizing weeks of life from lung cancer that summer. While he was busy coping with that and accepting his new responsibilities on the ranch, Travis had wasted no time sweeping in and stealing Faith's heart. By the time Chase woke up and realized what was happening, it was too late. His two closest friends were in love with each other and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He could have fought for her, he supposed, but it was clear from the beginning that Travis made her happy. After everything she and her sisters had been through, she deserved to find a little peace.

Instead, he had managed to put his feelings away and maintain his friendship with both of them. He had even tried to move on himself and date other women, with disastrous consequences.

Beck McKinley was a good guy. A solid rancher, a devoted father, a pillar of the community. Any woman would probably be very lucky to have him, as long as she could get past those hellion boys of his.

Maybe McKinley was exactly the kind of guy she wanted. The thought gnawed at him, but he took some small solace in remembering that she hadn't seemed all that enthusiastic at the idea of going out with him.

Didn't matter. He knew damn well it was only a matter of time before she found someone she did want to go out with. If not Beck, some other smooth-talking cowboy would sweep in.

He hadn't fought for her last time. Instead, he had stood by like a damn statue and watched her fall in love with his best friend.

He wouldn't go through that again. It was time he made a move—but what if he made the wrong one and ruined everything between them?

He felt like a man given a choice between a hangman's noose and a firing squad. He was damned either way.

He was still trying to figure out what to do when she shifted from watching the young horse dance around the pasture in the cold December air. Faith gazed up at the overcast sky, still dribbling out the occasional stray snowflake.

"I probably should get back. The kids will be out of school soon and I'm sure you have plenty of things of your own to do. You don't have to walk me back," she said when he started to head in that direction behind her. "Stay and unhitch the horse trailer if you need to."

"It can keep. I'll walk you back up to your truck. I've got to plug in my phone anyway."

A couple of his ranch dogs came out from the barn to say hello as they walked the short distance to his house. He reached down and petted them both, in total sympathy. He felt like a ranch dog to her: a constant, steady companion with a few useful skills that came in handy once in a while.

Would she ever be able to see him as anything more?

"Thanks again, Chase," Faith said when they reached her own pickup truck—the one she had insisted on driving over that morning, even though he told her he could easily pick her up and drop her back off at the Star N.

"You're welcome," he said.

"Seriously, I was out of my depth. Horses aren't exactly my area of expertise. Who knows, I might have brought home a nag. As always, I don't know what I would do without you."

He could feel tension clutch at his shoulders again. "Not true," he said, his voice more abrupt than he intended. "You didn't need me. Not really. You'd already done your research and knew what you wanted in a barrel racer. You just needed somebody to back you up."

She smiled as they reached her pickup truck and a pale shaft of sunlight somehow managed to pierce the cloud cover and land right on her delicate features, so soft and lovely it made his heart hurt.

"I'm so lucky that somebody is always you," she said.

He let out a breath, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms. He didn't have that right—nor could he let things go on as they were.

"About the stockgrowers' party," he began.

If he hadn't been looking, he might have missed the leap of something that looked suspiciously like fear in her green eyes before she shifted her gaze away from him.

"Really, it doesn't bother me to skip it this year if you want to make other plans."

"I don't want to skip it," he growled. "I want to go. With you. On a date."

He intended to stress the last word, to make it plain this wouldn't be two buddies just hanging out together, like they always did. As a result, the word took on unnatural proportions and he nearly snapped it out until it arced between them like an arrow twanged from a crossbow.

Eyes wide, she gazed at him for a long moment, clearly startled by his vehemence. After a moment, she nodded. "Okay. That's settled, then. We can figure out the details later."

Nothing was settled. He needed to tell her date was the operative word here, that he didn't want to take her to the party as her neighbor and friend who gave her random advice on a barrel racing horse for her daughter or helped her with the hay season.

He wanted the right to hold her—to dance with her and flirt and whisper soft, sexy words in her ear.

How the hell could he tell her that, after all this time, when he had so carefully cultivated a safe, casual relationship that was the exact opposite of what he really wanted? Before he could figure that out, an SUV he didn't recognize drove up the lane toward his house.

"Were you expecting company?" she asked.

"Don't think so." He frowned as the car pulled up beside them—and his frown intensified when the passenger door opened and a girl jumped out, then raced toward him. "Daddy!"

Chapter Two

He stared at his eleven-year-old daughter, dressed to the nines in an outfit more suited to a photo shoot for a children's clothing store than for a working cattle ranch.

"Adaline! What are you doing here? I didn't expect to see you until next weekend."

"I know, Dad! Isn't it great? We get extra time together—maybe even two whole weeks! Mom pulled me out of school until after Christmas. Isn't that awesome? My teachers are going to email me all my homework so I don't miss too much—not that they ever do anything the last few weeks before Christmas vacation anyway but waste time showing movies and doing busywork and stuff."

That sounded like a direct quote from her mother, who had little respect for the educational system, even the expensive private school she insisted on sending their daughter to.

As if on cue, his ex-wife climbed out of the driver's side of what must be a new vehicle, judging by the temporary license plates in the window.

She looked uncharacteristically disordered, with her sweater askew and her hair a little messy in back where she must have been leaning against the headrest as she drove.

"I'm so glad you're home," she said. "We took a chance. I've been trying to call you all afternoon. Why didn't you answer?"

"My phone ran out of juice and I forgot to take the charger to the auction with us. What's going on?"

He knew it had to be something dramatic for her to bring Addie all this way on an unscheduled midweek visit.

Cindy frowned. "My mother had a stroke early this morning and she's in the hospital in Idaho Falls."

"Oh, no! I hadn't heard. I'm so sorry."

He had tried very hard to earn the approval of his in-laws but the president of the Pine Gulch bank and his wife had been very slow to warm up to him. He didn't know if they had disliked him because Cindy had been pregnant when they married or because they didn't think a cattle rancher with cow manure on his boots was good enough for their precious only child.

They had reached a peace accord of sorts after Addie came along. Still, he almost thought his and Cindy's divorce had been a relief to them—and he had no doubt they had been thrilled at her second marriage to an eminently successful oral surgeon in Boise.

"The doctors say it appears to be a mini stroke. They suspect it's not the first one so they want to keep her for observation for a few days. My dad said I didn't have to come down but it seemed like the right thing to do," Cindy said. "Considering I was coming this way anyway, I didn't think you would mind having extra visitation with Addie, especially since she won't be here over the holidays."

He was aware of a familiar pang in his chest, probably no different from what most part-time divorced fathers felt at not being able to live with their children all the time. Holidays were the worst.

"Sure. Extra time is always great."

Cindy turned to Faith with that hard look she always wore when she saw the two of them together. His ex-wife had never said anything but he suspected she had long guessed the feelings he had tried to bury after Faith and Travis got married.

"We're interrupting," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all," Faith assured her. "Please don't be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry about your mother."

"Thanks," Cindy said, her voice cool. "We spent an hour at the hospital before we came out here and she seems in good spirits. Doctors just want to keep her for observation to see if they can figure out what's going on. Dad is kind of a mess right now, which is why I thought it would be a good idea for me to stay with him, at least for the first few days."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Thanks for taking Addie. Sorry to drop her off without calling first. I did try."

"It's no problem at all. I'm thrilled to have her."

The sad truth was, they got along and seemed to parent together better now that they were divorced than during the difficult five years of their marriage, though things still weren't perfect.

"I packed enough for a week. To be honest, I don't know what I grabbed, since I was kind of a mess this morning. Keith was worried about me driving alone but he had three surgeries scheduled today and couldn't come with me. His patients needed him."

"He's a busy man," Chase said. What else could he say? It would have been terribly hypocritical to lambast another man in the husband department when Chase had been so very lousy at it.

"I should get back to the hospital. Thanks, Chase. You're a lifesaver."

"No problem."

"I'm so sorry about your mother," Faith said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Cindy opened the hatchback of the SUV and pulled out Addie's familiar pink suitcase. He hated the tangible reminder that his daughter had to live out of a suitcase half her life.

After setting the suitcase on the sidewalk, Cindy went through her usual drawn-out farewell routine with Addie that ended in a big hug and a sloppy kiss, then climbed into her SUV and drove away.

"My feet are cold," Addie announced calmly, apparently not fazed at all to watch her mother leave, despite the requisite drama. "I'm going to take my suitcase to my room and change my clothes."

She headed to the house without waiting for him to answer, leaving him alone with Faith.

"That was a curveball I wasn't expecting this afternoon,"

"Strokes can be scary," Faith said. "It sounds like Carol's was a mild one, though, which I'm sure is a relief to everyone. At least you'll get to spend a little extra time with Addie."

"True. Always a bonus."

He had plenty of regrets about his life but his wise, funny, kind daughter was the one amazing thing his lousy marriage had produced.

"I know this was a busy week for you," Faith said. "If you need help with her, she's welcome to spend time at the Star N. Louisa would be completely thrilled."

He had appointments all week with suppliers, the vet and his accountant, but he could take her with him. She was a remarkably adaptable child.

"The only time I might need help is Friday night. Think Aunt Mary would mind if she stayed at your place with Lou and Barrett while we're at the party?"

Her forehead briefly furrowed in confusion. "Oh. I almost forgot about that. Look, the situation has changed. If you'd rather stay home with Addie, I completely understand. I can tag along with Wade and Caroline Dalton or Justin and Ashley Hartford. Or, again, I can always just skip it."

Was she looking for excuses not to go with him? He didn't want to believe that. "I asked you out. I want to go, as long as Mary doesn't mind one more at your place."

"Addie's never any trouble. I'm sure Mary will be fine with it. I'll talk to her," she promised. "If she can't do it, I'm sure all the kids could hang out with Hope or Celeste for the evening."

Her sisters and their husbands lived close to the Star N and often helped with Barrett and Louisa, just as Faith helped out with their respective children.

"I'll be in touch later in the week to work out the details."

"Sounds good." She glanced at her watch. "I really do need to go. Thanks again for your help with the horse."

"You're welcome."

As she climbed into the Star N king-cab pickup, he was struck by how small and delicate she looked compared to the big truck.

Physically, she might be slight—barely five-four and slender—but she was tough as nails. Over the last two and a half years, she had worked tirelessly to drag the ranch from the brink. He had tried to take some of the burden from her but there was only so much she would let him do.

He stepped forward so she couldn't close the door yet.

"One last thing."

"What's that?"

Heart pounding, he leaned in to face her. He wanted her to see his expression. He wanted no ambiguity about his intentions.

"You need to be clear on one thing before Friday. I said it earlier but in all the confusion with Addie showing up, I'm not sure it registered completely. As far as I'm concerned, this is a date."

"Sure. We're going together. What else would it be?"

"I mean a date-date. I want to go out with you where we're not only good friends hanging out on a Friday night or two neighboring ranchers carpooling to the same event. I want you to be my date, with everything that goes along with that."

There. She couldn't mistake that.

He saw a host of emotions quickly cross her features—shock, uncertainty and a wild flare of panic. "Chase, I—"

He could see she wasn't even going to give him a chance. She was ready to throw up barriers to the idea before he even had a chance. Frustration coiled through him, sharp as barbed wire fencing.

"It's been two and a half years since Travis died."

Her hands clamped tight onto the steering wheel as if it were a bull rider's strap and she had to hang on or she would fall off and be trampled. "Yes. I believe I'm fully aware of that."

"You're going to have to enter the dating scene at some point. You've already got cowboys clamoring to ask you out. McKinley is just the first one to step up, but he won't be the last. Why not ease into it by going out with somebody you already know?"

"You."

"Why not?"

Instead of answering, she turned the tables on him. "You and Cindy have been divorced for years. Why are you suddenly interested in dating again?"

"Maybe I'm tired of being alone." That, at least, was the truth, just not the whole truth.

"So this would be like a...trial run for both of us? A way to dip our toes into the water without jumping in headfirst?"

No. He had jumped in a long, long time ago and had just been treading water, waiting for her.

He couldn't tell her that. Not yet.

"Sure, if you want to look at it that way," he said instead.

He knew her well enough that he could almost watch her brain whir as she tried to think through all the ramifications. She overthought everything. It was by turns endearing and endlessly frustrating.

Finally she seemed to have sifted through the possibilities and come up with a scenario she could live with. "You're such a good friend, Chase. You've always got my back. You want to help make this easier for me, just like you helped me buy the horse for Louisa. Thank you."

He opened his mouth to say that wasn't at all his intention but he could see by the stubborn set of her jaw that she wasn't ready to hear that yet.

"I'll talk to Aunt Mary about keeping an eye on the kids on Friday. We can work out the details later. I really do have to go. Thanks again."

Her tone was clearly dismissive. Left with no real choice, he stepped back so she could close the vehicle door.

She was deliberately misunderstanding him and he didn't know how to argue with her. After all these years of being her friend and so carefully hiding his feelings, how did he convince her he wanted to be more than that?

He had no idea. He only knew he had to try.

* * *

Faith refused to let herself panic.

I want you to be my date, with everything that goes along with that.

Despite her best efforts, fear seemed to curl around her insides, coating everything with a thin layer of ice.

She couldn't let things change. End of story. Chase had been her rock for two years, her best friend, the one constant in her crazy, tumultuous life. He had been the first one she had called when she had gone looking for Travis after he didn't answer his cell and found him unconscious and near death, with severe internal injuries and a shattered spine, next to his overturned ATV.

Chase had been there within five minutes and had taken charge of the scene, had called the medics and the helicopter, had been there at the hospital and had held her after the doctors came out with their solemn faces and their sad eyes.

While she had been numb and broken, Chase had stepped in, organizing all the neighbors to bring in the fall harvest. He had helped her clean up and streamline the Star N operation and sell off all the unnecessary stock to keep their head above water those first few months.

Now the ranch was in the black again—thanks in large part to the crash course in smart ranch practices Chase had given her. She knew perfectly well that without him, there wouldn't be a Star N right now or The Christmas Ranch. She and her sisters would have had to sell off the land, the cattle, everything to pay their debts.

Travis hadn't been a very good businessman. At his death, she'd found the ranch was seriously overextended with creditors and had been operating under a system of gross inefficiencies for years.

She winced with the guilt the disloyal thought always stirred in her, but it was nothing less than the truth. If her husband hadn't died and things had continued on the same course, the ranch would have gone bankrupt within a few years. Through Chase's extensive help, she had been able to turn things around.

The ranch was doing so much better. The Christmas Ranch—the seasonal attraction started by her uncle and aunt after she and her sisters came to live with them—was finally in the black, too. Hope and her husband, Rafe, had done an amazing job revitalizing it and making it a powerful draw. That success had only been augmented by the wild viral popularity of the charming children's book Celeste had written and Hope had illustrated featuring the ranch's starring attraction, Sparkle the Reindeer.

She couldn't be more proud of her sisters—though she did find it funny that, of the three of them, Faith seemed the one most excited that Celeste and Hope had signed an agreement to allow a production company to make an animated movie out of the first Sparkle book.

Despite a few preproduction problems, the process was currently under way, though the animated movie wouldn't come out for another year. The buzz around it only heightened interest in The Christmas Ranch and led to increased revenue.

The book had helped push The Christmas Ranch to self-sufficiency. Without that steady drain on the Star N side of the family operation, Faith had been able to plow profits back into the cattle ranch operation.

As she drove past the Saint Nicholas Lodge on the way to the ranch house, she spotted both of her sisters' vehicles in the parking lot.

After taking up most of the day at the auction, she had a hundred things to do. As she had told Chase, Barrett and Louisa would be home from school soon. When she could swing it, she liked being there to greet them, to ask about their day and help manage their homework and chore responsibilities.

On a whim, though, she pulled into the parking lot and hurriedly texted both of her children as well as Aunt Mary to tell them she was stopping at the lodge for a moment and would be home soon.

The urge to talk to her sisters was suddenly overwhelming. Hope and Celeste weren't just her sisters, they were her best friends.

She had to park three rows back, which she considered a great sign for a Tuesday afternoon in mid-December.

Tourists from as far away as Boise and Salt Lake City were making the trek here to visit their quaint little Christmas attraction, with its sleigh rides, the reindeer herd, the village—and especially because this was the home of Sparkle.

As far as she was concerned, this was just home.

The familiar scents inside the lodge encircled her the moment she walked inside—cinnamon and vanilla and pine, mixed with old logs and the musty smell of a building that stood empty most of the year.

She heard her younger sisters bickering in the office before she saw them.

"Cry your sad song to someone else," Celeste was saying. "I told you I wasn't going to do it again this year and I won't let you guilt me into it."

"But you did such a great job last year," Hope protested.

"Yes I did," their youngest sister said. "And I swore I wouldn't ever do it again."

Faith poked her head into the office in time to see Hope pout. She was nearly three months pregnant and only just beginning to show.

"It didn't turn out so badly," Hope pointed out. "You ended up with a fabulous husband and a new stepdaughter out of the deal, didn't you?"

"Seriously? You're giving the children's show credit for my marriage to Flynn?"

"Think about it. Would you be married to your hunky contractor right now and deliriously happy if you hadn't directed the show for me last year—and if his daughter hadn't begged to participate?"

It was an excellent point, Faith thought with inward amusement that Celeste didn't appear to share.

"Why can't you do it?" Celeste demanded.

"We are booked solid with tour groups at the ranch until Christmas Eve. I won't have a minute to breathe from now until the New Year—and that's with Rafe making me cut down my hours."

"You knew you were going to be slammed," Celeste said, not at all persuaded. "Talk about procrastination. I can't believe you didn't find somebody to organize the variety show weeks ago!"

"I had somebody. Linda Keller told me clear back in September she would do it. I thought we were set, but she fell this morning and broke her arm, which leaves me back at square one. The kids are going to be coming to practice a week from today and I've got absolutely no one to lead them."

Hope shifted her attention to Faith with a considering look that struck fear in her heart.

"Oh, no," she exclaimed. "You can forget that idea right now."

"Why?" Hope pouted. "You love kids and senior citizens both, plus you sing like a dream. You even used to direct the choir at church, which I say makes you the perfect one to run the Christmas show."

She rolled her eyes. Hope knew better than to seriously consider that idea. "Right. Because you know I've got absolutely nothing else going on right now."

"Everyone is busy. That's the problem. Whose idea was it to put on a show at Christmas, the busiest time of the year?"

"Yours." Faith and Celeste answered simultaneously.

Hope sighed. "I know. It just seemed natural for The Christmas Ranch to throw a holiday celebration for the senior citizens. Maybe next year we'll do a Christmas in July kind of thing."

"Except you'll be having a baby in July," Faith pointed out. "And I'll be even more busy during the summer."

"You're right." She looked glum. "Do you have any suggestions for someone else who might be interested in directing it? I would hate to see the pageant fade out, especially after last year was such

a smash success, thanks to CeCe. You wouldn't believe how many people have stopped me in town during the past year to tell me how much they enjoyed it and hoped we were doing another one."

"I believe it," Celeste said. "I've had my share of people telling me the same thing. That still doesn't mean I want to run it again."

"I wasn't even involved with the show and I still have people stop me in town to tell me they hope we're doing it again," Faith offered.

"That's because you're a Nichols," Hope said.

"Right. Which to some people automatically means I burp tinsel and have eggnog running through my veins."

Celeste laughed. "You don't?"

"Nope. Hope inherited all the Christmas spirit from Uncle Claude and Aunt Mary."

The sister in question made a face. "That may be true, but it still doesn't give me someone to run the show this year. But never fear. I've got a few ideas up my sleeves."

"I can help," Celeste said. "I just don't want to be the one in charge."

Faith couldn't let her younger sister be the only generous one in the family. She sighed. "Okay. I'll help again, too. But only behind the scenes—and only because you're pregnant and I don't want you to overdo."

Hope's eyes glittered and her smile wobbled. "Oh. You're both going to make me cry and Rafe tells me I've already hit my tear quota for the day. Quick, talk about something else. How did the auction go today?"

At the question, all her angst about Chase flooded back.

She suddenly desperately wanted to confide in her sisters. That was the whole reason she'd stopped at the lodge, she realized, because she yearned to share this startling development with them and obtain their advice.

I want you to be my date, with everything that goes along with that.

What was she going to do?

She wanted to ask them but they both adored Chase and it suddenly seemed wrong to talk about him with Hope and Celeste. If she had to guess, she expected they would probably take his side. They wouldn't understand how he had just upended everything safe and secure she had come to depend upon.

When she didn't answer right away, both of her sisters looked at her with concern. "Did something go wrong with the horse you wanted to buy?" Celeste asked. "You weren't outbid, were you? If you were, I'm sure you'll be able to find another one."

She shook her head. "No. We bought the horse for about five percent under what I was expecting to pay and she's beautiful. Mostly white with black spots and lovely black boot markings on her legs. I can't wait for Louisa to see her."

"I want to see her!" Hope said. "You took her to Chase's pasture?"

"Yes, and a few moments after we unloaded her, Cindy pulled up with Addie. Apparently Carol Johnson had a small stroke this morning and she's in the hospital in Idaho Falls so Cindy came home to be with her and help her father."

At the mention of Chase's ex-wife, both of her sisters' mouths tightened in almost exactly the same way. There had been no love lost between any of them, especially after Cindy's affair with the oral surgeon who eventually became her husband.

"So Cindy just dropped off Addie like UPS delivering a surprise package?" Hope asked, disgust clear in her voice.

"What about school?" ever-practical Celeste asked. "Surely she's not out for Christmas break yet."

"No. She's going to do her homework from here." She paused, remembering the one other complication. "I haven't asked Mary yet if she's available but in case she's not, would either of you

like a couple of extra kids on Friday night? Three, actually—my two and Addie. Chase and I have a...a thing and it might run late."

"Oh, I wish I could," Hope exclaimed. "Rafe and I promised Joey we would take him to Boise to see his mom. We're staying overnight and doing some shopping while we're there."

"How is Cami doing?" Faith asked. "She's been out of prison, what, three months now?"

"Ten weeks. She's doing so well. Much better than Rafe expected, really. The court-ordered drug rehab she had in prison worked in her case and the halfway house is really helping her get back on her feet. Another six months and she's hoping she can have her own place and be ready to take Joey back. Maybe even by the time the baby comes."

Hope tried to smile but it didn't quite reach her eyes and Faith couldn't resist giving her sister's hand a squeeze. Celeste did the same to the other hand. Hope and her husband had cared for Rafe's nephew Joey since before their marriage after his sister's conviction on drug and robbery charges. They loved him and would both be sad to see him go.

Joey seemed like a different kid than he'd been when he first showed up at The Christmas Ranch with Rafe, two years earlier, sullen and confused and angry...

"We're trying to convince her to come back to Pine Gulch," Hope said, trying to smile. "It might help her stay out of trouble, and that way we can remain part of Joey's life. So far it's an uphill battle, as she feels like this is where all her troubles started."

Her sister's turmoil was a sharp reminder to Faith. Hope might be losing the boy she considered a son, and Celeste's stepdaughter, Olivia, still struggled to recover from both physical injuries and the emotional trauma of witnessing her mother's murder at the hands of her mentally ill and suicidal boyfriend.

In contrast, the problem of trying to figure out what to do with Chase seemed much more manageable.

"Anyway," Hope said, "that's why I won't be around Friday to help you with the kids. Sorry again."

"Don't give it another thought. That's exactly where you need to be."

"The kids are more than welcome at our place," Celeste said. "Flynn and Olivia are having a movie marathon and watching Miracle on 34th Street and White Christmas. I'll be writing during most of it, but hope to sneak in and watch the dancing in White Christmas."

She used to love those movies, Faith remembered. When she was young, her parents had a handful of very old, very worn VCR tapes of several holiday classics and would drag them from place to place, sometimes even showing them at social events for people in whatever small village they had set their latest medical clinic in at the time.

She probably had been just as baffled as the villagers at the world shown in the movies, which seemed so completely foreign to her own life experience, with the handsomely dressed people and the luxurious train rides and the children surrounded by toys she could only imagine.

"That sounds like the perfect evening," she said now. "Maybe I'll join the movie night instead of going to a boring Christmas party with Chase. I can bring the popcorn."

"You can't skip the stockgrowers' party," Celeste said. "It's the big social event of the year, isn't it? Jenna McRaven always caters that gala so you know the food will be fantastic, plus you'll be going with Chase. How can any party be boring with him around?"

Again, she wanted to blurt out to her sisters how strangely he was acting. She even opened her mouth to do it but before she could force the words out, she heard familiar young voices outside in the hallway just an instant before Barrett and Louisa poked their heads in, followed in short order by Celeste's stepdaughter, Olivia, and Joey. Liv went straight to Celeste while Joey practically jumped into Hope's outstretched arms.

It warmed her heart so much to see her sisters being such loving mother figures to children who needed them desperately.

"Joey and Olivia were coming to the house to hang out when I got your text," Louisa said. "We saw all your cars so decided to stop here to say hi before we walk up to the house from the bus stop."

"I'm so glad you did," Faith said.

She hugged them both, her heart aching with love. "Good day?" she asked.

Louisa nodded. "Pretty good. I had a substitute for science and she was way nicer than Mr. Lewis."

"Guess who got a hundred-ten percent on his math test?" Barrett said with a huge grin "Go on. Guess."

She made a big show of looking confused and glancing in the other boy's direction. "You did, Joey? Good job, kid!"

Rafe's nephew giggled. "I only got a hundred percent. I missed the extra credit but Barrett didn't."

Her son preened. "I was the only one in the class who got it right."

"I'm proud of both of you. What a smart family we have!"

Except for her, the one who couldn't figure out how to protect the friendship that meant the world to her.

Chapter Three

As he drove up to the Star N ranch house four days after the auction, Chase couldn't remember the last time he'd been so on edge. He wasn't nervous—or at least he would never admit to it. He was just unsettled.

So many things seemed to hinge on this night. How was he supposed to make Faith ever view him as more than just her neighbor and best friend? She had to see him for himself, a man who had spent nearly half his life waiting for her.

He didn't like the way that made him sound weak, like some kind of mongrel hanging on the fringes of her life, content for whatever scraps she threw out the kitchen door at him. It hadn't been like that. He had genuinely tried to put his unrequited feelings behind him after she and Travis got married. For the most part, he had succeeded.

He had dated a great deal and had genuinely liked several of the women he dated. In the beginning, he had liked Cindy, too. She had been funny and smart and beautiful. He was a man and had been flattered—and susceptible—when she aggressively pursued him.

When she told him she was pregnant, he decided marrying her and making a home for their child was the right thing to do. He really had tried to make their marriage work but he and Cindy were a horrible mismatch from the beginning. He could see now that they would never have suited each other, even if that little dusty corner of his heart hadn't belonged to the wife of another man.

"This is going to be so fun," Addie declared beside him. She was just about dancing out of her seat belt with excitement. "Seems like it's been forever since I've had a chance to hang out with Louisa and Olivia. It's going to be awesome."

The plan for the evening had changed at the last minute, Faith had told him in a quick, rather awkward conversation earlier that day. Celeste and Flynn decided to move their movie party to the Star N ranch house and the three girls were going to stay overnight after the movie.

If Lou and Olivia were as excited as Addie, Celeste and Mary were in for a night full of giggling girls.

His daughter let out a little shriek when he pulled up and turned off the engine.

"This is going to be so fun!" she repeated.

He had to smile as he climbed out and walked around to open the door. He never got tired of seeing the joy his daughter found in the simple things in life.

"Hand me your suitcase."

"Here. You don't have to carry everything, though. I can take the rest."

After pulling her suitcase from behind the seat, she hopped out with her pillow and sleeping bag.

"Careful. It's icy," he said as they headed up the sidewalk to the sprawling ranch house.

She sent him an appraising look as they reached the front door. "You look really good, Dad," she declared. "Like, Nick Jonas good."

"That's quite a compliment." Or it would be if he had more than the vaguest idea who Nick Jonas was.

"It's true. I bet you'll be the hottest guy at the party, especially since everyone else will be a bunch of married old dudes, right?"

He wasn't sure about that. Justin Hartford was a famous—though retired—movie star and Seth Dalton had once been quite a lady's man in these parts.

"You're sweet, kiddo," he said, kissing the top of her head that smelled like grape-scented shampoo.

Man, he loved this kid and missed her like crazy when she was staying with her mother.

"Doesn't their house look pretty?" she said cheerfully as she rang the doorbell.

The Star N ranch house was ablaze with multicolored Christmas lights around the windows and along the roofline, and their Christmas tree glowed merrily in the front bay window.

It was warm and welcoming against the cold, starry night.

The first year after Travis died, Faith had refused to hang any outside Christmas lights on the house and had only had a Christmas tree because Chase had decorated her Christmas tree with the kids and Aunt Mary. Faith hadn't been up to it and had claimed ranch business elsewhere while they did it.

Last year, he and Rafe had hung the outside Christmas lights.

This year, Faith herself had hung the lights, with Barrett and Lou helping her.

He wanted to think there was some symbolism in that, one more example that she was moving forward with her life.

Addie was about to ring the doorbell again when it suddenly opened. Faith's aunt stood on the other side and at the sight of him, Mary gave a low, appreciative whistle that made him feel extremely self-conscious.

"I should yell at you for ringing the doorbell when I've told you a hundred times you're family, but you look so good, I was about to ask Miss Addie what handsome stranger brought her to our door."

His daughter giggled and kissed the wrinkled cheek Mary offered. "Hi, Aunt Mary. It's just my dad. But I told him on the way that he looked super hot. For an old guy, anyway."

He felt hot in his suit and tie, but probably not the way she meant. Mary grinned. "You're absolutely right," she said. "Nice to see you dressed up for once."

"Thanks," he answered.

Before he could say more, Louisa burst into the room and started dancing around Addie. "You're here! You're here! I've been dying to see you and do more than just talk on the phone and text and stuff. It feels like forever since you've been here."

The girls hugged as if they had been separated for months.

"Need me to carry your stuff to your room?" he asked.

"It's just a suitcase and sleeping bag, Dad. I think we can handle it."

"Let's hurry, before Barrett finds out you're here and starts bugging us," Louisa said.

Poor Barrett, who until recently had been completely outnumbered by all the women in his life. At least now he had a couple of uncles and an honorary cousin in Rafe's nephew, Joey.

"Faith only came in from the barn about half an hour ago so she's still getting ready," Mary said, her plump features tight with disapproval for a moment before she wiped the expression away and gave him a smile instead. "I heard the shower turn off a few minutes ago so it shouldn't be long now."

He tried not to picture Faith climbing out of the shower, all creamy skin with her tight, slender body covered in water droplets. Once the image bloomed there, it was tough to get it out of his head again to focus on anything else.

"It's fine," he answered. "We've got plenty of time."

"You're too patient," Mary said. Her voice had an unusually barbed tone to it that made him think she wasn't necessarily talking about him waiting for Faith to get dressed for their night out.

"Maybe I just don't want to make anybody feel rushed," he answered carefully—also talking about more than just that evening.

Mary sniffed. "That's all well and good, but sometimes time can be your worst enemy, son. People get set in their ways and can't see the world is still brimming over with possibilities. Sometimes they need a sharp boot in the keister to point them in the right direction."

Well, that was clear enough. Mary definitely wasn't talking about the time Faith was taking to get ready. He gave her a searching look. Maybe he hadn't been as careful as he thought about not wearing his heart on his sleeve.

He loved Faith's aunt, who had opened her home and her heart to Faith and her sisters after the horrible events before they came to Pine Gulch. She and Claude had offered a safe haven for three

grieving girls but they had provided much more than that. Through steady love and care, the couple had helped the girls begin to heal.

Mary had truly been a lifesaver after Travis's death, as well. She had moved back into the ranch house and stepped up to help with the children while Faith struggled to juggle widowhood and single motherhood while suddenly saddled with the responsibilities of running a big cattle ranch on her own.

"I'm just saying," Mary went on, "maybe it's time to get off your duff and make a move."

He could feel tension spread out from his head to his shoulders. "That's the plan. What do you think tonight is about?"

"I was hoping."

She frowned, blue eyes troubled. "Just between me and you and that Christmas tree, I've got a feeling that might be the reason why a certain person just came in from the barn only a half hour ago, even though she knew all day you were on the way and exactly what time she would need to start getting ready."

Did that mean Mary thought Faith was avoiding the idea of going on a real date with him? He couldn't tell and before he had the chance to ask for clarification, Flynn Delaney came into the living room.

The other man did a double take when he spotted Chase talking to Mary. "Wow. A tie and everything."

Chase shrugged, though he could feel his skin prickle. "A Christmas party for the local stockgrowers association might not be a red-carpet Hollywood affair, but it's still a pretty big deal around here."

"Take it from me—it will be much more enjoyable for everyone involved."

He wasn't so sure about that, especially if Faith was showing reluctance about the evening.

"Sometime this week, Rafe and I are planning to spruce up the set we used last year for the Christmas show. If you want to lend a hand, we'll pay you in beer."

He had come to truly enjoy the company of both of Faith's brothers-in-law. They were both decent men who, as far as he was concerned, were almost good enough for her sisters.

"Addie's in town right now and I feel bad enough about leaving her tonight when our time together is limited. I'll have to see what she wants to do but I'm sure she wouldn't mind coming out again and riding horses with Lou."

"I get it. Believe me."

Flynn had been a divorced father, too. He and his famous actress wife had been divorced several years before she was eventually killed so tragically.

The other man looked down the hallway, apparently to make sure none of the kids were in earshot. "I hear a certain H-O-R-S-E is safely ensconced at your place now."

"Lou is twelve years old and can spell, you know," Mary said with a snort.

Flynn grinned at the older woman. "Yeah. But will she slow down long enough to bother taking time to do it? That's the question."

Chase had to laugh. The horse and Louisa would be perfect for each other. "Yeah. She's a beauty. Louisa is going to be thrilled, I think. You all are in for a fun Christmas morning."

"You'll come over for breakfast like you usually do, won't you?" Mary asked.

He wasn't so sure about that. Maybe he would have to see how that evening went first. He hoped like hell that he wasn't about to ruin all his most important relationships with Faith's family by muddying the water with her.

"I hope so," he started to say, but the words died when he heard a commotion on the stairs and a moment later, Faith hurried down them wearing a silver-and-blue dress that made her look like a snow princess.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry I'm late," Faith exclaimed as she fastened a dangly silver earring.

He couldn't have responded, since his brain seemed to have shut down.

She looked absolutely stunning, with her hair piled on top of her head in a messy, sexy bun, strands artfully escaping in delectable ways. She wore a rosy lipstick and more eye makeup than usual, with mascara and eyeliner that made her eyes look huge and exotically slanted.

The dress hugged her shape, with a neckline that revealed just a hint of cleavage. She wore strappy sandals that made him wonder if he was going to have to scoop her up and carry her through the snow.

He was so used to seeing her in jeans and a T-shirt and boots, wearing a ponytail and little makeup except lip balm.

She was beautiful either way.

He swallowed, realizing he had to say something and not just stand there like an idiot.

"You're worth the wait," he said.

His voice came out rough and she flashed him a startled look before he saw color climb her cheeks.

"I don't know about that. It's been a crazy day and I feel like I've been running since five a.m. I'll probably fall asleep the moment I get into your truck."

He would love to have her curl up beside him and sleep. It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

"I'll have to see what I can do to keep you awake," he murmured.

"Driving with the windows down and the music cranked always helps me," Flynn offered.

"I spent too long fixing that hair for you to mess it up with a wind tunnel," Celeste Nichols Delaney said as she followed her sister down the stairs.

Her words brought Chase to his senses and he realized he had been standing in the entryway, gaping at her like he'd never seen a beautiful woman before.

He cleared his throat and forced himself to smile at Celeste. "We can't have that. You did a great job."

"I did, especially with Faith trying to send three emails, put on her makeup and help Barrett with his English homework at the same time."

"I appreciate your hard work," Faith said. "I think I'm finally ready. I just need my coat."

She made it the rest of the way down the stairs on the high heels and reached inside the closet in the entryway, but before she could pull off the serviceable ranch coat she always wore, Celeste slapped her hand away. "Oh, no you don't."

Faith frowned at her sister. "Why not? This is a stockgrowers' dinner. You think they've never seen a ranch coat before?"

"Not with that dress, they haven't. That's why I brought over this."

She pulled a soft fawn coat reverently from the arm of the sofa. "I bought this last month in New York when Hope and I were there meeting with our publisher."

"I don't want to wear your fancy coat."

"Too bad. You're going to."

Celeste could be as stubborn as the other sisters. "Fine," Faith finally sighed, reaching for the coat that looked cashmere and expensive. With a subtle wink, Celeste ignored her sister's outstretched hand and gave it to Chase instead. It was soft as a newborn kitten. He felt inordinately breathless as he moved behind Faith and helped her into it.

She smelled...different. Usually she smelled of vanilla and oranges from her favorite soap but this was a little more intense, with a low, flowery note that made him want to bury his face in her neck and inhale.

"There you go," he said gruffly.

"Thanks." It was obvious she wasn't comfortable dressing up, perhaps because so much of her childhood was spent with parents who gave away most of their material possessions to the people they worked with in impoverished countries.

"Are you happy now?" Faith said to her sister.

"Yes. You're beautiful." Celeste's eyes were soft and a little teary. "Sometimes you look so much like Mom."

"She must have been stunning," Flynn said, kissing his sister-in-law on the cheek.

Chase cleared away the little catch in his throat. "Breathtaking," he agreed.

Her cheeks turned pink at the attention. "I still think we'd have much more fun staying home and watching Christmas movies with the kids," she said. She smiled at the three of them but he was almost certain he saw a flicker of nervousness in her eyes again.

"Now, there's absolutely no reason for the two of you to rush back," Celeste assured them. "The three of us have got this covered. The kids will all be fine. Go and have a great time."

"That's right," Mary said. She gave Chase a pointed look, as if to remind him of their conversation earlier. "You ask me, these parties end way too soon. I suppose that's what you get when you hang out with people who have to wake up early to feed their livestock. So don't feel like you have to come straight home when it's over. You could even go catch a movie in town if you wanted or grab drinks at that fancy new bar that opened up on the outskirts of town."

"The only trouble is we both also have to wake up early to take care of our livestock," Faith said with a laugh that sounded slightly strained.

"Louisa. Barrett," she called. "I'm leaving. Come give me a hug."

All the children, not only her two, hurried down the stairs to join them.

"You look beautiful, Faith," Addie exclaimed. "What a cute couple you guys are. Wait. Let me get a picture so I can show my friends."

She pulled out the smartphone he didn't think she needed yet and snapped a picture.

"Oh! What a good idea," Celeste said. "I want a picture, too."

"We're just going to a Christmas party. It's not the prom," Faith said. Her color ratcheted up a notch, especially when Aunt Mary pulled out her phone as well and started clicking away taking pictures.

"I'm posting this one," her aunt declared. "You both look so good. In fact, you better watch it, Chase, or you'll have about a hundred marriage proposals before the night is over. My friends on social media can be a wild bunch."

Faith's cheeks by now were as red as the ornaments on the tree. This was distressing her, and though he didn't quite understand why, it didn't matter. His job was to protect her—even from loving relatives with cell phone cameras.

"Okay, that's enough paparazzi for tonight. We'll really be late if this keeps up."

"You don't want that. You'll miss all of Jenna McRaven's good food," Mary said.

"Exactly." He hugged his daughter. "Be good, Ads. I imagine you'll still be up when I bring Faith back but if you're not, I'll see you in the morning."

"Bye, Dad. Have fun."

He waited for Faith to hug and kiss her kids and admonish them to behave for Aunt Mary and the Delaneys, then he held the door open for her and they headed out into the cold air that felt refreshing on his overheated skin.

Neither of them said anything as he led her to his pickup and helped her inside. He wished he had some kind of luxury sedan to take her to the party but that kind of vehicle wasn't very practical on an eastern Idaho ranch. At least he'd taken the truck for a wash and had vacuumed up any dried mud and straw bits out of the inside.

It took a little effort to tuck the soft length of her coat inside. "Better make sure I don't shut the door on Celeste's coat," he joked. "She would probably never forgive me."

He went around and climbed inside, then turned his pickup truck around and started heading toward the canyon road that would take them to Pine Gulch and the party.

"My family. Ugh. You'd think I never went to a Christmas party before, the way they carry on." Faith didn't look at him as she fiddled with the air vent. "I don't know what's gotten into them all. I mean, we went together last year to the exact same party and nobody gave it a second thought."

A wise man would probably keep his mouth shut, just go with the flow.

Maybe he was tired of keeping his mouth shut.

"If I had to guess," he said, after giving her a long look, "they're making a fuss because they know this is different, that we're finally going out on a real date."

Chapter Four

At his words, tension seemed to clamp around her spine with icy fingers.

We're finally going out on a real date.

She had really been hoping he had forgotten all that nonsense by now and they could go to the party as they always had done things, as dear friends.

She didn't know what to say. She couldn't stop thinking about that moment when she had started down the stairs and had seen him standing there, looking tall and rugged and gorgeous, freshly shaved and wearing a dark Western-cut suit and tie.

He had looked like he should be going to a country music awards show with a beautiful starlet on his arm or something, not the silly local stockgrowers association party with her.

She had barely been able to think straight and literally had felt so weak-kneed she considered it a minor miracle that she hadn't stumbled down the stairs right at his feet.

Then he had spotted her and the heat in his eyes had sent an entire flock of butterflies swarming through her insides.

"Every time I bring up that this is a date, you go silent as dirt," he murmured. "Why is that?"

She drew in a breath. "I don't know what to say."

He shot her a quick look across the bench seat of his truck. "Is the idea of dating me so incomprehensible?"

"Not incomprehensible. Just...disconcerting," she answered honestly.

"Why?" he pressed.

How was she supposed to answer that? He was her best friend and knew all her weaknesses and faults. Surely he knew she was a giant coward at heart, that she didn't want these new and terrifying feelings.

She had no idea how to answer him so she opted to change the subject. "I haven't had a chance to ask you. How's Louisa's new horse?"

He shifted his gaze from the road, this time to give her a long look. She thought for a moment he would call her on it and press for an answer. To her relief, he turned back to the road and, after a long pause, finally answered her.

"Settling in, I guess. She seems to have really taken to Tor—and vice versa."

"I hope they won't be too upset at being separated when we send the new horse to Seth Dalton's after Christmas."

"I'm sure they'll survive. If not, we can always arrange visitation."

That word inevitably reminded her of his ex-wife.

"How is Cindy's mother doing?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Fine, from what I hear. She's probably going to be in the hospital another week."

"Does that mean the cruise is off?"

"Cindy insists they don't want to cancel the cruise unless it's absolutely necessary. I'm still planning my Christmas celebration with Addie on December 20."

"It's just another day on the calendar," she said.

"Don't let Hope hear you say that or she might ban you from The Christmas Ranch," he joked.

They spoke of the upcoming children's Christmas show and the crowds at the ranch and the progress of her sisters' movie for the remainder of the short drive to the reception hall where the annual dinner and party was always held.

He found a parking space not far from the building and climbed out to walk around the vehicle to her side. While she waited for him to open her door, Faith took a deep breath.

She could do this. Tonight was no different from dozens of other social events they had attended together. Weddings, birthday parties, Fourth of July barbecues. Things had never been awkward between them until now.

We're finally going out on a real date.

When she thought of those words, little starbursts of panic flared inside her.

She couldn't give in. Chase was her dear friend and she cared about him deeply. As long as she kept that in mind, everything would be just fine.

She wasn't certain she completely believed that but she refused to consider the alternative right now.

The party was in full swing when they arrived. The reception hall had been decorated with an abundance of twinkling fairy lights strung end to end and Christmas trees stood in each corner. Delectable smells wafted out of the kitchen and her stomach growled, almost in time to the band playing a bluegrass version of "Good King Wenceslas." A few couples were even dancing and she watched them with no small amount of envy. She missed dancing.

"You'd better give me Celeste's New York City coat so I can hang it up," Chase said from beside her.

She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm a little afraid to let it out of my sight but I guess I can't wear it all night."

"No, you can't. Go on inside. I'll hang this and be there in a moment."

She nodded and stepped into the reception room. Her good friend Jennie Dalton—Seth Dalton's wife and principal of the elementary school—stood just inside. Jennie was talking with Ashley Hartford, who taught kindergarten at the elementary school.

While their husbands were lost in conversation, the two women were speaking with a young, lovely woman she didn't recognize—which was odd, since she knew just about everyone who came to these events.

Jennie held out a hand when she spotted her. "Hello, my dear. You look gorgeous, as always."

Faith made a face, wishing she didn't feel like a frazzled, overburdened rancher and single mother.

She held a hand out to the woman she didn't know. "Hi. I'm Faith Dustin."

The woman had pretty features and a sweet smile. "Hello. I'm Ella Baker. You may know my father, Curt."

"Yes, of course. Hello. Lovely to meet you."

Curt Baker had a ranch on the other side of town. She didn't know him well but she had heard he had a daughter he didn't know well who had spent most of her life living with her mother back East somewhere. From what she understood, his daughter had returned to help him through a health scare.

"Your dad is looking well."

Ella glanced at her father with a troubled look, then forced a smile. "He's doing better, I suppose."

"Ella is a music therapist and she just agreed to take the job of music teacher at the school for the rest of the school year," Jennie said, looking thrilled at the prospect.

"That's a long time coming."

"Right. We've had the funding for it but haven't been able to find someone suitable since Linda Keller retired two years ago. We've been relying on parent volunteers, who have been wonderful, but can only take the program so far. I'm a firm believer that children learn better when we can incorporate the arts in the classroom."

"I completely agree," Faith said, then was suddenly struck by a small moment of brilliance. "Hey, I've got a terrific way for you to get to know some of the young people in the community."

"Oh?"

"My family runs The Christmas Ranch. You may have seen signs for it around town."

"Absolutely. I haven't had time to stop yet but it looks utterly delightful."

"It is." She didn't bother telling the woman she had very little to do with the actual operations of The Christmas Ranch. It was always too complicated explaining that she ran the cattle side of things—hence her presence at this particular holiday party.

"Last year we started a new tradition of offering a children's Christmas variety show and dinner for the senior citizens in town. It's nothing grand, more for fun than anything else. The children only practice for the week leading up to the show, since everyone is so busy this time of year. Linda Keller, the woman who retired a few years ago from the school district, had offered to help us this year but apparently she just broke her arm."

"That's as good an excuse as any," Ashley said.

"I suppose. The point is my sisters are desperate for someone to help them organize the show. I don't suppose there's any chance you might be interested."

It seemed a nervy thing to ask a woman she had only met five minutes earlier. To Faith's relief, Ella Baker didn't seem offended.

"That sounds like a blast," Ella exclaimed. "I've been looking for something to keep me busy until the New Year when I start at the school part-time."

Hope was going to owe her big-time—so much that Faith might even claim naming rights over the new baby.

"Great! You'll have fun, I promise. The kids are so cute and we've got some real talent."

"This is true," Ashley said. "Especially Faith's niece, Olivia. She sings like an angel. Last year the show was so wonderful."

"The senior citizens in the area really ate it up," Jennie affirmed. "My dad couldn't stop talking about it. The Nichols family has started a wonderful thing for the community."

"This sounds like a great thing. I'm excited you asked me."

"If you give me your contact info, I can forward it to my sister Hope. She's really the one in charge."

"Your name is Faith and you have a sister named Hope. Let me guess, do you have another one named Charity?"

"That would be logical, wouldn't it? But my parents never did what was expected. They named our youngest sister Celeste."

"Celeste is the children's librarian in town and she's also an author," Ashley said. "And Hope is an illustrator."

"Oh! Of course! Celeste and Hope Nichols. They wrote 'Sparkle and the Magic Snowball'! The kids at the developmental skills center where I used to work loved that story. They even wrote a song about Sparkle."

Faith smiled. "You'll have to share it with Celeste and Hope. They'll be thrilled."

She and Ella were sending contact information to each other's phones when she felt a subtle ripple in the air and a moment later Chase joined them.

Speaking with the women had begun to push out some of the butterflies inside her but they suddenly returned in full force.

"Sorry I was gone so long. I got cornered by Pete Jeppeson at the coatrack and just barely managed to get away."

"No worries. I've been meeting someone who is about to make my sisters very, very happy. Chase Brannon, this is Ella Baker. She's Curt's daughter and she's a music therapist who has just agreed to help out with the second annual Christmas Ranch holiday show."

Chase gave Ella a warm smile. "That's very kind of you—not to mention extremely brave."

The woman returned his smile and Faith didn't miss the sudden appreciative light in her eyes, along with a slightly regretful look, the sort a woman might wear while shopping when someone else

in line at the checkout just ahead of her picks out the exact one-of-a-kind piece of jewelry she would have chosen for herself.

"Brave or crazy," Ella said. "I'm not sure which yet."

"You said it. I didn't," Chase said.

Both of them laughed and as she saw them together, a strange thought lodged in her brain.

The two of them could be perfect for each other.

She didn't want to admit it but Ella Baker seemed on the surface just the sort of woman Chase needed. She had only just met the woman but she trusted her instincts. Ella seemed smart and pretty, funny and kind.

Exactly the sort of woman Chase deserved.

He said he was ready to date again and here was a perfect candidate. Wouldn't a truehearted friend do everything in her power to push the two of them together—at least give Chase the chance to get to know the other woman?

She hated the very idea of it, but she wanted Chase to be happy. "Will you both excuse me for a moment? I just spotted Jenna McRaven and remembered I need to talk to her about a slight change in the menu for the dinner next week."

She aimed a bright smile at them. "You two should dance or something. Go ahead! I won't be long."

She caught a glimpse of Ella's startled features and the beginnings of a thundercloud forming on Chase's but she hurried away before he could respond.

He would thank her later, she told herself, especially if Ella turned out to be absolutely perfect for him.

He only needed to spend a little time with her to realize the lovely young woman who had put her life on hold to help her ailing father was a much better option than a prickly widow who didn't have anything left in her heart to give him.

* * *

She found Jenna in the kitchen, up to her eyeballs in appetizers.

This was the absolute worst time to bug her about a catering job, when she was busy at a different one. Faith couldn't bother her with a small change in salad dressing—especially when she was only using this as an excuse to leave Chase alone with Ella Baker. She would call Jenna later and tell her about the change at a better time.

"Hi, Faith! Don't you look beautiful tonight!"

She almost gave an inelegant snort. Jenna's blond curls were piled on her head in an adorable messy bun and her cheeks looked rosy from the heat of the kitchen and probably from the exertion of preparing a meal for so many people, while Faith had split ends and hands desperately in need of a manicure.

"I was just going to say the same to you," she said. "Seriously, you're the only person I know who can be neck-deep in making canapés and still manage to look like a model."

Jenna rolled her eyes as she continued setting out appetizers on the tray. "You're sweet but delusional. Did you need something?"

Faith glanced through the open doorway, where she could see Chase bending down to listen more closely to something Ella was saying. The sight made her stomach hurt—but maybe that was just hunger.

"Not at all. I was just wondering if you need any help back here."

Jenna looked startled at her question but not ungrateful. "That's very sweet but I'm being paid to hang out here in the kitchen. You're not. You should be out there enjoying the party."

"I can hear the music from here, plus helping you out in the kitchen would give me the chance to talk to a dear friend I don't see often enough. Need me to carry out a tray or two?"

Jenna blew out a breath. “I should say no. You’re a guest at the party. I hate to admit it, but I could really use some help for a minute. It’s a two-person job but my assistant has the flu so I’m a little frantic here. Carson will be here to help me as soon as he can, but his flight from San Francisco was delayed because of weather so he’s running about an hour behind.”

Faith found it unbearably sweet that Jenna’s billionaire husband—who commuted back and forth between Silicon Valley and Pine Gulch—was ready to help the wife he adored with a catering job. “I can help you until he gets here. No problem.”

Jenna lifted her head from her task long enough to frown. “Didn’t I see you come in with Chase when I was out replenishing the Parmesan smashed potatoes? I can’t let you just ditch him.”

She glanced at the door where he was now smiling at something Ella said.

“We drove here together, yes,” she answered. “But I’m hoping he’ll be dancing with Curt Baker’s daughter in a moment.”

“Oh. Ella. Jolie just started taking piano lessons from her. She’s a delight.”

“I think she would be great for Chase so I’m trying to give them a chance to get to know each other. Let nature take its course and all.”

Jenna’s busy hands paused in her work and she gave Faith a careful look. “You might want to ask Chase his opinion on that idea,” she said mildly.

“I don’t need to ask him. He’s my best friend. I know what he needs probably better than he knows himself.”

Jenna opened her mouth to answer, then appeared to think better of it.

She was right, Faith told herself. Chase would thank her later; she was almost certain of it.

Chapter Five

Faith was trying to ditch him.

He knew exactly what she was doing as she moved in and out of the kitchen carrying trays of food for Jenna McRaven's catering company. It wasn't completely unusual for her to help out behind the scenes, but he knew in this case she was just looking for an excuse to avoid him.

He curled his hands into fists, trying to decide if he was more annoyed or hurt. Either way, he still wanted to punch something.

The woman beside him hummed along with the bluegrass version of "Silver Bells." Ella Baker had a pretty voice and kind eyes. He felt like a jerk for ignoring her while he glowered after Faith, even though Ella wasn't the date he had walked in with.

"What were you doing before you came back to Pine Gulch to stay with your father?" he asked.

"I was the music instructor at a residential school for developmentally delayed children in Upstate New York, the same town where you can find the boarding school I attended myself from the age of eight, actually."

Boarding school? What was the story there? He wouldn't have taken Curt Baker as the sort of guy to send his kid to boarding school to be raised by someone else most of the year. He couldn't imagine it—it was hard enough packing Addie off to live with her mother half the time.

"Sounds like you were doing good work."

"I found it very rewarding. Some of my students have made remarkable progress. Music can be a comfort and a joy, as well as open doors to language and auditory processing skills I wouldn't have imagined before I started in this field."

"That sounds interesting."

She made a face. "To me, anyway. Sorry. I tend to get a little passionate when I talk about my job."

"I admire that in a person."

"It's not all I do, I promise. I did play piano and I sing in a jazz trio on the weekends."

"That's great! Maybe you ought to perform at the holiday show yourself."

She made a face. "I probably would be a little out of place, since it sounds like this is mostly a show featuring children. I'm happy enough behind the scenes."

The band changed to a slower song, a wistful holiday tune about regret and lost loves.

"Oh, I love this song," she exclaimed, swaying a little in time to the music.

What was the etiquette here? He had come to the party with a woman who was doing her best to stay away from him. Meanwhile another one was making it clear she wanted to dance.

He didn't know the social conventions but he figured simple politeness trumped the rules anyway.

"Would you like to dance?" he finally asked. If Faith would rather hide out in the kitchen than spend time in conversation with him, he probably wasn't committing some grave faux pas by asking another woman for a simple dance.

Ella's smile was soft with delight. "I would, actually. Thanks."

How weird was this night turning out? Chase wondered as he led the woman out to the dance floor with about a dozen other couples. He had come to the party hoping to end up with Faith in his arms. Instead, she was currently busy carrying out a pot of soup while he was dancing with a woman he had only just met.

Ella was a good conversationalist. She asked him about his ranch and Pine Gulch and the surroundings. He told her about Addie and the cruise she was going on with her mother and stepfather over the holidays and his plans to have their own Christmas celebration a few days before the twenty-fifth.

He actually enjoyed himself more than he might have expected, though beneath the enjoyment he was aware of a simmering frustration at Faith.

When the song ended, he spotted Ella's father on the edge of the dance floor speaking with a ranching couple he knew who lived up near Driggs. He led her there, visited with the group for a moment, then made his excuses and headed straight for the kitchen.

He found Faith plating pieces of apple pie. She was talking to Jenna McRaven but her words seemed to stall when she spotted him.

"Are you going to hide out in here all night?"

Her gaze shifted away from his but not before he saw the shadow of nervousness there. "I'm not hiding out," she protested. "I was just giving Jen a hand for a minute. Anyway, you've been busy dancing with Ella Baker."

Only because his real date was as slippery as a newborn calf.

"You've done more than enough," Jenna assured her. "I'm grateful for your help but I'm finally caught up in here. Carson's plane just landed and he's on his way here to help me with the rest of the night. You really need to go out and enjoy the party."

Faith opened her mouth to protest but Jenna gave her a stern look. "I'm serious, sweetie. Go out and enjoy all this delicious food I've been slaving over for a week. Now hand over the apron and back away slowly and nobody will get hurt."

"Fine. If you insist." Faith huffed out a little breath but untied her apron and set it on an empty space on the counter. Chase wasn't about to let her wriggle away again. He hooked his hand in the crook of her elbow and steered her out into the reception hall and over to the buffet line.

They grabbed their food, which all appeared delicious, then Faith scanned the room. "I see a couple of chairs over by Em and Ashley. Why don't we go sit with them?"

He enjoyed hanging out with their neighbors but right now he would rather find a secluded corner and have this out. Barring that, he would rather just go home and get the hell out of this suit and tie.

Nothing was working out as he planned and he felt stupid and shortsighted for thinking it might.

"Sure. Sounds good," he lied.

She led the way and as soon as they were seated, she immediately launched into a long conversation with the other couples.

By the time dinner was over, he was more than ready to throw up his hands and declare the evening a disaster, convinced she was too stubborn to ever consider they could be anything but friends.

Sitting at this table with their neighbors and friends filled him with a deep-seated envy that left him feeling small. They were all long-married yet still obviously enamored with each other, with casual little touches and private smiles that left him feeling more lonely than ever.

The band had begun to move away from strictly playing holiday songs and began a cover of a popular upbeat pop song, adding a bluegrass flair, of course. Ashley Hartford lit up. "Oh! I love this song. Come dance with me, darling."

Though they had four children and had been married for years, Justin gave her the sort of smoldering look Chase guessed women enjoyed, since the man had made millions on the big screen, before he walked away from it all to come to Pine Gulch.

"Let's do it," he said.

"We can't let them show us up," Emery declared to her husband. "I know you hate to dance but will you, just this once?"

Nate Cavazos, former army Special Forces and tough as nails, sighed but obediently rose to follow his petite wife out to the dance floor. Their departure left him alone at the table with Faith, along with an awkward silence.

He gestured to the floor. "Do you want to dance?"

Panic flickered in her eyes and his gut ached. She had been his friend for nearly two decades. They had laughed together, cried together, confided secrets to each other.

Why the hell couldn't she see they were perfect for each other?

"Forget it," he said. "You're not enjoying this. Why don't I just go get Celeste's fabulous coat and we can take off?"

Her lush mouth twisted into a frown. "That's not fair to you."

She looked at the dance floor for a moment, then back at him. "Actually, let's go dance. I would like it very much."

He wanted to call her out for the lie but it seemed stupid to argue. Instead, Chase scraped his chair back, then reached a hand out. She placed her slim, cool, working-rancher hand in his and he led her out to the dance floor.

Just as they reached it, the music shifted to a song he didn't know, something slow and dreamy, jazzy and soft. He pulled her into his arms—finally!—and they began to move in time to the music.

"This is nice," she murmured, and he took that as encouragement to pull her a little closer. She smelled delicious, that subtle scent he had picked up earlier, and he closed his eyes and tried to burn the moment into his memory.

She stumbled a little and when he glanced down, she was blushing. "Sorry. I'm not very good at this. I never learned to dance, unless you count some of the native dances we did in South America and Papua New Guinea."

"I'd like to see some of those."

She laughed. "I doubt I could remember a single one. Hope probably can. She was always more into them than I was. You're a very good dancer. Why didn't I know that?"

"I guess we haven't had much call to dance together."

His mother had taught him, he remembered, when he was about fourteen or fifteen, before his father's diagnosis and his family fell apart.

His mother had told him he needed to learn so he wouldn't be embarrassed at school dances. Turns out, he hadn't needed the lessons. His father's cancer and the toll the treatment had taken on him had left Chase little time for frivolous things like proms. It was all he could do to keep the ranch running while his mother ran his dad back and forth to the cancer center in Salt Lake City.

Despite the long, difficult fight, his father had lost the battle. After he died, things had been worse. His mother had completely fallen apart that first year and had slipped into a deep, soul-crushing depression that lasted for a tough four years, until she finally went to visit a sister in Seattle, fell in love with a restaurant owner she met there and moved there permanently.

Sometimes he wondered what might have happened if his father hadn't died, if Chase hadn't been forced to put his own plans for college on the back burner.

If he had been in a better place to pursue Faith first.

If.

It was a word he really hated.

A few more turns around the dance floor and she appeared to relax and seemed to be enjoying the music and the moment. He even made her laugh a few times. The music shifted into another slow dance and she didn't seem in a hurry to stop dancing so he decided to just go with it.

If he had his choice, he would have frozen that moment forever in time, just savoring the scent of her hair and the way her curves brushed against him and the way she fit so perfectly in his arms.

Too quickly, the music ended and she pulled away.

"That was nice," she said. "Thanks."

Dancing with him had been a big step for her, he knew.

"They're about to serve dessert," he said on impulse. "What do you say we grab a couple slices of that apple pie in a couple of to-go boxes and take off somewhere to enjoy it where we can look at Christmas lights?"

"We don't have to leave if you're enjoying yourself."

"I just want to be with you. I really don't care where."

He probably shouldn't have been that blunt. She nibbled on her lip, clearly mulling her options, then smiled.

"Let's go."

* * *

She hated being a coward.

Her sister Hope plowed through life, exploring the world as their parents had, experiencing life and collecting friends everywhere she went. Celeste, the youngest, was shy and timid and could be socially awkward. That seemed to have changed significantly since her marriage to Flynn and since her literary career took off, requiring more public appearances and radio interviews. Celeste seemed to be far more comfortable in her own skin these days.

Now Faith was the timid one.

Losing her husband and becoming a widow at thirty-two had changed her in substantial ways. Sometimes she wasn't even sure who she was anymore.

She had never considered herself particularly brave, though she had tried to put on a strong front for Hope and Celeste after their parents died. They had needed her and while she wanted to curl up into herself, she had tried to set an example of courage for her sisters.

After Travis died, she had wanted to do the same. That time, her children had needed her. She had to show them that even in the midst of overwhelming grief they could survive and even thrive.

Right now, that facade of strength seemed about to crumble to dust. In her heart, she was terrified and it seemed to be growing worse. She was so afraid of shaking up the status quo, setting herself up for more pain.

More than that, she was afraid of hurting Chase.

She wouldn't worry about that now. Once they were alone, just the two of them, they could forget all this date nonsense and just be Chase and Faith again, like always.

Jenna McRaven didn't ask questions when they asked if she had any to-go boxes. She pulled out a cardboard container that she loaded with two pieces of caramel-topped apple pie.

A moment later, without giving explanations to anyone, they grabbed Celeste's luxurious coat and hurried outside into the December night.

Her breath puffed out as they made their way to his pickup but she wasn't cold. She wanted to give credit to the fine cashmere wool but in truth she was still overheated from the warm dance floor and her own ridiculous nerves.

"Where should we go for dessert?" he asked. "What do you think about Orchard Park? It offers a nice view of town."

She would rather go back to the Star N and change into jeans and a T-shirt. Barring that, Orchard Park would have to do. "Sounds good," she answered.

He turned on a Christmas station and soft, jazzy music filled the interior of his pickup truck as he drove the short distance from the reception hall to an area of new development in Pine Gulch.

A small subdivision of single-family homes was being built here on land that had once been filled with fruit trees. The streets had names like Apple Blossom Drive, Jubilee Lane and McIntosh Court and only about half the lots had new houses.

Chase pulled above the last row of houses to a clearing at the end of the road, probably where the developer planned to add more houses eventually.

He put the vehicle in Park but left the engine running. Warm air poured out of the vents from the heater, wrapping them in a cozy embrace.

"I'm sorry I didn't think to get a bottle of wine but I should have some water in my emergency stash."

He climbed out and rummaged in a cargo box in the backseat before emerging with a couple of water bottles.

Given the harsh winters in the region, most people she knew kept kits in their vehicles with water bottles, granola bars and foil emergency blankets in case they were stranded in a blizzard.

"Don't forget to replenish your supply," she said when he slid back in the front seat.

"I won't. Nothing worse than being stuck in four-foot-high drifts somewhere with nothing to drink but melted snow."

That had never happened to her, thankfully. She unscrewed the cap and took a drink of the water, which was remarkably cold and refreshing, then handed him the to-go carton of pie Jenna had given them along with the fork her friend had provided.

"I guess it's fitting we should eat an apple pie here," she said.

His teeth gleamed in the darkness as he smiled. "Anything else wouldn't seem as appropriate, would it?"

With the glittery stars above them and the colorful lights of town below, she took a bite of her pie and nearly swooned from the sheer sensory overload.

"Wow. That's fantastic," she breathed. It was flaky and crusty and buttery, with just the right hint of caramel. "Jenna is a master of the simple apple pie. I've got her recipe but I can never make it just like this. I don't know what she does differently from me or Aunt Mary or my sisters but it's so fantastic."

"Even without ice cream."

She laughed. "I was thinking that but didn't want to say it."

It seemed a perfect moment, so much better away from the public social pressure of the party. She took a deep breath and realized she hadn't fully filled her lungs all evening. Stupid nerves.

"I love the view from this area," she said. "Pine Gulch seems so peaceful and quiet."

"I suppose it looks so peaceful because you can't see from up here how old Doris Packer is such a bitter old hag or how Ben Tillman has a habit of shortchanging his customers at the tavern or how Wilma Rivera is probably talking trash about her sister-in-law."

He was so right. "It's easy to simply look at the surface and think you know a place, isn't it?"

"Right." He sent her a sidelong look. "People are much the same. You have to dig beneath the nice clothes and the polite polish to find the essence of a person."

She knew the essence of Chase Brannon. He was a kind, decent, good man who so deserved to be happy.

She sighed and could feel the heat of his gaze.

"That sounded heavy. What's on your mind?"

She had a million things racing through her thoughts and didn't know how to talk to him about any of it. She couldn't tell him that she felt like she stood on the edge of a precipice, toes tingling from the vast, unknown chasm below her, and she just didn't know how much courage she had left inside her to jump.

"I'm feeling bad about taking you away from the party," she lied.

"You didn't take me away. Leaving was my idea, remember?"

He reached up to loosen his tie. Funny how that simple act seemed to help her remember this was Chase, her best friend. She wanted him to be happy, no matter what.

"It was a good idea. Still, if we had stayed, maybe you could have danced with Ella Baker again."

He said nothing but annoyance suddenly seemed to radiate out of him in pointed rays.

"She seems very nice," Faith pressed.

"Yes."

"And she's musical, too."

"Yes."

"Not to mention beautiful, don't you think?"

"She's lovely."

"You should ask her out, since you suddenly want to start dating again."

He made a low sound in the back of his throat, the kind of noise he made when his tractor broke down or one of his ranch hands called in sick too many times.

"Who said I wanted to start dating again?" he said, his voice clipped.

"You did. You're the one who insisted this was a date-date. You made a big deal that it wasn't just two friends carpooling to the stockgrowers' party together, remember?"

"That doesn't mean I'm ready to start dating again, at least not in general terms. It only means I'm ready to start dating you."

There it was.

Out in the open.

The reality she had been trying so desperately to avoid. He wanted more from her than friendship and she was scared out of her ever-loving mind at the possibility.

The air in the vehicle suddenly seemed charged, crackling with tension. She had to say something but had no idea what.

"I... Chase—"

"Don't. Don't say it."

His voice was low, intense, with an edge to it she rarely heard. She had so hoped they could return to the easy friendship they had always known. Was that gone forever, replaced by this jagged uneasiness?

"Say...what?"

"Whatever the hell you were gearing up for in that tone of voice like you were knocking on the door to tell me you just ran over my favorite dog."

"What do you want me to say?" she whispered.

"I sure as hell don't want you trying to set me up with another woman when you're the only one I want."

She stared at him, the heat in his voice rippling down her spine. She swallowed hard, not knowing what to say as awareness seemed to spread out to her fingertips, her shoulder blades, the muscles of her thighs.

He was so gorgeous and she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to taste that mouth that was only a few feet away.

He gazed down at her for a long, charged moment, then with a muffled curse, he leaned forward on the bench seat and lowered his mouth to hers.

Given the heat of his voice and the hunger she thought she glimpsed in his eyes, she might have expected the kiss to be intense, fierce.

She might have been able to resist that.

Instead, it was much, much worse.

It was soft and unbearably sweet, with a tenderness that completely overwhelmed her. His mouth tasted of caramel and apples and the wine he'd had at dinner—delectable and enticing—and she was astonished by the urge she had to throw her arms around him and never let go.

Chapter Six

For nearly fifteen years, he had been trying not to imagine this moment.

When she was married to one of his closest friends, he had no idea she tasted of apples and cinnamon, that she smelled like oranges and vanilla sprinkled across a meadow of wildflowers.

He hadn't wanted to know she made tiny little sounds of arousal, little breathy sighs he wanted to capture inside his mouth and hold there forever.

It was easier not knowing those things. He could see that now.

He had hugged her many times and already knew how perfectly she fit against him. Sometimes when they would come back from traveling out of town together—Idaho Falls for the livestock auction or points farther away to pick up ranch equipment or parts—she would fall asleep, lulled by the motion of the vehicle and the rare chance to sit in one place for longer than five minutes.

He loved those times. Invariably, she would end up curled against him, her head on his shoulder. It would always take every ounce of strength he possessed not to pull her close, tuck her against him and drive off into the sunset.

He had always tried to remember his place as her friend, her support system.

Aching and wistful, he would spend those drives wishing he could keep driving a little extra or that when they arrived at their destination, he could gently turn her face to his and wake her with a kiss.

It was a damn good thing he hadn't ever risked something so stupid. If he had, he would never have been able to let her go.

He had her now, though, and he wasn't about to let this moment go to waste. She needed to see that she was still a lovely, sensual woman who couldn't spend the rest of her life hidden away at the Star N, afraid to let anybody else inside.

If he couldn't talk her into giving him a chance, perhaps he could seduce her into it.

It wasn't the most honorable thought he'd ever had, but right now, with her mouth warm and open against his and her silky hair under his fingertips, he didn't care.

He deepened the kiss and she froze for a second, and then her lips parted and she welcomed him inside, her tongue tangling with his and her hands clutching his shirt.

She might never be able to love him as he wanted but at least she should know she was a beautiful, desirable woman who had an entire life ahead of her.

He wasn't sure how long they spent wrapped around each other. What guy could possibly pay attention to insignificant little details like that when the woman he loved was kissing him with abandon?

He only knew he had never been so grateful for his decision to get a bench seat in his pickup instead of two buckets. Without a console in the way, she was nearly in his lap, exactly where he wanted her...

This was the dumbest thing he had ever done.

Even as he tried to lose himself in the kiss, the thought seemed to slither across his mind like a rattlesnake across his boot.

He was only setting himself up for more heartache. He should have thought this through, looked ahead past the moment and what he wanted right now.

How could he ever go back to being friends with her, trying like hell to be respectful of the subtle distance she so carefully maintained between them? He couldn't scrub these moments from his mind. Every time he looked at her now, he would remember this cold, star-filled night with the glittering holiday lights of Pine Gulch spread out below them and her warm, delicious mouth tangling with his.

Some small but powerful instinct for self-preservation clamored at him that maybe he better stop this while he still could, before all these years of pent-up desire burst through his control like irrigation water through a busted wheel line. He couldn't completely lose his head here.

He drew in a sharp breath and eased away from her. Her features were a pale blur in the moonlight but her lips were swollen from his kiss, her eyes half-closed. Her hair was tousled from his hands and she looked completely luscious.

He nearly groaned aloud at the effort it took to slide away from her when his entire body was yelling at him to pull her closer.

She opened her eyes and gazed at him, pupils dilated and her ragged breathing just about the most erotic sound he'd ever heard.

He saw the instant awareness returned to her eyes. They widened with shock and something else, then color soaked her cheeks.

She untangled her hands from around his neck and eased away from him.

"It's been a long time since I made out with a pretty girl in a pickup truck," he said into the suddenly heavy silence. "I forgot how awkward it could be."

She swallowed hard. "Right," she said slowly. "It's the pickup truck making things awkward."

They both knew it was much more than that. It was the years of history between them and the weight of a friendship that was important to both of them.

"I so wish you hadn't done that," she said in a small voice.

Her words carved out another little slice of his heart.

"Which? Kissed you? Or stopped?"

She shifted farther away from him and turned her face to look out at the town below them.

Instead of answering him directly, she offered up what seemed to him like a completely random change of topic.

"Do you remember the first time we met?"

Of course he remembered. Most guys remembered the days that left them feeling as if they had been run over by a tractor.

"Yes. You and your sisters had only been here with Mary and Claude a day or two."

"It was February 18, a week after our mother's funeral. We had been in Idaho exactly forty-eight hours."

She remembered it so exactly? He wasn't sure what to think about that. He only remembered that he had been sent by his mother to drop off a meal for "Mary's poor nieces."

The whole community knew what had happened to her and her sisters—that their parents had been providing medical care in a poor jungle town in Colombia when the entire family had been kidnapped by rebels looking for a healthy ransom.

After all these years, he still didn't know everything that had happened to her in that rebel camp. She didn't talk about it and he didn't ask. He did know her father had been shot and killed by rebels during a daring rescue mission orchestrated by US Navy SEALs, including a very young Rafe Santiago, now Hope's husband.

He didn't know much more now than he had that first time he met her. When the news broke a few months earlier and her family returned to the US, it had been big news in town. How could it be otherwise, given that her father had grown up in Pine Gulch and everyone knew the family's connection to Claude and Mary?

Unfortunately, the family's tragedy hadn't ended with her father's death. After their rescue, her mother had been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer that might have been treatable if she hadn't been living in primitive conditions for years—and if she hadn't spent the last month as a hostage in a rebel camp.

That had been Chase's mother's opinion, anyway. She had been on her way out of town to his own father's cancer treatment but had told him to drop off a chicken rice casserole and a plate of brownies to the Nichols family.

He remembered being frustrated at the order. Why couldn't she have dropped it off on her way out of town? Didn't he have enough to do on the ranch, since he was basically running things single-handedly?

Claude had answered the door, with the phone held to his ear, and told him Mary was in the kitchen and to go on back. He had complied, not knowing the next few moments would change his life.

He vividly remembered that moment when he had seen Faith standing at the sink with Mary, peeling potatoes.

She had been slim and pretty and fragile, with huge green eyes, that sweet, soft mouth and short, choppy blond hair—which she later told him she had cut herself with a butter knife sharpened on a brick, because of lice in the rebel camp.

He also suspected it had been an effort to avoid unwanted attention from the rebels, though she had never told him that. He couldn't imagine they couldn't see past her choppy hair to the rare beauty beneath.

Yeah, a guy tended to remember the moment he lost his heart.

"I gave you a ride into town," he said now. "Mary needed a gallon of milk or something."

"That's what she said, anyway," Faith said, her mouth tilted up a little. "I think she only wanted me to get out of the house and have a look at our new community and also give me a chance to talk to someone around my own age."

Not that close in age. He had been eighteen and had felt a million years older.

She had been so serious, he remembered, her eyes solemn and watchful and filled with a pain that had touched his heart.

"Whatever the reason, I was happy to help out."

"Everyone else treated us like we were going to crack apart at any moment. You were simply kind. You weren't overly solicitous and you didn't treat me like I had some kind of contagious disease."

She turned to face him, still smiling softly at the memories. "That was the best afternoon I'd had in forever. You told me jokes and you showed me the bus stop and the high school and the places where the kids in Pine Gulch liked to hang out. At the grocery store, you introduced me to everyone we met and made sure cranky Mr. Gibbons didn't cheat me, since I didn't have a lot of experience with American money."

She had been an instant object of attention everywhere they went, partly because she was new to town and partly because she looked so exotic, with a half-dozen woven bracelets on each wrist, the choppy hair, her wide, interested eyes.

"A few days later, you came back and said you were heading into town and asked if Aunt Mary needed you to come with me to pick anything else up."

That had basically been a transparent ploy to spend more time with her, which everyone else had figured out but Faith.

"That meant so much to me," she said. "Your own father was dying but that didn't stop you from reaching out and trying to help me acclimatize. I've never forgotten how kind you were to me."

Was it truly kindness, when he was the one who had benefited most? "It couldn't have been easy to find yourself settled in a small Idaho town, after spending most of your childhood wandering around the world."

"It was easier for me than it was for Hope and Celeste, I think. All I ever wanted was to stay in one place for a while, to have the chance to make friends finally. Friends like you."

She gave him a long, steady look. "You are my oldest and dearest friend, Chase. Our friendship is one of the most important things in my life."

He wanted to squeeze her hand, to tell her he agreed with her sentiments completely, but he didn't dare touch her again right now.

"Ditto," he said gruffly.

She drew in a breath that seemed to hitch a little. She looked out the windshield, where a few clouds had begun to gather, spitting out stray snowflakes that spiraled down and caught the light of the stars.

"That's why I have to ask you not to kiss me again."

Chapter Seven

Though she didn't raise her voice, her hard-edged words seemed to echo through his pickup truck.

I have to ask you not to kiss me again.

She meant what she said. He knew that tone of voice. It was the same one she used with the kids when meting out punishment for behavioral infractions or with cattle buyers when they tried to negotiate and offered a price below market value.

Her mind was made up and she wouldn't be swayed by anything he had to say.

Tension gripped his shoulders and he didn't know what the hell to say.

"That's blunt enough, I guess," he finally answered. "Funny, but you seemed to be into it at the moment. I guess I misread the signs."

Her mouth tightened. "It's a strange night. Neither of us is acting like ourselves. Can we just...leave it at that?"

That was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to kiss her again until she couldn't think straight.

He hadn't misread any signs and they both knew it. After that first moment of shock, she returned the kiss with an enthusiasm and eagerness that had left him stunned and hungry.

"Can you just take me home?" she asked in a low voice.

"If that's what you want," he said.

"It is," she answered tersely.

A few moments ago she had wanted him.

She was attracted to him. Lately he had been almost sure of it but some part of him had worried his own feelings for her were clouding his judgment. That kiss and her response told him the sexual spark hadn't been one-sided.

Nice to know he was right about that, at least.

She was attracted to him but she didn't want to be. How did a guy work past that conundrum?

The task suddenly seemed insurmountable.

He put the pickup in gear and focused on driving instead of on the growing realization that she might never be willing to accept him as anything more than her oldest and dearest friend.

Maybe, just maybe, it was time he accepted that and moved on with his life.

* * *

Though his features remained set and hard as he drove her back to the Star N, Chase carried on a casual conversation with her about the new horse, about a bit of gossip he heard about cattle futures at the stockgrowers' party, about Addie's Christmas presents that still needed to be wrapped.

Under other circumstances, she might have been quite proud of her halfway intelligent responses—especially when she really wanted to collapse into a boneless, quivering heap on the truck seat.

She couldn't stop remembering that kiss—the heat and the magic and the wild intensity of it.

Her heartbeat still seemed unnaturally loud in her ears and she hadn't quite managed to catch her breath, though she could almost manage to string two thoughts together now.

She felt very much like a tiny island in the middle of a vast arctic river just beginning the spring thaw, with chunks of ice and fast-flowing water buffeting against it in equal parts, bringing life back to the frozen landscape.

She didn't want to come to life again. She wanted that river of need to stay submerged under a hard layer of impenetrable ice forever.

Knowing that hollow ache was still there, that her sexuality hadn't shriveled up and died with Travis, completely terrified her.

She was a little angry about it, too, if she were honest. Why couldn't she just resume the state of affairs of the last thirty months, that sense of suspended animation?

This was Chase. Her best friend. The man she relied on for a hundred different things. How could she possibly laugh and joke with him like always when she would now be remembering just how his mouth had slid across hers, the glide of his tongue, the heat of his muscles against her chest.

She didn't want that river of need to come to churning, seething life again.

Yes, her world had been cold and sterile since Travis died, but it was safe.

She felt like she was suffocating suddenly, as if that wild flare of heat between them had consumed all the oxygen.

She rolled her window down a crack and closed her eyes at the welcome blast of cold air.

"Too warm?" he asked.

Oh, yes. He didn't know the half of it. "A little," she answered in a grave understatement.

He turned the fan down on the heating system just as her phone buzzed. She pulled it from the small beaded handbag Celeste had offered for the occasion.

It was a text from her sister: Girls are asleep. Don't rush home. Have fun.

She glanced at the message, then slid her phone back into the totally impractical bag.

"Problem?" he asked.

"Not really. I think Celeste was just checking in. She said the girls are asleep."

"I hope Addie was good."

"She's never any trouble. Really, we love having her around. She always seems to set a good example for my kids."

"Even Barrett?"

She relaxed a little. Talking about their children was much easier than discussing everything else.

"He can be such a rascal when Addie's there. I don't get it. He teases both of them mercilessly. I try to tell him to cut it out but the truth is I think he has a little crush on her."

"Older women. They're nothing but trouble. I had the worst crush on Maggie Cruz but she never paid me the slightest bit of attention. Why would she? I was in fifth grade and she was in eighth and we were on totally different planets."

The only crush she could remember having was the son of the butcher in the last village where they'd lived in Colombia. He had dark, soulful eyes and curly dark hair and always gave her all the best cuts when she went to the market for her family.

That seemed another lifetime ago. She couldn't even remember being that girl who once smiled at a cute boy.

By the time Chase pulled up to the Star N a few moments later, her hormones had almost stopped zinging around.

He put the truck in Park and opened his door.

"Since Addie's asleep, you don't have to come in," she said quickly, before he could climb out. "You don't really have to walk me to the door like this was a real date."

Why did she have to say that? The words seemed to slip out from nowhere and she wanted to wince. She didn't need to remind him of the awkwardness of the evening.

He said nothing, though she didn't miss the way his mouth tightened and his eyes cooled a fraction before he completely ignored what she said and climbed out anyway.

Everything between them had changed and it made her chest ache with regret.

"Thanks, Chase," she said as they walked side by side through the cold night. "I had a really great time."

"You don't have to lie. It was a disaster from start to finish."

The grim note in his voice made her sad all over again. She sighed. “None of that was your fault. Only mine.”

“The old, it’s not you, it’s me line?” he asked as they reached the door. “Really, Faith? You can’t be more original than that?”

“It is me,” she whispered, knowing he deserved the truth no matter how painful. “I’m such a coward and I always have been.”

He made a low sound of disbelief. “A coward. You.”

“I am!”

“This is the same woman who woke up the day after her husband’s funeral, put on her boots and went to work—and who hasn’t stopped since?”

“What choice did I have? The ranch was our livelihood. Someone had to run it.”

“Right. Just like somebody jumped into a river to save a villager in Guatemala while everybody else was standing on the shore wringing their hands.”

She stared at him. “How did you... Where did you hear that?”

“Hope told me once. I think it was after Travis died. She also told me how you took more than one beating while you were all being held hostage because you stepped up to take responsibility for something she or Celeste had done.”

She was the oldest. It had been her job to protect her sisters. What else could she do especially since it was her fault they had all been taken hostage to begin with?

She had told that cute boy she had a crush on the day they were supposed to go to Bogota so her mother could see a doctor and that they would probably be leaving for good in a few weeks.

She had hoped maybe he might want to write to her. Instead, he must have told the psychotic rebel leader their plans. The next time she saw that boy, he had been proudly wearing ragged army fatigues and carrying a Russian-made submachine gun.

“You’re not a coward, Faith,” Chase said now. “No matter how much you might try to convince yourself of that.”

A stray snowflake landed on her cheek and she brushed it away. “You are my best friend, Chase. I’m so afraid of destroying that friendship, like I’ve screwed up everything else.”

He gave her a careful look that made her wish she hadn’t said anything, had just told him good-night and slipped into the house.

“Can we... More than anything, I would like to go back to the way things were a few weeks ago. Without all this...awkwardness. When we were just Faith and Chase.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You really think we can do that, after that kiss?”

She shivered a little, from more than simply the cold night. “I would like to try. Please, Chase.”

“How do two people take a step backward? Something is always lost.”

“Can’t we at least give it a shot? At least until after the holidays?”

She hoped he couldn’t hear the begging tone of her voice that seemed so loud to her.

“I won’t wait forever, Faith.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“Fine. We can talk again after the New Year.”

Her relief was so fierce that she wanted to weep. At least she would have his friendship through the holidays. Maybe in a few more weeks, she would be able to find the courage to face a future without his constant presence.

“Thank you. That’s the best gift anyone could give me this year.”

She reached up to give him a casual kiss on the cheek, the kind she had given him dozens of times before. At the last minute, he turned his head, surprise in his eyes, and her kiss landed on the corner of his mouth.

Instantly, the mood shifted between them and once more she was aware of the heat of him and the coiled muscles and the ache deep within her for him and only him.

He kissed her fully, his mouth a warm, delicious refuge against the cold night. His scent surrounded her—leather and pine and sexy, masculine cowboy—and she desperately wanted to lean into his strength and surrender to the delicious heat that stirred instantly to life again.

Too soon, he stepped away.

"Good night," he said, his eyes dark in the glow from the porch light. He opened the door for her and waited until she managed to force her wobbly knees to carry her inside, then he turned around and walked to his pickup truck.

She really wanted nothing more than to shrug out of Celeste's luxurious coat, kick off her high heels, slip away to her room and climb into bed for the next week or two.

Unfortunately, a welcoming party waited for her inside. Celeste, Flynn and Aunt Mary were at the table with mugs of hot chocolate steaming into the air and what looked like a fierce game of Scrabble scattered around the table—which hardly seemed a fair battle since Celeste was a librarian and an author with a freaky-vast vocabulary.

All three looked up when she walked into the kitchen.

"Chase didn't come in?" Mary asked, clear disappointment on her wrinkled face.

Sometimes Faith thought her great-aunt had a little crush on Chase herself. What other reason did she have for always inviting him over?

"No," she said abruptly.

How on earth was she going to face him, again, now that they had kissed twice?

"How was your date?" Celeste asked. Though the question was casual enough, her sister gave her a searching look and she suddenly wanted desperately to confide in her.

She couldn't do it, at least not with Flynn and Mary listening in. "Fine," she answered.

"Only fine?" Mary asked, clearly surprised.

"Fun," she amended quickly. "Dinner was delicious, of course, and we danced a bit."

"Chase is a great dancer," Mary said, her eyes lighting up. "I could have danced with him all night at Celeste's wedding, except Agatha Lindley kept trying to cut in. I don't think he wanted to dance with her at all but he was just too nice."

"She was there tonight, though she didn't cut in. Unless she tried it when he was busy dancing with Ella Baker."

"Ella Baker?" Celeste frowned. "I don't think I know her."

"She's Curt Baker's daughter. She's moved to Pine Gulch to look after her father."

"The girls at the salon were talking about her when I went for my color this week," Mary said. "She teaches music or something, doesn't she?"

With a jolt, Faith suddenly remembered her conversation with the woman at the beginning of the party, which seemed like a dozen lifetimes ago. "Oh! I have news. Big news! I can't believe I almost forgot."

"You probably had other things on your mind," Flynn murmured, his voice so dry that she shot him a quick look.

Did her lips look as swollen as they felt, tight and achy and full? She really hoped not.

"You owe me so big," she said. "I begged Ella Baker to help out with the Christmas program. I told her my sisters were desperate and she totally agreed to do it!"

Celeste's eyes widened. "Are you kidding? What's wrong with the woman?"

"Nothing. She was very gracious about it and even said it sounded like fun."

"Right. Fun," Celeste said with a shake of her head.

"You had fun, don't deny it," Mary said. "Look how it ended up for you. Married to a hot contractor, tool belt and all."

"Thanks, my dear." Flynn gave a slow grin and picked up Mary's hand and kissed the back of it in a totally un-Flynn-like gesture that made Celeste laugh and Mary blush and pull her hand away.

"That was a definite side benefit," Celeste murmured, and Flynn gave her a private smile that made the temperature in the room shoot up a dozen degrees or so.

"Well, I'm afraid we don't exactly have more hot contractors to go around for Ella Baker," Faith said. "Though I do think she would be absolutely perfect for Chase. I told him so, but for some reason, he didn't seem to want to hear it."

All three of them stared at Faith as if she had just unleashed a rabid squirrel in the kitchen.

"You told Chase you think this Ella Baker would be perfect for him," Celeste repeated, with such disbelief in her voice that Faith squirmed.

"Yes. She seems like a lovely person," she said, more than a little defensive.

"I'm sure she is," Celeste said. "That doesn't mean you should have tried to set Chase up with her while the two of you were out together on a date. I'll admit I didn't have a lot of experience before I met Flynn but even I know most guys in general probably wouldn't appreciate that kind of thing. Chase in particular probably didn't want to hear you suggest other women you think he ought to date."

Why Chase in particular? She frowned, though she was aware she had botched the entire evening from the get-go. How was she possibly going to fix things between them?

"We're friends," she retorted. "That's the kind of things friends do for each other, pick out potential dating prospects."

None of them seemed particularly convinced and she was too exhausted to press the point. It was none of their business anyway.

She pulled off Celeste's coat and hung it over one of the empty chairs and also pulled all her personal things out of the little evening bag.

"Thanks for letting me use your coat and bag."

"You're welcome. Anytime."

Right. She wasn't going to another stockgrowers' party. Ever.

"I'm going to go change into something comfortable."

"I'll come help you with the zipper. That one sticks, if I remember correctly."

"I don't need help," she said.

"That, my dear, is a matter of opinion."

Celeste rose and followed her up the stairs. As she helped Faith out of the dress, her sister talked of the children and what they had done that evening and about the latest controversy at the library.

Beneath the light conversation, she sensed Celeste had something more to say. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear it but she couldn't stand the charged subtext either.

After she changed into her favorite comfy pajamas, she sat on the edge of her bed and finally braced herself. "Okay. Out with it."

Celeste deliberately avoided her gaze, confirming Faith's suspicions. "Out with what?" she asked, her tone vague.

"Whatever is lurking there on your tongue, dying to spill out. I can tell you have something to say. You might as well get it over with, for both our sakes. What did I do wrong?"

After a pause, Celeste sat down next to her on the bed.

"I'm trying to figure out if you're being deliberately obtuse or if you honestly don't know—all while I'm debating whether it's any of my business anyway."

"Remember what mom used to say? Better to keep your nose in a book than in someone else's business. Most of your life, you've had a pretty good track record in that department. Don't ruin it now."

Celeste sighed. "Fine. Deliberately obtuse it is, then."

She pulled her favorite sweatshirt over her head. This was more like it, in her favorite soft pajama bottoms and a comfortable hoodie. She felt much more at ease dressed like this than she ever would in the fancy clothes she had been wearing all evening.

"I don't know about deliberate but I'll admit I must be obtuse, since I have no idea what you're trying to dance around here."

"Really? No idea?"

The skepticism in her sister's voice burned. "None. What did I do wrong? I was careful with your coat, I promise."

"For heaven's sake, this isn't about the stupid coat."

"I'm not in the mood to play twenty questions with you. If you don't want to tell me, don't."

Celeste's mouth tightened. "Fine. I'll come out and say it, then. Can you honestly tell me you have no idea Chase is in love with you?"

At her sister's blunt words, all the blood seemed to rush away from her brain and she was very glad she was sitting down. Her skin felt hot for an instant and then icy, icy cold.

"Shut up. He is not."

Celeste made a disgusted sound. "Of course he is, Faith! Open your eyes! He's been in love with you forever. You had to have known!"

Whatever might be left of the apple pie and the small amount she had eaten at dinner seemed to congeal into a hard, greasy lump in her stomach.

She didn't know whether to laugh at the ridiculous joke that wasn't really funny at all or to tell her sister she was absolutely insane to make such an outrageous accusation. Underneath both those reactions was a tangled surge of emotion and the sudden burn of tears.

"He's not. He can't be," she whispered.

It couldn't be true. Could it?

Celeste squeezed her fingers gently, looking as if she regretted saying anything. "Use your head, honey. He's a good neighbor, yes, and a true friend. But can you really not see that his concern for you goes way beyond simple friendship?"

Chase was always there, a true and loyal friend. The one constant, unshakable force in her world.

"I don't want him to be." Her chest felt tight now and she could feel one of those tears slip free. "What am I going to do?"

Celeste squeezed her fingers. "You could try being honest with yourself and admit that you have feelings for him, too."

"As a friend. That's all," she insisted.

Celeste's eyes were full of compassion and exasperation in equal measures. "I love you dearly, Faith. You know I do. You've been my second mother since the day I was born, and from the time I was twelve years old you helped Aunt Mary and Uncle Claude raise me. You're kind and loving, a fantastic mom to Barrett and Lou, a ferociously hard worker. You've taught me so much about what it is to be a good person."

She tugged her hand away, sensing her sister had plenty more to say, and steeled herself to hear the rest.

"But?"

Celeste huffed out a breath. "But when it comes to Chase Brannon, you are being completely stupid and, as much as I hate to say it, more than a little cruel."

"That's a harsh word."

"The man is in love with you and when you sit there pretending you didn't know, you are lying to me, yourself and especially to Chase."

"He has never once said anything." She still couldn't make herself believe it.

"The last two years, he has shown you in a thousand different ways. You think he comes over three or four times a week to help Barrett with his homework because he loves fourth grade arithmetic? Can anyone really be naive enough to think he adores cleaning out the rain gutters in the spring and autumn because it's his favorite outdoor activity? Does he check the knock in your

pickup's engine or help you figure out the ranch accounts or take a look at any sick cattle you might have because he wants to? No! He does all of those things because of you."

Faith could come up with a hundred other things he did for her or for the kids or Aunt Mary. That didn't necessary mean he was in love with her, only that he was a good, caring man trying to step up and help them after Travis's death.

The nausea inside her now had an element of panic. Had she been ignoring the truth all this time because she simply hadn't wanted to see it? What kind of horrible person was she? It made her feel like the worst kind of user.

"He's my best friend," she whispered. "What would I do without him?"

"I'm afraid you might have to figure that out sooner than you'd like, especially if you can't admit that you might have feelings for him, too."

With that, her sister rose, gave her a quick hug. "We all loved Travis. He was like the big brother I never had. He was a great guy and a good father. But he's gone, honey. You're not. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and accept that maybe you didn't want to see that Chase is in love with you so you have avoided facing the truth. But now that you know, what are you going to do about it?"

Her sister slipped from the room before she could come up with a response—which was probably a good thing since Faith had no idea how to answer her.

Chapter Eight

"Why couldn't Lou come with us to take me home?" Addie asked Faith as they pulled out of the Star N driveway to head toward Chase's place.

Faith tried to smile but it ended in a yawn. She was completely wrung out after a fragmented, tortured night spent mostly staring up at her ceiling, reliving the evening—those kisses!—and her conversation with Celeste and wondering what she should do.

She must have slept for a few hours, on and off. When she awoke at her five-thirty alarm, all she wanted to do was pull the covers over her head, curl up and block out the world for a week or two.

Faith blinked away the yawn and tried to smile at Chase's daughter again. "She had a few chores to do this morning and I decided it was better for her to finish them as soon as she could. Sorry about that."

Addie gave her a sudden grin. "Oh. I thought it was maybe because you didn't want her to see her Christmas present in the pasture."

She winced. She should have known Addie would figure it out. The girl was too smart for her own britches. She only hoped she could also keep a secret. "How did you know about that?"

"My dad didn't tell me, in case you're wondering. It wasn't that hard to figure it out, though, especially since Lou hasn't stopped talking about the new barrel racing horse she wants. It seemed like too much of a coincidence when I saw a new horse suddenly had shown up in my dad's pasture."

Faith didn't see any point in dissembling. Christmas was only a few weeks away and the secret would be out anyway. "It wasn't a coincidence," she confirmed. "Your dad helped me pick her out and offered to keep her at Brannon Ridge until after Christmas, when we take her to the Dalton ranch to be trained."

"Louisa is going to be so excited!"

"I think so." Her daughter was a smart, kind, good girl. Louisa worked hard in school, did her chores when asked and was generally kind to her brother. She had channeled her grief over losing her father at such a young age into a passion for horse riding and Faith wanted to encourage that.

"I won't tell. I promise," Addie said.

"Thank you, honey."

Addie was a good girl, as well. Some children of divorce became troubled and angry—sometimes even manipulative and sly, pitting one parent against the other for their own gain as they tried to navigate the difficult waters of living in two separate households. Addie was the sweetest girl—which seemed a minor miracle, considering her situation.

"Maybe once she's trained, Lou might let me ride her once in a while," the girl said.

Faith didn't miss the wistful note in Addie's voice. "You know, if you want a horse of your own, you could probably talk your dad into it."

Quite frankly, Faith was surprised Chase hadn't already bought a horse for his daughter.

"I know. Dad has offered to get me one since I was like five. It would be nice, but it doesn't seem very fair to have a horse of my own when I could only see it and ride it once or twice a month. My dad would have to take care of it the rest of the time without me."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind. He already has Tor. It wouldn't be any trouble at all for him to take care of two horses instead of only one."

"Maybe if I lived here all the time," Addie said in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's hard enough, only seeing my dad a few times a month. I hate when I have to go back to Boise. It would be even harder if I had to leave a horse I loved, too."

Faith swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. The girl's sad wisdom just about broke her heart. "I can understand that. But you do usually spend summers on the ranch," she pointed out. "That's the best time for riding horses anyway."

"I guess." Addie didn't seem convinced. "I just wish I could stay here longer. Maybe come for the whole school year sometime, even if I wouldn't be in the same grade with Louisa."

"Do you think you might come here to go to school at some point?"

"I wish," she said with a sigh. "My mom always says she would miss me too much. I guess she thinks it's okay for Dad to miss me the rest of the time, when I'm with her."

If she hadn't been driving, Faith would have hugged her hard at the forlorn note in her voice. Poor girl, torn between two parents who loved and wanted her. It was an impossible situation for all of them.

She and Addie talked about the girl's upcoming cruise over the holidays with her mother until they arrived at Chase's ranch. When she pulled up to the ranch, she spotted him throwing a bale of hay into the back of his pickup truck like it weighed no more than a basketball.

She shivered, remembering the heat of his mouth on hers, the solid strength of those muscles against her.

On the heels of that thought came the far more disconcerting one born out of her conversation with Celeste.

The man is in love with you and when you sit there pretending you didn't know, you are lying to me, yourself and especially to Chase.

Butterflies jumped around in her stomach and she realized her fingers on the steering wheel were trembling.

Oh. This would never do. This was Chase, her best friend. She couldn't let things get funky between them. That was exactly what she worried about most.

Celeste had to be wrong. Faith couldn't accept any other possibility.

The moment she turned off the vehicle, Addie opened the door and raced to hug her dad.

Could she just take off now? Faith wondered. She was half-serious, until she remembered Addie's things were still in the back of the pickup truck.

In an effort to push away all the weirdness, she drew in a couple of cleansing breaths. It didn't work as well as she hoped but the extra oxygen made her realize she had probably been taking nervous, shallow breaths all morning, knowing she was going to have to face him again.

She pulled Addie's sleeping bag out from behind the seat and pasted on a casual smile, knowing even as she did it that he would be able to spot it instantly as fake.

When she turned around, she found him and Addie just a few feet away from her. His eyes were shaded by his black Stetson and she couldn't read the expression there but his features were still, his mouth unsmiling.

"Looks like we caught you going somewhere," she said.

"Just down to the horse pasture to check on, uh, things there."

If she hadn't been fighting against the weight of this terrible awkwardness, she might have managed a genuine smile at his attempt be vague.

"You don't need to use code. Your daughter is too smart for either of us."

"You don't have to tell me that." He smiled down at Addie and something seemed to unfurl inside Faith's chest. He was an excellent father—and not only to his daughter.

Since Travis died, he had become the de facto father figure for Louisa and Barrett. Oh, Rafe and Flynn did an admirable job as uncles and showed her children how good, decent men took care of their families. But Louisa and Barrett turned to Chase for guidance most. They saw him nearly every day. He was the one Louisa had invited when her class at school had a father-daughter dance and that Barrett had taken along to the Doughnuts with Dad reading hour at school.

They loved him—and he loved them in return. That had nothing to do with any of the nonsense Celeste had talked about the night before.

"Did you have fun last night?" Chase asked Addie now.

"Tons," she declared. "We popped popcorn and watched movies and played games. I beat everybody at UNO like three times in a row and Barrett said I was cheating only I wasn't. And then we all opened our sleeping bags under the Christmas tree and put on another movie and I fell asleep. This morning we had hot chocolate with marshmallows and pancakes shaped like snowmen. It was awesome."

"I'm so glad. Here, I can take that stuff."

He reached to grab the sleeping bag and backpack from Faith. As he did, his hand brushed her chest. It was a touch that barely connected through the multiple layers she wore—coat, a fleece pullover and her silk long underwear—but she could hardly hold back a shiver anyway.

"I'll just take it all into the house now," Addie said. "Thanks for the ride, Faith."

"You're very welcome," she said.

After she strapped the bag over her shoulder and Chase handed her the sleeping bag, she waved at Faith and skipped into the house, humming a Christmas carol.

What a sweet girl, Faith thought again. She didn't let her somewhat chaotic circumstances impact her enjoyment of the world around her. Faith could learn a great deal from the girl's example.

"I'll add my thanks to you for bringing her home," Chase said. "I appreciate it, though I could have driven over to get her."

"I really didn't mind. I've got to run into Pine Gulch for a few things anyway. Can I bring you back anything from the grocery store?"

They did this sort of thing all the time. He would call her on his way to the feed store and ask if she needed anything. She would bring back a part from the implement store in Idaho Falls if she had to go for any reason.

She really hoped the easy, casual give-and-take didn't change now that everything seemed so different.

"We could use paper towels, I guess," he said, after a pause. "Oh, and dishwasher detergent and dish soap."

"Sure. I can drop it off on my way home."

"No rush. I'll pick it up next time I come over."

"Sounds good," she answered. At his words, her smile turned more genuine. This seemed much like their normal interactions—and if he was talking about coming to the ranch again, at least he wasn't so upset at her that he was going to penalize the kids by staying away.

"Did you hear Jim Laird messed up his knee?" he asked. "Apparently he slipped on ice and wrenched things and Doc Dalton sent him over to Idaho Falls for surgery yesterday. I wondered why he wasn't at the party last night. I was hoping Mary Beth wasn't in the middle of a relapse or something."

She didn't like hearing when bad things happened to their neighbors. Jim was a sweet older man in his seventies whose wife had multiple sclerosis. They ran a small herd of about fifty head and he often bought alfalfa from her.

"As if he didn't have enough on his plate! What is Mary Beth going to do? She can't possibly do the feedings in the winter by herself."

"Wade Dalton, Justin Hartford and I are going to split the load for a few weeks, until he can get around again."

He was always doing things like that for others in the community.

"I want into the rotation. I can take a turn."

"Not necessary. The three of us have it covered."

She narrowed her gaze. "For six months after Travis died, ranchers up and down the Cold Creek stepped up to help us at the Star N. I'm in a good place now, finally, and want to give back when I can."

The ranch wouldn't have survived without help from her neighbors and friends—especially Chase. She had been completely clueless about running a cattle ranch and would have been lost.

Now that she had stronger footing under her, she wanted to start doing her best to pay it forward.

Chase looked as if he wanted to argue but he must have seen the determination in her expression. After a moment, he gave an exasperated sigh.

"Fine. I'll have Wade give you a call to work out the details."

She smiled. "Thanks. I don't mind the early-morning feedings either."

"I'll let Wade know."

There. That was much more like normal. Celeste had to be wrong. Yes, Chase loved her—just as she loved him. They were dear friends. That was all.

"I better run to the store before the shelves are empty. You know how Saturdays get in town."

"I do."

"So paper towels, dish soap and dish detergent. You can pick up everything tomorrow when you come for dinner," she said.

"That would work."

She felt a little more of the tension trickle away. At least he was still planning to come for dinner.

She loved their Sunday night tradition, when she and her sisters and Aunt Mary always fixed a big family meal and invited any neighbors or friends who would care to join them. Chase invariably made it, unless he was driving Addie back to Boise after a weekend visitation.

"Great. I'll see you tomorrow."

He looked as if he wanted to say something more but she didn't give him the chance. Instead, she jumped into her pickup and pulled away, trying her best not to look at him in the rearview mirror, standing lean-hipped and gorgeous and watching after her.

They had survived their first encounter post-kiss. Yes, it had been tense, but not unbearably so. After this, things between them would become more comfortable each time until they were back to the easy friendship they had always enjoyed.

She cared about him far too much to accept any other alternative.

* * *

He stood and watched her drive away, fighting the urge to rub the ache in his chest.

The entire time they talked about groceries and hot chocolate and Jim Laird's bum knee, his damn imagination had been back in a starlit wintry night, steaming up the windows of his pickup truck.

That kiss seemed to be all he could think about. No matter what else he might be trying to focus on, his brain kept going back to those moments when he had held her and she had kissed him back with an enthusiasm he had only dreamed about.

Hot on the heels of those delicious memories, though, came the cold, hard slap of reality.

I have to ask you not to kiss me again.

She was so stubborn, fighting her feelings with every bit of her. How was he supposed to win against that?

He pondered his dwindling options as he headed inside to find Addie so she could put on her winter clothes and help him feed the horses.

He found her just finishing a call on her cell phone with a look of resignation.

"Who was that?" he asked, though he was fairly sure he knew the answer. He and Cindy were just about the only ones Addie ever talked to on the phone.

"Mom," she said, confirming his suspicion. "She said Grandma is doing better and Grandpa says he doesn't really need her help anymore. She decided to take me back tomorrow so I can finish the last week of school."

Why didn't she call him first to work out the details?

He was surrounded by frustrating women.

"That's too bad. I know you were looking forward to practicing for the show with Louisa."

Her face fell further. “I forgot about that!” she wailed. “If I don’t go to practice, I don’t know if I can be in the show.”

“I’m sure we can talk to Celeste and Hope and get special permission for you to practice at home. You’ll be here next weekend and the first part of next week so you’ll be able to be at the last few practices.”

“I hope they’ll let me. I really, really, really wanted to be in the Christmas show.”

“We’ll work something out,” he assured her, hoping he wasn’t giving her unrealistic expectations. “Meanwhile, why don’t you grab your coat and boots. Since you’re so smart and already figured out the new horse is for Lou, do you want to meet her for real so you can tell me what you think?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed.

“You’ll have to work hard to keep it a secret.”

“I know. I would never ruin the surprise.”

With that promise, his daughter raced for the mudroom and her winter gear and Chase leaned a hip against the kitchen island to wait for her and tried not to let his mind wander back to those moments in his pickup that were now permanently imprinted on his brain.

❄ ❄ ❄

Chase headed up the porch steps of the Star N ranch house with a bag of chips in one hand and a bottle of his own homemade salsa in the other, the same thing he brought along to dinner nearly every Sunday.

The lights of the house were blazing a warm welcome against the cold and snowy Sunday evening but his instincts were still urging him to forget the whole thing and head back home, where he could glower and stomp around in private.

He was in a sour mood and had been since Cindy showed up three hours earlier than planned to pick up Addie, right as they were on their way out the door to go to their favorite lunch place.

It was always tough saying goodbye to his daughter. This parting seemed especially poignant, probably because Addie so clearly hadn’t wanted to go. She had dragged her feet about packing up her things, had asked if they could wait to leave until after she and Chase had lunch, had begged to say goodbye to the horses.

Cindy, annoyed at the delays, had turned sharp-tongued and hard, which in turn made Addie more pouty than normal. Addie had finally gone out to her mother’s new SUV with tears in her eyes that broke his heart.

Being a divorced father seriously sucked sometimes.

In his crazier moments, he thought about selling the ranch and moving to Boise to be closer to her, though he didn’t know what the hell he would do for a living. Ranching was all he knew, all he had ever known. But he would do whatever it took—work in a shoe factory if he had to—if his daughter needed him.

He wasn’t sure that was the answer, though. She loved her time here and seemed to relish ranch life, in a way Cindy never had.

With a sigh, he rang the doorbell, grimly aware that much of his sour mood had roots that had nothing to do with Cindy or Addie.

He had been restless and edgy since the last time he rang this doorbell, when he had shown up at this same ranch to pick up Faith for that disaster of a date two nights earlier.

How many mistakes could one man make in a single evening? Part of him wished he could go back and start the whole stupid week over again and just let his relationship with Faith naturally evolve from friendship to something more.

How long would that take, though? He had a feeling he could have given her five years—ten—and she would still have the same arguments.

Despite all his mistakes, he had to hope he hadn't completely screwed up their friendship for good, that things weren't completely wrecked between them now.

As she had a few nights earlier, Aunt Mary was the one who finally answered the doorbell.

"It's about time," she said, planting hands on her hips. "Faith needs a man in the worst way."

He blinked at that, his imagination suddenly on fire. "O-kay."

Mary looked amused and he guessed she could tell immediately what detour his brain had taken.

"She needs your grilling skills," she informed him.

He told himself that wasn't disappointment coursing through him. "Grilling skills. Ah. You're grilling tonight."

"We would be, but Faith is having trouble again with that stupid gas grill. I swear that thing has it out for us."

He gestured behind him to the elements just beyond the porch. "You do know it's starting to snow, right?"

Aunt Mary shrugged. "You hardly notice out there, with the patio heater and that cover Flynn built us for the deck. Steaks sounded like a great idea at the time, better than roast or chicken tonight, but now the grill is being troublesome. Rafe and Hope aren't back yet from visiting Joey's mom, and Flynn had to fly out to California to finish a project there. That leaves Celeste, Faith and me. We could really use somebody with a little more testosterone to figure out what we're doing wrong."

"I'm not an expert on gas grills but I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, honey."

He followed Mary inside, where they were greeted by delectable smells of roasting potatoes and yeasty rolls. No place on earth smelled better than this old ranch house on Sunday evenings.

"I've got to finish the salad. Go on ahead," Mary said.

He walked through the kitchen to the door that led to the covered deck. Faith didn't see him at first; she was too busy swearing and fiddling with the controls of the huge, fancy silver grill Travis had splurged on a few months before his death.

She was dressed in a fleece jacket, jeans and boots, with her hair loose and curling around her shoulders. His chest ached at the sight of her, like it always did. He wished, more than anything, that he had the right to go up behind her, brush her hair out of the way and kiss the back of that slender neck.

Little multicolored twinkly Christmas lights covered all the shrubs around the deck and had been draped around the edges of the roof. He didn't remember seeing Christmas lights back here and wondered if Hope had done it to make the rear of the house look more festive. It did look over The Christmas Ranch, after all.

Faith wasn't the biggest fan of Christmas, which he found quite ironic, considering she was part owner of the largest seasonal attraction in these parts.

She fiddled with the knobs again, then smacked the front of the grill. "Why won't you light, you stupid thing?"

"Yelling at it probably won't help much."

She whirled around at his comment and he watched as delectable color soaked her cheeks. "Chase! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

He was aware of a fierce, deep-seated need to have her say those words because she wanted to see him, not because she had a problem for him to solve.

"Mary said you're having grill trouble."

"The darn thing won't ignite, no matter what I do. It's not getting propane, for some reason. I've been out here for ten minutes trying to figure it out. It's a brand-new tank that Flynn got for us a few weeks ago and we haven't used it since. I checked the propane tank. I tried dropping a match in case it was the ignition. I tried all the knobs about a thousand times. I just think this grill hates me."

He found it more than a little amusing that she had learned to drive every piece of complicated farm machinery on the place over the last two years and could round up a hundred head of cattle on her own, with only the dogs for help, but she was intimidated by a barbecue grill.

"This one can be finicky, that's for sure."

She frowned at the thing. "Travis had to buy the biggest, most expensive grill he could order—forget that the controls on it are more confusing than the space shuttle."

She didn't say disparaging things about her late husband very often. In this case, he had to agree with her. He had loved the guy, but she was absolutely right. Travis Dustin always had to have the best, even when they couldn't afford it. His poor management and expensive tastes in equipment—and his gross negligence in not leaving her with proper life insurance—had all contributed to the big financial hole he had left his family when he died.

"I'll take a look," he said.

She stepped aside and he knelt down to peer at the connection. It only took him a moment to figure out why the grill wouldn't work.

"Here's your trouble. Looks like the gas hose isn't connected tightly. It's come loose from the tank."

He made the necessary adjustment, then stood, turned on the propane and hit the ignition. The grill ignited with a whoosh of instant heat.

She made a face. "Now I feel like an idiot. I swear I checked that already."

"It's easy to overlook."

"I guess my mind must have been on something else."

He had to wonder what. Was she remembering that kiss, too? He cast her a sidelong look and found a pink tinge on her cheeks again that might have been a blush—or just as easily might have been from the cold.

"Thank you for figuring it out," she said.

"No problem. You'll need to let the grill heat up for about ten minutes, then I can come back and take care of the steaks."

"Thank you. No matter how well I think I know my way around all the appliances in my kitchen, apparently this finicky grill remains my bugaboo. Or maybe it's outdoor cookery in general."

"I can't agree with that. I seem to remember some mean Dutch oven meals where you acted as camp cook when Trav and I would combine forces for roundup in the fall."

"That seems like a long time ago."

"Not that long. I still dream about your peach cobbler." Usually his dreams involved her kissing him between thick, gooey spoonfuls, but he decided it would probably be wise not to add that part.

Still, something of his thoughts must have appeared on his face because she seemed to catch her breath and gazed wide-eyed at him in the multicolored glow from the Christmas lights.

"I didn't know you liked it that much," she said after a moment, her voice a little husky. "Dutch oven cooking is easy compared to working this complicated grill. I'll be happy to make you a peach cobbler this summer, when the fruit is in season."

"Sounds delicious," he answered, his own voice a little more gruff than usual, which he told himself was because of the cold—though right now he was much warmer than he might have expected.

She swallowed hard and he was almost positive her gaze drifted to his mouth and then quickly away again. He was sure the color on her cheeks intensified, which had to be from more than the cold.

Was she remembering that kiss, too? He wanted to ask her—or better yet, to step forward and steal another one, but the door from the house opened and Louisa popped her head out.

"Hey, Chase! Where's Addie? Didn't she come with you?"

He took a subtle step back. "No. She went back to Boise with her mom this afternoon. Didn't she tell you?"

Her face fell. “Oh, no! Does that mean she won’t be able to do the show with us? She thought she could! She and I and Olivia were going to sing a song together!”

“She still wants to. She’ll have to miss the first few rehearsals, but she should be here next week for the actual show. We’ll do our best to get her back here for rehearsal by Thursday. I might have to run into Boise to make it happen.”

“Isn’t that your day to help out at Jim Laird’s place?”

Rats. He had forgotten all about that. “Yes. I’ll figure out a way to swing it.”

“I’ll help,” she said promptly. “I can either run to Boise for you or take your day at Jim’s house. Either way, we will get Addie here.”

His heart twisted a little that with everything she had to do here at the Star N, she would even consider driving six hours round-trip to pick up his daughter.

“Thank you, but I think I can manage both. If I take off as soon as I finish feeding my stock and his, I should be able to have Addie back in time for practice. It’s important to her so I’ll figure out a way to make it happen.”

Both Faith and her daughter gave him matching warm looks that made him forget all about the snow just beyond their little covered patio.

“Thanks, Chase. You’re the best,” Lou said. Despite the cold, she padded out to the deck in her stocking feet and threw her arms around his waist. He smiled a little and hugged her back, thinking how much he loved both Louisa and her brother. They were great kids, always thinking of others. They were like their mother in that respect.

“Better head back inside. It’s cold out here and you don’t have shoes or a coat.”

“I do have to go back in. I have to finish dessert. I made it myself. Aunt Mary hardly helped at all.”

“I can’t wait,” he assured her.

She grinned and skipped back into the house, leaving him alone again with Faith. When he turned away from the doorway, he found her watching him with an expression he couldn’t read.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“I... Nothing,” she mumbled. “I’ll go get the steaks.”

She hurried past him before he could press her, leaving him standing alone in the cold.

Chapter Nine

Faith couldn't leave the intimacy of the covered deck quickly enough.

She felt rattled and unsettled and she hated it. With a deep sense of longing, she remembered dinner just the previous Sunday, when they had laughed and joked and teased like always. He had stayed to watch a movie and she had thrown popcorn into his mouth and teased him about not shaving for a few days.

There had been none of this tension, this awareness that seemed to hiss and flare between them like that stupid grill coming to life.

She had wanted him to kiss her. It was all she could seem to think about, that wondrous feeling of being alive, desired.

Another few moments and she would have been the one to kiss him.

She forced herself to move away from the door and into the kitchen, where Aunt Mary looked up from the rolls she was pulling apart.

"Tell me Chase saved the day again."

"We're in business. It was all about the gas connection. I feel stupid I didn't look there first."

"Sometimes it takes an outside set of eyes to identify the problem and find the solution."

Could someone outside her particular situation help her figure out how to go back in time and fix what felt so very wrong between her and Chase?

"Where are the steaks?" she asked her aunt.

"Over there, by the microwave."

"Whoa," she exclaimed when she spotted them. "That's a lot of steak for just us."

"I took out a few extras in case we had company or so we could use the leftovers for fajitas one day this week. Good thing, because Rafe and Hope said they're only about fifteen minutes out. I'm sure glad they'll beat the worst of the snow. I feel a big storm coming on."

"The weather forecast said most of the storm will clip us."

"Weather forecasts can be wrong. Don't be surprised if we get hit with heavy winds, too."

She had learned not to doubt her great-aunt's intuition when it came to winter storms. After a lifetime of living in this particular corner of Idaho, Mary could read the weather like some people read stock reports.

Sure enough, the wind had already picked up a little when she carried the tray of steaks out to the covered deck. Chase stood near the propane heater, frowning as he checked something on his phone.

"Trouble?" she asked, nodding at the phone.

"Just Cindy," he answered, his voice terse.

"I'm sorry."

He made a face as he took the tray from her and used the tongs to transfer the steaks onto the grill.

"Nothing new," he said as the air filled with sizzle and scent. "Apparently Addie sulked all the way to Boise about having to go back when she was expecting to stay through the week with me and practice for the show with Olivia and Lou. Of course Cindy blames me. I shouldn't have gotten her hopes up, etc. etc.—even though she was the one who changed her mind from her original plan."

Faith wanted to smack the woman. Why did she have to be so difficult?

"Maybe you should petition again for primary custody."

He sighed. "She would never agree. I don't know if that would be the best thing for Addie anyway. Her mom and stepfather have given her a good life in Boise. I just wish she could be closer."

She decided not to tell him about her conversation with Addie the previous morning. What a difficult situation for everyone involved. Her heart ached and she wished, more than anything, that she could give him more time with his daughter for Christmas.

He was such a good man, kind and generous. He deserved to be happy—which was yet another reason she needed to help him find someone like Ella Baker.

That was what a true friend would do, help him find someone whose heart was whole and undamaged, who could cherish all the wonderful things about him.

Some of her emotions must have appeared on her features because he gave her an apologetic look. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring you down.”

She mustered a smile. “You didn’t. What are friends for, if you can’t complain about your ex once in a while?”

“I shouldn’t complain about her at all. She’s my child’s mother and overall she takes excellent care of her. She loves her, too. I have to keep reminding myself of that.” He shrugged. “I’m not going to worry about it more tonight. For now, let’s just enjoy dinner. And speaking of which, I can handle the steaks from here, if you want to go back inside. That wind is really picking up.”

“I was planning on grilling,” she protested. “You should be the one to go inside. I can take over, as long as you’ve got the grill working.”

“I don’t mind.”

“If you go inside now, I bet you could nab a hot roll from Aunt Mary.”

“Tempting. But no.” He wiggled the utensil in his hand. “I’ve got the tongs, which gives me all the power.”

She gave him a mock glare. “Hand them over.”

“Come get them, if you think you’re worthy.”

He held them over his head, which was way over her head.

Despite the cold wind, relief wrapped around her like a warm blanket. He was teasing her, just like normal and for a ridiculous moment, she wanted to weep.

Perhaps they could find an even footing, return to their easy, dependable friendship.

“Come on. Give,” she demanded. She stretched on tiptoe but the tongs were still completely out of reach.

He grinned. “Is that the best you can do?”

Never one to back down from a challenge, she hopped up and her fingers managed to brush the tongs. So close! She tried again but she forgot the wooden planks of the deck were a bit slippery with cold and condensation. This time when she came down, one boot slid and she stumbled a little.

She might have fallen but before she could, his arms instantly came around her, tongs and all.

They froze that way, with his arms around her and her curves pressed against his hard chest. Their smiles both seemed to freeze and crack apart. Her gaze met his and all the heat and tension she had been carefully shoving down seemed to burst to the surface all over again. His mouth was right there. She only had to stand on tiptoe again and press her lips to his.

Yearning, wild and sweet, gushed through her and she was aware of the thick churn of her blood, a low flutter in her stomach.

She hitched in a breath and coiled her muscles to do just that when she heard the creak of the door hinges.

She froze for half a second, then quickly stepped away an instant before Rafe tromped out to the deck.

Her brother-in-law paused and gave them a long, considering look, eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline. He hesitated briefly before he moved farther onto the deck.

“You people are crazy. Don’t you know December in Idaho isn’t the time to be firing up the grill?”

Something was definitely fired up out here. The grill was only part of it. Her face felt hot, her skin itchy, and she could only hope she had moved away before Rafe saw anything—not that there had been anything to see.

"Steaks just don't taste the same when you try to cook them under the broiler," Chase said. "Though the purist in me would prefer to be cooking them over hot coals instead of a gas flame."

"You ever tried any of that specialty charcoal?" Rafe asked. "When I was stationed out of Hawaii, I tried the Ono coals they use for luaus. Man, that's some good stuff. Burns hot and gives a nice crisp crust."

"I'll have to try it," Chase said.

"I came to see if you needed help but it looks like you don't need me. You two appear to have things well in hand," he said.

Was his phrasing deliberate? Faith wondered, feeling her face heat even more.

"Doing our best," Chase replied blandly.

She decided it would be wise to take the chance to leave while she could. "Thanks for offering, Rafe. I actually have a few things I just remembered I have to do before dinner. It would great if you two could finish up out here."

She rushed into the house and tried to tell herself she was grateful for the narrow escape.

* * *

Chase took another taste of Aunt Mary's delicious mashed potatoes dripping with creamy, rich gravy, and listened to the conversation ebb and flow around him.

He loved listening to the interactions of Faith and her family. With no siblings of his own, he had always envied the close relationships among them all. They never seemed to run out of things to talk about, from current events to Celeste's recent visit to New York to the progress of Hope's pregnancy.

The conversation was lively, at times intense and heated, and never boring. The sisters might disagree with each other or Mary about a particular topic but they always did so with respect and affection.

It was obvious this was a family that loved each other. The girls' itinerant childhood—and especially the tragedy that had followed—seemed to have forged deep, lasting bonds between Faith and her sisters.

Sometimes they opened their circle to include others. Rafe and his nephew Joey. Flynn and Olivia. Chase.

He could lose this.

If this gamble he was taking—trying to force Faith to let things move to the next level between them—didn't pay off, he highly doubted whether Mary would continue to welcome him to these Sunday dinners he treasured.

Things very well might become irreparably broken between them. His jaw tightened. Some part of him wondered if he might be better off backing down and keeping the status quo, this friendship he treasured.

But then he would see Rafe touch Hope's hand as he made a point or watch Celeste's features soften when she talked about Flynn and he knew he couldn't let it ride. He wanted to have that with Faith. It was possible; he knew it was. That evening on the deck had only reinforced that she was attracted to him but was fighting it with everything she had.

They could be as happy as Rafe and Hope, Celeste and Flynn. Couldn't she see that?

He had told her he would give her time but even though it had only been a few days, he could feel his patience trickling away. He had waited so long already.

"Who's ready for dessert?" Louisa asked eagerly, as the meal was drawing to a close.

Barrett rolled his eyes. “I haven’t even finished my steak. You’re just in a hurry because you made it.”

“So? I never made a whole cheesecake by myself before. Mom or Aunt Mary always helped me, but I made this one all by myself. I even made the crust.”

“I saw it in the kitchen and it looks delicious,” Chase assured her. “I can’t wait to dig in.”

She beamed at him and his heart gave a sharp little ache. This was another reason he didn’t want to remain on the edge of Faith’s life forever. Louisa and Barrett were amazing kids, despite everything they had been through. He wanted so much to be able to help Faith raise them into the good, kind people they were becoming.

He had no idea what he would do next if she was so afraid to take a chance on a relationship with him that she ended up pushing him out of all of their lives.

He would be lost without them.

He set his fork down, the last piece of delicious steak he had been chewing suddenly losing all its flavor.

He had to keep trying to make her see how good they could all be together, even when the risks of this all-or-nothing roll of the dice scared the hell out of him.

“Okay, do you want chocolate sauce or raspberry?” Lou asked.

He managed a smile. “How about a little of both?”

“Great idea,” Mary said. “Think I’ll have both, too.”

Louisa went around the table taking orders like a server in a fancy restaurant, then she and Olivia headed for the kitchen. When Faith rose to go with them to help, Louisa made her sit back down.

“We can do it,” she insisted.

The girls left just as another gust of wind rattled the windows and howled beneath the eaves of the old house. The electricity flickered but didn’t go out and he couldn’t help thinking how cozy it was in here.

They talked about the record-breaking crowd at The Christmas Ranch that weekend until the girls came back with a tray loaded with slices of cheesecake. They were cut a little crooked and the presentation was a bit messy but nobody seemed to mind.

“This is delicious. The best cheesecake I think I’ve ever had,” Chase said after his first bite, which earned him a huge grin from Louisa.

“It is really excellent,” Celeste said. “And I’ve had cheesecake in New York City, where they know cheesecake.”

Louisa couldn’t have looked happier. “Thanks. I’m going to try an apple pie next week.”

He couldn’t resist darting a glance at Faith and wondered if he would ever be able to eat apple pie again without remembering the cinnamon-sugar taste of her mouth.

She licked her lips, then caught his eyes and her cheeks turned an instant pink that made him suddenly certain she was thinking about the kiss, too.

“That wind is sure blowing up a storm,” Rafe commented.

“The last update I heard on the weather said we’re supposed to have another half foot of snow before morning,” Hope said.

“Yay!” all of the children exclaimed together.

“Maybe we won’t have school,” Joey said with an unmistakably hopeful note in his voice.

“Yeah!” Barrett exclaimed. “That would be awesome!”

“I wouldn’t plan on it,” Mary said. “I hate to be a downer but I’ve lived here most of my life and can tell you they hardly ever close school on account of snow. As long as the buses can run, you’ll have school.”

“It really depends on the timing of the storm and the kind of snowdrifts it leaves behind,” Chase said, not wanting the kids to completely give up hope. “If it’s early in the morning before the plows can make it around, you might be in luck.”

"We should probably head home before the worst of it hits," Rafe said.

"Same here," Celeste said. "I'm so glad Flynn put new storm windows in that old house this summer."

Flynn had spent six months renovating and adding on to his late grandmother's old house down the road, a project which had been done just days before their wedding in August.

Chase remembered that lovely ceremony on the banks of the Cold Creek, when the two of them—so very perfect for each other—had both glowed with happiness.

Watching them together had only reinforced his determination to forge his own happy ending with Faith, no matter what it took. He had spent the past few months touching her more in their regular interactions, teasing her, trying anything he could think of to convince her to think of him as more than just her friend and confidant.

Right now he felt further from that goal than ever.

Sometimes their Sunday evening dinners would stretch long into the night when they would watch a movie or play games at the kitchen table, but with the storm, everyone seemed in a hurry to leave. They stayed only long enough to clean up the kitchen and then only he, Mary, Faith and her children were left.

"How's the homework situation?" Faith asked from her spot at the kitchen sink drying dishes, a general question aimed at both of her children.

"I had a math work sheet but I finished it on the bus on the way home from school Friday," Louisa said. Chase wasn't really surprised. She was a conscientious student who rarely left schoolwork until Sunday evening.

"How about you, Barrett?"

"I'm almost done. I just had a few problems in math and they're hard. I can ask my teacher tomorrow. We might not even have school anyway so maybe I won't have to turn them in until Tuesday."

"Let's take a look at them," Chase said.

Barrett groaned a little but went to his room for his backpack.

"You don't have to do that," Faith said.

"I don't mind," he assured her.

They sat together at the desk in the great room while the Christmas lights glowed on the tree and a fire flickered in the fireplace. It wasn't a bad way to spend a Sunday night.

After only three or four problems, a lightbulb seemed to switch on in the boy's head—as it usually did.

"Oh! I get it now. That's easy."

"I told you it was."

"It wasn't easy the way my teacher explained it. Why can't you be my teacher?"

He tried not to shudder at the suggestion. "I'm afraid I've already got a job."

"And you're good at it," Mary offered from the chair where she sat knitting.

"Thanks, Mary. I do my best," he answered humbly. He loved being a rancher and wanted to think he was a responsible one.

Now that the boy seemed to be in the groove with his homework, Chase lifted his head from the book and suddenly spotted Faith in the mudroom, putting on her winter gear. He had been so busy helping Barrett, he hadn't noticed.

"Where are you off to? Not out into that wind, I hope."

"I just need to make sure the tarp over the outside haystack is secure. Oh, and check on Rosie," she said, referring to one of her border collies. "She was acting strangely this morning, which makes me think she might be close to having her puppies. I've been trying to keep her in the barn but she wanders off. Before the storm front moves in, I want to be sure she's warm and safe."

Chase scraped his chair back. "I'll come with you."

"You don't need to. You just spent a half hour working on Barrett's homework. I'm sure you've got things to worry about at your place."

He couldn't think of anything. He generally tried to keep things in good order, addressing problems when they came up. He always figured he couldn't go wrong following his father's favorite adage: an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. Better to stop trouble before it could start.

"I'll help," he said. "I'll check the hay cover while you focus on Rosie."

Her mouth tightened for an instant but she finally nodded and waited while he threw his coat on, then together they walked out into the storm.

Darkness came early this time of year near the winter solstice but a few high-wattage electric lights on poles lit their way. The wind howled viciously already and puffed out random snowflakes at them, hard as sharp pebbles.

Below the ranch house, he could see that the parking lot of The Christmas Ranch—which had been full when he pulled up—was mostly cleared out now, with a horse-drawn sleigh on what was probably its last go-round of the evening making its way back to the barn near the lodge.

He would really like to find time before Christmas to take Addie on a ride, along with Faith and her children.

The Saint Nicholas Lodge glowed cheerily against the cold night. Beyond it, the cluster of small structures that made up the life-size Christmas village—complete with indoor animatronic scenes of elves hammering and Santa eating from a plate of cookies—looked like something from a Christmas card.

Her family had created a celebration of the holidays here, unlike anything else in the region. People came from miles around, eager to enhance their holiday spirit.

"It's nice that Hope has hired enough staff now that she doesn't have to do everything on her own," he said.

"With the baby coming, Rafe insisted she cut back her hours. No more fourteen-hour days, seven days a week from Thanksgiving to New Year's."

Those hours were probably not unlike what Faith did year-round on the Star N—at least during calving and haying season and roundup. In other words, most of the year.

She worked so hard and never complained about the burden that had fallen onto her shoulders after Travis died.

When they reached the haystack, tucked beneath a huge open-sided structure with a metal roof, he heard the problem before he saw it, the thwack of a loose tarp cover flapping in the wind. Each time the wind dug underneath the tarp, it pulled it loose a little further. If they didn't tie it down, it would eventually pull the whole thing loose and she would not only lose an expensive tarp but potentially the whole haystack to the storm.

"That's gotten a lot worse, just in the last few hours," she said, pitching her voice louder to be heard over the wind. "I should have taken time to fix it earlier when I first spotted the problem, but I was doing about a hundred other things at the time. I was going to fix it in the morning, but I didn't take into account the storm."

"It's fine," he said. "We'll have it safe and secure in no time. It might take both of us, though—one to hold the flap down and hold the flashlight while the other ties it."

They went to work together, as they had done a hundred times before. He wrestled the tarp down, which wasn't easy amid the increasing wind, then held it while she tied multiple knots to keep it in place.

"That should do it," she said.

"While we're out here, let's tighten the other corners," he suggested.

When he was satisfied the tarp was secure—and when the bite of the wind was close to becoming uncomfortable—he tightened the last knot.

"Thanks, Chase," she said.

"No problem. Let's go see if Rosie is smart enough to stay in from the cold."

She clutched at her hat to keep the wind from tugging it away and they made their way into the relative warmth and safety of her large, clean barn.

The wind still howled outside but it was muted, more like a low, angry buzz, making the barn feel like a refuge.

"That wind has to be thirty or forty miles an hour," she said, shaking her head as she turned on the lights inside the barn.

"At least this storm isn't supposed to bring bitter cold along with it," he said. "Where's Rosie?"

"I set her up in the back stall but who knows if she decided to stay put? I really hope she's not out in that wind somewhere."

Apparently the dog knew this cozy spot was best for her and her pups. They found her lying on her side on an old horse blanket with five brand-new white-and-black puppies nuzzling at her.

"Oh. Will you look at that?" Faith breathed. Her eyes looked bright and happy in the fluorescent barn lights. "Hi there, Rosie. Look at you! What a good girl. Five babies. Good job, little mama!"

She leaned on the top railing of the stall and he joined her. "The kids will be excited," he observed.

"Are you kidding? Excited is an understatement. Puppies for Christmas. They'll be thrilled. If I let her, Louisa probably would be down here in a minute and want to spend the night right there in the straw with Rosie."

The dog flapped her tail at the sound of her name and they watched for a moment before he noticed her water bowl was getting low. He slipped inside the stall and picked up the food and the water bowls and filled them each before returning them to the cozy little pen.

For his trouble, he earned another tail wag from Rosie and a smile from Faith.

"Thank you. Do you think they'll be warm enough out here? I can take them into the house."

"They should be okay. She might not appreciate being moved now. They're warm enough in here and they're out of the wind. If you're really worried about it, I can bring over a warming lamp."

"That's a good idea, at least for the first few days. I've got one here. I should have thought of that."

She headed to another corner of the barn and returned a moment later with the large lamp and they spent a few moments hanging it from the top beam of the stall.

"Perfect. That should do the trick."

While the wind howled outside, they stood for a while watching the dog and her pups beneath the glow of the heat lamp. He wasn't in a big hurry to leave this quiet little scene and he sensed Faith wasn't either.

"Seems like just a minute ago that she was a pup herself," she said in a soft voice. "I guess it's been a while, though. Three years. She was in the last litter we had out of Lillybelle, so she would have been born just a few months before Travis..."

Her voice broke off and she gazed down at the puppies with her mouth trembling a little.

"Life rolls on," he said quietly.

"Like it or not, I guess," she answered after a moment. "Thanks for your help tonight, first with Barrett's homework and then with storm preparation. You're too good to us."

"You know I'm always happy to help."

"You shouldn't be," she whispered.

He frowned. "Shouldn't be what?"

She kept her attention fixed on the wriggling puppies. "Celeste gave me a lecture the other night. She told me I'm not being fair to you. She said I take you for granted."

"We're friends. Friends help each other. You feed me every Sunday and usually more often than that. Addie practically lives over here when I have visitation and also ranch work I can't avoid. And you bought my groceries the other day, right?"

"Don't forget to take them home when you go." She released a heavy sigh. "We both know the ledger will never be balanced, no matter how many groceries I buy for you. The Star N wouldn't have survived without you. I don't know why you are so generous with your time and energy on our behalf but I hope you know how very grateful we are. How very grateful I am. Thank you. And I hope you know how...how much we all love you."

He looked down at her, wondering at the murky subtext he couldn't quite read here.

"I'm happy to help out," he answered again.

She swallowed hard, avoiding his gaze. "I guess what I wanted to tell you is that things are better now. The Star N is back in the black, thanks in large part to you and to The Christmas Ranch finally being self-sustaining. I'll never been an expert at ranching but I kind of feel like I know a little more what I'm doing now. If you...want to ease away a bit so you can focus more on your own ranch, I would completely understand. Don't worry. We'll be fine."

It took about two seconds for him to go from confusion to being seriously annoyed.

"So you're basically telling me you don't want me hanging around anymore."

She looked instantly horrified. "No! That's not what I'm saying at all. I just...don't want you to feel obligated to do as much as you have for us. For me. I needed help and would have been lost without you the last two years but you can't prop us up forever. At some point, I have to stand on my own."

"Would you be saying this if I hadn't kissed you the other night?"

Her eyes widened and she looked startled that he had brought the kiss up when they both had been so carefully avoiding the subject.

Finally she sighed. "I don't know," she said, her voice low again and her gaze fixed on the five little border collie puppies. "It feels like everything has changed."

She sounded so miserable, he wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her he was sorry, that he would do his best to make sure things returned to the way they were a week ago.

"Life has a way of doing that, whether we always like it or not," he said, knowing full well he wouldn't go back, even if he could. "Nobody escapes it. The trick is figuring out how to roll with the changes."

She was silent for a long time and he would have given anything to know what she was thinking.

When she spoke, her voice was low. "I can't stop thinking about that kiss."

Chapter Ten

At first he wasn't sure he heard her correctly or if his own subconscious had conjured the words out of nowhere.

But then he looked at her and her eyes were solemn, intense and more than a little nervous.

He swallowed hard. "Same here. It's all I could think about during dinner. I would like, more than anything, to kiss you again."

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to object. He waited for it, bracing himself for yet one more disappointment. To his utter shock, she took a step forward instead, placed her hands against his chest and lifted her face in clear invitation.

He didn't hesitate for an instant. How could he? He wasn't a stupid man. He framed her face with his hands, then lowered his mouth, brushing against hers once, twice. Her mouth was cool, her lips trembling, and she tasted of raspberry and chocolate from Louisa's cheesecake—rich, heady. Irresistible.

At first she seemed nervous, unsure, but after only a moment, her hands slid around his neck and she pressed against him, surrendering to the heat swirling between them.

He was awash in tenderness, completely enamored with the courageous woman in his arms.

Optimism bubbled up inside him, a tiny trickle at first, then growing stronger as she sighed against his mouth and returned his kiss with a renewed enthusiasm that took his breath away. For the first time in days, he began to think that maybe, just maybe, she was beginning to see that this was real, that they were perfect together.

They kissed for several delicious moments, until his breathing was ragged and he wanted nothing more than to find a soft pile of straw somewhere, lower her down and show her exactly how amazing things could be between them.

A particularly fierce gust of wind rattled the windows of the barn, distracting him enough to realize a cold, drafty barn that smelled of animals and hay might not be the most romantic of spots.

With supreme effort, he forced his mouth to slide away from hers, pressing his forehead to hers and giving them both a chance to collect their breath and their thoughts.

Her eyes were dazed, aroused. "I feel like I've been asleep for nearly three years and now...I'm not," she admitted.

He pressed a soft kiss on her mouth again. "Welcome back."

She smiled a little but it slid away too soon, replaced by an anxious expression, and she took another step away. He wanted to tug her back into his arms but he knew he couldn't kiss her into accepting the possibilities between them, as tempting as he found that idea.

"I'm afraid," she admitted.

His growing optimism cooled like the air that rushed between them. "Of what? I hope you know I would rather stab myself in the foot with a pitchfork than ever hurt you."

"Maybe I don't want to hurt you," she whispered, her features distressed. "You're the best man I know, Chase. When I think about...about not having you in my life, I feel like I'm going to throw up. But I'm not sure I'm ready for this again—or that I ever will be."

Well. That was honest enough. He had to respect it, even if he didn't like it. It took him a moment to grab his scrambled thoughts and formulate them into something he hoped came out coherently.

"That's a decision you'll have to make," he said, choosing his words with care. "But think about those puppies. We can keep them here under that heat lamp forever where it's safe and warm and dry. That's the best place for them right now, I agree, while they're tiny and vulnerable. But they won't always be the way they are right now, and what kind of existence would those puppies have if they could never really have the chance to experience the world? They're meant to run across fields and chase birds and lie stretched out in the summer sunshine. To live."

She let out a breath. “You’re comparing me to those puppies.”

“I’m only saying I understand you’ve suffered a terrible loss. I know how hard you’ve fought to work through the grief. It’s only natural to want to protect yourself, to be afraid of moving out of the safe place you’ve created for yourself out of that grief.”

“Terrified,” she admitted.

His heart ached for her and the struggle he had forced on her. He wanted to reach for her hands but didn’t trust himself to touch her right now. “I can tell you this, Faith. You have too much love inside you to spend the rest of your life hiding inside that safe haven while the world moves on without you.”

Her gaze narrowed. “That’s easy for you to say. You never lost someone you loved with all your heart.”

He wanted to tell her he had, only in a different way. He had lost her over and over again—though could a guy really lose what he’d never had?

“You’re right. I can only imagine,” he lied.

As tempting as it was to tell her everything in his heart—that he had loved her since that afternoon he took her shopping for Aunt Mary—he didn’t dare. Not yet. Something told him that would send her running away even faster.

She would have to be the one to make the decision about whether she was ready to open her heart again.

The storm rattled the window again, fierce and demanding, and she shivered suddenly, though he couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or from the emotional winds battering them. Either way, he didn’t want her to suffer.

“Let’s get you back to the house. Mary will be wondering where we are.”

She nodded. After one more check of the puppies, she tugged her gloves back on and headed out into the night.

* * *

Faith was fiercely aware of him as they walked from the barn to the ranch house with the wind and snow howling around them.

She felt as if all the progress she had made toward rebuilding her world had been tossed out into this storm. She had been so proud of herself these last few months. The kids were doing well, the ranch was prospering, she had finally developed a new routine and had begun to be more confident in what she was doing.

While she wouldn’t say she had been particularly happy, at least she had found some kind of acceptance with her new role as a widow. She was more comfortable in her own skin.

Now she felt as if everything had changed again. Once more she was confused, off balance, not sure how to put one more step in front of the other and forge a new path.

She didn’t like it.

Even in the midst of her turmoil, she couldn’t miss the way he placed his body in the path of the wind to protect her from the worst of it. That was so much like Chase, always looking out for her. It warmed her heart, even as it made her ache.

“You still need your groceries,” she said when they reached the house. “Come in and I’ll grab them.”

He looked as if he had something more to say but he finally nodded and followed her inside.

Though she could hear the television playing down the hall in the den, the kitchen was dark and empty. A clean, vacant kitchen on Sunday night after the big family party always left her feeling a little bereft, for some strange reason.

She flipped on the light and discovered a brown paper bag on the counter with his name on it. She couldn’t resist peeking inside and discovered it contained a half dozen of the dinner rolls.

Knowing Aunt Mary and her habits, she pulled open the refrigerator and found another bag with his name on it.

"It looks like Mary saved some leftovers for you."

"Excellent. It will be nice not having to worry about dinner tomorrow."

She knew he rarely cooked when Addie was with her mother, subsisting on frozen meals, sandwiches and the occasional steaks he grilled in a batch. Mary knew it, too, which might be another reason she invited him over so often.

Faith headed to the walk-in pantry where she had left the things she bought at the store for him.

"Here you go. Dishwashing detergent, dish soap and paper towels."

"That should do it. Thanks for picking them up for me."

"It was no trouble at all."

"I'll check in with you first thing in the morning to see if you had any storm damage."

If she were stronger, she would tell him thank you but it wasn't necessary. At some point in a woman's life, she had to figure out how to clean up her own messes. Instead, she did her best to muster a smile. "Be careful driving home."

He nodded. Still looking as if he had something more to say, he headed for the door. He put a hand on the knob but before he could turn it, he whirled back around, stalked over to her and kissed her hard with a ferocity and intensity that made her knees so weak she had to clutch at his coat to keep from falling.

She could only be grateful none of her family members came into the kitchen just then and stumbled over them.

When he pulled away, a muscle in his jaw worked but he only looked at her out of solemn, intense eyes.

"Good night," he said.

She didn't have the breath to speak, even if she trusted herself to say anything, so she only nodded.

The moment he left, she pulled her ranch coat off with slow, painstaking effort, hung it in the mudroom, then sank down into a kitchen chair, fighting the urge to bury her face in her hands and weep.

She felt like the world's biggest idiot.

She knew she relied on him, that he had become her rock and the core of her support system since Travis died. He made her laugh and think, he challenged her, he praised her when things went well and held her when they didn't.

All this time, when she considered him her dearest friend, some part of her already knew the feelings she had for him ran deeper than that.

She felt so stupid that it had taken her this long to figure it out. She had always known she loved him, just as she had told him earlier.

She had just never realized she was also in love with him.

How had it happened? How could she have let it happen?

She should have known something had shifted over the last few months when she started anticipating the times she knew she would see him with a new sort of intensity, when she became more aware of the way other women looked at him when they were together, as she started noticing a ripple of muscle, the solid strength of him as he did some ordinary task in the barn.

She should have realized, but it all just seemed so...natural.

She was still sitting there trying to come to terms with the shock when Mary came into the kitchen wearing her favorite flannel nightgown over long underwear and thick socks.

"Did Chase take off? I had leftovers for him."

She summoned a smile that felt a little wobbly at the edges. "He took them. Don't worry."

"Oh, you know me. Worrying is what I do best." Mary looked out the window where the snow lashed in hard pellets. "I'll tell you, I don't like him driving into the teeth of that nasty wind. All it would take would be one tree limb to fall on his pickup truck."

Her heart clutched at the unbearable thought.

This. This was why she couldn't let herself love him. She would not survive losing a man she loved a second time.

She pushed the grim fear away, choosing instead to focus on something positive.

"Rosie had her puppies. Five of them."

"Is that right?" Mary looked pleased.

"They're adorable. I'm sure the kids will want to see them first thing."

"I made them take their showers for the night. Barrett isn't very happy with me right now but I'm sure he'll get over it. They're both in their rooms, reading."

She would go read to them in a moment. It was her favorite part of the day, those quiet moments when she could cuddle her children and explore literary worlds with them. "Thank you," she said to her aunt. "I don't tell you enough how much I appreciate your help."

Mary sat down across from her at the table. "Are you okay? You seem upset."

For a moment, she desperately wanted to confide in her beloved great-aunt, who was just about the wisest person she knew. The words wouldn't come, though. Mary wouldn't be an unbiased observer in this particular case as Mary adored Chase and always had.

"I'm just feeling a little down tonight."

Mary took Faith's hands in her own wrinkled, age-spotted ones. "I get that way sometimes. The holidays sure make me feel alone."

A hard nugget of guilt lodged in her chest. She wasn't the only one in the world who had ever suffered heartache. Uncle Claude had died five years earlier and they all still missed him desperately.

"You're not alone," she told her aunt. "You've got us, as long as you want us."

"I know that, my dear, and I can't tell you how grateful I am for that." Mary squeezed her fingers. "It's not quite the same. I miss my Claude."

She thought of her big, burly, white-haired great-uncle, who had adored Christmas so much that he had started The Christmas Ranch with one small herd of reindeer to share his love of the holiday with the community.

"I'm thinking about dating again," Mary announced. "What do you think?"

She blinked at that completely unexpected piece of information. "Really?"

"Why not? Your uncle's been gone for years and I'm not getting any younger."

"I... No. You're not. I think it's great. Really great."

Her aunt made a face. "I don't know about great. More like a necessary evil. I'd like to get married again, have a companion in my old age, and unfortunately you usually have to go through the motions and go on a few dates first in order to get there."

Her seventy-year-old great-aunt was braver than she was. It was another humbling realization. "Do you have someone in mind?"

Her aunt shrugged. "A couple of widowers at the senior citizens center have asked me out. They're nice enough, but I was thinking about asking Pat Walters out to dinner."

She tried not to visibly react to yet another stunner. For years, Pat had been one of the men who played Santa Claus at The Christmas Ranch. His wife had died just a few months after Uncle Claude.

She digested the information and the odd rightness of the idea.

"You absolutely should," she finally said. "He's a great guy."

"He is. Truth is, we went out a few times three years ago when I was living in town and we had a lot of fun together. I didn't tell you girls because it was early days yet and there was nothing much to tell."

She shrugged her ample shoulders. “But then Travis died and I moved back in here to help you with the kids. I just didn’t feel like the time was right to complicate things so Pat and I put things on the back burner for a while.”

Oh, the guilt. The nugget turned into a full-on boulder. Had she really been so wrapped up in her own pain that she hadn’t noticed a romance simmering right under her nose?

What else had she missed?

“I wish you had told me,” she said. “I hate that you put your life on hold for me. I would have been okay. Celeste was here to help me out in the evenings and I could have hired someone to help me with Lou and Barrett when I was busy on the ranch and couldn’t take them with me.”

Mary frowned. “I didn’t tell you about Pat to make you feel guilty. You didn’t force me to move in after Travis died. You didn’t even ask me. I did it because I needed to, because that’s what family does for each other.”

Mary and Claude had been helping her and her sisters for eighteen years, since they had been three traumatized, frightened, grieving girls.

Her aunt, with her quiet strength, support and wisdom, had been a lifesaver to her after her parents died and even more of one after Travis died.

“I can never repay you for everything you’ve done,” she said, her throat tight and the hot burn of tears behind her eyes.

Mary sat back in her chair and skewered her with a stern look. “Is that what you think I want? For you to repay me?”

“Of course! I wish I could.”

“Well, you’re right. I do.”

She blinked. “Okay.”

“You can do that by showing me I taught you a thing or two over the years about surviving and thriving, even when the going is tough.”

She stared at her aunt, wondering where this was coming from. “I... What do you mean?”

“Life isn’t meant to be lived in fear, honey,” Mary said.

It was so similar to her recent conversation with Chase that she had to swallow. “I know.”

“Do you?” Mary pressed. “I’m just saying. Chase won’t wait around for you forever, you know.”

Faith pulled her hands from her aunt’s and curled them into fists on her lap. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Mary snorted. “Of the three of you, you were always the worst liar. You know exactly what I mean. That boy is in love with you and has been forever.”

She felt hot and then ice-cold. First Celeste, now Aunt Mary. What had they seen that she had missed all this time?

She wanted to protest but even in her head, any counterargument she tried to formulate sounded stupid and trite. Was it true? Had he been in love with her and had she been so preoccupied with life that she hadn’t realized?

Or worse, much worse, had she realized it on some subconscious level and simply taken it for granted all this time?

“Chase is my best friend, Mary. He’s been like a father to the kids since Travis died. And you and I both know we would have had to sell the ranch if he hadn’t helped me pull it back from the brink.”

Her aunt gave her a hard look. “Seems to me there are worse things to base a relationship on. Not to mention, he’s one good-looking son of a gun.”

She couldn’t deny that. And he kissed like a dream.

“I’m so scared,” she whispered.

Mary made that snorting noise again. “Who isn’t, honey? If you’re not scared sometimes, you’re just plain stupid. The trick is to decide how much of your life you’re willing to sacrifice for those fears.”

Before she could come up with an answer, her aunt rose. “I’m going to turn in and you’ve got kids waiting for you to read to them.”

She rose, as well. “Thank you, Mary.”

She didn’t know if she was thanking her for the advice or the last eighteen years of wisdom. She supposed it didn’t really matter.

Her aunt hugged her. “Don’t worry. You’ll figure it out. Good night, honey. Sleep well.”

She would have laughed if she thought she could pull it off without sounding hysterical.

Something told her more than the wind would be keeping her up that night.

* * *

She didn’t see Chase at all the next week. Maybe he was only giving her space, as she had asked, or maybe he was as busy at his place as she was at the Star N, trying to finish up random jobs before the holidays.

Or maybe he was finally fed up with her cowardice and indecision.

Though she didn’t see him, she did talk to him on the phone twice.

He called her once on Monday morning, the day after the storm and that stunning kiss in the barn, to make sure her ranch hadn’t sustained significant damage from the winds and snows.

On Thursday afternoon, he called to tell her he was driving to Boise to pick up Addie a day earlier than planned and asked if she needed him to bring anything back from Boise for the kids’ stockings.

He had sounded distant and frazzled. She knew how tough it was for him to be separated from Addie over the holidays, which made his thoughtfulness in worrying about Louisa and Barrett even more touching.

Again, she wanted to smack Cindy for her selfishness in booking a cruise over the holidays without consulting him.

He could have withheld permission and the court would have sided with him. After Cindy sprang the news on him, though, he had told Faith he hadn’t wanted to drag Addie into a war between her parents.

As a result, he was planning their own Christmas celebration a few days before the actual holiday, complete with Christmas Eve dinner, presents and all.

“I think we’re covered,” she told him, her heart aching. “Be careful driving back. Oh, and let Addie know she’s still on to sing with Louisa and Olivia. Ella is planning on it.”

“I’ll tell her. She’ll be thrilled. Thanks.”

She wanted to tell him so many other things. That she hadn’t stopped thinking about him. That their kisses seemed to play through her head on an endless loop. That she just needed a little more time. She couldn’t find the courage to say any of it so he ended up telling her goodbye rather abruptly and severing the connection.

There had been times when they stayed on the phone the entire time he drove to Boise to pick up his daughter, never running out of things to talk about.

Were those days gone forever?

She sighed now and headed toward Saint Nicholas Lodge with a couple of letters that had been delivered to the main house by accident, probably because the post office had temporary help handling the holiday mail volume.

Though she waved at the longtime clerk at the gift store, she didn’t stop to chat, heading straight for the office instead, where she found Hope sitting behind her desk.

"Mail delivery," Faith announced, setting the letters on the desk. "It looks like a bill for reindeer food and one for candy canes. I might have a tough time convincing my accountant those are legitimate expenses for a cattle ranch."

When Hope didn't reply, Faith's gaze sharpened on her sister. Fear suddenly clutched her when she registered her sister's pale features, her pinched mouth, the haunted eyes. "What is it, honey? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Faith. I... I was just about to call you."

Her sister's last word ended in a sob that she tried to hide but Faith wasn't fooled. She also suddenly realized her sister's arms were crossed protectively across her abdomen.

"What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

Hope nodded, tears dripping down the corners of her eyes. "I've been having crampy aches all day and I... I just don't feel good. I was just in the bathroom and...had some spotting. Oh, Faith. I'm afraid I'm losing the baby."

She burst into tears and Faith instantly went to her side and wrapped her arms around her. Her younger sister was normally so controlled in any crisis. Even when they had been kidnapped, Hope had been calm and cool.

Seeing her lose it like this broke Faith's heart in two.

"What do you need me to do? I can call Rafe. I can run you into the doctor's. Whatever you need."

"I just called Rafe." Hope wiped at her eyes, though she continued to weep. "He's on his way and we're running into Jake Dalton's office. It might be nothing. I might be overreacting. I hope so."

"I do, too." She whispered a prayer that her sister could endure whatever outcome.

She wouldn't let herself focus on the worst, thinking instead about what a wonderful mother Hope would be. She was made for it. She loved children and had spent much of her adult life following their parents' examples and trying to help those in need around the world in her own way.

Really, coming home and running The Christmas Ranch had been one more way Hope wanted to help people, by giving them a little bit of holiday spirit in a frazzled word.

"It's the worst possible time," Hope said, her eyes distressed. "Within the hour, I've got forty kids showing up to practice for the play."

"That is absolutely the least of your concerns," Faith said, going into big sister mode. "I forbid you to worry about a single thing at The Christmas Ranch. You've got an excellent staff, not to mention a family ready to step in and cover whatever else you might need. Focus on yourself and on the baby. That's an order."

Hope managed a wobbly smile that did nothing to conceal the fear beneath it. "You're always so bossy."

"That's right." She squeezed her sister's fingers. "And right now I'm ordering you to lie down and wait for your husband, this instant."

Hope went to the low sofa in the office and complied. While she rested, Faith found her sister's coat and her voluminous tote bag and carried them both to her, then sat holding her hand for a few more moments, until Rafe arrived.

He looked as pale as his wife and hugged her tightly, green eyes murky with worry. "Whatever happens, we'll be okay," he assured her.

It took all her strength not to sob at the gentleness of the big, tough former navy SEAL as he all but carried Hope out to his SUV and settled her into the passenger side. Faith handed her the tote bag she had carried along.

"Call me the minute you know anything," she ordered.

"I will. I promise. Faith, can you stay during rehearsals to make sure Ella has everything she needs?"

"Of course."

"Don't tell Barrett and Lou yet. I don't want them to worry."

"Nothing to tell," she said. "Because you and that baby are going to be absolutely fine."

If she kept saying that, perhaps she could make it true.

She watched them drive away, shivering a little until she realized she had left her own coat in Hope's office. Before she could go inside for it, she spotted Chase's familiar pickup truck.

How did he always know when she needed him? she wondered, then realized he must be dropping Addie off for rehearsal.

She didn't care why he had come. Only that he was there.

She moved across the parking lot without even thinking it through. Desperate for the strength and comfort of his embrace, she barely gave him time to climb out of his vehicle before she was at his side, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

She saw shock and concern flash in his eyes for just an instant before he held her tight against him. "What's going on? What's wrong?" he asked, his voice urgent.

Addie was with him, Faith realized with some dismay. She couldn't burst into tears, not without the girl wondering about it and then telling Lou and Barrett, contrary to Hope's wishes.

"It's Hope," she whispered in his ear. "She's threatening a miscarriage."

He growled a curse that made Addie blink.

"It's too early to know for sure yet," Faith said quietly. "Rafe just took her to the doctor."

"What can I do?"

It was so like him to want to fix everything. The thought would have made her smile if she weren't so very worried. "I don't think we can do anything yet. Just hope and pray she and the baby will both be okay."

"Will she need extra help here at The Christmas Ranch? I can cover you at the Star N if you need to step in here until the New Year."

Oh, the dear man. He was already doing extra work for their neighbor and now he wanted to add Faith's workload to his pile, as well.

"I hope I don't have to take you up on that but it's too early to say right now."

"Keep me posted."

"I will. I... Thank you, Chase."

"You're welcome."

She would have said more but other children started to arrive and the moment was gone.

Chapter Eleven

Chase ended up staying to watch the rehearsal, figuring he could help corral kids if need be.

He had plenty of other things he should be doing but nothing else seemed as important as being here if Faith or her family needed him.

A few minutes after the rehearsal started, Celeste showed up. She went immediately to the office, where Faith was staring into space. The two of them embraced, both wiping tears. Not long after, Mary showed up, too, and the three of them sat together, not saying much.

He wanted to go in there but didn't quite feel it was his place so he stayed where he was and watched the children sing about Silver Bells and Holly Jolly Christmases and Silent Nights.

About an hour into rehearsal—when he felt more antsy than he ever remembered—Faith took a call on her cell phone. The anxiety and fear on her features cut through him and he couldn't resist rising to his feet and going to the doorway.

"Are they sure? Yes. Yes. I understand." Her features softened and she gave a tremulous smile. "That's the best news, Rafe. The absolute best. Thank you for calling. I'll tell them. Yes. Give her all our love and tell her to take care of herself and not to worry about a thing. That's an order. Same goes for you. We love you, too, you know."

She hung up, her smile incandescent, then she gave a little cry that ended on a sob. "Dr. Dalton says for now everything seems okay with the baby. The heartbeat is strong and all indications are good for a healthy pregnancy."

"Oh, thank the Lord," Mary exclaimed.

She nodded and they all spent a silent moment doing just that.

"Jake wants to put her on strict bed rest for the next few weeks to be safe," Faith said after a moment. "That means the rest of us will have to step up here."

"I'm available for whatever you need," Chase offered once more.

She gave him a distracted smile. "I know but, again, you have plenty to do at your own place. We can handle it."

"I want to help." He tried to tamp down his annoyance that she was immediately pushing aside his help.

"We actually could use him tomorrow," Celeste said thoughtfully.

Faith didn't look convinced. "We'll just have to cancel that part of the party, under the circumstances. The kids will have to understand."

"They're kids," her sister pointed out. "They won't understand anything but disappointment."

"I'll just do it, then," Faith said.

"How, when you're supposed to be helping me with everything else?"

He looked from one to the other without the first idea what they were talking about. "What do you need me to do?"

"I've been running a holiday reading contest at the library for the last two months and the children who have read enough pages earned a special party tomorrow at the ranch," Celeste said. "Sparkle is supposed to make an appearance and we also promised the children wagon rides around the ranch. Our regular driver will be busy taking the regular customers to see the lights so Rafe has been practicing with our backup team so he could help out at the party. Obviously, he needs to be with Hope now. Flynn is coming back tomorrow but he won't be here in time to help, even if he learns overnight how to drive a team of draft horses."

Why hadn't they just asked him in the first place? Was it because things with him and Faith had become so damn complicated?

"I can do it, no problem—as long as you don't mind if Addie comes along."

Celeste gave him a grateful smile. “Oh, thank you! And Addie would be more than welcome. She’s such a reader she probably would have earned the party anyway. Olivia, Lou and Faith are my volunteer helpers and I’m sure they would love Addie’s help.”

“Great. I’ll plan on it, then. Just let me know what time.”

They worked out a few more details, all while he was aware of Faith’s stiff expression.

At least he would get to see her the next day, even if she clearly didn’t want him there.

* * *

She lived in the most beautiful place on earth.

Faith lifted her face to the sky, pale lavender with the deepening twilight. As she drove the backup team of draft horses around the Star N barn so she could take them down to the lodge late Sunday afternoon, the moon was a slender crescent above the jagged Teton mountain range to the east and the entire landscape looked still and peaceful.

Sometimes she had to pinch herself to believe she really lived here.

When she was a girl, she had desperately wanted a place to call her own.

She had spent her entire childhood moving around the world while her parents tried to make a difference. She had loved and respected her parents and understood, even then, that they genuinely wanted to help people as they moved around to impoverished villages setting up medical clinics and providing the training to run them after they left.

She wasn’t sure they understood the toll their self-ordained missionary efforts were taking on their daughters, even before the terrifying events shortly before their deaths.

Faith hadn’t known anything other than their transitory lifestyle. She hadn’t blinked an eye at the primitive conditions, the language barriers, making friends only to have to tearfully leave them a few months later.

Still, some part of her had yearned for this, though she never had a specific spot in mind. All she had really wanted was a place to call her own, anywhere. A loft in the city, a split-level house in the suburbs, a double-wide mobile home somewhere. She hadn’t cared what. She just wanted roots somewhere.

For nearly sixteen years, that had been her secret dream, the one she hadn’t dared share with her parents. That dream had become reality only after a series of traumas and tragedies. The kidnapping. The unspeakable ordeal of their month spent in the rebel camp. Her father’s shocking death during the rescue attempt, then her mother’s cancer diagnosis immediately afterward.

She had been shell-shocked, grieving, frightened out of her mind but trying to put on a brave front for her younger sisters as they traveled to their new home in Idaho to live with relatives they barely knew.

When Claude picked them up at the airport in Boise and drove them here, everything had seemed so strange and new, like they had been thrust into an alien landscape.

Until they drove onto the Star N, anyway.

Faith still remembered the moment they arrived at the ranch and the instant, fierce sense of belonging she had felt.

In the years since, it had never left her. She felt the same way every time she returned to the ranch after spending any amount of time away from it. This was home, each beautiful inch of it. She loved ranching more than she could have dreamed. Whoever would have guessed that she would one day become so comfortable at this life that she could not only hitch up a team of draft horses but drive them, too?

The bells on the horses jingled a festive song as she guided the team toward the shortcut to the Saint Nicholas Lodge. Before she could go twenty feet, she spotted a big, gorgeous man in a black Stetson blocking their way.

“I thought I was the hired driver for the night,” Chase called out.

She pulled the horses to a stop and fought down the butterflies suddenly swarming through her on fragile wings.

"I figured I could get them down there for you. Anyway, we just bought new sleigh bells for the backup sleigh and I wanted to try them out."

"They sound good to me."

"I think they'll do. Where's Addie?"

"Down at the lodge, helping Olivia and Lou set things up for the party. We stopped there first and Celeste sent me up here to see if you needed help with the team."

Faith fought a frown. She had a feeling her sister sent him out here as yet another matchmaking ploy. Her family was going to drive her crazy. "I've got things under control," she lied. She was only recently coming to see it wasn't true, in any aspect of her life.

"That's good," he said as he greeted the horses, who were old friends of his. "How's Hope?"

"I checked on her a few hours ago and she is feeling fine. She had a good night and has had no further symptoms today. Looks like the crisis has passed."

In the fading light, she saw stark relief on his chiseled features. "I'm so glad. I've been worried all day. And how is your other little mama?"

It took her a moment to realize he meant Rosie. "All the pups are great. They opened their eyes yesterday. The kids have had so much fun watching them. You'll have to bring Addie over."

"I'll try to do that before she leaves on Wednesday but our schedule's pretty packed between now and then. I don't think we'll even have time for Sunday dinner tomorrow."

"Oh. That's too bad," she said, as he moved away from the horses toward the driver's seat of the sleigh. "The family will miss you."

"What about you?" he asked, his voice low and his expression intense.

She swallowed, not knowing what to say. "Yes," she finally said. "Good thing we're not having steak or we wouldn't know how to light the grill."

"Good thing." He tipped his hat back. "Is there room for me up there or are you going to make me walk back to the lodge?"

She slid over and he jumped up and took the reins she handed him.

Though there was plenty of space on the bench, she immediately felt crowded, fiercely aware of the heat of him beside her.

Maybe she ought to walk back to the lodge.

The thought hardly had time to register before he whistled to the horses and they obediently took off down the drive toward the lodge, bells jingling.

After a moment, she forced herself to relax and enjoy the evening. She could think of worse ways to spend an evening than driving across her beautiful land in the company of her best friend, who just happened to be a gorgeous cowboy.

"Wow, what a beautiful night," he said after a few moments. "Hard to believe that less than a week ago we were gearing up for that nasty storm."

"We're not supposed to have any more snow until Christmas Eve."

"With what we already have on the ground, I don't think there's any question that we'll have a white Christmas."

"Who knows? It's Idaho. We could have a heat wave between now and then."

"Don't break out your swimming suit yet," he advised. "Unless you want to take a dip in Carson and Jenna McRaven's pool at their annual party this week."

"Not me. I'm content watching the kids have fun in the pool."

The McRavens' holiday party, which would be the night after the show for the senior citizens, had become legendary around these parts, yet another tradition she cherished.

"I don't think I'll be able to make it to that one this year," he said. "It's my last day with Addie."

"You're still doing Christmas Eve the night of the show?"

"That's the plan."

It made her heart ache to think of him getting everything ready for his daughter on his own, hanging out stockings and scattering her presents under the tree.

"You're a wonderful father, Chase," she said softly.

He frowned as the sleigh's movement jostled her against him. "Not really. If I were, I might have tried harder to stay married to her mother. Instead, I've given my daughter a childhood where she feels constantly torn between the both of us."

"You did your best to make things work."

"Did I?"

"It looked that way from the outside."

"I should never have married her. If she hadn't been pregnant with Addie, I wouldn't have."

He was so rarely open about his marriage and divorce that she was momentarily shocked. The cheery jingle bells seemed discordant and wrong, given his serious tone.

"It was a mistake," he went on. "We both knew it. I just hate that Addie is the one who has suffered the most."

"She has a mother and stepfather who love her and a father who adores her. She's a sweet, kind, good-hearted girl. You're doing okay. Better than okay. You're a wonderful father and I won't let you beat yourself up."

He looked touched and amused at the same time as he pulled the sleigh to a stop in front of the lodge. "I've been warned, I guess."

"You have," she said firmly. "Addie is lucky to have you for a father. Any child would be."

His expression warmed and he gazed down at her long enough that she started wondering if he might kiss her again. Instead, he climbed down from the sleigh, then held a hand up to help her out.

She hesitated, thinking she would probably be wise to make her way down by herself on the complete opposite side of the sleigh from him. But for the last ten minutes, they had been interacting with none of the recent awkwardness and she didn't want to destroy this fragile peace.

She took his hand and stepped gingerly over the side of the sleigh.

"Careful. It's icy right there," he said.

The words were no sooner out of his mouth when her boot slipped out from under her. She reached for the closest handhold, which just happened to be the shearling coat covering the muscled chest of a six-foot-two-inch male. At the same moment, he reacted instinctively, grabbing her close to keep her on her feet.

She froze, aware of his mouth just inches from hers. It would be easy, so easy, to step on tiptoe for more of those delicious kisses.

His gaze locked with hers and she saw a raw hunger there that stirred answering heat inside her.

The moment stretched between them, thick and rich like Aunt Mary's hot cocoa and just as sweet.

Why was she fighting this, again? In this moment, as desire fluttered through her, she couldn't have given a single reason.

She was in love with him and according to two of her relatives, he might feel the same. It seemed stupid to deny both of them what they ached to find together.

"Chase," she murmured.

He inched closer, his breath warm on her skin. Just before she gathered her muscles to stand on tiptoe and meet him, one of the horses stamped in the cold, sending a cascade of jingles through the air.

Oh. What was she doing? This wasn't the time or the place to indulge herself, when a lodge full of young readers would descend on them at any moment.

With great effort, she stepped away. "Hang out here and I'll go check with Celeste to see when she'll be ready for the kids to go on the sleigh."

He tipped his hat back but not before she saw frustration on his features that completely matched her own.

Chapter Twelve

"Wow," Chase said as his daughter rushed down the stairs so they could leave for the Saint Nicholas Lodge. "Who is this strange young lady in my house who suddenly looks all grown-up?"

Addie grinned and swirled around in the fancy red-and-gold velvet dress she was wearing to perform her musical selection with Olivia and Louisa. "Thanks, Dad," she said. "I love this dress so much! I wish I could keep it but I have to give it back after the show tonight so maybe someone else can wear it for next year's Christmas show."

"Those are the breaks in show business, I guess," he said. "You've got clothes to change into, right?"

She held up a bag.

"Good. Are you're sure you don't need me to braid your hair or something?"

He was awful with hair but had forced himself to learn how to braid, since it was the easiest way to tame Addie's curls.

"No. Faith said she would help me fix it like Louisa and Olivia have theirs. That's why I have to hurry."

"Yes, my lady. Your carriage awaits." He gave an exaggerated bow and held out her coat, which earned him some of Addie's giggles.

"You're so weird," she said, with nothing but affection in her voice.

"That's what I hear. Merry Christmas, by the way."

She beamed. "I'm so glad we're having our pretend Christmas Eve on the same night as the show. It's perfect."

He buttoned up her coat, humbled by the way she always tried to find a silver lining. "Even though we can't spend the whole evening playing games and opening presents, like we usually do?"

"You only let me open one present on Christmas Eve," she reminded him. "We can still do that after the show, and then tomorrow we'll open the rest of them on our fake Christmas morning."

"True enough."

"Presents are fun and everything. I love them. Who doesn't?"

"I can't think of anyone," he replied, amused by her serious expression.

"But that's not what Christmas is really about. Christmas is about making other people happy—and our show will make a lot of lonely older people very happy. That's what Faith said, anyway."

His heart gave a sharp little jolt at her name, as it always did. "Faith is right," he answered.

About the show, anyway. She wasn't right about him, about them, about the fear that was holding her back from giving him a chance. He couldn't share that with his child so he merely smiled and held open the door for her.

"Let's go make some people happy," he said.

Her smile made her look wiser than her eleven years, then she hurried out into the December evening.

* * *

Three hours later, he stood and clapped with the delighted audience as the children walked out onto the small stage at the Saint Nicholas Lodge to take their final bow.

"That was amazing, wasn't it?" Next to him, Flynn beamed at his own daughter, Olivia, whose red-and-gold dress was a perfect match to those worn by Louisa and Addie.

"Even better than last year, which I didn't think was possible," Chase said.

"Those kids have truly outdone themselves this year," Flynn said, gazing out at the smiles on all the wrinkled and weathered faces in the audience as they applauded energetically. "Like it or not,

I have a feeling this show for the senior citizens of Pine Gulch has now officially entered into the realm of annual traditions."

Chase had to agree. He had suspected as much after seeing the show the previous year. Though far from an elaborate production—the cast only started rehearsing the week before, after all—the performance was sweet and heartfelt, the music and dancing and dramatic performances a perfect mix of traditional and new favorites.

Of course the community would love it. How could they do otherwise?

"I'm a little biased, but our girls were the best," Flynn said.

Again, Chase couldn't disagree. Olivia had a pure, beautiful voice that never failed to give him chills, while Lou and Addie had done a more than adequate job of backing her up on a stirring rendition of "Angels We Have Heard on High" that had brought the audience to its feet.

"I overheard more than one person saying that was the highlight of the show," Chase said.

He knew Flynn had become more used to his daughter onstage over the last year as she came out of her shell a little more after witnessing the tragedy of her mother's death. While Flynn would probably never love it, he appeared to be resigned to the fact that Olivia, like her mother and grandmother before her, loved performing and making people happy.

Almost without conscious intention, his gaze strayed to Faith, who was hugging the children as they came offstage. She wore a silky red blouse that caught the light and she had her hair up again in a soft, romantic style that made him want to pull out every single pin.

She must have felt his attention. She looked up from laughing at something cute little Jolie Wheeler said and her gaze connected with his. Heat instantly sparked between them and he watched her smile slip away and her color rise.

They gazed at each other for a long moment. Neither of them seemed in a hurry to look away.

He missed her.

He hadn't really spoken with her since that sleigh ride the other night. She had seemed to avoid him for the rest of that evening, and he and Addie hadn't made it to Sunday dinner that week.

When he dropped Addie off earlier in the evening, he had greeted Faith, of course, but she had seemed frazzled and distracted as she hurried around helping the children with hair and makeup.

He hadn't had time to linger then anyway, as Rafe had sent him out to pick up some of the senior citizen guests who didn't feel comfortable driving at night amid icy conditions.

Now Jolie asked her a question and Faith was forced to look down to answer the girl, severing the connection between them and leaving him with the hollow ache that had become entirely too familiar over the last few weeks.

More than anything, he wished he knew what was in her head.

Addie came offstage and waved at him with an energy and enthusiasm that made Flynn laugh.

"I think someone is trying to get your attention," his friend said to Chase in a broad understatement.

"You think?" With a smile, Chase headed toward his daughter.

"Did you see me, Dad?" she exclaimed.

"It was my very favorite part of the show," he told her honestly.

"Lots of other people have told us that, too. We were good, but everyone else was, too. I'm so glad I got to do it, even though I missed the first rehearsals."

"So am I."

She hugged him and he felt a rush of love for his sweet-natured daughter.

"What now?" he asked.

"I need to change out of the dress and give it back, I guess," she said, her voice forlorn.

"You sound so sad about that," Faith said from behind him.

He hadn't seen her approach and the sound of her voice so near rippled down his spine as if she had kissed the back of his neck.

Addie sighed. “I just love this dress. I wish I could keep it. But I understand. They need to keep it nice for someone else to wear next year.”

Faith hugged her. “Sorry, honey. I took a thousand pictures of you three girls, though. You did such a great job.”

Addie grinned. “Thanks, Faith. I love my hair. Thank you for doing it. I wish it could be like this every day.”

“You are so welcome, my dear,” she said with a smile that sent a lump rising in his throat. These were the two females he loved most in the world, with Louisa, Mary and Faith’s sisters filling in the other slots, and he loved seeing them interact.

“I guess I should be wishing you a Merry Christmas Eve,” Faith said.

“It’s the best Christmas Eve on December 20 I ever had,” Addie said with a grin, which made Faith laugh.

The sound tightened the vise around his chest. She hadn’t laughed nearly enough over the last three years.

What would everyone in the Saint Nicholas Lodge do if he suddenly tugged her to him and kissed her firmly on the mouth for all to see?

“What’s for Christmas Eve dinner?” Faith asked him before he could think about acting on the impulse.

He managed to wrench his mind away from impossible fantasies. “You know what a genius I am in the kitchen. I bought a couple of takeout dinners from the café in town. We are having a big breakfast tomorrow, though. I can handle waffles and bacon.”

“Why don’t you eat your Christmas Eve dinner here? We have so much food left over. I think Jenna always overestimates the crowd. Once the crowd clears, we’re going to pull some of it out. Everyone is starving, since we were all too busy for dinner before the show to take time for food. You’re more than welcome to stay—though I completely understand if you have plans at home for your Christmas Eve celebration.”

“Can we, Dad?” Addie begged. “I won’t see my friends for three weeks after this.”

She wouldn’t see him for that amount of time either—a miserable thought.

He shrugged, already missing her. “We don’t have any plans that are set in stone. I think the only other thing we talked about, besides the show, was playing a couple of games.”

“And reading the Christmas story,” she pointed out.

“Right. We can’t forget that,” he answered. “I don’t mind if we stay, as long as you promise to go straight to bed when we’re done. Santa can’t come if you’re not asleep.”

She rolled her eyes but grinned at the same time. At eleven, she was too old for Santa but that didn’t stop either of them from carrying on the pretense a little longer.

“I’m going to go change and tell Lou and Livvie that we’re having dinner here,” she announced.

She hurried away, leaving him alone with Faith—or as alone as they could be in a vast holiday-themed lodge still filled with about twenty other people.

“It really was a wonderful show,” he said.

“I can’t take any of the credit.”

He had to smile, remembering how busy she had been before and during the show. The previous year had been the same. She claimed she wanted nothing to do with the holiday show, then pitched in and did whatever was necessary to pull it off.

His smile slid away when he realized she was gazing at his mouth again.

Yeah. He decided he didn’t much care what people would think if he kissed her again right now.

She swallowed and looked away. “I need to, um, probably take Sparkle back to the barn for the night.”

Besides the musical number with Addie and her friends, the other highlight of the show had been when Celeste, under duress, read from her famous story “Sparkle and the Magic Snowball” to

the captivated audience while the real Sparkle stood next to her, looking for all the world as if he were reading the story over her shoulder.

"I'll help," he offered.

Both of them knew she didn't need his help but after a moment, she shrugged and headed toward the front door and the enclosure where Sparkle hung out when he made appearances at the lodge.

Faith paused long enough to grab her coat off the rack by the door and toss his to him, then the two of them walked outside into the night.

The reindeer wandered over to greet them like old friends, the bells on his harness jingling merrily.

"Hey, Sparkle. How are you, pal?"

The reindeer lipped at his outstretched hand, making Chase wish he'd brought along an apple or something.

"I really don't need your help," Faith said. "He's so easygoing this is a one-person job—if that. I could probably tell him to go to bed and he would wander over to the barn, flip the latch and head straight for his stall. He might even turn off the lights on his way."

He had to smile at the whimsical image. "I'm here. Let's do this so we can eat, too."

With a sigh, she reached to unlatch the gate. Before she could, Ella Baker came out of the lodge, bundled against the cold and carrying an armload of sheet music.

"You're not staying for dinner?" Faith asked after they exchanged greetings.

"I can't. My dad is having a rough time right now so I need to take off. But thank you again for asking me to do this. I had so much fun. If you do it again next year and I'm still in town, I would love to help out."

"That's terrific!" Faith exclaimed. "I'll let Hope know. I can guarantee she'll be thrilled to hear this. Thank you!"

"I'm so sorry your sister couldn't be here to see it," Ella said. "I hope the live video worked so she could watch it at home."

Hope was still taking it easy, Chase knew, though she'd had no other problems since that frightening day the week before.

"She saw it," Faith assured her. "I talked to her right afterward and she absolutely loved it, just like everyone else did."

"Oh, I'm so glad." Ella smiled, then turned to him. "Chase, it's really good to see you again. I didn't have the chance to tell you this the other night but I had such a great time dancing with you. I'd love to do it again sometime."

It was clearly an invitation and for a moment, he didn't know what to say. Any other single guy in Pine Gulch would probably think he'd just won the lottery. Ella was lovely and seemed very nice. A relationship with her would probably be easy and uncomplicated—unlike certain other women he could mention.

The only trouble was, that particular woman in question had him so wrapped up in knots, he couldn't untangle even a tiny thread of interest in Ella.

"I'm afraid opportunities to dance are few and far between around here," he said, in what he hoped was a polite but clear message.

"You two could always go to the Renegade," Faith suggested blithely. "They have a live band with dancing just about every Saturday night."

For a moment, he could only stare at her. Seriously? She was pimping him out to take another woman dancing?

"That would be fun," Ella said, obviously taking Faith's suggestion as encouragement. "Maybe we could go after the holidays."

Chase didn't want to hurt her but he was not about to take her up on the invitation to go out dancing while he was standing in front of the woman he loved.

Even if it had been Faith's suggestion in the first place.

"I don't know," he said, in what he hoped was a noncommittal but clear voice. "I have my daughter a couple weekends a month and it's tough for me to get away."

Understanding flashed in her eyes along with a shadow of pained rejection. He hated that he had planted it there—and hated more that Faith had put him in the position in the first place.

"No problem," she said, some of the animation leaving her features. "Let me know if you have a free night. I've got to run. Good night. And Merry Christmas in advance."

She gave a smile that was only a degree or two shy of genuine and headed out into the parking lot toward her car.

He wasn't sure how, exactly, but Chase managed to hold on to the slippery, fraying ends of his temper as they led the reindeer the short distance across the snowy landscape to The Christmas Ranch barn.

It coiled through him as they worked together to take off Sparkle's harness and bells, gave him a good brushing, then made sure he had food and water.

He should just let it go, he told himself after they stepped out of the stall and closed the gate.

The evening had been wonderful and he didn't want to ruin it by fighting with her.

He almost had himself convinced of that but somehow as he looked at her, his anger slipped free and the words rolled out anyway.

"Why the hell would you do that?"

Chapter Thirteen

Faith stared at him, stunned by the anger that seemed to seethe around them like storm-tossed sea waves.

"Do...what?"

"You know. You just tried to set me up with Ella Baker again."

Her face flamed even as she shivered at his hard tone. Oh. That.

"All I did was mention that the Renegade has dancing on Saturday nights. I only thought it would be fun for the two of you."

His jaw worked as he continued to stare down at her. "Is that right?"

"Ella is really great," she said. She might as well double down on her own stupidity. "I've seen her with the kids this week and she's amazing—so patient and kind and talented. You heard her sing. Any single guy would have to be crazy not to want to go out with her."

"Really, Faith. Really?" The words came at her like a whip snapping through the cold air.

He was furious, she realized. More angry than she had ever seen him. She could see it in every rigid line of his body, from his flexed jaw to his clenched fists.

"After everything that's happened between us these last few weeks, you seriously want to stand there and pretend you think I might have the slightest interest in someone else?"

She let out a breath, ashamed of herself for dragging an innocent—and very nice—woman into this. She didn't even know why she had. The words had just sort of come out. She certainly didn't want Chase dating Ella Baker but maybe on some level she was still hanging on to the hope that they could somehow return to the easy friendship of a few weeks ago and forget the rest of this.

"I can't help it if I want you to be happy," she said, her voice low. "You're my dearest friend."

"I don't want to be your friend." He growled an oath that had her blinking. "After everything, can you really not understand that? Fine. You want me to be clear, I'll be clear. I don't want to be your buddy and I don't want to date Ella Baker. She is very nice but I don't have the slightest flicker of interest in her."

"Okay," she whispered. She shouldn't be relieved about that but she couldn't seem to help it.

He gazed down at her, features hard and implacable. "There is only one woman I want in my life and it's you, Faith. You have to know that. I'm in love with you. It's you. It has always been you."

She caught her breath at his words as joy burst through her like someone had switched on a thousand Christmas trees. She wanted to savor it, to simply close her eyes and soak it in.

I love you, too. So, so much.

The words crowded in her throat, jostling with each other to get out.

Over the last few weeks, she had come to accept that unalterable truth. She was in love with him and had been for a long time.

Perhaps some little part of her had loved him since that day he drove her into town when she was a frightened girl of fifteen.

What might have happened between them if his father hadn't been dying, if Travis hadn't come back to the Star N and she hadn't been overwhelmed by the sweet, kind safety he offered, the anchor she had so desperately needed?

She didn't know. She only knew that Chase had always been so very important in her world—more than she could ever have imagined after Travis died so suddenly.

The reminder slammed into her and she reached out for the rough planks of Sparkle's enclosure for support.

Travis.

The images of that awful moment when she had found him lying under his overturned ATV—covered in blood, so terribly still—seemed to flash through her mind in a grim, horrible slide show.

She hadn't been able to save him, no matter how desperately she had tried as she begged him not to leave her like her father, her mother.

She had barely survived losing Travis. How could she find the strength to let herself be vulnerable to that sort of raw, all-consuming, soul-destroying pain again?

She couldn't. She had been a coward so many years ago as a helpless girl caught up in events beyond her control and she was still a coward.

Faith opened her mouth to speak but the words wouldn't come.

The silence dragged between them. She was afraid to meet his gaze but when she forced herself to do it, she found his eyes murky with sadness and what she thought might be disappointment.

"You don't have to say anything." All the anger seemed to have seeped out of him, leaving his features as bleak as the snow-covered mountains above the tree line. "I get it."

How could he, when she didn't understand? She had the chance for indescribable happiness here with the man she loved. Why couldn't she just take that step, find enough strength inside herself to try again?

"It doesn't matter how much time I give you. You've made up your mind not to let yourself see me as anything more than your dearest friend and nothing I do can change that."

She wanted to tell him that wasn't true. She saw him for exactly what he was. The strong, decent, wonderful man she loved with all her heart.

Fear held both her heart and her words in a tight, icy grip. "Chase, I—" she managed, but he shook his head.

"Don't," he said. "I pushed you too hard. I thought you might be ready to move forward but I can see now I only complicated things between us and wasted both of our time. It was a mistake and I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry," she said softly, but he had turned around and headed for the door and she wasn't sure he heard her.

The moment he left, she pressed a hand to her chest and the sharp, cold ache there, as if someone had pierced her skin with an icicle.

She wanted so badly to go after him but told herself maybe it was better this way.

Wasn't it better to lose a friendship than to risk having her heart cut out of her body?

* * *

Chase didn't know how he made it through the next few days.

The hardest thing had been walking back inside the Saint Nicholas Lodge and trying to pretend everything was fine, with his emotions a raw, tangled mess.

He was pretty sure he fooled nobody. Celeste and Mary seemed especially watchful and alert as he and Addie dined with the family. As for Faith, she had come in about fifteen minutes after he did with her eyes red and her features subdued. She sat on the exact opposite side of the room from him and picked at her food, her features tight and set.

He was aware of a small, selfish hope that perhaps she was suffering a tiny portion of the vast pain that seemed to have taken over every thought.

She had left early, ostensibly with the excuse of taking some of the leftovers to Rafe and Hope, though he was fairly certain it was another effort to avoid him.

He did his best to put his pain on the back burner, focusing instead on making his remaining few hours with his daughter until after the New Year memorable for her.

Their premature Christmas Eve went off without a hitch. When they returned home, she changed into her pajamas and they played games and watched a favorite holiday movie, then she opened the one early present he allowed her—a carved ornament he had made from a pretty aspen burl on a downed tree he found in the mountains. In the morning she opened the rest of her presents from him and he fixed her breakfast, then she helped him take care of a few chores.

Too soon, her mother showed up after visiting her parents at the care center where Cindy's mother was still recovering from her stroke.

Chase tried to put on a smile for Cindy, sorry all over again for the mess he had made of his marriage.

He had tried so hard to love her. Those early days had been happy, getting ready for the baby and then their early days with Addie, but their shared love of their daughter hadn't provided strong enough glue to keep them together.

It hadn't been Cindy's fault that his heart hadn't been completely free. Despite his best efforts, she somehow had sensed it all along and he regretted that now.

He understood why disappointment and hurt turned her bitter and cold toward him and he resolved to do his best to be kinder.

Addie had decided to leave some of the gifts he had given her at the ranch so she could enjoy them during her time with him there, but she still had several she wanted to take home. After he loaded them into her mom's SUV, he hugged his daughter and kissed the top of her head. "Have a fun cruise, Addie-bug, and at Disney World. I want to hear every detail when you get back."

"Okay," she said, her arms tight around his neck. "You won't be by yourself on Christmas, will you, Dad? You'll go open presents at the Star N with Louisa and Barrett, right?"

His heart seemed to give a sharp little spasm. That's what he had done for several years, even before Travis died, but that was looking unlikely this year.

"I'm not sure," he lied. "I'll be fine, whatever I do. Merry Christmas, kiddo."

As they drove away, he caught sight of the lights of the Star N and The Christmas Ranch below the Brannon Ridge.

How was he going to make it through the remainder of his life without her—and without Lou and Barrett and the rest of her family he loved so much?

He didn't have the first idea.

* * *

"Why isn't Chase coming for dinner tonight?" Louisa asked as she and Barrett decorated Christmas cookie angels on the kitchen island.

"Yeah. He always comes over on Christmas Eve," Barrett said.

"And on Christmas morning when we open presents," Louisa added.

Faith had no idea how to answer her children. It made her chest ache all over again, just thinking about it.

That morning she had gathered her nerve and called to invite him for dinner and to make arrangements for transferring Louisa's Christmas present from Brannon Ridge to the Star N. She had been so anxious about talking to him again after four days of deafening silence, but the call went straight to voice mail.

He was avoiding her.

That was fairly obvious, especially when he texted just moments later declining her invitation but telling her that he already had a plan to take care of the other matter and she didn't need to worry about it.

The terse note after days of no contact hurt more than she could have imagined, even though she knew it was her own fault. She wanted so much to jump in her truck and drive to his ranch, to tell him she was sorry for all the pain she had put them both through.

"I guess he must have made other plans this year," she said now in answer to her daughter.

Mary made a harrumphing sort of noise from her side of the island but said nothing else in front of the children, much to Faith's relief.

Though her aunt didn't know what had transpired between Faith and Chase, Mary knew something had. She blamed Faith for it and had made no secret that she wasn't happy about it.

"Addie texted me a while ago. She's worried he'll be all by himself for the holidays," Louisa said. Her daughter made it sound like that was the worst possible fate anyone could endure and the guilty knot under Faith's rib cage seemed to expand.

Her children loved Chase—and vice versa. She hated being the cause of a rift between them.

"We should take him some of our cookies," Barrett suggested.

"That's a great idea," Mary said, with a pointed look at her. "Faith, why don't you take him some cookies? You could be there and back before everybody shows up for dinner."

He didn't want cookies from her. He didn't want anything—except the one thing she wasn't sure she had the strength to give.

"Maybe we can all take them over later," she said.

The three looked as if they wanted to argue but she made an impromptu excuse, desperate to escape the guilt and uncertainty. "I need to go. I've got a few things I need to do out in the barn before tonight."

"Now?" Mary asked doubtfully.

"If I finish the chores now, I won't have to go out to take care of them in the middle of our Christmas Eve party with Hope and Celeste," she said.

It was a flimsy excuse but not unreasonable. She did have chores—and she had plans to hang a big red ribbon she had already hidden away in the barn across the stall where she planned to put Lou's new horse. She could do that now, since Louisa had no reason to go out to the barn between now and Christmas morning.

She grabbed her coat and hurried out before any of them could argue with her.

Outside, a cold wind blew down off Brannon Ridge and she shivered at the same time she yawned.

She hadn't been sleeping much the last few weeks, which was probably why her head ached and her eyes felt as if they were coated with gritty sandpaper.

Maybe she could just go to bed and wake up when Christmas was over.

She sighed. However tempting, that was completely impossible. She had hours to go before she could sleep. It was not yet sunset on Christmas Eve—she still had to make it through dinner with her sisters and their families. Both of them were coming, since Hope had been cleared to return to her normal activities.

They would want to know where Chase was and she didn't know how to answer them.

Not only that but her kids would likely be awake for hours yet, jacked up on excitement and anticipation—not to mention copious amounts of sugar from the treats they had been making and sampling all day.

She should take sugar cookies to Chase. He loved them and probably hadn't made any for himself.

How could she possibly face him after their last encounter?

Tears burned behind her eyes. She wanted to tell herself it was from the wind and the lack of sleep but she knew better. This was the season of hope, joy, yet she felt as if all the color and light had been sucked away, leaving only uniform, lifeless gray.

She was in love with him and she didn't know what to do about it.

The worst part was knowing that even if she could find the strength and courage to admit she loved him, she was afraid it was too late.

He had looked so bleak the last time she saw him, so distant. Remembering the finality in that scene, the tears she had been fighting for days slipped past her defenses.

She looked out at the beautiful landscape—the snow-covered mountains and the orange and yellows of the sunset—and gave in to the torment of her emotions here, where no one could see her.

After a few moments, she forced herself to stop, wiping at the tears with her leather gloves. None of this maudlin stuff was helping her take care of her chores and now she would have to finish

quickly so she could hurry back to the house to fix her makeup before her sisters saw evidence of her tears and pressed her about what was wrong.

How could she tell them what a mess she had made of things?

With another sigh, she forced herself to focus on the job at hand. She walked through the snow to the barn and pushed the door open but only made it a few steps before she faltered, her gaze searching the interior.

Something was wrong.

Over the past two and a half years, she had come to know the inside of this barn as well as she did her own bedroom. She knew it in all seasons, all weather, all moods.

She knew the scents and the sounds and the shifting light—and right now she could tell something was different.

Someone was here.

She moved quietly into the barn, reaching for the pitchfork that was usually there. It was missing but she found a shovel instead and decided that would have to do.

No one else should be here.

She had two part-time ranch hands but neither was scheduled to be here on Christmas Eve. She had given both time off for the holidays and didn't expect to see them until the twenty-seventh. Anyway, if it had been Bill or Jose, wouldn't she have seen their vehicles parked out front?

With the shovel in hand, she headed farther into the interior of the big barn, eyes scanning the dim interior. Seconds later she spotted it—a beautiful paint mare in one of the stalls near the far end of the barn.

At almost that exact moment, she heard a noise coming from above her. She whirled toward the hayloft that took up one half of the barn and spotted him there, his back to her, along with the missing pitchfork.

"Chase!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

He swiveled around, and for an arrested moment, he looked at her with so much love and longing, she almost wept again.

Too quickly, he veiled his features. "Feeding Lou's new horse. While I was at it, I figured I could take care of the rest of your stock in the barn so you wouldn't have to worry about it tonight. I was hoping to get out of here before you came down from the house but obviously I'm not fast enough."

He had done that for her, even though he was furious with her. She wanted to cry all over again.

Happiness seemed to bloom through her like springtime and the old barn had never looked so beautiful.

She swallowed, focusing on the least important thought running through her head. "How did you get the new horse down here? I never saw your trailer."

"I didn't want Lou to see it and wonder what was going on so I came in the back way, down the hill. I rode Tor and tied the mare's lead line to his saddle."

"You came down through all that snow?" she exclaimed. "How on earth did you manage that?" There were drifts at least four feet deep in places on that ridgeline.

"It was slow going but Tor is tough and so's the new little mare. She's going to be a great horse for Lou."

She felt completely overwhelmed suddenly, humbled and astonished that he would go to such lengths for her daughter.

And for her, she realized.

This was only one of a million other acts over the last few years that provided all the evidence anyone could need that he loved her.

"I can't believe you would do that."

"Don't make a big deal out of it," he said, his tone distant.

"It is a big deal to me. It's huge. Oh, Chase."

The tears from earlier broke free again and a small sob escaped before she could cover her mouth with her fingers.

"Cut it out. Right now."

She almost laughed at the alarm in his voice, despite the tears that continued to trickle down her cheeks.

"I can't. I'm sorry. When the man I love shows me all over again how wonderful he is, I tend to get emotional. You're just going to have to deal with that."

Her words seemed to hang in the air of the barn like dust motes floating in the last pale shafts of Christmas Eve sunlight. He stared at her for a second, then lurched toward the ladder. Before he reached it, his boot heel caught on something. He staggered for just a moment and tried to regain his balance but he didn't have anything to hold on to.

He fell in what felt like slow motion, landing with a hard thud that sounded almost as loud as her instinctive scream.

* * *

He couldn't breathe—and not because her words had stunned him. No. He literally couldn't breathe.

For a good five seconds, his lungs were frozen, the wind knocked hard out of him. He was aware on some level of her running toward him to kneel next to him, of her panicked, tearstained features and her hands on his face and her cries of "breathe, breathe, breathe."

He wasn't sure if the advice was for him or herself but then, just as abruptly, the spasm in his diaphragm eased and he could inhale again, a small breath and then increasingly deeper until he dared talk again.

"I'm...okay."

She was reaching for her phone when he spoke. At his voice, she gasped, dropping it to the concrete floor of the barn and throwing herself across him with an impact that made him grunt.

She immediately eased away. "Where does it hurt? I need to call an ambulance. It will probably take them a while to get here so it might be faster for me to just drive you."

The panic in her voice seeped through his discomfort and he reached out a hand to cover hers.

"I don't...need an ambulance. The breath...was knocked out of me...but I'm okay."

The alfalfa he had been forking down for the animals had cushioned most of the impact and he knew there was no serious damage, even though everything still ached. He might have a broken rib in there, but he wasn't about to tell her that.

"Are you sure? That was a hard fall."

"I'm sure."

Her hand fluttered in his and he suddenly remembered what she had said and his complete shock that had made him lose his footing.

He sat up and wiped at her tears.

"Faith. What were you saying just before I fell?"

She looked down, her cheeks turning pink. "I... Nothing."

It was the exact antithesis of nothing. "You said you loved me," he murmured.

She rubbed her cheek on her shoulder as if trying to hide evidence of the tears trickling down. "That was a pretty hard fall," she said again. "Are you sure you didn't bump your head, too?"

"Positive. I know what I heard. Why do you think I fell? You shocked me so much I forgot I was ten feet up in the air. Say it again."

Her hand fluttered in his again but he held it tight. He wasn't going to let her wriggle away this time. After a moment, she stopped and everything about her seemed to sigh.

"I love you," she whispered. "I've known it for a while now. I just... I've been so afraid."

"I know. I'm sorry."

He hadn't wanted to make her suffer more than she already had. But maybe they both had to pass through this tough time to know they could make it through to the other side.

He pulled her toward him and his breath seemed to catch all over again—and not at all from the pain—when she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his chest.

Joy began to stir inside him, tentative at first and then stronger.

She belonged exactly here. Surely she had to know that by now.

"After Travis died, I never wanted to fall in love again. Ever," she said, her voice low. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't."

He frowned in confusion, nearly groaning at the possibility of more mixed signals from her.

And then she kissed him. Just like that. She lifted her head, found his mouth and kissed him with a fierce emotion that sent joy rushing through him like the Cold Creek swollen with runoff.

"I didn't need to fall in love," she said, her beautiful eyes bright with more tears and a tenderness that made him want to weep. "I was already there, in love with my best friend. That love surrounded me every moment of every day. I just had to find the strength to open my heart to it."

"And have you?"

She kissed him again in answer and he decided he wanted to spend every Christmas Eve right here with her in her barn, surrounded by animals and hay and possibilities.

He had no idea how all his Christmas wishes had come true but he wasn't about to question it.

"I love you, Chase Brannon," she murmured against his mouth.

He didn't want to ask but he had to know. "What changed?"

"Why am I not afraid to admit I love you?" She smiled a little. "Who said I'm not? But I have been thinking about something my dad told us over and over when we were held prisoner in Colombia. Remember, girls, he would say in that firm voice. Faith is always stronger than fear. He was talking about faith in the abstract, not me in particular, but I have decided to listen to his words and apply them to me. I can't let my fear control me. I am stronger than this—and during the times when I'm not, I've got your strength to lean on."

He kissed her, humbled and overwhelmed and incredibly grateful for this amazing woman in his arms, who had been through incredible pain but came through with grace, dignity and a beautiful courage.

He wiped a tear away with his thumb, grateful beyond words that such a woman was willing to face her completely justifiable fears for him.

"I thought I was going to have a heart attack just now when you fell. For an instant, it was like Travis all over again—but it also confirmed something I had already been thinking."

"Oh?"

She pressed her cheek against his hand. "I've been worried that I'm not strong enough to open my heart to you. The real question is whether I'm strong enough to live without you. When I saw you fall, in those horrible few seconds when you weren't breathing, I realized the answer to that is an unequivocal, emphatic no. I can't bear the idea of not being with you."

He couldn't promise nothing would ever happen to him—but he could promise he would love her fiercely every single day of his life.

"I love you, Chase. I love you, my kids love you, my entire family loves you. I need you. You are my oldest and dearest friend—and my oldest and dearest love."

He framed her face in his hands and kissed her with all the pent-up need from all these years of standing on the sidelines, waiting for their moment to be right. He almost couldn't believe this was real. Maybe he was simply hallucinating after having the wind knocked out of him. But his senses seemed even more acute than usual, alive and invigorated, and the joy expanding in his chest was too bright and wild and beautiful to be imaginary.

People said Christmas was a time for miracles.

He would never doubt that again.

Epilogue

Christmas Eve, one year later

"Okay, help me out, Mary. Where do you keep the salad tongs since you and Pat have renovated the kitchen?"

With whitewashed cabinets and new stainless steel appliances, the new Star N kitchen was beautiful, Faith had to admit—almost as pretty as the renovated kitchen at the Brannon Ridge that had been her wedding present from Chase. But after two months, she still couldn't seem to figure out how to find things here now.

Mary headed to a large drawer on the island. "It made more sense to keep all the utensils in the biggest drawer here where they can all fit instead of scattered throughout the kitchen. I don't know why it took me fifty years to figure that out. Is this what you're looking for?"

"Yes! Thank you."

She added the dressing to the rest of the ingredients in her favorite walnut cranberry salad and tossed it with the tongs. "There. That should do it. Everything looks great, Mary."

"Thanks." Her aunt beamed and Faith thought, not for the first time, that Mary seemed years younger since her marriage to Pat.

"Thank you for hosting the party here at the Star N."

"Christmas is about home and this old house is home to you girls," Mary said simply. "It seemed right, even though all of you have bigger places now. Your kitchen up at Brannon Ridge is twice the size as this one."

As they were discussing how they would merge their lives after they were married, she and Chase had looked at both houses and decided to run both ranches from Brannon Ridge. The house was bigger for all three of their kids and assorted horses, dogs and barn cats.

It had been a good decision, confirmed just a few months after Faith and Chase's wedding, when Mary announced she and her beau were getting married and wanted to renovate the Star N—a process now in the final phases.

"Anything else I can carry out to the dining room?" she asked.

"I made a fruit salad, too. It's in the refrigerator," Mary said.

Faith grabbed it and, with one bowl under each arm, headed for the two long tables that had been set up in the great room to hold the growing family.

She was arranging the bowls when Hope wandered over. "Hey, do you have any idea where I can find tape? I've still got one present to wrap."

"Let me get this straight. You run the most famous Christmas attraction in the Intermountain West and you've illustrated a holiday book that was turned into a movie currently ranked number one at the box office for the fourth consecutive week. Yet here it is five p.m. on Christmas Eve and you're still not finished wrapping your presents?"

"Oh, give me a break. I've had a little bit on my plate. You would not believe how much of my day this little creature takes up."

Faith smiled. "I think I would. I've had two of my own, remember? Here. Give."

Her sister held up the wriggling adorableness that was her six-month-old son, Samuel, born healthy and full-term, with no complications whatsoever from that early scare more than a year ago.

"You can have him if you tell me where I can find tape."

"The desk drawer in the office." She grinned and admitted the truth. "That's where I put it a half hour ago, anyway, when I finished wrapping my last present."

Hope snorted but fulfilled her part of the deal by handing over the boy.

After she left, Faith nuzzled his neck. Oh, he smelled delicious. Her heart seemed to burst with happiness. "Hey, Sammy. How's my favorite guy?"

"Wow. I guess that puts us in our place, right, Barrett?"

She looked up to find Chase and her son in the doorway, stomping snow off their boots after coming in from shoveling the driveway.

He was smiling but she didn't miss the light in his gaze as he watched her cuddle Hope's cute little boy.

How was it possible that, even after a year, she loved Chase more every single time she saw him?

"My favorite little guy," she amended. "You two are my favorite bigger guys. How's the snow out there?"

"Still coming down," Chase said. "Mary said she thinks we'll get another six or seven inches out of the storm. Perfect for cuddling in by the fire and hanging out with the family on Christmas morning."

"I hope Celeste and Flynn make it."

"They pulled in right as we were finishing the driveway," he assured her.

"That's good," Mary said from the kitchen. "Everything's ready and I'm starving."

"Sorry we're late," Celeste said as she, Flynn and Olivia came in with their arms loaded down with gifts.

"We still had to wrap a couple of presents," Olivia explained.

Hope paused in the act of setting her hastily wrapped final present under the big tree in the window. "Seriously, CeCe? On Christmas Eve? Maybe next year you should plan ahead a little better," she said virtuously.

Faith had to laugh, which ended up startling Sammy. "Sorry, kiddo."

"Here, I'll take him back."

She didn't want to surrender the soft little bundle but Mary came in just then. "Great. Everybody's here. Find your places."

After handing Sammy back to his mother, she found a place beside Chase. Addie and Louisa sat at her other side while Barrett sat on Chase's other side.

When they were all settled, Celeste looked around at their family.

"I have an announcement to make. We do, actually."

Olivia, Faith noticed, was just about jumping out of her chair in excitement.

"Is this about Sparkle and the Magic Snowball being number one again at the box office?" Addie asked.

"Everybody knows that already," Olivia said.

"Is it about the new Sparkle book that's coming out next summer or the movie sequel they're already making?" Louisa asked.

"No," Flynn said. "Though that's all very exciting."

He reached for Celeste's hand and Faith held her breath, sensing what was coming next before her sister even said it.

"We're having a baby."

The table erupted into squeals of excitement and hearty congratulations.

"Another baby. What wonderful news—and the perfect time to find out, on Christmas Eve," Mary exclaimed, her features soft with delight. "When are you due?"

"June. Right around the book launch, which isn't the greatest of timing, I know."

"We'll figure it out," Hope said. "This is so great! Maybe you'll have a boy, too, and he and Sammy can be best friends!"

Faith felt a big, strong hand reach out and grip hers. She glanced at her husband and saw a secret little smile there, the same one exploding in her heart. The two new cousins would soon become three, but she and Chase were the only ones at the table who knew that, for now.

They wouldn't share their news yet. Faith was only eight weeks along and they had decided to wait until after the New Year to tell anyone. Even Barrett, Lou and Addie didn't know yet.

It was tough to keep the news under wraps but there would be time enough to let the family know even more joy would soon be on the way.

For now, she would celebrate her sister's happiness.

Her heart seemed filled to overflowing and tears welled up as she looked around the table at her family, these people she loved so much.

Pregnancy hormones were making her crazy. She cried at everything these days. This, the chance to spend Christmas Eve with all the people she loved most in the world, was worth a few tears, she decided.

Chase's strong, callused fingers threaded through hers and more tears leaked out. He nudged her shoulder with his, and then her oldest and dearest friend—and the man she loved with all her heart—handed her his napkin so she could dry her tears.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying, Mom?" Louisa asked, concern in her eyes that could look so fierce and determined when she and the horse she adored galloped through a barrel course.

Faith sniffled a little more. "I'm happy. That's all."

"Cut it out or you'll set me off," Celeste said.

"And me," Hope said. "Since I had Sammy, I cry if the wind blows at me from the wrong direction."

Faith gave her sisters a watery smile. Their father's words certainly held true for his daughters. Each of them had proved that faith was stronger than fear, that they could move past the tough experiences in their past and let love help them heal.

She tightened her fingers around Chase's, the joy in her heart blazing as brightly as the lights on Aunt Mary's big Christmas tree that sent out warmth and color and hope across the snowy night.

* * * * *

Christmastime Courtship

Marie Ferrarella

Stop...in the name of love

What kind of motorcycle cop gives a speeding ticket around Christmas? One as by the book as Colin Kirby. But when he stops pediatric oncology nurse Miranda Steele, little does he know that she’s about to zoom straight into his heart. Or that the Matchmaking Mamas have the unlucky-in-love pair straight in their sights...

After a childhood tragedy, bright-as-sunshine Miranda’s used to making the best of any situation. So she knows the handsome policeman represents an opportunity: he needs to visit her sick kids at the hospital. But Miranda quickly realizes the closed-off Colin is in need of her help just as much as any of those she volunteers for. And she’s determined to work her way into his heart this holiday season.

To

Melany,

The Best Daughter-in-Law

Anyone Could Ask For.

Welcome To The Family.

Prologue

"Is it true?"

Theresa Manetti looked up from the menu she was putting the final touches on to see who had just walked into her inner office. Most clients who wanted to avail themselves of her catering services either called or were brought in by one of her staff and announced.

As it turned out, this time Theresa found herself looking up at Jeannine Steele, an old friend she hadn't seen in at least six months. Not since she'd catered Jeannine's husband's funeral reception.

"Well, that's a new kind of greeting," Theresa commented, amused. "Most people usually say hello. Is what true?" she asked, nodding toward the chair on the other side of her desk, indicating that her friend should sit down.

Looking uncomfortable and nervous, Jeannine lowered herself onto the chair, perching on its edge. "There's a rumor going around that in addition to your catering business, you're running some sort of a dating service on the side."

Theresa had known Jeannine since her own two children had been in elementary school with Jeannine's daughter, and in all that time, she couldn't recall the stately woman appearing anything but completely in control.

Always.

But not this time.

"Well, that's not exactly an accurate description," Theresa replied. "It's not really a 'dating service,' so much as a matchmaking service."

Confusion furrowed Jeannie's otherwise smooth, alabaster brow. "There's a difference?"

From her vantage point, Theresa could see the other woman twisting her long, slender fingers together. Theresa was experienced enough to know where this was heading, and did what she could to set her friend at ease.

"A big difference," she answered, pushing back her chair and rising to her feet. "Would you like something to drink, Jeannine?" she asked kindly. "I have everything from tea to soft drinks to something a little more 'bracing' if you'd rather have that."

Jeannine drew in a deep breath before answering. "I'll take tea," she replied. "Strong tea."

Theresa smiled as she went to the counter against the back wall, where she had a pot of hot water steaming. She had a preference for tea herself.

"So, it's been a while, Jeannine," she said in her customary easygoing manner. "How are you?"

"Concerned, frankly," the other woman admitted.

Recrossing the room, Theresa held out the cup of tea. "You're worried about Miranda, aren't you?"

Her friend nearly dropped the cup Theresa had handed her. Some hot liquid sloshed over the side. "How did you know?" she asked, surprised.

"To begin with, you asked me about my so-called 'sideline,'" Theresa answered, employing a whimsical term for the labor that had become near and dear not just to her heart, but to Maizie's and Celia's hearts, as well.

Theresa and the two women she had been best friends with since the third grade had weathered all of life's highs and lows together. The highs included marriage, children and the successful businesses all three had started in the second half of their lives and were currently running.

The lows included all three becoming widows. But she, Maizie and Celia had learned to push on past the pain. After all, they each had children to provide for. They were determined to lead productive, fulfilling lives. And above all else, they were always, always there for one another.

Their matchmaking had begun slowly, by finding matches for their own children. That was to be the end of it, but matching up the right two people brought such satisfaction with it, they'd decided to try their hand at it again.

And again.

With each successful match, their secondary vocation just seemed to take wings. They loved the businesses they had begun and nurtured individually, but there was something exceedingly fulfilling about bringing together two people who otherwise might never have found one another.

Two people who clearly belonged together.

It looked as if the adventure was about to begin again, Theresa thought.

"Tell me about Miranda," she coaxed, taking her seat once more. "How is she? Is she still as wonderfully generous and bighearted as ever?"

Jeannine thought of her only daughter—her only living child—whose career path had been chosen at the age of ten. "Yes—and that's the problem. She's so busy giving of herself, working at the children's hospital, the women's shelter and the city's animal shelter, that she doesn't have any time to focus on herself. Don't get me wrong, Theresa. I'm prouder of Miranda than I can possibly say, but, well, I'm really afraid that if she keeps going like this, she's eventually going to wind up alone." Jeannine sighed. "I know that sounds like I'm being small-minded and meddling, but—"

Theresa cut her short. "Trust me, I know the feeling," she assured her. "We're mothers, Jeannine. It comes with the territory." With her business going full steam ahead the way it was these days, she could use a little diversion. "Tell me, do you have any idea what Miranda's dating life is like?"

"I have a very clear idea," Jeannine replied. "It's nonexistent these days."

"Really?"

"Really," she confirmed sadly. "The problem is that no man can compete with her full-time job, as well as all her volunteer work. Besides, what man wants to come in fourth?"

"Definitely not the kind of man we would want for your daughter," Theresa said with conviction.

Jeannine looked confused. "What are you saying?"

Theresa smiled as she began making plans. "I'm saying we need to change Miranda's focus a little."

"So you do think there's hope?" A glimmer of optimism entered the other woman's hazel eyes.

Theresa leaned over and patted her friend's hand. "Jeannine," she said confidently, "there is always hope."

Chapter One

"Ladies, we have work to do," Theresa announced the moment she entered Maizie Sommer's house.

She strode into Maizie's family room with the vigor of a woman half her age. Matchmaking projects always got her adrenaline going, creating a level of enthusiasm within her even greater than her usual line of work did—and it went without saying that she dearly loved her catering business.

"We certainly do," Cecilia Parnell agreed.

Already seated at the card table—their usual gathering place whenever they were discussing their newest undertaking in the matchmaking arena—Celia turned to look at her. "This one is going to be a real challenge for us."

"Oh, I don't know," Theresa protested, gracefully slipping into the chair that was set up between Celia and Maizie. "I don't think it'll be that hard finding someone suitable."

Taken aback, Celia looked quizzically at her old friend, who hadn't called ahead with any details about the person she felt should be their latest project. "Wait, how would you know?"

"How would I know?" Theresa repeated incredulously. "Because I've known Miranda Steele ever since she was a little girl. She has this incredibly huge heart and she's always trying to help everyone. Fix everyone," Theresa emphasized, which was why she had come to think of the young woman as "the fixer" in recent years.

"Miranda?" Celia echoed, decidedly more confused than she'd initially been. "Maizie and I were talking about Colin when you walked in."

It was Theresa's turn to be confused. "Who's Colin?" she asked, looking from Maizie to Celia.

"Police Officer Colin Kirby," Celia clarified, adding, "our latest matchmaking project. His aunt Lily is a friend of mine and she came to talk to me on the outside chance that maybe I—actually we—could find someone for him."

Without pausing, Celia launched into a brief version of the police officer's backstory. "Lily took him in when her sister, Vanessa, a single mother, died in a car accident. Colin was fourteen at the time. She said that he's a decent, hardworking young man who just shut down when he lost his mother. He enlisted in the Marines straight out of high school. When his tour of duty overseas ended, he was honorably discharged and immediately joined the police force in Los Angeles."

Maizie appeared a little dubious. "Los Angeles is a little out of our usual territory," she commented. "But I guess—"

"Oh no." Celia quickly cut in. "He's not in Los Angeles anymore, he's in Bedford now. Lily talked him into moving back down here. Her health isn't what it used to be and he's her only living relative, so he made the move for her, which, in my book, shows you what sort of a person he is.

"The problem is," Celia continued, "Lily says he's really closed off, especially after what he saw during his tour overseas and as a police officer in one of the roughest areas in Los Angeles. To put it in Lily's own words," she concluded, "Colin needs someone to 'fix him.'"

Smiling, Maizie shifted her gaze from Celia to Theresa. It was obvious that, in her estimation, they needed to look no further in either case. "You just said you have someone who likes to 'fix' people."

But Celia was more skeptical than her friend. She needed more to work with. "Fix how?"

Theresa gave them Miranda's background in a nutshell. "According to her mother, Miranda's a pediatric nurse at Bedford Children's Hospital who volunteers at a women's shelter in her free time. She also volunteers at the city's animal shelter and occasionally takes in strays until they can be placed in a permanent home."

Maizie's smile widened. "Ladies, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, but this sounds to me like a match made in heaven. I'm assuming you both have a few more pertinent details that we can

work with—like what these two look like and how old they are, for openers," said the woman whose decision to find her daughter a suitable match had initially gotten what turned out to be their "side business" rolling eight years ago.

"Miranda's thirty," Theresa told them, producing a photograph on her smartphone that Jeannie had sent her, and holding it up for the others to see.

"Colin's thirty-three," Celia said. "And I'll ask Lily to send me a picture."

So saying, she texted a message to the woman. In less than a minute, her cell phone buzzed, announcing that her request had been received and answered.

"Here we go," Celia declared. "Oh my," she murmured as she looked at the image that had materialized on her smartphone. Colin's aunt had sent her a photo of her nephew in his police uniform.

Maizie took Celia's hand and turned the phone around so she could look at it.

"Definitely 'oh my,'" she agreed wholeheartedly. Pushing the deck of cards aside, she gave up all pretense that they were going to engage in a game of poker this evening, even a single hand. Her gaze took in her two lifelong friends. "Ladies, let's get down to work. These two selfless servants of society need us. And from what I've heard, they also need each other," the successful Realtor added knowingly. "We'll require more information to bring about the perfect subtle 'meet' to get this particular ball rolling."

Filled with anticipation, the three old friends got busy.

* * *

Every year, the holiday season seemed to begin earlier and earlier, Miranda Steele thought.

Not that she was complaining. Christmas had always been her very favorite time of year. While others grumbled that the stores were putting up Christmas decorations way too soon, motivated by a desire to increase their already obscene profits, Miranda saw it as a way to stretch the spirit of Christmas a little further, thereby making the true meaning of the season last a little longer.

But sometimes, like now, the pace became a little too hectic even for her. She had just put in a ten-hour day at the hospital, coming in way before her shift actually began in order to help decorate the oncology ward, where she worked. She felt particularly driven because she knew that for some of the children there it would be their last Christmas.

As harsh and sad as that thought was to deal with, she chose to focus on the bright side: bringing the best possible Christmas she could to the children and their families.

At times, she felt like a lone cheerleader, tirelessly attempting to drum up enthusiasm and support from the other nurses, doctors and orderlies on the floor until she had everyone finally pitching in, even if they weren't all cheerful about it.

She didn't care if the rest of the staff was cheerful or not, as long as they helped out. And as was her habit, she worked harder than anyone to make sure that things were ultimately "just right."

If she were a normal person, about now she would be on her way home, having earned some serious bubble bath time.

But soaking in a hot tub was not on this afternoon's agenda. She didn't have time for a bubble bath, as much as she longed for one. She had to get Lily's birthday party ready.

Lily Hayden was eight today. The little girl was one of the many children currently living with their moms at the Bedford Women's Home, a shelter where Miranda volunteered four days a week after work.

The other two or three days she spent at the city's no-kill animal shelter, where she worked with dogs and cats—and the occasional rabbit—that were rescued from a possible bleak demise on the street. Miranda had an affinity for all things homeless, be they four-footed or two-footed. In her opinion there never seemed to be enough hours in the day for her to help all these deserving creatures.

She had been working in all three areas for years now and felt she had barely been able to scratch the surface.

Agitated, Miranda looked at the clock on her dashboard. The minutes were flying by.

She was running the risk of being late.

"And if you don't get there with this cake, Lily is going to think you've forgotten all about her, just like her mom did," Miranda muttered to herself.

Lily's mother had left the little girl at the shelter when she'd gone to look for work. That was two days ago. No one had heard from the woman since. Miranda was beginning to worry that Gina Hayden, overwhelmed with her circumstances, had bailed out, using the excuse that the little girl was better off at the shelter, without her.

Stepping on the gas, Miranda made a sharp right turn at the next corner, reaching out to hold the cake box on the passenger seat in place.

Focused on getting to the homeless shelter on time, Miranda wasn't aware of the dancing red and blue lights behind her until she heard the siren, high-pitched, demanding and shrill, slicing through the air. The sound drew her attention to the lights, simultaneously making her stomach drop with a jarring thud.

Oh damn, why today of all days? Miranda silently demanded as, resigned to her fate, she pulled her car over to the right. Even as she did so, something inside her wanted to push her foot down on the accelerator and just take off.

But considering that her newfound nemesis was riding a motorcycle and her car was a fifteen-year-old asthmatic vehicle way past its glory days, a clean getaway was simply not in the cards.

So she pulled over and waited for her inevitable ticket, fervently hoping the whole process was not going to take too long. She was already behind schedule. Miranda didn't want to disappoint Lily, who had already been disappointed far too often in her short life.

* * *

This wasn't his usual route. For some unknown reason, the desk sergeant had decided that today, he and Kaminski were going to trade routes.

Sergeant Bailey had made the switch, saying something about "mixing things up and keeping them fresh"—whatever that was supposed to mean, Colin thought, grumbling under his breath.

As far as he was concerned, one route was as good as another. At least here in Bedford the only thing people shot at him were dirty looks, instead of bullets from the muzzles of illegally gotten handguns. He had to admit that patrolling the streets of Bedford was a far cry from patrolling the barrio in Los Angeles, or driving on the roads in Afghanistan. In those situations, a man had to develop eyes in the back of his head to stay alive.

Here in Bedford, those same eyes were in danger of shutting, but from boredom, not a fatal shot.

He supposed, after everything he had been through in the last ten years, a little boredom was welcome—at least for a while.

But he didn't exactly like the idea of hiding on the far side of the underpass, waiting to issue a ticket to some unsuspecting Bedford resident.

Yet those were the rules of the game here, and for now, he wasn't about to rock the boat.

First and foremost, he was here because of Aunt Lily. Because he owed her big-time. She had taken him in when no one else would, and to his discredit, he had repaid her by shutting her out and being surly. It wasn't her fault he had behaved that way; the blame was his.

In his defense—if he could call it that—he hadn't wanted to risk forming another attachment, only to have to endure the pain that came if and when he lost her. Lost her the way he'd lost everyone else in his life that ever mattered. His mother. Some of the men in his platoon. And Owens, his last partner in LA.

Colin's method of preventing that sort of pain was to cut himself off from everyone. That way, the pain had no chance of ever taking root, no chance of slicing him off at the knees.

At least that was what he told himself.

Still, he reasoned, playing his own devil's advocate, if there wasn't some part of him that cared, that was still capable of forming some sort of an attachment, however minor, would he have uprooted himself the way he had in order to be here because Aunt Lily had asked him to?

He didn't know.

Or maybe he did, and just didn't want to admit it to himself.

Either way, it wasn't something that was going to be resolved today. Today he needed to focus on the small stuff.

Right now he had a speeder to stop, he told himself, coming to life and increasing his own speed.

Because the woman in the old sedan was obviously not looking into her rearview mirror, Colin turned on his siren.

There, that got her attention. At least she wasn't one of those foolhardy birdbrains who thought they could outrace his motorcycle, Colin observed, as the car began to decrease its speed.

Watching the vehicle slow down and then come to a stop, Colin braced himself for what he knew was about to come. Either the driver was going to turn on the waterworks, attempting to cry her way out of a ticket by appealing to what she hoped was his chivalrous nature, or she was going to be belligerent, demanding to know if he had nothing better to do than to harass otherwise law-abiding citizens by issuing speeding tickets for offenses that were hardly noteworthy, instead of pursuing real criminals.

After parking his motorcycle behind her vehicle, he got off, then took his time walking up to the offending driver. Because the street was a busy one, with three lanes going in each direction, Colin made his way to the passenger side, to avoid getting hit by any passing motorist.

As he approached, he motioned for the driver to roll down her window.

She looked nervous. Well, the woman should have thought about this before she'd started speeding.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" he asked gruffly.

Miranda took a breath before answering. "Because I was speeding."

A little surprised at the simplicity of her reply, Colin waited for more.

It didn't come.

The woman wasn't trying to talk her way out of the ticket she obviously knew was coming. He found that rather unusual. In his experience, people he pulled over in Bedford weren't normally this calm, or this seemingly polite.

Colin remained on his guard, anticipating a sudden turn on the driver's part.

"Right," he said, picking up on her answer. "You were speeding. Any particular reason why?"

He was aware that he was giving her the perfect opportunity to attempt to play on his sympathies, with some sort of a sob story. Such as she'd just gotten a call from the hospital saying her mother or father or some other important person in her life had just had a heart attack, and she was rushing to their side before they died.

He'd heard it all before. The excuses got pretty creative sometimes.

He had to admit that, for some reason, he was mildly curious to hear what this driver had to offer as her excuse.

"There's this little girl at the homeless shelter. It's her birthday today and I'm bringing the cake. The party starts in ten minutes and I got off my shift at the hospital later than I anticipated. I work at Children's Hospital and we had an emergency," she explained, inserting a sidebar.

"Where at Children's Hospital?" Colin asked, wondering just how far the woman was going to take this tale she was spinning.

"The oncology ward," she answered.

He should have seen that one coming. "Really?" he challenged.

Was he asking her for proof? That was simple enough, she thought. Because she'd been in such a rush, she was still wearing her uniform, and she had her hospital badge around her neck.

Holding up her ID, she showed it to him. “Yes, really, Officer,” she answered politely. “Now if you’ll please write out the ticket and give it to me so I can be on my way, I can still make the party on time. I don’t want Lily to think I forgot about her, today of all days.”

About to begin doing so, Colin looked up sharply. “Lily?” he questioned.

“That’s her name,” Miranda answered. “Lily.”

Colin stared at the woman, a stoic expression on his face as he tried to make up his mind if she was actually serious, or trying to con him.

She couldn’t possibly know about his aunt, he decided.

“My aunt’s name is Lily,” he told her, watching her face for some telltale sign that she was making all this up.

“It’s a nice name,” Miranda responded, waiting for him to begin writing.

Colin paused for a long moment, weighing the situation.

And then he did something he didn’t ordinarily do. Actually, it was something he’d never done before. He closed his ticket book.

“All right, I’m letting you off with a warning,” he told her. Then added an ominous “Watch yourself,” before he turned on his heel and walked back to his motorcycle.

Chapter Two

Miranda's first impulse was to take off before the officer decided to change his mind about writing her that ticket. But as she thought about the fact that she had just dodged a bullet, an idea came to her. Rather than start her car and drive away under the police officer's watchful eye, Miranda opened her door and got out of her beloved vehicle.

"Officer?" she called, raising her voice.

Colin had already gotten on his motorcycle. Surprised, he looked in her direction. After a beat, he sighed and then slowly dismounted.

Now what? he silently demanded.

"Something on your mind, miss?" he asked, his voice low and far from friendly.

The officer sounded as if she was annoying him. But Miranda hadn't gotten where she was by giving in to the nervous quiver that occasionally popped up in her stomach—as it did now.

Raising her head so that her eyes met his—or where she assumed his eyes were, because he'd lowered the visor on his helmet, she stated, "I wanted to say thank you."

Colin grunted in response, because in his opinion, this wasn't the sort of situation where "you're welcome" suited the occasion. As far as he was concerned, she wasn't welcome. He'd just given in to an impulse that had come out of nowhere, and if he thought about it now, he was rather bewildered by his own actions.

"Do you have a card?" she asked him.

"A card?" Colin repeated, clearly perplexed by her question.

Miranda didn't think she was asking for anything out of the ordinary. "Yes, like a business card. The police department issues those to you, right?"

Instead of answering her question, or giving her one of the cards he carried in his pocket, Colin asked, "Why do you want it? You don't have anything to report me for," he pointed out gruffly.

It took Miranda a second to absorb what he was saying. Talk about being defensive. But then, maybe he had a reason. Some people were belligerent when dealing with the police.

"I don't want to report you," she assured him with feeling. "I just want to be able to call you."

So that was it, Colin thought. The woman was a groupie. He knew that there were people—mostly women—who were attracted to the uniform, some to the point of obsession. He had no patience when it came to groupies.

Colin got back on his motorcycle, ready to take off. "That's not a good idea," he told her in a voice that left no room for argument.

Or at least he thought it didn't.

"But the kids at the hospital would get such a big kick out of meeting a real live motorcycle cop," she said, hoping to change his mind.

She caught him completely off guard. He definitely hadn't been expecting that.

Now that he had transferred to Bedford, he didn't find himself interacting with any children. The ones back in the LA neighborhood he used to patrol saw police officers as the enemy, and either scattered whenever they saw him coming, or would throw things at him and then run.

"Look, I don't think—" Colin got no further than that.

Determined to convince him, Miranda attempted to submerge the police officer in a tidal wave of rhetoric. "A lot of the kids in that ward haven't been out of the hospital in months. I think meeting you would go a long way in cheering them up."

There had to be some sort of an ulterior motive at work here, Colin thought, and he wasn't about to fall for whatever trap she was trying to set for him.

"I really doubt that," he told her as he revved his motorcycle.

"I don't," Miranda countered cheerfully, refusing to be put off. "Why don't you come by the hospital and we'll see which one of us is right?" Mindful of procedure, she told him, "I'd have to clear it with my supervisor, but I don't see why she would say no."

"She might not, but I will." Then, just in case the woman still had any doubt about what he was telling her, Colin said, "No."

"But, Officer—" Rebounding quickly, Miranda tried again "—it's Christmas."

Colin's eyes narrowed. "It's November," he corrected.

"Almost Christmas," she amended.

The woman just wouldn't give up, he thought, his irritation growing to astounding levels.

"Look, why don't you get back into your car and drive off before I decide to change my mind about issuing you that ticket?" Colin suggested tersely. "You said something about a birthday party for a little girl named Lily," he reminded her.

"Oh my goodness! Lily!" Miranda cried, genuinely upset. She'd gotten so caught up with her idea about having the police officer visit the children in the oncology ward that she'd forgotten the mission she was on right now. "The poor thing's going to really be upset if I don't turn up on time."

Whirling around, Miranda hurried back to her car and got in. She was starting the vehicle before she even closed the door.

Raising his voice, Colin called after her, "Remember the speed limit!"

There was next to no traffic at the moment.

Reining herself in, knowing that the officer would be watching her pull away from the curb, Miranda gripped the steering wheel and drove off at a respectable speed, all the while wishing herself already at her destination.

Despite her hurry to get to the women's shelter, she made a mental note to track down the officer and get his name and number from his precinct the first chance she got. This wasn't over yet, she promised herself.

Miranda managed to catch all the lights and breeze through them, arriving at the women's shelter fifteen minutes later.

Rather than wasting time driving around and looking for a parking spot near the gray, two-story building's front door, she pulled into the first space she came to.

Grabbing the cake, she hurried into the building—and nearly collided with the blonde little girl who was anxiously waiting for her at the door.

"You came!" Lily cried happily, her furrowed brow smoothing out the second she saw Miranda.

"Of course I came," she said, pausing to kiss the top of Lily's head as she balanced the large cake box in her arms. "I told you I would. It's your birthday and I wouldn't miss that for the world."

Lily was all but dancing on her toes, eagerly looking at the rectangular box in Miranda's arms. "Is that a cake?"

"Aw, you guessed," Miranda said, pretending to be disappointed that her secret had been uncovered. "What gave it away?"

"The box," Lily answered solemnly, as if she'd been asked a legitimate question. And then she giggled as she added, "And I can smell cake."

"Well, since you guessed what it is, I guess you get to keep it," Miranda told her.

Lily was all but bursting with excitement. "Can I carry it to the dining room?" she asked.

That wouldn't be a good idea, Miranda thought. The box was large and would prove to be rather unwieldy for a little girl to carry.

"Well, it's kind of heavy," she told her. "So why don't I carry it there for you and you can open the box once I put it on the table?"

"Okay," Lily responded, obviously ready to agree to anything her idol suggested.

The little girl literally skipped to the dining area at Miranda's side. And she never took her eyes off the box, as if afraid it would suddenly disappear if she did.

"What kind of cake is it?" she asked.

"A birthday cake," Miranda replied solemnly.

Lily giggled and waved her hand at her friend. "I know that, silly," she told her. "I mean what kind of birthday cake?"

"A good one," Miranda said, still pretending that she didn't understand what Lily was asking her.

"Besides that," Lily pressed, giggling again.

"It's a lemon cake with vanilla frosting," Miranda told the bubbly little girl beside her as they reached the dining area.

Lily's eyes grew huge with obvious delight. "Lemon cake's my very favorite in the whole world."

"Well, how about that." Miranda pretended to marvel. "I didn't know that."

"Yes, you did," Lily said, a surprisingly knowing look on her small, thin face.

And then Miranda smiled affectionately at the girl. "I guess I did at that. Guess what else I've got," she said.

"Candles?" Lily asked in a hopeful whisper.

Miranda nodded. "Eight big ones. And one extra one for luck."

Instead of saying anything in response to the information, Lily threaded her small arm through one of her friend's and hugged it hard, her excitement all but palpable.

Miranda could feel her heart practically squeezing within her chest. This moment she was sharing with Lily was both humbling and sad. Other children her age would have asked for toys or expensive video games, and not shown half the excitement when they received them that Lily displayed over the fact that she was getting a birthday cake—with candles.

Drawn by the sound of Lily's squeals, Amelia Sellers, the tall, angular-looking woman who ran the shelter, made her way over to them. Her smile was warm and genuine—and perhaps slightly relieved, as well.

Amelia'd probably thought she wasn't going to make it. Most likely because she had a habit of being early, not running late like this.

"Lily's been looking forward to this all day," Amelia told her the moment she reached them.

"So have I," Miranda assured both the director and the little girl, who was looking up at her with nothing short of adoration in her eyes.

"I put out the plates," Amelia announced, gesturing at one of the dining tables. "So let's get started."

Miranda smiled down at Lily, who was obviously waiting for her to make the first move. She had to be the most well-mannered eager little girl she'd ever met.

"Let's," Miranda agreed.

Carefully taking the half sheet cake out of the box, Miranda moved the rectangular container aside and out of the way. She then put the candles on the cake, making sure she spaced them close enough together that Lily would be able to blow them all out at once when she made her wish.

The moment the birthday cake was placed on the table, children began coming over, clustering around the table, all hoping to get a piece.

Taking out the book of matches she had picked up when she'd purchased the candles, Miranda struck one and then carefully lit the eight plus one wicks.

Blowing out the match, she looked at all the eager faces around the table. "All right," she told the small gathering. "Everybody sing!"

And she led the pint-size group, along with the smattering of adults also gathered around the table, in a loud, if slightly off-key chorus of "Happy Birthday." All the while she kept one eye on Lily, who looked positively radiant.

When the children stopped singing, Miranda told the little girl, "Okay, Lily, make a wish and blow out the candles."

Nodding, Lily pressed her lips together, clearly giving her wish a great deal of thought. Then she looked up at Miranda and smiled.

Taking in a deep breath, Lily leaned over the cake and blew as hard as she could. The candles flickered and went out.

"You got them all," Miranda declared, applauding the little girl's accomplishment.

The children and adults around the table joined in, some loudly cheering, as well.

Miranda felt someone tugging on the bottom of her tunic. Glancing down, she found herself looking into the upturned face of an animated little boy named Paul.

"Now can we have some cake?" he asked.

"Absolutely," she replied. "Right after Lily gets the first piece."

Removing all nine candles, she set them on a napkin. Miranda proceeded to cut a piece of cake for Lily, making sure it was an extra-large one.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lily folding the napkin over the candles she'd just removed. The little girl covertly slipped the napkin into the pocket of her jeans, a souvenir of her special day.

"There you go," Miranda told her, sliding the plate to her.

"Thank you," Lily said.

To Miranda's surprise, rather than devour the cake as she expected, the little girl ate the slice slowly, as if savoring every morsel.

"This is the best cake I ever had," Lily declared when she finally finished it.

The other children had made short work of the cake that was left, but Miranda had anticipated that. "You can have another piece," she told Lily. Not waiting for a response, she pushed her own plate in front of the little girl.

Lily looked tempted, but left the slice untouched.

"What's wrong?" Miranda asked.

"I can't eat that. That's your piece," she protested.

Miranda smiled at the girl. One in a million, she thought.

Out loud she stated, "And I saved it for you. I wanted you to have an extra piece and knew that the rest of the cake would probably be gobbled up fast. So don't argue with me, young lady. Take this piece. It's yours," she coaxed.

Lily still looked uncertain. "Really?"

"Really," Miranda assured her. "I'm the grown-up here. You have to listen."

Lily's face was all smiles as she happily dug into the second piece.

When she finished, Miranda cleared away the plates, stacking them on the side.

"That was the best cake ever!" Lily told her with enthusiasm, and then hugged her again.

"Glad to hear that," Miranda said, when the little girl loosened her hold. "By the way, I have something for you."

"For me?" Lily cried, clearly amazed. It was obvious that she felt the cake was her big prize. Anything else was above and beyond all expectation. "What is it?"

Miranda reached into the oversize purse she'd left on the floor and pulled out the gift she had wrapped for Lily early this morning, before she'd left for the hospital.

Handing it over, she said, "Why don't you open it and see?"

Lily held the gift as if she couldn't decide whether to unwrap it or just gaze at it adoringly for a while. Her curiosity finally won out and she started peeling away the wrapping paper.

The moment she'd done so, her mouth dropped open. "You got me a puppy!" she cried.

"Well," Miranda amended, "I can't get you a real puppy because the shelter won't allow it, so for now, I want you to have this stuffed one. But someday, when you're in a home again, I'll come and bring you a real one," she promised.

Heaven knew she had access to enough homeless dogs at the animal shelter to pick just the right one for the little girl.

Lily threw her arms around her a third time and hugged her as hard as she could. “I wish you were my mom,” she said breathlessly.

Touched though she was, Miranda knew she couldn’t have the girl feeling like that. “Don’t say that, honey. Your real mom’s out there and she’s probably trying to get back here to you right now.”

But Lily shook her head. “I still wish you were my mom,” she insisted, burying her face against Miranda as she clutched the stuffed dog. “Thank you for my cake and my candles and my puppy. Thank you for everything,” she cried.

Miranda hugged the little girl, moved almost to tears and wishing there was something she could do for her beyond giving her a gift and a cake.

And then it came to her. She knew what she had to do.

She needed to track down the police officer on the motorcycle. Not to bring to the hospital with her—that would come later—but to help her find out what had happened to Lily’s mother. The man had resources at his disposal that she certainly didn’t have.

All she needed to do, once she located him, Miranda thought, was to appeal to his sense of justice or humanity, or whatever it took to get him to agree to look for Lily’s mother.

Smiling, she hugged Lily a little harder.

Chapter Three

Because she didn't want to risk possibly getting the motorcycle officer in any sort of trouble by going to the precinct and asking about him, Miranda spent the rest of that evening and part of the night reviewing her viable options.

By the next morning, Miranda decided that her best course of action was to literally track down the officer. That meant driving by the overpass where he'd been yesterday. She could only hope that he'd be there, waiting to ticket someone going over the speed limit.

But when she swung by the area that afternoon, after her shift was over, the police officer wasn't there.

Disappointed, Miranda had to concede that not finding him there stood to reason. If an officer frequented the same spot day after day, word would quickly spread and drivers would either avoid the area altogether or at the very least be extra cautious about observing the speed limit.

Still, as she drove slowly by the overpass, Miranda wondered how far away the police officer could be. Unless he had been relocated, there must be a certain radius he had to adhere to, so as not to cross into another cop's territory, right?

Giving herself a fifteen-minute time limit to find him, Miranda drove up one street and down another. She knew she was attempting to second-guess a man she knew absolutely nothing about, but at the moment she couldn't think of an alternative.

Fifteen minutes later Miranda sighed. The time was up and she still hadn't found the officer. She didn't want to be too late getting to the women's shelter. She knew that Lily's mother still hadn't shown up—she'd called Amelia to check—and the little girl would be devastated if she didn't come to see her as she'd promised.

She had to go, Miranda thought. Maybe she'd come across the traffic cop tomorrow.

Slowing down, Miranda did a three-point turn in order to head toward the street that would ultimately take her to the shelter.

As she approached the red light at an intersection, a fleeting glint from the left caught her attention. The setting sun was reflecting off some sort of metal.

Miranda turned her head in that direction, and found the sun was hitting the handlebars of a motorcycle.

A police motorcycle.

His motorcycle.

Although the officer was wearing a helmet, and virtually all police motorcycles in Bedford looked alike, something told her that this particular officer was the one who had pulled her over yesterday. Pulled her over and didn't give her a ticket. Miranda could feel it in her gut.

When the light turned green, instead of driving straight ahead, she deliberately eased her car to the left, into the next lane. Far enough to allow her to make a left-hand turn.

As she did so, she rolled down her window and honked her horn twice. Getting the officer's attention, she waved her hand at the man, indicating that she wanted him to make a U-turn and follow her. She then mentally crossed her fingers that she hadn't accidentally made a mistake, and that this was the same officer she'd interacted with yesterday.

* * *

Always alert when he was on the job, Colin tensed when he heard the driver honking. Seeing an arm come out of the driver's window, waving to get his attention, he bit off a curse. Was the woman taunting him? Or did she actually want to get a ticket?

And then, as he looked closer, he realized that it was the same car he'd pulled over yesterday. The one driven by that petite blonde with the really deep blue eyes.

The one who had that birthday cake on the passenger seat.

What was she doing here? Was she deliberately trying to press her luck? Because if she was, she was in for a surprise.

Her luck had just run out, he thought.

Biting off a few choice words under his breath, Colin made a U-turn and took off after her.

Less than thirty seconds later, he realized that she wasn't going anywhere. The woman with the soulful doe eyes had pulled over to the curb.

Something was definitely off, Colin thought as he brought his motorcycle to a halt behind her vehicle.

Training from his days on the force in Los Angeles had Colin approaching the car with caution. Every police officer knew that the first thirty seconds after a vehicle was pulled over were the most dangerous ones. If something bad was going to happen, it usually took place within that space of time.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the pulled-over driver was harmless. It was that one other time that turned out to be fatal.

Although he had volunteered for this detail, choosing to patrol the city streets on a motorcycle over riding around in a squad car with a partner, he was not unaware of the risk that came with the job. A risk that always had his adrenaline flowing and his breath backing up in his lungs for that short time that it took for him to dismount and approach the offending driver's vehicle.

If he had a partner, there would be someone close by who had his back. However, Owens, his last partner, had been killed on the job, and although Colin never said anything to anyone about it, that had weighed really heavily on him, and still did. After that tragic incident, he operated alone. Patrolling alone meant he had to watch out only for himself. He liked it that way.

The second he peered into the passenger window and saw the driver, he knew that he was facing another kind of danger entirely.

No one was going to die today, but it was still a risk.

Miranda rolled down the passenger window and leaned toward him. "Hi. I wasn't speeding this time," she said, greeting him with a cheerful smile and a chipper demeanor he found almost annoyingly suspicious.

He scowled at her. "No, you were just executing a very strange turn."

"I had to," Miranda explained. "If I went straight and turned at the next light, by the time I came back, I was afraid that you'd be gone."

Only if I'd been lucky, Colin thought.

Just what was this woman's game? "And that would have been a problem because...?"

She never missed a beat. "Because I had to talk to you."

The idea of just turning away and getting back on his motorcycle was exceedingly tempting, but for some reason he couldn't quite put his finger on, Colin decided to hear this overly upbeat woman out.

"You are persistent, aren't you?" he retorted.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Miranda did her best to try to get the officer to lighten up a little and smile.

His stoic expression never changed. "It is from where I'm standing." He'd glimpsed her driver's license yesterday and tried to recall the name he'd seen on it. Maybe if he made this personal, he'd succeed in scaring her off. "What do you want, Miriam?"

"Miranda," she corrected, still sounding annoyingly cheerful. "That's okay, a lot of people get my name wrong at first. It takes getting used to."

"I have no intention of getting used to it," he informed her. Or you.

As far as he was concerned, the woman was really pushing her luck.

"Look, I let you off with a warning yesterday," he reminded her. "Would you like me to rescind that warning and give you a ticket?"

Colin was fairly confident that the threat of a ticket would be enough to make her back off.

"No. That was very nice of you yesterday. That's the reason I came looking for you today."

She wasn't making any sense. And then he remembered what she'd said yesterday about asking him to pay a visit to some ward at the hospital.

That's what this was about, he decided. Something about sick children. Well, he was not about to get roped into anything. Who knew what this woman's ultimate game really was?

"Look, I already told you," he retorted. "I'm not the type to come see kids in a hospital. I don't like hospitals."

Rather than look disappointed as he'd expected her to, the woman nodded. "A lot of people don't," she agreed.

Okay, she was obviously stalking him, and this was over. "Well then, have a nice day," Colin told her curtly, and then turned to walk back to his motorcycle.

"I'm not here about the hospital," Miranda called after him. "Although I'd like to revisit that subject at a later time."

Colin stopped walking. The woman had to be one of the pushiest people he'd ever encountered, not to mention she had a hell of a lot of nerve.

Against his better judgment, he found himself turning around again to face her. "And just what are you 'here' about?" he asked.

There was absolutely nothing friendly in his voice that invited her to talk. But she did anyway.

"That little girl I told you about?" Miranda began, feeling as if she was picking her way through a minefield that could blow up on her at any moment. "The one with your aunt's name," she reminded him, hoping that would get the officer to listen, and buy her a little more time.

"Lily," he repeated, all but growling the name. "What about her?" he asked grudgingly.

He wasn't a curious man by any stretch of the imagination, but there was something about this overly eager woman that had him wondering just where she was taking this.

"Lily's mother is missing," she told him, never taking her eyes off his face.

Rather than show some sort of reaction to what she'd just said, his expression never changed. He looked, Miranda thought, as if she'd just given him a bland weather report.

She began to wonder what had damaged the man to this extent.

"So go to the precinct and report it," Colin told her. "That's the standard procedure."

"The director at the shelter already did that," Miranda answered.

"All right, then it's taken care of." What more did she expect him to do? Colin wondered irritably as he began to walk away again.

"No, it isn't," Miranda insisted, stepping out of her car and moving quickly between him and his motorcycle. "The officer who took down the information said that maybe Lily's mother took off. He said a lot of women in her situation feel overwhelmed and just leave. He said that maybe she'd come to her senses in a few days and return for her daughter."

"Okay, you have your answer," Colin said, moving around this human roadblock.

Again Miranda shifted quickly so he couldn't get to his motorcycle. She ignored the dark look he gave her. She wasn't about to give up. This was important. Lily was depending on her to do everything she could to find her mother.

"But what if she doesn't?" Miranda asked. "What if she didn't take off? What if something's happened to Lily's mother and that's why she never came back to the shelter?"

He felt as if this doe-eyed blonde was boxing him in. "That's life," he said, exasperated.

"There's a little eight-year-old girl at the shelter waiting for her mommy to come back," Miranda told him with feeling. "I can't just tell her 'that's life.'"

Taking hold of Miranda's shoulders, he moved her firmly out of his way and finally reached his motorcycle. "Tell her whatever you like."

Miranda raised her voice so that he could hear her above the sound of the cars going by. "I'd like to tell her that this nice police officer is trying to find her mommy."

Colin turned sharply on his heel and glared at this woman who refused to take a hint. "Look, lady—"

"Miranda," she prompted.

"Miranda," Colin echoed between gritted teeth. "You are a royal pain, you know that?"

Miranda had always tried to glean something positive out of every situation, no matter how bleak it might appear. "Does that mean you'll look for her?" she asked hopefully.

Colin blew out an angry breath. "That means you're a royal pain," he repeated.

With nothing to lose, Miranda climbed out on a limb. "Please? I can give you a description of Lily's mother." And then she thought of something even better. "And if you come with me, I can get you a picture of her that'll be useful."

He had a feeling that this woman wasn't going to give up unless he agreed to help her. Although it irritated him beyond description, there was a very small part of him that had to admit he admired her tenacity.

Still, he gave getting her to back off one more try. "What will be useful is if you get out of my way and let me do my job."

Miranda didn't budge. "Isn't part of your job finding people who have gone missing?"

"She's not missing if she left of her own accord and just decided to keep on going," he told the blonde, enunciating every word.

"But we don't know that she decided to keep on going. She did leave the shelter to go look for work," Miranda told him.

"That's what the woman said," Colin countered impatiently.

"No, that's what she did," Miranda stressed. "Gina Hayden has an eight-year-old daughter. She wouldn't just leave her like that."

"How do you know that?" Colin challenged. The woman lived in a cotton candy world. Didn't she realize that the real world wasn't like that? "Lots of people say one thing and do another. And lots of people with families just walk out on them and never come back."

Miranda watched him for a long moment. So long that he thought she'd finally given up trying to wear him down. And then she spoke and blew that theory to pieces.

"Who left you?" she asked quietly.

"You, I hope," he snapped, turning back to face his motorcycle.

He sighed as she sashayed in front of him yet again. This was beginning to feel like some never-ending dance.

"No, you're not talking about me," Miranda told him. "You're talking about someone else. I can see it in your eyes. Someone walked out on you, probably when you were a kid. So you know what that feels like," she stressed.

He needed this like he needed a hole in the head. "Look, lady—"

"Miranda," she corrected again.

He ignored that. "You can take your amateur psychobabble, get back in your car and drive away before I haul you in for harassing a police officer."

Was that what he thought this was?

She had to get through to him. Something in her heart told her that he'd find Gina, She just needed him to take this seriously.

"I'm not harassing you—"

He almost laughed out loud. "You want to bet?"

Miranda pushed on. “I’m just asking you to go out of your way a little and maybe make a little girl very happy. If her mother doesn’t turn up, Lily’s going to be sent to social services and placed in a foster home. The only reason she hasn’t been taken there already is that the director of the shelter agreed with me about waiting for her mom to come back. The director bought us a little time.” And that time was running out, Miranda added silently.

“The kid can still be taken away,” Colin pointed out. “Her mother abandoned her.”

Why couldn’t she get through to this officer? “Not if something happened to her and she’s unable to get back.”

Colin sighed. He knew he should just get on his motorcycle and ride away from this woman. For the life of him, he didn’t know why he was allowing himself to get involved in this.

“Did you call all the hospitals?”

She nodded. “All of them. There’s no record of anyone fitting Gina’s description coming in on her own or being brought in.”

So what more did this woman want him to do? “Well then—”

“But there could be other reasons she hasn’t come back,” she insisted. “Gina could have been abducted, or worse.” Miranda looked at him with eyes that were pleading with him to do something.

Colin shook his head. “I should have given you that ticket yesterday,” he told her gruffly.

He was weakening; she could just feel it. “But you didn’t because you’re a good man.”

“No, because I should have had my head examined,” he grumbled. “All right,” he relented, taking out his ticket book and flipping to an empty page.

Miranda’s eyes widened. “You’re writing me a ticket?” she asked.

“No, I’m taking down this woman’s description. You said you’d give it to me. Now, what is it?” Colin demanded.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked.

“I didn’t.” He could feel her looking at him. Swallowing a couple choice words, he said, “Officer Colin Kirby.”

“Thank you, Officer Colin Kirby.”

Maybe he was losing his mind, but he could swear he could feel her smile.

“The description?” he demanded.

Miranda lost no time in giving it to him.

Chapter Four

"Okay," Colin said, closing his ticket book and putting it away. "I'll check with the other officer your director talked to. What's his name or badge number?" he asked.

Miranda shook her head. She hadn't thought to ask for that information when the director had given her an update. "I'm afraid Amelia didn't mention either one."

Colin looked at her. The name meant nothing to him. "Amelia?"

"Amelia Sellers," Miranda specified. "That's the shelter's director. She didn't give me the officer's name, but seemed pretty upset that he wasn't taking the situation seriously."

Colin read between the lines. He assumed that the officer the shelter director had talked to hadn't told her that he would get back to her. Not that he blamed the man.

"I take it this Amelia isn't as pushy as you," he commented.

Miranda wasn't exactly happy with his description, but the situation was far too important for her to get sidelined by something so petty.

"Actually, she can be very forceful. But the officer taking down the information really didn't seem to think that Gina was missing," Miranda said.

She was looking at him with the kind of hopeful eyes that made men seriously consider leaping tall buildings in a single bound and bending steel with their bare hands in an attempt to impress her.

If he was going to interact with this woman for any length of time, he was going to have to remember to avoid looking into her eyes, Colin told himself. They were far too distracting.

"I bet you were prom queen, weren't you?" he asked.

The question came out of the blue and caught her completely off guard. It took Miranda a moment to collect herself and answer, "Actually, I didn't go to the prom."

"No one asked you?" He found that rather hard to believe. She struck him as the epitome of a cheerleader. Was she pulling his leg?

Miranda didn't answer his question directly. She actually had been asked, just hadn't said yes.

"I had a scheduling problem," she said vaguely. "The prom interfered with my volunteer work."

"In high school?" Colin asked incredulously.

"You look surprised," she noted, then told him, "People in high school volunteer for things." At least, the people she'd kept company with had.

Shrugging, he said, "If you say so." He'd never concerned himself with social activities, even back then, nor did he involve himself with any kind of volunteer work. Most of his life he'd been a loner.

Securing the ticket book in his back pocket, he told her, "I'll see what I can find out."

"Don't you want the phone number at the shelter?"

He caught himself thinking fleetingly that he'd rather have her number. The next second he deliberately pushed the thought away. If he had her number, that might very well lead to complications, which was the very last thing he wanted. He supposed that obtaining the shelter's number was innocuous enough. Most likely if he used it he'd wind up speaking to the director.

"Right," Colin answered, doing his best to exercise patience. "So what is it?"

Miranda gave him the number to the shelter's landline, then waited for him to take out the ticket book again so he could jot it down.

Sensing what she wanted, he did just that. As he put the book away a second time he heard her asking, "Aren't you going to follow me to the shelter?"

It just didn't end with her, did it? he thought, exasperated. "Why would I want to do that?"

"To see Gina's picture," she reminded him. "I told you that there's one at the shelter. Lily has it."

He looked at her blankly for a split second until the information clicked into place. "Lily. Right, the little girl."

For a moment, he thought about telling her—again—that this wasn't something he did. His main sphere of expertise was keeping the flow of traffic going at a reasonable rate.

There were patrol officers who took this kind of information down, as well as detectives back at the precinct who specialized in missing persons. But he had no desire to get into all that with her. It would just lead to another prolonged debate.

Besides, it wasn't as if leaving the area was tantamount to abandoning a hub of vehicular infractions and crimes. And how long would following her to the shelter and getting that photograph of the runaway mother take, anyway?

Making no effort to suppress the sigh that escaped his lips, he said, "Okay, lead the way."

The officer's answer surprised her. She'd expected more resistance from him. Finally!

Her mouth curved. "So then, you are going to follow me?"

The woman had a magnetic, not to mention hypnotic, smile. He forced himself to look away.

"That's what 'lead the way' usually means," he answered shortly.

"I know that," she acknowledged. "It's just that I realize I'm asking you to go above and beyond the call of duty."

And yet here you are asking me, he thought, irritated. Colin was beginning to think that the woman could just go on talking indefinitely. He, on the other hand, wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

"Just get in your car and drive, Miranda," he instructed gruffly.

Her mouth quirked in another smile that made him think of the first ray of sunshine coming out after a storm. "You remembered."

"Yeah," Colin said shortly. He wasn't about to tell her that, like it or not—and he didn't—this fleeting contact with her had already left a definite imprint on his brain. "Well?" he prodded, when she continued standing there. "I don't have all day."

"Right."

The next moment she was hurrying back to her vehicle. Getting in, she started up the engine mindful of the fact that she had to be careful to observe all the rules. She had no doubt that if she exceeded the speed limit—and there seemed to be a different one posted on each long block—the officer behind her wouldn't hesitate to give her a ticket this time.

He'd probably see it as a reward for humoring her, Miranda thought.

But it didn't matter. She'd gotten him to agree, however grudgingly, to try to find Lily's mother, and that was all that did matter.

The shelter wasn't far away. Parking near the entrance, she got out of her car and stood beside it, waiting for the officer to pull into the parking lot.

When he did, he found a spot several rows away from her.

She watched him stride toward her. The dark-haired officer was at least six-one, maybe a little taller, and moved like one of those strong, silent heroes straight out of the Old West. She sincerely hoped that he would turn out to be Lily's hero.

"You've got ten minutes," Colin told her the moment he reached her.

He expected her to protest being issued a time limit. But she surprised him by saying, "Then I'd better make the most of it. Lily will probably be in the common area," she added. "That's where she watches for me to arrive."

"You come every day?" he questioned. Didn't this woman have a social life? He would have expected someone who looked the way she did to have a very busy one.

"I come here four, sometimes five days a week," she told him matter-of-factly. "Other days I work at the animal shelter, exercising the dogs."

Nobody did that much volunteering, he thought, opening the door and holding it for her. She had to be putting him on.

"What do you do when you're not earning your merit badges?" he asked sarcastically.

"Sleep," she answered, without missing a beat.

She sounded serious, but he still wasn't sure if he was buying this saint act. He was about to ask the woman if her halo was on too tight, cutting off the circulation to her brain, but he never got the chance. She'd turned away from him, her attention shifting to the little blonde girl who was charging toward her.

"There she is," Miranda declared, opening her arms just in time.

The next second she was closing them around the pint-size dynamo, who appeared to be hugging her for all she was worth.

"Did you find her?" the little girl cried eagerly, her high-pitched voice partially muffled against Miranda's hip. "Did you find my mommy?"

"Not yet, darling," Miranda answered.

Slowly, she moved the little girl back just far enough to be able to see the man she'd brought with her. "But this nice officer—" she nodded toward Colin "—is going to help us find her."

Colin noted that the firebrand who had dragged him here hadn't used the word try. She'd gone straight to the word help, making it sound as if it would be just a matter of time before he located this missing mother who might or might not have taken off for parts unknown of her own free will.

He didn't like being tied to promises he had absolutely no control over, nor did he like deceiving people into thinking he could deliver on goods that he had no way of knowing he could even locate.

But when he began to say as much to the little girl, he found himself looking down into incredible blue eyes that were brimming with more hope than he recalled seeing in a long, long time.

How could this kid exist in a place like this and still have hope? he wondered.

"Are you going to find her?" Lily asked, all four feet of her practically vibrating with excitement and anticipation. "Are you going to find my mommy?"

"I'm—" He started to tell her that he would do what he could, because he wasn't in the habit of lying, not to anyone. Not even to children, who usually fell beneath his radar.

"Officer Kirby is going to need to see that picture you have of you and your mommy," Miranda said, cutting into what she was afraid the man was about to tell the little girl. "Can you go get it for me, Lily?"

The little girl bobbed her head up and down enthusiastically. "I'll be right back," she stated, and took off.

"I can't promise her I'll find her mother," Colin said in a no-nonsense voice.

"Maybe you could try," Miranda suggested. When she saw his expression darken, she tried to make him see it from Lily's side. "Everyone needs something to hang on to," she pointed out.

Colin looked totally unconvinced. "Hanging on to a lie doesn't help," he told her.

"It won't be a lie—if you find Gina," Miranda countered.

He couldn't believe she'd just said that. The woman obviously had her head in the clouds. "Does your plane ever land?" he asked.

"Occasionally," she allowed, and then, smiling, she added, "To refuel."

Colin was about to say something about the danger of crashing and burning if she wasn't careful, but just then Lily returned, burrowing in between them. The little girl was clutching a five-by-seven, cheaply framed photograph against her small chest.

Planting herself squarely in front of the police officer, she held out the picture for him to see. It was recent, by the looks of it, he judged. The little girl appeared the same in it and she was wearing the dress she had on now.

He caught himself wondering if it was her only dress, which surprised him. Thoughts like that didn't usually occur to him.

"That's us. Me and my mommy," Lily told him proudly. She held the framed photograph up higher so he could see it better. "Miranda says she's pretty," the little girl added. And then her smile faded as she asked, "You're not going to lose the picture, are you? It's the only one I've got."

Colin paused, looking at the small, worried face. “Tell you what,” he said, pulling his cell phone out of his breast pocket. “Why don’t I take a picture of your photo with my phone?” he suggested. “That way I’ll have a copy to show around so I can find your mother, and you get to keep that picture for yourself.”

He was rewarded with a huge smile that took up Lily’s entire face. “That’s a good idea,” she told him. Her eyes were sparkling as she added, “You’re really smart.”

He was about to dismiss that assessment, flattering though it was, when he heard Miranda tell the little girl, “He’s a police officer,” as if the one automatically implied the other.

“Just seemed like a simple solution,” Colin told the little girl evasively. “Now hold up the picture,” he said to her, wanting to move on to another topic.

Lily did as he asked, holding the framed photograph as high as she could so that he had an unobstructed view. The moment he snapped the picture with the camera app on his phone and, after looking at the screen, pronounced it “Good,” he suddenly felt small arms encircling his waist just below his belt and holstered weapon.

“Thank you!” Lily cried. “And thank you for looking for my mommy.”

He was about to say that “looking” didn’t necessarily mean finding, but before he did, something made him glance in Miranda’s direction.

She was moving her head slowly from side to side, silently indicating that she knew exactly what he was about to say to the little girl, and imploring him not to do so.

Colin blew out his breath impatiently, then compromised and told the little girl, who still had her arms around him, “I’ll do my best, Lily.”

“You’ll find her,” she declared. “I know you will.” Lily said it with the kind of unshakable belief that only the very young were blessed with.

“Lily, honey,” Miranda prompted, “you need to let go of Officer Kirby so he can get started looking for your mommy.”

“Oh.”

He was surprised and maybe just a bit charmed, he discovered, to hear the little girl giggle.

“I’m sorry,” she said, releasing him. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

Again he wanted to tell her that just because he’d promised to look for her mother didn’t mean that he was going to be able to find her.

Maybe it was because Miranda was standing so close to him, or maybe it was all that hope he saw shining in the little girl’s blue eyes, but the words he was about to say froze on his tongue, unable to exit. He couldn’t bring himself to be the one to force Lily to face up to reality and all the ugliness that came with it.

So all he did was mumble, “Yeah,” and then turn on his heel and begin striding toward the shelter’s exit—and freedom.

It wasn’t until he was way past the front door and standing outside, dragging in air to clear his head, that he realized the woman who had roped him into this was right behind him.

Now what?

Was she going to try to get him to pinkie-swear that he was going to come through on that half promise he’d been forced to make?

“Look, I’ll do what I can,” he said, before she could open her mouth to say a word.

To his surprise, the woman who was quickly becoming his main source of irritation nodded as she smiled at him. “I know. That’s all anyone can ask.”

No, Colin thought, as he mounted his motorcycle. The exasperating blonde was asking him for a hell of a lot more than that.

The thing that he really couldn’t understand, he realized as he rode away, was that for some reason Miranda Steele was making him want to deliver on that vague nonpromise he’d just made to that little girl.

Chapter Five

He absolutely hated asking anyone for anything, even if it involved something in the line of duty. If he didn't ask, Colin felt that there was no chance of his being turned down. There was also the fact that if he didn't ask someone to do something for him, then he wouldn't owe anyone a favor in return.

Again he found himself wishing he had never pulled Miranda over to give her a ticket in the first place. If he hadn't done that, then he wouldn't be faced with the dilemma he was now looking at.

It was the end of his shift and Colin was tempted to just clock out and go home. But despite his desire to divorce himself from the situation, his mind kept conjuring up images of that little girl's small, sad face looking up at him as if he was the answer to all her prayers.

No one had ever looked at him like that before.

It was all that woman's fault, Colin thought grudgingly.

Miranda.

Who named their kid Miranda these days, anyway? he wondered irritably.

It was late, Colin thought as he walked into the locker room. Too late to really start anything today. To assuage his conscience, he decided to come in earlier tomorrow and maybe nose around, see if anyone had any information pertaining to a woman who matched this Gina Hayden's description.

After opening his locker, Colin took out his civilian clothes and began changing into them. He was tired and he'd be able to think more clearly tomorrow morning when he—

"The poor woman was lying there, slumped over by the Dumpster and hardly breathing. I thought she was dead. Really not the kind of thing you'd expect to see around here."

Colin stopped tucking his shirt into his jeans. The conversation that was coming from the row of lockers directly behind his caught his attention. He listened more closely.

"Lucky thing you found her when you did, Moran," a second, deeper voice commented. "Why did you go in that alley, anyway?"

Colin heard a locker door being closed before "Moran" answered the other officer. "I saw two kids running out of there. They looked pretty spooked."

"You think they were the ones who assaulted her?" the other patrol officer asked.

A second locker was closed. The officers sounded as if they were about to leave.

"There was no blood on either one of them," Moran was saying, "and frankly, they looked too scared to have beaten her that way. To be on the safe side, I snapped a picture of them as they took off. They ran into a building across the way. Shouldn't be all that hard locating them if I need to."

Colin closed his locker. What were the odds? he wondered.

At the very least, he needed to check this out.

Making his way to the next set of lockers, he was just in time to catch the two officers before they left the locker room.

"What happened to the woman?" Colin asked.

Officer Bob Moran looked up at him, surprised by the question. They knew one another vaguely by sight, but that was where it ended. They'd certainly never talked shop before.

"I called a bus for her," Moran answered. "The paramedics took her to Mercy General."

"Did you go with her?" Colin inquired.

Moran looked slightly uncomfortable. "No. It was the end of my shift and she was unconscious. I figured she'd be more up to giving me a statement tomorrow morning."

"What happened to her?" Colin pressed.

The fact that he was asking questions seemed to surprise the other two officers. Moran exchanged glances with Pete Morales, the second policeman, before answering. "Looked to me like someone stole her purse. I couldn't find any ID on her—or a wallet."

Colin took out his cell phone and flipped to the picture he'd taken of the photograph Lily had held up for him.

He turned his cell toward Moran. "This her?"

Bushy eyebrows rose high enough to almost meet a receding hairline. Moran appeared stunned. "Yeah, that's her, minus the swollen lip and the bruises." And then he looked at Colin. "You know her?"

He put his phone away. "No."

When he didn't volunteer anything further, curiosity had Moran asking, "Then why do you have her picture?"

Colin scowled. Granted, this wasn't exactly personal, but he still didn't like being put in the position where he had to elaborate. He preferred keeping to himself in general and answering questions only when he had no other choice.

But he didn't see a way out without arousing even more questions. Pausing for a moment, he finally said, "The woman was reported missing from a homeless shelter."

"That her little girl with her?" Morales asked, his demeanor softening as he looked at the child holding up the framed photograph.

"Yeah," Colin answered shortly. "Thanks for the information." Without any further exchange, he began walking away.

"You going to see her?" Moran called after him.

Colin didn't stop to turn around when he replied, "That was the idea."

"I can go with you," Moran volunteered, raising his voice.

Colin almost asked why, but supposed the other man's conscience had gotten the better of him. Or maybe Moran just wanted the credit. In either case, Colin didn't care.

"You've done enough. I'll take it from here." He kept on going, then slowed down long enough to throw the word thanks over his shoulder before he left the locker area.

He heard a somewhat confused "Don't mention it" in response.

Colin just kept on walking.

* * *

The last person in the world Miranda expected to see walking into the women's shelter that evening was the motorcycle officer she'd managed to talk into looking for Lily's missing mother.

Ordinarily, Miranda would have left by now, but she'd stayed at the shelter today to try to bolster Lily's spirits. Despite her normally upbeat, cheerful nature, it was obvious that the little girl was sincerely worried about her mother. The fact that several of the other children there had told her that her mother had "run away" and abandoned her didn't help any. Lily refused to listen to them.

"My mommy wouldn't leave me!" she'd cried. "She loves me!" The little girl was convinced that something had to have happened to her mom, preventing her from returning.

Miranda had stayed at the shelter until she'd finally managed to calm Lily down and get her to fall asleep.

She was just leaving when she saw the officer coming in.

One look at Colin's grim face had her thinking the worst—and fervently hoping she was wrong.

It was obvious that he didn't see her when he walked in. Miranda cut across the common area like a shot, placing herself in his path.

Trying to brace herself for whatever he had to say, she didn't bother with any small talk or preliminary chitchat. "You found her," she said breathlessly, willing him to say something positive.

Colin hadn't been sure Miranda would still be here, but she managed to surprise him by materializing out of nowhere.

"Yeah, I found her."

Miranda immediately felt her heart shoot up into her throat, making it almost impossible for her to breathe.

How was she going to tell Lily that her mother was dead?

Her mind scrambled, searching for words, for solutions. Maybe she could take Lily in as a foster parent, or maybe—

The woman standing in front of him almost turned white. That was not the sort of reaction he was expecting from her.

She also wasn't saying anything, another surprise, he thought.

"Don't you want to know where she is?" he finally asked.

The startlingly blue eyes widened more than he thought was humanly possible. "You mean she's alive?" Miranda cried.

"Well, yeah," he answered, surprised she was asking that. "If she was dead, I would have led with that."

"Dead? Somebody's dead?" an adolescent boy standing within earshot asked, instantly alert.

"Every single nerve in my body, for openers, Edward." Miranda blew out a shaky breath. "That's what I get for jumping to conclusions." She turned toward the police officer, who had just become her hero. Suddenly, tears were filling her eyes, spilling out and rolling down her cheeks. "You really found her," she whispered, clearly choked up.

"We've established that," Colin retorted. And then he looked at her more closely and realized what was going on. "Hey, are you crying?" he demanded, stunned.

Miranda pressed her lips together as she nodded. "Miracles make me do that," she told him hoarsely.

He wasn't sure if the miracle she was referring to was that he had found Lily's mother, or that he had bothered to look in the first place. Either way, he knew he wasn't about to ask her to elaborate. He was determined to keep communication between them to an absolute minimum—or as close to that as possible.

Digging into his back pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and pushed it into her hand. "You're getting messy," he muttered.

Taking the handkerchief, Miranda smiled at him.

I see through you, Officer Kirby. You're not the big, bad wolf you pretend to be. You're a kind man under all that bluster.

Wiping her eyes, she asked, "What happened to her?"

He'd gone to the hospital to get as much information as he could before coming to the shelter. He knew there would be questions and he wasn't about to turn up unprepared.

Drawing her toward an alcove, he told Miranda, "From the looks of it, someone tried to rob her. When she held on to her purse, the thug decided to teach her a lesson. Doctor said she was pretty badly beaten. She was unconscious when they first brought her in," he added.

"But she's conscious now." It was half a question, half an assumption.

The woman had been just coming around when he'd gone to see her. "Yeah."

"Which hospital is she in?" Miranda asked.

"The paramedics took her to the one closest to where they found her," he answered. "Mercy General."

Miranda nodded, absorbing the information. Lily. She had to tell Lily.

She started to head toward the back, where some of the beds were located, when she stopped suddenly and whirled back around to face Colin again. Hurrying over, she caught him completely by surprise by throwing her arms around him.

Startled, Colin's ingrained training immediately had him protecting himself and pushing the person in his space away. But that turned out to be harder than he'd anticipated. For a rather willowy, dainty-looking woman, Miranda had a grip worthy of a world-class wrestling champion.

The second she'd thrown her arms around him, she'd felt Colin stiffening. She was making him uncomfortable.

Loosening her hold, Miranda took a half step back. "Thank you," she said.

He'd never heard more emotion stuffed into two words in his life.

Colin deflected the tidal wave of feelings as best he could. "I'm a cop. That's just supposed to be part of my job."

The smile on her lips was a knowing one, as if she had his number—which was impossible, because they were practically strangers. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that his protest was falling on deaf ears.

"The key words being 'supposed to,'" she told him. "I didn't think you were going to look for her," Miranda admitted.

That made no sense. "Then why did you ask me to?" he asked.

Her face seemed to light up as she answered, "A girl can always hope." And then she grabbed his hand and said, "Come with me."

But Colin remained rooted to the spot, an immovable object. "Come with you where?"

"To tell Lily that you found her mother," she answered, tugging on his hand again.

But Colin still wouldn't budge an inch. "You can tell her."

Miranda was nothing if not stubborn. He had done the work and he deserved to get the credit, which in this case involved Lily's gratitude. "You found her. Lily is going to want to hear it from you. And then after you tell her, you can take us to the hospital to see Gina."

She had this all mapped out, didn't she? He didn't like being told what to do. "You're assuming a hell of a lot, aren't you?"

Miranda gazed up at him with what had to be the most innocent look he had ever seen. "So far, I've been right, haven't I?"

"Well, guess what? Your lucky streak is over," he informed her.

But just as he was about to break free and walk away, Colin heard a high-pitched squeal coming from the far side of the room. Looking in that direction, he saw a small figure with a flurry of blond hair charging toward him.

Obviously, someone had woken the little girl and told her he was here. She must have put the rest together on her own.

"You did it!" Lily cried. The next moment, she had wrapped herself around him like a human bungee cord. "You found her! You found my mommy, didn't you?" Tilting back her head so that she could look up at him, Lily gushed, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Utterly stunned, Colin looked at the woman standing behind Lily. "How?"

"It's not just the walls that have ears here," she told him, beaming just as hard as Lily. She nodded toward the cluster of children who had been steadily gathering around them as if that should answer his question.

"Can we go see her now?" Lily pleaded. She looked from her hero to Miranda and then back again. "Please, can we? Can we?" she asked, giving every indication that she intended to go on pleading until her request was granted.

Looking at the officer's expression, Miranda made a judgment call. The man looked far from eager to go with them and he had done enough.

"Officer Kirby has to go home now, Lily. But I'll take you," Miranda said, putting her hand on the little girl's shoulder.

"And I'll drive," Amelia told them, approaching from yet another side.

The director had been drawn by the sounds of the growing commotion and just possibly by her own pint-size informant. In any case, the woman appeared relieved and thrilled at the news.

"Officer Kirby found my mommy," Lily told the director excitedly.

"So I heard," Amelia replied. Nodding at Colin, she smiled her thanks. "All of us here at the shelter—especially Lily—really appreciate everything you've done, Officer Kirby," she told him.

Colin wanted to protest that he really hadn't done anything. He certainly hadn't gone out of his way to find Lily's mother. The information had literally fallen into his lap and all he had really done was follow up on it.

But something told him that the more he protested, the more gratitude he would wind up garnering. His protests would be interpreted as being modest rather than just the simple truth.

So he left it alone, saying nothing further on the subject.

Instead, he decided that going home could wait awhile longer.

Turning toward the director, he addressed her and the little girl who was jumping up and down at his side. "I'll lead the way to the hospital, since I know what floor Lily's mother is on."

He deliberately avoided looking at Miranda, sensing that if he did glance her way, he'd somehow wind up being roped into something else, and his quota for good deeds was filled for the month.

Possibly the year.

Chapter Six

"Wait!"

The order came from the head nurse sitting at the second-floor nurse's station.

When the three adults and child continued walking down the corridor, she hurried around her desk and into the hall to physically block their path.

Surprised, Miranda told the woman, "We're going to see Gina Hayden. We won't be long," she promised.

"Clearly," the nurse snapped, crossing her arms over her ample chest. "Visiting hours are done," she informed them in a voice that would have made a drill sergeant proud. "You can come back tomorrow."

Lily looked stricken. "But she's my mommy and we just found her," the little girl protested in distress.

"She'll still be here tomorrow," the woman told her, sounding detached. It was obvious she wanted them off the floor and wasn't about to budge.

Lily's lower lip trembled. "But—"

"Rules are rules, little girl," the nurse maintained stiffly.

Colin felt Lily tugging on his sleeve, mutely appealing to him for help. He made the mistake of looking down into her worried face.

Swallowing an oath, he took out his badge and held it up in front of the nurse so she couldn't miss seeing it. "But they can be bent this one time, can't they?" It wasn't a question.

The head nurse looked no friendlier than she had a moment ago, but she inclined her head and backed off—temporarily.

"Ten minutes, no longer. Ten minutes or I'll call security," she warned.

"No need," Miranda promised the woman. A small victory was better than none. Taking Lily's hand, she urged the little girl, "Let's hurry."

"She's in room 221," Colin told them gruffly.

They moved quickly. He followed at his own pace.

There were four beds in the room, two on either side. Lily's head practically whirled around as she scanned the room looking for her mother. Seeing her lying in the bed next to the window, she sprinted over.

"Mommy!" she cried happily, and then skidded to a stop as she took a closer look at the woman in the hospital bed.

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. Her mother was hooked up to two monitors as well as an IV. The monitors were making beeping noises.

The scene was clearly upsetting to the little girl, as were the bruises she saw along her mother's arms and face.

Inching closer, Lily asked in a hushed voice, "Did you fall down, Mommy?"

Gina turned her head and saw her daughter for the first time. Light came into the woman's eyes and she tried to open her arms so she could hug the little girl, but she was impeded by the various tubes attached to her.

"Oh, Lily-pad, I did. I tripped and fell down," Gina told her daughter.

Miranda squeezed the woman's hand lightly, letting Gina know that she understood she was lying for Lily's sake.

"We were all worried about you," she told her. "But Lily never gave up hope that we'd find you."

The expression on Gina's face reflected confusion and embarrassment. "I don't remember what happened," she admitted.

"That doesn't matter right now, darling," Amelia said in a soothing, comforting voice. "All that matters is that you're here and you're being taken care of."

"Officer Kirby found you for me," Lily told her mother excitedly. Taking Colin's hand, Lily pulled on it to bring him closer. "This is Officer Kirby, Mommy," she explained, showing off her brand-new champion to her mother.

Eyes that were the same shade of blue as Lily's looked up at him. They glinted with sheer appreciation. "Thank you."

"No thanks needed," Colin told her, then explained, "It's complicated."

Miranda suppressed a sigh. The man just couldn't accept gratitude, she thought. She wanted to call him out on it, but this definitely wasn't the moment for that.

"We're out of time," she told Lily, as well as Amelia and Colin. And then she explained to Gina, "We promised the nurse on duty to only stay for ten minutes because it's after hours."

"We'll come back tomorrow, Mommy," Lily promised her solemnly.

Miranda bit her bottom lip. She wouldn't be able to come by with Lily until after her shift at the hospital. She looked at the director, a mute request in her eyes.

Picking up the silent message, Amelia nodded obligingly. "See you then," she told Gina, then patted the young mother's hand. "Feel better, dear."

Colin waited for the three females to file out of the room before he started to leave himself. He almost didn't hear Gina say, "Thank you, Officer Kirby."

Again, he wanted to tell the woman that he hadn't been the one who had located her. But that would take time and the nurse at the station had given every indication that she would come swooping in the second their ten minutes were up. He didn't trust himself not to snap at the nurse, which would undoubtedly upset the little girl, and in his estimation, she had been through enough.

So he merely nodded in response to the woman's thanks and left the room.

"Mommy has to be more careful," Lily said authoritatively as she and the three adults with her headed toward the elevator.

Miranda looked at the little girl as they got on. It wasn't entirely clear to her if Lily actually believed what she was saying, or if she was saying it so as not to let the adults with her know that she knew something bad had happened to her mother.

In some ways, she felt that Lily was an innocent girl; in other ways, she seemed older than her years. Only children were often a mixture of both.

"That was a very nice thing you did," Miranda told Colin once they reached the ground floor and got off the elevator. When he stared at her blankly, she elaborated. "Getting the nurse to allow us to see Gina."

The officer said nothing. There was no indication that he had even heard her, except for his careless shrug.

The man was a very tough nut to crack. And she intended to crack him—but in a good way. Miranda smiled to herself. Whether Officer Kirby knew it or not, he had just become her next project.

They split up when they reached the hospital parking lot, with Miranda and Lily going back with Amelia, while Colin headed for his vehicle, a vintage two-door sport car that was a couple years older than he was.

"Goodbye, Officer Kirby!" Lily called after him. When he glanced over his shoulder in response to her parting words, Lily waved at him as hard as she could. It looked as if she was close to taking off the ground.

Colin nodded once, climbed into his car and drove off.

Lily insisted on standing there until she couldn't see him any longer.

"He's a hero," she told the two women when she finally turned around and got into the director's car.

"Yes, he is," Miranda agreed.

A very reluctant hero, she added silently.

* * *

"Hey, Kirby, there's someone here who's been waiting to see you for some time now," the desk sergeant told Colin when he came into the precinct and walked by the man's desk.

It was past the end of his shift and Colin was more than tired. It had been two days since he'd led that little safari of females into the hospital and he'd assumed—hoped, really—that Miranda was now a thing of the past.

But the moment the desk sergeant said there was someone waiting to see him, he knew in his gut that it had to be her. Granted, it could have easily been anyone else; Bedford wasn't exactly a minuscule city and it felt as if the population was growing every day. But somehow he just knew it had to be the woman he had made the fatal mistake of pulling over that day.

The annoyingly perky, pushy woman he just couldn't seem to get rid of. She was like a burr he couldn't shake loose.

"Where?" Colin growled.

"Need your eyes checked, Kirby?" the desk sergeant asked. "She's sitting right over there." He pointed to the bench situated against the wall fifteen feet away.

Reluctantly, Colin sighed and looked in the direction the desk sergeant was pointing.

Damn it, he thought.

It was her—and she was looking right at him. It was too late to make an escape.

He might as well find out what she wanted.

Striding over to the bench, he saw her rise to her feet. The woman appeared ready to pounce on him.

Now what?

Bracing himself for the worst, he skipped right over any kind of a formal greeting and asked, "Something else you want me to do?"

Just as sunny as ever, Miranda thought, more convinced than before that he needed her to turn him around. "No, actually, I brought something for you," she told him, hoping that would get rid of the scowl on his face.

It didn't.

He needed to stop her right there, Colin thought, instantly on guard. "I can't accept any gifts," he told her. "The department frowns on its officers taking any sort of gratuities in exchange for services rendered, either past, present or in the future."

He sounded so incredibly uptight, Miranda thought. They'd crossed paths not a moment too soon.

"This isn't a gratuity," she assured him, trying to put his fears to rest.

He wasn't about to stand here exchanging words with her. For one thing, she was far better equipped for a verbal battle than he was. For another, he didn't have time for this.

"Whatever you want to call it—gratuity, gift or bribe—I can't accept it." He concluded in a no-nonsense voice, thinking that would be the end of it.

He should have known better. The woman had shown him that, right or wrong, she wasn't one to back off.

And she was clearly not listening to him but was reaching into the large zippered bag she'd picked up from the bench. Extracting something from inside it, she held up what appeared to be an eleven-by-fourteen poster board for him to look at.

It was a drawing.

"Lily drew this just for you," Miranda told him. She pointed to the blue figure in the center of the page. It was twice as large as the four other figures present. "In case you don't recognize him, that's you."

And then she proceeded to point out the other people in the drawing. “That’s Lily, her mother in the hospital bed, Amelia, and that’s me.” Miranda indicated the figure in the corner, who was almost offstage, appearing to look on.

Colin couldn’t help staring at the central figure. “I’m a giant,” he commented, surprised that the little girl would portray him that way.

As if reading his mind, Miranda explained, “That’s how she sees you. You are a giant in her eyes. Heroes usually are,” she added.

The term made him uncomfortable. “I’m not a hero,” he retorted.

“I hate to break this to you, but you are to Lily,” she told him.

Colin continued looking at the drawing, still not taking it from her. His attention was drawn to the stick figure the little girl had drawn of Miranda.

“You could stand to gain some weight,” he observed, still not cracking a smile.

“That’s good,” she responded, as if they were having an actual serious conversation. “That means I get to indulge in my craving for mint chip ice cream.”

He glanced at her rather than the drawing, his eyes slowly running over her, taking in every curve, every detail.

“You don’t look as if you indulge in anything that’s nonessential,” he told her.

She laughed. It was a melodic sound he tried not to notice.

“You’d be surprised,” she told him. When she saw him look at her quizzically—most likely because she was thin—Miranda explained, “I do a lot of running around—at the hospital, at the women’s shelter and especially at the animal shelter.” They had her exercising the dogs, which meant that she was exercising, as well.

“Don’t you take any time off for yourself?” Colin asked, positive that she was putting him on.

Miranda smiled. The man just didn’t get it, did he? “The women’s shelter and animal shelter are my ‘time off’ for myself,” she stressed. “I like feeling that I’m helping out and doing something productive. It makes me feel good about myself,” she explained.

He still wasn’t completely convinced. “Did you ever hear the saying ‘Too good to be true’?”

She tried to suppress the grin that rose to her lips. “Are you saying that you think I’m good?”

“You’re missing the point of the rest of the saying,” he pointed out. Taking a breath, he decided that this meeting was over. “Anything else?” he asked her, impatience pulsing in his voice.

“Well, since you asked—have you thought any more about visiting my kids at the hospital?”

She called them ‘her’ kids, not just ‘the’ kids. Did she feel as if they were hers? he wondered incredulously.

He should never have asked if there was anything else. “No, I haven’t,” he answered, upbraiding himself.

Not about to be put off, Miranda asked, “Well, would you think about it? Please?” she added. “Christmas is getting closer.”

Why should that make a difference? Christmas had ceased to have meaning for him when he’d lost his mother.

“Happens every year at this time,” he answered.

Miranda gave it another try. “Well, like I told you, I think it would do them a lot of good. Their lives are really hard and they don’t have all that much to look forward to.”

“And my visiting would give them something to look forward to?” he asked sarcastically.

She never wavered. “Yes, it would.”

The woman just wasn’t going to give up. He didn’t like being made to feel guilty.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, only because he felt it was the one way to get her to cease and desist. And then he looked at his watch. “Don’t you have to be someplace, volunteering?”

“Actually, I do,” she said, slipping the straps of her bag over her shoulder. “I promised I’d come by the animal shelter. There’s this German shepherd that needs a foster home until she can be placed.”

The woman was a relentless do-gooder. “Right up your alley,” he cracked.

Miranda smiled at him. He saw the corners of her eyes crinkling. “Actually, it is.”

“Then you’d better get to it.”

“I will. Oh, don’t forget your picture,” she prompted. Picking up the poster board drawing, she forced it into his hands.

“Right,” he muttered, less than pleased.

He was still standing there, looking down at the drawing, as she hurried out the door.

Chapter Seven

Colin frowned. He needed to have his head examined. He obviously wasn't thinking clearly.

Or maybe at all.

Why else would he be out here, parked across the street from Bedford's no-kill animal shelter, waiting for that overachieving do-gooder to come out?

As far as he knew, he was free and clear, which meant that he could go on with his life without being subjected to any more taxing, annoying requests.

So why the hell was he here, willingly putting himself in that woman's path again? Why would he be setting himself up like this?

It wasn't as if he didn't know what Miranda was like. He'd learned that she was the kind of person who, if given an inch, wanted not just a mile but to turn it into an entire freeway.

Colin sighed. Knowing that, what was he doing out here?

Satisfying his own curiosity, he supposed.

A curiosity, he reminded himself, he hadn't even been aware of possessing a short while ago —not until life had thrown that woman into his path and she'd come charging at him like some kind of undersized, stampeding unicorn.

Damn it, go home, Kirby, he ordered himself, straightening up beside his vehicle. Go home before anyone mistakes you for some kind of stalker and calls someone from the department on you.

He'd talked himself out of being here and was just about to open his car door when he heard the sound of metal scraping on concrete across the street. A second later, he realized that the gates in front of the animal shelter were being opened.

Someone was coming out.

Colin's suspicions were confirmed a heartbeat later when he heard someone calling his name.

"Officer Kirby, is that you?"

He froze.

You should have been faster, he upbraided himself. Better yet, he shouldn't have been here to begin with.

Caught, he turned around, to see Miranda hurrying across the street toward him.

She wasn't alone.

She had a lumbering, overly excited German shepherd running with her. Miranda appeared to be hanging on to the leash for dear life. At first glance, it was difficult to say exactly who had who in tow.

Both woman and dog reached him before he had a chance to finish his thought.

Her four-footed companion suddenly reared up on its hind legs and came within an inch of planting a pair of powerful-looking front paws against his chest.

"You sure you can handle him?" Colin asked, far from pleased and moving back just in time to escape the encounter.

"Her," Miranda corrected, tugging harder on the leash. "It's a her."

That, in his opinion, was not the point. Whether the animal was too much for her was.

"Whatever." He never took his eyes off the dog. "You look like you've met your match," he told her as he took another step back.

"Down, Lola," Miranda ordered in an authoritative voice. The mountain of a dog immediately dropped to all four legs, resuming her initial position. "Good girl," Miranda praised, petting the German shepherd's head while continuing to maintain a firm hold on the leash with her other hand. Her attention shifted to Colin. "You're not afraid of a frisky puppy, are you, Officer?"

Colin continued eyeing the animal cautiously. "That all depends on whether or not that 'puppy' is bigger than I am."

"Don't let Lola scare you," Miranda told him. "She was just excited to see you." She petted the dog again. Lola seemed to curl into her hand. "I think she sees everyone as a potential master."

"Uh-huh." He wasn't all that sure he was buying this. Colin continued to regard the dog warily.

"Heel, Lola," she ordered, when the dog started to move in Colin's direction again. When Lola obeyed, Miranda looked at the police officer, wondering what he was doing here. This was not his usual patrolling area, and he was out of uniform. "Were you waiting for me, Officer Kirby?" she asked.

The expression on her face was nothing short of amused. A week ago, seeing an expression like that, seemingly at his expense, would have been enough for him to take offense, but for some reason now, he didn't.

Instead, he let it ride. Reaching into the back seat of his car, he took out the drawing she'd given him the other day at the precinct. "I came by to give you this."

Lola's ears perked up and the animal looked as if she was debating whether or not the drawing he was holding was something to eat.

Miranda pulled a little on the leash, drawing the dog back.

"That's not for you, Lola," she informed the eager German shepherd. Her eyes shifted back to the police officer. "Why are you giving it to me?" she asked. "Lily drew it for you. She wanted you to have it. It was her way of saying thank you."

Colin shrugged. "Yeah, well, I don't have anyplace to put it," he told her, still holding out the drawing.

He kept one eye on the German shepherd to make sure Lola didn't grab a chunk out of the poster board. He didn't want it, but there was no reason to let it be destroyed.

Holding the dog's leash tightly, Miranda made no effort to take the drawing from him. Instead, she looked at the tall, imposing police officer. The solemn expression in his eyes convinced her more than ever that the man needed fixing.

"You don't have any closets?"

"Of course I have closets," he retorted. What kind of question was that? Did she think he lived in a public park?

"Well, you could put the drawing in one of your closets," she suggested helpfully. "That is, if you don't want to hang it on your refrigerator."

Still not taking it from him, she glanced at the drawing. Thinking back, Miranda could remember producing something like that herself when she was younger than Lily. Hers had been of her parents and herself—and Daisy, her father's beloved Doberman. That had stayed on display on the fridge for almost a year.

"Most people put artwork like that on their refrigerator," she added, smiling encouragingly. This was all undoubtedly alien to him. "You must be new at this."

Colin furrowed his brow in concentration as he wondered what made this woman tick—and why she seemed to have singled him out like this. "I guess I'm new at a lot of things," he observed.

Her smile turned almost dazzling. "Hey, even God had a first day."

He thought of the last few days since he'd run into this sorceress. She made him behave in a manner that was completely foreign to his normal mode of operation. Exactly what was this secret power she seemed to have that caused him to act so out of character?

"Not like this," he murmured under his breath.

He heard Miranda laugh in response. The sound was light, breezy, reminding him of the spring wind that was still three months away.

For some reason, an image of bluebells in his mother's garden flashed through his mind, catching him completely by surprise. He hadn't thought of his mom's garden for more than twenty-two years.

He shook his head, as if to free himself of the memory and the wave of emotion that came with it. Colin felt as if he was getting all turned around.

"Is something wrong, Officer?" Miranda asked, concerned.

"You mean other than the fact that I should be home nursing a beer, instead of standing out here trying to make you take back this drawing?" Colin asked, exasperated.

"It's not my drawing to take," Miranda reminded him. "Lily wanted you to have it." And then she abruptly switched subjects. "Seriously? A beer?" she asked. "What about dinner?"

Colin stared at her. "Is this mothering-smothering thing of yours just something that spills out without warning, or do you have to summon it?" he asked.

She ignored his question. Instead, she made a quick judgment call.

"Tell you what," she said. "I owe you a dinner. Why don't you come on over to my place and I'll make it?"

"What?" he cried, dumbfounded. There was no way he could have heard her correctly.

"I'd offer to come over to your place and make dinner there—you know, familiar surroundings and all that to keep you from getting skittish—but I've got a feeling the only things in your refrigerator, now that we've established the fact that you have one, are probably half-empty cartons of ten-day-old Chinese takeout. Maybe eleven days."

He continued to stare at her, as close to being overwhelmed as he had ever been.

When she finally stopped talking for a moment, he jumped in and took advantage of it. "You done yet?"

"That depends," she answered, lifting her chin as if getting ready for a fight. "Are you coming?"

"No," he said flatly.

"Then I'm not done." Glancing at the dog by her side, she added, "I have a very persuasive companion right here who could help me make my argument. All things considered, I'd suggest that you avoid her attempts to convince you to see things my way and just agree to come along to my place."

Damn it, this was insane. But he could actually feel himself weakening. He really did need to have his head examined.

Colin put on the most solemn expression he had at his disposal. "You know, there're laws against kidnapping police officers."

Rather than back away, Miranda leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with humor. "Not if, ultimately, that police officer decides to come along willingly."

Then, as if on cue, Colin's stomach began to rumble and growl. Audibly.

Miranda smiled broadly. "I think your stomach is siding with Lola and me," she told him.

Colin scowled in response. She continued to hold her ground. He had to be crazy, but he found himself actually admiring her tenacity. If he had an iota of sense, he'd jump in his car and get the hell out of here.

But he didn't.

"That dog couldn't care less one way or another," he told her, thinking that might blow apart her argument and finally get her to back off.

She studied him for a long moment. Lola tugged on her leash, leaning forward as far as she could, but Miranda continued regarding the man before her, and seemed practically oblivious to the German shepherd. She was mulling over his response.

"You never had a pet when you were growing up, did you?" she asked Colin.

"Why would you say that?"

Miranda smiled. She had her answer. He hadn't told her she was wrong—which told her she was right.

"Because of what you just said," she murmured. "If you'd ever had one, you'd know that pets, especially dogs, do care about their humans."

He had her there, he thought. “I’m not her human,” Colin pointed out.

“No, but at least for now, I am, and I care about you,” she told him. “Lola picked up on that.”

That was all so wrong, he didn’t even know where to start.

“First of all, you said you were probably going to take a German shepherd home to give him—her—” he corrected, “a foster home. That means you’re taking this dog home for the first time. She doesn’t know a thing about you and she’s not really your dog yet,” he stressed. “And second of all—or maybe this should be first—” he said pointedly, “why the hell should you care if I have anything in my house to eat or not?”

Miranda never blinked once during what he considered to be his well-constructed argument. Instead, she looked at him, totally unfazed, and when he was done she asked, “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because we’re strangers, damn it,” he muttered in exasperation. “You don’t know me,” he added for good measure. Why didn’t this woman get that?

In a calm voice, she went on to quietly refute his argument.

“You pulled me over to give me a ticket, then didn’t after I explained why I went over the speed limit and where I was going.” She paused for a moment, then told him what she felt in her heart had been his crowning achievement. “And then when I told you that Lily’s mother was missing, you found her.”

He felt like he was hitting his head against a brick wall. No matter what he said, she kept turning it into something positive.

“That wasn’t my doing,” he told her, repeating what he’d said the other day. “That all happened by accident.”

Despite the fact that he had raised his voice, the woman just didn’t seem to hear his protest. Or if she did, she wasn’t listening. Instead, she went on to make her point.

“You came to the shelter to tell Lily her mother was at the hospital—when you didn’t have to—and then you went out of your way to go with us to the hospital—when you didn’t have to.”

“Damn it, you’re twisting things,” he shouted.

At the sound of his raised voice, Lola pulled forward, as if to protect her.

“Stay!” Miranda ordered, stilling the anxious dog. And then she looked at Colin. “Why are you so afraid of having people think of you as a good guy?”

“Because I’m not,” he insisted.

She inclined her head. “I guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree on that point,” she told him philosophically.

“We don’t have to do anything,” he retorted impatiently.

She smiled at him knowingly. “I think that you might see things differently on a full stomach. Here’s my address,” she told him, pausing to take a card out of her shoulder bag and handing it to him. “You might find it easier to just follow me,” she suggested.

“I might find it easier to just go home,” he contradicted.

About to cross back to her vehicle, Miranda stopped and sent him a smile that seemed to corkscrew right through his gut.

“No, you won’t.” She said it with such certainty, she stunned him. And then his stomach rumbled again. “See?” she said. “Your stomach agrees with me. Just get in your car and follow me. And after dinner, you’re free to go home. I promise.”

Heaven help him, she made it sound appealing. And he was hungry. Involved in a car chase this afternoon, he’d wound up skipping lunch, and his stomach was protesting being ignored for so long.

He shifted gears, going on the attack. “You know, it’s dangerous to hand out your address like that,” he told her.

Miranda smiled again, running her hand over Lola’s head and petting the dog. “I’m not worried,” she answered. “I have protection.”

Colin decided to keep his peace and made no comment in response. He'd already lost enough arguments today.

Besides, he was hungry.

Chapter Eight

Colin nearly turned his car around.

Twice.

However, each time, he wound up curbing his impulse and talking himself into continuing to follow Miranda. He knew that if he didn't show up at her place for that dinner she seemed so bent on making for him, she would show up at his precinct tomorrow just as sure as day followed night. Probably with some sort of picnic lunch or something like that.

That was the last thing he wanted or needed.

Colin muttered a few choice words under his breath and kept going.

He might as well get this over with, and then maybe the book would finally be closed: he had done a good deed in her eyes and she paid him back with a dinner she'd made for him—hopefully not poisoning him in the process.

Caught up in his thoughts, Colin missed the last right turn Miranda took.

Watching his rearview mirror, he backed his vehicle up slowly, then turned right. When he did, he saw that her car was halfway up the block in front of him. Idling.

Miranda was obviously waiting for him to catch up.

Once he came up behind her, she started driving again.

His gut told him that he'd been right. There was absolutely no way this woman would have allowed him to skip having this payback dinner with her.

Her house turned out to be two residential blocks farther on. It was a small, tidy-looking one-story structure that seemed to almost exude warmth.

He caught himself thinking that it suited her.

Miranda parked her vehicle in the driveway. He parked his at the curb. It allowed for a faster getaway if it wound up coming to that, he thought.

She got out of the car, then opened the passenger door for the dog she'd brought home. Lola jumped down onto the driveway and they both stood at the side of her vehicle, waiting for him to come up the front walk.

"Don't trust me?" Colin asked, just the slightest bit amused, when he reached her.

"We just wanted to welcome you, that's all," she told him, nodding toward the German shepherd, which had somehow become part of this impromptu dinner.

Leading the way, Miranda went up to her front door and unlocked it, then walked inside, still holding on to Lola's leash.

She threw a switch that was right next to the door. Light flooded the living room.

"Welcome back to your home, Lola," she cheerfully told the dog. After bending to remove the leash, she dropped it on the small table that was just a few feet beyond the entrance.

"She's been here before?" Colin asked. From what she'd said earlier, he thought Miranda was bringing the dog home with her for the first time.

"A couple of times," Miranda answered. "It was kind of a dry run to see how she fared in my house."

"And how did she?" he asked, shrugging out of his jacket as he walked into the house.

Miranda smiled. "Well. She fared well."

Colin was about to make a flippant comment in response, but he'd just glanced around and his attention had been completely absorbed by what he saw.

There was a Christmas tree in the center of the room. Not just a run-of-the-mill Christmas tree but one that looked to be at least ten feet tall. Overwhelming, the tree appeared to only be half-decorated.

The rest of the Christmas ornaments were scattered all over the room—in and out of their respective boxes—waiting to be hung up.

"It looks like a Christmas store exploded in here," he commented, scanning the room in total disbelief.

"I haven't had a chance to finish," Miranda explained. "I don't have much time left over every night to hang up decorations," she tossed over her shoulder as she made her way to the kitchen. "I'm usually pretty beat by that time."

Miranda was back in less than a minute with a dog bowl filled with fresh water and set it down in a corner by the coffee table.

"There you go, Lola, drink up," she told the animal. "Dinner will be coming soon."

Despite himself, Colin was surprised. "You've got a dog dish."

She paused for a moment to pet the dog's head. She viewed it as positive reinforcement. "Like I said, this isn't her first time here. And I believe in being prepared."

Obviously, he thought. Colin looked back down at the decorations that covered three-quarters of the living room floor space.

"Are these all your decorations?" he questioned incredulously. He'd seen Christmas trees in shopping centers with less ornaments on them than were scattered here.

"Well, if I'd stolen the decorations, it'd be pretty stupid of me to bring a police officer into my house to see them, wouldn't it?" she asked. Not waiting for a response, she told him, "Half these ornaments belonged to my parents. I've just been adding to the collection over the years."

"And the ten-foot tree?" Colin asked, nodding toward the towering tree. Most people opted for a smaller tree, if they had one at all. He couldn't remember the last time he'd put up a tree for the holidays.

"That was theirs, too. I inherited it. My mother decided that she needed to scale back and get a smaller tree. I couldn't see throwing away a perfectly good tree," she told him. Since he was asking about the tree, she said, "You can help me hang up a few of the ornaments after dinner if you like." Seeing the wary look on his face, she added, "But you don't have to."

The next moment, she turned back toward the kitchen.

"If I'm going to make that dinner I promised you, I'd better get started," Miranda announced. And then she caught him off guard by asking, "Would you like to keep me company?"

Thinking that she might ask him again to hang up ornaments if he chose to remain in the living room, he said, "Yeah, sure, why not?"

Miranda grinned. "That's the spirit. How are you at chopping vegetables?" she asked, moving toward the refrigerator.

"Depends on how you want them chopped," he answered drolly.

"Into smaller vegetables," she answered, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "I just want to be able to cook them faster."

Placing a cutting board and large knife on the counter in front of the police officer, she took three kinds of vegetables out of the refrigerator and deposited those in a large bowl. She put the bowl next to the cutting board.

"Have at it," she told him.

Colin regarded the items on the counter. "You didn't mention that I'd have to make my own dinner," he said.

"Not entirely," Miranda corrected. "It's just a little prep work," she explained. "I figured you'd want to join in."

Cooking was something he usually avoided. Takeout and microwaving things was more his style.

"And exactly what made you 'figure' that?" he asked.

"Easy," she answered. "You don't strike me as the kind of person who likes standing around, doing nothing while he's waiting."

"I wasn't planning on standing, I was planning on sitting," he told her.

"You'll be sitting soon enough," Miranda promised cheerfully—in his opinion, nobody was this damn cheerful. What was wrong with her?

Turning away from the counter, she opened the pantry on the side and took out a medium-sized can from the bottom shelf. He assumed that whatever was in the can was going to be part of dinner. He watched her placing the can under a mounted can opener. Once the can was opened, he was surprised to see her emptying the can's contents into a bowl that was beside Lola's water dish.

She was feeding the dog.

"I take it that wasn't part of our dinner," he quipped drily.

Picking up the large knife, he made short work of the carrots he found in the large bowl.

She grinned at him. He deliberately looked away. "Not unless you have an insatiable fondness for ground up turkey liver."

"I'll pass," he told her.

"Hopefully, Lola doesn't share your lack of enthusiasm," she said, glancing over her shoulder toward the dog. The dog was eating as if she hadn't been fed for days, a fact that Miranda knew wasn't the case. She smiled as she watched. "Looks like she doesn't."

Lola was making short work of the liver that had been deposited in her bowl. Within seconds, the liver was almost completely gone.

A moment later, licking her lips, Lola looked up at her. She made no noise, but it was obvious what the dog wanted.

"Sorry, that's it for now, Lola," Miranda told her, walking away. "Play your cards right and you might get something later after we have our own dinner."

"If I were you," Colin commented as he went on chopping vegetables, "I'd consider myself lucky if she didn't destroy half those ornaments you have strewn all over the floor."

Miranda looked unfazed. "Lola's a good dog. She doesn't destroy things. Her philosophy is live-and-let-live," she told the policeman, taking out a large package of boneless chicken breasts from the top shelf in the refrigerator.

"How do you know that?" he challenged.

"I can just tell," Miranda answered, sounding a great deal more confident than he would have been, Colin thought.

Opening the package, Miranda proceeded to cut each of the individual breasts into tiny pieces with the shears she'd taken out of the utensil drawer. The pieces fell into a big pot that she'd put on the larger of the two front burners.

Watching her, Colin came disturbingly close to cutting one of his fingers with the knife that he was wielding. Sustaining a nick, he pulled back his finger just in time and then, swallowing a curse, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Getting dinner ready," she answered simply, turning up the burner beneath the pot. Turning, she saw the tiny drop of blood. She took a napkin and attempted to dab at it, but he was not about to cooperate. "Do you want a Band-Aid?"

"No. I'll live." Taking the napkin from her, he wrapped a small piece of it around his finger only to keep the blood from mingling with the vegetables. "What is dinner?" he asked.

"Stir-fry chicken and vegetables over rice—unless you'd rather have something else," she offered, dubiously watching his injured finger.

The chicken pieces were already beginning to sizzle in the pot. "Seems a little late for that now," he told her.

Undaunted, Miranda shook her head. "It's never too late."

Colin got the distinct impression that the woman actually believed that—and that she applied it to life.

"Stir-fry chicken is fine," he told her. He was not about to have her start something from scratch. Who knew how long that would take?

His response was rewarded with a smile that reminded him more and more of sunshine each time he saw it.

The fact that it did bothered him to no end because he wasn't used to having thoughts like that. His was a dark world and he had gotten accustomed to that. This new element that had been introduced into his world disturbed the general balance of things and he wasn't sure what he was going to do about it if it persisted.

"Good," Miranda responded, stirring the chicken so as to make sure that both sides were browned. "Because that means that we're more than halfway to getting dinner on the table."

There was that word again.

"We."

He wasn't in the habit of thinking of himself as part of a "we."

Granted that he was part of the police department, but he was a motorcycle cop, which meant by definition that he operated alone. He was a loner and didn't worry about having anyone's back. "We" brought a whole different set of ground rules with it and he wasn't comfortable with those rules.

Coming here had been a bad idea, Colin thought. And yet, he wasn't abruptly terminating his association with this living embodiment of Pollyanna, wasn't walking out of her kitchen and her house. He was still standing here, in that kitchen, chopping vegetables like some misguided cooking show contestant.

Something was definitely wrong with him, Colin thought, exasperated.

"Perfect!" Miranda declared.

Taking the large bowl filled with the vegetables he'd just chopped, she deposited the entire contents into the pot. She stirred everything together, then poured in a can of chicken broth, followed by several tablespoons of flour.

Stirring that together, Miranda proceeded to drizzle a large handful of shredded mozzarella cheese into the mixture and added a quarter cup of ground up Parmesan cheese.

Watching her, Colin frowned. "That isn't stir-fry chicken."

"That's my version of stir-fry chicken," she clarified and then told him, "Give it a try before you condemn it."

"I'm not condemning it," he retorted. "I'm just saying that it's...different."

"And that's what makes the world go around," she told him with a smile.

Stirring the pot's contents again, she lowered the heat under the pot and turned her attention to making the last additive: the rice.

Measuring out two cups of water and pouring them into a small pot, she told Colin, "I do have a can of beer in the refrigerator. You're welcome to it and you can retreat into the living room if you like."

He glanced toward the living room and saw the German shepherd she'd brought from the shelter. As if on cue, Lola raised her head. He felt as if the dog was eyeing him, waiting for him to step into the room.

To what end?

He wasn't afraid of the dog, but why borrow trouble?

The next moment his mind came to a skidding halt. Why borrow trouble? That was a phrase he remembered his aunt used to like to say. He felt something pricking his conscience. He hadn't been to see his aunt for several months. He supposed he should stop by and pay the woman a visit. After all, it was getting close to Christmas and Aunt Lily was the reason he'd moved back to this city in the first place.

His aunt would probably approve of all this, he realized.

She'd approve of the decorations lying all over the living room, of the animal shelter dog hovering over the empty dog dish—and most of all, she'd probably really approve of this do-gooder-on-steroids who was fluttering around the kitchen, preparing some strange concoction that very possibly might just wind up being his last meal.

"Colin?" Miranda asked when he made no response to her suggestion.

Aware that he had just drifted off, he blinked and focused his attention on Miranda. "What?"

"Would you like that beer?" she asked again, nodding toward the refrigerator.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the living room again. The German shepherd was still looking straight at him. Colin shrugged indifferently.

"No," he answered. "I can wait until dinner's ready."

"Well, guess what?" she said, looking very pleased. "Your wait is over. Dinner is ready and about to be served."

Good, he thought, blowing out a breath. The sooner it was served, the sooner he could leave.

Chapter Nine

Miranda waited for what she felt was a decent interval but the silence continued to stretch out as she and Colin sat opposite one another at the small dining room table.

It was giving every indication that it would go on indefinitely. Even Lola remained quiet, sitting under the table close to her feet.

Finally, feeling the need to initiate some sort of a conversation between them, Miranda looked at her incredibly quiet guest and said a single word.

"Well?"

Colin glanced up at her and then back down at the meal he was presently eating. He assumed she wanted him to make some sort of a comment about the dinner she had served.

"Not bad," he told her.

"Coming from you, that's heady praise," Miranda commented, amused. "But I wasn't asking if you liked the dinner."

"Seemed like it," he answered. And then Colin put down his fork and gave her his full attention. For a supposedly easygoing woman, she certainly didn't make things easy, he thought. "Then what were you asking?"

"I wasn't asking about anything specially. I was just asking for something—anything you might want to talk about. You know, most people make conversation when they eat."

He had no interest in what "most" people did. "I usually eat alone," he told her.

"It shows," she answered.

Okay, this had gone far enough. He'd let her feel as if she'd paid him back for the debt she'd mistakenly thought she owed him. But now this was over. It was time for him to go.

Putting the napkin on the table, he began getting up to leave. "Look, I—"

Miranda cut into whatever he was about to say and gave in to her curiosity by asking him, "Why'd you become a police officer?"

The question came out of the blue and caught him off guard.

He stared at her for a long moment, trying to make heads or tails of what was happening here. Was she actually asking him that or was there some kind of other motivation at work here?

"Is this an interview?" he asked sarcastically.

"I'm just curious, that's all," Miranda answered. "Being a police officer is all about 'protecting and serving,'" she said, referring to the popular credo. "You don't look all that happy about protecting and you just don't seem like the type who wants to serve."

He would have said the same thing, but life had a strange way of taking twists and turns. "What I am is someone who doesn't want to be analyzed," he told her curtly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound like I'm invading your space, I'm just trying to understand you."

Her answer made no sense to him. "Why?" he challenged suspiciously.

"Because I'd like to be friends and friends understand each other."

"Friends?" Colin echoed, stunned as he stared at her. "We're not friends."

"Not yet," Miranda pointed out in her easygoing manner.

"Not ever," Colin corrected sharply.

He was resisting. Well, she hadn't thought this was going to be easy. "Everyone needs a friend," she told him.

He didn't appreciate the fact that she thought she had his number. She didn't. And if she believed that she did, she was way out of her depth.

"I don't," he snapped. Storming to the front door, he yanked it open.

"Yes, you do," she persisted softly.

If he stayed here a second longer, he was going to wind up saying things that he'd regret saying once he calmed down.

So he bit off, "Thanks for dinner," and left, letting the door slam behind him in his wake.

Miranda stood there, looking at the door for a long, long moment.

Maybe she'd pushed too hard. He was a man who needed to be eased into new situations, into accepting that being alone wasn't the answer.

About to turn away from the door, it occurred to her that she hadn't heard the sound of a car starting up—or pulling away, for that matter.

Curious, she opened the door and found herself looking up into the face of a man who was struggling to come to terms with the fact that maybe he had allowed his temper to flare and then spin out of control much too quickly.

Frowning, Colin mumbled, "I forgot to finish my beer."

"I didn't clear the table," she told him, then asked, "Would you like to come back inside?"

He inclined his head and rather than say "yes" he just followed her back into the house.

Still not ready to apologize or say that he shouldn't have just stormed out the way he had, Colin just asked, "Anyone ever tell you you're too pushy?"

Miranda pretended to consider his question as she walked back into the dining room.

"No," she answered. "Not that I know of."

He snorted shortly. "Then you're either not listening, or you're dealing with people who don't want to hurt your feelings."

"But you don't have that problem," she guessed, a smile quirking her lips.

Colin scowled. "My only problem seems to be you."

"I'll work on that," Miranda promised. And then she nodded toward his empty dish. "Would you like some more?" she asked.

"No, just the beer," Colin responded, sitting down again.

But Miranda wasn't finished being his hostess. "I have some ice cream in the freezer if you'd like to have dessert," she offered.

"Just the beer," he repeated.

"Just the beer," Miranda echoed, backing off for the moment. She smiled at him as she sat down again opposite him.

Colin shook his head. He'd just yelled at the woman and she was smiling at him. He just didn't get it. Blowing out an annoyed breath, he sat back and regarded her in silence for a long moment.

Then, still frowning, Colin forced himself to apologize.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper and yelled at you." This was a first for him. He wasn't used to apologizing.

"It's in the past," Miranda told him cheerfully.

He stared at her, trying to make sense out of what she'd just said. "Yeah. Five minutes in the past." Which meant, as far as he was concerned, that it wasn't in the past at all.

But he realized that wasn't the way Miranda obviously looked at things because she said, "Still the past. And I'm sorry if you felt that I was invading your space. That wasn't my intention."

"Right. I know. You want to be friends," Colin responded, unable to fully cover up the exasperated edge in his voice. It frustrated him that he couldn't figure her out, couldn't get a handle on the woman.

Who talked like that? Or thought like that? Just what was her angle? There was no way all of this was genuine.

"Would that be so bad?" she was asking him. "Being friends?"

He felt like he was trying to get a sticky substance off his hands—and failing miserably no matter how hard he tried.

He tried one more time to make her understand. “Look, lady, we don’t have a thing in common,” Colin pointed out. “Not a single thing. You seem to see the world as this wonderful, shining place and I see it the way it really is.”

“And how’s that?” she asked him, wanting to hear what his answer was.

He never hesitated. “A dark place where everyone’s out for themselves.”

“I’m not,” she told him.

He frowned. He had a feeling that she would say that. “Well, maybe you’re the exception.”

She’d expected him to say that and she was ready with a response. “And maybe there are more exceptions.”

“Pretty sure you’re the only one.”

“What about your Aunt Lily?” she asked Colin pointedly. “Wouldn’t you say that she’s one?”

He eyed her sharply. “How do you know what my aunt’s like?”

“Easy,” Miranda answered. “When you asked me why I was speeding and I told you about being late for Lily’s birthday, you said that you had an aunt by that name. One look on your face immediately told me you cared a great deal about that aunt.”

“So now you’re into face reading,” Colin said mockingly.

“Not exactly,” she corrected him. “You might say that I’m more into reading people.”

Colin drained the last of his beer from the can and set it down on the table. He knew if he lingered, he was going to regret it. The woman was getting to him—and nothing good could come of that.

“I’ve got to get going,” he told her, standing up.

Miranda rose to her feet, as well. Following her lead, Lola came to attention.

“Sure I can’t talk you into hanging up a few ornaments with me?” Miranda asked. She was fairly certain that she knew his answer, but she wanted to ask just the same.

“Sorry. I’m totally out of practice,” he told her as he started walking out of the dining room for a second time that evening. “I’d probably just wind up breaking them.”

The way he said it had her drawing conclusions. “You don’t have a Christmas tree?” Miranda asked.

“Not for a long, long time,” he answered. “Thanks for dinner—and the beer.”

She smiled as she walked him to the door. “My pleasure.”

He shook his head. By all rights, she should be relieved he was leaving. He hadn’t exactly been the kind of guest that a hostess kept asking to come back—and yet she was acting as if she’d enjoyed his company.

“You are incredible,” he murmured.

Miranda’s smile widened. “If I was incredible, I’d be able to talk you into coming to the hospital ward to visit my kids.”

“You just don’t give up, do you?” he asked in disbelief.

“What’s the point of that?” she said. “If you give up, nothing happens. This way, there’s always a chance that it might.”

He made no comment on that. Instead, Colin merely shook his head. “There’s such a thing as spreading yourself too thin, you know,” he told her, trying to get her to be realistic.

There was that smile again, he noted. The one that told him she knew something that he didn’t—and was pleased by it.

“Hasn’t happened yet,” she told him.

“Doesn’t mean it’s not going to.” It was his parting shot.

* * *

He had every intention of going straight home. Heaven knew he’d earned it. Spending time with that chipper do-gooder had really tired him out. Hell, it had all but wiped him out, actually.

But it had also started him thinking. Not about Miranda and what was starting to sound like her endless tally of good deeds. What it had gotten him thinking about was the fact that he hadn't been to see his aunt since...well, he wasn't all that sure when the last time had been, exactly.

So rather than going home and having that beer that was waiting for him in his own refrigerator —a beer that would still be waiting when he finally did get home, he reminded himself—Colin rerouted his path and drove over to his aunt's house.

Of course, his aunt might be out, he told himself as he made his way there. But it was the middle of the week and Aunt Lily wasn't exactly the carousing type.

Colin pulled up in her driveway. If it turned out that she wasn't here, well, he'd tried, and according to that Pollyanna who had insisted on making him dinner tonight, trying was what counted.

After parking his car, he got out and walked up to the front door. It could use some paint. Maybe he'd come by and paint it for her over the holidays. He had a lot of time accrued because he usually didn't take any days off. There wasn't anyplace he wanted to go as far as vacations went, and staying home just meant he'd be alone with his thoughts, which was why he'd rather be working.

Colin rang the doorbell and waited.

He'd give it a total of ten minutes, and if Aunt Lily didn't come to the door by then, well, at least he'd—

"Colin?" The small, genteel woman standing in the doorway was looking at him in utter surprise. "Colin, is anything wrong?"

"No. Why would you think something was wrong?"

"Because it's Wednesday," she said. "I mean, because it's the middle of the week and you never come by in the middle of the week."

"Yeah, well, I don't really come by much at all," Colin admitted, feeling somewhat guilty about that. Especially since Aunt Lily never complained that she didn't see him.

"I know," she responded. Then, obviously realizing how that had to sound, she amended by saying, "I mean..." Reaching up, she touched his face lovingly. "You're sure nothing's wrong?"

"I'm sure." He laughed, shaking his head. "The only thing that's wrong is that I haven't been by much to see you."

"I understand, sweetheart. You've been busy," Lily told him. Wielding guilt had never been her way. Tucking her arm through his, she gave in to the sheer pleasure of seeing him. "Come in, come in. Have you eaten?" Not waiting for an answer, she offered, "Can I fix you something?"

"I already had dinner, Aunt Lily," he told her.

She closed the door behind him and then turned to look at her nephew.

"Today? You had something to eat today?" she questioned, then went on to say, "You look so thin."

"The department doesn't like to see fat motorcycle cops, Aunt Lily. It's hard on the bikes."

Lily shook her head. "It's a wonder they can see you at all. Are you sure I can't get you something to eat?"

In her own way, his aunt was as persistent as that do-gooder was. "How about coffee?" he said. "I'll take some coffee."

"How about some banana cream pie?" Lily offered, preceding him to the kitchen. "You used to love banana cream pie when you were a little boy," she recalled.

He knew she wouldn't stop until he agreed to have something, and obviously coffee wasn't going to cut it. "Okay, I'll have a piece of pie. But I really just came by to see how you were."

Lily smiled. "I'm wonderful now that my favorite nephew's stopped by."

"I'm your only nephew, Aunt Lily," he reminded her, amused.

"That makes this that much more special.," She gave him one final penetrating look. "You're absolutely certain nothing's wrong?"

"Absolutely," he assured her.

"All right, then come to the kitchen and let's have some of that pie," she told him, hooking her arm through his again. Smiling up at his face, she said, "I've been dying for an excuse to have some—and this is certainly it."

"Glad to help," Colin told her.

Lily merely smiled.

Chapter Ten

Colin realized that he was more on edge and alert than usual. That was because he kept looking around for Miranda to pop up. He told himself that he didn't want to run into her. If he saw her coming, he could avoid her.

So he remained vigilant, expecting the woman to materialize somewhere along his usual route, the way she had the day she'd waylaid him about that little girl's missing mother.

He didn't drop his guard when he walked into the precinct, since she'd turned up there, as well.

But she didn't turn up there, nor did she track him down along his route. Not that day, nor the next day. Nor the day after that.

When the third day passed, he told himself he should feel relieved. That maybe "the curse" had been lifted.

But he didn't feel relieved. Instead, he had this uneasy, growing feeling of impending doom. He sensed that the second he let his guard down, Miranda would strike again.

The odd thing was that he felt edgier when she wasn't around than when she was and he was interacting with her.

So after the third Pollyanna-free day came and went, he began to think that something was wrong. Rather than leave well enough alone, he found himself needing answers in order to gain some sort of peace of mind—or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Maybe she hadn't been around because Lily's mother had taken a turn for the worse. Or possibly that German shepherd Miranda had brought home with her—Lulu or Lola or something like that—had turned on her. It had been known to happen.

Not all German shepherds took after Rin Tin Tin, although Colin was still annoyed with himself for not just being grateful that she wasn't around, but actually seeking her out.

He refused to examine what he was doing, because if he had, he would have labeled himself as certifiably insane. What else would you call willingly leaping out of the frying pan into the fire?

As if in self-defense, he jabbed the doorbell before he could think better of it, get into his car and drive away as if the very devil was after him.

Run¸ you idiot! Get out of here before it's too late!

But he didn't.

He heard barking in the background the second he pressed the doorbell. Either that canine Miranda had brought home had turned into a guard dog, or she was trying to get his attention because something had happened to her mistress.

Damn it, what the hell was wrong with him? Colin wondered. He didn't think this way.

Calling himself a few choice names, he turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Colin?"

Miranda had the same surprised note in her voice that he'd heard in his aunt Lily's when he'd showed up at her place.

Apparently nobody expected him just to drop in. So why was he doing it?

"Yeah." Colin answered almost grudgingly, half turning toward her. "I just wanted to make sure everything was all right—with Lily's mother," he added belatedly, not wanting Miranda to think that he was here checking up on her.

Knowing the perverse way the woman's mind worked, he'd never hear the end of it if she thought that.

Miranda's surprise gave way to a welcoming smile. "She's doing fine, thanks to you," she told him. She opened the door farther. "Why don't you come on in? Lola would love to see you," she added, glancing over her shoulder to the German shepherd, who was fairly leaping from paw to paw.

As if she knew that she had temporarily taken center stage, the dog barked at him.

Miranda laughed, then told her visitor, “And I’ve got some more beer in the refrigerator.”

When he still made no move to come in, she took hold of his arm and coaxingly pulled him across the threshold.

He should have made his getaway when he had a chance, Colin thought, allowing himself to be drawn in.

And then he thought of her offer. “Do you even drink beer?” he asked.

“No.”

Okay, like everything else that had to do with her, that made no sense. “Then why do you have it in your refrigerator?”

That was easy to explain. She released him. “A few of the women I work with at the hospital and the animal shelter stop by on occasion. I keep the beer on hand for them.”

Again Colin told himself he’d made a mistake in coming here. “I can’t stay—” he began.

Miranda felt that maybe he needed to be coaxed a little more. “Well, you came all the way over here, so surely you can stay for one beer.”

“It’s not that far from your place to mine,” he protested. His point was that he hadn’t gone out of his way all that much—but he realized his mistake the moment the words were out of his mouth. He’d inadvertently given her too much information.

Her next words confirmed it.

“So you do live in Bedford.” Not all members of the police department did. “What neighborhood?”

He was not about to compound his mistake. “There are stalking laws on the books, you know.”

There was a knowing, amused smile on her lips. “You’re the one who showed up on my doorstep, and at the animal shelter before that,” she pointed out.

He was immediately defensive. “Are you saying you think I’m the stalker?”

“I’m just saying it’s only fair that I know where you live, since you know where I live.” With a wink, she added, “Not everything has a hidden agenda. Sit,” she told him. “I’ll go get that beer.”

When she walked back in, she saw that he was still on his feet and was looking at the Christmas tree.

“Haven’t gotten very far decorating it, have you?” he commented.

Miranda handed him the cold can of beer. “Like I said, I only get to hang up a few ornaments every night. I can’t seem to convince Lola to hang up any while I’m out.” When his eyes narrowed and he looked at her, puzzled, she told him, “That’s a joke.”

“I never know with you,” he admitted drolly.

She would have loved to just sit down beside him and talk, but she had a feeling he might think she was crowding him. It would seem more natural to him if she worked on the tree, so she asked, “Would you mind if I put up some decorations while you’re here?”

Colin waved a careless hand. “Don’t let me keep you.” As Miranda got back to hanging up the ornaments, he took a long pull from the can. Lola had plopped herself next to his feet and looked up at him. The scene was far too domestic for him.

And yet...

“You decided to keep the dog?” he asked, assuming that was why the animal was still here.

“Well, at least until after Christmas,” Miranda answered. Arming herself with several decorations, she moved around the tree, seeking out empty spaces. “Everyone who comes to the shelter at this time of year is looking for a cute little dog to give to their kids.” She glanced over at the German shepherd and said fondly, “Lola’s cute, but she definitely isn’t little.”

He laughed drily. “That’s an understatement.” He studied the animal. “She’s got to be the biggest female German shepherd I’ve ever seen. I thought they were supposed to be a little smaller than this.”

“Obviously Lola hasn’t read the German shepherd handbook,” Miranda quipped, stretching to hang up a long silver bell. “But what she lacks in daintiness she makes up for with friendliness. I’ve

been working at the animal shelter for a couple of years now and she's got to be the most docile dog I've ever encountered." Picking up a few more ornaments, she searched for more empty spaces she could reach. "Most dogs freak out when they see a vacuum cleaner, much less when they hear one being operated. Lola, bless her, is completely indifferent to it. I could probably vacuum Lola and it wouldn't faze her in the slightest."

The dog wasn't all that easygoing, he thought. "I heard her barking when I rang the doorbell."

"That's because when she thinks someone is trying to come in, she instantly gets into her protective mode. She's being protective of me," Miranda explained, her voice coming from behind the tree. "Once she sees that I'm okay with you, she's fine."

Colin remained on the sofa, sipping his beer and absently petting the dog as he watched Miranda circling the Christmas tree, hanging up ornaments whenever she found a space.

"Damn," he heard her murmur under her breath. She'd worked her way back to the point where she'd started.

"What's the matter?"

She sighed. "I'm going to have to bring out a ladder from the garage to hang up any more of the ornaments tonight. The tree's beginning to look kind of bottom heavy and I can't reach the higher branches," she explained.

She was doing it again, he thought. Roping him into helping. If he had half a brain, he'd just ignore her.

Sighing, Colin stood up. Leaving his beer on the coffee table, he crossed to her. "Where do you want to hang that?" he asked, nodding at the decoration in her hand.

"Higher than I can reach," she answered.

Taking the decoration from her, he reached up to the branch that she'd obviously targeted and easily hung the ornament on it.

"That looks very nice," she told him, somewhat surprised that he had willingly volunteered to help.

"I wasn't exactly performing brain surgery."

"No," she agreed. "You were performing a service." And then she grinned as she held out another ornament. "You up for another one?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not," he said carelessly, taking the decoration from her and hanging it on the next branch over. Turning to face her, he saw the huge smile on Miranda's face. "You're grinning like a little kid," he pointed out.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked. "I've just witnessed a Christmas miracle."

Colin snorted. "Let's not get carried away here."

Her smile only grew; he didn't think that was possible, but it obviously was.

"Getting carried away is fun," she told him. "You should try it sometime."

The thought of doing just that—of getting carried away—popped into his head out of nowhere. It had nothing to do with hanging up decorations or anything even remotely along those lines. In his case getting carried away involved the sudden desire to find out what those smiling lips tasted like.

The thought zipped through his brain like a lightning bolt, daring him to follow through.

Okay, time to go, Colin thought sternly. He didn't know where that thought had come from, but he wasn't about to stick around and risk acting on it.

Turning his back on the tree and the miscellaneous ornaments that still needed to be hung up, he said, "Thanks for the beer—again."

Miranda looked at him in surprise. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, I shouldn't have stayed this long," he told her. "I just wanted to find out how the kid's mother was doing."

They both knew that was just an excuse, but Miranda nodded as if she wholeheartedly believed what he was saying.

"Thanks for coming by," she said, walking alongside him to the door.

Colin stopped in his tracks. He didn't need an escort. Putting space between himself and the woman was the whole point of his leaving.

"I know my way out," he protested.

"I know that," Miranda answered.

Her tone of voice was friendly but firm, as if to let him know that she wanted to walk him to the door and wasn't about to be talked out of it.

As they approached the front door, Miranda began to broach another subject. "Since you're being in such a generous mood..."

Instantly on his guard, Colin looked at her warily. The woman seemed to know just how to get to him. He knew coming here had been a mistake on his part.

"Yeah?"

"The kids at the hospital would still love to see you," she told him.

"You just never give up, do you?"

Rather than be insulted or put off by his sharp tone and his question, she smiled as if she'd thought over what he'd asked. "What's the fun in that?"

He scowled. Maybe she thought of this as fun, but he certainly didn't.

He answered her seriously—and hopefully, once and for all. "I can't come to the hospital. We work the same hours."

"That's okay, I'll wait," she answered breezily. "Just tell me what time you can get there."

"Not until my shift is over," he snapped. "By then you're on your way to one or the other of those two shelters where you volunteer." And that was that.

The next moment, he realized that he really should have known better.

"You know, the good thing about volunteering," Miranda told him cheerfully, "is that it's extremely flexible. There are no hard-and-fast hours for me to maintain."

Colin read between the lines. "I can't get out of this easily, can I?"

"You can." She certainly couldn't force him to come to the hospital. If nothing else, the man was a lot bigger than she was. "But between you and me, I don't think you really want to."

"So you've added mind reading to your list of talents, is that it?" he asked.

"No, no mind reading," she answered. "But as I said before, I can read people pretty well, and despite your bluster and your 'Big Bad Wolf' attitude, I think you're a good guy under all that."

Colin laughed wryly. "I guess it's a good thing you're not trying to earn your money as a mind reader. You'd wind up starving to death."

Her eyes met his—and then she gave him that soul-melting smile of hers. "So then it's a yes?" she asked innocently.

Every fiber of his being was geared up to shout "no" at her, that he wasn't about to be corralled or bullied into agreeing to turn up at a hospital ward like some sort of living, breathing show-and-tell object. He had absolutely nothing to say to one kid, much less an entire ward full of them.

But she was looking up at him with those eyes of hers, those eyes that despite all his attempts to shut them out seemed to get past all his safeguards and burrow right into him, giving him no peace.

"We'll see," he finally growled.

Miranda caught her lower lip between her teeth as if debating what to say next. "So that's a yes?" she asked again.

"No," Colin corrected, holding his ground. "That's a 'we'll see.'"

"Almost as good," she told him with more enthusiasm than he felt the phrase merited. The woman was incredible. She found optimism where absolutely none existed.

The next moment, she joyfully told him, "Thank you!"

With one hand on his arm to steady herself, Miranda rose up on her toes to kiss his cheek in gratitude.

That was the exact moment he turned his head to tell her that he hadn't done anything yet and most likely would not.

He never got the chance to say it, because when he turned his head, her lips made direct contact with his.

And just like that, an unexpected, harmless kiss on the cheek turned into something else.

It turned into an actual kiss, and what had started out as fleeting evolved into a great deal more.

Surprised, Miranda began to pull back, but then paused as their contact blossomed into something far more intense than just a kiss between friends.

Before she knew it, Miranda had her arms around his neck and he had his wrapped around her waist, drawing her closer as the kiss deepened.

He was making her breathless, which in turn was making her head spin.

What was going on here?

And how did she get it to continue?

Chapter Eleven

Colin had no idea what came over him. He had never been one of those men who would size up a woman, biding his time until he could seduce her. It wasn't that he was immune to attractive women. He just felt maintaining any sort of a relationship with one was too complicated, and one-night stands could prove to be troublesome.

He found it easier just to steer clear.

But there was something incredibly compelling about this particular woman that just reeled him in. There was no other explanation as to why he'd sought her out tonight when he didn't have to.

And why else was he even considering showing up at that hospital ward of hers? He'd never thought of himself as someone to take up causes or go that extra mile. Yes, he'd been in the Marines, and yes, he'd become a police officer, but neither had come about out of some compulsive need to help his fellow man. He'd joined the Marines and later the police force because it just seemed like the thing to do at the time. The situations suited him; it was as simple as that.

But although Miranda Steele presented herself as straightforward, there was nothing simple about this woman. And right now, he had an uneasy feeling he was in way over his head. Though he wasn't someone who was ruled by desire, Colin had a feeling there would be no turning back for him if he stayed here a minute longer. And he wasn't all that certain that the road ahead was one he should be venturing onto.

The sound of Lola barking in the background was what finally broke apart the moment—and forced him back to his senses.

Taking a step away from her, he looked at Miranda. Her lipstick was blurred from the imprint of his lips and she looked as dazed as he felt.

He was shaken up inside and it was a struggle not to show it. "Did you do that so that I'd come down to your children's ward?"

That hurt, Miranda thought. Did he really believe she was that kind of person? The kind who physically manipulated people?

"No," she answered, her voice low as she tried to collect herself. "I was just trying to kiss your cheek. You were the one who turned his head."

His expression remained stoic and unyielding. "So you're not trying to seduce me into seeing things your way?"

"No, I'm not," Miranda cried, stunned. The moment had shattered and what had seemed so wonderful a second ago no longer was. "Forget I asked you," she told him stiffly.

Damn it, those were tears filling her eyes. He hadn't meant for any of that to happen. He wasn't accustomed to dealing with a woman who didn't have some ulterior motive—except for his aunt.

Hell, he wasn't really used to dealing with women at all, Colin thought, feeling helpless and annoyed at the same time.

Unable to find the right words to express his regret for having hurt her, he marched to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

He heard the door close behind him. Heard the lock being flipped into place. For just a split second, he considered turning around and knocking on the panel, to apologize.

But words didn't come to him now any more than they had before.

If he tried to say anything, he'd only make things worse, he knew. Communication was not his forte, so instead he walked away.

* * *

Numb, confused, Miranda wiped away the tears sliding down her cheeks with the back of her hand. She wasn't all that sure what had just happened here. All she knew was that Colin had taken off like a man who had been ambushed and then suddenly given the chance for a clean getaway.

She heard a car starting up and then taking off.

His car.

She didn't understand. He had given off mixed signals. Why had he bothered coming over in the first place?

Turning away from the door, she sighed. "I really do wish I was a mind reader, Colin. Then maybe I could understand what's going on here."

She realized that she was absently running her fingertips along her lips. She could almost swear she could still feel his lips against hers.

Taste his lips against hers.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to focus her brain. She'd never been the type to let a guy throw her, or mess with her mind. But she'd never felt what she had felt this evening when he'd kissed her.

"C'mon, Miranda, this isn't like you. Get a grip." Opening her eyes, she saw that Lola was looking at her as if she understood what was going on here.

"You're right, Lola. I don't have time to waste like this. We have a tree to decorate and we don't need anybody's help, right, girl?"

Lola yipped, making her laugh.

"Of course right. So let's get started. I'll hang, you supervise. Deal?"

Lola barked again.

"Deal," Miranda agreed, grinning.

With that, she went to the garage to get the ladder she was going to need in order to reach the higher branches.

* * *

Colin did his best to talk himself out of it and he succeeded.

For a day.

But the following day, he did something he had never done before. He called in and told his sergeant that he was taking half of one of his many accumulated vacation days.

The man sounded rather surprised. "Just a half day?"

"That's all," Colin answered.

If he took the whole day, he knew he'd wind up getting roped into spending the entire time visiting sick kids—kids who didn't have the odds in their favor. He didn't like admitting that he wasn't strong enough to face something like that for more than a short amount of time.

It was obvious that Miranda was made of stronger stuff than he was, which was why he was going to the oncology ward as she'd wanted him to. He owed her an apology for the way he'd behaved the other night, and this was the only way he knew how to apologize.

He was probably going to regret this, Colin thought, not for the first time. But if nothing else, he was a man who always paid his debts. It was part of his code.

* * *

Miranda peered into one of the few private rooms that were located on the floor. Jason Greeley still appeared to be asleep. His mom had been here with the little boy all night. But the single mother had to go to work, so had left an hour ago. Since then Miranda had been checking on the five-year-old every few minutes. She didn't want him waking up by himself.

Moving closer to the boy, she adjusted his covers. “You usually don’t sleep this long after a treatment, Jason,” she said, deliberately sounding cheerful. Cheer begot cheer, in her opinion. “Don’t turn lazy on me now. Your mama was here all night. She hates leaving you, but she had to go to work. But don’t worry, she’ll be back soon. And I’ll be here all day until she gets here,” Miranda promised.

The boy stirred a little, but didn’t open his eyes. His even breathing told her that he was still sleeping.

Miranda went on talking as if he could hear every word she said. “I’ve got cherry Jell-O waiting for you the second you open your eyes. You told me that was your favorite, so I made sure there’s plenty. All you have to do to get some is open your eyes. C’mon, baby, it’s not that hard.”

When he didn’t, Miranda sighed. “Okay, play hard to get. But you’re going to have to open them sometime. No sense in letting all that cherry Jell-O go to waste, you know.”

“How do you do it? How do you deal with this without falling apart?”

Startled, pressing one hand against her chest to contain the heart that had all but leaped out, nearly cracking her rib cage, she swung around to see Colin, all 6’2” and broad-shouldered, standing just inside the room. He was wearing his police uniform.

It took her a second to find her voice. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop by,” he quipped. And then his voice lowered. “Besides, I figured after the other evening, I kind of owed it to you.”

She wasn’t sure if he was referring to the kiss they’d shared or his walking out on her, but felt it best not to pursue the question. He was here, and right now, that was all that mattered.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she told him. “But these kids will get a big kick out of seeing a real police officer.” And then she glanced at her watch. It was early. “Speaking of which, aren’t you supposed to be out there, handing out tickets right now?”

“I took half a vacation day.” He expected her to ask him why he hadn’t taken a full day, followed by a whole bunch of other questions. Instead she just smiled at him, looking pleased.

“That’s great,” she enthused. “But if you’re only here for a little while, we’ll have to make the most of it.”

He wasn’t sure exactly what she had in mind, but he’d come to expect the unexpected with Miranda. “And exactly how are we going to do that?”

Her mind was already racing. “We’ve got a big recreation room where the kids play games and where we hold their birthday parties. Right now, it’s where we put up the ward’s Christmas tree.”

“But all the kids aren’t—”

She knew what he was going to say—that there were more holidays than just Christmas this season. She answered his question before he had a chance to voice it. “That’s all right. All kids like bright lights and presents. It helps to cheer them up a little.”

“And feel normal?” he guessed. That had to be what she was shooting for.

“They are normal,” Miranda told him calmly. She had to make him understand. “They just have more than their share of health issues, but you’d be surprised how they bear up to that. It makes me ashamed when I let everyday, mundane problems overwhelm me.”

“You? Overwhelmed?” he asked, teasing her. “I don’t believe it. Joan of Arc would probably see you as a role model.”

That was his idea of a joke, she realized. Her smile widened.

“Mama?” Jason opened his eyes and looked around the room, disoriented, obviously expecting to see his mother there instead of his nurse and a strange policeman.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to wake him up.” Colin looked contrite as he addressed Miranda. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

She put her hand on his arm to keep him from leaving. “No, this is a good thing,” she assured him. “We were waiting for him to wake up.” She turned her attention back to the boy. “Jason, guess what? Remember that police officer I told you about?”

"The one who wouldn't give you a ticket," Jason answered. "I remember."

"That's right, he didn't give me a ticket," she repeated, raising her eyes to Colin's for a moment before shifting them back to the boy. Colin looked surprised. "Well, this is him—and he's here to visit," Miranda announced.

"Cool," the little boy said, with as much enthusiasm as he was able to muster, given that he was still trying to come around. Shifting in his bed, he looked to Miranda for help. "I want to sit up."

Colin was about to press a button on the remote control attached to the guardrail on the boy's bed when he saw Miranda slowly shake her head at him.

"You remember what to do, Jason," she prompted. "We practiced."

"Oh yeah." Small fingers pulled the remote a little closer and then pushed one of the arrows. The back of his bed began to rise. He beamed, looking very proud of himself. "I got it right."

"Of course you did." She tousled his hair affectionately. "That's because you're such a smart boy."

Jason's chocolate brown eyes shifted to look at the policeman who had come to visit him. "Is that a real badge?" he asked, pointing toward Colin's chest.

He glanced down and nodded. "It sure is."

Jason looked at him hopefully. "Is it okay if I touch it?"

Colin came closer and leaned over the boy's bed. "Go ahead."

Small fingers reached out and very slowly and reverently traced the outline of the badge.

"Wow," Jason murmured. "When I grow up, I'm gonna be a police officer just like you."

No one had ever said anything like that to him before—since he didn't interact with children—and Colin found himself truly moved, more than he thought possible. Especially since the boy was talking so positively about a future he might not live to see.

"And you'll be a really great police officer. Maybe even a police detective, if you study very hard," Miranda told the little boy. She could see that Colin had been affected. It wasn't that she wasn't as moved as Colin. She had just learned to handle her own onslaught of emotions so they wouldn't get in the way of her being the best possible nurse she could be for the sake of the children.

"I'll study real hard," Jason promised. He sounded sleepy. And then he yawned. "I'm tired, Miranda."

"Well, then I suggest you'd better get some sleep," she coaxed.

It was obvious that he was trying not to let his eyes close. "But then I'll miss seeing Officer Colin," the boy protested.

"Tell you what," Colin said. "I'll come by again and see you before I leave."

"And will you be back tomorrow, too?" the little boy asked. It was clear that he was losing his battle to keep his eyes open.

"Not tomorrow," Colin answered honestly. "But I'll come back soon."

"Promise?" Jason asked sleepily.

"I promise," Colin told him, saying the words as solemnly as if he were talking to an adult.

But the boy was already asleep again.

Miranda moved the covers up higher on Jason's small body. "That was very nice of you," she told Colin with genuine warmth.

He shrugged. "I didn't do anything out of the ordinary."

"Jason might argue with you about that—if he could argue," she added, looking at the boy with affection. She glanced at her watch. "C'mon, we need to spread that charm of yours around before your coach turns into a pumpkin."

Colin shook his head, mystified. "I never understand half of what you're talking about."

Miranda laughed. "You might just be better off that way."

He inclined his head in agreement. "I was thinking the same thing."

But Miranda didn't hear him. She was on her smartphone, busy summoning the other nurses.

Chapter Twelve

In less than three minutes after Miranda finished making her call, the hallway outside Jason's room was alive with activity.

As Colin looked on in amazement, nurses and orderlies pushed children in wheelchairs and patiently guided others who were using walkers, crutches or braving the way to the recreational room on their own under the watchful eye of an aide or a parent.

To Colin, it looked as if an organized mass evacuation was having a dry run. The whole thing seemed incredible to him, given the average age of the children. However, rather than leaving the building, everyone was going to the large recreation room that currently held the Christmas tree.

Glancing back, Miranda realized that the "guest of honor" directly responsible for this mass migration was still standing just outside Jason's doorway. Determined to change that, she took Colin's hand in hers.

"C'mon," she coaxed.

The expression on his face was rather uncertain as he took in the masses. "That's an awful lot of kids," he told her.

She gently tugged on his hand. "They don't bite," she said cheerfully. "And having them all together in one place means you won't have to repeat yourself. You can say things just once."

The uncertain expression deepened. "What things?"

Miranda had nothing specific to offer, but she was confident that issue would be resolved naturally.

"It'll come to you," she promised. "And the kids'll probably drown you in questions once they get started. C'mon," she coaxed again, drawing him down the hallway. "You're not afraid of a bunch of little kids."

She said it as if she believed it, Colin thought. And it wasn't the kids he was afraid of; he was afraid of inadvertently saying something that might wind up hurting one of them.

But now that she had started this parade of hospitalized children, like some sort of modern-day Pied Piper, he couldn't very well hang back and watch from the sidelines. The sidelines had virtually disappeared in any case, as Colin found himself surrounded on all sides by children streaming into the rec room.

"Kids," Miranda said in a slightly louder voice, when the commotion had died down and the children had all settled in. "This is my friend Officer Kirby. When I told him that some of you had never met a policeman or seen one up close before, he insisted on coming by to say hello." Turning to look at Colin over her shoulder, she grinned at him and said, "Say hello, Officer Kirby."

On the spot and feeling decidedly awkward, Colin murmured, "Hello."

The moment he did, a cacophony of "Hellos," mostly out of sync, echoed back at him.

Pattie, a little girl with curly red hair seated in a wheelchair in the front row, was the first to speak up. "Are you really a policeman?" she asked.

"Yes." And then, doing his best not to sound so wooden, Colin added, "I am."

The two extra words seemed to open up the floodgates. Suddenly he heard questions coming at him from all directions.

"Do you have a gun?" one boy in the back asked.

"Do you shoot people?" a boy beside him added.

"How many bad guys have you caught?" a little blonde girl ventured, while a smaller girl with almost violet eyes shyly asked him if he was "a good cop."

Taking pity on him, Miranda spoke up, hoping that the piece of information she told them would somehow help the children to get a better image of the kind of police work he did. "Officer Kirby rides a motorcycle."

A dark-haired boy with crutches beside his chair cried, “Cool!”

A little girl to Colin’s left asked, “Can you do a wheelie?”

“Did you ever fall off your motorcycle?” one little boy wearing a brace asked. “I fell off my bicycle once and broke my neck bone.”

“Your collarbone,” Miranda corrected gently.

“Oh yeah, my collarbone,” he amended. He was still waiting for an answer. “Did you ever fall off?” he asked again.

“No,” Colin answered. “I never have.”

“Did it take you a long time to learn how to ride your motorcycle?” a little girl sitting near the Christmas tree asked.

As he began fielding the questions a little more comfortably, more and more came his way. Before he knew it, Colin found himself immersed in a give-and-take dialogue with approximately twenty-five children of varying ages, confined to the hospital ward for a number of different reasons.

He was surprised, given the relative seriousness of their conditions, how eager the children all seemed to hear about his job and what he did on his patrols.

Some asked run-of-the-mill questions, like how long it had taken him to become a police officer. Others wanted to know what he thought about while he was out on patrol. Still others asked totally unrelated questions.

The queries came one after another, some voiced eagerly, others shyly, but there were no awkward silences. Everyone had questions, usually more than one. Or two.

Pleased, Miranda stood back, happy to see the children so caught up in their visitor. She kept a watchful eye on Colin, as well, ready to step in if it got to be too much for him. But as the minutes went by, she was fairly certain that he was doing fine. He didn’t need her to bail him out.

When the motorcycle officer answered a little girl named Shelly’s question if he’d ever had a pet hamster—he hadn’t—Miranda finally decided he’d had enough for one day and stepped in.

“I’m afraid Officer Kirby is going to have to be going,” she told the children. The news was met with youthful voices melding in a mournful “Oh,” tinged with surprise as well as disappointment.

“Can he come back?” the girl with the curly red hair, Pattie, asked. Then, not waiting for Miranda to reply, she took her question straight to the horse’s mouth. “Can you, Officer Kirby?”

“If I get the chance,” Colin answered diplomatically.

Progress, Miranda thought. She’d expected him to make an excuse outright. The fact that he hadn’t, that he’d said something half hopeful in response, made her feel that he was beginning to come around and see the light.

He was starting to see the children as people.

“When?” A persistent little boy wearing a wool cap over his bare head looked at his new hero hopefully.

“When his sergeant can spare him again,” Miranda told the child, grasping at the first handy excuse that came to her. The look in Colin’s eyes when their glances met assured her she’d come up with a good one. “Now, everybody, say goodbye to Officer Kirby.”

A swell of voices, more enthusiastic since the kids had gotten to spend some time with him, chorused loudly, “Goodbye, Officer Kirby,” while others added, “Come back soon!”

Putting her hand on Colin’s elbow, Miranda took control of the situation. She gently guided him out of the room. They swung by Jason’s room and he spent a little time there.

After that, Miranda walked him to the elevators.

“Well, you survived,” she observed happily, offering him a pleased smile.

“I guess I did, didn’t I?” There was no missing the relief, as well as the surprise, in his voice. Colin paused, looking back over his shoulder in the general direction of the rec room. “Are all those kids...you know...?”

Somehow, even though he'd spent more than an hour talking with them, Colin couldn't get himself to say the word. Saying it made it that much more of an evil reality.

Miranda seemed to know exactly what he was trying to ask her. If the children were terminal.

"Treatments have greatly improved over the last five years. A lot of those kids have more of a fighting chance to beat the odds and get well, or at least have their diseases go into remission. Meanwhile, every day they have is special to them, and we all have to make the most of it.

"They really enjoyed having you come," Miranda went on. "Thank you for letting me bully you into coming to the hospital to talk to them."

"Is that what you call it?" he asked, amusement curving his mouth. "Bullying?"

"No," she admitted honestly, raising her eyes to his. "I don't. But that's what I figure you'd call it, so I thought I'd put it into terms that you could relate to more easily."

Her eyes were at it again, he thought. Doing that funny little laughing, twinkly thing that captivated him.

The elevator arrived and he put his hand against one of the doors to keep it from closing. He searched for words to answer her and finally said, "Maybe I'll let you bully me into it again soon."

There was no other way to describe it but to say that he saw joy leap into her face. "Just say the word," she told him.

Doing his best not to stare, Colin nodded. "Maybe I will," he said.

Stepping inside the elevator, he dropped his hand. Her smile was the last thing he saw before the doors shut.

* * *

During the remainder of the day, after he returned to the precinct and went on duty, Colin tried to tell himself that the heat he was experiencing radiating through his chest and his gut was nothing more than a case of heartburn. But he had a strong suspicion that even if he consumed an entire bottle of antacid tablets, that wouldn't have any effect on the warmth that was pervading him.

He should have been annoyed. That pushy woman had invaded his world and messed with his routine. She'd completely messed up the natural order of things.

But somehow, try as he might, he couldn't drum up the slightest bit of irritation. To make matters worse, he caught himself thinking about her.

A lot.

Thinking about her and wondering if he wasn't inadvertently sealing his own doom if he just happened to stop by her place and see her again sometime in the near future.

Like tonight.

Telling himself that it was the holiday season and that everyone was guilty of experiencing some sort of generosity of spirit—why try to be different?—he didn't go home after his shift was over. Instead, he hung around the precinct for a while, killing time by catching up on the paperwork that was the bane of every police officer's existence.

And when he was finished and he'd made sure to file all the reports before leaving, Colin decided to play the odds. For this to work out, Miranda needed to be home instead of one of the two places she volunteered.

He had less than a fifty-fifty chance of finding her there, but he went and picked up a pizza anyway.

With the tantalizing aroma from the pizza box filling the interior of his vehicle, Colin made one more quick stop, at a pet store that was along the way, and then drove on to his final destination, Miranda's house.

He wasn't aware of holding his breath that last half mile until he found himself releasing it.

Her car was parked in the driveway.

Apparently, Miranda was done doing good deeds for the day, Colin thought happily as he parked his vehicle at the curb and got out.

When he passed her car on the way to her front door, he felt heat coming from her engine.

She must have gotten home just minutes ago, he thought with a faint smile.

Juggling the extra-large pizza, Colin rang the doorbell. Inside, Lola instantly began barking. The familiar sound was oddly comforting, though he couldn't begin to explain why. He was afraid that if he thought about it too much, he'd turn right around and go home. Coming here like this carried many implications, and he wasn't sure he was ready to face them.

The best way to deal with those implications at the moment was just to ignore them. Ignore them and focus on the hungry feeling in the pit of his stomach. The one that involved not having eaten.

When Miranda opened the door she was obviously more than a little surprised to see him.

"Hi, what's up?"

"Um, I thought that since you made me dinner that other time, I should reciprocate." Rather than continue—because he felt himself about to trip over his tongue—he held up the cardboard box. "Pizza," he added needlessly, since the aroma—as well as the shape and the label—clearly gave away what he had brought.

"You made me a pizza?" Miranda asked, amused.

Her question threw him for a second. "What? No. I picked this up on the way over here. I guarantee you wouldn't want to eat any pizza that I made," he told her with a self-depreciating laugh.

"Oh, it couldn't be all that bad," she stated, ushering Colin in and then closing the door behind him.

Lola came bounding over the moment he walked in. The animal's attention was totally focused on him and, more specifically, the aromatic box he was carrying.

Miranda caught the dog's collar to keep the German shepherd from knocking Colin over. "She's happy to see you."

Colin harbored no such illusions. "She smells the pizza," he said.

"And you," Miranda added. "Dogs have incredibly keen senses of smell—and they can separate one thing from another. The pizza's the draw," she agreed. "But Lola clearly likes you."

Colin made no acknowledgment of that statement one way or the other. Instead, he took a small paper bag out of his jacket pocket. The sack had the insignia of a local pet store chain embossed on it. Thinking ahead, he had stopped to pick up several doggie treats before coming by. At the very least, he'd wanted to be able to distract the dog for a few minutes so that he and Miranda could have their pizza in peace.

"I brought these for her," he announced, passing the bag of treats to Miranda.

Opening it, she looked inside and then smiled broadly at him.

"I think that before the evening is over, Lola is going to be madly in love with you."

Lola had begun to nudge the paper bag with her nose before Miranda finished her sentence.

"I was just hoping to distract her long enough for us to eat the pizza," Colin explained.

Miranda laughed. "In that case, you should have bought out the entire pet shop. Have you ever watched a dog eat? It's like watching a furry vacuum cleaner. The treats'll be gone before we have a chance to sit down.

"But that's okay," she assured Colin. "I've been working with her and she's getting to be a little more well behaved than she was." Her grin widened as she added, "We might even get to eat an entire slice apiece before she starts begging for a bite—or ten. The trick," Miranda told him with a wink, "is not to give in."

Easier said than done, Colin thought. The dog was already looking up at her with soulful eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

"I see you finished decorating your Christmas tree," Colin commented as he followed her into the kitchen.

Miranda nodded cheerfully. "Yes, finally. All those boxes and ornaments were starting to make the living room a real obstacle course, not to mention pretty messy. So I made up my mind that I wasn't going to go to bed until I had hung the last ornament on the tree.

"The next day I happily put all the boxes away." She looked down at the dog, who was eyeing the pizza box as if expecting to see slices come leaping out. "This way Lola has a little more room to move around, don't you, girl?"

"She doesn't strike me as the type to be put off by a bunch of boxes," he observed. "I can see her plowing through them."

"She kind of does plow through things when she wants to get somewhere," Miranda agreed.

He set down the pizza box and watched her take a couple plates from the cupboard. She placed them on either side of the box. "I thought you said she was becoming more obedient."

"I said we were working on it," she corrected. "Right now," Miranda told him, patting the German shepherd's head, "she's a work in progress."

There was no missing the affection in the woman's voice. "You seem kind of attached to her," Colin observed.

"It's hard not to be." Taking out a bottle of beer, she set it next to Colin's plate. "She's very affectionate and lovable." She saw the confused way Colin was looking at the beer. "I just replaced the can you drank the other day," she explained.

"Uh-huh," he responded, taking her explanation at face value. He waited for her to sit down opposite him. "What are you going to do when someone adopts her?" he asked.

"Be happy for her," she answered.

Her response sounded rather automatic to him. Miranda probably meant that on some level, because she was a selfless person. But on another level, he had a feeling she would miss the German shepherd a great deal if the dog was placed in another home. "Why don't you adopt her?"

Taking a large slice of pizza, she bit into it. And then laughed softly. "If I adopted every dog I fostered, I'd wind up being cited by the police for having way too many dogs in my house. This area isn't zoned for kennels," she reminded him.

He shrugged. After all, she probably knew what was best for her. It was just that there seemed to be a bond between her and the dog she was fostering. But then, he hadn't known Miranda all that long and most likely she was like this with all the dogs she took care of—just like she was with all the children she looked after at the hospital.

"This is really good pizza," she commented. Looking at the box, she read the name written across the top. "Rizzoli's." She shook her head. It didn't ring a bell. I don't think I'm familiar with that chain."

"That's because it's not a chain," he told her. He was finishing up his second slice and then slid a third one onto his plate in between washing them down with beer. "It's this little hole-in-the-wall of a place in the next town. Easy to miss," he told her. "It's been there for about twenty years. I discovered it when I moved back to Bedford."

"The next town?" Miranda repeated. "That's a long way to travel for something that's available in practically every shopping center in Bedford."

Colin shrugged and then his eyes met hers. "Sometimes quality is worth going the extra mile or so."

Miranda grinned. Leaning over, she took her napkin and wiped away a dab of sauce from the corner of his mouth. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could have sworn a spark of electricity zapped through her. “I’m glad you think so.”

What was she up to? he wondered, and why was he so captivated by her? Why wasn’t he just walking out instead of sitting here across from this do-gooder?

“Why do I feel like I’m being set up for something?” he asked Miranda.

“Because you’re a cop and you’re naturally suspicious,” she replied with a warm laugh. “You’re not being set up for anything,” she told him, and heaven help him, he believed her. “Besides, setting you up would be an awful way to pay you back for bringing over this really great pizza.”

Lola had been whimpering since they’d started eating. Her whimper was growing louder by increments. Obviously antsy, the German shepherd had moved from Miranda’s right side to her left and then back again, watching her with big brown eyes that seemed to grow larger each time she moved.

Upping her game, Lola dipped her head and slipped it under Miranda’s arm, nudging it.

Miranda laughed. “Okay, okay, I surrender.” Tearing off a piece from her slice, she held it out to the dog. Less than half a second later, the piece was gone, disappearing between Lola’s teeth.

“Hey, you could lose a finger that way,” Colin warned, instantly alert.

“No, she’s very careful,” she assured him. “For a dog with such big teeth, Lola’s incredibly gentle when she takes food from my hand.”

He knew that in Miranda’s place, he would have flinched, hearing those teeth click shut. But she had remained completely unfazed. “I take it this isn’t the first time she’s eaten out of your hand.”

“No, it’s not,” she confirmed. “Lola likes to kibitz when I’m having dinner.”

“You’re spoiling her,” he told her. There was disapproval in his voice.

It was Miranda’s turn to shrug. “Lola’s been through so much, I figure she’s entitled to a little spoiling.” As he watched, Miranda’s expression darkened. “Her last owner chained her up in the backyard, then beat her and starved her. He didn’t give her any water, either.”

“How did Lola wind up at the shelter?” Colin asked her.

“A neighbor heard her whimpering and looked over this guy’s fence. Lola was half-dead. Horrified, he called the police. They arrived just in time. Another couple of days and Lola would have died,” she told him fiercely. “Needless to say, they took her away.”

Colin had set his beer down when she started telling him about Lola’s background. “What happened to the owner?” he asked.

Every time she thought about the incident, Miranda was filled with anger.

“He got off with a fine. If it were up to me, I would have had him drawn and quartered in the town square and made an example of.” She saw Colin looking at her incredulously. She wondered if she’d set off some alarms in his head since, after all, the man was a police officer. “What?”

“I’ve just never seen you angry before. I didn’t think you were capable of it,” he confessed.

“Oh, I’m capable of it all right,” Miranda assured him. “Cruelty of any kind gets me very angry —especially when it comes to children or animals.” She saw his reaction. “Why are you grinning?”

For once his poker face failed him. “You look kind of...I don’t know...cute when you get angry like that. You don’t exactly fit the part of an avenging angel, that’s all.”

Miranda pressed her lips together, but her anger was abating. Her eyes did narrow a little, though. “You’re making fun of me,” she accused.

“No, not really.” He polished off yet another pizza slice. “It’s just nice to know that you have this darker side to you. Up until now,” he admitted, “I wasn’t sure you were human.”

“I’m all too human,” Miranda told him. She pushed away her plate. “I’m also stuffed.”

Colin doubted it. “You only had two and a half slices,” he pointed out.

“And I’m stuffed,” Miranda repeated.

"How?" he asked. He nodded at the dog, who was still circling the table. "Lola could probably eat more than you just did."

"Undoubtedly," Miranda agreed with a laugh. She watched the dog for a moment "She burns it all up running around in the backyard."

Colin snorted. "And you, of course, just lie around like a slug."

Tickled, Miranda grinned at his assessment. "I don't need much fuel."

He nodded at her empty plate. "Obviously."

Her attention shifted toward the open pizza box. There were several slices still in it. "Speaking of which, why don't you take what's left home with you when you go? You can do it more justice than I would. And if you leave it here, I'll only wind up giving it to Lola when she starts begging."

He sighed, shaking his head. "You're going to have to learn how to say no."

Amusement curved her mouth as she raised her eyes to his. "I'm working on it."

For just a moment, he wondered if Miranda was putting him on some kind of notice—and if she felt she needed to. Which in turn led him to wonder why. Was she afraid that he thought bringing over pizza entitled him to make a move on her?

Where the hell had that come from? Colin silently demanded. He was here because he was paying her back for the dinner she'd made him, nothing more. He certainly wasn't thinking of her in any sort of a romantic light. Just because they'd accidentally kissed didn't mean he wanted to capitalize on it—even if it had been a memorable kiss.

Damn it, he upbraided himself, he was overthinking the whole thing. Maybe he should go home now.

As he wrestled with his thoughts, Miranda rose and took her plate to the sink.

He still had part of a slice—his fifth one—on his plate. Making a decision, Colin picked up what was left of it and lowered his hand to Lola's level.

On cue, the German shepherd quickly rounded the table to his side. Colin hardly saw her open her mouth. Just like that, the pizza was gone.

"Now who's spoiling her?" Miranda asked with a knowing laugh.

Colin's shoulders rose and fell in a careless shrug. "I don't like seeing food go to waste," he told her.

"Neither do I," she replied. "Of course, if I keep this up with Lola, she is definitely going to wind up being a blimp."

He looked at the dog, who seemed to know that no more slices were coming her way tonight. With a satisfied yawn, she stretched out at his feet.

This was far too domestic a scene, Colin thought uneasily. He really should be on his way home.

But somehow, he remained sitting where he was. "I don't think there's much chance of that," he told Miranda. "She looks pretty lean to me."

"Hear that, Lola?" Miranda asked. She finished drying her hands and left the towel hanging on the hook next to the refrigerator. "The nice police officer just paid you a compliment."

Hearing her name, Lola barked in response.

Miranda's eyes crinkled as she suppressed a laugh. "She says thank you," she told Colin.

"You didn't tell me you can communicate with dogs." But to be honest, it wouldn't have surprised him if she said she did.

"You don't have to speak the language to be able to communicate," Miranda answered. Rather than sit down at the table again, she paused and glanced toward the rear of the house. "Oh, by the way, I have something for you."

"What do you mean by 'something'?" he asked warily, on his guard.

"Don't look so worried. It's not a bribe," Miranda teased. "It's harmless. Wait right here." With that, she hurried out of the kitchen. "I got it on my lunch break," she called, raising her voice so that it carried back to him.

Minutes later, Miranda returned to the kitchen, carrying a two-foot potted fir tree. The tree was decorated with a string of lights and tiny silver and blue Christmas balls.

"This is for you," she told him, setting the tree on the table. "I took a chance that you still hadn't gotten a Christmas tree."

"I didn't," he answered.

Colin was about to add that he had no plans to get one and that he never got a tree at Christmas time. The last time there'd been a Christmas tree in his house, he was living at his aunt's and the tree in question had been hers, not his.

But something stopped him from telling Miranda any of that, at least for now.

"I was going to get a bigger tree, but I didn't think you'd want it, so I settled for this small, live one," she explained.

He didn't want one at all, but since she'd gone to the trouble of going out and buying it for him, he bit his tongue and refrained from saying that.

Instead, curious, he asked her, "Did the tree come with decorations?"

"Not exactly," she confessed. "But to be honest, I didn't think you'd decorate it if I handed you a naked tree, so I did it for you. It was kind of fun, being able to deck out a Christmas tree in half an hour." Her momentum picked up as she added, "And when the season's over, you can plant it in your backyard."

"Just one problem with that," Colin told her. He broke off a small piece from one of the remaining pizza slices. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lola come to attention again. "I don't have a backyard."

Miranda never missed a beat. "Or you can transplant it into a larger pot as it starts to get bigger." Second-guessing Colin's objection to that suggestion, she offered, "I could do that for you if you're too busy."

"Because you have so much time on your hands," he said with a touch of sarcasm. He felt his conscience taking him to task. Miranda was only trying to be nice, he reminded himself. "Sorry, I didn't mean that the way it came out."

"No offense taken," she told him. "Besides, haven't you ever heard the old saying 'If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it'?"

"No, I haven't. But I'll take your word for it." He looked at the tree with its dainty ornaments and the bright red foil wrapped around its base. "Thanks. It's a nice-looking tree." He left it standing on the table for now. "But you really didn't have to get me one," Colin stressed.

"Let's just say it makes me happy doing so," she told him. "I couldn't stand the idea of you not having at least a little tree—so I got you one."

It was little, but he would have preferred an even smaller one—or better yet, none at all.

Colin pinned her with a piercing look. "But why would that bother you?" he couldn't help asking. "Not having a tree doesn't bother me."

"I know, but it does me." She could see they could go on dancing endlessly around the same point, so she tried something else. "It's a reminder of goodwill toward one another."

It took a lot to suppress the laugh that rose to his lips, but somehow, he managed. "Maybe if everyone thought the way you do, there'd be no need to be reminded. It would just be a given," Colin mused.

"That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me," she told him, her eyes misting.

"If it's so nice, why are you crying?" he asked. If he lived to be a hundred and fifty, he would never understand women.

Miranda shrugged. "I guess I'm one of those people who cries when she's happy."

Colin shook his head. "Talk about mixed signals," he murmured.

He needed to leave.

He could feel barriers weakening within him, walls being breached and beliefs he'd held as hard and fast truths dissolving like cotton candy left out in the rain.

This woman was turning him inside out without lifting a finger, he thought grudgingly. If he didn't leave now, he didn't know what sort of mental condition he'd be in by the time he did leave.

"Okay," he said, rising. "I'd better be going." Belatedly, he remembered the little Christmas tree on the table. "Thanks for the tree."

"Thank you for dinner and for coming to the hospital today," she told him. "The kids just couldn't stop talking about you after you left. You were definitely the highlight of their week."

He had no idea how to respond to that. Being on the receiving end of gratitude was totally new to him. "Yeah, no problem."

"Oh, I think it was a problem for you, which was why having you come was so special—for everyone," she added meaningfully.

"You included?"

Now why the hell had he just said that? Was he asking for trouble? Colin silently demanded.

Miranda took a breath before answering. "Me most of all."

Chapter Fourteen

The moment, wrapped in silence, stretched out for a long time. He didn't know how to respond to what she'd just said.

Me most of all.

Finally, he stumbled through an awkward answer. "Oh, um, good to know."

Miranda felt sorry for him. Colin looked completely out of his element. Deftly, she changed the direction of the conversation.

"I'll walk you to your car," she offered.

"No," he said, perhaps a little too forcefully. All he wanted to do now was to get into his vehicle —quickly—and drive away. "You don't have to," he added.

She nodded at the things still on the table. "You can't carry the Christmas tree and the pizza box at the same time."

The German shepherd presented herself right next to him, a plaintive look on her face. He read between the lines.

"Um, I think that Lola would probably prefer if I left the pizza here."

Miranda pushed the pizza along the table so it was closer to him.

"Which is exactly why you're taking it with you. Too much people food isn't good for her and you've already seen what a pushover I am around Lola."

He wasn't accustomed to women who owned their shortcomings. He found himself smiling at Miranda in acknowledgment. "That's something you're going to have to overcome when you have kids."

He'd just said when, not if, Miranda noted. Was that just a careless slip of the tongue on his part, or did Colin really see her as a mother?

She rather liked the idea that he did. Of course, that would have to mean she'd have to slow down long enough to actually have a child.

Miranda took the pizza box, leaving the Christmas tree for him to carry. When he picked it up, they began to walk to the front door.

"Disciplining is something that I think I'll delegate to my husband," she told him, adding, "He'll probably be the strong and masterful type."

Colin's laugh was dry as he thought over her comment. "He would have to be."

Miranda cocked her head, trying to decide how he meant that. "Was that a compliment or a criticism?" she asked, curious.

He was talking too much, Colin decided. That had never been a problem for him before he'd met this woman.

"Take it any way you want," he answered, thinking that being vague was the safest way to go right now.

Miranda felt Lola trying to crowd her, attempting to push her way outside.

"No, girl, you have to stay in. I'll be right back," she promised.

Tucking the pizza box under her arm, she cringed slightly as she both heard and felt the remaining slices sliding together.

With her free hand, she gently steered the dog back into the house. Then, trying not to drop the box, she pulled the door closed behind her.

Looking on, Colin said with approval, "You're making progress."

"Well, I had to," Miranda told him. "You were watching me."

"So if I wasn't here...?" He left the end of the sentence up in the air and waited for her to finish it.

She did, but not as he expected. "I wouldn't have pizza to keep away from her in the first place."

Colin shook his head, impressed despite himself. “I’ve got to say, you really do know how to dance around a subject.”

“I’ve learned from the best,” she said, grinning. She watched his brow furrow as he looked at her over his shoulder, perplexed.

Miranda hadn’t meant for it to sound cryptic. Following him to his vehicle, she explained, “Kids. They can spin tales that’ll make you dizzy.”

Stopping beside his car, Colin looked at her pointedly. “I know the feeling.”

He took his keys out of his pocket. Unlocking the doors, he put the potted Christmas tree on the floor in the rear. Taking the pizza, he placed the box on the passenger seat, then turned to face her.

“Well, thanks for your help with the pizza. And thanks for the tree,” he added belatedly.

He watched as a smile filled her eyes. “Don’t mention it. It’s the least I can do after all that joy you brought my kids.”

Her thanks made him feel awkward again. “I just showed up,” he insisted again, not wanting to make any more out of it than that. But with Miranda he should have known better.

“You did a lot more than that,” she insisted. “You brightened up their day. Their parents come as often as they can—and that’s a good thing,” she assured him. “But having you come to their ward was something out of the ordinary. Something special,” she said with feeling.

He opened his mouth and then shut it again. When he saw the curious look on her face, he told her, “Well, I’m not going to argue with you, because I’m beginning to get the feeling that no one stands a chance of winning an argument with you.”

“Sure they do,” she declared, although, offhand, she couldn’t think of a single example to cite.

“Uh-huh.” His response as he started to go reeked of skepticism.

“Oh, and Colin?” Miranda called after him, raising her voice.

Colin was about to round the hood to get into his side of the vehicle, but stopped. “Yes?”

“Promise you won’t forget and leave the tree in the car. It’s a hardy little thing, but if you leave it in the car indefinitely, it’ll wilt and lose all its needles.”

Indulging her, he promised, “I won’t forget.”

“Oh, and drive carefully,” she called after him.

Colin paused again. He should feel annoyed or insulted that, given the nature of his work, she still felt the need to say something like that to him. And yet this whole scene just made him smile. He had no idea why.

Waiting, he turned around. “Anything else?”

Miranda knew that she was pushing her luck to the absolute limit, but then nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

Taking a breath, she forged ahead. “Well, there’s a Christmas Eve party, if you’d like to come.”

He hadn’t expected her to say that; he’d just assumed she’d have more trivial slogans to send his way. “At the hospital?”

He’d done his part at the hospital and she was now focusing on the other two places where she volunteered her time.

“Well, yes, there, too,” she allowed. “But I was thinking of the shelter.”

She still wasn’t narrowing it down, he realized. “Homeless or animal?”

“Homeless. Although, now that I think about it, we are having a party at the animal shelter, too,” she told him. “It’s an adoption party. There’s one every month, but there’s an extra push to find the animals a home just before Christmas.”

“Of course there is.” Listening to her, he shook his head. It was a wonder the woman didn’t just fall over and collapse. “When do you have time for you?” he asked.

“All of this is for me,” she responded. Seeing the doubtful look on his face, she insisted, “I derive pleasure out of seeing the animals find new homes and the kids getting better and going back

to their families. And the women at the shelter taking stock of their situation and finding a way to create new lives for themselves and their children."

Saints have less to do, he thought. Colin shook his head again, but the corners of his mouth had curved ever so slightly.

"All of this is for you, huh?" He watched as she nodded with feeling. "I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before, Miranda Steele," he told her in all sincerity.

"Is that a good thing?" she asked.

"I'm thinking on it," he answered, remaining deliberately vague.

She couldn't read his expression, and her curiosity was getting the better of her even though she knew it shouldn't. "Let me know what you come up with."

"I have a feeling you'll be the first to know."

Colin suddenly found himself fighting the urge to pull her into his arms. If he didn't leave now, he might wind up doing something stupid, and as unique as this woman was, he didn't need any complications in his life.

He'd already gotten too involved with her as it was.

He needed distance, not closeness, Colin insisted silently.

So why wasn't he getting into his car and leaving? Why was he turning around and crossing back toward the woman?

Miranda was standing at the curb, ready to wave at him as he pulled away.

When instead of leaving, he approached, she looked at him uncertainly, slightly confused even while she felt her heart climbing up into her throat.

Her breath was backing up in her chest. "Did you forget something?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "My sanity."

Her confusion mounted. "I don't know what that means."

Colin didn't respond. At least not verbally. Instead, he took her into his arms just the way he'd told himself not to, and kissed her the way he knew he shouldn't.

The way every fiber of his being felt that he just had to.

Confusion ran rampant all through Miranda. One moment she was standing at the curb, getting ready to watch Colin drive down the street and disappear; the next moment she found herself smack in the middle of an old-fashioned twister, being sucked up into its very core and whirling around so hard she couldn't breathe. She certainly couldn't think or get her bearings.

But then, bearings were highly overrated, she decided.

Standing up on her toes, Miranda dug her fingertips into his shoulders in a desperate attempt to anchor herself to something solid before she was swept so completely away she would never be able to find her way back again.

This wasn't a kiss. She'd been kissed before, kissed by faceless, unremarkable men who faded from her memory before they had a chance to even walk out the door.

But this—this was an experience. A mind-blowing, incredible experience that she would remember to her dying day even if she lived to be a hundred and ten.

* * *

Colin fought the urge to deepen this kiss and take it to its natural conclusion. Fought the urge to sweep her up into his arms and carry her back inside her house so that he could make love with her. Make love with her until they were both too exhausted to even breathe.

He came within a hair's breadth of giving in to that urge, that desire.

And then a last sliver of sanity rose up, stopping him.

He couldn't do this, he silently insisted, couldn't make love with her. Because if he did, he would be willfully bringing his darkness into her world.

She was a bright, shining ray of light, bent on bringing happiness to everyone and everything. If he took this to its natural conclusion, he would be guilty of if not extinguishing that light, then at the very least dimming it considerably.

He couldn't be responsible for that, couldn't do that to her and all the other lives that Miranda would wind up touching.

Although every fiber of his being fought it, trying to keep him from following through, he separated himself from Miranda. He removed her arms, which she'd wound around his neck, and pushed them down against her sides, held them there for a long moment—until he could collect himself.

"I've got to go," he told her hoarsely.

Then, without another word, Colin got into his car and turned on the ignition. He pulled away from the curb without a single backward glance.

Then, unable to help himself, he looked in the rearview mirror.

Miranda was still standing there at the curb where he had left her.

A pang of regret seized his very being.

Colin struggled with the impulse to turn the car around and head back to her. Instead, he pushed down hard on the accelerator, determined to put more and more distance between them.

"Count yourself lucky," he said, addressing the figure that was growing progressively smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror. "You don't need someone like me in your life."

He had a very strong feeling that if he had given in to himself tonight, if he had weakened and made love to Miranda, he wouldn't have been able to walk away from her, short of being sandblasted away.

That would be a very bad thing.

For her.

* * *

Miranda had a sinking feeling as she watched Colin drive off that he could very well be gone from her life for good.

There'd been something about the set of his shoulders, about the foreboding expression on his face as he had removed her arms from around his neck and stepped away, that made her think of an iron gate coming down, separating the two of them.

Cutting her off from him.

But even so, she kept watching for him every time she looked up, every time her attention was drawn to something—a noise, a flash of light out of the corner of her eye.

Every time she raised her eyes, she was looking for Colin.

And every time she did, he wasn't there.

He wasn't leaning in the doorway of any of the hospital rooms belonging to the small patients she attended, wasn't standing across the street from the animal shelter, waiting for her to come out. He wasn't walking into the women's shelter, wasn't ringing her doorbell and standing on the front step until she opened the door.

He wasn't anywhere in her life—except in her mind, and there he had set up housekeeping, big-time.

If she was going to function properly, she was either going to have to purge him from her mind and forget all about him, or else beard the lion in his den, Miranda thought in a moment of madness.

Get hold of yourself, she silently lectured.

She was far too busy for this, far too busy to mentally dwell on a man who—a man who...

In the middle of her rounds, Miranda abruptly came to a dead stop. She'd initially been drawn to the tall, dark, silent police officer not because he could kiss like nobody's business and set her

soul on fire. She'd been drawn to him because of the sadness she saw in his eyes. She remembered thinking that Colin needed someone to brighten his world, to help him find hope and hang on to it.

He needed her, and somehow, she had lost sight of that.

But not anymore, she vowed. She was back on track and determined to strip that sadness, that darkness out of him until Officer Colin Kirby found a reason to smile of his own accord.

He could keep those lips to himself. That wasn't what was important here. What she wanted was his happiness.

And she was determined to help him find it if it was the last thing she did.

Chapter Fifteen

Despite his resolve, he couldn't seem to get Miranda out of his head. Not that day, nor the next. The harder he tried, the less success he had. His thoughts turned to the bubbly nurse over a dozen times a day. More, if he was being honest with himself.

For the first time in his adult life, Colin's laser-like focus completely failed him.

He couldn't get himself to concentrate exclusively on his work. Images of Miranda's face kept materializing in his mind's eye at the worst possible times, impeding him at every turn.

Colin had never been one to throw in the towel. He struggled to regain control over himself and his thoughts. He'd triumphed over the racking pain of losing his parents—especially his mother, who he'd been so close to—and managed to keep going during his tour overseas when more than half his platoon had been wiped out all around him.

And though they hadn't been close, guilt had skewered him when he'd lost his partner, Andrew Owens, while on the job.

But he'd managed to rise above all that, erasing it from his mind and functioning as if his insides hadn't been smashed into a thousand pieces. He did it to survive, to continue putting one foot in front of the other and moving on the path he found himself on.

But this—this was completely different. For some mysterious reason, he'd lost his ability to isolate himself, to strip all distracting thoughts from his mind.

He'd lost the ability to continue, and he knew he had to resolve this if he had any hopes of functioning and moving on with his life.

He just had to figure out how.

* * *

How had this happened? It felt as if Thanksgiving had been only yesterday, then somehow she'd blinked, and now Christmas was a week away and Miranda had more than enough to keep not just herself but half a dozen people busy.

To paraphrase Dickens, it was both the best time of the year and the worst time of the year, mainly because of all the things that were associated with the season. The shelters as well as the hospital needed her more than ever, and there was enough for her to do thirty-six hours a day if she could somehow find a way to create that many hours out of thin air.

But even with everything she had to handle, she couldn't stop thinking about Colin. Worrying about Colin. It was interfering not just with her ability to devote herself to her work as a nurse, but also as a volunteer—in both areas that used her services.

She needed to talk to Colin, she decided, and she needed to do it face-to-face, not over the phone. Any other means would be far too impersonal.

Because of the hectic pace this time of year generated, taking time off from the hospital was not an option. The only thing she could do was try to shave a little time from her volunteer work. The pace there was hectic, as well, and there were a great many demands on her time whenever she had any to spare. But she had to do this. Because not talking to Colin was unthinkable.

The problem was, since she still didn't know where the man lived, the only place she could hope to find him was along the route he patrolled or at the precinct before he went off duty.

However, both conflicted with her shift at the hospital.

Still, maybe if she played the odds and really hurried—and hopefully he was getting off late—she might be able to catch Colin before he left work for the day.

Miranda felt stressed because even if she was lucky enough to catch him, she'd have to talk fast because the women's shelter's Christmas party, the one she'd helped organize for the children, was scheduled to begin the minute she walked through the door.

She was exhausted already.

As Miranda dashed to her car, all set to take off for the precinct, her cell phone rang.

Please let it be a wrong number, she prayed as she took it out of her purse and then quickly put in her password.

The caller ID that came up belonged to the homeless shelter. Specifically, to Amelia.

Maybe the director was just checking in with her, Miranda thought, mentally crossing her fingers as she answered.

"Hi, Amelia." She used her free hand to buckle her seat belt. "What's up?"

"We've got an emergency," the woman said, without even bothering to return the greeting. "I just hung up with Santa Claus. He called to say he's stuck in traffic in LA and he's not going to be able to get here in time."

Miranda knew the director was referring to the man she had hired to play Santa for the kids at the shelter. Thinking of the children's disappointment, she felt her heart sink.

The words came out before she could stop them. "But the kids are expecting to see Santa Claus."

"I know. I know," the director answered. "The toys are here, but they're going to feel really let down that Santa Claus couldn't make it to hand them out."

Her mind going in all directions, Miranda searched for a solution. And then she thought of something. "Do you still have that old Santa suit from last year?"

"I think so," Amelia answered. "The last time I saw it, it was in the storage room, shoved behind some cans of paint. Why?"

"Find it," she told her. "I'll be at the shelter as soon as I can get there," Miranda promised, terminating the call.

So much for waylaying Colin today, she thought, dropping her phone into her purse.

"Looks like you've gotten a reprieve, Officer Kirby," Miranda murmured under her breath, starting up her vehicle and then peeling out of the hospital's parking lot.

She was going to need padding. Lots and lots of padding if she had a prayer of pulling this off. She'd have to have Amelia round up a whole bunch of pillows.

Miranda was still trying to figure out exactly what she would do as she pulled into the women's shelter's parking lot. If she hadn't been so lost in thought, she would have seen him.

As it was, she didn't.

Not until after she'd jumped out of her car and run smack-dab into him, so hard she all but fell backward. Only Colin grabbing her by the arm kept her from meeting the concrete skull-first.

Stunned, for a split second Miranda thought she was hallucinating—until her brain assured her that she really wasn't conjuring Colin up.

He felt much too real for that.

"Colin?" she cried, shaken. "What are you doing here?" Miranda still wasn't a hundred percent sure that she wasn't just imagining him, putting his face on another man's body.

The police officer released her slowly, watching her intently to make sure she was all right.

"I guess I'm not as noble as I thought," he answered with a self-depreciating shrug.

Maybe she had hit her head, Miranda thought, blinking. She didn't understand what he was telling her. "Why?"

"Because," he confessed, "I was going to stay away from you."

Miranda continued staring at him. He still wasn't making any sense to her.

"Why is staying away 'noble'?" she asked.

He might have known she'd want an explanation. This wasn't easy for him to say. "Because I would only bring you down, and you don't need that."

Miranda thought of the kids in the shelter. She was still in a hurry, but the emergency would have to wait, at least for a couple minutes. This needed to be cleared up, and it needed to be cleared up now.

"First of all," she told him, "I do have free will and a mind of my own. I'm not just some ink blotter that indiscriminately absorbs whatever happens to be spilled on it—"

"I'm not saying that you're an ink blotter!" Colin protested.

"I'm not finished," she informed him crisply. "And second of all, I can make up my own mind whom I want or don't want in my life. That's only up to you if you don't want to be in my life because you can't abide being around me."

Colin stared at her in astonishment. How could she even think that, much less say it?

"You know that's not the case." Angry at how the situation was devolving, he had to rein himself in to keep from shouting the words at Miranda.

"Well, then there's no problem, is there?" she concluded. Turning on her heel, she started to walk toward the building.

Before he could think better of it, Colin caught her by the arm to keep her from leaving. "Oh, there's a problem, all right."

Her desire to resolve this warred with her sense of responsibility. She was going to be cutting it very close, Miranda thought. For all she knew, Amelia might not have located the Santa suit yet.

"Walk with me," she requested. When Colin fell into step beside her, she asked him to elaborate on what he'd just said. "Do you want to tell me just what is the problem?"

Colin tried to smother his frustration. He felt as if he was talking to a moving target, but then, that was part and parcel of who this unique creature was.

He thought of waving away her question, or just telling her flatly, "no." But he had started this and had to be man enough to own up to it.

Colin forced himself to say, "I can't get you out of my head."

Miranda's eyes were shining. She spared him a smile as they came up to the shelter's double doors. "Still not seeing the problem."

"But you will," Colin predicted.

She highly doubted that. "Then we'll put a pin in this now and talk about it later. Right now, I have an emergency to deal with," she told him as she reached for the door's brass handle.

So she wasn't just running from him, Colin thought. Taking charge, he nudged her hand away and opened the door for her. "What sort of an emergency?"

She glanced at her watch. "The Christmas party starts in less than half an hour and Santa Claus is still in LA, stuck in traffic."

Okay, this was convoluted, even for her. "You want to run that by me again? And this time, try to speak slower than the speed of light."

Miranda took a breath. "Amelia hired this professional Santa Claus for the party, and now he can't get here in time because he's stuck in traffic. These kids have been disappointed an awful lot in their lives. I'll be damned if I'm going to let it happen again if I can do something about it."

"Just what is it you have in mind?"

"Amelia said there's an old Santa suit here at the shelter. If we can find it, I'm going to play Santa Claus."

Colin looked at her for a long moment. And then he laughed. Hard. It occurred to Miranda that she had never heard him laugh out loud like that before, but now wasn't the time she wanted to hear it. "You got a better idea?"

It took him a second to collect himself and stop laughing. "Sorry, Miranda, I don't mean to laugh at you, but you just don't look like anyone's idea of Santa Claus." He paused again, thinking. And then he nodded. "And yes, I've got a better idea."

She thought she knew what he was going to say and she shook her head, shooting down his idea.

"Just handing out the gifts to the kids isn't going to be enough. These children want Santa Claus giving them those gifts. They want to be normal and see Santa Claus, like every other kid this time of year. They've got a right to that," she insisted passionately.

Just seeing her like this nearly undid Colin. "That wasn't the idea I had," he told her. "Let's go see if we can find that Santa suit. I've got a better chance of pulling this off than you do."

It didn't happen very often, but Miranda found herself practically speechless. When she did recover, she cried, in astonishment, "Really?"

Colin nodded. "Really."

Miranda continued staring at him, waiting for some sort of a punch line. When none came, she had to ask, "You're going to willingly play Santa Claus without having me twist your arm?"

He really did like surprising her.

"Without bending any of my body parts," he assured her. "Now are we going to go on standing here talking about it or are you going to take me to wherever you think that Santa suit is stashed so we can get this show on the road?"

Her response to his question sounded incredibly like a squeal. The next second, Miranda had grabbed his hand and was dragging him through the shelter's main room.

Before they had crossed it, Amelia approached them.

"Did you find it?" Miranda asked breathlessly. "The Santa suit?"

"It's in my office." The director seemed a little surprised by the man Miranda had in tow. "Officer Kirby, it's so nice to see you again. Are you going to be joining the party?"

Before he could answer, Miranda cried, "Definitely!"

Turning on her short, stacked heel, Amelia followed Miranda and the policeman to her office.

Still somewhat bewildered, the woman sounded uncertain as she asked Colin, "You're not going to be playing Santa Claus for the children, are you, Officer Kirby?"

Glancing her way, Miranda answered the question for him. "It's a real Christmas miracle, isn't it?"

The dignified director was smiling so hard she was practically beaming. "It most certainly is. The suit's going to be a little big on you," she warned Colin. "So I found some pillows." She gestured to some stacked on the battered, secondhand easy chair that stood in the corner of her small office.

Colin briefly glanced at them. "They'll work," he told her.

Looking pleased, Amelia said, "Well, I'll give you some privacy..." And she eased herself out of her office.

"And I'll go get the sack of toys ready so you can hand them out," Miranda volunteered. "I'll meet you back here in Amelia's office. If you finish dressing before I return, wait for me. You don't want to go into the main hall empty-handed."

No matter how much Miranda had built up the importance of Santa Claus making an appearance, he knew that the toys were the main attraction. "Not a chance," he assured her.

But as he turned to look at her, he found that he was talking to himself. Miranda had already hurried off.

"That woman's got way too much energy," he murmured as he began to change.

Chapter Sixteen

Miranda turned around when she heard the office door behind her opening. About to tell Colin that she'd gotten the bulging sack of toys for him to hand out while he'd been changing into his costume, she instead wound up saying, "Wow."

"Does it fit all right?" He glanced down at himself critically.

"You look just like Santa Claus," Miranda declared. "I wouldn't have known it was you if I hadn't handed you the costume." She circled him, then nodded with approval. "Laugh."

He eyed her warily. "What?"

"Santa's jolly, remember? You're going to have to go 'ho, ho, ho' at least a few times, so let's hear it."

"Ho, ho, ho," Colin said.

"You're frowning under that beard, aren't you?" she guessed. "Never mind," she told him when he started to answer. "The beard covers it. But put some gusto into it. And here's your bag of presents." She indicated the sack next to her.

Taking hold of it, he began to swing it over his shoulder. Then his eyes widened. "You carried this here?"

"Dragged, actually," she admitted. "It's kind of heavy."

"That's an understatement," Colin muttered under his breath. "Okay, let's get this over with."

"A little more 'ho, ho, ho' spirit," she advised.

"I'm saving myself," he responded, following her back to the main room.

"Hey, look, everybody! Look who's here," Miranda called out to the children the moment Colin walked into the common area.

The space was filled with kids of all sizes who had been anxiously waiting for the legendary elf to make his appearance. As they turned almost in unison in his direction, their faces lit up with delight, Colin saw.

"It's Santa!"

"Santa's here!"

"Santa!"

A chorus of excited voices called out, creating a cacophony of eagerness and joy blended with disbelief that Santa had actually come to the shelter—and he'd made it ahead of Christmas Eve, as well.

The next second, Colin found himself surrounded as children eagerly rushed up to him.

Miranda took control. Raising her voice, she told the children, "Okay, give him a little space. We don't want to overwhelm Santa. He's still got a lot of places to visit before the holidays are here." Waving the little ones over to her side, she instructed, "Line up, kids. You'll all get your turn, I promise."

As Colin watched in surprise, the children obediently lined up as ordered and patiently awaited their turn.

His eyes shifted in Miranda's direction. This was definitely a new side to her, he thought in admiration.

"That's your cue to get started," she prompted.

"Oh, right." Colin set down his sack and opened it.

To his relief, Miranda stayed by his side the entire time and helped him hand out the gifts. As each child came up to him, she very subtly fed him his or her name to personalize the experience for the child.

Any doubts or uncertainty he'd harbored about volunteering to play Santa vanished within the first few minutes. The excitement, gratitude and awe he saw shining in the eyes of the children who surrounded him managed to create nothing short of an epiphany for Colin.

He began to understand why Miranda did what she did. Being there for these children brought about an incredibly warm feeling that he'd been unacquainted with prior to today.

He really got into the part.

* * *

Colin continued digging into the sack and handing out gifts until the very last child in line cried, "Thank you, Santa!" and hurried away, clutching her present against her.

It took him a second to process the fact that there was no one left in line. Turning toward Miranda, he asked, "Is that it?"

"Yup. You saw every last kid in the place," she told him happily.

The sack sagged as he released it, and it fell to the floor. "Good, because there's only a couple of gifts left. I would have hated to run out of presents before you ran out of kids," he told her. He saw the wide grin on her face. "What?"

"Look at you," she said proudly. "All full of Christmas spirit."

He didn't want her making a big deal of it. "There's a difference between being full of Christmas spirit and not behaving like Scrooge."

"Not in my book," Miranda responded. Leaning into him, she whispered, "Lighten up, Santa, and take the compliment."

Colin glanced down at the suit he was wearing. She saw the look in his eyes and took an educated guess as to what he was thinking. "Itchy, huh?"

He lowered his voice. "You have no idea."

"You held up your end very well," she told him. "Let's get you back to Amelia's office so you can get out of that suit." Miranda looked around at the children, all of whom were happily playing with their toys from Santa. Some were still regarding their gifts in awe. "C'mon, the coast is clear," she whispered. "Let's go."

Following her lead, Colin slipped out of the room. When he didn't hear any of the children calling after him, he breathed a sigh of relief and quickly went down the hall to the small office at the rear of the building.

He went in and was surprised when Miranda followed.

"I'll leave in a minute," she promised, "so you can get out of that costume. I just wanted to indulge a fantasy."

"A fantasy?" he questioned, surprised. She struck him as being so squeaky clean, so grounded, and not the type to have fantasies. His curiosity was aroused. "What kind of a fantasy?"

Mischief danced in her eyes. "I've always wanted to know what it was like to kiss Santa Claus," she told him. "Do you mind?"

Was she kidding? He could feel the whiskers in his fake beard spreading as he grinned. "Not at all."

Miranda wasn't certain just what had possessed her to behave like this. Maybe it was the fact that Colin had volunteered—of his own accord—to help, and by doing so, had literally managed to save the day, which in turn had created a really warm feeling within her.

Or maybe it was because the memory of that last kiss was still lingering on her mind, making her long for a replay. Besides, there was something safe about kissing "Santa Claus" here in the director's office, with a building full of people nearby.

Whatever excuse she gave herself didn't really matter. What did matter was that a moment after she'd asked, she found herself being kissed by "Santa."

Or more specifically, by Colin.

And she discovered that the third time around was even better.

This time, her knees turned to mush right along with the rest of her, and she really did have to hold on for dear life as Colin/Santa deepened the kiss by soul-melting degrees until her mind slipped into a black hole.

Only the sudden awkward noise in the doorway kept the kiss from totally engulfing not just her but both of them.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I—I didn't mean to interrupt," Amelia stuttered, obviously embarrassed about having walked in on them like this. Averting her eyes and addressing the nearby wall, she said, "I just wanted to thank you, Officer Kirby. You really made all those kids extremely happy."

The director turned her head slowly, as if to make sure it was safe to look at them. She breathed a sigh of relief to see that neither was annoyed with her for the accidental intrusion.

"Well, I've said my piece," she added, "so I'll leave you two alone. Thank you again, Officer Kirby."

"Um, yeah. Don't mention it. I got a kick out of it," Colin confessed.

"I'll wait for you out here," Miranda told him, quickly slipping out of the room right behind Amelia. She closed the door in her wake.

When he came out less than five minutes later, the director was nowhere in sight. However, true to her word, Miranda was standing out in the hall close by, waiting for him.

"I'm leaving the suit on the chair in the office," Colin said, nodding toward the room.

"That's perfect," Miranda assured him. "Amelia'll put it away until next year."

He'd already forgotten about the costume. His mind was on something more important. He searched for the right words.

"Are you going home?" he asked.

Miranda nodded. "Lola's waiting for her dinner. She's probably right in front of the door."

"So she's still with you." It wasn't really a question. He'd just assumed that the dog had become more or less of a fixture at Miranda's house, even though she'd called the situation temporary.

Miranda smiled as she nodded. "Still with me. And I have to say that I'm really getting used to having her around."

"Then why not keep her?"

"It wouldn't be fair," she told him. "Lola needs kids to play with."

He didn't understand why she thought that. "What that dog needs more is love, and you seem to have that covered."

His comment surprised her. It wasn't like him. "I think that Santa suit transformed you."

Colin waved away her assessment. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just say it like it is. Speaking of which..." He let his voice trail off as he framed his next sentence. He didn't want her getting the wrong idea, but didn't want to be so low-key that she turned him down.

When he paused, Miranda cocked her head, waiting for him to finish. "Yes?"

"Would you mind if I came home with you? Just for a while," he qualified a little too quickly. "I feel like I need to wind down a bit after this whole Santa thing."

She laughed. "Too much adulation to handle?" she guessed, amused. This had to be all new to him.

He shrugged carelessly. "Something like that. Is it all right?" he asked, still waiting for her to tell him whether or not he could come over.

"Sure," Miranda replied, wondering why Colin would think that it wouldn't be. "Lola would love to see you."

He laughed drily. Miranda made it sound as if he had some sort of a relationship with the German shepherd. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I am," she said, hooking her arm through his. Thinking he might like to leave with a minimum of fuss, she suggested, "We can take the side door if you want to avoid walking through the main room and running into the kids."

"No, that's all right," he told her. "We can go out the front."

He really had changed, she marveled. And she definitely liked this new, improved Colin. "Maybe you should have put on that Santa suit earlier."

He shrugged. It wasn't the suit; it was what had prompted him to put it on: Miranda.

"Maybe I should have," he allowed casually. "By the way, how was it?"

He'd lost her. "How was what?"

"Back in the director's office, you said you wanted to see what it felt like, kissing Santa Claus," he reminded her. He knew he was leaving himself wide-open, but he was curious about what Miranda would say. "So how was it?"

She smiled up at him and said, "Magical."

He had no idea if she was kidding or not, but they had just entered the common room. Most of the kids were still there and he didn't want to say anything that could draw attention to them, so made no comment on her response.

As they crossed the floor to the front door, he saw the director looking their way. Colin nodded at the woman and she mouthed, "Thank you." He smiled in response but kept walking.

"I've got a question for you," Miranda said once they were out the door and in the parking area.

Colin braced himself. "Go ahead."

It was already cold and the wind had picked up. Miranda pulled her jacket more tightly around herself. "How did it feel to save the day? Or is that something you've pretty much gotten used to, being a police officer and all?"

Colin laughed to himself, shaking his head. She was serious, he realized. "Miranda, I'm a motorcycle cop, remember? I usually ruin people's day, not save it."

"You know, it doesn't have to be that way."

"Oh? And what is it that you suggest?" he asked, humoring her.

"Well, did you ever think about switching departments?" Miranda asked.

Colin grew solemn. "I was in a different department when I worked in LA."

"What happened?"

His expression grew grim as he remembered. "My partner got killed. On the job," he added. Confronted with that information, she would surely drop the subject. But he'd obviously forgotten who he was dealing with.

"All right," she said slowly, processing what he'd just told her and extrapolating. "Bedford's got a canine unit. You could ask to be transferred there," she told him. She thought of the way he interacted with Lola. "You'd be really good at it."

"We'll see," Colin answered, just to get her to stop taking about it.

But Miranda was on to the way he operated. "Just something to think about," she told him. For now, she tabled the subject. Pointing to her vehicle, which was farther down the lot, she said, "I'm parked over there. Do you want to follow me home?"

"I do know where you live, Miranda," Colin reminded her.

Miranda's smile widened as she inclined her head. "Then I'll see you there. I'll make dinner," she added.

He didn't want her to feel obligated. "You don't have to—"

"I've got to eat," she told him. "And I've seen you eat, so I know that you do, too." She gave him a knowing look. "You don't have to turn everything into a debate, Colin."

He supposed he was guilty of that—at least part of the time. "You do have a way with words."

She grinned. "As long as you know that, everything'll be fine."

He wasn't sure about that, Colin thought, as he walked over to his car. Ever since he'd met Miranda, he'd been doing things completely out of character.

Getting into his vehicle, he started it up and pulled out of the parking lot.

His simple routine of eat, sleep, work, repeat, had gone completely out the window. Ever since he'd moved back to Bedford, he hadn't socialized, even remotely. But since he'd crossed paths with Miranda, he found himself entertaining strange thoughts. He wanted to socialize. How else could he explain what he had done today?

Never in his wildest dreams would he have thought that he'd put on a Santa suit, much less wear it for more than two hours the way he'd done, while handing out toys to a whole bunch of kids. Even letting those kids crawl onto his lap, and not just putting up with having some of them hug him, but actually, deep down in his soul, liking it.

It felt as if he'd lost sight of all the rules he'd always adhered to. Not just lost sight of them but willfully abandoned them.

If he wasn't careful, he would never be the same again.

What "if"? he silently jeered. There was no "if" about it. He wasn't the same now—and did he even want to be?

All these years, he'd been sleepwalking, moving like a shadow figure through his own life—and that wasn't living at all, he silently insisted.

For weeks now he'd kept thinking that if he hadn't crossed paths with Miranda, his life wouldn't have been turned upside down. As if that was a bad thing.

But maybe it wasn't. Maybe it—and she—had actually been his salvation.

And maybe, he told himself as he approached Miranda's house, he'd be better off if he just stopped thinking altogether.

Chapter Seventeen

Colin never got a chance to ring Miranda's doorbell. The front door flew open the minute he walked up to it.

Seeing the surprised look on his face, Miranda explained, "Lola heard your car pulling up and she barked to let me know you were here. I looked out the window and saw she was right."

Walking in, Colin paused to pet the German shepherd's head. He didn't really have much of a choice since she was blocking his path into the house.

"She let you know it was me," he repeated incredulously.

Moving around them, Miranda smiled as she closed the door. "She has a different bark when a stranger comes."

"I'm flattered, Lola." In response, the dog jumped up, placing her paws against his chest. He had a feeling he knew what she was after. "I'm sorry, girl, I don't have anything for you this time. I came straight here from the shelter."

"Don't worry," Miranda said. "I'm always prepared." To his surprise, she reached around the dog and slipped something into the front pocket of his jeans. "I'm not getting fresh," she told him. "I'm just giving you a couple of treats to give her. What?" she asked, when she saw the amused expression on his face.

"I don't think I've ever heard that phrase—getting fresh—outside of an old movie from the sixties, maybe earlier. No offense," he added quickly. "I think it's kind of cute."

"None taken—now that you've redeemed yourself," she added cheerfully. "C'mon, dinner's on the table."

Colin stared at the back of her head, stunned, as he followed her to the dining room. "How did you manage to get anything ready so fast? You couldn't have gotten here more than five minutes ago."

"Ten," she corrected. "I know a shortcut. And I really didn't have to cook. Those are leftovers from yesterday." She gestured at the covered tureen in the center of the table. "Nothing fancy. Just some chicken Alfredo over angel-hair spaghetti."

"Leftovers," Colin repeated, nodding. "That makes more sense. I didn't think even you were that fast."

She dished out the spaghetti, then the chicken Alfredo, first on one plate, then the other.

"Am I being challenged?" she asked him, the corners of her mouth curving.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said, then qualified, "Unless you wanted me to."

All she wanted right now was to sit down to a peaceful dinner with him.

"Eat," she prompted. "Dinner's getting cold. And, you," she said, looking down at Lola, who had presented herself at the table. "Let the man eat in peace, girl. He already gave you a bribe."

He was amused by the dog's antics. "I think she's expecting more."

Miranda sighed. "You were right. I have been spoiling her. But her new owner is going to do a better job of making her toe the line," she said.

Surprised, Colin lowered his fork. "New owner? Lola's been adopted?"

Miranda nodded, looking oddly calm to him. He would have expected her to be more upset. "Her papers were all put through and her fee was paid."

"Fee?" he questioned. He had no idea how pet adoption was conducted.

"Every dog and cat that the shelter takes in gets all their shots and they're neutered or spayed, depending on the animal's gender. When they're adopted, the new owner is charged a nominal fee for those services. It's to ensure that the next homeless animal can be taken care of."

Something didn't make sense to him. "If Lola's been adopted, why is she still here?" he asked.

The surge of disappointment he was experiencing over the news of the adoption really caught him off guard. He realized with a pang that he was going to miss Lola once her owner picked her up.

"That's rather a funny story," Miranda answered. "I'll tell it to you once we finish eating."

Colin filled in the blanks: they were going to be taking Lola to her new owner right after dinner. That was why Miranda was holding off telling him the story until later.

He honestly didn't know if he wanted to go with her. Watching the German shepherd being handed over to someone else wasn't something he wanted to witness.

But then it occurred to him that maybe Miranda was asking him to come along because she was going to need some moral support for this. He knew that she had gotten close to the animal. She'd said as much herself. What surprised him was that he had, too.

Picking up his fork again, Colin continued to eat, but he was no longer tasting anything and twice had to rouse himself because he'd missed what Miranda was saying.

"You're awfully quiet," she noted, finishing her dinner.

"I'm just thinking," Colin told her without elaborating.

"Okay," she announced, rising from the table. "Let's do this."

He looked at the empty plates on the table. She was leaving them where they were. "You're not going to do the dishes first?"

"They can wait," she told him loftily. "I'll do them later."

That wasn't like her. Giving up Lola and taking her to her new owner was undoubtedly hard on Miranda, he thought. He wanted to shield her from this, but had no idea how.

"Okay, let's get it over with," he told her.

Responding, Miranda took his hand and led him into the living room.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked, nodding at Lola. Miranda hadn't stopped to put a leash on the dog. In fact, she'd left her in the dining room, gnawing on a bone that she had given her.

"I don't think so," Miranda answered innocently.

Instead of walking to the front door, she stopped in front of the Christmas tree. Bending down, she picked up a flat, rectangular box sporting shiny blue wrapping paper and held it out to him.

"Merry Christmas," Miranda declared. "A little early."

"What is it?" he asked, perplexed.

When he didn't take it from her, she gently shoved the box into his hands. "You could open it and see."

She was being very mysterious about this, Colin thought. Still not opening it, he told her uncomfortably, "I didn't get you anything."

"You've given me more than you think—and you were Santa Claus for all those kids," she added. "Now, are you going to open that? Or are you going to just keep looking at it?"

He would have preferred going with the latter, but knew that wouldn't be fair to her, especially after she had gone through all the trouble of not just getting him something but wrapping it, as well.

Colin made his decision. "I'll open it."

"Good choice," she told him with approval. Watching him do so, she could only marvel. "You tear off wrapping paper slower than anyone I've ever seen." Finally, he finished removing the wrapping paper to reveal a decorative gift box beneath. "Now take the top off the box and see what's in it," she coaxed.

When he did, Colin found paperwork. Specifically, paperwork that belonged to Lola, saying that she'd received her rabies vaccination as well as a number of other vaccinations. There was also confirmation of a license registration with the city of Bedford that was good for one year. The certificate stated that her name was Lola Kirby and that she belonged to—

Colin's head jerked up. "Me?" he asked, stunned. "I'm Lola's owner?"

Nodding, Miranda told him, "I didn't know what to get you for Christmas and then it came to me. You needed to have a friendly face to come home to, and Lola needed a home. It seemed like the perfect solution."

"But I can't take care of her," he protested. "I'm never home."

"Sure, you can take care of her. And when you need to take a break, you can leave her with me. I'll dog-sit Lola for you," she volunteered cheerfully.

He was as close to being speechless as he had ever been in his life. Shaking his head, Colin muttered, "I don't know what to say—you're crazy, you know that?"

"I would have accepted 'Thank you, Miranda. It's just what I wanted,'" she responded. Then, growing serious, she told him, "I saw it in your eyes, you know. The way you felt about Lola."

Moved, he came closer to her. So close there was hardly any space for even a breath between them. His gaze met hers. "What else did you see in my eyes?"

Lola was still in the dining room, working away at her soup bone. Except for the sound of teeth meeting bone, there was nothing but silence in the house.

Silence and heat.

"What else was I supposed to see in your eyes?" Miranda asked, her voice dropping to barely a whisper. Her mouth suddenly felt extremely dry, even as she felt her pulse accelerating, going double time.

"You, Miranda," he replied softly. "You were supposed to see you."

She could hardly breathe. "I thought that was just wishful thinking on my part," she confessed.

"You're trembling," he said.

She couldn't seem to stop. Grasping at straws, she said the first thing that came to mind. "It's cold in here."

"Then I guess I'll have to warm you up," Colin told her, his voice low and seductive as he took her into his arms.

The next thing she knew, Colin had lowered his mouth to hers.

And then the whole world slipped into an inky, endless abyss. There was nothing left except the two of them.

This time, there was no hesitation, no second thoughts.

For the first time since he'd met her, he felt no need to put on the brakes, or to tell himself that being with her like this was a mistake.

He wanted her.

Wanted her more than he wanted to breathe.

Because he had come to understand that this woman was what made his existence worthwhile. Just by being herself, she had brought happiness into his life. She'd taken his dark existence and illuminated it, bringing color into his world.

Color and warmth and desire in such proportions they completely overwhelmed him.

And humbled him.

He kissed Miranda over and over again, each kiss more soul-stirring than the one that had come before it. And then, just as she was about to utterly succumb to the passion that was making her head spin, he drew back for a moment.

Miranda felt confusion taking hold.

Oh Lord, he wasn't stopping again, was he? She didn't think she could bear it if he stopped.

Colin drew in a shaky breath. He needed to make his intention clear to her. He didn't want Miranda to look back on this later and feel that he had somehow used the madness of the moment to take advantage of her.

He wanted to be sure—and most of all, he wanted her to be sure.

"Miranda, I want to make love with you."

A laugh escaped her lips, a laugh of relief. "It's about time."

And then suddenly, just like that, everything felt right.

He kissed her with more eagerness than he thought he could possibly possess. His lips never left hers as desire surged through him, guiding him.

Controlling him.

He didn't remember undressing her, but he remembered every smooth, tempting curve of her body once her clothing had been stripped away. Remembered the thrill of passing his hands slowly over her silky skin. Remembered the rush he felt as he mentally cataloged every part of her, making it his.

Passion grew to incredible proportions, demanding an appeasement that couldn't be reached, because each time he drew closer to the peak, it moved that much further out of reach, tempting him to kept going, to keep taking refuge in all parts of her, in everything she had to offer.

The sound of her breathing, growing shorter and more audible, drove him wild.

He wanted to take her now, this moment. Wanted to bury himself in her. But with iron control, he reined himself in.

For her.

He wanted Miranda to remember this night, to remember him, and for that to happen, he needed to slow down. To make this all about her—and that, in turn, would make it about them, which had become so very important to him.

Sweeping her up in his arms, he carried her to her bedroom. He closed the door with his back, automatically creating their own private little world. Carrying her over to her bed, Colin placed her down on it gently.

His heart was hammering in his chest and echoing in his head as he lay down beside her. Demands collided within him, making it increasingly difficult to hold himself in check, to not give in to the ever-mounting desire just to take her.

Somehow, he managed to pace himself, but it was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Trailing his lips along Miranda's body, he anointed every part of her, thrilling to the sight and to the feel of her growing more and more excited. She was twisting and turning beneath him as if trying to absorb every sensation that he was creating for her.

With her.

When she ran her hands up and down his torso, when she turned the tables and mirrored all his movements, spiking his desire to unbelievable heights, Colin came exceedingly close to losing total control. But again, at the last moment, he caught himself, vowing to go one more round before he surrendered and made them into one joined being.

He feasted on her lips, the hollow of her throat, working his way down to her belly and farther. Her unbridled gasp when he brought her to her first climax reverberated within his chest, exciting him so much that he tottered on the very edge of restraint.

And then, fearing he couldn't hold on for even another heartbeat, Colin worked his way back up along her damp body, with Miranda rising and twisting against him as he went.

Suddenly, he was over her, his eyes meeting hers, his fingers entwining with hers.

Her legs parted beneath him, issuing a silent invitation he welcomed with every fiber of his aching being. When he entered her, they instantly moved together as if this was the way it was always meant to be. The tempo increased, the rhythm grew to demanding proportions that neither of them was capable of resisting.

Passion wrapped heated wings around them as they raced to the very top of the summit. To the very end of their journey.

When the explosion finally came, fireworks of majestic dimensions showered over them.

And Colin clung to her as if she was his very salvation.

Because she was.

Chapter Eighteen

A myriad of feelings vied for space within Colin as the heated, comforting glow of euphoria he'd been experiencing slowly began to recede. Feelings he wasn't able to completely sort out just yet.

Feelings that had been missing from his life for more than a decade.

As fierce passions settled down, he drew Miranda to him, happy just to have her here next to him on the bed. Contentment, something he was unfamiliar with up until now, washed over him.

He felt like a different person.

Colin wondered if there was a way he could remain here like this indefinitely, her breath mingling with his, the scent of the light, flowery body wash she used filling his senses.

He came close to drifting off when a noise caught his attention.

Moving his head to hear better, Colin couldn't quite place the sound. "You hear something?" he asked Miranda.

She turned her face toward him, managing to rub her cheek against his chest. He could literally feel her smile on his skin.

Raising her head just a little, she looked at him. "You can't tell what that is?"

"So then you do hear something." He was beginning to think that he was imagining it.

"Sure. That's Lola scratching against the door," she murmured. "I guess she finished gnawing on that bone and decided to track you down."

"Me?" he questioned. "Why me?" It didn't make any sense to him.

"My guess is that she wants your attention." He could feel heat beginning to travel through his body again as every inch of Miranda seemed to be smiling at him. "Why don't you open the door and let her in?"

"In here?" he asked, surprised.

Miranda didn't see why he would hesitate. "Why not? She's got the run of the place already."

"But we just, um..." Colin seemed to trip over his tongue.

She hadn't thought that he could be this incredibly sweet, so delicate that he didn't know how to go about saying that they'd just made love. She came to his rescue and glossed right over his meaning.

"Which is why she probably tracked you down," Miranda told him. "Lola knows that you're the alpha male and she wants to be the alpha female."

Colin stared at the woman in his arms, stunned as well as confused. "This is getting way out of hand. I don't understand any of it."

Miranda laughed. "Don't worry," she said, patting his chest. "I'm here to talk you through this if you need help. Just think of Lola as a fuzzy child. She needs discipline, a firm hand and lots of love—just like any child."

Colin sat up, looking at the door. The scratching continued.

He dragged a hand through his hair, trying to think, and feeling totally out of his element. "Taking care of a dog is a lot of responsibility."

"Yes, but it has a lot of compensation, too. Like boundless love."

He still looked uncertain. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

Since he wasn't getting up, Miranda did, wrapping the sheet around her.

"Not ready for being on the receiving end of boundless love? Sure you are," she exclaimed, making it sound as if she knew him better than he knew himself.

But he was thinking of the responsibility part. "No, if I'm going to be her new owner, I'm definitely going to need help," he said, looking at Miranda pointedly.

Meanwhile, she had opened the door and Lola came flying in. In two steps the German shepherd went from standing out in the hallway to standing on the bed. She came close to knocking Colin off the mattress in her enthusiasm and then started licking his face.

"Lots and lots of help," Colin declared, doing his best to sit up again and gain some semblance of the upper hand over the dog.

Miranda laughed as, still wearing the sheet like a Roman toga, she climbed back into bed. Lola was between them and was acting as if this was some sort of new game. Her head practically spun as she looked from one of them to the other, as if to say that she didn't know the rules to this game yet, but was more than willing to play.

Watching her, Miranda stated, "I think she wants you to pet her."

Stroking the animal, he looked over Lola's head at Miranda. "Now you see, I'm going to need that sort of insight to help me navigate through this pet ownership thing."

She was certainly on board with that, Miranda thought. "Like I said, you can give me a call anytime you need help."

"I appreciate that," he told her. "But then you'd have to find the time to come over, or I'd have to come over to you and bring the dog. That would consume an awful lot of downtime and we're both pretty busy as it is."

She knew she'd taken a chance when she'd decided to make him Lola's owner, but she'd thought he would last longer than a few hours.

Miranda took a breath, resigning herself to the inevitable. "You're saying you don't want the dog." She gave it one more shot, taking Lola's muzzle in her hands and turning the dog's head in his direction. "How can you say no to this face?"

"I'm not saying no," Colin told her. "I'm saying we need a different solution."

She took the only guess open to her. "You're saying you want her to stay with me."

But Colin shook his head. Stroking the dog's back—Lola had settled down and was now lying in the bed, content to have one of them on either side—he said, "That's not it, either."

At a loss now, she asked, "All right then, so what is it?"

Nerves all but got the better of him. This was brand-new territory for him and he didn't know how she would receive what he was about to say. "If you stop making guesses and just listen, I'll tell you." The moment the words were out of his mouth, he knew he'd sounded short with her.

"Okay." Miranda crossed her arms, waiting for him to go on.

The sheet slipped down just enough to give him a tantalizing glimpse of what he'd availed himself of earlier. Thinking about that, Colin found he had to struggle to keep his mind on what he was trying to say.

"So talk," she prompted, when he remained silent.

Here went nothing, Colin decided.

"I thought that we could move in together," he told her.

He was surprised that the words came out as easily as they did.

Miranda's mouth dropped open. But not a single sound emerged.

She was speechless, he realized, and he didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad one. Was she trying to find the words to turn him down gently, or was she so shocked that she'd lost the ability to talk?

"Move in together," she said, repeating his words.

"Yes," he confirmed, then went on to elaborate. "You could move in with me. But my place is small. It's an apartment and it might be kind of crowded for you, especially with Lola. Or I could move in here," he said, watching Miranda's face intently for her reaction.

"Move in together," she repeated again. "For the sake of the dog." The last words were uttered in semidisbelief.

"Well, yes," he agreed. Something was off and he felt like a man trying to walk across a lake on very thin ice. He could feel the ice cracking beneath his feet with every step he took, yet he had no choice but to forge on. "You were the one who gave her to me, so I figured you'd want to do what was best for her."

"You want to move in together because of the dog," she said, as if trying to wrap her mind around what he was telling her.

"Well, that's one reason," he agreed. He was having a devil of a time getting the words out.

"Oh, so there's another reason?" she asked innocently.

Feeling awkward and totally inarticulate, not to mention afraid of being turned down once he told her the real reason behind his suggestion, Colin seriously thought about throwing up his hands and just abandoning the whole idea, lock, stock and barrel.

But then something egged him on.

It was all or nothing.

If he didn't say anything, he'd already lost, so there was nothing to lose by speaking up.

Frustrated, he shouted at her, "Of course there's another reason."

Lola instantly sat up, a canine barrier intent on protecting whichever one of them needed protecting.

"It's okay, Lola," Miranda said soothingly, rubbing the tip of the animal's ear, a trick she'd learned to calm a dog down. "It's okay. Lie down, girl."

After a moment, the dog obeyed.

"Okay," Miranda said, turning her attention back to him. "You were saying there was another reason..." She trailed off, waiting for him to pick up the conversation.

"You know there's another reason," he told her. When she continued silently looking at him, waiting, he blew out a breath. "You're going to make me say this, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so." The corners of her mouth curved ever so slightly. "I need clarification, Colin. What's the other reason you want us to move in together?"

Exasperated, he raised his voice again. "Because I love you, damn it."

She struggled not to laugh. "Is that one word?"

"Miranda..." He sounded very close to the end of his rope.

Once again she came to his rescue. "I love you, too, damn it," Miranda said, mimicking his exact intonation. And then she asked, "Are you sure about this?" She would hate for him to look back with regret because it had all come about in the heat of the moment.

"Sure that I love you?" he questioned. "Yes, I'm sure. I just didn't want to have to say it. Putting myself out there is hard for me," he told her. "It's not something I do."

Reaching over the dog, who appeared to be close to falling asleep, she touched Colin's face and smiled. "I was talking about moving in together, but what you just said was very nice."

"Just 'very nice'?" he asked in surprise, mimicking her intonation.

There was humor in Miranda's eyes as she told him honestly, "I'm afraid if I say any more, I'll scare you off."

"After everything I've just been through, that is not going to happen," he stated.

"Since words are so difficult for you—" Miranda rose up on her knees, allowing the sheet to fall away and pool around her thighs "—why don't I just show you how I feel about what you said?"

She was about to lean into him when Colin put a finger to her lips, stopping her. "Hold that thought."

The next moment, he got off the bed, coaxing the dog to do the same. Holding on to Lola's collar, he guided the animal to the bedroom's threshold.

"C'mon, girl," he told her, "you need to go back into the other room for a few minutes."

"Just a few minutes?" Miranda pretended to question him.

"Maybe an hour—or two," he amended.

After taking Lola out, Colin was gone for a couple minutes. Returning, he made sure to close the door behind him.

Miranda cocked her head, listening for a moment for scratching noises.

Or whining.

She heard neither.

"Nothing," she said. "You really are good at disciplining." She wove her arms around his neck as he joined her.

Rather than say anything in response to her compliment, Colin murmured, "I hope you didn't have any plans for that other soup bone in the refrigerator."

So that was why the dog was so quiet. Miranda could only laugh. "You're as bad as I am."

"I really hope so," he told her.

And with that, there was no more talk. About anything. He had far better things to do than talk, and was more than eager to get started.

Epilogue

"Ladies, I think that it's pretty safe to say this is quite possibly the most unique wedding venue we have ever attended," Maizie told her two friends as she sat on the white folding chair between Theresa and Celia.

There was row after row of folding chairs in the hospital rec room, in the same area of the children's ward that just a few months ago had housed the giant Christmas tree.

The large room was all but filled to capacity with small patients from the ward, a great many women and children from the shelter, and several volunteers who worked with Miranda at the animal shelter.

"Thank goodness Miranda's mother and Colin's aunt were here early to make sure the altar was set up before it got so crowded in here," Theresa commented.

She and her catering team had arrived early, as well. Working quickly, they had prepared everything for the reception that was to follow immediately after the ceremony.

"If they knew there was going to be this many people attending, why didn't they just opt for someplace bigger?" Celia asked.

"That's simple enough to answer," Theresa told her. "Miranda didn't want the children here missing the wedding. A lot of them aren't able or well enough to leave the hospital—and all of them are very attached to her. Miranda wouldn't dream of leaving any of them out."

Maizie nodded, pleased. "You ask me, Colin's getting a hell of a girl," she said to her friends. "There aren't many young women who are that thoughtful."

Theresa was beaming as she kept her eyes peeled for any sign that the bride was about to enter. "I really think that we outdid ourselves with this particular match, girls."

"Well, none of this would have happened if Maizie hadn't charmed that desk sergeant into rescheduling Colin's regular route so that he'd be right there when Miranda whizzed by," Celia commented. She turned toward Maizie. "How did you know that Miranda would be driving too fast?"

"And how did you really get that sergeant to change Colin's schedule with the other police officer's?" Theresa asked.

Maizie merely smiled, remaining tight-lipped, at least for now. "A girl's got to have some secrets, ladies," she told them with a wink.

"Not at this stage she doesn't," Celia told her lifelong friend.

"Shh, they're starting to play the wedding march. You don't want to miss any of this," Maizie said.

Those who could rose to their feet. The rest of the attendees remained seated, anxiously anticipating the entrance of the bride.

Miranda was standing just outside the recreation room's closed doors, holding on to her bouquet of pink and white carnations and willing the sudden burst of butterflies in her stomach to go away.

"Nervous, darling?" Jeannine asked her daughter.

"A little. Mostly just afraid of tripping before I reach the altar," Miranda answered, a small smile curving her lips.

"You won't," Jeannine said confidently. "You're the steadiest person I ever knew."

Miranda took a breath, pressing one hand against her stomach as if that would get the butterflies to settle down.

"I wish your father was here," Jeannine said in a soft whisper. "He would have loved to see you in your bridal gown."

"He's here, Mom. I can feel it." The music swelled. Miranda took a breath. "That's our cue."

"I love you, Miranda," Jeannine told her.

"And I love you." She looked at her mother. The woman's cheeks were wet. "Please don't cry, Mom. You'll get your contacts all foggy."

Jeannine laughed, brushing the tears away. "Don't worry, I'll get you there. I promise."

The doors parted, drawn open by two of the orderlies. Miranda saw a sea of faces turning in her direction, but they all blended together before her eyes. Looking out at them, she could make out only one face in that enormous crowd.

The only face that mattered to her right at this moment.

Colin's face.

He was standing at the altar, looking incredibly handsome in his black tuxedo and dark gray shirt. She had half expected him to come in his police uniform. She wouldn't have cared what he wore, as long as he came.

"Ready, darling?" Jeannine asked.

Her eyes not leaving the man she had never expected to come into her life, Miranda answered, "More than ready, Mom."

They made their way up the makeshift aisle until they reached the minister, who was standing in front of the altar, waiting to say the words that would join her to Colin.

"Who gives this woman?" the man asked when she came before him.

"I do," Jeannine replied, her voice trembling. And then she withdrew so that the ceremony could begin.

"You look beautiful," Colin whispered to Miranda.

"You do, too," she told him.

He nearly laughed. It was a good feeling, he couldn't help thinking. Miranda had brought laughter into his life and into his heart.

More than a few of the children giggled as they watched Lola trot up the aisle next, the wedding rings tied around her neck with a navy blue bow.

"We can begin," the minister announced.

Colin never thought he would ever be this lucky. When he looked at Miranda, just before they began to exchange their vows and their rings, he realized that she was thinking the same thing.

He could see it in her eyes.

They really were meant for one another, he thought. And he for one would always be eternally grateful for that.

* * * * *

One Winter Wedding
Once Upon a Wedding
Stacy Connelly
Bridesmaid Says, 'I Do!'
Barbara Hannay
The Morning After the Wedding Before
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Once Upon a Wedding

Stacy Connelly
To all my friends—
Thanks for being as excited about my dream
coming true as I have been.

Chapter One

I can't believe I'm doing this, Kelsey Wilson thought as she hurried through the airport as fast as possible in her straight skirt and low-heeled pumps. Her oversized purse thudded against her side with every step. The shoulder strap caught a lock of red hair that had escaped her sensible bun, and she felt as though someone had reached out and grabbed her. Holding her back from the job she had to do.

The family is counting on you, Kelsey. Her aunt's voice rang in her mind. *You know what can happen when a woman falls for the wrong kind of man.*

Kelsey hadn't needed Aunt Charlene's reminder. She had her mother as an example. Olivia Wilson had thrown away everything for a man who left her with nothing. Olivia had been eighteen when she met Donnie Mardell—Kelsey's father, though she never thought of him in those terms. Donnie had promised Olivia a love of a lifetime, as well as freedom from her too-strict parents, and she fell for every word. When her father made her choose between Donnie and her family, Olivia chose Donnie. But while Olivia may have had stars in her eyes, Donnie had dollar signs in his. When the Wilsons offered him money to leave town, he took it without a glance back at his girlfriend or unborn child.

But Kelsey's cousin Emily hadn't fallen for the wrong man. She was engaged to Todd Dunworthy. The only son of a wealthy Chicago family, he'd come to Scottsdale to start his own company and add to his already considerable fortune. Todd was handsome, charming, and Charlene couldn't have handpicked a better son-in-law.

Kelsey had worked nonstop for the past two months to put together the perfect wedding. The dress, the flowers, the music, the cake, everything wove together like the hand-stitched Irish lace in Emily's veil. But Kelsey knew how delicate that lace was. One wrong pull, and it could all fall apart.

She refused to let that happen.

She *needed* this wedding to be amazing. She'd staked her reputation on the success of the ceremony, certain her cousin's wedding was the spotlight that would make her business shine. She'd been so sure of that she'd put most of her savings into a down payment for a small shop in Glendale. Kelsey had felt confident making the huge step. After all, her aunt and uncle were wealthy, influential people with wealthy, influential friends. Once the guests saw the job she'd done, Weddings Amour would flourish.

Even more important, her aunt and uncle would see that she, too, could succeed, that she was more than the poor relation they'd taken into their home. She'd been sixteen when her mother died, sixteen when Olivia finally admitted she was not an only child as she'd led Kelsey to believe. Olivia had an older brother, a sister-in-law and two nieces…total strangers who became Kelsey's only family.

Hold your head high, Olivia had whispered to Kelsey only days before passing away. Her face pale and gaunt, her blond hair long gone, her mother's eyes still blazed with the pride that empowered her to walk away from her family when she'd been pregnant at eighteen. *You may not have been raised as one of the wealthy Wilsons, but you're going to show them what an amazing young woman you are.*

Tears scalding her throat like acid, Kelsey had promised. She'd had no idea how difficult—how *impossible*—keeping that promise would be.

Finally, though, after eight years, she would have her chance to make good on her word. As a wedding planner, Kelsey had found her niche. She was organized, efficient, detail-oriented. Lessons learned as she scheduled her mother's doctor appointments, oversaw her medications and dealt with the insurance company served her well as she juggled caterers, musicians, photographers and the occasional Bridezilla.

Every wedding that ended in *I do* was a tribute to her mother's memory, and Emily's walk down the aisle would mean more than all the previous weddings. But before Emily could say her vows, Kelsey had to deal with one serious snag.

A sudden attack of nerves cartwheeling through her stomach, Kelsey swung her purse off her shoulder. She unzipped the center pocket and pulled out her day planner where, along with every detail of the wedding, she'd written the flight information. According to the listed arrivals, the plane from Los Angeles was on time.

Connor McClane was back in town.

Kelsey flipped to the front of the day planner and pulled out a photograph. Her aunt had said the picture was ten years old, which could account for the worn edges and creased corner. Kelsey feared there might be another reason. How many times had Emily stared at this photograph and wondered what might have been?

Kelsey had never met her cousin's ex-boyfriend, the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks, but the snapshot said it all. Connor McClane leaned against a motorcycle, dressed head-to-toe in black—from his boots, to the jeans that clung to his long legs, to the T-shirt that hugged his muscular chest. His arms were crossed, and he glared into the camera. A shock of shaggy dark hair, a shadow of stubble on his stubborn jaw and mirrored sunglasses completed the look.

Kelsey could tell everything she needed to know from that picture except the color of Connor McClane's eyes. The man was trouble, as bad a boy as Donnie Mardell had ever been. Kelsey knew it, just like she knew Connor was better looking in a two-dimensional photo than any living, breathing man she'd ever meet.

Stuffing the picture and her day planner back in her purse, she hurried to the waiting area, where she focused on every man headed her way. He'd be twenty-nine by now, she reminded herself, four years her senior. Kelsey didn't suppose she was lucky enough that he'd aged badly or gone prematurely bald.

A beer belly, she thought, mentally crossing her fingers. A beer belly would be good.

But at the first glimpse of the dark-haired man sauntering down the corridor, her heart flipped within her chest and her hopes crashed. No signs of age, baldness or overhanging waistline…just pure masculine perfection. Her mouth went as dry as the surrounding desert.

Connor McClane had stepped to life from the photograph. From his form-hugging T-shirt, to his worn jeans and boots, to the sunglasses covering his eyes, every detail remained the same. A plane took off from a nearby runway, and the low rumble reverberating in her chest could have easily come from a motorcycle.

Kelsey tried to swallow. Once, twice. Finally she gave up and croaked out, "Mr. McClane?"

"Yes?" He stopped to look at her, and Kelsey's only thought was that she still didn't know the color of his eyes. Brown, maybe? To match the mahogany of his hair and tanned skin. Or blue? A bright, vivid contrast to his coloring.

A dark eyebrow rose above his mirrored sunglasses, a reminder that she had yet to answer him. A rush of heat flooded her cheeks. "Uh, Mr. McClane—"

"We've already established who I am. Question is, who are you?"

"My name's Kelsey Wilson."

He flashed a smile that revved her pulse. His head dipped, and she sensed him taking in the red hair she struggled to control, the freckled skin she tried to cover, and the extra pounds she sought to hide beneath the khaki skirt and boxy shirt. She saw her reflection in his mirrored glasses, a much shorter, much wider version of herself, like a carnival funhouse distortion.

Kelsey didn't feel much like laughing.

Had she known her aunt was going to assign her this mission, she would have worn something different—like full body armor. The image of what Emily might have worn to meet her former boyfriend flashed in Kelsey's mind. She shoved the pointless comparison away. Too much like trying to force Strawberry Shortcake into Barbie's wardrobe.

"Well, what do you know?" Connor stood in the middle of the corridor, mindless of the sea of people parting around him. "The Wilsons sent out a welcoming party. Heck, if I'd known I'd get this kind of reception, I might have come back sooner."

"I doubt that," Kelsey muttered.

Connor McClane had planned his return perfectly, coming back to ruin Emily's wedding. Aunt Charlene was certain of it. Kelsey knew only one thing. Her cousin had nearly thrown her future away once for this man, and she could see how Emily might be tempted to do it again.

"Don't underestimate your appeal," he told her, and though she couldn't see beyond the reflective sunglasses, she had the distinct impression he'd winked at her.

Kelsey straightened her spine to the shattering point. "My appeal isn't in question. I'm here to __"

Keep him away from Emily, Kelsey. I don't care how you do it, but keep that man away from my daughter!

"To do what, Kelsey Wilson?"

His deep voice made her name sound like a seduction, and suddenly she could think of all kinds of things to do that had nothing to do with her aunt's wishes. Or did they? How far would Aunt Charlene expect her to go to keep Connor away from Emily?

"To give you a ride from the airport," she answered with a saccharine smile. "Baggage claim is this way."

Connor patted the duffel bag slung over one shoulder. "Got everything with me."

Eyeing the lumpy bag, Kelsey wondered how dress clothes could survive such careless packing. Maybe he planned to ride his motorcycle up to the church in leather and denim, the same way he'd ridden out of town ten years ago? Unless—

"You didn't bring much with you. You must not plan to stay long."

Something in her voice must have given away her hope, because Connor chuckled. He adjusted the duffel bag and headed down the corridor, his strides so long Kelsey nearly had to jog to keep up.

"Oh, I'll be here as long as it takes," he told her with a sideways glance, "but I won't need more than a few days."

A few days. Did she really want to know? Did she really want to throw down the verbal gauntlet? Kelsey took a deep breath, partly to gather some courage, partly to gather some much needed oxygen. "A few days to what?"

"To stop Emily from marrying the wrong man."

Connor hadn't known what to expect when he stepped off the plane. He'd given Emily his flight information with the hope she might meet him at the airport. He'd wanted a chance to talk to her away from her family and her fiancé. He was realistic enough to know the whole Wilson brigade might be lined up at the gate like some kind of high-fashion firing squad. But he hadn't expected a petite redhead. He'd never imagined the Wilson genes could produce a petite redhead.

"So who are you anyway?" he asked, only to realize the woman was no longer at his side.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Kelsey Wilson stood in the middle of the corridor, her brown eyes wide, her lips adorably parted in shock. She didn't look anything like the other Wilsons, and curiosity stirred inside him. He couldn't picture her at the elegant country-club settings the status-conscious family enjoyed any more than he'd imagined himself there.

A Wilson misfit, he thought, *on the outside looking in.* Their gazes locked, and the momentary connection rocked him. Shaking off the feeling, he circled back around and asked, "You coming?"

The flush of color on her cheeks nearly blotted out her freckles. "You don't actually think you can come back here after ten years and expect to take up where you left off?You weren't right for Emily back then, and you aren't right for her now!"

As far as insults went, the words were pretty tame, especially coming from a Wilson. And it wasn't as if he had any intention of taking up where he and Emily had left off. He'd made his share

of mistakes, and some—like thinking he and Emily had a chance—didn't bear repeating. Emily had been looking for someone to rescue her from the life her parents had planned for her, and he'd been young enough to think of himself as a hero.

Connor knew better now. He was nobody's hero.

Still, Kelsey's reminder stirred long-buried resentment. *Worthless. Good for nothing. Troublemaker.* Gordon Wilson had shouted them all when he'd discovered his younger daughter sneaking out to meet Connor. After being knocked around by his old man during his childhood, he knew a thing or two about male aggression and had arrogantly faced down the older man.

But Charlene Wilson's clipped, controlled words had managed to pierce his cocky facade. "From the moment Emily was born, she has had nothing but the best," Charlene told him with ice practically hanging from her words. "We have given her the world. What could *you* possibly give her?"

He'd tried to give her her freedom, the chance to live her life without bowing to her family's expectations. If someone had given his mother that same chance, things would have been different, and maybe, just maybe, she would still be alive. But when Emily made her choice, she didn't choose him. She took the easy way out—and in the end, so did he, Connor thought, guilt from the past and present mixing. But he wasn't going to fail this time. He was here to help Emily, no matter what the redhead standing in front of him like a curvaceous barricade thought.

"Look, whoever you are," he said, since she'd never explained her relationship to the Wilsons, "you didn't know me then, and you don't know me now. You don't have a clue what I'm good for."

He ducked his head and lowered his voice, not wanting to attract attention, but the words came out like a seductive challenge. He stood close enough to catch a hint of cinnamon coming from her skin. The color faded from her complexion, and her freckles stood out clearly enough to play a game of connect-the-dots. He shoved his hands into his pockets rather than give into the urge to trace a five-point star over one cheek. He tried to imagine Kelsey's reaction if he touched her. Would she recoil in shock? Or would he see an answering awareness in her chocolate eyes?

Right now, sparks of annoyance lit her gaze. "I know all I need to know. You're no good for Emily. You never were—What are you doing?" she demanded when Connor leaned around to look over her shoulder.

"Amazing. You can't even see the strings."

"What strings?"

"The ones Charlene Wilson uses to control you."

"Aunt Charlene does not control me."

Aunt Charlene, was it? He didn't remember Emily talking about a cousin, but they hadn't spent time discussing genealogy. "Funny, 'cause you sure sound like her."

"That's because we both want to protect Emily."

Protecting Emily was exactly why he was there. Adjusting the duffel bag on his shoulder, he started toward the parking garage. "So do I."

"Right." Kelsey struggled to keep up with him, and Connor shortened his stride. "Who do you think you have to protect her from?"

"From Charlene. From you." Before Kelsey could voice the protest he read in her stubborn expression, he added, "Mostly from Todd."

"From *Todd?* That's ridiculous. Todd loves Emily."

Yeah, well, Connor had seen what a man could do to a woman in the name of love. Seen it and had been helpless to stop it from happening…Shoving the dark memories of his mother and Cara Mitchell aside, Connor said, "Todd's not the golden boy the Wilsons think he is. The guy's bad news."

"How would you know?" Kelsey challenged as they stepped out the automatic doors and into the midday sunshine. Exhaust and honking horns rode the waves of heat. "My car's this way."

Connor followed Kelsey across the street to the short-term parking, where the fumes and noise faded slightly in the dimly lit garage. "I could tell from the second we met."

She stopped so suddenly he almost crashed into her back. When she turned, he was close enough that her shoulder brushed his chest, and the inane thought that she would fit perfectly in his arms crossed his mind.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’ve never met Todd.”

“How do you know?”

“Be-because,” she sputtered. “Emily would have told me.”

Despite her words, Connor saw the doubt written in her furrowed brow as she walked over to a gray sedan. The car nearly blended into the concrete floor and pylons. Between her plain vehicle and sedate clothes, he had the feeling Kelsey Wilson was a woman who liked to fade into the background.

But he was trained to notice details. He’d bet the brilliant hair she kept coiled at the back of her neck was longer and wilder than it looked, and try as they might, the shapeless clothes did little to hide some amazing curves.

“If Emily tells you everything, then you know she and Dunworthy spent a weekend in San Diego a few weeks ago, right?” At Kelsey’s nod, Connor added, “Well, I drove there to meet them, and we had dinner.” Keeping his voice deceptively innocent, he asked, “Emily didn’t mention that?”

“Um, no,” Kelsey grudgingly confessed.

“I wonder why. Don’t you?” he pressed.

Not that there was much to tell, although he wasn’t about to admit that to Kelsey. When he left town, he never thought he’d see Emily again. But after hearing through the long-distance grapevine that she was getting married, calling to congratulate her seemed like a good way to put the past behind him. The last thing he expected was Emily’s invitation to have dinner with her and her fiancé while they were vacationing in California. But he’d agreed, thinking the meeting might ease his guilt. After all, if Emily had found Mr. Right, maybe that would finally justify his reasons for leaving Scottsdale.

But when Connor went to dinner with Emily, he didn’t see a woman who’d grown and matured and found her place in life. Instead, he saw in Emily’s eyes the same trapped look as when they’d first met—a look he could not, would not ignore.

Kelsey kept both hands on the wheel and her gaze focused on the road, but she was far too aware of Connor McClane to pay much attention to the buildings, billboards and exit signs speeding by. The air-conditioning blew his aftershave toward her heated face, a scent reminiscent of surf, sand and sea. His big body barely fit in the passenger seat. Twice now, his arm brushed against hers, sending her pulse racing, and she nearly swerved out of her lane.

She’d been right in thinking the man was dangerous, and not just to Emily’s future or her own peace of mind, but to passing motorists, as well.

“I can’t believe how much the city has grown. All these new freeways and houses.…” He leaned forward to study a sign. “Hey, take this next exit.”

Kelsey followed his directions, wishing she could drop him off at a hotel and call her familial duty done. Unfortunately, playing chauffeur wasn’t her real purpose. Connor had flat-out told her he planned to ruin Emily’s wedding. If she didn’t stop him, her own business would be destroyed in the fallout. Who would trust a wedding planner who couldn’t pull off her own cousin’s wedding?

Panic tightened her hands on the wheel. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“My friend Javy’s family owns a restaurant around here. Best Mexican food you’ve ever tasted.”

“I don’t like Mexican food.”

He shook his head. “Poor Kelsey. Can’t take the heat, huh?”

They stopped at a red light, and she risked a glance at him. He still wore those darn sunglasses, but she didn’t need to look into his eyes to read his thoughts. He was here to win back Emily and show the Wilsons and the rest of the world they’d underestimated him all those years ago. But until then, he’d kill some time by flirting with her.

Kelsey didn’t know why the thought hurt so much. After all, it wasn’t the first time a man had used her to try and get to her beautiful, desirable cousin.

The light turned green, and she hit the gas harder than necessary. “Let’s just say I’ve been burned before.”

A heartbeat’s silence passed. When Connor spoke again, his voice was friendly, casual and missing the seductive undertone. “You’ll like this place.” He chuckled. “I can’t tell you how many meals I’ve had there. If it hadn’t been for Señora Delgado…”

Kelsey wondered at the warmth and gratitude in his words. Something told her Connor wasn’t simply reminiscing about tacos and burritos. An undeniable curiosity built as she pulled into the parking lot. The restaurant looked like an old-time hacienda with its flat roof and arched entryway. The stucco had been painted a welcoming terra-cotta. Strings of outdoor lights scalloped the front porch, and large clay pots housed a variety of heat-tolerant plants: pink and white vinca, yellow gazanias, and clusters of cacti.

Still checking out the exterior, Kelsey remained behind the wheel until Connor circled the car and opened the door for her. Startled by the chivalry, she grabbed her purse and took his hand. As she slid out of the seat, she hoped Connor didn’t guess how rare or surprising she found the gesture.

She thought he’d let go, but he kept hold of her hand as he led her along red, green and yellow mosaic stepping stones that cut through the gravel landscape. His palm felt hard and masculine against her own, but without the calluses she’d somehow expected.

When he opened the carved door, he let go of her hand to lay claim to the small of her back. A shiver rocked her entire body. His solicitous touch shouldn’t have the power to turn on every nerve ending. And it certainly shouldn’t have the inexplicable ability to send her mind reeling with images of his hand stroking down her naked spine…

Full body armor, Kelsey thought once again, uncertain even that extreme could shield her from her own reactions.

Desperate to change her focus, she looked around the restaurant. A dozen round tables stood in the center of the Saltillo-tiled room, and booths lined each wall. The scent of grilled peppers and mouthwatering spices filled the air.

“Man, would you look at this place?” Connor waved a hand at the brightly colored walls, the piñatas dangling from the ceiling and the woven-blanket wall hangings.

He removed his sunglasses to take in the dimly lit restaurant, but Kelsey couldn’t see beyond his eyes. Not brown, not blue, but gorgeous, glorious green. A reminder of spring, the short burst of cool days, the promise of dew-kissed grass. Without the glasses to shield his eyes, Connor McClane looked younger, more approachable, a little less badass.

“Has it changed?”

“No, everything’s exactly the same. Just like it should be,” he added with a determination that made Kelsey wonder. Had someone once threatened to change the restaurant that was so important to his friends?

A young woman wearing a red peasant-style blouse and white three-tiered skirt approached, menus in hand. *“Buenas tardes.* Two for lunch?”

“Sí. Dínde est´ Señora Delgado?”

Startled, Kelsey listened to Connor converse in fluent Spanish. She couldn’t understand a word, so why did his deep voice pour like hot fudge through her veins?

Get a grip! Connor McClane is in town for one reason and one reason only. And that reason was not her.

The hostess led them to a corner booth. Kelsey barely had a chance to slide across the red Naugahyde and glance at the menu when a masculine voice called out, “Look what the cat dragged in!”

A good-looking Hispanic man dressed in a white button-down shirt and khakis walked over. Connor stood and slapped him on the back in a moment of male bonding. “Javy! Good to see you, man!”

“How’s life in L.A.?”

"Not bad. How's your mother? The hostess says she's not here today?"

"She's semiretired, which means she's only here to kick my butt half the time," Javy laughed.

"I didn't think you'd ever get Maria to slow down."

"This place means the world to her. I still don't know how to thank you."

"Forget it, man," Connor quickly interrupted. "It was nothing compared to what your family's done for me over the years."

Modesty? Kelsey wondered, though Connor didn't seem the type. And yet she didn't read even an ounce of pride in his expression. If anything, he looked…guilty.

"I'm not about to forget it, and I *will* find a way to pay you back," Javy insisted. "Hey, do you want to crash at my place while you're here?"

"No, thanks. I've got a hotel room."

Finally Connor turned back to Kelsey. "Javy, there's someone I'd like you to meet. Javier Delgado, Kelsey Wilson."

Javy did a double take at Kelsey's last name, then slanted Connor a warning look. "Man, some people never learn."

Still, his dark eyes glittered and a dimple flashed in one cheek as he said, "Pleasure to meet you, *señorita.* Take care of this one, will you? He's not as tough as he thinks he is."

"Get outta here." Connor shoved his friend's shoulder before sliding into the booth across from Kelsey. "And bring us some food. I've been dying for your mother's enchiladas." He handed back the menu without opening it. "What about you, Kelsey?"

"I'm, um, not sure." The menu was written in Spanish on the right and English on the left, but even with the translation, she didn't know what to order.

"She'll have a chicken quesadilla with the guacamole and sour cream on the side. And we'll both have margaritas."

"I'll take mine without alcohol," Kelsey insisted. Bad enough he'd ordered her lunch. She didn't need him ordering a drink for her, especially not one laden with tequila and guaranteed to go right to her head.

"Two margaritas, one virgin," Connor said with a wink that sent a rush of heat to Kelsey's cheeks. With her fair complexion, she figured she could give the red pepper garland strung across the ceiling a run for its money.

"I'll get those orders right up."

As his friend walked toward the kitchen, Connor leaned back in the booth and gazed around the restaurant. Nostalgia lifted the corners of his mouth in a genuine smile. "Man, I've missed this place."

"So why haven't you come back before now?" Kelsey asked, curious despite sensible warnings to keep her distance.

He shrugged. "Never had reason to, I guess."

"Until now," she added flatly, "when you've come to crash Emily's wedding."

Losing his relaxed pose, he braced his muscled forearms on the table and erased the separation between them. His smile disappeared, nostalgia burned away by determination. "First of all, there isn't going to be a wedding. And second, even if there was a wedding, I wouldn't be crashing. I'd be an invited guest."

"Invited!" Surprise and something she didn't want to label had her pulling back, hoping to create some sanity-saving distance. "Who…" She groaned at the obvious answer, and the confident spark in Connor's emerald eyes. "What on earth was Emily thinking?"

"Actually, she summed up her thoughts pretty well."

Connor reached into his back pocket and pulled out an invitation. He offered it up like a challenge, holding a corner between his first and second fingers. She snatched it away, almost afraid to read what her cousin had written. Emily's girlish script flowered across the cream-colored vellum.

Please say you'll come. I can't imagine my wedding day without you.

Good Lord, it was worse than she'd thought! The words practically sounded like a proposal. Was Emily hoping Connor would stop her wedding? That he'd speak now rather than hold his peace?

"Okay," she said with the hope of defusing the situation, "so Emily invited you."

"That's not an invitation. It's a cry for help."

"It's—it's closure," she said, knowing she was grasping at straws. "Emily has moved on with her life, and she's hoping you'll do the same."

He frowned. "What makes you think I haven't?"

"Are you married? Engaged? In a serious relationship?" Kelsey pressed. Each shake of his head proved Kelsey's point. He wasn't over Emily.

Kelsey couldn't blame him. Her cousin was beautiful, inside and out. And experience had taught Kelsey how far a man would go to be a part of Emily's life.

Connor slid the invitation from her hand in what felt like a caress. "There's no reason for me not to be here, Kelsey."

Here, in Arizona, to stop the wedding, she had to remind herself as she snatched her hand back and laced her fingers together beneath the table. Not *here* with her.

The waitress's arrival with their drinks spared Kelsey from having to come up with a response. Connor lifted his margarita. "To new friends."

Rising to the challenge this time, she tapped her glass against his. "And old lovers?"

If she'd hoped to somehow put him in his place, she failed miserably. With a low chuckle, he amended, "Let's make that old friends…and new lovers."

His vibrant gaze held her captive as he raised his glass. Ignoring the straw, he took a drink. A hum of pleasure escaped him. The sound seemed to vibrate straight from his body and into hers, a low-frequency awareness that shook her to the core.

He lowered the glass and licked the tequila, salt and lime from his upper lip. "You don't know what you're missing."

Oh, she knew. The taste of a man's kiss, the scent of his aftershave on her clothes, the feel of his hard body moving against her own. How long had it been since a man had stolen her breath, her sanity? How many weeks, months? She'd probably be better converting the time into years—fewer numbers to count.

Odd how Kelsey hadn't missed any of those things until the moment Connor McClane walked down the airport corridor. No, she had to admit, she'd suffered the first twinge of—loneliness? Lust? She didn't know exactly *what* it was, but she'd first felt it the moment she'd looked at Connor's picture.

"Aren't you having any?"

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and for one second, she imagined leaning over the table and tasting the tequila straight from Connor's lips.

"Kelsey, your drink?" he all but growled. The heat in his gaze made it clear he knew her sudden thirst had nothing to do with margaritas.

Maybe if she downed the whole thing in one swallow, the brain freeze might be enough to cool her body. She sucked in a quick strawful of the tart, icy mixture with little effect. Frozen nonalcoholic drinks had nothing on Connor McClane.

Still, she set the glass down with a decisive clunk. "You can't come back here and decide what's best for Emily. It doesn't matter if *you* don't like Todd. You're not the one marrying him. Emily is, and her opinion is the only one that matters."

Connor let out a bark of laughter. "Right! How much weight do you think her *opinion* carried when we were dating?"

"That was different."

"Yeah, because I was a nobody from the wrong side of the tracks instead of some old-money entrepreneur with the Wilson stamp of approval on my backside."

A nobody from the wrong side of the tracks. Kelsey schooled her expression not to reveal how closely those words struck home. What would Connor McClane think if he learned she had more in common with *him* than with her wealthy cousins?

Kelsey shook off the feeling. It didn't matter what they did or didn't have in common; they were on opposite sides.

"Did you ever consider that Emily's parents thought she was too young? She was barely out of high school, and all she could talk about was running away with you."

"Exactly."

Expecting a vehement denial, Kelsey shook her head. "Huh?"

One corner of his mouth tilted in a smile. "I might have been blind back then, but I've learned a thing or two. Emily was always a good girl, never caused her parents any trouble. She didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't do drugs. No tattoos or piercings for her."

"Of course not."

From the time Kelsey had moved in with her aunt and uncle, she'd lived in her cousin's shadow. She knew all about how perfect Emily was—her fling with Connor the sole imperfection that proved she was actually human.

"Emily didn't have to do those things. She had me. I was her ultimate act of rebellion."

Kelsey listened for the arrogant ring in his words, but the cocky tone was absent. In its place, she heard a faint bitterness. "No one likes being used," she murmured, thoughts of her ex-boyfriend coming to mind.

Matt Moran had her completely fooled during the six months they dated. With his shy personality and awkward social skills, she couldn't say he swept her off her feet. But he'd seemed sweet, caring, and truly interested in her.

And she'd never once suspected he was secretly in love with her cousin or that he'd been using her to get closer to Emily. So Kelsey knew how Connor felt, and somehow knowing that was like knowing *him.* Her gaze locked with his in a moment of emotional recognition she didn't dare acknowledge.

The question was written in his eyes, but she didn't want to answer, didn't want him seeing inside her soul. "What was Emily rebelling against?"

Connor hesitated, and for a second Kelsey feared he might not let the change of subject slide. Finally, though, he responded, "It had to do with her choice of college. She hated that exclusive prep school, but Charlene insisted on only the best. I suppose that's where you went, too."

"Not me," she protested. "I had the finest education taxpayers could provide." One of Connor's dark eyebrows rose, and Kelsey hurried on before he could ask why her childhood had differed from her cousins'. "So after Emily survived prep school…"

He picked up where she left off, but Kelsey had the feeling he'd filed away her evasion for another time. "After graduation, Gordon wanted Emily to enroll at an Ivy League school. She didn't want to, but her parents held all the cards—until I came along. I was the ace up her sleeve. Guess I still am."

The bad-boy grin and teasing light were absent from his expression, and Kelsey felt a flicker of unease tumbling helplessly through her stomach. Did Connor know something about Todd that would stop the wedding? Something that would tear apart all Kelsey's dreams for success and her chance to prove herself in her family's eyes?

"Emily invited me because her parents are pushing her into this marriage. She's pushing back the only way she knows how. She *wants* me to stop the wedding."

"That's crazy! Do you realize Emily is having her dress fitting right now? And we're going to the hotel tomorrow evening to make final arrangements for the reception? She loves Todd and wants to spend the rest of her life with him."

Leaning forward, he challenged, “If you’re right, if Emily’s so crazy about this guy, then why are you worried I’m here?”

A knowing light glowed in his green eyes, and history told Kelsey she had every reason to worry. After all, on the night of her senior prom, after spending the day having her hair artfully styled and her makeup expertly applied, and wearing the perfect dress, Emily had stood up her parents’ handpicked date…to ride off with Connor on the back of his motorcycle.

Having met Connor, Kelsey could see how easily he must have seduced her cousin. With his looks, charm, his flat-out masculine appeal, how was a woman supposed to resist?

And Kelsey wondered if maybe Emily wasn’t the only one she should be worried about.

Chapter Two

"Honestly, Kelsey, why are you ringing the doorbell like some stranger?" Aileen Wilson-Kirkland demanded as she opened the front door. She latched on to Kelsey's arm and nearly dragged her inside her aunt and uncle's travertine-tiled foyer.

"Well, it's not like I still live here," Kelsey reminded her cousin.

Aileen rolled her eyes. "You probably rang the doorbell even when this *was* your home."

"I did not," Kelsey protested, even as heat bloomed in her cheeks. Her cousin might have been teasing, but the comment wasn't far off. She'd never felt comfortable living in her aunt and uncle's gorgeous Scottsdale house, with its country-club lifestyle and golf-course views. Before moving in with her relatives, *home* had been a series of low-rent apartments. And, oh, how she'd missed those small, cozy places she'd shared with her mother.

"I didn't want to barge in," she added.

"You're kidding, right? Like I haven't been dying to hear how things went! Did you pick up Connor? Does he look the same? Do you think—"

Ignoring the rapid-fire questions, Kelsey asked, "Where are Emily and Aunt Charlene?"

"Emily's still having her dress fitted."

"Oh, I'd love to see it." A designer friend of Kelsey's had made the dress for her cousin, but so far Kelsey had seen only drawings and fabric swatches.

For such a gorgeous woman, Aileen gave a decidedly inelegant snort as they walked down the hall. "Nice try. Do you really think you can escape without going over every detail from the first second you saw Connor right up to when you left him—" Emily's older sister frowned. "Where *did* you leave him?"

"At a restaurant."

"By himself?"

"What else could I do, Aileen? Follow him to his hotel and ask for an invitation inside?"

"Well, that would make it easier to keep an eye on him."

"Aileen!"

Waving aside Kelsey's indignation, Aileen said, "I'm just kidding. Besides, he doesn't have a car, right?"

"Like that's going to slow him down! Don't you remember the time Connor got busted for joyriding in a 'borrowed' car?" She hadn't been around then, but her aunt had remarked on Connor's misdeeds long after he'd left town. In fact, Connor's name had come up any time Emily threatened to disobey her parents. Like some kind of bogeyman Aunt Charlene evoked to keep her younger daughter in line.

Her cousin's perfectly shaped brows rose. "You don't think he's still involved in illegal activities, do you?"

"I have no idea," Kelsey said, ignoring the internal voice yelling *no.* Her automatic desire to rush to Connor's defense worried her. She was supposed to stop him, not champion him.

"You should find out," Aileen said as she led the way into the study. The bookshelf-lined room, with its leather and mahogany furniture, was her uncle's masculine domain, but even this room had been taken over by wedding preparations. Stacks of photo albums cluttered the coffee table.

"Why me?" Kelsey groaned.

"You want to help Emily, don't you?"

"Of course I do!" she insisted, even if she had to admit her motives weren't completely altruistic.

"And you want the wedding to be perfect, right?" Her cousin already knew the answer and didn't wait for Kelsey's response.

"I know Mother exaggerates, but not when it comes to Connor McClane. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried kidnapping Emily again," Aileen added.

Kelsey fought to keep from rolling her eyes. "She took off with Connor on prom night and didn't come back until the next day. I think your parents overreacted."

"Maybe, but I guarantee he'll try to stop the wedding somehow." Aileen pointed an older-therefore-wiser finger in Kelsey's direction. "But don't let him fool you."

He hadn't bothered to try to fool her. Was Connor so confident he could stop the wedding that he didn't care who knew about his plan?

Walking over to the coffee table, Aileen picked up a stack of photos. "Here are the pictures Mother wants to show during the reception."

"Thanks." Kelsey flipped through images of her cousin's life. Not a bad-hair day or an acne breakout in the bunch. Even in pigtails and braces Emily had been adorable. As Kelsey tucked them into her purse, she noticed a stray photo had fallen to the Oriental area rug. "Did you want to include this one?"

Her voice trailed off as she had a better look at the picture. At first glance, the young woman could have been Emily, but the feathered hair and ruffled prom dress were wrong. "Oh, wow."

From the time Kelsey had come to live with her aunt and uncle, she'd heard how much Emily looked like Kelsey's mother, Olivia. Kelsey had seen similarities in the blond hair and blue eyes, but from this picture of a teenage Olivia dressed for a high school dance, she and Emily could have passed for sisters.

Reading her thoughts, Aileen said, "Amazing, isn't it?"

"It is. Everyone always said—" Kelsey shook her head. "I never noticed."

"Really? But they look so much alike!"

"My mother, she didn't—" Laugh? Smile? Ever look as *alive* as she looked in that photo? Uncertain what to say, Kelsey weakly finished, "I don't remember her looking like this."

"Oh, Kelse. I'm sorry." Concern darkened Aileen's eyes. "I should have realized with your mother being so sick and having to go through chemo. Of course, she didn't look the same."

Accepting her cousin's condolences with a touch of guilt, Kelsey silently admitted Olivia Wilson had lost any resemblance to the girl in the picture long before being diagnosed with cancer. What would it have been like had her mother retained some of that carefree, joyful spirit? Kelsey immediately thrust the disloyal thought aside.

Olivia had given up everything—including the wealth and family that now surrounded Kelsey—to raise her daughter. Emily's wedding was Kelsey's chance to live up to her promise. To hold her head high and finally show the Wilsons how amazing she could be.

With a final look at the picture, Kelsey slid the photo of her mother back into one of the albums. "It's okay," she told Aileen. "Let's go see if Emily's done with the fitting."

"All right. But be warned," Aileen said as she led the way down the hall toward Emily's bedroom. "The photographer's in there."

"Really?" Kelsey frowned. "I don't remember pictures of the fitting being included. Was that something Emily requested?"

She had long accepted that her ideas and her cousins' differed greatly, but a seamstress fretting over her measurements would have been a nightmare for Kelsey, not a photo op.

Aileen shrugged and opened the door just a crack. "The photographer said it was all part of the package."

A quick glance inside, and Kelsey immediately saw what "package" the photographer was interested in. Emily stood in the middle of the bedroom, with its girlish four-poster bed and French provincial furniture. Her sheer, lace-covered arms were held out straight at her sides while the seamstress pinned the beaded bodice to fit her willowy curves. Dewy makeup highlighted her wide blue eyes, flawless cheekbones and smiling lips.

"What do you think, Mother? Will Todd like it?" Emily leaned forward to examine the skirt, testing the limits of a dozen stickpins.

The photographer, a man in his midtwenties, started snapping shots as fast as his index finger could fly. It wasn't the first time Kelsey had seen slack-jawed amazement on a man's face. Too bad she saw the expression only when her cousin was around.

"Of course he will. Audra is an amazing designer, and she created that dress just for you. It's perfect," Aunt Charlene insisted, keeping a narrow-eyed glare on the photographer.

Charlene Wilson didn't share her daughters'beauty, but she was a tall, striking woman. She could instantly command a room with her timeless sense of style and demand for perfection from herself and those around her. Today she wore a beige silk suit that wouldn't dare wrinkle and her brown hair in an elegant twist at the nape of her neck.

Glancing down at her own clothes, a map of creases that spelled fashion disaster, Kelsey knew her aunt would be horrified by the sight. Fortunately, Charlene was far too busy to notice. Kelsey slid the door shut and walked back down the hallway with Aileen.

"I know all brides are supposed to be beautiful," Aileen said with a mixture of sisterly affection and envy, "but that's ridiculous."

"Please, I've seen pictures of your wedding. You were just as gorgeous."

Aileen gave a theatrical sigh. "True. Of course, I wasn't lucky enough to have you to plan everything. I ran myself ragged, and you make it look so easy."

Kelsey laughed even as her cheeks heated with embarrassed pleasure. "That's because I'm only planning the wedding. It's far more stressful to be the bride."

"Still, you're doing an amazing job. Mother thinks so, too, even if she hasn't told you. This wedding will make your company."

That was just what she was counting on, Kelsey thought, excitement filling her once again. "I know." Taking a deep breath, she confessed, "I put down first and last month's rent on that shop in Glendale."

Aileen made a sound of delight and threw her arms around Kelsey in a hug that ended before she could lift her stiff arms in response. After eight years, Kelsey should have anticipated the enthusiastic embrace, but somehow, both her cousins' easy affection always caught her off guard.

"That is so exciting, and it's about time! You should have opened a shop a long time ago instead of working out of your home."

"I couldn't afford it until now."

"You could have if you'd taken my father up on his loan," Aileen said.

Kelsey swallowed. "I couldn't," she said, knowing Aileen wouldn't understand any more than her uncle Gordon had. Starting her business was something she had to do for herself and for her mother's memory.

Wilson women against the world… Her mother's voice rang in her head. Opening the shop wouldn't have the same meaning with her uncle's money behind the success.

Aileen shook her head. "Honestly, Kelsey, you are so stubborn." A slight frown pulled her eyebrows together. "But something tells me you're going to need every bit of that determination—"

Kelsey jumped in. "To keep Connor McClane away from Emily. I know, Aileen. But if Emily's so crazy about Todd, what difference does it make that Connor's in town?"

Ever since he'd posed that question, Kelsey couldn't get his words out of her mind. Okay, so in her opinion, Todd Dunworthy didn't hold even a teeny, tiny, flickering match to Connor McClane. But if her cousin truly loved Todd, shouldn't he outshine every other man—including an old flame like Connor?

"Kelsey, we're talking about Connor McClane. I know you've sworn off men since Matt, but please tell me that idiot didn't rob you of every female hormone in your body!"

Even after two years, the thought of her ex-boyfriend made Kelsey cringe. Not because of the heartbreak but because of the humiliation. Still, she argued, “I’m not discounting Connor’s appeal.” If anything, she’d been mentally recounting every attractive feature, from his quick wit to his sexy smile and killer bod. “But if I were a week away from getting married and madly in love with my fiancé, none of that would matter.”

Aileen sighed and slanted Kelsey a look filled with worldly wisdom. “It’s cold feet. Every engaged woman goes through it. I called things off with Tom three times before we finally made it to the altar. You’ll see what I mean when you get engaged.”

The idea of Kelsey getting engaged was in serious question, but if that time ever did come, she was sure she’d be so in love she’d never harbor any doubts. “Okay, so you called off your engagement. Did you run off with another man?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s my point. If Emily and Todd are right for each other, Connor’s presence shouldn’t matter.”

“It shouldn’t, but it does. You weren’t here when Emily and Connor were together. He’s the kind of man who makes a woman want to live for the moment and never think of tomorrow. When Emily was around him, she’d get completely caught up in the here and now of Connor McClane. But her relationship with Todd is something that can last.” Aileen flashed a bright smile. “Look, you’ve handled prewedding problems before. All you have to do is keep Connor away. You can do that, can’t you, Kelsey?”

What else could she do but say yes?

Connor scrolled through his laptop’s files, going over the information he’d compiled on Todd Dunworthy. He had to have missed something.

Swearing, he rolled away from the desk in his hotel suite and pushed out of the chair. He paced the length of the room, but even with the extra money he’d paid for a suite, he couldn’t go far. From the closet, past the bathroom, between the desk and footboard, to the window and back. He supposed he should consider himself lucky not to have Kelsey Wilson shadowing his every step. An unwanted smile tugged at his lips at the thought of the woman he’d met the day before.

He’d finally convinced her to leave him at the restaurant, telling her he had years to catch up with his friend, Javy. The words were true enough, but he’d seen the suspicion in her brown eyes. He chuckled at the thought of the atypical Wilson relative. She was nothing like Emily, that was for sure. Compared to Kelsey’s fiery red hair, deep brown eyes, and womanly curves, Emily suddenly seemed like a blond-haired, blue-eyed paper doll.

But no matter how much curiosity Kelsey Wilson provoked, Connor couldn’t let himself be distracted.

After his relationship with Emily ended, Connor had drifted around Southern California. Different state, but he’d hung out with the same crowd. Busting up a fight in a club had gotten him his first job as a bouncer. He’d worked security for several years before taking a chance and opening a P.I. business.

Up until three months ago, he would have said he was good at his job, one of the best. That he had a feel for people, an instinct that told him when someone was lying. Listening to his gut had saved his skin more than once. Not listening had nearly gotten a woman killed.

From the first moment he’d met Todd Dunworthy, Connor had that same hit-below-the-belt feeling. And this time he was damn sure gonna listen. So far, though, his background check had merely revealed Dunworthy was the youngest son of a wealthy Chicago family. Numerous newspaper photos showed him at the opera, a benefit for the symphony, a gallery opening. And while the events and locales changed, he always had a different woman—tall, blond and beautiful—on his arm.

No doubt about it, Emily was definitely Todd’s type.

"You sure you don't hate the guy just 'cause the Wilsons love him?" Javy had pressed on the ride from the restaurant to the hotel.

Connor couldn't blame his friend for asking. And, okay, so maybe he would dislike anyone who met with the Wilsons' approval, but that didn't change his opinion. Todd Dunworthy was not the man they thought he was.

He'd spoken to several of the Dunworthy family employees and none of them were talking. It wasn't that they wouldn't say anything bad about their employers; Connor expected that. But these people refused to say a word, which told him one important thing. As well paid as they might be to do their jobs, they were even better compensated to keep quiet.

Most were lifers—employees who had been with the family for decades. But there was one woman he hadn't been able to reach. A former maid named Sophia Pirelli. She'd worked for the family for two years before suddenly quitting or getting fired—no one would say—two months ago. The silence alone made Connor suspicious, and figuring an exemployee might be willing to talk, Connor wanted to find her.

A few days ago he'd found a lead on Sophia's whereabouts. As much as he longed to follow that trail and see where it ended, he couldn't be in two places at once. He wanted to stay focused on Todd, so he'd asked his friend and fellow P.I., Jake Cameron, to see if the former maid was staying with friends in St. Louis.

Grabbing his cell phone, he dialed Jake's number. His friend didn't bother with pleasantries. "You were right. She's here."

Finally! A lead that might pan out. "Have you found anything?"

"Not yet. This one's going take some time."

Frustration built inside Connor. Although he trusted Jake and knew the man was a good P.I., Connor wasn't used to relying on someone else. "We don't have a lot of time here."

"Hey, I've got this," Jake said with typical confidence. "I'm just telling you, she's not the type to spill all her secrets on a first date."

Connor shook his head. He shouldn't have worried. His friend had been in St. Louis for all of two days, and he already had a date with the former maid. "Call me when you've got anything."

"Will do."

Snapping the cell phone shut, Connor hoped Jake worked his cases as quickly as he worked with women. But he wasn't going to sit around waiting for Jake; he wanted to find something on Dunworthy, irrefutable proof that the guy wasn't the loving husband-to-be he pretended.

Scowling, he resumed pacing, lengthening his stride to cross the room in four steps instead of eight. Connor had never been one to back down from a fight, but some battles were lost before they'd even begun. Gordon and Charlene Wilson would never take the word of the kid from the wrong side of the tracks over their handpicked golden boy.

Dammit, he needed an insider. He needed someone the Wilsons trusted to break the bad news. He needed one of their own. He needed…Kelsey.

Connor laughed out loud at the idea, but damned if he didn't think it might work. Kelsey hadn't played a part in his past relationship with Emily. She was as unbiased a witness as he could hope to find. She had nothing at stake with Emily's wedding, nothing riding on her cousin saying "I do."

No doubt about it, Kelsey was his best shot.

The following evening, Emily twirled around the hotel's atrium, her arms outspread like Sleeping Beauty. "You were right, Kelsey. This is the perfect place for the reception. Don't you think so, Mother?"

She looked so beautiful and happy Kelsey half-expected cartoon animals to surround her at any moment. Smiling at her cousin's unfettered happiness, she breathed a sigh of relief. Connor McClane was wrong, dead wrong. Emily and Todd were meant to be.

"It's lovely," Aunt Charlene commented without looking up from her mother-of-the-bride notebook. "I knew we could count on Kelsey to find the perfect place."

"Um, thank you, Aunt Charlene," Kelsey said, surprised and pleased by the compliment. Even after eight years, Kelsey and Charlene had a tentative, tightrope relationship that had yet to get past a disastrous beginning.

When Kelsey had first come to live with the Wilsons, she'd been overwhelmed by their obvious wealth, and her cousins' beauty and grace had left her feeling outclassed. Especially when Charlene took one look at her and declared, "Someone must take this girl shopping."

Looking back now, Kelsey realized her aunt had been trying to relate to her the same way she did to her own daughters, who loved nothing more than a day spent raiding Scottsdale boutiques. But back then, as an intimidated, awkward teenager, Kelsey had suffered the pain of being seen as an embarrassment by her new family.

She'd survived the multiple fittings and outfit changes—a living, breathing, *silent* mannequin —as her aunt and a shopkeeper went back and forth over which colors, styles and accessories best suited Kelsey. But when she stood with her aunt at the register, when she saw the *hundreds* of dollars a single item cost, a sick sense of disbelief hit her stomach.

How many weeks' rent would that pair of shoes have paid for when she and her mother were living in tiny one-room apartments? How many months of food? How much better might her mother's medical have been with that kind of money?

In a quiet, cold voice, Kelsey had told the saleswoman to put every item back, before marching out of the store.

Later, once Kelsey had calmed down and realized how ungrateful her actions must have seemed, she tried to apologize to her aunt. Charlene had declared the matter over and forgotten, but never again did she offer to take Kelsey shopping.

Their relationship had yet to recover from that day. By asking Kelsey to coordinate the wedding, Charlene had helped breach the gap, but Kelsey knew this opportunity didn't come with second chances. This was her one shot.

"I've always thought this was an amazing place for a reception," Kelsey said, hearing the dreamy wistfulness in her own voice. The glass ceiling and towering plants gave the illusion of being in a tropical paradise, and from the first time she'd seen the hotel, Kelsey had known it was perfect.

Perfect for Emily, she reminded herself.

Although between having so many of her friends working the wedding and Emily's willingness to let Kelsey make so many of the decisions, the entire event was feeling more like *Kelsey's* dream wedding.

Except the choice of groom…

The insidious thought wove through her mind along with images of Connor McClane…His rebellious saunter, his too confident grin, his…*everything.*

"I hope Todd likes it." Emily lowered her arms, a small frown tugging at her eyebrows. "Do you think he will?"

"It's a five-star hotel, one of the finest in the state," Charlene said imperiously.

"I know, but Todd's family is from Chicago. They have all those historic buildings and…Todd can be particular."

Kelsey's hand tightened on her day planner at her cousin's hesitant tone. Suspicions planted by Connor's too-pointed comments threatened to sprout into tangled choking weeds, but Kelsey ground them down. Finger by finger, she eased her grip before she left permanent indentations on the leather book.

Her cousin was a people pleaser. Of course she worried what Todd would think. "He agreed to let you make all the decisions about the wedding," Kelsey reminded Emily, who had in turn, left most of the decisions up to her. "So he must trust your choices."

"I know, but…" Emily took a look around the atrium without the excitement she'd shown moments ago. Trying to see it through Todd's particular eyes?

"But what?" Kelsey prompted gently.

"It's—it's nothing." Emily shook her head with a laugh. "I just want everything to be perfect. You understand, don't you, Kelsey?"

Yes, she knew all about trying and failing again and again. But not this time—not with Emily's wedding. "Of course I do. And your wedding will be perfect," she insisted, before an already familiar masculine voice filled the atrium and sent shivers up and down her spine.

"Hey, Em! How's the blushing bride?"

"Oh, my gosh! Connor!" Emily squealed her former boyfriend's name and ran to meet him. A broad smile on his handsome face, he caught her in his arms and spun her around. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Keeping an arm around Emily's shoulders, Connor glanced at Kelsey. "When Kelsey said you'd be here, I had to see you."

Heat rushed to Kelsey's face. Bad enough Connor had outmaneuvered her. Did he have to rub it in in front of her aunt?

Connor McClane had been in town less than twenty-four hours, and she could already feel the familiar undertow of failure dragging her under.

"You told him we'd be here?" The words barely escaped the frozen smile on her aunt's face. Charlene would never make a scene in public. Even if it meant smiling at the man out to ruin her daughter's future.

"No! I didn't." Except she *had* told Connor Emily was making final arrangements for the reception that evening, and he would know where the reception was being held. After all, he'd been invited. "I didn't mean to," she almost groaned.

Charlene straightened her razor-sharp shoulders, taking charge of a situation that had gotten out of control. Out of *Kelsey's* control. Interrupting Emily and Connor's conversation, she said, "Mr. McClane, you'll have to excuse us. Emily has a wedding to plan."

"Mother!" her daughter protested. "Connor's come all this way to see me. We have so much to talk about. Can't this wait?"

"This is *your* wedding we're talking about, Emily! The most important day of your life."

The most important day of your life. Kelsey understood the sentiment. Every bride wanted her wedding day to be perfect, and she was doing everything in her power to see that this affair was the type every girl dreamed about, but Emily was only twenty-eight years old. Shouldn't she have something to look forward to?

Why Kelsey chose that moment to meet Connor's glance, she didn't know. He flashed her a half smile as if he could not only read her thoughts but agreed one hundred percent.

"You're right, of course, Mother." Emily turned to Connor with a smile. "I'm sorry, Connor. We don't have much time before the wedding, and there's still so much to do."

"Don't worry, Em. We'll have plenty of time to talk before then. I'm in Room 415."

"You're staying here?" Kelsey blurted the words in horror. At the hotel where not only the reception was taking place, but also the rehearsal dinner.

Connor's grin was maddening—and disturbingly enticing. "Thought it would be convenient."

"Convenient. Right." That way he could *conveniently* intrude on every event she had planned for the location and drive her insane!

"Kelsey, Emily and I can take things from here. You have…other matters to attend to now."

Her aunt's pointed look spoke volumes. Charlene could handle the final wedding details. Kelsey's job was to handle Connor McClane. She desperately clutched her day planner to her chest like a leather-bound shield. There were some things in life she could not control, but everything else

made it onto a list. A methodical, point-by-point inventory of what she needed to accomplish, making even the impossible seem manageable. Nothing beat the satisfaction of marking off a completed task.

And although Kelsey certainly hadn't counted on Connor when she prioritized her checklist for Emily's wedding, as long as she kept him occupied for the next week and a half, Kelsey would be able to cross him off once and for all.

Catching a touch of her aunt's righteous indignation, she straightened her own shoulders and nodded imperceptibly. Satisfied, Charlene marched Emily out of the atrium.

Emily cast a last, longing glance over her shoulder, and the uncertainty Kelsey saw in her cousin's gaze strengthened her resolve. Aileen was right. Emily was suffering from cold feet. Her worries about her future as a wife and eventually a mother had her looking back to simpler times. Back when she could lose herself in Connor's live-for-the-day attitude.

But her cousin would only regret it if she threw away her future for a man of the moment like Connor McClane. And Kelsey could not allow Emily to make the same mistake her own mother had.

Chapter Three

"You know, Kelsey, I've never been *attended to* before."

Even with her back turned, as she watched Emily and Charlene walk away, Connor sensed the determination rolling off Kelsey in waves. Shoulders straight and head held high, she looked ready for battle. And yet when he took a closer step, his gaze locked on a curl of hair that had escaped the confining bun. The urge to tuck that curl behind her ear and taste her creamy skin nearly overwhelmed him. He sucked in what was supposed to be a steadying breath, but the air—scented with cinnamon and spice and *Kelsey*—only added to the desire burning through his veins.

Struggling to hide behind the cocky facade that had served him so well in his youth, Connor murmured, "Gotta say I'm looking forward to it."

"I don't know what you mean," she said stiffly.

"You think I don't know I'm those 'other matters' your aunt was talking about?"

Kelsey opened her mouth, looking ready to spout another unbelievable denial, only to do them both the favor of telling the truth. "You're right, Connor. My aunt wants me to keep you away from Emily."

"Charlene wants me gone and Emily happily married. There's just one problem."

"That would be you," Kelsey pointed out. "A problem easily solved if you were actually gone."

"If I leave, Emily's problems will have just begun."

"That's your unbiased opinion?"

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. "And not one your aunt and uncle are gonna listen to."

"Can you blame them?" Kelsey demanded.

No, and that was the hell of it. Connor knew *he* was the only one to blame. He knew what the Wilsons thought of him and he knew why. He could still see the look in Gordon Wilson's eyes when he offered Connor money to break up with Emily. Not a hint of doubt flashed in the older man's gaze. He'd been so sure Connor—a dirt-poor loser from the wrong side of town—would take the money.

Connor had longed to shove the money and his fist into the smug SOB's face. But he hadn't. He *couldn't.* And the pride he'd had to swallow that day still lingered, a bitter taste on his tongue.

He'd let Emily down, although from what he'd gathered during their recent conversations, she didn't know anything about the payoff. She thought their breakup had been her idea…just as she thought marrying Todd Dunworthy was her idea. But Connor knew better, and this time he wasn't going to be bought off.

"The Wilsons aren't going to listen to anything I have to say," he acknowledged. "That's where you come in."

Kelsey frowned. "I *am* a Wilson."

He hadn't forgotten…exactly. "You're different."

Drawing herself up to her five-foot-nothing height, shoulders so straight Connor thought they just might snap, Kelsey said, "Right. Different." Hurt flashed in her chocolate-brown eyes as if he'd just insulted her, when nothing could be further from the truth.

"Hey, wait a minute." Pulling her into a nearby alcove, out of the way of nearby guests, Connor insisted, "That was *not* a put-down. Your aunt and uncle turned their noses up so high when they met me, if it rained, they would have drowned. I was trailer trash, and no way was I good enough for their little girl. So when I say you're nothing like them, you can say 'thank you,' because it's a compliment."

There were a dozen words he could have said, compliments he could have used, but the stubborn tilt of Kelsey's chin told him she wouldn't have listened to a single one. Someone—her family, some guy from her past—had done a number on her.

No, words wouldn't do it, but actions…How far would he have to go to show Kelsey how attractive he found her? A touch? A kiss? The undeniable proof of his body pressed tight to hers?

"In case you've forgotten," Kelsey pointed out, her voice husky enough to let him know she'd picked up on some of his thoughts and wasn't as immune as she'd like him to believe, "according to my aunt and uncle you *kidnapped* their daughter."

"It was not kidnapping," he argued, though he'd had a hell of a time convincing the police. Fortunately Emily had backed his story, insisting that she'd left willingly. Eventually the charges had been dropped; Emily had been eighteen and legally an adult, able to make her own choices. Not that her parents had seen it that way. "But that's my point. Your aunt and uncle won't listen to anything I have to say. Which is where you come in."

"Me?"

"Right. We'll be partners."

"Partners?"

"Sure. After all, we're on the same side."

"Are you crazy? We are not on the same side!" Kelsey argued.

"I want Emily to be happy," he interjected, shaking her thoughts as easily as his sexy grin weakened her composure. "What do *you* want?"

Challenge rose in the lift of his eyebrow, but Kelsey couldn't see a way out. The trap was set, and all she could do was jump in with both feet. "Of course I want her to be happy."

"That's what I thought. Kelsey, this guy won't make her happy. He's not what he seems, and I want to prove it. The Wilsons won't believe *me,* but with you to back me up, they'll have to at least listen."

Kelsey longed to refuse. She didn't trust him. Not for a second. Oh, sure, his story sounded good, but finding dirt on Todd wasn't just a matter of looking out for Emily—it played perfectly into Connor's interests, as well.

If Connor did find some deep, dark secret to convince Emily to call off the wedding, not only would he be the hero who saved her from a horrible marriage, he'd also be there to help pick up the pieces. But if Connor couldn't find anything in Todd's past, what was to keep him from making something up? Working together, he wouldn't be able to lie. Not to mention, he'd given her a way to keep an eye on him.

Connor held out his hand. "Deal?"

Sighing, she reached out. "Deal."

Connor's lean fingers closed around her hand. Heat shot up her arm, and a warm shiver shook her whole body. Like stepping from ice-cold air-conditioning into the warmth of a sunny day.

"All right, partner."

"Not so fast." She hadn't lived with her businessman uncle for as long as she had without learning a thing or two about negotiation. "You might want to hear my terms first."

"Terms?"

Kelsey nodded. As long as Connor thought he needed her, maybe she could get a few concessions.

Instead of balking, Connor grinned. "Let's hear 'em."

"First, we're equal partners. I want to be in on this every step of the way. No hearing about anything you've found on Todd after the fact."

"No problem. From this point on, we're joined at the hip. 'Course, that will make for some interesting sleeping arrangements."

"Second, this is strictly business," Kelsey interrupted, as if cutting off his words might somehow short-circuit the thoughts in her head. But they were already there: sexy, seductive images of hot kisses and naked limbs slipping through satin sheets in her mind. She could only hope Connor couldn't read them so clearly by the heat coloring her face.

"And third?"

"Thi-third," she said, clearing her throat, "you stay away from Emily. *If* we get any dirt on Todd, *I'll* break the news to her. Until then, I don't want you filling her head with your 'bad feelings.'"

Expecting an argument, Kelsey was surprised when Connor nodded. "I'll keep my distance."

"Okay, then, we're partners." She should have experienced a moment of triumph, but all Kelsey could think was that she'd just made a deal with the devil.

Certainly, when Connor smiled, he looked like sheer temptation.

"Got to hand it to you, Kelsey, you're one hell of a negotiator. Two outta three ain't bad."

It wasn't until Connor strode away that Kelsey realized he'd never agreed to her second condition.

As Kelsey stepped into the florist shop the next morning, cool, floral-scented air washed over her. She breathed deeply, enjoying the feeling of a refreshing spa treatment without the outrageous prices. She wasn't a big believer in aromatherapy, but the stress of dealing with Connor might drive her to alternative measures. Anything to stop her pulse from jumping each time she saw him—and to keep her hormones under wraps and in control for the next ten days.

Why couldn't life be easy? Why couldn't she plan an elegant, trouble-free wedding? The kind where the biggest worry was the ice sculpture melting too quickly in the summer heat. Instead, she got Connor McClane, a man guaranteed to make women melt with nothing more than a look.

"Kelsey! Thanks so much for coming!" Lisa Remming, Kelsey's friend and the owner of In Bloom, circled the checkout counter to greet her with a hug. As always, Lisa dressed in clothes inspired by her favorite flower—bird of paradise. Her long brown hair and blue eyes were complemented by a sleeveless fiery-orange blouse and swirling olivegreen skirt. "I feel so bad for calling you."

"Don't be silly." Kelsey waved off her friend's apology and pulled out her checkbook from her purse. "It's no problem."

"I still can't believe I'm doing flowers for Emily Wilson's wedding! There isn't a florist around who wouldn't kill for this job."

Hiding a smile, Kelsey teased, "Wow, who knew florists were so bloodthirsty?"

Lisa made a face, then gave Kelsey another hug. "I totally have you to thank for this."

The two women had gone to high school together, and Lisa was one of the few people in whom Kelsey confided. By the time she'd moved in with her aunt and uncle, Kelsey had gotten accustomed to blending in and going through her teen years unnoticed. Telling her fellow students she was a long-lost member of the wealthy Wilson family would have shoved her under a microscope.

The only worse fate would have been the exclusive prep school her aunt had suggested she attend.

"I really hate asking you to do this," Lisa said as she reached behind the counter for an invoice.

"A deposit is standard practice."

"I know, but—We're talking about the Wilsons. It's not like they're going to leave me holding the bill. But with the flowers for the church and the bouquets and the boutonnieres, I have to pay my suppliers and—"

"And that's why you need the money up front." Kelsey tore off a check. The amount for the deposit alone would have depleted her own meager bank account, but Aunt Charlene had given her access to the special account established for Emily's wedding.

"Thanks." Lisa breathed a sigh of relief as she noted the deposit on the invoice. "This wedding is going to mean the world to my business." She laughed as she pressed a button on the cash register and slid the check inside. "Like I need to tell *you* that, right? You'll be flooded with calls after Emily's friends see the amazing job you're doing. Have you thought anymore about getting your own place?"

Excitement pulsing through her veins, Kelsey nodded. "I've put down first and last month's rent on the space in downtown Glendale, near the antique shops."

Lisa gave a squeal. "And you didn't even say anything! When are you moving in?"

"As soon as the current renters move out. The landlord's supposed to give me a call."

"You must be so excited! I know I was when I first opened this place. Do you have all the furniture and office equipment you'll need? Have you thought about hiring a support staff and—"

"Whoa, Lisa! Don't get carried away," Kelsey said with a laugh that sounded far too shaky.

"I'm not. Don't tell me you of all people—with your day planner and your endless lists—haven't thought of these things."

In fact, she *had,* and only days ago she'd been riding high on her plans. Now, with Connor back in town, she feared she'd put the honeymoon before the wedding, and her stomach roiled at the thought of losing control. "I don't want to get too far ahead of myself."

"What are you talking about?" Lisa challenged. "Emily's wedding is only a week and half away. You aren't too far ahead. If anything, you're behind!"

"Well, thank you for giving me that combination vote of confidence and total panic attack."

"I'm sorry. But I know how much effort you've put into this, and I want to see it pay off for you."

I want Emily to be happy. What do you *want?*

With Connor's words ringing in her head, Kelsey insisted, "Emily's happiness comes first."

"Honey, Emily's happiness *always* come first," Lisa deadpanned.

"That's not fair, Lisa," Kelsey insisted quietly.

Emily and Aileen could have turned their backs when their unknown and potentially unwanted cousin showed up to live with them. Instead, they'd done everything possible to include Kelsey. It certainly wasn't their fault she'd never fit in.

"I know." Lisa's sigh expressed an unspoken apology. "But I also know you've played second fiddle to both your cousins for as long as I've known you. I don't want you to be so focused on Emily's wedding that you lose track of your dream."

"I haven't and I won't."

Despite her determined vow, a touch of guilt squirmed through Kelsey. She'd kept silent about renting the shop for exactly the reasons Lisa mentioned. Her aunt wouldn't want her attention on anything other than the wedding. But the shop was nothing compared to Connor McClane. The man was a living, breathing distraction.

"Emily's wedding *is* my dream," Kelsey added. "A highprofile event with an extravagant budget and built-in publicity thanks to my uncle's business contacts and my aunt's country-club friends—it's guaranteed to put my business on the map."

"I agree, and I can't believe you pulled it off in only two months!"

"It *was* short notice, wasn't it?" Kelsey asked, fiddling with the zipper on her purse. "Yes, but you did it!"

Kelsey nodded. Thanks to working almost nonstop, she'd pulled off planning the event in a fraction of the time it normally took, but Emily had insisted on a June wedding…hadn't she?

Sudden doubts buzzed through her mind like annoying insects, unrelenting and unavoidable. Had Emily pushed for the summer wedding? Or was the idea Charlene's…or Todd's? Kelsey had been so focused on getting everything done on time, she hadn't stopped to wonder about the short engagement. Until now…until Connor had stirred up the hornet's nest of doubt.

Connor hung up the phone after ordering breakfast and ran his hands over his face. He hoped the distraction of food would wipe the nightmare from his memory. It wasn't the first time disturbing images had invaded his sleep.

The beginning of the dream was always the same. Connor watched his client, Doug Mitchell, arrive at his wife's apartment through the tunnel-eye view of a telephoto lens; only when he tried to stop the man from attacking his estranged wife, did the dream shift and alter, keeping him off balance, unsure, helpless. Sometimes he froze in place, unable to move a muscle, unable to shout a warning. Other times, he ran through air thick as quicksand, each move bogged down by guilt and regret.

But no matter how the dream changed, one thing remained the same: Connor never arrived in time to stop Doug.

A sudden knock at the door jarred the memories from Connor's thoughts. Undoubtedly the Wilsons had picked the best hotel around for Emily's reception, but no one's room service was *that* fast. Besides, he had an idea who might be on the other side of the door, and it wasn't the maid with fresh towels.

Opening the door, he summoned a smile for the woman standing in the corridor. "Morning."

Emily Wilson beamed at him, looking like a Hollywood fashion plate of old in a yellow sundress layered beneath a lightweight sweater and a scarf knotted at her neck. "Connor! I'm so glad you're here. I know I should have called first, but—"

He waved off her not-quite-an-apology and held the door open. "Come on in."

As she breezed into the hotel room and set her handbag next to his laptop, Connor was glad to see the computer logo flashing across the screen. Last thing he needed was for Emily to see the dossier on her fiancé.

Emily took her time looking around the suite's miniature living area: a cluster of armchairs and end tables encircling the entertainment center. The added touches of a stone fireplace, balcony overlooking the pool and hot tub spoke of the hotel's five-star accommodations, but Connor doubted she was impressed. After all, she'd grown up surrounded by luxury and wealth.

"What are you doing here, Em?"

"I wanted to see you." She blushed as prettily now as she had at eighteen, but somehow for Connor the effect wasn't the same.

An image of Kelsey flashed in his mind, and he couldn't help making the comparison between Emily and her cousin. It was the difference between a sepia photograph—all soft, dreamy hues—and a full-color, HD image that instantly caught the eye.

As a hotheaded teen, Emily had been his unattainable fantasy. But now it was Kelsey and her down-to-earth reality who kept intruding into his thoughts.

Like yesterday evening, when he'd stood on the balcony and watched to see if the Arizona sunsets were still as amazing as he remembered. As he watched the blazing light slowly fade on the horizon, it wasn't past evenings that came to mind. Instead he thought of the way sunshine caught the fire in Kelsey's auburn curls…

"I snuck out like when we were kids."

Emily's words jarred Kelsey from his mind. He told himself the swift kick in the gut was remembered pain and not anything current or life threatening. But, dammit, he didn't need the reminder that as far as the Wilsons were concerned, he'd never be good enough. And while Kelsey might not look like her blond-haired, blue-eyed cousins, she was still a Wilson, and some things never changed.

Judging by Emily's impish grin, she'd enjoyed reliving her youthful rebellion and the walk down memory lane. Too bad the trip wasn't so pleasant for him. Feeling his smile take a sardonic twist, he asked, "Still can't risk being seen with me in public, huh, Em?"

Her eyes widened in what looked like genuine dismay. "No, Connor! It's not like that." She reached out and grasped his arm, and the frantic expression did take him back in time, filling his thoughts with memories of the girl so desperate to make everyone else happy, she'd made herself miserable.

Relenting slightly, he leaned one hip against the arm of the sofa and reminded her, "We're not kids anymore, and we're too old to be sneaking around."

"I know." Fidgeting with her engagement ring, she added, "But I wanted to see you, and I didn't want…anyone to get upset."

"You mean Todd?" Connor asked pointedly.

"You have to understand, he's very protective of me. I'm sorry the two of you didn't hit it off when we met for dinner in San Diego last month."

Connor held back a snort of derisive laughter at the irony. No, he and Todd hadn't hit it off. In fact, at the end of the night they'd nearly come to blows. Connor could admit he hadn't walked into the restaurant with a totally open mind. It was entirely possible Connor would dislike any man who met with the Wilsons' approval on principle alone. But within fifteen minutes of meeting Todd Dunworthy, Connor had stopped thinking about the past and started worrying about Emily.

In that short span of time, Dunworthy bragged about his Scottsdale loft apartment, his top-of-the-line SUV, his various summer homes in exotic ports of call, all of which would have been little more than annoying except for one thing.

He talked about Emily the same way. She was new and bright and shiny just like the fancy Lexus he drove, and Connor hadn't been able to shake the feeling that Dunworthy wouldn't have thought twice about tossing her aside for a newer model.

And the bad feeling roiling through Connor's gut like acid ever since he'd been hired by Doug Mitchell got so much worse. Outwardly, Doug and Todd Dunworthy had as little in common as, well, as Connor and Todd did. But from the moment he met Doug, the cold look in the man's eyes and the way he spoke about his wife set Connor's teeth on edge, too reminiscent of the way his father had talked about his mother, the bitter blame he'd placed on her for dying and saddling him with an unwanted kid to raise.

But Connor had set aside his personal feelings and taken the job. *Taken the money,* his conscience accused. If only he'd listened to his gut then…

Taking a deep breath, Connor looked out the window, hoping the daylight might dispel his dark thoughts. Only, it wasn't the sunshine that broke through the shadows, but memories of the sunset, memories of Kelsey, that eased the weight on his chest.

The spark in her dark eyes, the stubborn jut of her chin, her determination to stand up to him… even if she barely stood up to the height of his shoulder. He didn't doubt for one second she'd be a formidable opponent, and he was glad to have her on his side.

Turning his focus back to Emily, he said, "I'm sorry, too, Em." And he was. He wanted her to be happy, and he was sorry Dunworthy wasn't the man she—or more important, he suspected, her parents—thought him to be.

Something in his tone must have given his suspicions away, because Emily's already perfect posture straightened to a regal, Charlene-like stature. "Todd is a wonderful man," she insisted. "I love him. I really do, and I can't wait to be his wife."

How many times had Emily repeated that statement before she started believing it was true? The words had a mantralike sound to them. Or maybe more like the punishment meted out by a second-grade teacher: *I will not chew gum in class. I will not chew gum in class.*

"I should go," she murmured.

"Emily, wait." A knock on the door broke the tension. "Look, that's room service. I ordered way too much food. Stay and have breakfast with me."

Without waiting for her response, he stepped around her and opened the door. The waiter wheeled in the cart, filling the room with the scent of bacon and eggs. He pulled the covers off the steaming plates and revealed a meal large enough for two.

"I shouldn't," she protested, eyeing the food with a look of longing. "I need to watch what I eat or I won't be able to fit into my dress."

Connor tried to smile; dieting before a big occasion was undoubtedly a prerequisite for most women, but he didn't think it was the dress Emily had in mind. He'd shared only a single meal with Dunworthy, but he could still see the smug smile on the bastard's face as he waved the waiter and the dessert tray away with a laugh. "Gotta keep my bride-to-be looking as beautiful as ever!"

"Come on," Connor cajoled. "You're not going to make me eat alone, are you?"

Sighing, she slid onto the chair and confessed, “This smells amazing.”

“Dig in,” he encouraged. “Nothing like carbs and cholesterol to start the day right.”

The spark in her eyes reminded him of the old Emily, and she grabbed a fork with an almost defiant toss to her head. “Thank you, Connor.”

“Anytime, Em,” he vowed, knowing her gratitude was for much more than a simple offer to share breakfast.

He picked up his own fork, ready to dig into the eggs, when a hint of spice seemed to sneak into his senses. Normally sides like toast or muffins were an afterthought, something to eat only if the main meal wasn’t filling enough. But the powder-sprinkled muffin on the edge of his plate suddenly had his mouth watering.

He broke off an edge and popped it into his mouth. The moist confection melted on his tongue, tempting his senses with sugar, cinnamon and…Kelsey.

The hint of sweet and spicy had filled his head when he stood close to her, urging him to discover if the cinnamon scent was thanks to a shampoo she used on the red-gold curls she tried to tame or a lotion she smoothed over her pale skin.

If he kissed her, was that how she’d taste?

“What’s Kelsey doing today?”

The question popped out before Connor ever thought to ask it, revealing a curiosity he couldn’t deny yet didn’t want to admit. He set the muffin aside and shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth in case any other questions decided to circumvent his thought process.

After taking a drink of juice, Emily said, “Oh, she’s likely running herself ragged with wedding preparations, making sure everything’s going to go according to plan.”

Her words sent suspicion slithering down his spine. At a small, low-key wedding, the bride’s cousin might be the one behind the scenes, making sure everything went *according to plan.* But not at the Wilson-Dunworthy wedding, where professionals would handle those kind of details.

“What, exactly,” he asked, “does Kelsey have to do with the wedding preparations?”

Emily frowned. “Didn’t she tell you she’s my wedding coordinator?”

“No,” he said, setting his fork aside and leaning back in the chair, “no, she didn’t.”

“I’m lucky to have her working on the wedding. She’s amazing when it comes to organization, and she’s taking care of everything.”

Everything, Connor thought wryly, including him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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