



Amalie Berlin

Reunited in the
SNOW



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Reunited In The Snow

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Left at the altar... ..reunited under the stars!In this Doctors Under the Stars story, Lia Monterrosa arrives at the Antarctic science station as resident staff doctor... and comes face-to-face with her ex fiancé! Working in close confines means brooding Dr. Weston MacIntyre can't hide the painful reason he left Lia at the altar much longer. Lia knows she must guard her heart – especially as desire as bright as the Southern Lights still blazes between them!

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Left at the altar...

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AMALIE BERLIN lives with her family and her critters in Southern Ohio, and writes quirky and independent characters for Mills & Boon Medical Romance. She likes to buck expectations with unusual settings and situations, and believes humour can be used powerfully to illuminate the truth—especially when juxtaposed against intense emotions. Love is stronger and more satisfying when your partner can make you laugh through the times when you don't have the luxury of tears.

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Reunited in the Snow

Amalie Berlin

MILLS & BOON

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REUNITED IN THE SNOW

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MILLS & BOON

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To my Mamaw Mary, who reads more than any other person I ever met—because she’s awesome—and who still reads all of my books. Except for the sexy parts. (I don’t know if that’s true but I want to believe it, so I do, no matter what anyone else says. La-la-la-la, I can’t hear you!)

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CHAPTER ONE

DR. LIA MONTERROSA had not inherited the seafaring, adventurous spirit of her Portuguese ancestors. But she talked a good game.

None of her traveling companions appeared to be any more sprightly than she was after the long, arduous journey. Each lugged modest amounts of luggage down the pristine, shiny corridors of the brand-new Antarctic research station where they'd just arrived, no spring in any thick-booted step. All of them were carrying what would see them through the long months of a dark Antarctic winter.

She'd heard various reasons for coming—once-in-a-lifetime experience, work they wanted to do and could best accomplish locked up for eight solid months with fifty strangers. For her, that was the upside of her trip—being surrounded by people who didn't know her, and therefore had no expectations about how she should behave. She didn't have to be the strongest person on the planet, and she didn't have to be the most docile, polite one, either.

But her ex-fiancé was who she'd come to find. To ask why he was her ex. What had happened during the four days she'd been gone, home in Portugal, that had made him decide he didn't love her anymore, didn't want to marry her? To ask why he'd been cold enough to also go missing while she was filing paperwork with the Polícia Judiciária to locate her missing father.

He hadn't left a message. Hadn't scribbled his farewell on a sticky note affixed to the bathroom mirror. He'd just stopped answering her calls, and three days before her wedding, when she'd had a moment free to go back to London and look for him, as well, she'd found his flat vacated, job vacated, mobile phone canceled. He'd left her with the beautiful ring they'd painstakingly designed together, and a hole in her chest so big a truck could pass through.

But she would see him today, the end of too many months of torture. If fate was with her, he'd provide answers. Closure, if that was a real thing that actually happened, and not just some psychobabble placebo. Closure, no closure—it didn't really matter. The end was coming. The final end. The official end that had been denied her when she'd come home to find him gone.

Right on cue, her stomach plummeted—a sensation she should've become immune to by now, but which still had the ability to wrench away brief control of her extremities. Her booted foot scuffed the floor, but she didn't fall—walking was a little easier to recover from than errant hand-twitches in surgery when a slight wrong move could end a life. Knowing what had ended *them* would help, even if it was just another case of her not being enough. No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't fix whatever she'd done wrong if she didn't know what it was.

“Dr. Monterrosa, you're in Pod C,” her guide said, jerking her from her thousandth thought-spiral of this trip, and gesturing to a nondescript door with a circular window at head height—the kind peppering the station, and which reminded her of doors on boats.

The group all stopped long enough for the woman to add, “With you lot arriving at the end of summer, you're getting stacked where there is an open cabin.”

And she was the only one in C, which would practically become a ghost town in little more than a week when she could probably have her pick of rooms. After Jordan and Zeke left. After West...

Lia opened her mouth to ask the number, but her fatigue was starting to show. The guide answered before she even formed the first sluggish word.

“Last door on the left, end of the hall.”

With a soft, tired grunt, Lia hoisted one of her two meager bags onto her shoulder and entered without another word. Through the door and into a much dimmer hallway, somewhere obviously designed for sleeping through the twenty-four-hour days of summer.

She had about three seconds to see it as the door swung closed and the bright light from the corridor dissipated, but all she really saw was beige. Walls. Low-static carpeting. White doors dotting

both sides of the hall. Snow blind, she waited only long enough for general shapes to form in her vision, allowing her to navigate without bumping into walls or running over strangers in the hallway.

Dr. Weston MacIntyre would never know what had hit him. She had the upper hand, and she needed it. He'd expect her to come at him with guns blazing, and that method had its own appeal. It might help her hide the hole and all the raw-hamburger emotions lining the inside.

Jordan knew she was coming. Her best friend from medical school and almost maid of honor had been the one to call Lia the day West had shown up at Fletcher Station, the person she'd gone to for help shutting down a wedding when hope was finally lost, but she hadn't even known if he was alive. She'd had months to prepare herself for this confrontation, to script every word and every motion in her head, compose the best emasculating zingers and lists of all the ways she would never, and had never, missed him. But with the starting gun ready to sound, the idea of actually saying any of those things left her cold. Colder than the balmy ten below that she'd walked through from the bus to the station. No one who went halfway around the world to find another person could honestly say she hadn't missed him. Hadn't worried. But it felt better to pretend. Lies could comfort.

She made a sharp right bend in the hallway and kept walking. Halfway to the end, her vision had cleared enough to see a tall, broad man with a black knit hat and an equally black beard standing outside the last two doors, keys in hand, staring in her direction.

In another couple of meters, her stomach did that dropping thing again and this time when her limb control faltered, the only thing that saved her from further humiliation was the meager stability offered by the suitcase rolling beside her.

West.

It was West.

Her polished, ever-immaculate fiancé. Former fiancé. But far scruffier.

Her whole world slowed down, and the remaining length of the hallway grew longer than the thousands of kilometers she'd traveled to reach this hallway with this man.

Instead of a tirade, her mind filled with all the times she'd walked toward him. Right back to that first time they'd met in a London hospital, when a newly minted general surgeon had required an assist and been told to pull one of the not-busy neurosurgical fellows. Her. And the way he'd watched her approaching after having her paged, down the hallway to where he loitered at the nurses' station, his eyes broadcasting bold, open interest until he'd heard her name. How she'd pretended not to notice the looks, how she'd managed to ignore her own attraction for three whole days before she'd asked *him* out.

London Lia did those things. London Lia was fearless. At least on the outside. Because it was what everyone expected of her.

Lifting her chin, Lia held his gaze now, struggling to ignore the burst of other memories. All the church aisles they'd tried on looking for the perfect church for their wedding. When he'd looked at her with the promise of a long future dancing in his eyes, the future he delighted in planning and dreaming into existence with her.

Time sped back up. Her heart squeezed hard once, then began stomping a *chula* around her sternum, fast enough she'd have been silencing alarms on her fitness monitor if the battery hadn't died on the trip down. And her stomach, which had been lurching and freefalling for the duration of the trip, went hollow, and cold. Then the nausea hit.

He didn't speak or look away, just stared. There was an intensity in his gaze, but nothing loving. She'd call it a glare were it not for the pallor she could see when she got closer.

Was this it? The burning in her eyes said so. All happening before she'd even dropped off her luggage?

She wasn't ready.

What could she say? What had she even practiced? She was supposed to say something. She'd come all this way to say *things*. Learn things. Remove the weight of betrayal and loss that glittered on her left ring finger.

The ring that symbolized that future they'd planned weighted her finger and something like relief weighted her tongue. Relief. Regret. Betrayal.

If she'd slept at all on the way there, she would've been able to think. She'd be able to look away from his eyes, and her ears wouldn't be ringing in a way that made her worry about a stroke. She'd hear something other than her own loud, labored breathing in the dead space in her chest.

The Lia he knew would say the words. Slap him, maybe. Shake answers out of him. *Something*. But whoever she was now didn't have that in her.

As the seconds stretched out his shock turned to something else, something harder, and she gave up the mental scramble for words to wait him out, watching anger flare in his eyes, bitterness turn the mouth she'd lived to kiss into a slash amid the facial hair she'd never before seen him wear.

But he didn't say anything, either. No words from either of them. The only acknowledgment that she had any more meaning to him than a stranger came in the form of gritted teeth.

As if he had any right to be angry with *her*. She hadn't left *him* practically at the altar.

She opened her mouth, but before she'd even mustered a word, he stepped past her and silently stormed down the hallway, rigid and straight. Angry. So angry, with her.

He was nearly to the bend, with his rigid posture and determination to yet again get away from her. She'd gone around the world to find him, but in that moment, she had no energy left to chase.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly out.

In her memories, it seemed she was always walking toward him—down hallways, church aisles, even on staircases in the hospital where they'd meet for a quick kiss between patients or rounds. She didn't have it in her to watch him walking away. That was the only kindness afforded her by the manner of his leaving—she hadn't even seen it coming, let alone had to watch him going.

God, she was so stupid.

There were other Antarctic research stations she could've gone to. A whole world where no one knew her and she could sort herself out without pressure, get ready for the new life waiting for her outside of medicine. This wasn't going to be productive enough to endure the pain that went with it.

Bending her head, she pinched her eyes harder shut, so the pressure swirled colors and shadow to light behind her eyelids, blocking out the mental replay of things she'd obviously never have again with him.

And none of this should surprise her. Of course he didn't want to talk to her. She was the personification of the past, and West had always avoided talking about the past. Only the future. And she was no longer part of his future. Or she was only part of his immediate future, for the next ten days, until he could escape.

He would talk to her. She'd figure out what to say to him, what she really wanted to say, not just what her broken heart wanted to shout. They'd be working together, seeing each other every day. He'd talk, or he'd *listen*. After she'd gotten some sleep, she'd conjure the words.

That was the one good thing about becoming Lia again. She'd been Ophelia while at home in Portugal, and that had taken time to adjust to, too. She'd remember how to be Lia. Lia, who always had opinions and wasn't afraid to share them. And maybe by the time she left Antarctica, she'd figure out who she really was, outside the judging eyes of people who had expectations of her.

Sleep would help. Being around her best friend again would help her remember Lia, the version of herself she preferred to the sober, sad child she'd been.

“Lia?”

She hadn't heard anyone approach, but the sound of her name in her best friend's voice pulled her eyes open again. Once again, she saw anger in the eyes of someone she loved, but this time, it wasn't directed at her.

“What did he say?” Jordan demanded, grabbing her in a quick, hard hug that grounded her enough to banish church aisles and promises of forever from cluttering up her ability to speak.

What had he said?

“Nothing,” Lia muttered, making her arms contract, giving an underachieving hug in return. “He said nothing.”

When Jordan leaned back, her scowl had grown deeper, firmer. “What did you say to him? Did you tell him he’s the world’s smallest man and you hoped global warming would eventually thaw out his glacial heart? Would be the only good thing to come from it.”

Jordan with the better zingers than Lia, despite the months of practice and mental composing she’d done.

Lia just shook her head, no heart for it. “I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t expecting to see him yet.”

“I was going to tell you. I arranged it so he couldn’t get too far away if he wanted to sleep at all while he’s here.”

“That’s his cabin?”

Jordan nodded, but one glance over her shoulder to the door showed her hesitation. “Maybe I shouldn’t have done that. Or maybe I shouldn’t have even told you he was here.”

The worry in Jordan’s voice and eyes helped her get some clarity.

“Nonsense. I want to be here. It’s cold, but I’ll get used to it. I just need to think of what to say before—”

“You have some time.”

Ten days. Something she’d reminded herself at least ten thousand times on the trip down. “I was just about to drop my bags off and go to the clinic, as directed.”

“And he was just standing there?” Jordan took the bags and the keys, and opened the door to lead Lia into what she would’ve called a closet under any other circumstances. A small closet. With a small bed.

“With the expression of someone who’d be packing as soon as possible and taking the first transport out.”

Something she could appreciate as she mentally inventoried the tiny room. Two windows wrapping around the corner, as the cabin sat at the end of the pod. Twin bed. Bedside table. And a built-in wardrobe that might have actually been a cupboard. Half a meter area to walk from door to window and everything else to the right against the wall.

Cozy.

That’s what she decided right then to call it. Yep. Cozy. A small space that would be easier to keep warm. There, some optimism.

“He looks at me like that every day,” Jordan confirmed, placing the suitcases by the bed and gesturing Lia back out. “Well, not exactly like that, but we’ll talk more about what a louse he is later. I’m not just the welcome wagon, I’m supposed to show you to your physical.”

A physical she didn’t need but understood the reason for. As they walked back the way she’d come, Jordan filled up the empty space where Lia still had no words, chattering on about the station and the job. And Zeke. Jordan’s trip to the southernmost continent had led her to meet and fall in love with someone she may have never met otherwise. Lia would just be happy to meet the true Lia, not some version she’d learned to present, depending upon her audience.

“You won’t go into the schedule until tomorrow,” Jordan continued, walking Lia back the way she’d come. “I was going to ask if you wanted to have dinner tonight, but as tired as you look, I’m thinking you might just want to sleep.”

That wasn’t all she wanted, but it would probably facilitate her being able to think well enough to do the other thing: grab West by the beard and shake some answers out of him. Not that she had the energy for that, either.

“Play it by ear?”

“You got it. After I introduce you to Zeke...”



Every muscle in West’s body ached by the time he made it to the clinic. How he’d gotten there, he couldn’t say. One second, he was watching his second biggest regret catch up with him, the next he stood in the lobby of the medical center with his head buzzing and no idea why he’d even come.

What the hell was she doing there? He should’ve turned around and left Fletcher the moment he’d arrived and found Jordan Flynn stationed there. With her, it assured Lia would learn of his location. If he’d had any idea she’d come all that way, he wouldn’t have stayed. When it came to Lia Monterrosa, he was weak. The only way he could see to giving her a better life, not ruining it as he’d ruined Charlie’s, was to leave. Leaving had been the only way for them to both survive; he couldn’t go through that kind of loss again.

Without him there, she could move on and find someone more deserving than a man who couldn’t even hear her name without remembering the day, months earlier, when he’d had to claim the body of his little brother. Someone who would still be alive if it weren’t for West’s ultimatum. Not that it took hearing her name, or thinking of her, to be sucked right back there. It could barely be called a memory; it remained so present in his head it was like one long, unending day since.

He’d assumed once Jordan delivered the news, they’d both curse him and do whatever women did when thousands of miles separated them but there was an ugly breakup to contend with.

She hadn’t been going to his cabin. She’d carried luggage, and worn the standard-issue red snowsuit given to every crew member.

She’d been moving into the empty cabin beside his. And he’d just stood outside his door because...

He rubbed between his brows, trying to will some clarity to his thoughts.

It wasn’t morning. He’d...gone to the shop for supplies, then the post office to collect books he’d ordered a month ago, and...that was why he’d even been there. Dropping off his packages. After lunch. Which meant he was in the clinic because he had physicals to perform for the six new arrivals who the department head had put on the schedule a week ago: four scientists, a computer programmer and the doctor hired to overwinter.

Lia was there for the winter. The woman who lived for sunshine had signed up for six months of Antarctic night?

Whatever.

He wasn’t staying on. He just had to hold on for the next ten days without groveling and begging her to forgive him. Even through the horror darkening the edges of his vision, his whole body sparked, and he breathed too fast. He needed to slow that down before someone came in.

Regardless of the constant state of chill in the station’s open facilities, he felt sweat running down his spine, and did the only thing he could—ripped his jacket off and hung it on the wall hooks.

Damn it. The clinic was the last place he should be. Walking away from her just now had only hit the pause button on whatever she’d come to say. He just needed a minute to think.

Focus.

He walked to the counter at the wall where hard backups of patients’ files were kept, and braced his hands on the counter for stability, then closed his eyes and took a deep, slow breath.

Get it together. With his current state of mental function, almost nothing permeated the towering brick wall cutting across his brain. He’d be useless like this if there was an emergency.

He never let himself picture what it would be like to see her again, but if he had, it wouldn’t have been gut-churning. Leaving wiped the slate, let him have a start fresh. Always. And once he’d gotten past that big first hump, the pain of loss dulled. Sometimes slower than others.

The thought of her projected her sorrow-filled expression on that towering wall in his head. Sad. Heartbroken, even. But not angry. She'd obviously come to see him, but hadn't come out swinging. Something wasn't right.

"West." His name spoken jerked his attention back to earth and he turned to see the medical director, Dr. Tony Bradshaw, approaching, folders in hand. "The new arrivals—"

"I know," West cut in, shaking his head, "you told us days ago."

The man was getting so forgetful, West should be so lucky. And too thin, but he didn't comment on that. They'd had that conversation twice before, and there was only so much West could do to make the man accommodate the increased metabolic needs Antarctica triggered.

He took another slow breath, fighting his own body, depriving himself of the increased demands for oxygen through sheer force of will.

"Right," Tony said slowly, as if he truly didn't remember, and handed over the folders. "Jordan is coming in to help you. She went to round some of them up."

Went to round up Lia.

She'd just stopped outside his door, with eye contact that pulled at him like gravity, and dragged memories into the front of his mind. The way she smelled fresh from the shower. Or better, first thing in the morning when she had his scent all over her, and it all mingled together. His cabin didn't smell like home still.

The sudden heat returned, and he noticed the inconsistency of it—the whole front of him on fire, and his spine like an ice core down his back, a frozen ice dagger digging into the base of his skull. Twisting. Tangling the nerves there, spaghetti-style.

"I've got a meeting, so you and Jordan sort them out," Tony called from the door as West bent to gather up the paper he'd dropped.

"Right."

He sighed hard enough to waft paper off the top of the pile.

Just get through the next couple of hours. That was the only thing to do.

Then she could go back home now and management would have time to get another doctor in there, someone suited to the winter, and he wouldn't have to spend the next eight months thinking about her and wondering if the woman who lived in the sunshine was all right with the unending dark of Antarctic night. He needed a fresh start. Another fresh start.

"You all right?" Tony's voice came from behind him, still there. Not gone.

And still no answer to give. At least, that he wanted to give. Far from all right. He hadn't been all right for months, why should today be better?

"Not sleeping great," he said. It was the only thing he could think of that wasn't a lie.

"Are you taking the sleep aids?"

"Aye." He stood. If they were going to talk about his health, he'd say something again about Tony's. The man was going to overwinter to head some project for NASA, and his weight loss would become more of an issue soon. "You still tryin' to increase calories? You're too thin."

Tony dropping inches was more of an issue than West's sleep troubles.

Tony redirected, ignoring his question. "Get Jordan to do a thyroid check on you when you're done with the newbies."

"Checked last week, man." West reminded him about that, too, refusing the redirect. "You do the same. Forgetfulness is a T3 symptom."

"Fine, fine."

Which meant *no*.

"Threw me straight out of the bunk." Jordan's voice came from the door providing the interruption Tony needed to slip out. He heard Lia's voice in reply and had to force himself not to look at her until his thundering heart slowed.

That was one thing he had going for him with this—no matter how riled up, Lia was a quiet talker. If she insisted on having it out with him, he could get her into a treatment bay, close the door, and whatever she had to say to him wouldn't carry through the walls. So long as he kept *his* voice down. The walls between the cabins were paper-thin, but not in the medical center.

But that would entail giving Lia a physical... The thought shouldn't make that heat burrowing into his chest grow, dip lower, grow hotter. The very last thing he should do was touch her in any capacity. It would snowball. It always snowballed. He had no restraint around her. Even wanting to avoid the conversation he knew was coming, he still wanted to look at her. He still wanted to touch her.

He picked up the stack of folders and turned to find both Jordan and Lia watching him. Waiting for him to say something. Too bad.

A quick sort of the folders, and he handed three to the other doctor, making sure Lia's was on top.

"Tony wants everyone done ASAP."

Jordan shared a look with Lia, but took the folders.

"If you're planning to ignore me the rest of your time at the station, get ready to be annoyed." Lia finally spoke, soft voice, pointed words.

It was still the three of them, waiting on the arrival of the rest of the new crew. He could risk saying something short. He just didn't know what to say, other than a direct response or ignoring her.

"I'm already annoyed."

He finally let himself look at her again, holding her gaze for a second before the curious presence of pink on her head had him looking up, and then down over her, cataloging differences between the woman before him and the one he'd known in London.

Tired. Tanned. Pink hat. She hated pink. Wispy brunette curls poked out from beneath the folded brim, longer than the short, edgy pixie she was known for. The effect was the same, drawing all focus to her soft, feminine features.

"Welcome to my life," she said, words still softly spoken in her usual custom, but with steel he'd never been able to resist. Strength he'd long admired. Strength he'd once upon a time pictured in her as the mother to his children. The kind of mother like he'd never experienced, and which might not even exist. A mother who would fight and die to protect her children.

Another life. Another future he'd failed to build.

"You seriously want to do this here?"

She didn't answer him. A couple of seconds passed, and she just turned to Jordan. "Can you do mine first? I'm the only one here, and I'm really tired from the trip. It's amazing I'm upright."

Shutting him out was fine. Shutting him out was perfect.

Showdown at least momentarily averted, he headed off to the side of the room where he could spread the files on the countertop for review. It gave him something to do. He'd take anything that dulled the knife at his neck, and helped him ignore the pull she exuded. It was all he could do.

CHAPTER TWO

ONCE WEST HAD made a decision he did his best to move on it. Over the hours between Lia's arrival and the dragged-out end of his shift, he'd decided the only way to handle things was to tackle his Lia problem head-on, as brutally as his conscience would allow.

The circumstances of his shift only served to wrench up his irritation—two of his three assigned physicals had showed up, but the third, a recalcitrant astrophysicist, had ignored multiple calls to the telescope. Then, five minutes before the end of his shift, an emergency bone-setting had dragged his shift out an extra hour.

By the time he made it to her cabin door, some of his gut-swirling panic had settled into annoyance, and he let it. Was glad for it. Annoyance helped keep fond memories at bay. He didn't need anything making him want to go to her, talk to her, make her smile. Kiss her. Even if he could drum up anger for her, he doubted he'd still want to be outside of her presence. Ever.

The only way to handle this was to make sure she didn't want him, make sure she hadn't come all the way to Antarctica to try and reconcile. Make sure she understood they were done.

Remove temptation.

He had to, harsh and quick, like a battlefield surgeon removing a gangrenous limb so the person would live. Only he was also the limb.

He took a deep breath to wrest control back from the willful, stubborn and half-wild, survival-focused part of his personality, and knocked.

Get the words out, move on. If she didn't want him, he wouldn't have to fight his own impulses for the next ten days. Not the best plan, but the only one he had.

He listened for signs of movement within. If she was there, he'd hear her.

Seconds ticked on, but no sound came from inside the tiny room. He knocked again, louder.

Then he heard the sound of bedclothes rustling, and when the door opened, her sleepy, confused face appeared in the frame. Four hours of frustration, but when he looked at her, memories of their mornings together and that old affection wrapped around him, making him want to wrap around her. Pretend now was then, and at any second, the sleepy confusion would warm to one of those soft-eyed smiles he'd so adored. The glimpses she'd reserved for him, past her strength, competency or expectations, to see the woman within.

But when her confusion cleared, there was nothing soft in her eyes for him.

Good. He did his best to ignore the exhaustion in her eyes, in her whole body.

"I'll make it quick," he said, gesturing inside with a nod.

"Tomorrow."

He finally noticed in the dim light that she was wearing pink from head to toe. Some fluffy pink thing. Pajamas, maybe. It had a hood and feet built in. His annoyance had already started to fade.

Why was she wearing pink everywhere? She hated pink. Lord, he wanted to ask. But that would be showing an interest, the opposite of what he was trying to do. So would touching her, even though the urge to feel her skin against his boomed through him like a foghorn.

"Now or never, Lia." He curled his fingers to his palms with the control it took not to push the door in, haul her to him. Just looking at her hurt.

Hell.

"Speak now, or forever hold your peace?" She spoke softly, like the effort to utter every word shaved a year off her life.

The ceremonial words sailed straight and true, and hit harder than a sledgehammer. Despite his determination to be a stone, he couldn't hide the shock rippling through him, but grit his teeth, nodded once, and she stepped back to let him in.

This was why he didn't stick around to watch the destruction after whatever life catastrophe had triggered. He couldn't stand there, inside the bubble of pain he could almost see around her, warping reality. As if this cabin were some awful place that existed between two universes, the one where he'd gotten everything he'd ever wanted, and this one, where the last gift he could give her was walking away.

He closed the door behind him and leaned there, while she tracked the measly few feet that made up the whole of the walking space, getting as far from one another as was possible in the tiny space.

In his mind, all afternoon, when he'd pictured himself coming, acting it out, he'd dialed his performance to eleven. Shouted. Said ugly, awful things. Lied. Everything he could think of to make her angry, to make her hate him. But there with her, breathing the same air, feeling the pain written all over her, from the tilt of her eyebrows to the way she shifted from foot to foot, fidgeting, her hands hidden in her cuffs, he couldn't do it.

He couldn't do it, more proof that he had to make her want to stay away.

He forced himself to look her in the eye, but kept his voice quiet, and more sympathetic than he wanted. "I don't know what you're wantin', lass, but you're wastin' your time comin'. It's done between us. Over. Say what you want to say, and let's have done with it."

He heard his accent thicker than it had been in years, not just the shifting pronunciation, but the words, the cadence. Further proof this was scrambling his eggs.

"I didn't come to *say* anything. I wanted to see with my own eyes that you were alive and well." Her voice wobbled, like it had to pass through bubbles of emotion in her throat. This would be easier if she would just shout.

"And now you see."

"Alive. And I need to understand why the man who said he loved me, the only—" She stopped midthought, and closed her eyes, hands slipping from her sleeves enough to fidget before her as she struggled for composure. "Why would you just leave without word, three days before our wedding? I deserve to know what I did wrong."

There it was, her taking the blame for it. An example of exactly what she would do if he told her the whole damned story, try to take his guilt away or at least share the load. She'd probably say his brother had committed suicide because she'd taken too much of West's time, or that it was her fault because she was the subject of West's ultimatum. He couldn't have an addict around his new family, and he'd picked Lia over Charlie. And Charlie had picked drugs over rehab and family. A choice Charlie obviously wasn't ready to make, and he should've seen that. If he'd listened...

He lifted one hand to mash against his forehead, trying to rub away the tension headache already starting to drill in.

Don't think about Charlie.

He didn't need to explain. He wasn't *going* to explain. But if he wanted her to believe him, not take the blame, he had to give some excuse. Pinning some action on her would be an even greater sin than the lie he was about to tell. He couldn't make her take the blame. He'd take it. He deserved it.

"You didn't do anything wrong." The muscles all seemed to have tightened, and making his mouth form words was harder than running in water. "Something happened, and I needed to go. So I left."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about that. I don't want to talk about any of this, and you know that."

Her shoulders bobbed quickly under the fluffy pink onesie she'd zipped herself into. In any other circumstances, the ridiculousness of her outfit would delight him—with the hood and the footsies attached—but he hadn't smiled in a long time.

"I don't care about your aversion to talking about the past. It's not that far in the past, and I need to understand."

“Aye, I see that. But you don’t need to know everything. You’re not part of my life now, Lia. We’re not friends. We’re not lovers. We’re not engaged.”

“If you had to leave, I would’ve gone with you.”

“No,” he said swiftly, searching for any route that would get through to her. “When I proposed, I thought it was love. I thought I loved you. Turns out, I didn’t.”

The color drained from her face.

“But when I left...” she started, but then just stopped. Like she didn’t even have an avenue to try and argue it. Like it was almost expected.

Which it probably was. He had left her days before their wedding.

That was something he should apologize for; he could do that without explanations. But softening his position now would be a bad idea. Inside, he was already as soft as peat; it wouldn’t take much for him to sink into the dreck. He’d apologize another day, after she’d accepted things.

“Is there anything else you want to discuss?”

Speak now, or forever hold your peace... She didn’t even have to say the words this time.

“I guess I don’t have anything else to say,” she said, the words hanging there, sucking the air out of the room as she extended her left arm a bit, eyes fixed on the hand she’d let slide out from the cuff she’d tucked it into for warmth. “Just...”

He followed her gaze down to her hand. And the glittering diamond ring still perched on her finger. Where he’d slid it almost a year before.

The ice he’d felt cramming into the back of his neck earlier returned, a single, hard throb in his head stopping him from saying anything else. Why would she still be wearing that?

“I came to give this back.” Her voice wobbled, then cracked, the sound as sudden and startling as a gunshot. “This beautiful ring we designed together, and the lie that it represents...”



Lia had other things she wished she had the strength to say, but as soon as she got feeling back in her face, she might be able to be proud of herself for still breathing after having him say the worst thing he could have to her. But all she could think of was to return the ring.

She flexed her hand, noted the way it trembled, the way her body could respond while mentally she still scrambled for anything to say. Her heart rabbited away. She heard her breath as if through a stethoscope, but it was as if every part of her brain was focused on keeping her upright and breathing. All emotion. No reason.

West stared at the ring, his jaw bunched and his brow beetled, but he didn’t say anything.

Take it off. She was supposed to take it off now.

Forcing her arms to move, she latched on to the exquisite trigold engraved band and pulled.

In the first days, when she hadn’t been able to locate him, the ring had been a comfort to her. When she discovered his empty flat, she’d clung to the promise she’d still trusted in and wanted to protect.

Her hands were cold enough that the knuckle, which always snagged it, had contracted, and it took nearly no effort for the ring to pop free. But everything still wobbled. Her hands. Her voice, when she finally found some words, the last she hoped she’d ever have to say to him. “I can’t carry it anymore, or the weight of your broken promises.”

The last word was whispered, no strength left to fake, all swept away with the sudden, sickly warmth washing over her face and down. Lightly stinging in her eyes and cheeks, then like a fever in her throat where muscles tensed, opened, hollowed so that when she breathed in it sounded strangled, choking...

Oh, no...

She was going to cry. As if she needed one more ounce of humiliation. The cascade of physical processes had already begun, the ones she could feel and which let her know it was too late to stop.

She thrust her hand out to him, the ring on her quaking palm.

He started to say something, but stopped dead a split second before her chin began the quiver and tears spilled.

Focusing on the process of it was the only thing she could think to do.

Useless Science Fact Number One: tears from grief and pain were chemically different from those summoned by dirt or onion fumes.

Useless Science Question Number One: How would these tears have dried on a microscope slide? Spiky or like a web of fractals, like that strange theory she'd once read which hypothesized that different tears produced different crystalline salt structures.

She looked away from his eyes, not wanting to see him through the wavering watery line, or the horror there. But that coping mechanism fritzed and she had to reach for any other information to sedate her emotions.

“Lia?”

What else?

Something...

Prolactin.

Useless Science Fact Number Two: prolactin was somehow present in tears—a hormone initially believed only to govern lactation and the reason babies instinctively suckled. There was no way to stop it.

“Lia?” He said her name again, confusion present in his voice. As if she shouldn't experience grief. Like she wasn't a human who'd gone through loss in the past, who wasn't having her third round of grief in a handful of months, just because he'd wanted to share those old pains with her, or know her. Never wanted to let her close enough to love her, just close enough to fool her into thinking she'd finally found someone who would.

Lia never cried.

Ophelia had, but only when she was alone. She needed to be alone now.

He said her name again, but she could only shake her head, her eyes fixed on the little closet at his shoulder.

Why was he still standing there? Didn't he have any decency? Couldn't he see that she...

The ring. He hadn't taken it; she still felt it weighing her palm down.

When she gave it to him, he would go...

She thrust it forward, finally looking again at his face, his horrified face.

Enough. He had to go.

She opened her mouth to tell him, but a short, choked hiccup came out instead, and in her own horror, she slammed her free hand over her mouth to hold it.

“Lia?”

He had to stop saying her name like he could make her stop feeling by him being horrified by it.

One step forward came with his word this time, so her knuckles touched his chest.

The brush of his hand on her well-padded arm got through the grief fogging her brain.

He thought he could be horrible and cruel and then just...what? Comfort her? Maybe tell her to stop being dramatic?

No.

She peeled her own hand from her mouth and slapped his hand away hard. Then again, because it wasn't far enough. She'd come all this way, and now all she wanted was distance.

Distance and getting rid of the ring, which he still hadn't taken. A quick survey of his attire provided an array of pockets where she could stick the cursed thing. She found one, and as soon as she'd stuffed the diamond band inside, she shoved at his chest.

“Lia, you have to take a breath. Calm down.”

“Stop saying my name.” She panted the words, because she was only half functioning on intention.

“Okay, but you have—”

“Get out!”

West lifted both hands, palms forward, to stay her, and backed warily out the door.

As soon as he stepped through, she took two big steps, made sure it was as closed as possible, then flipped the locks.

She crawled back into bed and pressed her face into the pillow to muffle the sounds she couldn't stop.

It was done. It was over. She'd wanted to know what she'd meant to him, and now she knew. But she'd always known that, in the back of her mind. She'd just let herself pretend otherwise.

CHAPTER THREE

WEST PUSHED INTO the clinic early the next morning, before anyone else had arrived, and flipped on the lights before heading straight for the supply room.

He'd endured many sleepless nights when he'd first arrived at Fletcher Station, but with the absence of dark, there was a healthy insomniac population for him to blend into.

Last night, he'd been unable to will away the image of her with tears on her cheeks, the complete breakdown of the steel-framed woman he'd known. In the moment, he thought he'd heard everything she'd said to him; he'd tried to listen, but it wasn't there in his head. All the times he'd concentrated, pressed the mental replay, all he got was the vision of her shaking and crying, and the understanding that it would take a long time to scab over.

Worse, he couldn't shake the notion that he'd ruined her as badly as he'd ruined Charlie. Yet more proof that he shouldn't be trusted with the psychological well-being of anyone.

The only good thing a sleepless night afforded him was early breakfast and getting to lock himself away before she arrived for her first shift. If he was lucky, he could busy himself counting everything, a task that would minimize contact with other people, while staying mostly out of sight. For her.

Instinct said *give her time*. Trust Jordan to be there for her to lean on as he was sure she had done at the start. But it also said *keep an eye on her*. Because he just wasn't sure how bad this could get. He prayed not as bad as it had with his brother, but then Lia wasn't an addict. She had Jordan looking out for her. Maybe he should quietly ask her to keep a closer eye...

He opened the digital inventory and sent it to the office printer. Working on paper would be easier on his fried brain, and anything he could do to make today easier, he would. Including throwing himself into monotony, testing the status of everyday machines used for testing and upkeep. Centrifuge, autoclave and irradiator for sterilizing equipment that would be reused—something he'd never encountered in any other hospital but was in Antarctica. Everything brought onto the continent had to be shipped out again, including all forms of garbage.

He left in nine days.



“Are we having fun yet?” Jordan asked after throwing away the last bits of a stitch kit Lia had used on a butter-fingered galley cook, her second patient of the day.

As part of her first day on the job, Lia shadowed Jordan to learn her way around and get a crash course in station medicine, which was like some cross between a small hospital and field medicine. “Oh, sure, nothing like stitching up a hearty thumb slice to get the party started.”

“Or an asthma attack.”

“That was the first party of the day,” Lia corrected her thumb party joke, finishing up the file entry for the thumb.

She'd expected to struggle to find the old Lia, the version of her that Jordan knew, but a few minutes with her almost maid of honor had her stepping into London Lia's shoes once more, the ones she hadn't been strong enough to cram onto her metaphorical feet with West last night.

Not that she had to try too hard in that regard. Of all the people in her life, Jordan, who'd known her since medical school, was the most likely to be accepting of changes to the Lia she knew. But it was just one more thing on an already overwrought mind and Lia didn't have it in her yet to try and sort out who she was supposed to be while trying to sort out everything else. While still hollow and cold from last night's official breakup. Breakdown. Whatever. From feeling him very close by, but knowing she wouldn't be welcome if she spoke to him, that she shouldn't even want to speak to

him, that he'd never smile for her again or cuddle under a warm woolly blanket with her to watch some silly movie with more special effects than story.

If being London Lia made it even a tiny bit easier, she'd stick to it for now. But that didn't mean she couldn't tell Jordan the truth about her situation, it just meant she had to be strong about it. No matter how helpless and heartbroken she might be on the inside.

"But I guess this is just my life now."

"While you're here, you mean?" Jordan asked, her tone saying she'd picked up on the undercurrent of dismay. "It can get more exciting here. Fieldwork can be pretty dangerous—not that you'll be doing any of that over the winter. Are you nervous about staying?"

"For the winter?" Lia popped her head out of the treatment room to make certain no other patients had come in while they stood there chatting. "Not really. I've decided it's adventurous and as my life is no longer going to be neurosurgery exciting, and even if my cabin is freezing compared to the rest of the station, it's adventure time and I should enjoy the memory-making."

"I'm going to come back to that whole life-without-adventure thing, but right now...your cabin was really that cold last night?" Jordan asked. "Inside the station never seems much colder than being at home."

She had a point. Lia didn't feel colder in the clinic, but no, her cabin had been colder. "Maybe I was just really tired. But honestly, I was always a little bit cold when I worked in London, and that was before I spent time in Portugal. Maybe the warm temperate climate had made me go soft."

Jordan snorted her disbelief, a testament to how well Lia had played the self-assigned role of all things unsinkable. "You'll do more than waste away in a little village. Maybe you can work part-time in Porto."

All Lia could think to do was nod. "Maybe."

But even if the authorities were still unsure if her father would return and take over the vineyard, she wasn't confused about it. Once he lost interest in something, that was it. Her mother. His second and third wives. Her—not that she could remember him ever having interest in her. Just the opposite. Disappointment that she wasn't male, and all the assurances that she'd never inherit. A point that had left her further confused when the lawyers had said, with him gone, she was the one indicated in his paperwork to manage Monterrosa Wine.

But that strange surprise had faded when they'd informed her that as soon as she married it would be her husband who actually inherited the vineyard. At that time, she'd thought that would be West. Now she might never feel comfortable enough to marry, not if she could be as wrong about West as she had been. A man who wanted her to believe he loved her? She'd probably fall for it without a drop of sense.

"But considering the village is called Monterrosa, I feel my first responsibility is to them, the people who have been loyal to Monterrosa Wine since the time of titles."

"Who was assigned Nigel Gates yesterday?" The question came from the lobby area, immediately shifting both of their attention from the spiky conversation.

"Tony?" Lia mouthed the question to Jordan, not yet able to identify people by voice.

Jordan nodded, then mouthed back, "West had him."

They both eased off the counter where they'd been leaning and drifted out to the lobby in time to see West coming out of the room where the autoclave and irradiators lived.

"I had him, but he never showed. It's in the file," West said, glancing toward the two of them, but focusing again on the medical director. "I was here with a broken arm an hour after end of shift, and he never made an appearance. Called up to the BAT twice before that, no answer."

Nigel was being uncooperative. Figured.

"BAT?" she whispered to Jordan, staying out of the conversation between Tony and West, despite staying to listen in.

"Big-ass telescope," Jordan filled in. "There are a lot of goofy acronyms around here."

Lia nodded, but as it now all made sense, she had to join in the conversation. She could be an adult about this. She had to learn how to coexist with West at the station for several more days, couldn't spend the whole time avoiding him.

"Nigel is in a big hurry to get the telescope calibrated before the night sky appears. I guess it takes a lot of time and effort," she said, because she had picked up that much from the man's single-minded but strangely nonconversational conversation. "He's not going to take time away from that telescope without being forced."

"Why do you say that?" West asked, his voice growing quiet and sober enough that she had to look at him.

"We spent two days traveling with each other, talking and getting to know one another." Even if it was more like she was just there, listening to him talking to himself about his plans, she'd heard enough. "He's got a fire in his belly."

She immediately heard how it sounded—like she and Nigel had developed more of a connection than they had, and while seeming less pathetic, like someone who was still able to connect to another man appealed, West only had to meet Nigel to know how inaccurate that assumption would be.

"What's the goal? A study of some kind?" Tony asked from the doorway of his office where he continued to loiter.

She could only shake her head. "I couldn't tell you. He told me. In detail. But it was more like me listening to him thinking out loud than conversation. I mostly understood his drive. He said he'll never get this kind of unrestricted access to a large telescope again, and his future plans ride on proving some theory. He's not coming out of there without pressure. And it'll probably get worse once the night sky arrives."

West moved on. "I'll call up there again, and if he doesn't answer, I'll take equipment and go."

The way he turned his body away from her made it clear her part of this conversation was over, and she turned to Jordan, and tried to pretend she didn't see worry in her friend's eyes.

West got on the radio, and after a moment, he was speaking into the mic, calling Nigel by name, but no response came but static and silence.

"He can hear it broadcasting over the whole building?"

"It's basically a big dome with a room built on for entry. If he's with the telescope, he should be able to hear the radio."

And why would he answer West today when he hadn't yesterday?

She stepped away from Jordan and, although the last thing she should do was get close to West, stopped a couple feet down from where he stood with the radio. "Let me try. He might answer me."

A few moments after she made the call and announced who it was, Nigel answered.

"Lia, busy right now." He mumbled something else, something about cycling and whatever that was, but it was an opening.

"It's really important that I get your baseline and type your blood, just in case there is some kind of emergency this winter and we're all cut off from evacs. Maybe you can make up the time later."

"Time is fixed, it cannot be made up."

"Okay, but it can be saved. If I get dinner delivered to you later, you won't have to come down to the galley and take time away, just keep working."

He was silent a moment, and then agreed, "Fine. But be quick."

Right. She rang off and then looked back to Jordan. "Want to come with me?"

Jordan nodded, but West interrupted, stepping over to take the radio from her hand. "He's my patient. I'm going. You don't need to go. Just send the dinner later."

"If he's going to be a problem child for the winter," Tony interjected, "Lia needs to reinforce her relationship with him and learn where to find him when he refuses to come down."

West's answering grunt had all eyes on him, but he *stared* at Lia for several long seconds before he nodded. "Lia can come with me if she wants to."

She definitely didn't want to, but she also didn't want to let him keep affecting all her decisions, making her less than she had the potential to be, as she'd been since she'd found him missing.

One look around provided a befuddled-looking Tony Bradshaw, who clearly did not understand the angsty undercurrent flowing between them all, but didn't ask for clarification. He just gave final directions about blood typing and equipment, then returned to his office.

"Get your boots on and your outdoor suit," West directed, then pivoted to grab a bag from the wall and headed for the inventory room again, where he'd been all day. "Meet me here in fifteen."

Right. Great.

She looked over to find Jordan hurrying to her side. "Are you sure you're okay with this? It probably shouldn't be all three of us, but if you don't want to make the trek alone with him, you can bow out and I'll take you up there tomorrow. So you know where it is."

The question alone would've alarmed Lia back home, but here it just confirmed that she wasn't pulling off her quiet strength act as well as she'd used to, no matter how easy it was to talk to Jordan again.

"It's okay. I said I was after adventure, right?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure spending time with *him* means adventure, just...suffering." Jordan kept her words quiet, and the gentle assertion of support had that tingling returning to Lia's eyes. She shook her head and gestured to the door, eager to escape before that awful leaking came back. "I need to get my suit. It'll be fine. I'm not going to let him make me dread any part of my adventure. I'm here to revel. R.E.V.E.L. And climbing a frozen, snowy, almost-mountain is the kind of adventure I can't have in Portugal. Don't worry."

She silently repeated the words to herself. Don't worry. Don't worry because he couldn't say anything worse than he already had. And that stare of his hadn't said he wanted to talk to her about anything, just like him hiding out in the storage room all day said he didn't want to be in her presence any more than she wanted to be in his.

"I'm going to worry, anyway," Jordan muttered, still looking uneasy with the concept, but apparently with enough confidence in Lia still to say, "Call me for dinner when you get back. Zeke and I will meet you in the galley."

"Okay. Don't worry," she repeated. "We're just going to work. Said everything we needed to last night."

"You did?" If possible, Jordan looked more alarmed.

Suddenly, Lia didn't want to uphold any masks with her. She could shrug it off, she would've before, but she probably couldn't pull off the unaffected face. Not when she knew that her eyes were still a little red, which might become a chronic condition.

"I don't think I can talk about it yet," she said after a hard pause that made a little line appear between Jordan's brows.

Jordan squeezed her hand once and nodded, accepting. "When you're ready."

She had to swallow down another rise of emotion, but glanced toward the door. "If I'm late, he won't wait for me."

God knew West found it too easy to leave her behind.

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