

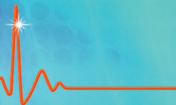


MELANIE MILBURNE

Italian Surgeon to
the Stars



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Melanie Milburne
Italian Surgeon to the Stars
Серия «Mills & Boon Medical»

Аннотация

‘You think you can erase what we had?’ Celebrity heart surgeon Dr Alessandro Lucioni may be gorgeous, but I will never forget what we shared in Paris five years ago...or how he broke my heart! Except now he’s standing in front of me, asking for my help with his young niece – and determined to pick up where we left off! But this time I won’t be his consolation prize. I will remain strong! Yet with the memories of those magical, blazing nights swirling through my mind, he’s just so very hard to resist...

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MELANIE MILBURNE

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Praise for Melanie Milburne

‘Fast-paced, passionate and simply irresistible, *Sydney Harbour Hospital: Lexi’s Secret* is a powerful tale of redemption, hope and second chances that sparkles with richly drawn characters, warm-hearted pathos, tender emotion, sizzling sensuality and uplifting romance.’

—*CataRomance*

‘A tale of new beginnings, redemption and hope that will make readers chuckle as well as wipe away a tear. A compelling medical drama about letting go of the past and seizing the day, it is fast-paced and sparkles with mesmerising emotion and intense passion.’

—*GoodReads on Their Most Forbidden Fling*

From as soon as **MELANIE MILBURNE** could pick up a pen she knew she wanted to write. It was when she picked up her first Mills & Boon® at seventeen that she realised she wanted to write romance. After being distracted for a few years by meeting and marrying her own handsome hero, surgeon husband Steve, and having two boys, plus completing a Masters of Education and becoming a nationally ranked athlete (Masters’ swimming), she decided to write. Five submissions later she sold her first book and is now a multi-published, bestselling, award-winning *USA TODAY* author. In 2008 she won the Australian Readers’

Association most popular category/series romance, and in 2011 she won the prestigious Romance Writers of Australia R*BY award.

Melanie loves to hear from her readers via her website, melaniemilburne.com.au, or on Facebook: facebook.com/melanie.milburne

After completing a degree in journalism, working in the advertising industry, then becoming a stay-at-home mum, **Robin Gianna** had what she calls her ‘midlife awakening’. She decided she wanted to write the romance novels she’d loved since her teens, and embarked on that quest by joining RWA, Central Ohio Fiction Writers, and working hard at learning the craft.

She loves sharing the journey with her characters, helping them through obstacles and problems to find their own happily-ever-afters. When not writing, Robin likes to create in her kitchen, dig in the dirt, and enjoy life with her tolerant husband, three great kids, drooling bulldog and grouchy Siamese cat.

To learn more about her work visit her website:

RobinGianna.com

Italian Surgeon to the Stars

Melanie Milburne



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Dear Reader,

One of the things I love about being a writer is that I never have to look very far for the characters for my stories. They nearly always come looking for me. Jem Clark is one such character.

I wrote Jem's younger sister Bertie's story, *A Date with Her Valentine Doc*, with the intention of it being a one-off first person Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™ especially for St Valentine's Day. (By the way, I had so much fun writing that story!) But right from the start Jem was there, with her story just waiting to be told. In fact she was so real to me I sent an email to my editor using her voice!

Jem is a strong and sharp-tongued young woman, with a take-no-prisoners attitude. You have been warned!

Thankfully, I didn't have to look very far for my hero, Alessandro Lucioni. My Mills & Boon® Modern™ Romance readers will already know how much I love an Italian alpha hero—and a deeply tortured one even more so.

I hope you enjoy *Italian Surgeon to the Stars* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Warmest wishes

Melanie Milburne

To Amy Thompson—a fellow poodle-lover, a fantastic friend and a fabulous beauty therapist. You are one of the sweetest and

kindest people I know. xxx

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CHAPTER ONE

EVEN THOUGH I'M a fully qualified teacher I still hate getting called into the headmistress's office. I get this nervous prickle in my stomach, like a bunch of ants are tiptoeing around in there on stilettos. My knees feel woolly and unstable. My heart starts to hammer.

It's a programmed response from my childhood. I was rubbish at school. I mean *really* rubbish. Which is kind of ironic since I ended up a teacher at the prestigious Emily Sudgrove School for Girls in Bath, but that's another story.

Being called in to the office nearly always means there's a problem with one of the parents—a complaint or a criticism over how I'm handling one of their little darlings. Everyone knows helicopter parents are bad news. But, believe me, fighter pilot ones are even worse.

I stood outside the closed door and took a calming breath before I knocked on the door and entered.

'Ah, here she is now,' said Miss Fletcher, the headmistress, with a polished professional smile. 'Jem, this is Dr Alessandro Lucioni—a new parent.'

The words were like a closed-fist punch to my heart. *Bang*. I'm sure it missed a beat. Maybe two. Possibly three. I stood there with a blank expression on my face ... or at least I hoped it was blank. God forbid I should show any sign of the shock that was

currently rocketing through me.

Alessandro was a parent? A father? He was married? He was in love?

The words were like a ticker tape running through my head. But then it flipped off its spool and flickered in a tangled knot inside my head. One of the stray tapes wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed until it hurt.

Alessandro gave a formal nod and held out a hand. ‘Miss Clark.’

I stared at his hand. That hand had known every inch of my body. That hand had coached me to my first orgasm. Those long, clever fingers had made me feel things I hadn’t felt before or since. The sight of that hand made memories I’d locked away twist and writhe and wriggle out of their shackles and run amok with my emotions. I could feel the spread of heat flowing through me. Furnace-hot heat. Heat that made me acutely aware of my sexuality and the needs and urges I usually staunchly, stubbornly, *furiously* ignored.

I brought my gaze up to his unreadable one. So he wasn’t going to let on that he knew me. Biblically or literally. Fine. I would play the same game.

‘Welcome to Emily Sudgrove,’ I said, and put my hand in his. His fingers were cool and strong, and closed around mine with just enough pressure to remind me of the sensual power he’d once had over me.

Okay. Forget about once. I admit it. He *still* had it over me. I

felt the tingle of the contact. The nerves of my fingers and hand were lighting up like fairy lights on a tree. Sparking. Fizzing. Wanting.

‘Thank you,’ he said, with a brief flicker of his lips that passed for a smile—but I noticed it didn’t make the distance to his eyes.

Oh, dear Lordy me, his eyes! They were a dark lustrous brown. Darker than chocolate. Strong eyes. Eyes that could melt frozen butter like a blowtorch. Eyes that could be sexily hooded and smouldering when he was in the mood for sex. Eyes that could make my blood sing through my veins with just a look.

I felt his gaze move over my face in an assessing manner. I hoped he wasn’t noticing my eyebrows needed shaping. Why hadn’t I made the time for a bit of lady landscaping? Why, oh, why hadn’t I used the hair straightener that morning? My hair is my biggest bugbear. I *hate* my corkscrew curls. For most of my life I’ve had to endure dumb blonde jokes. At least when I tame my hair it gives me a little more credibility, or so I like to think.

Think. Now, there’s an idea. But my brain wasn’t capable of rational thought. I was in fight-or-flight mode. I wanted to get away from Alessandro—as I’d been doing for the last five years.

I’d seen glimpses of him from time to time. He’d saved the life of a London theatre actor a couple of years ago, which had made him into a celebrity doctor. He’s a heart surgeon. A pretty darn good one too—I have to give him that. He ripped *my* heart right out of my chest without anaesthetic. Oh, and the reason he’s called ‘Dr’, and not Mr like other surgeons, is because he’s done

a PhD on top of his arduous training.

Talk about an overachiever. And people think *I'm* a workaholic. I reckon his business card would have to be one of those fold-out concertina ones, like those old-fashioned postcards, to accommodate all the letters after his name.

I saw him just a couple of weeks ago in Knightsbridge, when I was having lunch with my younger sister Bertie. He didn't see me, thank God. He was with a blonde. A gorgeous supermodel type, with legs up to her armpits and perfect skin, perfectly shaped eyebrows and perfectly smooth straight hair. The type of woman he's been seen out and about with ever since our relationship. Luckily my sister didn't recognise him—or if she did she knew better than to say anything.

Urgh. I hate thinking about my relationship with Alessandro. I hate even using that term. It wasn't a relationship—not for him, anyway. I was a rebound. That's another word I loathe. I was a consolation prize. Not Miss Right, but Miss Will Do.

'Dr Lucioni has enrolled his niece into your class, Jem,' Miss Fletcher said into the canyon of silence.

Niece?

An inexplicable sense of relief collided with shock. He had a sister? A niece? Relatives? He'd told me he was an orphan.

I'd been amazed at how well he had done for himself when he had no one to back him. Not many people get to where he has without a leg-up somewhere along the way. But on the rare occasions when he spoke of his past he'd told me his parents died

when he was a teenager and he had put himself through school and then medical school by working three jobs. There was no family money. No extended family support.

What other lies had he fed me?

I looked at him with a quizzical frown. ‘You have a sister?’

Something moved at the back of his eyes, like a stage-hand darting back into the shadows behind the curtains between acts.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘She’s currently unwell, and I’m taking care of Claudia until she recovers.’

His voice ... *Holy guacamole*. His voice was like a caress to my sex-starved body. It stroked over me like a sensual hand, making the base of my spine melt like a marshmallow in front of a campfire. The deepness of it, the mellifluous tone of it, the Sicilian accent even years living outside his homeland hadn’t been able to remove.

That voice had told me things I had no business believing. I had fallen for every word. Every shallow promise I had taken to heart. I was ashamed of how stupid I’d been. Deeply and cringingly ashamed.

I’d spent years scoffing at my hippie parents for falling for the latest fad and then I’d gone and done the same. I’d latched on to Alessandro like a directionless follower does a guru. I’d worshipped him. I’d been prepared to give up all I had to be with him. I would have walked—no, crawled on my knees—over glass or razorblades or burning coals or a pit of hissing vipers to be with him.

But what I'd thought we had was a sham. It was all smoke and mirrors. He hadn't loved me at all. I was payback to the woman who'd dumped him for a richer man.

'Claudia will be boarding with us,' Miss Fletcher said.

I swung my gaze back to Alessandro's. 'Boarding?'

His expression gave nothing away. 'I work long, sometimes unpredictable, hours at the hospital.'

I teach six and seven-year-olds. Key Stage One as we call it in the UK. Grade One in the US and other parts of the world. I know children in the UK go to boarding school a lot younger than anywhere else, but sometimes it's a good thing. *Sometimes*. If a family is dysfunctional or not coping with the demands of kids then a well-run boarding school is a good option. Maybe even the best option in some cases. But I worry about kids who are shunted off before they're emotionally ready.

Boarding school can be a brutal place for a child who is overly sensitive. I have a history of oversensitivity, so I kind of know about these things.

Mind you, I never went to boarding school. Maybe if I had my childhood would have been a little less chaotic. My sister and I were hauled out of school when we were six and seven respectively and taken off to live in a commune in the Yorkshire moors, where we were supposed to learn through play. We were there two whole years before the authorities tracked us down and stepped in.

My sister Bertie's playing and learning was clearly of a much

higher standard than mine, because she was a year ahead of her peers when she was placed back in the system. Unfortunately I was behind. Way, *way* behind. It took me years to catch up, and even now whenever I don't know the answer to something I get that same sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach—a feeling of inadequacy, of not being smart enough, of not quite making the grade.

It doesn't take a psychotherapist to understand why I chose to teach at a posh girls' school. I needed to prove to myself that I was good enough to teach in one of the best schools in the country. But the thing I've come to realise is that it doesn't matter how rich or poor your parents are—children are the same the world over. Some are strong academically; others, like me, can wangle the social side to their advantage. I made the art of fitting in into a science. I totally nailed it. Even though at times I compromised myself.

Alessandro was watching me with that same unfathomable expression on his face. Why had he chosen my school? There were dozens of boarding schools across the country. Why The Emily Sudgrove School for Girls in Bath? He worked in one of London's top hospitals. He lived in Belgravia. Yes, Belgravia. I told you he'd done well for himself. Why didn't he enrol his niece in a school closer to where he lived?

'Dr Lucioni would like a tour of the school,' Miss Fletcher said.

Her name was Clementine, but no one was allowed to call

her that. She was proudly single and preferred Miss to Ms. She believed in formal address from her staff to establish respect, although she always called us by our Christian names when the children weren't around.

‘Will you see to that, Jem?’ she added.

‘Sure,’ I said brightly.

See how good I am at playing the game? Show no fear. That was my credo. It comes in pretty useful as a teacher too. You'd be surprised at how knee-knocking scary some six or seven-year-olds can be. Although nothing compares to a six-foot-three hot Sicilian guy you once had monkey sex with, but still ...

‘Come this way,’ I said.

I felt him just behind me as I walked out of the office. If I stopped he would cannon into me. I was tempted to stop. It had been a long time since a man had touched me, even by accident. I'm no nun, but neither have I been getting out there much. Not lately. Not since ...

I had to really think before I could remember. Ah, yes, I remember now. I had a blind date with a friend of a friend's older brother a couple of years ago. God, what a disaster *that* was. No wonder I don't like remembering it. He was on something illegal and kept leaving the table where we were having dinner to have another snort. It took me a while to realise what was going on. The third time he said he needed the bathroom I ordered the most expensive wine on the wine list, drank half a glass and then left him to sort out the bill. I don't let men walk all over me any

more. I get in first.

Speaking of illegal ... There should be a law against men as good-looking as Alessandro Lucioni. I know the tall, dark and handsome tag is a bit of a cliché, but he's exactly that. Tall and olive-skinned, and with the sort of looks that would make any woman between the ages of fourteen and fifty throw herself on the nearest bed and beg to be ravished by him.

He has sharply chiselled cheekbones and a prominent brow that gives him a slightly intimidating air whenever he frowns. His hair is thick and plentiful and not quite short, not quite long, but somewhere fashionably in between. He looks like one of those dishy European aftershave models. That day his hair was brushed back off his forehead, and it looked like the last time he'd done it he had used his fingers.

I wished I could stop thinking about his fingers. I was breaking out into a hot flush. I could feel it deep in my core. That subtle tensing of my girly bits as I recalled the way he had stroked me there. I pressed my knees together, but that only made it worse.

'This is the ... erm ... library,' I said as I pushed open the door.

He stood waiting for me to go in before him. He had excellent manners. That's another thing I have to give him. Ladies first—that's his credo. *Yikes*, why couldn't I stop thinking about sex?

I turned on my heel and walked in with my head high, waving my hand to encompass the shelves and shelves of books. 'We at Emily Sudgrove Academy pride ourselves on giving our girls a broad choice in reading material which is both age-appropriate

while giving them the opportunity in which to extend their reading range.'

I sounded like I was reading it from the school information booklet—which is not surprising since I was the one who rewrote the latest edition.

'Jem.'

I get called by my name, or at least the shortened version of it, all the time. There was no reason why my legs should suddenly feel as if the bones had been taken out. Or for my heart to beat extra quickly and my chest to feel tight, as if something rapidly expanding had taken up all the space in there. But something about the way Alessandro said my name made the base of my spine tingle.

I took a slow deep breath and turned to face him with my Key Stage One teacher face on. My sister Bertie calls it my Miss Prim and Proper face. Apparently I've been doing it since I was a little kid, which is kind of ironic since nothing about our childhood was anywhere close to being prim and proper.

'Miss Clark,' I said, with a tight smile that didn't reveal my teeth. 'We at Emily Sudgrove believe in teaching our girls proper forms of address, so as to equip them with the necessary tools to—'

'Why did you run away the other week in London?'

I tried to keep my expression composed. I hadn't realised he'd seen me that day. It made me cringe to think he'd witnessed my panicked bolt via the kitchen of the restaurant Bertie and I had

been lunching in. But I hated seeing him with his lovers, either in the press or in the flesh. He was in and out of relationships like a cab driver in and out of his cab. I swear to God he should have a revolving door in his bedroom. Or a ticketing machine—like the ones in the deli to keep people from jumping the queue.

‘I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ I said. ‘You must have mistaken someone else for me.’

The corner of his mouth tipped up in a knowing smile. It was only a slight hitch of his lips but it was enough to set my pulse racing.

‘I could never mistake you for anyone else, *cara mio*.’

This time I didn’t bother with the composed expression. I frowned. I glared. I bristled. ‘Do *not* call me that. It’s Miss Clark.’

The hitch of his lips went higher, as if he found my stand-off amusing. ‘How long have you been teaching here?’ he asked.

I made an effort to relax my shoulders. *Keep it cool and professional*. I could do this as long as I forgot about our history. ‘Five years.’

His brows moved together over his dark eyes. ‘Since Paris, then?’

Paris. The city of love.

Yeah, right. The city of bitter disappointment, if you ask me. I hate Paris now. I can’t even bring myself to look at a baguette without wanting to throw up or hit someone over the head with it. Or both.

I brought up my chin. ‘I was ready for a change.’

His frown had melted away as if it had never been, but I got the feeling he was thinking about our time together. Shuffling through the memories like someone searching for something in a long neglected drawer. I could see the distant look in his gaze. I got the same look in mine if I allowed myself to think of that whirlwind month in Paris.

But then he blinked and rearranged his features into a cool mask. 'I chose this school because it's close to where I live.'

My heart gave a lurch. 'You live nearby?'

'I've bought a property in the countryside, just outside of Bath,' he said.

'Then why are you boarding your niece?'

'It's being renovated at present,' he said. 'I don't think it's a safe place for a young child.'

'So what will you do once it is?' I asked. 'Take her to live with you? Or will you be too busy travelling back and forth to London?' *And sleeping with anyone with a pulse*, I wanted to add but didn't.

He'd selected a book from the bookshelves and was turning it over in his hands. It was a Beatrix Potter book. My mother had a thing about Beatrix Potter. Hence Bertie's name—Beatrix, but don't call her that unless you want her to hate you—and my name. Had he chosen the book deliberately? Reminding me of the connection we'd once had?

I hadn't told him *everything* about my childhood but I'd told him a lot. Well, maybe not a lot—more like a bit. There was stuff

I hadn't even told Bertie, close as we were. There were some things it was best not to talk about. Best not to even think about. I'm good at avoidance. Avoidance is my middle name ... Well, it's not—but it could be.

Bertie and I don't have middle names. Our parents didn't believe in them. I suspect it's because they have about four or five apiece and can never remember them. My parents both come from aristocratic backgrounds. I figure it's a whole lot easier being a hippie when someone else is paying the bills. But don't get me started ...

I watched as Alessandro slid the book back into place on the shelf. As his index fingertip slowly slid down the slim spine I felt a traitorous quake of lust roll through me. I squeezed my thighs together to stop the thrumming sensation. Like *that* was ever going to work. Just being in the same room as him was enough to make me come. That voice. Those eyes. Those hands. That delicious body ...

I drank in the sight of him. The broad shoulders, the strong back and lean hips, the long legs and taut buttocks. I had run my hands and lips and tongue over every inch of that body. I had learned how to give and receive pleasure instead of being frozen with fear. A fear I hadn't told him about. Well, not the truth, anyway.

I told him my first time had been 'a bit unpleasant'. I didn't go into the details of exactly *how* unpleasant. I refuse to see myself as a victim. I don't even see myself as a survivor. I'm a fighter.

I'm strong and tough and I take no crap from anyone.

Alessandro turned and his gaze locked with mine. 'You look good, Jem.'

That's another thing I hate. Compliments. I never believe them.

I've never considered myself beautiful. Even though I'm blonde and blue-eyed and slim, with a decent set of boobs—who I am to talk about clichés?—I have hang-ups about my looks. I've got my father's nose and my mother's cheekbones. I've got my maternal grandmother's hair and my paternal grandfather's chin. I don't know whose eyes I've got, but I sure hope they can see without them! Seriously, it's like all the bad bits of everyone in my family were cobbled together to make me. Thanks a bunch, God, or whoever it is in charge of genetics.

Bertie's the beautiful one in our family—not that she thinks so or anything. She would say I'm the good-looking one, but that's because she's a sweetheart. She has gorgeous brown hair and brown eyes, and the cutest smile with tiny dimples. When I smile it looks more like a grimace.

I have to remind myself that's it okay to show my teeth because for most of my childhood my teeth were like a picket fence. They were so wide apart I could have flossed with hessian rope. My parents went through a 'no medical intervention' phase, which unfortunately included dentistry. They believed my teeth would eventually find their rightful position all by themselves. Well, let me tell you they didn't. I had to endure braces and a night-time

plate for three and a half years during my late teens and early adulthood. Yes. *Three and a half years!*

God, talk about excruciating torture—socially *and* physically. No wonder my sex life was a little on the barren side when I met Alessandro. Not that I cared about it all that much then—or now. If I remove my memory of Alessandro’s lovemaking—which is darn near impossible to do—I think sex is horribly overrated.

I shrugged off his compliment like I did everyone else’s. ‘I’ll show you the boarding house. Please come this way.’

I led the way out of the library, but before I could get through the door he put a hand on my arm. I was wearing a silk shirt and a cotton cardigan, but even so I could feel the heat of his long fingers as they wrapped around my wrist like a set of handcuffs. I looked at his hand on my wrist like someone would look at a cockroach on a piece of cake. I brought my gaze up to his. How had I forgotten how tall he was? I was going to have get myself a decent set of heels or a neck brace.

‘Do you mind?’ I said, with a crisp note to my voice. Bertie calls it my schoolmarm tone.

His fingers didn’t budge. If anything I thought they tightened a fraction. I lost myself for a moment in the bottomless depths of his coal-black gaze. I could feel his eyes drawing me in, like a magnet does a piece of metal. I could even feel my body leaning towards him, as if an unseen force was pushing me from behind.

Hell’s bells. I’m starting to sound like my mother, with her paranormal take on things. She would have a field day with his

aura. He was sending off vibes even I could read. Although his eyes were dark and inscrutable it felt like he was watching me from behind a closed door that had once been open.

But hadn't I always felt that way about him? He had shadows in his eyes I had chosen to ignore five years ago. I hadn't liked to press him because I knew how awful it was to talk about stuff you didn't want to talk about. I figured that, him being an orphan and all—how had I fallen for *that* lie?—meant he wasn't comfortable talking about his childhood.

Why had he lied to me? What sort of family did he come from? Surely it couldn't be half as weird and wacky as mine.

Alessandro's thumb found my leaping pulse. *Damn*. No way of hiding that involuntary reaction from him. It didn't matter how determined I was in my brain to armour up, because he could always find a way to ambush my senses. That was why I'd so assiduously avoided him over the years. I didn't go to places I knew he frequented. I didn't want to run into him like we were old friends. Making polite conversation, talking about the weather or current affairs, as if he *hadn't* torn my heart out of my chest and ground it under the heel of one of his handmade Italian leather shoes.

I had way more self-respect than that. *No second chances* was another credo of mine. One strike and you're out. You don't get to screw over Jem Clark more than once.

I suppressed a shiver as his thumb began a slow stroke, back and forth, making every nerve beneath my skin shiver and shriek

out for more. He had a mesmerising touch, gentle and yet strong. Confident. Assured. As if he knew my body like a maestro knows his favourite instrument.

Actually, it was a pretty accurate analogy, because I was as strung up as an over-tuned violin. I could feel every nerve and muscle in my body pulling taut. My insides practically shuddered with longing.

How could he possibly have that effect on me after all this time? I hated him for how he'd used me. I detested his smooth-talking artifice. Saying he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me when all he'd wanted to do was send a message to his stunningly beautiful ex that he'd moved on.

Why had I been so dumb as to fall for that? I wasn't proud of my history for falling for charming lies. The event during my early teens which I refuse to mention came about because of my naivety when it came to men and their lies.

But I'm older and wiser now. Tough as old goat's knees, that's me. No one can charm me nowadays—which is kind of why I haven't been out on a date in years. I don't care if men are put off by me. I'm fine with it. I don't want the fairy tale, like my sister. I'm not hankering after some guy to lock me away in the suburbs with two-point-five kids and a mortgage.

Besides, I have more than enough kids to take care of at school. Mothering at a distance. I can handle that. I'm darn good at it too.

I unpeeled Alessandro's fingers as I gave him a look of utter

contempt. ‘I don’t think you heard me, Dr Lucioni.’

Dr Lucioni? Snort. Who was I kidding? No amount of formality was going to wipe away the memory of our affair. It was a presence in the room.

Sheesh. There I went with the paranormal thing again. But really—it was. I felt the erotic tension in the air like a singing wire. The memories of how we were together were swirling around inside my head. From behind the wall of my resolve I caught glimpses of our bodies locked together in passion. Rocking together, straining, writhing, climbing the summit of human pleasure until we both came apart. His long, tanned hairy legs entwined intimately with mine. His arms wrapped around me, holding me to him as if he never wanted to let me go. His mouth ...

I should *not* have thought about his mouth. His mouth had wreaked such havoc on my senses. He had used his mouth in ways I had not experienced before. No one had ever pleased me that way. I hadn’t allowed them to. But with him it had felt natural. Damn it, it had felt like he was worshipping my body. It had added a level of sanctity to our lovemaking that was sadly lacking in my past experiences ... especially the one I refuse to mention.

Alessandro gave me one of his half smiles—a twitch of his lips that was borderline mocking. ‘You think you can erase what we had?’

I rubbed at my wrist as if it had been stung, glaring at him

so hard my eyes hurt. 'I would appreciate it if you would refrain from referring to our ... association whilst within the parameters of this school.'

I sounded so priggish I almost laughed out loud. Bertie would have been doubled over at me.

His eyes took on a glint that did serious damage to my equilibrium—if indeed I had any in the first place, which I suspect I didn't.

'I've told my niece we're old friends,' he said. 'I thought it would help her to feel less threatened by coming here.'

I widened my eyes. I'm not talking cup-and-saucer wide. I'm talking satellite-dish wide, like those ones on the International Space Station.

'What?'

'You have a problem with making a small child feel a little more secure?'

I whooshed out a stormy breath. 'I have a problem with you fabricating a relationship between us that doesn't exist.'

'It did once.'

I sent him another death-adder stare. 'I beg to differ. How can you stand there and say we had something together when you failed to mention the fact that you'd recently broken up with your gold-digging fiancée? Not to mention your lies about not having a family. You lied to me from day one, Alessandro.'

I mentally kicked myself for using his Christian name. It was too personal. Too informal. Too intimate.

‘You have a sister and a niece and God knows who else. That’s not what people in a relationship do. They share stuff. Important stuff.’

I felt a teeny-weeny twinge of guilt at my statement. I hadn’t told him *my* important stuff, but I refused to see it as important. It was not worth thinking about. I *hated* thinking about it. It gave me nightmares to think about it. It was so long ago. I had packed away the sickening memories behind layers of I’m-a-tough-girl-don’t-mess-with-me bravado.

‘I would’ve told you in time.’

I rolled my eyes in disdain. ‘Like when?’ I said. ‘On our fiftieth wedding anniversary?’

Ack! There’s another word I loathe. Wedding.

‘But there wasn’t going to *be* a wedding, was there? Or even an engagement. Our quick-fire affair was all for show. After you’d achieved your aim of royally annoying your ex you would’ve neatly extricated yourself from our—’ I put my fingers up in air quotation marks ‘—relationship” and moved on to your next conquest. You’re just annoyed I saw through you and got out first.’

His eyes held mine in a dark, unreadable lock. ‘I’m not here to talk about the past. I’m here to talk about my niece’s future.’

I gave him a narrow look. ‘Why this school?’

His eyes didn’t waver as they held mine. ‘I told you. It’s convenient for where I’ll be living.’

‘So you’re thinking of settling down at some point?’

Why are you asking that? I thought. You. Do. Not. Care.

‘At some point.’

I was like a dog with a bone. A terrier, that’s me. Now I had him here I wanted to know everything—even the stuff I didn’t want to know. Maybe it wasn’t a bone I was hanging on to. It was a smelly old carcass I was rolling in.

‘Are you in a relationship with someone at present?’ I said.

‘No.’

‘What about the blonde the other week?’

His eyes glinted as if in triumph. ‘Was that your sister with you?’

I glowered at him. Why had I allowed myself to fall into his trap so easily? But then, I thought, what was the point in denying I’d seen him? It was making me look foolish, and the last thing I wanted was to appear foolish and gauche in front of him.

‘Yes. Who was your date?’

‘The practice manager from my consulting rooms.’

I only just managed to stop myself from rolling my eyes. I could just imagine the ‘practice’ they’d get up to.

‘I’d love to see her job description.’

His jaw tensed as if he found my comment irritating. ‘It was her birthday. Now, let’s get on with the tour, shall we?’

It annoyed me that he’d made me look petty and unprofessional. ‘This way,’ I said, and turned smartly on my heels.

But I was all too acutely aware of his tall, commanding frame following close behind.

CHAPTER TWO

I COULD SMELL the lemon and spice of his aftershave as I led the way to the dormitories on the second floor. It was a subtle scent, redolent of warm summer afternoons in a lemon grove. I thought of that brief time in Paris—the way we’d met by accident when I’d run into him as I was coming out of a shop late on a Saturday afternoon. He steadied me with his hands and I looked up into his face and my heart all but stopped.

I’m the last person who would ever believe in love at first sight, but something happened at that moment I still can’t explain. I felt something shift inside me as his dark brown eyes met mine. He spoke to me in fluent French, so that might have explained it. It made me fall all the faster. And then he was so gallant, bending down to help me pick up the tote bag that had slipped off my shoulder, spilling its contents all over the cobblestones.

When he handed me my wand of lip gloss our fingers touched. I felt a fizzing sensation that travelled all the way up my arm and somehow ended in a molten pool between my legs.

He led me to a quiet table in the shade of a leafy tree outside a café on the Rue de Seine and ordered sparkling mineral water for me and an espresso for himself. We talked for two hours but it felt like two minutes.

He told me how he had grown up in Sicily but had studied and trained in London, and was spending that year working at

Paris's top cardiac centre to complete his PhD before heading back to London. Most surgeons found the specialty hard enough, but he'd taken on even more study.

He fascinated me. I was spellbound by his warm, intelligent brown eyes and his long-fingered hands that had so briefly touched mine. I thought of those hands, how they performed intricate surgery and saved countless lives. I sat there aching for him to touch me again. I must have communicated it silently, for he suddenly reached across the table and took my hand in his, stroking his thumb over the back of it as his eyes meshed with mine.

He didn't have to say a word. I could see it in his gaze. I knew it was the same in mine. There was a connection between us that transcended the primal attraction of two healthy consenting adults. I had never felt a surge of lust so overpowering, and yet I could feel something else as well, which was less easily defined.

Looking back, I suspect I recognised some quality in him that spoke to the lonely outsider in me, which I prided myself on keeping well hidden. My mother would say it was fate, or kismet, or the planets aligning or something. My father would say it had something to do with our chakras being balanced. Whatever it was, the world seemed to carry on without us as we sat there gazing into each other's eyes.

I gave myself a mental slap and pushed open the first dormitory door. 'We sleep the Key Stage One and Two girls two to a room to encourage close friendship,' I said. 'The older girls

can request single rooms, but we encourage sharing to maintain a sense of family.’

Alessandro gave the dormitory a cursory look before meeting my gaze. I wondered if he could see any trace of the nostalgia that had momentarily sideswiped me. His eyes moved back and forth between each of mine as if searching for something.

‘Are you happy, *ma petite*?’

I felt my knees weaken at the French endearment. I covered it quickly by pasting a poised and professional look on my face. I could *not* allow myself to be lured back into his sensual orbit. His voice, no matter what language he spoke—French, Italian, English or a combination of all three—made a frisson of delight shimmy down my spine.

I wondered if my voice had the same effect on him. Not flipping likely. I might have smoothed over my Yorkshire vowels after years of living in London, but even so there was no way anyone would want to listen to me reading the phone directory.

‘What’s wrong with Claudia’s mother?’ I asked, to steer the conversation away from my emotional health.

An impenetrable sheen came over his eyes and he turned away to look at the dormitory, with its two neatly made beds and the waist-high bookshelf that doubled as a bedside table between. There were two teddy bears in pink and purple tutus sitting side by side on the top. It might have been any bedroom in the suburbs except for the sound of schoolchildren playing in the playground outside.

‘She’s receiving treatment for a protracted illness,’ he said after a long moment.

Something in my stomach slipped. ‘Terminal?’

‘I hope not.’

I bit my lip as I thought of six-year-old Claudia losing her mother. My mother—both my parents, actually—drove me nuts, but I couldn’t imagine not having her around any more.

What would it do to a little girl so young to have no one but her uncle to watch out for her? Who would help her with the issues of growing up? Who would tell her about the birds and the bees, not to mention the blowflies who could destroy her innocence in ...? Well, I’m not going to go there. Who would she turn to when the world seemed to be against her? Or when she got her heart broken for the first time? Who would hold her and tell her they loved her more than life itself?

‘What about Claudia’s father?’ I asked.

Alessandro’s top lip developed an unmistakable curl of disdain. ‘He’s not in the picture. Never has been. Claudia has never met him.’

‘What about grandparents?’

The line of his mouth tightened until it was almost flat. ‘There are none on either side.’

None? Or none he wanted to acknowledge? I wondered. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you had a sister five years ago?’ I said.

He drew in a deep breath and slowly released it. I watched as his broad shoulders went down on the long exhale and what

looked like a tiny flicker of pain passed over his features.

‘We weren’t in contact at that point.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘It sounds it.’

He gave me a level look. ‘It’s important to me that Claudia settles in as quickly and seamlessly as possible.’

‘What have you told her about her mother’s illness?’

He held my gaze for a moment before he looked away again. He let out another long breath. ‘Not much. I didn’t want her overburdened with worry about things she can’t change. She’s a sensitive child.’

‘Then she’ll join the dots for herself but probably come up with the wrong picture,’ I said. ‘You should be honest with her. Kids are much more resilient than you realise.’

His eyes collided again with mine, one of his brows going up in an arc. ‘Are they?’

It was a pointed question that hung suspended in the air.

I found myself going back in time to my own childhood, thinking of all the times when a bit of resilience would have come in handy. My parents’ hippie lifestyle was fine for them, but it hadn’t been fine for me or for my younger sister Bertie. So many times I’d had to take on a parenting role for Bertie’s sake because our parents were missing in action, so to speak.

It’s not that they weren’t loving parents—if anything they were too indulgent. We didn’t have any proper boundaries—not just

to keep us in line, but also to give others a clear message that someone was watching out for us. Mum and Dad were dreamers—drifters who never stayed in one place long enough to put down roots—which meant Bertie and I had little stability during our childhood. We would no sooner make friends at one place before we'd be shuffled on to another location where some visionary guru was setting up a new lifestyle commune our parents were keen to join.

I was always watching out for Bertie, who got bullied a lot. I did too, until I learned to stand up for myself. I had to pretend to be tougher than I really was in order to survive. It's a good skill to have, but it has its downside. After all those years of playing tough it's hard to find my soft centre. It's been bricked in, like a vault cemented into a wall. I don't know if you can call that resilience or not.

I stopped thinking about my childhood and started speculating on Alessandro's. Was that why he had posed the question? Was there something about *his* childhood that made him sceptical of a child's ability to cope with what life dished up? I had always seen him as a strong, invincible sort of person. He had brushed off his 'orphan' status with a casual it-happened-a-long-time-ago-and-I'm-over-it shrug. But what had made him pretend to be alone in the world?

I didn't think it had been to garner sympathy. He was too self-reliant to want or need anyone else's comfort. That was what I'd found so attractive about him. He didn't care what people thought

of him other than in a professional sense. He'd told me he wasn't out to win a popularity contest but to save lives. He got on with his life as if other people's opinions were irrelevant.

I secretly envied him as I'd spent so much of my life trying to fit in. I'd learned to morph into whatever I needed to be in order to belong. My chameleon-like behaviour had turned me into someone I didn't always like, but I wasn't sure how to go back to being the warm and friendly and open girl I had once been. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't sure if I even wanted to be that girl any more. That girl had got herself into trouble, and the last thing I wanted to attract was trouble.

Alessandro might have been in any sort of career and I would still have been attracted to him. I had been totally swept away by him—charmed and captivated by his take-charge, can-do attitude, which was so at odds with the way I had been raised. He was goal-orientated and disciplined. He didn't dream or drift aimlessly, or wait for someone else to tell him what he should do. He made plans and set about fulfilling them. He hadn't let his background or lack of family money stop him from becoming one of London's top heart specialists. He had laid down a career path as a young boy and got on with making it happen.

His intelligence was the biggest turn-on for me. I don't mean his doctor status, because that sort of thing doesn't impress me. I loved it that he was well read and well informed on topics I had barely even thought of before. But it was the physical intensity between us that took me completely by surprise. I had never

considered myself a sensual person. The event I refuse to talk about put paid to that when I was thirteen. I wasn't the touchy-feely sort. I didn't hug or kiss. I didn't seek affection and I didn't give it—unless there was no avoiding it, like at Christmas and on birthdays.

But with Alessandro I embraced my sexuality. I celebrated my womanhood with every cell of my body. I bloomed and burned and blazed under his touch. I discovered things about my body I had no idea it was capable of—wickedly delightful things that left my skin tingling for hours afterwards. I loved exploring the hard contours of Alessandro's body. I just about crawled into his skin once I lost my first flutter of fear.

I had never seen a man more beautifully made. Although I'm not a doctor like my sister Bertie, who sees naked men all the time, I've seen a few. My parents went through a naturalist stage when I was in my early teens, so the male form is no stranger to me. Talk about embarrassing ... Most of those men had the sort of bodies one would think they would be desperate to cover up with clothes—layers and layers of them. But, no, it was all out on show. However, none of the men I had seen in their birthday suits had looked anywhere as perfect as Alessandro. He wasn't gym-obsessed perfect, but rather healthy and virile and in-his-prime perfect.

I had to give myself another mental slap to keep my mind on the conversation. Images of his naked body were flooding my brain to such a degree I could feel warmth blooming in my

cheeks. I rarely blush. I lost my innocence a long time ago. But something about Alessandro's penetrating gaze made me feel as if he could see exactly where my mind was taking me.

I realised then with a little jolt that the intimacy we'd shared would always be between us. We had 'A History'. It wasn't as if I could wipe it away, like I do the day's lesson from the whiteboard in the classroom. There was a permanent record of it in my flesh.

I was tattooed with his touch, indelibly marked, so that when any other man touched me I automatically compared it to Alessandro's and found it sadly lacking. It's basically why I haven't bothered dating. I don't see the point. Quite frankly, I could do without being reminded I'm basically dead from the waist down with anyone else.

'I'll ... erm ... show you the bathrooms,' I said, and made to turn away.

But his hand stalled me again. I had folded my arms across my body, which meant his hand was tantalisingly close to my breasts. I felt the stirring tingle of my flesh, as if my breasts had picked up his proximity like some sort of finely tuned radar.

My breath stalled somewhere in the middle of my throat. I brought my gaze up to his. His eyes were so dark it was impossible to make out his pupils. A girl could get lost in those eyes. Disappear and never be found again.

My gaze went to his mouth as if of its own volition. My stomach did a rollercoaster loop and drop as I recalled how his lips had felt against mine. The taste of him, the feel of him, the

sensual power of him had made everything so tight and bound up inside me unwind. His lips were evenly shaped—neither too thick or too thin. He had shaved that morning, but even so I could see the urgent pinpricks of stubble surrounding his mouth and on his lean jaw.

My fingers twitched to slide over it, to remind myself of the erotic feel of his prickly male skin against the softness my female flesh.

I dragged in a ragged breath and brought my gaze back to his, but he was now looking at *my* mouth, a small frown tugging at his brow. I ran the tip of my tongue over my lips and my stomach did another crazy somersault as I saw his sexily hooded eyes follow its pathway.

I swear to God someone had sucked all the oxygen out of the air. I was finding it hard to breathe. I was standing there as if I'd been snap freeze-dried. I couldn't have move if I'd tried.

His hand reached out and ever so gently cupped my cheek. A shiver of reaction coursed through me, but for some reason I still didn't move away. It was like I was under his spell. Totally under his control, with no will to snap out of it. The pad of his thumb moved over the circle of my chin, not quite touching my lower lip but close enough for it to go into raptures of tingling, fizzing anticipation. His eyes remained focused on my mouth, as if he too were recalling how it had felt against his.

Was he going to kiss me? Would I allow him to? I was in a conundrum. I wanted to feel his mouth on mine if for no other

reason than to prove to myself that I'd been imagining it had felt far more amazing than it actually had. I guess I also wanted to prove to myself that I could resist him. That I could withstand the commanding pressure of his mouth and not melt into a pool of mush.

But another shockingly traitorous part of me wanted to close the distance between our mouths and give myself up to the storm of passion I could feel building inside my body. It was surging through my blood, firing up all my senses, making me giddy with longing. A longing I could feel pounding deep in my core. The relentless ache of it was part pleasure, part pain. It had been so long since I'd felt desire I was shocked at how powerful it was.

I realised then how base I was. How utterly primal my urges were that, for all my prim and proper fastidiousness, I was as earthy and lust driven as anyone else.

Alessandro's thumb pressed against my lower lip and I all but whimpered. I smothered it as best I could but I saw the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes as they meshed with mine.

'Have dinner with me tonight,' he said.

The fact he'd issued it as a command rather than asked me was enough to break the spell. I stepped out of his light hold and sent him an icy glare.

'The staff at Emily Sudgrove are prohibited from fraternising with the parents or guardians of the girls,' I said.

That wasn't strictly true, but it sounded like it could be. I hoped he wouldn't find out about Kate McManus, a young widow who

had recently started dating our Physical Education teacher, Rob Canning. We were delighted with the budding romance, because Rob had gone through a really painful divorce a few years ago and Kate was the only woman he'd dated since.

'Are you involved with someone?' Alessandro said.

I put on my best haughty look. Bertie reckons no one can do haughty better than me. I can arch my brows and look down my nose and send sparks of scorn from my gaze like a blue-blooded aristocrat staring down an impudent underling.

'I have no idea what makes you think you have the right to ask me such an impertinently personal question, Dr Lucioni,' I said.

His mouth tipped up at one corner, as if he found me amusing rather than threatening. 'So that's a no,' he said.

I wished I could deny it, but he would only have to ask around to find out my dating track record was abysmal. My life was a cycle of work, eat and sleep. I occasionally threw in a bit of exercise to break it up a bit. But the fact is I love my job. I don't want to be distracted from it. As far as I can see, having a relationship is one big time suck.

I didn't have the time or the inclination to be someone's date for a few weeks or months, until they found someone more attractive or more interesting. I had much more important things to do with my time. I was proud of the work I did with the girls—especially the ones who struggled to fulfil their high-flying, high-achieving parents' dreams for them. I spent a lot of time planning lessons and writing up programmes and exercises.

I'm not a chalk-and-talk teacher. I'm interactive and creative and I thrive on seeing the girls in my charge blossom and play to their strengths. I would much rather give my girls an A for effort and attitude than an A for academic prowess.

My mother laments the fact that my life has no balance but who is she to talk? She hasn't held down a job since before Bertie and I were born. Nor has my father. They've lived on their parents' trust funds while meditating their mostly peaceful way around the country. I say 'mostly' because there was one occasion a couple of years back when I had to bail both of them out of a county court after a forestry expansion protest got a little ugly. It was quite a while before I could turn on the television without expecting to see an image of my parents chained to a tree, dressed in hemp clothing and waving placards.

Lately even Bertie has been banging on about me finding someone now she's got herself engaged to a fellow doctor. I must admit when I met her fiancé I did feel a teeny-weeny twinge of envy. The way Matt Bishop looked at my sister made me feel all squishy and gooey inside. But I quickly squashed the feeling. Bertie has always been a romantic, with her head in the clouds. I'm much more down to earth and practical. Believe me, I've had to be. Someone in our family had to have their head screwed on.

I pursed my lips at Alessandro. One thing I did have in common with my little sister was that I did not appreciate being laughed at.

'You find it funny that I choose to be single?' I said. *'You're*

currently single, are you not?’

His brows lifted slightly. ‘I didn’t realise you took such an interest and followed my love-life in the press.’

I could have kicked myself. I had as good as admitted to poring over every inch of the tabloids for news of him. Mind you, he kept a much lower profile than some others of his ilk. Being a celebrity doctor and a bachelor made men like him a juicy target for the press.

Every time I saw a photo of him with some gorgeous model-type I would seethe and quake with rage. It would reopen all the wounds I’d tried so hard to heal. It was like rock salt being pummelled into them.

But why he had never settled for long with anyone since me puzzled me. The ex he had been so keen to prove a point to had married the man she’d left Alessandro for—a high-profile businessman who was superduper wealthy. But I’d heard whispers in the press that the marriage was in trouble. Was he waiting for her to divorce her husband so they could be together?

I glowered at Alessandro as I stalked past to lead the way on the rest of the tour. I pointed out the bathrooms, and then the games room, and the juniors’ and the seniors’ common rooms. I spoke in a flat monotone, stripping my expression of anything other than excruciating boredom.

If he was annoyed by my little show of defiance he didn’t show it on his face. His expression was mostly blank, apart from that faraway look I caught a glimpse of now and again. Finally we

made our way outside into the sunshine, where the children were playing just before the lunch break ended.

One of my pupils, a little girl called Harriet, came gambolling up with a cheeky grin on her freckled face. 'Is that man your boyfriend, Miss Clark?'

I'm not one to blush easily, but right then I could feel heat spreading like a grass fire across my cheeks.

When I was a little kid I didn't think teachers were anything but teachers. I didn't think they had a personal life. To me they were like police or firemen or other authority figures. They didn't seem like real people. Not so today's kids. They know too damn much and way too early.

'No, Harriet,' I said. 'Dr Lucioni is enrolling his niece into our school. I'm giving him a guided tour.'

Harriet scrunched up her face as she peered at Alessandro. 'Are you a movie star?'

Alessandro's smile at Harriet made something at the backs of my knees go fizzy.

'No, I'm afraid not.'

Harriet wasn't convinced. 'You *look* famous.'

'Run along, Harriet,' I said. 'The bell is about to ring.'

As if I'd summoned it, the bell sounded, and Harriet scampered off to join the rest of the girls as they prepared to enter the building for the afternoon's lessons.

I turned to face Alessandro. 'That's my cue as well. When shall I expect Claudia to come to class?'

‘I’ll bring her tomorrow.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘With a temporary nanny.’

‘Why didn’t you bring her with you today?’ I said. ‘It would’ve helped her to get her bearings. Meeting the other girls and so on.’

His eyes tethered mine in a lock that made my insides flutter as if a handful of flustered moths were trapped in the cavity of my stomach.

‘I thought it best for us to meet alone first,’ he said.

I didn’t think it was wise for me to *ever* be alone with him. I didn’t trust myself. He had a frightening way of dismantling my self-control with a look or a casual touch. My chin was still tingling from where his thumb had stroked. My wrist was still burning as if he had left a brand on my flesh. My inner core was still pulsating with the memory of how his body had moved within mine.

Again I wondered if he was remembering all we had shared in that brief mad fling I’d stupidly thought would last for ever.

His gaze was dark and bottomless ... inscrutable, enigmatic. Mesmerising.

The sound of the second end-of-lunch bell startled me out of my stasis. ‘Excuse me,’ I said with a formal quirk of my lips that passed for a smile. ‘I have to get to class.’

He put out his hand, and because we were in full view of the school admin office, as well as Miss Fletcher’s office, I had no choice but to slide mine into it.

His fingers closed around mine in the same way they had before. There was nothing formal or polite about it. It was purely erotic. Wickedly, shamelessly erotic.

I drew my hand away from the temptation of his touch and turned and walked into the school building. But it was not until school finished that day that my hand finally stopped tingling.

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