



Melanie Milburne

CLAIMED

for the

**BILLIONAIRE'S
CONVENIENCE**

MILLS & BOON

MODERN

Melanie Milburne
Claimed For The
Billionaire's Convenience
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

To redeem his notorious reputation...She'll agree to wear his ring! When headlines mistakenly announce florist Holly Frost's engagement to ruthless celebrity divorce lawyer Zack Knight, she's stunned. His lethal charisma may have ignited a fire in her blood, but she's finished with fairy tales. Yet Zack seems determined to turn this scandal, and their red-hot attraction, to their mutual advantage... Swept away to Paris, Holly must remember this alliance is only temporary—even while wearing his diamond!

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Escape to Paris with this marriage of convenience story!

MELANIE MILBURNE read her first Mills & Boon novel at the age of seventeen, in between studying for her final exams. After completing a master's degree in education she decided to write a novel, and thus her career as a romance author was born. Melanie is an ambassador for the Australian Childhood Foundation and a keen dog-lover and trainer. She enjoys long walks in the Tasmanian bush. In 2015 Melanie won the HOLT Medallion, a prestigious award honouring outstanding literary talent.

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Melanie Milburne

MILLS & BOON

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MILLS & BOON

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To Bernice (B) Dodds.

You have been a part of my journey as a writer from my very first RWAustralia conference.

I am so glad we are friends and writing colleagues.

This one is for you with much love. Xxxxx

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CHAPTER ONE

EVERY TIME HOLLY FROST looked at her younger sister's engagement party invitation she wanted to emigrate. To Siberia. Not because she didn't love her baby sister Belinda. She did. She loved all three of her sisters—Katie, Meg and Belinda were awesome. The best sisters a girl could ask for. Holly loved her parents too, and her grandparents. She'd been lucky in the family lottery, unlike a couple of her friends who had the sort of families you read about in crime novels. All of Holly's family were supportive and loving. Katie and Meg were happily married, and now Belinda was joining them, which left Holly the odd one out.

Again.

Her baby sister was getting married, which meant everyone would look at Holly and ask when she was going to find herself a husband. Argh. Like she needed another man in her life after being jilted not once, but twice.

How could she get through another family gathering with no partner in tow? How could she bear the looks and pointed questions about her lack of a love life? Her family thought any young woman pushing thirty should have a husband on the horizon if not in hand. Especially if said young woman was a wedding florist and was surrounded by blissfully happy brides every day of the week, and yes, even on weekends.

Double argh.

Holly was the go-to wedding florist in London. Obsessed by all things bridal since childhood, she had built her business on wedding flowers. She also did flowers for funerals, parties, corporate functions and so on, but it was her wedding work that had lifted her profile. She'd done the flowers for a minor celebrity's marriage four years ago. The reality-TV star had more followers on social media than the Kardashians.

Holly's shop was her life. She didn't have time for anything else. Being successful professionally made up for not being successful personally. Her failed relationships were as bad as having dead flowers on display in her shop window. Withered hope, dried-up dreams, bruised ego.

Why her family thought she couldn't possibly be happy remaining single was a constant source of frustration to her. Plenty of people were happy being single. Lots and lots of people were single and loving it. Not everyone wanted the fairy tale. The fairy tale sucked if your handsome prince decided to run off with another woman the week before your wedding. It sucked even more if your second handsome prince—because who didn't try things twice to see if they could get it right the second time?—also took off. But this time on the day before the wedding with his personal trainer.

Holly had been cured of fairy-tale fever by two fickle fiancés. Permanently cured.

'Will you be doing the flowers for your sister's wedding?' Jane, her chief assistant asked, coming in from the cool room with a

bunch of white roses.

Holly cleared a space on her workbench for the roses. ‘Yep. And I’m chief bridesmaid. Again. Go me.’

‘Three times a bridesmaid...’ Jane stepped back as if she were trying to avoid contamination by association. ‘Glad it’s you and not me. Aren’t you worried you might jinx your chances of—’

‘No.’ Holly picked up one of the roses and snipped the stem. ‘Because I don’t want to get married.’

‘Don’t you want to have one more go? To see if this time—’

‘Nope.’ Holly took another rose and snapped off the stem. ‘I do not.’

Jane glanced at the invitation on Holly’s desk. ‘So who will be your plus-one for Belinda’s engagement party?’

Holly wrapped fine green wire around the stem of a rose like she was tying up one of her cheating exes. ‘I’m not taking anyone.’

Jane gave a series of exaggerated blinks. ‘You’re going alone? To one of your family’s parties? Isn’t that a bit...erm, risky after the last time?’

Holly pressed her lips together so hard she could have cracked concrete. ‘I told my mother in no uncertain terms she is to refrain from setting me up with techie nerds. The ones with dandruff who get blind drunk because they’re nervous about meeting a real woman in the flesh instead of an avatar on a computer screen. I’m fine being single.’ She picked up another rose and began wiring it. ‘Just because everyone in my family is partnered doesn’t mean I want to be.’

‘Speaking of the absence of partners...’ Jane handed over the printout of a new order that had come in overnight via the website. ‘You’ve been asked to do the flowers for a divorce party. That’s a first, isn’t it?’

Holly frowned and peered at the form. ‘Hmm, that’s from Kendra Hutchinson. She was one of my brides about four years ago, before you came to work for me. Big socialite wedding. Massive. I paid off my overdraft with that account. I was up two nights in a row doing the flowers. I knew she was wasting her time marrying that guy. She knew he was getting it on with one of the bridesmaids but she still went ahead with the wedding. She was so blinded by love she needed a guide dog. No. Two guide dogs and a white cane.’

‘Weddings are expensive things to cancel at the last minute.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Holly grimaced and snipped off another stem. *And dead embarrassing.*

‘Do you know who handled Kendra’s divorce?’ Jane’s tone and twinkling eyes were straight out of the schoolyard gossip handbook. ‘Zack Knight, the celebrity divorce lawyer who’s made his millions by dissolving peoples’ marriages. Maybe you’ll meet him at the party.’

Holly stretched her lips into a smile that felt like it belonged on a corpse. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’ *Not.*

Jane’s expression lost some of its sparkle when she looked at the divorce party order printout again. ‘I hope we’re not going to only do divorce parties and funerals now...’

A clench of panic gripped Holly's gut like a bad case of giardia. During the last week, three of her biggest clients had cancelled their wedding bookings without explanation. It had never happened before and she was trying not to worry. Yet. But she had a mortgage and expensive renovations on her new house to pay for. Staff to pay. Hell to pay if she failed. 'It'll be fine. All businesses go through downturns. Things will pick up now that it's spring. Not that you'd notice by the weather.'

Jane chewed her lower lip, her finger absently flicking the corner of the paper. 'It's just with my nephew's autism therapy costing so much I couldn't bear to cut back my hours, or worse, to lose this job.'

Holly would rather live on the street than see Jane short of money to fund her young nephew's therapy. She took Jane's hand. 'You are *not* going to lose your job. I can't run this place without you.' She let her assistant's hand go to pick up her secateurs. 'Anyway, I hear divorce parties are big business these days.'

'But weddings are your speciality,' Jane said. 'You love everything to do with weddings. Everyone knows that. Do you think it's because you're so anti-men?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'You've not exactly made it a secret you think all men are bastards,' Jane said. 'A few of those social media posts of yours have been a little negative and you haven't had a date in what...two and a half years? What if that's putting off potential clients?'

Holly snipped another stem off a rose. ‘I hardly see what my opinion of men has to do with running a successful floristry business. I don’t need a man in my life. I’m fine. *F-I-N-E*. Fine.’

‘If you don’t get more wedding work, you’re finished.’ Jane’s tone was grim. Funereal grim. ‘There are other wedding florists in London, you know. Competition is tough. What you need is an image makeover. Or a man. Or both.’

Holly put her secateurs down. ‘What is this obsession with finding me a partner? Why does everyone think a woman is lacking something if she hasn’t got a man in her life?’

The computer pinged to say another order had come in. Jane moved across to read the screen and sighed. ‘There goes another one. The Mackie wedding in June. Cancelled.’

Holly came over and peered at the email, her stomach feeling like she’d ingested thorns. Hundreds and hundreds of prickly thorns. Like the other three cancellations, there was no explanation. Was it *her* fault? Had she been too vocal about her anti-men phase? She straightened from the computer. ‘Okay. So maybe I’ll shut up on social media about how much I hate two-timing men.’

Jane drummed her fingers on the bench like she was accompanying the cogs of her brain turning over. ‘Hey, I have an idea. Get someone to take a photo of you at the divorce party standing next to Zack Knight. Get Kendra to do it. She’s got gazillions of followers. A photo of you two flirting with each other would be sure to go viral. Then your problem’s solved.’

‘Brilliant suggestion, Jane, but as far as I’m concerned flirting is as bad as the other F-word. Anyway, I hung up my flirting boots a long time ago.’ Holly picked up the secateurs and wished she had both of her exes handy so she could prune off their most prized parts of their anatomy. ‘I don’t even know how to do it any more.’

And even if I did, I wouldn’t do it.

The divorce party was being held at a swanky hotel in the heart of London. The champagne was flowing like a fountain on fast-forward, but the lively chatter and party atmosphere did nothing to improve Holly’s mood. The tiny teeth of panic were nipping at her stomach lining like aphids on rose petals. What if she couldn’t meet her financial commitments? What if her business folded?

What if she failed? That was another F-word she hated.

Failure.

Holly was tucking into her second slice of black forest cheesecake when Zack Knight arrived. She knew it was Zack because of the way the mostly female guests gave a collective gasp of awe when he entered the room. Holly would have gasped too if it hadn’t been for the mouthful of cheesecake she’d just spooned in. She could never resist cheesecake. It was her weakness. Well, one of them anyway. She had seen photos of Zack in the gossip pages but had never met him in the flesh. The photos hadn’t done him justice. Not one bit of justice. Had she ever seen a more gorgeous-looking man?

He was head and shoulders over everyone in the room, which

was saying something because even though most of the women were wearing skyscraper heels, he still towered over them like a thoroughbred stallion surrounded by circus ponies. His jet-black hair was styled in one of those casual, just-got-out-of-bed-after-wild-sex styles that gave him a rakish air. He was clean-shaven but the rich dark pinpricks of stubble had a sexy urgency about them that suggested there was no lack of supply of potent male hormones pulsing through his blood. His skin had an olive tone that glowed with a light tan, which highlighted the healthy vital energy that surrounded him like an aura.

Holly could feel the energy he radiated all the way across the room. It was like his body was sending out a radio signal and hers was sending a response. *Peep. Peep. Peep.* Her skin lifted in a shower of goose bumps, even the backs of her knees tingled and something lying asleep deep and low in her belly woke and stretched its limbs like a languorous cat.

Zack's mouth looked as if it was no stranger to smiling. Not just any old smiling. The sort of smiling that could melt the strongest of feminine willpower like a blowtorch through a block of ice.

His gaze swept the room and suddenly honed in on Holly's. His dark brows rose ever so slightly in a do-I-know-you? fashion that made the sleepy cat in her belly start to purr. She could feel the vibrations inside her body. Deep inside her body, sending hot little flickers of awareness between her thighs. His gaze went to her mouth and then did an assessing sweep of her figure, and

another frisson passed over her flesh as if he had reached across the room and touched her.

Holly couldn't understand why her heart was flip-flopping like a frantic fish. Her breathing was shallow and hurried as if she'd run up a flight of stairs. Two flights. Possibly more. Her body felt like it was being heated up from the inside, making her skin hot and tight and so sensitive she became aware of every fibre of her clothing against her body.

She couldn't remember meeting a more attractive-looking man. She might be over men, but even a confirmed celibate like her wasn't completely immune from such an amazing vision of manhood. His body was toned from regular exercise or good genes or both. Or maybe it was from marathon sex sessions with his numerous lovers. Holly could see why women found him irresistible. She was half a room away and could feel his magnetic pull like she was a puny little florist pin and he an industrial-strength magnet.

His gaze came back to hers and his lips curved upwards in a confident smile that did strange things to her pulse and other parts of her anatomy. He crossed the floor towards her. He had a purposeful I-never-fail-to-meet-my-goals gait that more or less confirmed what she knew of him. He was a lethal opponent in a court of law. The word on the street: you engaged Zack Knight's services—expensive as they were—before your ex-partner did. He worked overtime for his clients and, while they paid for it, he always delivered. Always. He acted on some of the dirtiest

celebrity divorces in the country and always made sure his clients left court with a fist pump of victory.

Holly only realised she was holding her breath when she became light-headed. Or maybe it was the two glasses of champagne she'd drunk earlier. That was another one of her weaknesses—champagne. The drink of celebrations, even though she had nothing to celebrate and no one with whom to celebrate. Or maybe it was because Zack Knight had come to stand within half a metre of her and every cell in her body was jumping up and down like a hyperactive cheerleader and saying, *Yippee!*

'I believe you're responsible for the flowers tonight.' His voice was a rich baritone, warm honey rolled over gravel. His eyes did a slow appraisal of her and he added, 'Beautiful.'

Holly was so fixated on the startling colour of his eyes she couldn't locate her voice. A smoky blue with flecks of navy in the irises and on the outer rim as if someone had drawn a precise circle around them with a felt-tip marker. She raised her chin a fraction. 'You don't strike me as a man who would stop long enough to smell the roses.'

A glint appeared in his eyes like twin diamond chips and the sound of his laugh rumbled down the entire length of her spine. 'There's nothing I love more than a prickly rose. The thornier the better.'

Holly tried not to look at his mouth but his smile made her think of how it would feel to have those lips move hotly,

temptingly, passionately against her own. His lips were more or less evenly sized with well-defined vermilion borders. Firm and yet sensually sculptured and lethally attractive. And this close she could see the way his stubble peppered his jaw and around his nose and mouth. It had been more than two years since she had touched a man's face. She hadn't felt a man's kiss in so long she could barely recall what it was like any more.

Zack held out his hand. 'Zack Knight.'

Holly placed her hand in his and a zap of electric energy shot through her hand and straight to her core, buzzing there like a fizzing sparkler. *Seriously, she had to get out more.* She was acting like a sex-starved spinster, which she was, but still. His hand was warm and dry and large. His fingers closed around hers with the slightest pressure and she couldn't stop thinking what it would feel like to have those strong masculine hands sliding over her flesh, over her breasts, over her belly and below...

'Holly Frost.' She made sure the don't-mess-with-me tone was back in her voice and yet his smile lifted in a mocking slant, as if he knew how hard it was for her to keep from drooling.

Zack's hand released hers first, which annoyed her because it made her look like she hadn't wanted to let him go, which she hadn't, but that was beside the point. But then she noticed he opened and closed his fingers a couple of times as if her touch had had the same effect on him. Something passed through his gaze—a flicker of surprise or was it intrigue? Either way, Holly couldn't tear her eyes away from him. The citrus and

wood fragrance of his aftershave flirted with her senses, the fresh sharpness as intoxicating as his presence. The deep blue of his sharply intelligent gaze only intensified his commanding presence. He was wearing a blue suit that made his eyes seem all the more striking, and the white business shirt with its casually open collar exposed the strong, tanned column of his throat.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Zack asked.

Holly didn’t need any more alcohol. She was tipsy from just looking at him. ‘No, thank you. I’ve had my two drinks for the evening.’

That diamond glint was back in his eyes as if her saying no had secretly delighted him.

‘Are you driving?’

‘No. I caught a cab.’

‘I can’t tempt you to break your two-drinks-only rule?’

Holly raised her chin and channelled her childhood Sunday school teacher’s prim Temperance Society tone. ‘No, Mr Knight. You cannot tempt me.’

Zack’s you-just-watch-me smile made something in Holly’s belly flutter like a breeze through the pages of an open book.

‘Are you here with anyone?’

‘No. I came alone.’

‘Is that usual for you?’ Something about the tone of his voice made her wonder if they were discussing her relationship status or something much more intimate. Thinking about sex while standing in front of a man as arrantly masculine as Zack Knight

was like standing in front of flammable fuel with a lit match.

Dangerous.

Stupidly, recklessly dangerous.

Holly could feel her cheeks heating, her body tingling and her resolve limping away. She stretched her mouth into a stiff no-teeth-showing smile. ‘Don’t let me keep you from chatting up the other guests.’

‘I’m not interested in the other guests. I’m interested in you.’ His statement was underlined with determination and his gaze as steady as a marksman’s.

Holly mentally gave her resolve a pep talk but it was like trying to get a lame horse to finish a steeplechase. On crutches. ‘I can’t imagine why you’d be interested in me.’ *Damn it.* She sounded like she was flirting.

‘Zack!’ Kendra Hutchinson came click-clacking towards them in her terrifyingly high heels, her voice so shrill she sounded like a beginner on bagpipes. ‘And yay, you’ve found Holly.’ She beamed at Holly. ‘I told him *all* about you. I hope you don’t mind.’

Holly clenched her teeth behind a polite smile. ‘Why should I mind? If Mr Knight is in the market for wedding flowers, then I’m the woman he needs to call.’

Kendra laughed and shone her orthodontist-perfect smile at Zack. ‘Isn’t she gorgeous? I knew you two would hit it off.’

‘Undeniably gorgeous.’ Zack’s gaze met Holly’s, reminding her of a hunter who had just selected his prey.

‘Holly hasn’t been on a date in two and a half years,’ Kendra

said to Zack. ‘Don’t you find that simply amazing?’

What Holly found amazing was how she stopped herself from grabbing one of Kendra’s heels, pockmarking her collagen-plumped cheeks with it and taking out a couple of those bright white tooth veneers while she was at it. She might have vented a little ire about men on her Facebook account now and again but she hadn’t said anything about how long she’d been celibate. That was no one’s business. Who had Kendra been talking to? Jane? Or Sabrina, her best friend, who ran the other arm of Holly’s Love Is in the Care business?

‘Let’s see if I can get her to change her mind about dating,’ Zack said with another I’ve-got-this-nailed smile.

Holly inched up her chin and sent him a haughty glare straight out of a Georgette Heyer novel. ‘You’d be wasting your time, Mr Knight.’

‘It’s my time to waste,’ he said.

Kendra took out her phone and held it up to take a picture. ‘Smile, you two.’

Holly frowned. ‘No. Wait. I don’t want my—’ Too late. The camera phone flashed and clicked. She could see it now. Hundreds, thousands, possibly millions of social media shares with her standing next to Zack Knight with her mouth hanging open as if she were a starstruck teenage fan at a boy band meet-and-greet.

Kendra checked the photo and smiled like a cat standing beside an empty aviary. She gave Holly and Zack a fingertip wave

and turned on her spiky heels to join her other guests.

Holly turned to glower at Zack. ‘You should’ve stopped her. That will be all over Instagram or Twitter in minutes. She’ll have us flipping engaged before you know it.’

His shoulder lifted in a nonchalant shrug. ‘Who would believe it? I’m not the long-term commitment type.’

Holly wondered why he was so against commitment. Was there some reason behind his date-them-and-dump-them lifestyle? A rejection from a woman in his past that had stung a little too much? Was that why he was happy with hook-up sex but not emotional-connection sex?

Zack took two drinks from a passing waiter and turned back to Holly. ‘Still not willing to be tempted?’

She took the glass of champagne, trying not to touch his fingers in the process. If nothing else she could throw it in his face if he got too annoying. ‘I’m not the settling-down type either, but I suppose Kendra has already told you that?’

He took a slow sip of his drink and returned his gaze to hers. ‘She told me you’ve had your heart broken a couple of times.’

Argh. Why were people still talking about her doomed love life two and a half years on? It was pathetic. And embarrassing. ‘Actually, that’s not quite correct. *Bruised* is the terminology I would’ve used.’

‘Bruises still hurt.’

‘Is that the voice of experience or observation?’

He lifted his glass as if toasting an eternal truth. ‘It’s hard to

get to the age of thirty-four without a little collateral damage.'

What had put that cynical gleam in his dark blue gaze? What had made his mouth smile in that mocking way?

'So why family law? Why not commercial, criminal or conveyance?'

His gaze remained game shooter steady. 'Why are you a florist?'

'I love flowers.'

'But why wedding flowers?'

Holly could feel her cheeks heating up when she thought of how wedding-obsessed she had been in the past. Her bedroom walls hadn't been plastered with boy band posters but with bridal ones. She hadn't doodled in class with boys' names but had drawn wedding bouquets instead. 'I might not want to get married any more but that doesn't mean I don't love weddings. They're happy occasions where whole families get together to celebrate the commitment of a couple they know and love. I love being a part of that. Helping the bride choose what she wants, finding out her vision for the special day and making sure it happens. I love seeing the church or garden or wherever they're getting married decked out with my designs. And the thought of the bride carrying a bouquet I've made specially for her is very rewarding, and no, I don't just mean financially.' Holly stopped to draw a breath and suddenly realised how much she had told him. And what a good listener he was. 'But you didn't answer my question. Why family law?'

‘It pays the bills.’

Holly flicked her gaze over his superb tailoring. ‘Apparently quite handsomely too.’

Zack’s lazy smile made something in her stomach flip. Damn the man for being so attractive. ‘The golden rule in making a success of your career is never to undersell yourself. If you’re good at what you do, then your fees should reflect that expertise.’

‘Isn’t there a fine line between charging a fee for a service and exploiting people during a vulnerable time?’ Holly raised her eyebrows and injected her tone with Sunday school–teacher disapproval.

He glanced at her mouth, then back to her gaze, his eyes going a deeper shade of blue. Sapphires with a backdrop of steel. ‘I don’t exploit my clients. I give them what they pay for—excellent service.’

Holly gave him one of her mortuary-slab smiles. ‘If ever I find myself in need of a divorce, then you’re apparently my go-to man.’

His eyes glinted and her stomach did another jerky somersault. ‘Likewise for wedding flowers.’

You’re flirting with him.

No, I’m not.

Yes, you are. And you’re loving it.

Holly took a sip of her champagne. ‘Don’t let me keep you.’

‘From?’

She waved a hand at the crowd of guests. ‘Hooking up with

someone for a raunchy one-night stand.’

The glint of amusement was back in his eyes. ‘You don’t approve of raunchy one-night stands, Miss Frost?’

Holly’s cheeks were getting so hot she was worried all her fresh flower arrangements would wilt. Her fault for mentioning raunchy sex, but still. She had trouble thinking of anything *but* sex when standing near him. It was like her mind was stuck in a groove like a vinyl record under a turntable needle. *Sex. Sex. Sex.* She couldn’t look at his mouth without thinking of it clamped to hers. She couldn’t glance at his hands without imagining them touching her body. She couldn’t look at his body without wanting him to pin her to the nearest surface and have his wild and wicked way with her.

She didn’t understand why she was reacting like this. It was out of character. It was like a fever had taken over her body—a virulent fever that sabotaged her self-control like a lightning strike to a power box. She hadn’t thought about sex for years. She’d been as celibate as a ninety-nine-year-old nun. But one glance at Zack Knight was enough to make her eggs pack their bags and head for the nearest exit.

Holly forced herself to hold his satirical I’m-going-to-win-this gaze. ‘I’m not sure why I’m the lucky recipient of your peacock-like display of charm. And I apologise if this inflicts any bruises to your undoubtedly robustly healthy ego, but I’m not interested in continuing this discussion. Do I make myself unmistakably clear?’

He gave a mock shudder. ‘I love it when a woman talks starchy schoolmistress with me.’

Holly’s mouth twitched and she hated him for making her smile. She refused to be charmed by him. By any man. ‘You’re impossible. I’ve never met a more annoying man.’

‘And I’ve never met a more fascinating woman.’

‘Because I’m the only woman who’s ever resisted you?’

‘So far.’ His smile and his tone had a hint of ruthless hunter meets cornered prey.

Holly chastised herself for being so transparent. What was she these days? Cling film? ‘I can assure you, Mr Knight, I have zero interest in you physically.’ She tried to keep her gaze away from his mouth. Tried, but failed.

He gave a deep chuckle and raised his glass to hers. ‘I’ll be seeing you. *Ciao.*’

Holly was still thinking of a pithy comeback when he turned and walked away. She stood silently fuming that he’d had the last word. Furious that he’d made her feel things she didn’t want to feel. She felt alive for the first time in two and a half years. She was furious because *he* had done that to her. Her blood zinged through her veins like it had been injected with a potent drug.

Holly sucked in a deep breath and marshalled her self-control back on duty. Zack Knight could be as charming and handsome and amusing as he liked—she was not going to break her man drought.

Zack half listened to the conversation going on around him

while he watched Holly move about the room. He could tell she was pretending to be captivated by the lively chatter, and every now and again would give a brief smile, but then she'd look vacant.

He couldn't remember a time when he'd been more intrigued by a woman. Kendra had warned him about Holly's self-imposed celibacy. His interest had been piqued because he hadn't had a woman brush him off since he was a teenager. Her cool reception of him turned him on. Dating had become so predictably boring. He figured it was time to change things up.

And right now he wanted Miss Holly Frost with her damn-you-to-hell brown eyes. Eyes so rich a brown they reminded him of toffee. Her eyelashes were thick and ink black like miniature fans. He couldn't stop thinking about her curly, burnished-copper-coloured hair spread over his pillow. Or over his chest. He'd caught a whiff of her fresh flowery scent when he'd stood in front of her and had longed to lean in to breathe in more of her intoxicating fragrance. Her mouth was soft and supple, except when it was flinging quick-witted comebacks at him.

But those lushly shaped lips never failed to draw his eyes, even when they were as flat and as intractable as a search warrant. He couldn't stop looking at her mouth, imagining it crushed beneath his own. Her figure was slim with curves in all the right places, and he couldn't wait to explore those tempting places with his hands, lips and tongue. Her skin was as creamy as a cultured pearl, the only blemish a small dusting of freckles across the

bridge of her retroussé nose.

Zack caught her eye from across the room and her mouth flattened, her chin came up and her eyes flashed like sheet lightning. But then her tongue swept over her mouth, her gaze dipping to his mouth and her slim white throat rose and fell in a swallow.

Yep. All the signs were there. He'd been in the game long enough to recognise female attraction when he saw it. It wasn't a matter of blindsided male ego. He could feel the chemistry between them as soon as their hands had touched. The tingling bolt of electricity had jolted him straight to the groin. He could still feel the soft brush of her fingers against his hand. He could still feel the thrum of his blood surging through his veins. Her touch had sent a rocket blast of lust through his flesh that even now rumbled in his body like distant thunder. He'd seen the way she'd kept looking at his mouth, the way her eyes had darkened to pools of simmering desire.

He was prepared to wait. He knew more than most that some of the best things in life were worth waiting for. Holly's little cat-and-mouse game was amusing but he knew it wouldn't be long before she was in his bed.

And that was *exactly* where he wanted her.

CHAPTER TWO

HOLLY WAS NORMALLY the first of her staff at work in the morning but her elderly landlady, Mrs Fry, delayed her. She'd insisted on telling Holly about the other neighbour on the left, who hadn't put the rubbish bins the right distance apart for collection. Behind her back, Holly called her Mrs Fry because nothing escaped the old busybody's attention.

Holly was only renting the small one-bedroom flat while her new home was being renovated. It was taking longer and costing way more than she'd planned, but she knew it would be worth it in the end. Owning her own home was something she'd longed to do ever since she'd moved to London. All those years of living in bedsits or cramped flats where the walls were as thin as cardboard had made her long for her own place. A place she could decorate to her taste, where she could have a pet—a dog because they were so loving and faithful, unlike men.

When Holly arrived at work, Jane turned the computer screen so Holly could see the order that had come in first thing. 'You must have made a good impression on Zack Knight last night. He's ordered flowers for his legal practice. A regular order too. Two dozen roses, a different colour every week.'

Holly leaned forward to glance at the order, her heart doing a little skip and trip when she saw his name. She straightened and hoped her cheeks were not glowing as hot as they felt. 'I don't

want his business. I loathed him on sight. He's an egotistical jerk who thinks he only has to smile at a woman to get her into bed.'

Jane's eyes danced so much they could have won a dancing competition. 'And that's not all.' She pointed to the bottom of the order, where it asked for special delivery instructions. 'He wants you to deliver them in person.'

Holly pinched her lips together. 'I'm not a courier, for pity's sake. I'm the owner of this business. I haven't got time to hand deliver roses.'

'His practice is walking distance from here. And if you don't deliver them, then he says here he'll come and get them.' Jane's smile was sugar sweet. 'Won't that be fun?'

Holly snatched up her apron and tied it around her waist with savage movements. 'I'm not kowtowing to that man's outrageous demands.'

'Maybe he likes you. I mean *really* likes you.' Jane had gone all dreamy looking. 'How cool would it be to be wooed and won by a man as gorgeous as him?'

'You've been watching way too much TV,' Holly said. 'I don't want to be wooed or won by anyone and particularly not by someone who doesn't understand the word *no*.'

'Think about it, Holly.' Jane suddenly turned serious. 'His interest in you could be really good for business. Did you get a photo with him? I've been checking social media but nothing's come up.'

'Kendra took one but she must have changed her mind about

uploading it.’ *Thank God.*

‘I can see the headlines now.’ Jane swept her hand from left to right as if to highlight a billboard. “‘Top Celebrity Divorce Lawyer Falls for Wedding Florist’.” Her grin widened. ‘You’ll have brides queuing down the footpath once they hear you’ve caught the interest of London’s most eligible playboy.’

Holly rolled her eyes like marbles but her brain was already doing the calculations. How long would a so-called relationship with Zack take to turn her business back around? If spurious gossip had already soured things for her, then why shouldn’t she use more gossip to turn things around?

Because dating Zack Knight would be dangerous.

Capital *D* Dangerous.

Holly was finishing an arrangement for a new mother in hospital when the bell on the front door tinkled as someone came in. Normally Jane or one of her other assistants handled customers when she was working on an arrangement. But all three girls were currently out of the shop—Jane on a coffee break and Taylor and Leanne both away sick with colds. Holly put the arrangement to one side and came out of the workroom to the shopfront. She saw Zack Knight standing there with a lazy smile and her breath caught.

She stayed behind the shop counter, gripping it with her hands and setting her shoulders. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Did you get my order?’ His deep blue eyes were backlit with amusement. Or was it mockery?

Holly forced herself to hold his gaze. 'I don't take orders from customers... I mean, specific orders like the one you sent. If you want my roses or any other flowers, you'll have to accept they'll be delivered by my courier.'

'I'll pay you double to deliver them in person.'

Had he somehow heard about her financial troubles? Had everyone? She would *not* fail. She could *not* fail. Holly fixed him with a steely glare and gripped the counter so hard she thought her knuckles would burst out of her skin. 'Mr Knight, I might not have quite the disgusting amount of wealth you've accumulated, but let me assure you I am not in such dire financial straits that I would ever consent to accepting a bribe from you.'

He stepped closer, so close she could smell the sharp citrus scent of his aftershave and the lighter, more subtle fragrance of cleanly showered man. So close she could feel her resolve downing tools and walking off the job. 'Forget about the roses. Have dinner with me instead.' It was a demand, not a request, delivered in a low, deep burr that did strange tickly things to her insides.

Something at the back of her knees fizzed as his lips curved around a smile. She swallowed. Swallowed again. Her heart skipping like it was in a jump rope competition. She was tempted to accept. Tempted because she hadn't been on a date for so long and she was tired of sitting alone in her flat. Tempted because she wanted to prove she wasn't the pushover he thought her to be. It would be fun teaching him a lesson. The sort of fun she

hadn't had in a long time. She would have dinner with him and show him he couldn't win her over with his polished charm. And if anyone saw them out and about, the gossip would bring back the brides to her shop.

Holly released her clawlike grip on the counter and let out a you-win-this-round sigh. 'All right. I'll have dinner with you. Tell me where and when and I'll meet you there.'

His smile never faltered but a glint of cynicism appeared in his gaze. 'I have a rule when I date a woman. I pick her up and I deliver her safely home.'

Holly pursed her lips, wondering what her landlady Mrs Fry would make of the handsome celebrity divorce lawyer coming to pick her up. 'I have a rule, as well. Just dinner. Nothing else. Understood?'

'Just dinner.' His gaze locked on hers and something tightly knotted in her belly slowly unravelled. 'I'll look forward to it.' He took out his phone, asked for her number and address and typed it into his contacts. He slipped his phone back into his jacket pocket and gave her another bone-melting smile. 'See you at seven.'

Zack had a couple of mediation meetings to attend and a stack of paperwork so high it rivalled The Shard, the tallest building in London. He sat back in his office chair and tipped his pen back and forth between his fingers, wondering again why Holly had finally agreed to a dinner date. She'd been so adamant about having nothing to do with him. He would like to put it down to

his powers of persuasion but he suspected there was some other reason for her capitulation.

She had something to prove, but then so did he.

He wanted her.

He couldn't remember when he'd ever been so turned on by the prospect of a dinner date, much less anything else that might follow. Holly was frosty and feisty, but he would soon melt through her defences. Miss Frost would be Miss Firebrand by the time he was done. He could see it in her eyes—the flash and spark of desire that made him want her all the more. She was the most captivating challenge he'd encountered in a long time—perhaps ever. When was the last time a woman had stood up to him? It was almost boring these days how easy it had become to select one from the crowd. He found it strangely exhilarating to have to work so hard at changing her mind. Especially when he knew it was herself she was fighting, not him.

His phone rang and when he saw his father's number come up on the screen, his stomach did its usual clench. His father had never got over Zack's mother leaving him for another man when Zack was ten years old. Twenty-four years had passed and his dad was still hoping Zack's mum would come back. He'd had a few relationships since, but they always followed a predictable pattern—the honeymoon phase and then the hell-on-earth phase. His dad was currently in the hell phase, having broken up with his partner a few months ago. His dad didn't cope well with rejection. It could take months for him to get his life back on track, with

a lot of help from Zack. And then it would all start again when his dad got involved with someone else.

Zack had seen it professionally too many times to count. Men or women who couldn't let go of a love they had lost. And how the old pain of unresolved issues poisoned every other relationship.

It made him all the more determined never to fall in love. He didn't want to be one of those people, the broken-hearted person who couldn't function any more without their partner. To this day his dad still struggled to hold down a full-time job after a break-up.

How could loving someone be worth all that suffering?

He tossed his pen onto his desk and picked up the phone. 'Hi, Dad, how are things?'

'I'm okay...' His voice was flat and toneless and Zack wondered if he had been drinking again. *Please, God. No.*

'Just wondered what you were doing this evening. Thought we could hang out. Grab a meal, watch a movie or take in a show or something.'

Damn. Zack rubbed a hand down his face. He'd forgotten today was his parents' wedding anniversary. The first of April was always a bad day for his dad. It wasn't called April Fool's Day for nothing. It was marginally better if his dad was in a relationship but his recent break-up had made his dad depressed. Zack usually kept his diary free so he could take him out and distract him but it had slipped his mind for some reason. Should he tell his dad he already had a date?

But how could he?

If he left his dad to his own devices, who knew what might happen? His dad had been sober for months but Zack knew from experience that he was always only one drink away from a binge. Anniversaries, Christmas and birthdays were the days he had to take action to make sure his dad was safe—or at least as safe as he could keep him, especially when his dad was in a single-and-hating-it phase.

‘If you’re too busy...’

‘No. I’ll make it work.’ Zack injected a shot of enthusiasm in his voice. ‘I’ll pick you up at seven.’

He ended the call and pulled up Holly’s number on his phone. He sat staring at it for a long moment. There were few people in his life who knew about his dad’s struggles and he wasn’t about to start sharing now. He’d spent most of his life watching out for his father and he didn’t need anyone to know how hard it could be at times.

It wouldn’t change anything—it never did.

He pressed the call button but it went through to voicemail. He felt a stab of disappointment. He left a brief message and clicked off his phone. Under normal circumstances he would have sent flowers by way of apology, but sending flowers to a florist seemed a bit weird. He ordered some specialist chocolates instead and sent them by courier with instructions to pick up his handwritten note from his office first. He knew Holly had a sweet tooth because he’d seen her at the dessert table at the divorce

party. He smiled at the memory of her spooning gooey black forest cheesecake into her kissable mouth.

Yep, Holly Frost was definitely worth the work and the wait.

Holly was in a Love Is in the Care late-afternoon business meeting with Sabrina. They met at least once a week for coffee or dinner or drinks after work when their schedules obliged and caught up on industry gossip and any issues to do with their businesses. If it was a coffee and quick catch-up, they took turns to meet in each other's work premises and today it was at Sabrina's studio, a few roads away from Holly's shop.

'Has business picked up at all?' Sabrina asked, passing a slice of carrot cake Holly's way.

Holly held up her hand. 'Not for me. I had two helpings of cheesecake at Kendra's party last night. And no, business hasn't improved. I had another cancellation yesterday.'

'Oh, no! Not another one?'

'I don't know what's going on. Normally at this time of year I have a full diary of weddings. Why aren't I getting business any more? Now I have to resort to doing divorce parties.'

'So how was your first divorce party?'

'Interesting.' Holly eyed the carrot cake. 'I met Zack Knight. He did Kendra's divorce for her. She took a photo of Zack and me standing together. I've been dreading her uploading it on social media, but so far she hasn't, which kind of makes me even more nervous. You know Kendra. She fancies herself a matchmaker.'

‘I saw a photo of Zack recently in a gossip magazine,’ Sabrina said. ‘What’s he like in person? He looks gorgeous. Is he even better-looking in the flesh?’

Holly could feel her cheeks betraying her. *Darn it.* She couldn’t even hear his name without blushing. And the less she thought about his flesh the better. ‘He was exactly as I expected him to be. Full of charm and full of ego.’

Sabrina’s expression was so full of intrigue she could have moonlighted as a gossip hound. ‘And?’

‘And...I’m going out to dinner with him this evening.’

‘You’re what?’ Sabrina’s eyes went as round as the cake plate. ‘But I thought you said you never wanted to—’

‘It’s just dinner.’ Holly picked a crumb of carrot cake off the plate. Crumbs were another one of her weaknesses. ‘I’m only going so I can teach him a lesson. He thinks he can wine and dine me and then I’ll automatically fall into his bed. I’m going to show him there is one woman left on the planet who is immune to him.’

‘I don’t know, Holly. You might be taking on more than you can handle with someone like him.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Holly licked some cream cheese icing off her fingers. ‘I know what I’m doing. Besides, it will be good for my reputation to be seen out and about with a man. Jane thinks I’m to blame for the cancellations for venting my spleen about men on social media.’

‘You have been rather negative. That can really damage your brand.’ Sabrina chewed her lower lip. ‘*Our* brand.’

Something in Holly's stomach fell off a shelf. 'Have *you* had cancellations for wedding dresses?'

'Only one.'

'Only one?' Holly leaned forward. 'When did they cancel? Did they give a reason? Who was it?'

'The Mackie wedding.'

Holly was horrified that anything she had done or said was affecting her best friend's business. Maybe Jane was right. She needed an image makeover. She needed a man. 'I'm so sorry. I had no idea my venting would hurt you.'

'It might not have anything to do with you.'

'But what if it does?' Holly asked. 'I need to get into damage control. As soon as possible.' She wiped her sticky fingers on a napkin and then picked up her phone to check the time. She saw that while it had been on Silent a call had come in. She didn't recognise the number but the caller had left a message on her voicemail.

'Excuse me for a sec,' Holly said. The message was brief and from Zack. She was so busy listening to the deep and sexy timbre of his voice that it took her a moment to realise he was cancelling their dinner date. Disappointment trickled through her like iced water. Why had he cancelled? Had he got a better offer? Someone far more enthusiastic about going on a date with him? Someone more beautiful? More glamorous and sophisticated?

Someone who would put out?

Holly clicked the off button and tossed the phone back in her

bag.

Sabrina leaned closer. 'Why are you frowning like that?'
'Apparently Zack has overlooked a prior engagement.'
'He cancelled?'

Holly sighed and picked up the carrot cake. 'I've been stood up. Story of my life.' She glanced at Sabrina mid-mouthful of cake. 'What are you doing tonight? Do you fancy dinner and a movie?'

'I've got an even better idea.' Sabrina leaned down and dug out a West End flyer from her tote bag. 'One of my clients has a sister who is an actor in a musical in the West End. I'll call her and see if I can get a couple of last-minute tickets. We can dress up and have a girls' night out. Sound good?'

'Sounds perfect.'

Zack rarely enjoyed a night out with his father. He felt more like a guardian than a son. Not that his dad couldn't be good company at times, but this day in April was never a good day on the William Knight calendar. After a ridiculously expensive dinner where his dad talked at length about how lonely he was, Zack was ready to turn to drink himself. He'd managed to get some good seats for a West End show. He'd figured a movie, especially the sad one his dad had mentioned in passing, was not going to do anything to improve his dad's mood. The musical wasn't to Zack's taste but he was prepared to get his dad through the evening no matter what.

But, upbeat musical or not, as the evening went on his dad

became more and more maudlin. He sank lower and lower into his seat and, even though the music was loud, Zack could still hear his father sigh with depressing regularity.

Zack tried not to think of the night he could have been having with Holly. During the interval, he did his best to listen while his dad went through every reason why his life sucked since his divorce twenty-four years ago.

The musical finished close to eleven p.m. Zack waited in the theatre foyer while his dad went to use the bathroom. He scrolled through his messages and found a curt text from Holly. He'd offered her a rain check and she'd texted back.

No, thanks.

Zack was surprised at how disappointed he was. Surprised and galvanised. He would have to work harder to win her over. He smiled to himself and put his phone back in his pocket. But then he saw Holly not more than a metre or two away, coming out of the other side of the theatre with a young woman. The dark-haired woman was attractive, but he only had eyes for Holly. Her emerald-green dress was sweater girl snug against her breasts and clung to her shapely hips and thighs as if spray-painted to her body. Her black high heels had little straps that wrapped around her dainty dancer ankles. Ankles he wanted wrapped around his waist. With her curly copper-coloured hair in a sophisticated up-do and cover-girl make-up, she was sweet girl next door meets sexy supermodel. She laughed at something her friend said and something in his chest gathered together like the final stitch

in a wound. The tension trickled down to his groin, hot, tight, tempting. He was vaguely conscious of his breath stopping and starting like the stutter of an old engine.

Rein it in, buddy. But right then his brain wasn't listening to his body.

Holly suddenly turned her head and registered him standing there and her gaze narrowed and heated to a fulminating glare. Her fingers tightened on her clutch purse and then she came striding towards him, weaving through the knot of theatregoers.

'Enjoying your *prior engagement*, Mr Knight?' Her words cut through the air like shards of ice and she looked to either side of him, presumably to locate his date.

Under normal circumstances, Zack would never have explained he was on a night out with his father. But he felt Holly deserved some explanation. A city this size and they happened to choose the same West End show? *Give me a break.* 'I'm sorry about cancelling tonight. I forgot I promised my father we'd spend the evening together.'

Her expression faltered for a moment. 'Your...father?'

'Yes. He's just gone back to use the bathroom.' Zack nodded towards the direction of the theatre toilets. 'He'll be out soon.'

'How soon?' A note of cynicism sharpened her tone another notch.

Zack glanced at Holly's friend, who was watching them from a distance, her expression reminding him of a spectator at a boxing match. So far he was losing. Big time. He turned his attention

back to Holly. ‘There must be a long queue or something.’

‘Actually, that would be the female toilets with the long queue.’ Holly’s eyes flashed. ‘I don’t suppose your...erm...*father* is using one of those?’

His father was taking so long to come out Zack was starting to worry. Surely it didn’t take this long to take a leak? Could his father have taken a back exit? Was he even now downing a few drinks at a nearby pub? Drowning his sorrows in a glass of whisky? Multiple glasses of whisky? His mouth clamped to a barrel of the stuff? ‘Holly, I can explain—’

‘Please don’t waste your breath or my time.’ Holly’s chin came up and a bomb went off behind her eyes. Shrapnel and scorn rained down on him.

Should he tell her about his concerns about his dad? He had told no one. It was too private. Too personal. Too painful.

Zack’s guts churned at the thought of having to search every pub in the neighbourhood. Of finding his dad sitting in a dark corner, quietly sobbing into his scotch, like so many times before. So far he’d kept the press away from his private life, but since his dad had moved back to London from the West Country a couple of months ago after this recent break-up, he wondered, how soon before someone connected him with the sad drunk who couldn’t get his life back on track? Not that Zack was ashamed of his father—he felt sorry for him more than anything. Sorry for him and frustrated with him at the same time. But he knew if the press brought attention to his father, it would only push his dad further

into a pit of despair, perhaps even push him over the edge...

Zack released a slow breath, hoping it would calm his racing pulse and spiralling panic about his father's whereabouts. 'My father is going through a rough time just now and I—'

'My heart bleeds.' The sarcasm in her tone stung like a slap. She walked back to her friend, and a section of Holly's up-do fell from its position and swung from side to side as if it too were giving him the flick.

Zack was torn between wanting to go after her and the need to find his father. He couldn't risk it. Not today of all days. This time his father had won.

But didn't he always?

'That was Zack Knight, wasn't it?' Sabrina asked. 'What did you say to him? You looked like you were going to hit him.'

'Drat that odious man.' Holly grabbed Sabrina's arm and led her out to the street. 'This is exactly why I've stopped dating. He said he was here with his father. His father! Who takes their father to a musical? Excuse me while I throw up. Does he think I'm that naïve?'

'Not all men are two-timing jerks. Maybe he really was here with his father. Or his mother.'

Holly gave her the side-eye. 'Or his sister? His second cousin twice removed who happens to be his personal trainer?'

Sabrina grimaced. 'Point taken.'

Holly glanced back to see if Zack's 'father' had joined him but there was no sign of either Zack or whoever was supposedly with

him. She'd been a fool to think she could outsmart him. Damn him for turning the tables on her. He was probably on his way back to his palatial penthouse by now with his 'date'. *Grr*. She wished now she'd acted a little more blasé about him cancelling their date. Why should she care if he decided to take someone else out? She hadn't wanted to go out with him in the first place. Of course she hadn't. Well...maybe just a wee bit.

'He's amazingly handsome, isn't he?' Sabrina's voice had a note of star-struck fan about it. 'Like one of those European aftershave models, all brooding and sexy. No wonder you're feeling a little disappointed.'

'I'm not disappointed. I was only going to go out with him to mess with his head. And to improve my reputation. But I'll think of some other way to do that. I will not be jerked around by a man who's a player.' Holly blew out a breath like she was blowing out the last candle on her self-esteem. 'Damn. I wish I'd seen who he was with. I wonder where he was sitting. I'd like to know who my competition is.'

'I'm not sure who could compete with you wearing that dress,' Sabrina said. 'You look amazing.'

Holly tucked her escaping section of hair back into position. 'Humph. I didn't think it was possible to dislike a man so much.' *And still be attracted to him.*

Holly got back to her flat a short time later to find a package had been left on the table outside her door. Mrs Fry always left any post or parcels that came for Holly if she didn't come home

straight from work. She picked up the gift-wrapped box with a small card attached and took it inside her flat. She took the card out of its envelope and read the message.

Sorry to cancel at short notice.

Hope these make amends.

Zack Knight

Holly studied the bold strokes of his handwriting for a long moment. She put the card down and unwrapped the package to find a box of handmade chocolates from a high-street chocolatier. How had he known one of her weaknesses was chocolate?

Holly began to take one out of the box but then snatched her hand away. *No*. She was not going to be tempted. He could send her boxes and boxes of chocolates, truckloads of them, but she was not going to let one past her lips.

Not a single one.

Zack searched four pubs before he found his father. He was sitting at a booth at the back of the pub with a drink clasped between his hands that thankfully looked like it hadn't been touched.

His dad looked up as Zack slid into the booth opposite. 'I know what you're going to say, so don't start. You don't understand. You've never been with someone longer than a week or two.'

'Dad...' Zack moved the whisky out of his father's reach. 'I know it's hard. It's always been hard for you, but you have to accept that some relationships end and you have to move on.'

‘Move on?’ His dad leaned his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands. ‘How can I move on? Every relationship I have ends up failing. It’s because I can’t love anyone else like I loved your mother. I keep trying but it never works.’

Zack wondered if his dad really did still love his mother or was longing for the life they’d once had. Theirs had been a whirlwind courtship ending in marriage, hastened by his mum becoming pregnant with him. And while the marriage had been mostly happy for the first few years—or maybe he’d been too young to know any better—it hadn’t taken long for his mother to look elsewhere for entertainment. Zack’s dad had forgiven her for an affair with the gardener, and another with the pool man, but the following year she’d left him for the local vicar, creating an enormous scandal that people in the village still talked about to this day.

Zack put his hand on his father’s shoulder. ‘It’s been twenty-four years, Dad. Surely that’s enough time to—’

His dad raised his head to look at him. ‘You’re as stuck as I am. That’s why you don’t date anyone long-term. I blame myself for your lack of commitment.’

‘I’m happy the way I am. I don’t need someone permanent in my life.’

‘I tried my best to be a good father but I failed you.’

‘You’re a great father. Stop being so down on yourself.’

‘But you’re a *playboy*.’ His dad’s tone couldn’t have sounded more disappointed if he’d said Zack was dealing cocaine.

Zack laughed but somehow it didn't sound too convincing. 'Hey, I thought you admired my lifestyle.'

'Do you know how it makes me feel? Like a failure. A dismal, pathetic failure. I can't have a successful relationship and neither can you. I've cursed you with my own inadequacies.'

Zack was shocked to find his father blamed himself for his lifestyle. So what if he shied away from commitment? That wasn't an inadequacy—it was his choice. It had nothing to do with his childhood. Well, not much. 'That's crazy, Dad. I don't consider it a failure to be single.'

'You don't understand.' His dad looked at him with a watery gaze. 'Your mother and I had ten years together. Ten years where everything was fine. You haven't been in love. You don't know how wonderful it is to be that close to someone. You haven't met The One.'

I hope to God I don't. He didn't want to end up like his father, emotionally shattered by every relationship that came to an end. He didn't want the responsibility of someone else's emotional upkeep. It was hard enough supporting his father for all these years. But he had to do something to ease his father's guilt. He had to show his father he wasn't the man whose he thought he was. And he knew exactly how to do it. He just had to convince Holly to go out with him.

'Dad, actually there is this girl I've met. She's pretty special. I think you'd approve.'

His dad grabbed Zack's wrist. 'Really? How special?'

‘It’s early days, but I’ve never felt this way about anyone else.’ It wasn’t a lie. Zack had never felt so drawn to a woman before. He only had to picture Holly’s flashing gaze and plump mouth and he got hard. Rock-hard.

His father’s expression brightened like someone had turned up a dimmer switch. ‘It would make me so happy to see you settled with a nice girl. Maybe give me a couple of grandkids—’

‘Hey, hold on.’ Zack laughed and got to his feet. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.’ He picked up his dad’s coat off the booth seat and handed it to him. ‘Come on. Let’s get you home.’

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