

Lynne Marshall

200 Harley Street: AMERICAN SURGEON IN LONDON

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Lynne Marshall

200 Harley Street: American Surgeon in London

«HarperCollins»

Marshall L.

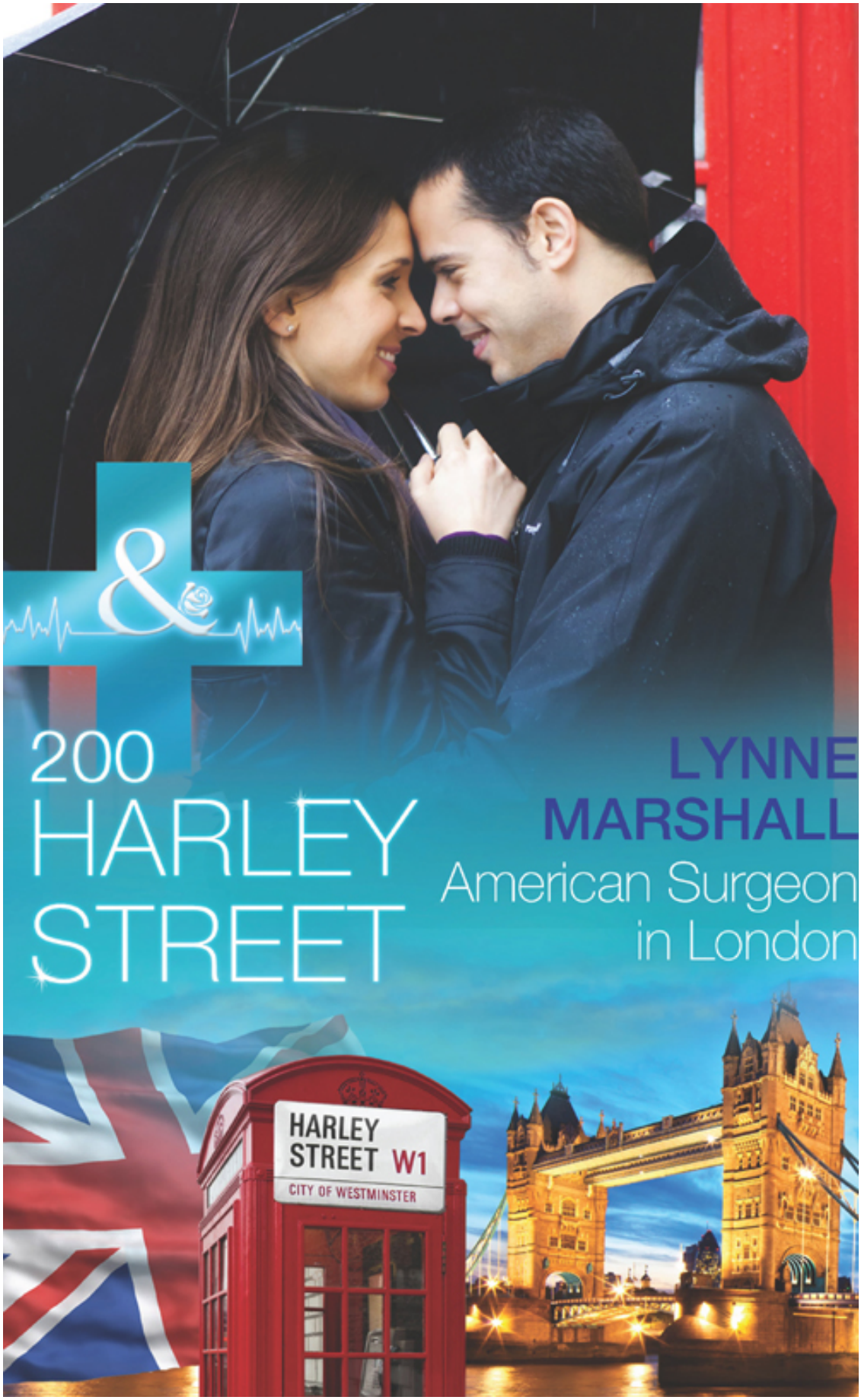
200 Harley Street: American Surgeon in London / L. Marshall — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Medical)

Plastic surgeon Mitchell Cooper used to have it all.But when his life collapsed, he and his little daughter Molly moved to London to rebuild their lives – and Mitchell sealed off his damaged heart. Yet after one star-studded night with fellow surgeon Grace, Mitchell finds himself daring to live again! Only Grace is hiding painful secrets of her own…

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Содержание

200 Harley Street: American Surgeon in London 7
MILLS & BOON 8
Dedication 9
Table of Contents 10
CHAPTER ONE 11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 20


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MARSHALL
American Surgeon
in London
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200 HARLEY STREET

Glamour, intensity, desire—

the lives and loves of London's hottest team of surgeons!

For the next three months enter the world of London's elite surgeons as they transform the lives of their patients and find love amidst a sea of passions and tensions …!

In April, renowned plastic surgeon and legendary playboy Leo Hunter couldn't resist the challenge of unbuttoning the intriguing new head nurse, Lizzie Birch!

200 HARLEY STREET: SURGEON IN A TUX by Carol Marinelli

And glamorous Head of PR Lexi Robbins was determined to make gruff, grieving and super-sexy Scottish surgeon Iain MacKenzie her Hunter Clinic star!

200 HARLEY STREET: GIRL FROM THE RED CARPET by Scarlet Wilson

In May, top-notch surgeons and estranged spouses Rafael and Abbie de Luca find being forced to work together again tough as their passion is as incendiary as ever!

200 HARLEY STREET: THE PROUD ITALIAN by Alison Roberts

And one night with his new colleague, surgeon Grace Turner, sees former Hollywood plastic surgeon Mitchell Cooper daring to live again …

200 HARLEY STREET: AMERICAN SURGEON IN LONDON by Lynne Marshall

Then, in June, injured war hero Prince Marco meets physical therapist Becca Anderson—the woman he once shared a magical *forbidden* summer romance with long ago …

200 HARLEY STREET: THE SOLDIER PRINCE by Kate Hardy

And when genius micro-surgeon Edward North meets single mum Nurse Charlotte King she opens his eyes to a whole new world …

200 HARLEY STREET: THE ENIGMATIC SURGEON by Annie Claydon

Finally join us in July, when junior surgeon Kara must work with hot-shot Irish surgeon Declan Underwood—the man she kissed at the hospital ball!

200 HARLEY STREET: THE SHAMELESS MAVERICK by Louisa George

And brilliant charity surgeon Olivia Fairchild faces the man who once broke her heart—damaged ex-soldier Ethan Hunter. Yet she's unprepared for his haunted eyes and the shock of his sensual touch …!

200 HARLEY STREET: THE TORTURED HERO by Amy Andrews

Experience glamour, tension, heartbreak and emotion at 200 HARLEY STREET in this new eight-book continuity from Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™

These books are also available in eBook format and in two 200 HARLEY STREET collection bundles from www.millsandboon.co.uk

200 Harley Street: American Surgeon in London

Lynne Marshall



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Dedication

For my husband of thirty-one years.

I'm so glad I found you.

And special thanks to Flo for inviting me into this continuity.

Dear Reader

It's always exciting to be a part of a big continuity and I was fortunate to be asked to participate in this one along with seven other authors. The combination worked a bit like a recipe: Take one group of breath-taking characters in a chic plastic surgery clinic setting, add eight enthusiastic writers, mix well with fabulous storylines from the editors, bake slowly to seal in the passion, serve warm with a dollop of wonderful. The name of this creation? **200 Harley Street.**

I get to tell Mitchell and Grace's story in book number four. Grace is running away from her life in Arizona, taking a job in London as a reconstructive surgeon. This is a profession near and dear to her heart, as she can relate to her patients on more levels than meets the eye. Mitchell is also American, and has been living and working in London for a few years already. He is a plastic surgeon at Hunter Clinic as well as the doting father of young daughter, Mia, and he will do anything to make the young one's life stable. Mitch doesn't realize that on the night he takes over host duties at the charity benefit held at London Eye, that his and Mia's lives would change forever.

Have you ever met someone never intending to get to know them, and immediately hitting it off, just hung out together for one evening? Neither have I, LOL, that's why I enjoyed writing Mitchell and Grace's story. I got to throw these two wounded characters together on one special night, let them forget their troubles and develop a harmless crush in a safe setting, then pull them apart leaving them both with a deep yearning for something more in their lives.

Next stop Hunter Clinic where the cast of characters is fun and entertaining, even though each character has a difficult story to tell. Now it's got to be all business between Mitchell and Grace. There's just one problem, their attraction to each other is too strong to ignore, and resist as they may these two future lovebirds cannot keep apart. Add little Mia into the mix and whether they realize it at first or not, they've completed their perfect little circle of three.

File this story under—a readymade family meant to be together.

I love to hear from my readers. You can contact me at my website: www.lynnemarshall.com and friend me on Facebook!

Wishing you happy reading,

Lynne

Table of Contents

Cover
Excerpt
Title Page
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Copyright

CHAPTER ONE

GRACE TURNER GLANCED around the perfectly appointed guest apartment—cream-colored walls, beige couch and a matching club chair, with half a dozen colorful pillows strategically placed, red accent chair on the opposite side, fresh-cut white calla lilies in a tall vase on the glass-topped coffee table. There was even a small cherrywood desk pushed into the corner with internet hookup. Her laptop fit perfectly there.

Everything was in place for her convenience, and she was definitely thankful to the Hunter Clinic for the comfort in her new home away from home. The apartment was also supposed to be a mere ten-minute walk around the corner to 200 Harley Street and her new job.

Her gaze drifted into the single bedroom with the extra-large bed. *That's not going to see any action. A single wide would have been more than adequate*. Surrounded by luxury and taste to the hilt, the guest apartment was already closing in on her and she needed to get out. Desperately.

The extended-stay hotel was fully serviced, and though she hadn't had a chance to shop for food yet, she didn't feel like ordering room service. She'd heard of a tiny car-free street somewhere nearby, also within walking distance, where she could window-shop and dine alfresco, but she was sick of being alone. And why bother to buy new clothes when she didn't have anyone to wear them for?

She paced the length of the living room, noticed the invitation placed carefully on her mantelpiece before her arrival from the States yesterday, and picked it up. It was a duplicate of the one sent to her a couple of months back. Frankly, she'd forgotten all about the fundraising event at the London Eye tonight. Leo Hunter, the man who'd personally asked her to join his clinic, had said he'd be attending. The combination of meeting her new boss a day early and in a more casual setting at a charity event, and a bit of fun on the London Eye sounded like the perfect antidote for her early-onset cabin fever.

Grace strode to the eye-popping white kitchen and put on some water for tea. Even though she was tired, she felt too restless to sleep. She needed a little caffeine to ward off the quickly approaching fatigue from the long flight. Then she headed for the bedroom to find the perfect outfit.

Never an easy chore, finding fashionable clothes that covered her scars, Grace burrowed through her two suitcases, tossing tops, dresses, slacks, and underwear every which way. Making a mental note to put things in the drawers and closet at her earliest convenience, she continued to dig through the luggage. Ah, there was the black lace bodysuit, the one with a mock turtleneck and wrist-length sleeves. It would go perfectly under that low-cut black evening dress with the puffy shoulders and cap sleeves, and the above the knee-length dress would showcase her best attribute—her legs.

It being May in London, she could definitely get away with bundling up for the clear but chilly evening. No one would raise an eyebrow about the extra layer of underclothing, especially as it was sexy. She'd discovered over the years that there was nothing quite like fine black lace to cover up the scars.

An hour later, invitation in hand, a new layer of makeup carefully applied, and with a glittery fake jeweled barrette in her hair just for fun, she made her way toward the apartment door.

Grace felt like a kid again. Getting out of the taxi near Westminster Bridge, her eyes went to the huge, brightly lit, famous Ferris wheel. The cabbie instructed her toward the entrance, and off she went, entranced by the huge ride, following the spectacle that filled up this part of the London skyline. Showing her invitation to the official-looking security guard, she was let inside the gate. A fairly large crowd of impeccably dressed people of all shapes and ages milled around, chatting, sipping drinks and eating tidbits provided by tuxedo-dressed helpers with flashy silver trays.

Though she was considered wealthy back home by Scottsdale, Arizona standards, they paled in comparison with tonight's larger-than-life festivities. She ate a salmon puff, sipped some champagne

and looked for a familiar face. The only face she knew, actually, and that was from an interview on world-renowned plastic surgery clinics she'd seen on TV, was Leo Hunter's.

A half hour later, still circulating through the crowd, a gaze here, a nod there, a smile every once in a while, she noticed one particularly grandly dressed couple get off the Eye. She'd seen them get on—she checked her watch—about half an hour ago. Still unsuccessful in finding Leo Hunter, she decided to quit looking for him and take the ride.

She might not be able to meet Leo tonight, but she could at least grab a few quiet moments and take in the amazing sights of London all lit up. She read a sign with a few facts about the Eye. After doing some quick mental math, converting meters to feet, she took a deep breath, realizing she'd soon be more than four hundred feet in the air. Her phobia wasn't fear of heights so much as fear of falling. She glanced at the sturdy-looking steel-and-glass pods, convincing herself they'd hold. But she'd keep safely away from the windows. So she walked up the ramp and, with the Eye closed to the public for the charity event, was able to follow a handful of people onto the next pod.

One man already on board didn't bother to get off.

Two middle-aged couples talked quietly on one side of the egg-shaped pod. She nodded at them and they smiled, but clearly their circle of friends was closed to outsiders. She considered sitting on the wooden bench in the middle to help lessen her fear of falling, but changed her mind.

On the other side of the pod, that single figure taking a second trip gazed outside. Something about him drew her to his side of the pod. From behind, he had broad shoulders that filled out his tuxedo perfectly, and rich brown hair that kissed the collar on his shirt. He seemed closer to her age than the others, too. He leaned against the rail, shoulder to the glass, arms folded, deep in thought. She took a tentative step closer, not invading his privacy but close enough to see his profile.

Wow. The man was nothing short of gorgeous, with a high forehead, strong brows and jaw, a nose that could be claimed perfect if it wasn't for the attractive bump on the bridge. The decisive cleft in his chin was almost overkill. Speaking strictly as a reconstructive surgeon, this guy was a natural work of art. Even the shell of his ear was attractive.

She'd never been one to swoon over looks, especially in her line of work, when she knew people could alter their appearances to be more perfect looking, but this man in all his glory elicited chill bumps. Tingles danced along the skin of her arms and up the back of her neck as he awakened something inside her, long forgotten.

She took in a slow breath to steady herself. Perhaps it was the fact the pod had reached a point where she realized she'd soon be dangling from a height almost twice that of the Statue of Liberty that made her knees weaken. She snuck another glance at him and reached for the rail.

There was something more than pure handsomeness in this man. Something about his brooding, the tight upper lip and mildly pouting lower lip, how lost in his thoughts he seemed. There was something about his dissatisfaction about God only knew what that drew her in. Unfortunately, she'd always been a sucker for brooders. And she was definitely drawn to his contemplation, against her will maybe, but will seemed to have nothing to do with it. She couldn't stop herself from staring.

He was a perfectly made man who, from the expression on his face, seemed perfectly miserable, and that was the part that touched her most—it made him someone she could relate to.

"Hi," she said to him, surprising herself, but what the hell, if she was going to spend the next half hour dangling above the Thames, she may as well be talking to the handsomest man she'd ever laid her eyes on. Who knew? Regardless of the millions of people who'd already ridden it safely, something could go wrong on the Eye tonight. For all she knew, this might be the last thirty minutes of her life.

Wouldn't it be smart to spend those last minutes staring into the most intense eyes she'd ever seen?

Grace smiled to herself, thinking she'd officially turned into a fatalistic drama queen. Apparently the handsome stranger's doom and gloom had rubbed off on her.

This was the last place Mitch Cooper wanted to be tonight, but Leo had needed someone to cover for him while he and Lizzie were seeing a travel agent about their upcoming honeymoon in Paris. Between Leo and this highly sought-after travel agent's schedules, the appointment landed at eight o'clock on a Sunday night.

The black-tie affair had been on the calendar long before Leo had finally seen the light and popped the question to the head nurse at the Hunter Clinic. Though the newly marrieds had put off their honeymoon until the summer, he understood the guy needed an extra night off duty every now and again.

Mitch would rather be home, reading a good-night book to Mia. Sure, Roberta was there, but no nanny could replace a father's love—or a mother's.

He braced himself for more nights like these, since Leo had asked his surgeons to step in and help with the multiple and necessary social functions and fund-raisers related to the Hunter Clinic. Especially now that Leo had gotten married, he'd want a life away from the clinic and that meant the rest of them attending more events. And as a team player, Mitch would do his share.

After all, the clinic with the wealthy donors who kept things running for the sake of those in need, not to mention the eternally nipping-and-tucking plastics patients, was everyone's bread and butter. If he wanted to stake out a new life for himself in London, and provide the kind of life he dreamed of for his daughter, this small price to pay wasn't so bad.

Tonight he'd rubbed elbows with as many guests as humanly possible. He'd made the rounds, done his duty and had now decided to sneak off and take in the view one more time before heading home. He'd have to bring Mia here one day. She'd love it.

He really did love London, especially after dark, and most especially after leaving Hollywood and all the bad memories behind.

Someone spoke—a woman. He dragged himself out of his dark thoughts, which always managed at quiet times like these to circle back to his ex-wife and best friend.

"Hi," he said robotically, looking straight ahead. "Enjoying yourself?" Then, back on duty and clicking into host mode, he actually glanced at the person to his left.

Time slowed as he took in the strikingly beautiful woman. Large and inquisitive pale eyes, enhanced by dark eyeliner and curtained by thick bangs, stared expectantly at him. Having never seen her before, because he'd definitely remember this face if he had, he assumed she was a wealthy donor.

With no sign of plastic surgery or Botox injections, she smiled naturally, with fine crinkles beside her eyes and mouth. Her cheeks grew more prominent, and that sweet little mouth with meticulously applied pink lipstick stretched into a serene smile. The sight of such a lovely face buoyed his spirits nearly to the height of the pod.

Could he be so superficial, letting natural beauty grab him like this? Yes, and his broken marriage proved it. Hadn't he learned his lesson? "Have you been to the London Eye before?"

She shook her head of dark hair—half of it piled high on her crown and with a shiny barrette meant for nothing more than show, something his daughter might wear—the rest of the hair dropping in waves around her neck. "I'm new in town."

Probably here for some plastic-surgery work since tonight's guests were by invitation only. All the beautiful women he'd ever known thought of plastic surgery as their little beauty secret. Maybe he could talk her out of whatever procedure she'd come to have. Why mess with genuine perfection? God, he hoped she didn't plan to change her lips. They were just fine as they were, with the classically shaped Cupid's-bow upper lip and the plump lower mate. Bigger was not always better, and lip jobs never looked completely natural, in his opinion. Even under his skilled hands.

"If you're new in town, then I guess I need to be a gentleman and point out a few landmarks, don't I?"

She continued to smile and her expression changed to one of playfulness. "Definitely. By the way, I notice you're American, too."

He nodded. “I’m from California originally. How about you?”

“Arizona.”

Didn’t they have highly acclaimed plastic surgery clinics in Scottsdale? Maybe, as Scottsdale could be a tight-knit small town, she didn’t want anyone to know she was undergoing a procedure. Maybe she’d told everyone she was going on vacation, and when she went home she’d look amazingly well rested. Who knew? Who cared? Maybe he should quit reading so many sleuth novels and stop assuming the worst about women.

Right now, he’d grab a moment for himself and enjoy it with … what was her name?

“I’m Mitchell, by the way, and you are?”

“Grace. Nice to meet you.”

Yes, of course her name would be Grace, she almost shimmered with it.

“So, Grace, across the Thames there you’ll notice Big Ben, and the Gothic-style building with all of those lights right on the river are the Houses of Parliament.”

She followed wherever he pointed, smiled and nodded. He liked it that she’d stepped a little closer and a refreshing, brisk, fruity scent floated up his nose. She wore a sexy black dress with a diving neckline, but instead of flaunting everything God had given her—there he went assuming again, but her breasts were probably real as they were shapely but not overly large—she’d covered up with amazingly alluring thin black lace. Sexy. And not fair. The subtle holding back made him all the more curious about what lay beneath. Some women knew how to make a man take notice and beg for more. Hats off to the beautiful Grace from Arizona.

He cleared his throat, forcing his thoughts back on task. “Oh, and over there is Westminster Abbey. Look down just a bit more. There.”

She inched forward and grimaced when she glanced downward.

“Fear of heights?”

“Fear of falling.”

“Ah. I promise I won’t push you or swing the pod.” She smiled and another moment stopped in time. He grasped for something to say. “Remember trying to make the Ferris-wheel gondolas swing when you were a kid?”

She gave him an incredulous and funny look.

He grinned. “Maybe that was just a guy thing. Anyway, I’ll point out a few more places….”

She oohed and ahhed over everything, giving him the impression he was doing a fantastic job as a tour guide. Maybe he could start a second career? But then again, maybe she was easily pleased.

“The lights make everything so much more beautiful, don’t they?” she said, her sweet, husky voice soothing every wrinkle in his mind.

The sparkling city lights reflected off the pod window and dappled her face in shimmering whites and muted colors. He dipped his head in agreement with her statement—the lights did make everything look more beautiful, especially her.

They continued the rest of the ride in casual conversation, just two Americans in London sharing a fun moment together. It was a hell of a lot better than what he’d been doing before she’d spoken to him.

She laughed easily when he tried to be charming and he liked that—made him want to keep talking. He also liked it that her fashionable shoes made her only a couple of inches shy of his six feet—all the better to stare into those amazingly vibrant blue eyes.

Suddenly energized, as the pod ended its full circle journey, and not wanting to say goodbye to the lovely lady, he got a crazy idea. Ask her out. Why not?

But he was so out of practice at spending time with women. Didn’t have a clue what she might like to do. Where did the only female that mattered in his life like to go best? “Do you enjoy swinging?”

A shocked and offended expression replaced Grace's prior childlike enjoyment. She really had a way with giving "looks" that said it all.

Realizing his unintentional allusion to carefree sex—*swinging*—he raced to make things right. "On swings, I mean. Actual swings. Uh, the kind you sit on. Swinging?"

She blurted out a laugh, relief softening her eyes. "Oh. Well, in that case … I haven't been on a swing in ages."

The pod door opened. The other couples exited. He took her by the arm and led her out. "I know a place nearby—that is, if you're up for it. We could walk over. Maybe have a drink afterwards?" He let go of her arm, not wanting to seem overbearing. "No strings." He gazed earnestly into her blue—yes, they were definitely blue—eyes. "What do you say?"

He'd laid it on the line, stuck out his neck and set himself up to be humiliated with a firm no, but he couldn't help it. Something about her had made him ask. Suddenly, his only desire was to spend more time with this woman.

But for all she knew, he could be a London serial killer. He, on the other hand, had known immediately that she definitely wasn't a serial killer, just a lovely lady biding her time before "donating" to the Hunter Clinic.

"I'm still on Arizona time, everything's all mixed up, but I'm not ready to turn in yet. Sure. Why not?"

Apparently as good at reading people as he was, she, and their mutual trust of strangers at charity events, overcame all her doubts. And he couldn't have been happier with her decision.

The man named Mitch—and she was perfectly happy not knowing his full name, because once she began her new job she wouldn't have a spare moment to get to know anyone outside work anyway—grabbed each of them some champagne in a plastic flute and directed her out of the gate. Facing away from the Thames, they turned left and soon came upon a few straggling street artists, no doubt holding out for the last of the tourists of the day. Or night. She checked her watch, it was almost ten.

One street artist was completely silver and stood on a small box with a large jar for tips at his feet. His head was shaved, he wore a suit and was reading a book. Perfectly still. Another fellow wore a fedora and a raincoat, all bronze from head to toe, arms folded, one foot forward looking like something from out of the forties or fifties.

"What if their nose itches?" she said, taking a long sip of her bubbly, admiring the live art.

Mitch laughed. "I'll ask." He stepped forward, dug into his pocket and put a bill into the tip jar. "What do you do if your nose itches?"

The pavement artist slowly and believably came to life. First his eyes moved, then he twitched his nose. He unfolded his arms and robotically took his index finger and ran it up and down the bridge of his nose. Then, just as methodically, as if he were a machine or wind-up toy, he returned to his original stance.

Grace clapped. "Love it."

Mitch gave her an odd look as he took the crook of her elbow and pulled her down the path. She followed willingly. Halfway down the wide walkway they came upon a huge fenced-off playground on the right.

"This is, bar none, my favorite playground," he said.

Why would he have a favorite playground? Was he married with children? Could her innocent desire to forget and enjoy the night damage someone else's relationship? She slowed. He noticed her hesitation, raising an eyebrow over it.

"I'm just a big kid, I guess."

He said it so matter-of-factly that she didn't pursue the rest of the story. He'd told her everything she needed to know. He was a big kid who happened to know about children's playgrounds.

Yeah, he was probably a dad. A single dad? One could only hope.

But tonight wasn't about making a new friend, learning about family trees, personal baggage, regrets, or joys. Tonight was about letting go and having a little adventure with a complete, and totally handsome, stranger. The less she knew the better. Just to be on the safe side, though, she'd memorized the walk back to the Eye and could get herself there in a flash.

She nodded. He took the cue and they walked to the entrance of the Jubilee Playground, which had a large green sign on the gate.

"'Young adventurers this way,'" he read, glanced at her and winked. "That would be us."

Grace saw the shoulder-high fence railings and closed gate and wondered how they'd manage to get inside, just as two hands took her by the waist and hoisted her upward. He lifted her as if she weighed nothing. "You want to go first? Or should I?"

She suppressed her need to squeal, sucking in a breath instead. "Let me take off my shoes at least."

He put her down and moved a few feet over to an embankment where the fence was much lower. He jumped up on the cement ledge and offered down his hand. She threw her shoes onto the grass and climbed up with his help. To hell with the sexy dress, and thank God she had on the body suit!

His eyes sparkled when he glanced at her just before he jumped the fence. How the hell was she supposed to do that? Realizing his mistake, he jumped back over and helped her up, giving her time to get her footing and gain confidence, and soon, with the help of his cupped hands for her foot, she'd also scaled the fence.

Everything in the playground was made of sturdy logs and wood, encouraging the "young adventurers" to climb and play. Like a man who'd been here a number of times, Mitch led her to the swings and helped her on, then gave her a big push.

He had to be a father. And husband? Oh, no, she hoped not.

She curved into the night, feeling like a kid again. Soon he joined her on another swing and they quietly went about the business of letting down their hair in the cool evening breeze.

"This is great," she said, having pumped her feet enough to take her to the hilt on the swing. "Haven't done this since I don't know when."

"Then I'd say you're overdue. Hey, for someone with a fear of heights, you're awfully high."

"That's 'cause I'm in control."

"Ah, a lady who likes to be in control. How refreshing."

She'd play along with his teasing jab about pushy women. "Watch it, buddy." With that she jumped out of her swing in midair, feeling daring, and more like a kid trying to impress an older boy than a thirty-two-year-old reconstructive surgeon.

He applauded then used his feet to stop his swing the old-fashioned way. "Want to go down the slide?" He looked directly at her in the darkness of the playground, daring her to take his challenge.

She sputtered a laugh. "In this dress?"

"You climbed the fence and dove out of the swing, didn't you?"

"True," she said, dusting off her hands. "But I really don't want to ruin my dress on a slide." She ignored his dare and walked farther on. "You're probably renting that tuxedo, and don't care what happens to it," she said, one last attempt to save face.

"How about the monkey bars, then?"

"Who's there?" came a gruff voice from over the fence. A high-beamed flashlight danced around the vicinity of the swings. She fought the urge to hide sideways behind a pole. "No trespassing."

"We were just leaving, Officer." Mitch stepped up and offered a hand to Grace. Her heart pounded from the swinging, and now for getting into trouble for it.

She grinned to make up for her nerves and decided to go the teasing route. "That's what I get for going off with a strange man on an adventure. Next I'll be thrown in jail and I've barely been in town twenty-four hours."

The security officer noticed the fact that Mitch wore a tuxedo and she was in an evening dress, and he beetled his brows and tugged his earlobe. “You’re not dressed for the playground, are you?”

“No, sir, we’re escapees from the Hunter Clinic charity function at London Eye tonight,” Mitch said.

The man’s expression brightened. “The Hunter Clinic helped my niece when she’d burned her face on a campfire. Wonderful place, that clinic on Harley Street. Now if you’ll just run along, I’ll let you off with a stern warning.”

“Thank you!” Grace called out, walking briskly toward the exit.

The officer stood by and watched with one brow raised as they jumped back over the fence, Mitch helping Grace up and over. Then Mitch shook the man’s hand and the officer bid them good-night. They all walked away, the officer one direction, they in another.

“I’m starving. How about you?” Mitch asked, grinning like a kid who’d just gotten away with mischief.

Besides the salmon puff she really hadn’t eaten anything today, not yet having had time to stock food in her new kitchen. “Come to think of it, I am, too.”

“I know a great place about ten minutes away. You okay to walk in those shoes?” He nodded toward the shoes dangling from her fingers.

“I made it here, didn’t I?” She brushed off her skirt with the palm of her free hand and worried about how messed up her hair must look.

He smiled and his white teeth gleamed in the night. It wasn’t fair he was that gorgeous. “That’s the spirit.”

Fifteen minutes later they wound up past the Hunger-ford Bridge on the third floor of the Royal Festival Hall in an upscale restaurant overlooking the South Bank. They sat at the huge modern wraparound bar with a distinct 1950s-influenced design. The view was gorgeous, and Grace ordered a Cabernet Sauvignon and gnocchi. Mitch ordered a mixed drink and steak.

Up close, in the brighter-than-average lit bar, his eyes were green, more sea-green blue, and she realized she’d gotten lost gazing into them. He must have noticed and lifted the corner of his mouth in an angled smile.

“For someone from the sunny state of Arizona, you have a really creamy complexion,” he said.

“I own stock in sunscreen.” Feeling flattered he’d noticed something about her, she smiled.

He smiled back, and added a light laugh. Maybe she hadn’t lost her touch with social conversation after all, or he was going out of his way to be polite.

It was easy to make him chuckle, and their evening went on in free-flowing banter. No topic scratched below the surface. Somehow they’d made a pact not to really get to know each other. Yet she picked things up, like the fact he hated onions and separated them out of his dinner salad, and even after cavorting in the park he smelled fresh and trendy. The scent probably cost an arm and leg from some designer store. He owned his own tux and he knew where to take children to play.

The nagging question returned. Did he have a wife and family? And if so, who looked after them while he gallivanted around at charity events with strange women? Maybe he was one of the wealthy Hunter donors and could afford to live a double life.

She really needed to quit trying to figure him out and just enjoy his company. After tonight she’d never see him again anyway.

Her gnocchi was delicious and she forced herself to eat slowly. The cabernet warmed her brain and for her first night in London she had to admit she would never have come up with this scenario in her wildest dreams. *Thank you, Leo, for inviting me to the Eye.*

By half past midnight, rather than get to know each other, they’d discussed half a dozen couples from the bar, sizing them up and guessing their circumstances. Then, after making up far-fetched stories about secret agents and international spies along with who the couples must be, they pondered what other people might surmise about them.

"Maybe they think we're two famous doctors out to save the world," Mitch said, hitting very close to home in Grace's situation.

"How about a rich American actress and her best friend's husband," said Grace, raising her brows, wanting to throw him off track. She must have done a good job as his expression faltered for a millisecond. Oh, no, she'd pushed the game too far. Had she hit a nerve?

The next few moments ticked by in silence, and he seemed to have lost interest in playing the game.

Mitch finished his drink and looked at his watch. "I should get you home."

Okay, she'd definitely hit a nerve, and now she'd ruined their evening. "Yes," she said, suddenly feeling awkward for the first time that night. "I imagine you've got to get home, too." *To your wife and family*.

"I'm divorced, in case you're wondering." His mood had shifted toward all business and she suspected it was because of what she'd hinted at. Or could he read her mind?

He reached for his wallet when the bill came.

"Let me pay for mine, okay?"

He scowled at her, but quickly turned the look playful. "Not on your life. I almost got you into trouble back there. It's the least I can do."

She glanced at the huge run in her hose. "True. And I've ruined my stockings."

"Sorry about that. Maybe I should buy you another drink?"

"No, thanks." She sat straighter. "It was fun. Well worth the cost of new stockings."

"It was, wasn't it?" He left the right amount of cash plus a generous tip and got off the barstool. "We're pod people," he said, offering his hand. "Pod people and young adventurers, and we must stick together."

And total strangers, don't forget.

Grace grinned and accepted his hand to help her down then followed Mitch out of the bar. They took the elevator, more subdued than earlier, though he made eye contact with her several different times. She wondered if he'd ask for her phone number, but he didn't. When they hit the street, he hailed a cab, opened the door and helped her to get in.

"Look," he said, sticking his head inside but not getting into the taxi, "I've had a great time tonight. You're a beautiful woman, and I thank you for spending these past few hours with me." He sucked in a breath and Grace waited for the "but".

"But I have a demanding job and what extra time I have … well … I don't have time to date." He glanced into her eyes, as if looking for understanding. She held his gaze, not saying a word. She wasn't his type, or … Was this how men who were involved handled things? "If it was a different time in my life. If circumstances were different. The thing is, I just don't have … well … it just wouldn't be fair."

"Shh," she stopped him. She'd heard enough.

He'd made his point quite clear. There was no room for anyone else in his life. He was probably living with someone and had needed a night to himself, that was all. He was an honorable guy who didn't fool around on the side, just hung out with strange ladies.

He'd been the one to say no strings immediately after inviting her to walk with him. What had she expected?

Silly thoughts invaded her mind but nothing could stop the disappointment that came crashing down around her. Though in her heart she knew exactly what he'd meant about not having any time beyond work. Hell, she'd been thinking those very thoughts earlier. She was in London to start a new job as a reconstructive surgeon at the Hunter Clinic on Harley Street, she planned to put her heart and soul into her job, and where did that leave her? Exactly in Mitch's shoes.

There was simply not enough time to have a well-balanced life in her line of work.

Grace reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Thank you so much for this superspecial introduction to London. Every time I look at that overgrown Ferris wheel I’ll think of my adventurous pod man and smile.”

He grinned, moved in closer and pecked her cheek. “Thank you for understanding.”

She lowered her eyelids and nodded. “More than you know.”

He connected with her eyes once more; there was that pang of remorse again as they shared a silent agreement—this had only been for tonight. The poignant moment stretched on until the cabbie cleared his throat.

From the mood she’d slipped into, she’d probably only projected what she thought had been a look of regret in his eyes. She knew for a fact he could detect it in her gaze.

Soon the door shut, he gave the cabbie some money and instructions. “Take the lovely lady home.”

As the car pulled away from the curb, and Mitch’s scent lingered on, Grace looked out the back window at the most amazing man she’d ever met. He stood there, posed with one hand in his pocket and his head cocked slightly to the side, as if he was a suave street artist, watching her leave.

Whatever or whoever he was, he would forever be etched in her mind as her pod man—quite possibly a figment of her imagination.

But then she glanced down at her legs and saw the gaping rip in her stockings.

No. Adventurous pod man was real. She sighed.

Life sure had a sucky way of rubbing bad timing into her scarred skin, and reminding her she was completely alone and without prospects beyond her new job.

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