

THE DOCTOR'S BABY DARE

Michelle Celmer



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Michelle Celmer

The Doctor's Baby Dare

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A baby in need—and one special nurse—tame a wealthy doctor in this Texas Cattleman's Club novel from USA TODAY bestselling author Michelle Celmer! Pediatrician Parker Reese likes to play the field and usually has women at his beck and call. Until caring for a newborn in crisis sets him on a collision course with beautiful but standoffish nurse Clare Connelly. He's willing to wager he can seduce her despite herself. But as they bond over healing the baby, the question becomes: Who's seducing whom? Soon all bets are off, but can Clare trust her heart to this player or is it just a game?

Содержание

MILLS & BOON	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

“Would you believe that since I moved here I haven’t slept with anyone?”

Probably ... Maybe ...

No, not really. “It seems as if you’ve had a lot of opportunity.”

His grin made her cringe. She was sounding jealous again. Because she *was*, darn it. It was totally irrational, not to mention impossible to control.

“I did have a lot of opportunity, and a lot of offers.” His eyes locked on hers. “I wasn’t interested.”

Was he implying what she thought he was implying? She hadn’t planned to respond, but without her permission her lips formed the question. “Why?”

“You know why.”

He moved closer, looking like a tiger on the prowl, his eyes shining with male heat. If this were the wild, he would take her in an instant. And because it was the wild, she would be helpless to stop him.

He looked like he was going to kiss her, and she wanted him to.

* * *

The Doctor’s Baby Dare is part of the series Texas Cattleman’s Club: Lies and Lullabies—Baby secrets and a scheming sheikh rock Royal, Texas

The Doctor’s Baby Dare

Michelle Celmer



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Title Page](#)

[The Doctor's Baby Dare](#)

[About the Author](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Never Too Late

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[The Doctor's Baby Dare](#)

Michelle Celmer

MICHELLE CELMER is a bestselling author of more than thirty books. When she's not writing, she likes to spend time with her family and their menagerie of animals.

Michelle loves to hear from readers. Like her on Facebook or write her at PO Box 300, Clawson, MI 48017, USA.

[One](#)

Dr. Parker Reese considered himself an all-around great guy.

He was affable and easygoing and had a great sense of humor. He was also honest and respectful and always willing to lend a hand. He was a rock in a crisis and a natural born leader. And despite the fact that he'd lived in Texas for only three months and knew nothing about cows, he had just been accepted into the prestigious Texas Cattleman's Club. And they didn't let just anybody in.

Parker was one of those rare individuals who got along with everyone. Everyone who knew him liked and respected him.

Well, almost everyone.

Parker glanced across the hospital cafeteria to the table where the object of his recent fascination sat eating her lunch, phone in hand, earbuds in place to deflect any unwanted attention. Head nurse of the new pediatric ward at Royal Memorial Hospital, Clare Connelly was smart and competent, by far one of the best nurses he'd ever worked with. She ran a tight ship on her ward, and was highly regarded by her coworkers.

And for reasons that escaped Parker, she refused to like him.

Lucas Wakefield, chief of surgery and fellow Texas Cattleman's Club member, set his tray down on the table and dropped into the seat across from Parker. "Mind if I join you?"

Parker grinned. "I think you just did."

If it wasn't for Luc, Parker wouldn't even be in Texas. The two had met at a conference when they were both medical students. At the time, Parker had been working toward a career in cosmetic plastic surgery for the rich and famous, the only medical field his father considered lucrative enough for a tycoon's son, and one that Parker knew would never elicit any real sense of pride. As was often the case, his father's own selfish demands and archaic values trumped Parker's happiness.

Luc had told him to screw the old man and convinced Parker to follow his true passion. Pediatrics. And for the first time in his life Parker stood up to his father. There had been a fair amount of shouting, and threats to cut Parker off financially. His father had even threatened to disown him, but Parker told him that was a chance he was willing to take. His father finally, though reluctantly, conceded. That put an end to the threats and manipulations his father had always used to control him, and for the first time in his life, Parker felt truly independent. But the event had caused a fissure in their relationship, one that took many years to heal. Even so, by the time his father had passed away last year, they'd managed to resolve most of their differences.

After a lifetime of coveting his father's approval, he'd earned it. And now, with his inheritance, Parker had the means to do anything he wanted, wherever he wanted. He knew that he needed a change, that the only reason he'd stayed in New York was to be near his ailing father. Aside from his practice, and a few good friends, there was nothing tying him there. He knew it was time to move on. But where?

Enter Luc. He'd called out of the blue to offer Parker a job in the town of Royal, Texas. Dr. Mann, Royal Hospital's neonatal specialist, was retiring and they were looking for a replacement. The salary wasn't all that impressive, but Parker's inheritance left him set for life. So he sold his practice and relocated to Texas.

Best move he ever made.

"So, did you ever call that girl you met in the gift shop?" Luc asked, dumping a packet of sugar in his coffee.

"We had dinner," Parker told him.

"And..."

"Then I took her home."

"Your home or hers?"

"Hers."

"Did she invite you in?"

They always did. And he didn't doubt that the next stop would have been her bedroom, and a couple of months ago he wouldn't have hesitated. But something about it, about all of his romantic relationships lately, felt hollow. "She invited, I declined."

Luc made a noise like he'd been punched in the gut. "Dude, you're killing me. I'm married and I'm having more sex than you are."

At thirty-eight, the ever-widening age span between Parker and the twentysomethings he'd been dating was losing its luster. What he was looking for now was an equal. Someone to challenge him. He glanced over at Clare again. Someone capable of stimulating his intelligence as well as his libido.

Luc followed Parker's line of sight and rolled his eyes. "Dude, let it go already. How many times have you asked her out?"

Parker shrugged. He'd honestly lost track. A couple dozen at least. At first her rejection was firm, but polite—for the most part. Not so much anymore. Lately he could feel the tension when they were forced to work together. Which was often. But that was okay. It would just be that much more satisfying when she gave into him. And she would. They always did.

"What do you think it is about me that she finds so offensive?" he asked Luc.

"Could it be your inability to accept no as an answer?"

Parker shot him a look. "She wants me. I guarantee it."

He glanced over at her again. Her eyes were lowered, but she knew he was looking. He wasn't sure how he knew, he just did. He could feel her from across the cafeteria. In her early thirties, she was nearly a decade older than the women he typically dated, but he liked that.

"You really can't stand it can you?" Luc said and Parker turned to him.

"Can't stand what?"

"That she won't bend to your will."

It would irritate him a lot more if he didn't know that it was temporary. But yes, he was used to women falling at his feet. And honestly, it wasn't as great as it sounded. "Clare will change her mind. I just have to catch her at the right time."

"When the chloroform kicks in?"

Parker laughed in spite of himself and said, "Let me tell you a story. When I was a kid, there was a girl at my school named Ruth Flanigan. And for reasons unknown to me, Ruth relentlessly picked on me."

"You were bullied by a girl?" Luc laughed. "Is that some sort of ass-backward karma?"

"It's funny now, but at the time it was traumatic. She would shove me in the lunch line or kick my shins on the playground. She pulled my hair and knocked me off the swings. For years I was afraid of girls."

"Clearly you got over that."

Had he? Sometimes he wondered. When it came to relationships, he was always the one calling the shots, the one in control. He only dated women who were substantially younger and intellectually inferior. That had to mean something.

“So, what happened?” Luc asked him.

“At some point in the second grade she either moved or switched to a different school. I don’t remember exactly. I just remember coming back to school in the fall, and being relieved that she was no longer there. I didn’t have any contact with her again until college. I was home for the holidays and I ran into her at the party of a mutual friend.”

“Did she kick your shins?”

“No. She confessed that she’d had a huge crush on me, and torturing me was just her way of showing it.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to kick Clare in the shins and pull her hair.”

“Of course not.” Though he was sure the hair-pulling part would come later, if she was into that sort of thing. “My point is, just because someone acts as if they don’t like you, it doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that Clare is only pretending not to like you?”

Parker shrugged. “It’s not impossible.”

“You clearly have your pick of female companions. Why this infatuation with Clare?”

Because she fascinated him, and not just because she was the only woman he’d ever met who was seemingly immune to his charms. Weird as it sounded, he just felt drawn to her. He wanted to crack her open, peek inside and see what made her tick. Metaphorically speaking of course.

Clare had been on the hospital staff for almost a decade, but Parker had yet to find a single person who knew her on a deeply personal level. Which he thought was weird. He spent far more time with his coworkers than anyone. He liked to think of them as extended family. But then, he had always been a very social person. Clare was not. She always sat alone in the cafeteria, and kept to herself on the ward. He’d heard that she had never been married or had kids, and had lived with her old-maid aunt since college. But like the librarian who wore sexy lingerie under a conservative and drab suit, Clare had layers, and boy would he love to be the one to peel them back. He was sure he would find sexy underthings in there somewhere. He was betting that if she wanted to, Clare could teach him a thing or two about having fun.

“I’d just like to get to know her.”

“I’ve never known you to fixate on a woman this way,” Luc said. “I have to say it’s a little disconcerting. It’s like you’re obsessed.”

He had no explanation for why he felt such a deep connection to Clare. In the past he’d avoided deep connections like the plague. Why this time did it feel so...natural?

He knew her work routine like the back of his hand. Knew exactly when she started her rounds, when she ate her lunch, when she worked on charts. He knew her smile, and the melody of her voice, though when she used it to address him it was always filled with irritation. But he was getting close, he could feel it.

Okay, maybe he was a little obsessed.

“Even if you’re right,” Luc said, “and she doesn’t hate you as much as she lets on, everyone knows that Clare doesn’t date coworkers.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Parker told him. “And I never say never.”

“I think that’s your biggest problem.”

Luc could poke fun all he wanted—Parker was confident he would wear her down. “I give it a month, probably less.”

With a sly grin that said he was up to something, Luc asked, “Are you willing to bet on that?”

“You’ll lose,” Parker told him.

“If you’re so sure, put your money where your mouth is.”

It wouldn't be the first time they had entered into a friendly wager. "The usual amount?"

"You've got a deal," Luc said and they fist-bumped on it.

Parker's phone rumbled and he pulled it from the pocket of his lab coat. It was Vanessa, a nursing assistant from the NICU.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Doctor, but we need you up here. Janey's vitals are erratic again."

He cursed under his breath. Born premature and abandoned on the floor of a truck stop, Baby Janey Doe had been brought into Emergency last month and had instantly captured the heart of everyone on the ward. And though she was getting the best medical care available, her little body just wasn't ready to heal.

"Be right there," he told her, then rose, telling Luc, "Gotta go."

"Janey?" Luc asked, and when Parker nodded Luc shook his head grimly. "No improvement?"

"It doesn't make sense," he said, gathering up what was left of his lunch. "I've run every test I could think of, scoured the internet and medical journals for similar cases, but nothing fits. I'm at a loss. In the meantime her little body is shutting down. I'm worried we might lose her."

"It sucks, but you can't save them all."

He knew that, and he'd lost patients before. "Maybe I can't save them all," he told Luc, "but I'll never stop trying."

* * *

Clare Connelly sat in the hospital cafeteria, headphones in, wishing this day would hurry up and be over. This morning when she'd gotten into her car, it had stalled several times before she finally got it running. Then it had stalled again at a red light when she was halfway there, and she'd wound up with a line of angry drivers behind her. As she'd pulled into the hospital lot the skies had opened up and dumped a deluge of rain on her as she walked to the building.

Yesterday had been their monthly family dinner at her parents' horse farm an hour away, and though she had warned them that she might have to work, apparently Clare's absence had caused a stir again. Her phone had been blowing up all morning with calls from her seven siblings. When her brothers or sisters missed dinner no one freaked out. Of course, they all saw each other on a regular basis.

Her three brothers and two of her sisters worked on the farm, and her other two sisters were stay-at-home mothers with four children each. In total Clare had twenty-two nieces and nephews ranging in age from newborn to twenty-six. It seemed as if every time she turned around one of her siblings was expecting another child, and her oldest niece and nephew were both newly married with first children on the way. An entirely new generation to remind Clare how much of a black sheep she really was.

Being single and childless in such a traditional family made her a target for well-meaning and sometimes not-so-well-meaning relatives. No one could grasp the concept that she actually enjoyed being single, and that she wasn't deliberately going against the grain. She was just trying to be happy on her own terms. Refusing to join the family business after high school had sent relations into a tizzy; they'd tagged her as the rebel. If they had bothered to pay attention they would have known she had always dreamed of being a nurse. But from the day she graduated from nursing school they had teased her relentlessly, saying that she'd only entered the profession to snag a rich doctor and live in a mansion.

Her gaze automatically sought out her new boss.

An attractive, smooth-talking multimillionaire well-known for his philanthropy, Parker was every woman's dream. With his GQ model physique, rich brown hair always in need of a trim and eyes that looked green one minute and brown the next, he was way above average on the looks scale. Way, way above. At the sight of him on his first day at the hospital, her female staff had been reduced to giggling, blushing, hormonally driven adolescent girls.

He was hands down one of the finest physicians she'd ever worked for. He was trustworthy, honest, reliable, and she had never once seen him in a foul mood. He was as charming as he was funny, and his often ruffled, shabby-chic appearance only added to his appeal. And despite being an East Coaster, he had exceptionally good manners. But most important, his rapport with children made him an outstanding pediatrician.

He was also a shameless, womanizing serial dater. Or so she had heard. One who had apparently set his sights on her.

As if.

She'd learned the hard way that emotional entanglements with a coworker, especially one in a position of power, were a prescription for disaster. It was how her no-dating-coworkers rule had come to be. And though she'd made every effort possible to ignore him, he made that nearly impossible with his relentless teasing and barely veiled innuendo. All of that unwanted attention had resulted in a mild crush.

Mild crush? She nearly laughed out loud at the understatement. She could fool her family and her coworkers, but she couldn't fool her own heart. And though she would die before admitting it to another human being, she wanted him. Badly.

Getting that first guilty glimpse of him every morning, with his slightly ruffled hair and lopsided tie, was by far the highlight of her day. She would imagine brushing back that single soft curl that fell across his forehead and straightening that tie and then she would push herself up on her toes...

And that was where it always ended because if she let herself go any further, she would forget all of the reasons she needed to keep him at arm's length. But even if he wasn't her boss, he was off-limits. If her family got wind that she was dating a doctor, especially a rich one, they would never let her live it down.

She just wished he would stop watching her. He had her so tied in knots she could barely eat her lunch. She supposed that was one of the advantages of a crush, or lust, or whatever this thing was. Inevitable weight loss. Since Dr. Reese had moved there, Clare had dropped a total of eighteen pounds. She hadn't been this skinny since her first year of college. She felt so good without the extra weight that she'd begun jogging again. Though she did realize she would have never put on those eighteen pounds in the first place if she hadn't gotten lax with her exercise regimen. Then again, she'd had no one to look good naked for. Nor the time or even the desire to go out and find someone.

In her peripheral vision she saw Dr. Reese rise from the table where he'd been sitting with Dr. Wakefield, and her stomach did a flip-flop. He would have to walk past her to leave the cafeteria. Keeping her eyes on her phone, she watched in her peripheral vision as Parker neared her table, and when he walked past she could feel the air shift.

Would he stop and give her a hard time? He was always making excuses to talk to her about things that weren't work related. Probably because he knew it annoyed her. That's what she wanted him to think anyway.

Parker must have been in a hurry because he didn't stop this time. She should have been relieved, so why the feeling of disappointment? She couldn't go on this way, harboring an irrational lust for a man who was completely wrong for her, walking around in a state of constant confusion.

Her phone rang and she answered, instantly back in work mode when Vanessa, one of her nurses, told her Janey's vitals were no longer stable and getting worse by the minute.

Clare jumped up, leaving her tray on the table and shoving her phone in her cardigan pocket as she headed for the closest elevator. Since she'd been discovered in the truck stop, just minutes after her birth and barely clinging to life, Janey's condition had been touch and go. Being in the medical field, Clare had been trained to put her personal feelings aside and remain objective, but Janey was like no other patient she'd ever had. She had no one, and despite efforts to find her family, or anyone who may have known who her family was, the police had come up empty, so Janey had become a ward of the state. Clare couldn't imagine being so helpless and alone, nor could she understand how

a woman could abandon her child that way. Though she had no children of her own, or plans to have a baby anytime soon, Clare could see how fiercely protective her sisters were of their children. What could have happened to Janey's mom to make her think that her baby would be better off without her? Or maybe she hadn't been given a choice.

The idea gave Clare a cold chill.

She rounded the corner to see the elevator doors sliding closed and broke into a run, calling, "Hold the elevator!"

A hand emerged to stop the door, a hand that she realized, as she slipped inside, was attached to the very person she was trying to avoid. And now she was the last place she wanted to be.

Stuck alone with him.

He hit the button for the fourth floor, wearing a look that made her knees weak, and as the doors slid shut said, "Hey there, sunshine."

Two

Clare shot Parker one of those looks. This one seemed to say, Seriously, did you really just call me that?

But a month ago she would have completely ignored him, so that was progress. Right?

"They called you about Janey?" he asked her.

"Erratic vitals," Clare said, her concern for the infant clear on her face. Janey had made an emotional impact on everyone in the NICU, but Clare seemed more attached to her than anyone. He couldn't deny that Janey's case had tested his objectivity from the minute she was admitted to the hospital, barely clinging to life. And now, with treatment options diminishing, he was feeling the pressure.

There had to be something he was missing...

"She's not getting better," Clare said as if she were reading his mind.

"No," he agreed. "She isn't."

A code blue was called over the PA for the fourth floor. Parker looked at Clare, and she looked at him, and they cursed in unison. Their fragile patient had gone from unstable to arrest.

Knowing it wouldn't do a bit of good, he stabbed the button for the fourth floor again. Janey could be dying and the two people responsible for her care were stuck on a damned elevator.

"If this thing moves any slower I'll have to get out and push," he told Clare.

It felt like an eternity before the elevator dinged for their floor. They stood side by side, like sprinters at the starting line. The instant the doors slid open they broke into a run. By the time he reached her, Janey was in full cardiac arrest. Nurses stood around watching anxiously as a pediatrics resident performed manual CPR on her pale and limp little body. The sight of it was so heartbreaking Parker had to dig down extra deep for the focus to perform his duties.

"Let me through," he barked, and a group of startled staff instantly cleared the way. He never raised his voice to his team, or anyone for that matter, but this was bad.

"She's not responding," the resident said as Parker took over the heart compressions.

"Call her cardiologist," he barked to no one in particular, knowing someone would do it.

He tried to find a pulse, and couldn't. "Come on, little one. Fight for me."

He continued the compressions to no avail.

Damn it, he had hoped it wouldn't come to this. "Paddles," he said, turning to his left where Clare always stood, surprised to find a different nurse there. He glanced around and found Clare standing way over by the door. Her face looked pale and her eyes wide, and for an instant he was sure she was about to either be sick or lose consciousness. Unfortunately he had a sick infant who took priority.

Even using the paddles it took almost thirty minutes to get Janey stable, and afterward everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief, including him. She was okay for now, but that had been a really close

call. He turned to find Clare, who he had assumed wouldn't leave Janey's side for the remainder of her shift, but she was gone.

He texted her, checking the hallway as he waited for an answer, but after several minutes the message was still tagged as unread. Clare always read and answered her messages.

He frowned. Something was definitely up.

Assuming she'd gone back to the nurses' station, he headed that way. "Have you seen Nurse Connelly?" he asked Rebecca, the nursing assistant sitting there.

"She walked by a second ago." She looked up at him through a veil of what he was sure were fake lashes. "So, I was thinking we could get together again this weekend."

Oh, no, that was not a good idea. He liked Rebecca, but she was a party girl and these days he could barely stay awake past eleven thirty. His father used to tell him, You're only as old as you feel. After a night of partying with Rebecca and her friends, he felt about eighty. She was fun and sexy, but the inevitable hangover wasn't worth it. He could no longer stay out till 3:00 a.m. then make it to work by seven and still function. He was pushing forty. His party days were over.

He checked his phone but still no text.

"Did you see where Nurse Connelly went?" he asked Rebecca, ignoring her suggestion completely, which she didn't seem to like very much.

"Sorry, no," she said tartly.

He doubted he would be getting any more help from her. Ironically, this very situation was probably why Clare didn't date people from work. A lesson he clearly hadn't learned yet.

So, where the hell had she disappeared to? Did she go back down to the cafeteria? Had she slipped past Rebecca and gone to the elevator? No, he thought with a shake of his head. Knowing Clare, she wouldn't want anyone to see her lose her cool, so where would she go for guaranteed privacy? At the end of this hall there was a family waiting room—the last place she would go—and the door to the stairs...

Of course! That had to be it. He'd taken a breather or two in the stairwell himself. Or used it to sneak a kiss with a pretty young nurse. She had to be there.

He found Clare sitting on a step halfway between the fourth and fifth floor, arms roped around her legs, head on her knees so her face was hidden.

"Here to harass me in my moment of weakness?" she asked without looking up.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Because that's the kind of day I've been having." She lifted her head, sniffing and wiping tears from her cheeks with the heel of her palms.

Tears?

Clare was crying?

Just when he thought she couldn't be more interesting, or perplexing, she threw him a curveball.

"And I know how your shoes sound," she added. "From hearing you walk up and down the halls."

He would be flattered that she paid attention, but she paid attention to everything on the ward.

"Are you all right?" He offered her one of the tissues he kept in his lab coat pocket. He dealt with parents of sick children on a daily basis. Tissues were a part of the uniform.

She took it and wiped her nose. "I'm okay. Just really embarrassed. I don't know what happened in there."

"You choked," he said, knowing Clare would want an honest answer. "It happens to the best of us."

She lifted her chin stubbornly. "Not to me it doesn't."

If she had been standing, and was a foot taller, he was sure she would be looking down her nose at him. "At the risk of sounding like a tool, all evidence is to the contrary, cupcake."

Outraged, she opened her mouth, probably to say something mean, or respond to the cupcake remark, then something inside her seemed to give. Her face went slack and her body sort of sank in on itself. She dropped her head to her knees again, groaning, “You’re right.”

He was? She really must have been out of sorts because she never thought he was right about anything.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“You know those days when you feel like you could take on the world? When everything goes exactly the way you want it to?”

“Sure.”

She looked up at him with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. “This is not one of those days.”

He cringed. “That bad, huh?”

She dropped her head back down to her knees. “Choking on the job is just the icing on the cake.”

Clearly. “So you really never choked?”

She shook her head, making her messy bun flop from side to side, and said, “Not even in nursing school.”

He took a chance and sat down beside her. She didn’t snarl or hiss, or unsheathe her talons, so that was good. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Shoot me and put me out of my misery.”

“I think you’re being a little hard on yourself,” he told her. He had heard of surgeons who choked during surgery and never got their confidence back, but this was different. This wasn’t a matter of confidence, this was pure human emotion.

“What if it happens again, when she needs me?” Clare said, looking up at him. She had the prettiest eyes, and she smelled amazing. It would barely take anything to lean in and kiss her. Her lips looked plump and delicious. It might even be worth the concussion afterward, when Clare clocked him.

“If there hadn’t been fifteen other people in the room to compensate, if it had been just you and me, or even just you, I have no doubt that you would have performed admirably,” he said.

“It’s getting more difficult to be objective with her,” Clare said, looking genuinely distraught. “When they called the code I thought for sure that this was it, that this time she wouldn’t snap back. It made me sick inside, like she was my own flesh and blood.”

“Your compassion is what makes you such a good nurse.”

“Yeah, I’m awesome,” she said. “I was so limp with fear I barely made it out of the elevator. I was sweating and my heart was pounding and I felt like I couldn’t breathe, and all the way down the hall it was like I was walking through quicksand.”

It sounded like a panic attack, but to suggest it would probably only make her feel worse. “These are special circumstances.”

“How do you figure?”

“Until they find Janey’s mother, or get her into foster care, you and I are the only ‘parents’ she has. She may be a ward of the state, but it’s up to us to see that she gets the best care. That’s a huge responsibility.”

“You’re right,” she said, sounding cautiously optimistic. “Maybe that’s why I have this deep need to protect her.”

“Right now, she needs protecting.”

She looked up at him and there were those lips again. Plump and juicy and pink. She had pale, flawless skin and the brightest, clearest green eyes that he had ever seen.

He would never forget the day he’d met her, when she’d walked into the staff meeting and the administrator had introduced them. He had been totally blown away. He’d probably held her hand a little too long when he shook it, and all through the meeting he hadn’t been able to stop staring

at her. Which, in retrospect, might have seemed a little creepy. Maybe they'd just gotten off on the wrong foot.

"I'm not sure if I've ever said it, but you're a really good doctor," she said.

He wiggled his brows and said, "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Now if we could just do something about your personality," she grumbled with an exasperated shake of her head, but there was the hint of a smile, and a twinkle of something sly and impish in her eyes. She was teasing him.

"Admit it," he said, teasing her right back. "I'm starting to grow on you."

"I admit nothing," she said, nose in the air, trying not to smile, but he could see that she was having as much fun as he was. "Though I will say that after this, it might be a little more difficult to dislike you."

He grinned and wiggled his brows. "Then my evil plan is working."

* * *

Clare laughed. She couldn't help it. Because it was just so Parker. And boy did it irritate her that she knew him well enough to say that. Five minutes ago she'd felt lower than low; now he had her laughing. How did he do that?

Try as she might to push him away, he always pushed back a little harder. Was this campaign to keep him at arm's length a futile waste of time? Was falling for him an inevitability?

She refused to believe that. She would just dig extra deep for the will to resist him.

No meant no, not maybe.

"You know that I don't date people from work," she said. "Especially doctors."

He grinned. "Who said anything about dating?"

The way he was looking at her mouth... If only he knew how tempting that really was.

On second thought, it was probably good that he didn't know. "I don't sleep with people at work either," she said.

"We definitely won't be sleeping. And we won't be doing it at work." His grin was teasing, but there was a fire in his eyes, and it was one hell of a blaze. He was so damned sexy and he smelled so good. He'd missed a small strip of stubble on the underside of his chin. Any other man would look sloppy or unkempt. On Parker it looked sexy and charming. And she wanted to kiss him there. And pretty much anywhere else.

Okay, why was she saying no? He had a body to die for; he was beyond gorgeous. Not to mention nice, with a really good sense of humor, and she had the feeling that he would not disappoint in the bedroom. Maybe, if they could keep it a secret...

No, no, no!

What was wrong with her? She was a strong, independent woman. When she made up her mind about something, there was no changing it. So why this sudden ambivalence? What was it about being around this man that made her go all gooey?

The dynamics were fairly simple: rich doctor, bad.

Parker was watching her, looking amused. "Penny for your thoughts."

Considering the semismug grin he wore, her inner struggle must have been pretty obvious.

Swell.

"Tell you what," he said. "Since you seem to be having a rough time with this, I'm going to give you an easy out."

Why would he do that?

Suspicious, she asked, "What's the catch?"

"No catch. If you can honestly tell me that you aren't attracted to me, and that you want me to leave you alone, I promise I'll back off."

Really? After all this time he would really just give up? "I'm not attracted to you," she said.

His smile was smug. "That was great. Now tell it to me, cupcake, not your shoes."

Darn, she was hoping he wouldn't notice the lack of eye contact. The truth was, she was a terrible liar. As a child she could never get away with anything.

There was no avoiding it—she had to look at him, and the instant their eyes met, she was totally tongue-tied. He seemed to know every button to push and he pushed them liberally. But that was what womanizers did, right?

“You are evil,” she said.

“Nah, just irresistible.” He stood and held his hand out to give her a boost. “We'd better get back on the floor before someone misses us.”

Without thinking, she took his hand, realizing as he pulled her up how insanely stupid it had been. Though they bumped elbows and shoulders occasionally, other than a handshake when she met him, they had never deliberately touched each other. And while she didn't actually see any sparks arcing between them as his hand wrapped around hers, boy did she feel them. And so did he.

“Interesting,” he said, with a slight arch of his brow. “Very interesting.”

That single word spoke volumes. But mostly it just told her that she was in big trouble.

Three

Her arms loaded with bags of donated clothes, Clare trudged through the brisk February wind to her car in the staff lot. It had gotten so cold the puddles of rain from earlier that day had turned to patches of ice. All she wanted now was to go home, take a long hot shower, crawl into bed and forget today ever happened. Although mostly she just wanted to forget the part with Parker.

Janey had begun to show very slight signs of improvement over the course of the day, but she was nowhere close to being out of the woods. Fragile as she was, her condition could turn on a dime. Until they could figure out what was wrong, they were treating the symptoms, not the cause.

Clare left the night staff very strict instructions to contact her if Janey went into distress again. She wasn't obligated to come in on her off hours, but this wasn't about obligation. And hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

Shivering, Clare popped the trunk, dropped the bags inside and then unlocked her car with the key fob and slid onto the icy-cold seat. Shivering, she stuck the key into the ignition and turned...

Nothing happened.

“Are you kidding me?” she grumbled.

She tried again, and again, but the engine was dead.

She got out, pulling her collar up to shield her face from the icy wind. She popped the hood and looked at the engine for anything obvious, like a loose battery wire. She'd watched her brothers work on cars her entire childhood and she had learned a thing or two. Her car was almost fifteen years old and malfunctioned from regular wear and tear. She had been planning to look for a new one next month when the weather was better, but it looked as if she might have to do it sooner.

With her aunt away for a week she really had no one to pick her up. She would just have to call a tow truck and wait around. Hopefully it wouldn't take long.

She dialed the garage and was informed that they would be there ASAP. Which meant no more than an hour.

“I'm supposed to wait in the freezing cold for an hour?”

“Just leave your keys in the glove box.”

Grumbling to herself, she hung up. Now she would have to call a cab to get home. But she would do it inside the hospital where it was warm.

She put her keys in the glove box and shut the door.

She was getting ready to close the hood when she heard a vehicle pull up behind her car. She knew before she even heard him call out to her who it was. Because that was the kind of day she was having.

“Looks like you could use some help, angel face.”

There he was, in his sporty import, grinning at her. She wanted to be exasperated but she couldn't work up the will.

"Car's dead. I called for a tow."

"Need a lift?"

It sure beat waiting for a cab, though she knew she was asking for trouble. But she was exhausted and frustrated and she just wanted to get home. "If it's no trouble."

Oh, that smile. "Hop in."

"Can I put something in your trunk?"

"Is it a dead body?"

She opened her trunk. "Well, not the whole thing."

He grinned and popped his trunk. "In that case, absolutely."

She tossed the bags inside, closed the trunk and climbed in the passenger's side. The interior was soft black leather and her seat was toasty warm.

She took off her gloves and held her hands in front of the heat vent.

"Where to?"

She told him her address, and how to get there, but as he pulled out of the lot he went in the opposite direction. "Hey, genius, my house is the other way."

"I know. But dinner is this way."

She blinked. "Who said anything about dinner?"

"I just did. If I don't eat something soon I'll go into hypoglycemic shock."

"You really think I'm going to fall for that?"

His grin said that she didn't have a whole lot of choice.

Damn it. She should have known better than to get in his car. But she was too exhausted to argue. She let her head fall back against the seat rest.

"You can't tell me that you're not hungry. I know for a fact that you didn't get to eat your lunch."

Of course she was hungry. She was starving, but he was the last person she wanted to be seen with in a social setting. The way gossip traveled in the town of Royal, people would have them engaged by the end of the week.

"No offense, but I really prefer that we not be seen together outside of work."

"So, not only do you not date coworkers, but you don't dine with them either? Is that why you always eat lunch alone?"

"That's not why I eat alone, and no, I have nothing against dining with coworkers. It's just something I don't do often."

"So then having a meal with me shouldn't be a big deal, right?"

She was pretty sure he already knew the answer to that question. And as he pulled into the parking lot of the Royal Diner, the number one worst place to go when trying to avoid the prying eyes of the town gossips, she found herself wishing that she'd called a cab instead.

"I can't risk someone seeing us and getting the wrong idea."

"We're just two colleagues sharing a meal while you wait for a tow. Not to mention that I'd like to talk about Janey. Bounce a few ideas off of you. Think of it as an offsite work meeting."

Well, if it was a work meeting...

"Just this one time," she said. "And I mean that."

He grinned, shut the engine off and said, "Let's go."

Since he was the type of guy who would insist on opening a car door for a woman, she hopped out before he could get the chance. And when he reached past her to open the diner door, she grabbed it first. She didn't want anyone getting even the slightest impression that this was a date.

The hostess showed them to a booth near the back. It was after eight so most of the dinner rush had already cleared out. Which could only be a good thing. "What would you two like to drink?"

"Decaf coffee," Clare said.

“Make that two,” Parker told her.

“Enjoy your meal,” the hostess said, laying their menus on the table.

As they sat down Parker said, “See, it’s not so bad. There’s hardly anyone here.”

He was right. The subfreezing temperatures must have kept people inside tonight. But it would take only one nosy person to see them together and draw the wrong conclusion.

Their waitress, Emily, was someone Clare knew well. She often brought her autistic daughter to the free clinic on the weekends when Clare was volunteering, and her husband worked at the auto-repair shop. She set their coffees down and Clare didn’t miss the curious look as she said, “Hey, Clare, Dr. Reese. Looks cold out there.”

“So cold Clare’s car wouldn’t start,” Parker told her.

“Are you still driving that old thing?” Emily asked her.

“I know I need to get a new one,” she said, warming her hands with her coffee cup. “I just haven’t had time.”

“Do you know what you’d like to order or would you need a minute to look at the menu?”

“I know what I want,” Parker said, eyes on Clare. From his mischievous grin, Clare knew he wasn’t talking about the food.

“Caesar salad with the dressing on the side,” she told Emily.

“Would you like chicken on that?”

Would she ever, but she was only five pounds away from her high school weight and she wanted to hit that number by swimsuit season. “No chicken.”

“My usual,” Parker told Emily.

“One Caesar, one bacon cheeseburger and fries, comin’ right up.”

When she was gone Parker said, “She knows what car you drive?”

“Everyone around here knows what everyone drives.”

His brows knit together. “That’s weird.”

Not for Royal it wasn’t. “You’ve never lived in a small town, have you?”

“Nope. I’ve always lived in the city, but I like the slower pace. Though it has taken some getting used to.”

“You must eat here often if you have a usual,” Clare said.

“Several times a week at least, and sometimes I come in for breakfast.”

“You eat a burger and fries several times a week?”

“I’m a carnivore. I eat meat.”

“There’s this thing called vegetables...”

He shrugged, sipping his coffee. “Sometimes I order a side salad.”

He was a doctor, for God’s sake. He should have known better. “What do you have the other four days?”

“That depends on who I’m with,” he said, and his cheeky smile said that once again they were no longer talking about food. But she’d sort of walked into that one, hadn’t she?

Why did he have to be so damned adorable, with his stubbled chin and dark, ruffled hair? The soft waves begged to be combed back by her willing fingers and his hazel eyes smoldered, though they looked more whiskey-colored in this light. He’d loosened his lopsided tie and opened the top button on his dress shirt...

“Have you lived in Royal your whole life?” he asked her.

Jarred by the sudden change of subject, she realized she was staring at his chest and lifted her gaze to his handsome face instead. Which was just as bad, if not worse. Sometimes when she was sitting at the nurses’ station and he was nearby she would watch him in her peripheral vision. He had such a nice face to look at.

“I moved here to live with my aunt about a year after nursing school,” she told him.

“Where are you from originally?”

“My parents own a horse farm about an hour from here. Five of my siblings work there.”

He blinked. “Five? How many siblings do you have?”

“Seven. All older. Three boys, four girls.”

“Wow.” He shook his head in disbelief. “That’s a lot of kids.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Catholic?”

“No, just very traditional. My mom has six siblings and my dad has four. They both grew up on farms.”

“What about your siblings. Do they have kids?”

“As of last month I have twenty-two nieces and nephews, and two great-nieces on the way.”

“Wow. That is a big family. And you’re the baby?”

There was nothing more annoying than being referred to as the baby by her family. It was their way of pushing her down and keeping her in her place. But when Parker said it, with that teasing smile, it wasn’t demeaning at all.

“I’m the youngest, yes.”

“Were you spoiled?”

As if. “My parents were pretty burned out by the time I came along. As long as I did my chores and kept my grades up they pretty much left me alone. I would rather be invisible than get sucked into all the family drama.”

“I used to wish that I had a big family.”

“Do you have siblings?” she asked him.

“Only child.”

“I had a friend in school who was an only child and I was always so envious.”

Emily returned to the table with their food and Clare’s stomach howled. Though getting a salad had been the responsible thing to do, Parker’s juicy burger and greasy fries beckoned her.

“Well, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” he said, popping a fry in his mouth, and when he offered her one, she couldn’t resist. Her mouth watered as the greasy, salty goodness sent her taste buds into overload.

She looked at her plate, then his, and thought, Man, I should have ordered a burger.

“Growing up I always wanted siblings,” Parker said, pushing his plate toward her, gesturing to her to take more.

“I had to share a room with three of my sisters. I had no privacy whatsoever.” There hadn’t even been anyone who’d keep things in confidence. If one sibling knew, they all knew. Because of that it had always been difficult for her to trust people to keep her secrets. Her aunt was the only person in her life she could be totally honest with.

“For what it’s worth, I didn’t either,” he said, and she watched his lips move. She loved looking at his lips. It was always the first place her eyes landed.

“My father was very strict throughout my entire childhood,” Parker said. “He controlled pretty much every aspect of my life, like which friends I was allowed to have, what books I was allowed to read. He even chose the classes I took in high school. He was grooming me to take over his business. I always thought that if he had another child he might not be so focused on my every move.”

“What does he do?”

“He was a financial tycoon. He passed away last year.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“We had a very tenuous relationship. I had no interest in finance, and he considered practicing medicine beneath me. He agreed to pay for medical school, but only if I studied to be a cosmetic surgeon. He even set up a job for me with his own cosmetic surgeon when I graduated.”

As amazing as he was with children, that would have been a terrible waste. “Clearly you changed his mind.”

“It was Luc Wakefield who talked me into standing up to my father.”

“How did that go over?”

“There was a lot of shouting and threats. He said he would disown and disinherit me. I said go for it. At that point I was so sick of being controlled I honestly didn’t care.”

Her family may have been a ginormous pain, but his father sounded a million times worse. “What did your mom have to say about it?”

“Not much,” he said, and his casual reply belied the flash of something dark and sad in his eyes. But as soon as it was there, it was gone again. “She wasn’t around.”

For whatever reason, she had just assumed that someone as successful as Parker would come from a well-adjusted and happy home. She imagined him as the golden child, probably captain of the football team, valedictorian and loved by all.

It would appear that she was wrong. Again. That’s what she got for drawing conclusions without facts.

“Have I got something between my teeth?” Parker asked suddenly.

She blinked. “No. Why?”

“Are you sure? Because you haven’t stopped staring at my mouth.”

Her cheeks went hot with embarrassment. Was she really doing that?

“It’s either that, or you’re thinking about kissing me.”

She was almost always thinking about kissing him. She really had to be more careful in the future where she let her eyes wander. And her thoughts.

* * *

“I don’t suppose you played football in high school?” Clare asked, and Parker laughed.

“No, I didn’t. But if I had, boy, my father would have loved that.” The only thing that would have pleased his dad more than Parker taking over the family business was if he’d become a professional athlete. But it had been obvious from a very early age that Parker had no interest, and more important, no natural talent.

He was barely out of diapers when his father began pushing him into various sports. First soccer, then T-ball, but he’d sucked at them both. He’d been more interested in sitting on the sidelines, searching the grass for bugs and snakes.

His dad had enrolled him in tag football when Parker was six, and had forced him to stay for the entire season. Luckily Parker had had a sympathetic coach who’d let him spend most of his time on the bench. Because as fanatical as his father had been about his son’s physical abilities, he’d never once made it to a practice or even a game.

Swimming lessons had come next, but Parker got so many ear infections as a result that the doctor told his father the lessons had to stop. Parker’s equestrian training was probably the least horrible thing he’d been forced into, and though being so high up on the horse’s back had always made him nervous, he loved animals. Until his horse was spooked and threw him, and nearly trampled him to death. That was the last time he’d ever gone near a horse.

“My father played ball in college,” Parker told her. “I guess he just assumed that I would want to play, too. He was real big on me following in his footsteps. He wanted a mini me, and I seriously didn’t fit the bill. I was skinny and scrawny and kind of a geek.”

“You were not,” she said, taking another fry, eyeing his burger with a look of longing. She had barely touched her salad, but she’d already eaten half his fries.

“I’m serious. I was a total nerd. Remind me and I’ll dig out some old pictures.” He slid his plate closer. “Take a bite.”

She blinked. “Of what?”

“My burger. You haven’t taken your eyes off of it, and I think I see a little drool in the corner of your mouth.”

She hesitated, looking a little embarrassed, but her stomach won the battle. “Well, maybe a little bite...”

There was nothing little about the bite she took.

“I didn’t start to really fill out until my third year of college,” he said. “When I started weight training.”

“So you were what, like, twenty-one?”

“Eighteen. I graduated high school when I was fifteen.”

“Wow, you really were a geek. But your dad must have been happy about that.”

“My dad was never happy about anything. He was a tyrant. Thankfully I saw more of the nanny and the house staff than him.”

“I went through sort of the same thing when I was a kid. Although not the tyrant part. Everyone assumed I would work on the ranch after high school, but I wanted to be a nurse. I knew from the time I got my first play doctor kit as a kid that I wanted to work in medicine. I wanted to help people.”

“Did you ever tell your family that?”

“Probably a million times, but I was more or less invisible. No one ever listened to what I had to say. Hell, they still don’t. If it isn’t ranch business, or my various nieces’ and nephews’ academic accomplishments, they don’t discuss it. So I worked my butt off in school and got a scholarship to a college far away from home and haven’t looked back since. My parents were not very happy with me.”

In what universe did that make even a lick of sense? “Aren’t most parents proud when their kids go to college?”

“Like I said, they’re very traditional. Nothing was more important to them than their children ‘paying their debt to the family,’” she said, making air quotes with her fingers. “Whatever the hell that meant. I didn’t ask to be born. I never felt as if I owed my family anything.”

It amazed him that despite their very different upbringings, their childhoods weren’t really all that different. “I felt the same way about my father. He had my entire life planned out before I was out of diapers. With no regard whatsoever to what I might want. But that was just who he was. People were terrified of him and he used that to manipulate. No one dared deny him anything.”

“Stubborn as I am, my parents’ archaic thinking probably only pushed me further from the fold. The thought of staying on the farm and working with my family for the rest of my life gives me hives. And they have no respect for what I do. To this day I still hear snide remarks about going into medicine just to snag—” She stopped abruptly, but it was already too late. He knew exactly what she’d been about to say.

“A wealthy doctor?” he said.

Her cheeks flushed a deep red and she lowered her eyes to her salad, her juicy bottom lip wedged adorably between her perfect teeth. He’d never seen her blush, but damn, she sure was pretty when she did. But then, she always looked good to him. And suddenly her attitude toward him made a whole lot more sense.

“I didn’t mean to tell you that,” she said, looking mortified.

“At least now I know why you spend so much time pretending you don’t like me.”

She lifted her chin, getting all indignant on him. “Who says I was pretending?”

He laughed. “Sweetheart, I’ve dated a lot of women. I know the signals.”

She opened her mouth to argue—because she always argued when he was trying to make a point—then must have had a change of heart and closed it again. “Okay, yes, that is part of the reason I can’t see you. But there are other factors, as well, things I’m not comfortable getting into right now.”

“So you do like me,” he said.

“I respect you as a physician and peer, and you seem like a good person. I could even see us eventually becoming friends, but it can never be more than that.”

Four

“Do you want to be friends?” Parker asked her.

She wanted that and so much more, and it wasn't fair that she couldn't have it. But she of all people knew that life was not often fair. She also realized that neither of them had said a word about Janey. Not that it surprised her. It was all just a ruse to get her alone. And she'd fallen for it. Willingly. She looked at her phone to check the time. "It's late. I should go home. I want to get up early tomorrow and go jogging."

Her very obvious brush-off didn't seem to faze him. "You don't strike me as the jogging type."

"I like it. There's a cute little park behind my house."

"Are you one of those die-hard joggers who's on the road before the sun's up?"

"God, no. If I'm on the track at seven thirty it's a good day."

He just grinned and said, "Could you be more intriguing?"

She didn't even know how to respond to that. She led a pretty unexciting life. What did he see that was so special? So interesting? If he was just looking to get laid, he was seriously overplaying his hand.

Parker motioned Emily for the check, and refused to let Clare pay her portion.

"You can buy next time," he said, but she didn't think there was going to be a next time. It was stupid to think that she could ever be friends with Parker without wanting more. So. Much. More. So she figured, why tempt herself? Out of sight, out of mind. Wasn't that the way it was supposed to work?

"Where to?" he asked when they got into the car. He blasted the heat and switched the seat warmers on.

"We're just outside of town. Turn left." Thankfully this time he followed her directions.

"Didn't that area get hit pretty hard by the tornado?" he asked as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"Our house was leveled," she said, realizing that she could look at his mouth all she wanted now; he was focused on the road.

"Tell me you and your aunt weren't in the house," he said.

"My aunt was away on a trip and I was at the hospital."

"Were you able to salvage anything?"

"We lost everything. Clothes, furniture, keepsakes. My aunt travels extensively and she had things from all over the world. Things she'd been collecting for decades. By the time it was over, they were scattered all over the city. Wet and broken. My aunt's file cabinet, with the papers still in it, was found over a mile away. The tornado picked her car up and launched it through the house across the street. It was utter devastation."

"I can't even imagine," he said. "I've seen some major hurricane damage on the East Coast, but nothing that bad. And you saw it? The tornado, I mean."

She nodded. "It was surreal at first. I kept thinking that it couldn't happen to Royal, that at the last second it would change course or blow itself out, then the debris started to hit things. Windows started breaking and cars in the hospital lot were getting pummeled with softball-sized hail and we knew we were going to be right in the middle of it. You feel like a sitting duck. All you can do is take shelter, hang on tight and hope for the best."

"The hospital has a shelter, right?"

"Yes, but I wasn't in it. It happened so fast, there was no time to move the patients, so, along with the rest of the staff I stayed on the ward."

"That was very brave."

"No." She shook her head. "I was terrified. It was the longest five minutes of my life."

"You were terrified but you did it anyway. You put the lives of those kids before your own. That's the definition of bravery."

The compliment, coming from him, made her heart go pitter-pat. Why did he have to be so nice? And so ridiculously handsome? Did the man have a single negative attribute? Other than being

extremely stubborn. But to be fair she was guilty of that, too. He turned into her subdivision and took a right onto her street.

“It’s the third house on the left.”

“You know, I’ve learned more about you tonight than in the past three months,” Parker said.

“There isn’t much to know. The tornado aside, I don’t lead a very exciting life.”

“Excitement is highly overrated. And believe me, I’m speaking from experience. I love the slower pace here. The people are so different, so much more laid-back. For the most part. It’s exactly what I needed.”

It was all about perception, she supposed, because for her this was just normal. But she was sure that moving from Royal to somewhere like Dallas, or even New York City, would be a jarring change of pace. But she never would. She was a country girl at heart and that would never change.

He pulled into the driveway and the automatic outdoor lights switched on, illuminating the exterior of her aunt’s sprawling colonial. “This is nice.”

“Thanks. It’s pretty much identical to the old one, just a little more modern.”

“It’s a lot of house for two people.”

“My aunt has out-of-town guests frequently, so she likes the extra space.” She gathered her purse and gloves and said, “Thanks for the ride. And dinner.”

“I’ll help you with your body,” he said, shutting off the car.

She blinked. Oh, man, if he only knew the things she wanted him to do to her body. Sexy, tantalizing things...

Uh-oh, was she drooling a little again...?

She must have looked confused, because he said, “In the trunk. The body bags.”

Oh, right, she would have completely forgotten and left them there. “I can get them,” she said.

“Nonsense, I’ll help.” He popped the trunk open and got out of the car. She met him around back.

“Did you really just say nonsense?”

“Isn’t that how people talk in Texas?”

“If you’re eighty. And a woman.”

“My bad,” he said, but he was grinning. Did the man ever stop smiling? No one should be that happy that much of the time.

She reached for the bags but he snatched them up first. Darn it, the last thing she wanted was to let him into her house. She had the feeling that once she did, it would be near impossible to get him back out the door.

“I’ve got it,” she said, but he was already heading up the walk. Her exasperated breath crystalized in the air as she jogged to catch up. She had no choice but to go along with it. And of course there was a small part of her that wanted him in her house. Or maybe not so small.

“I think you have a hearing problem,” she told him as they walked up the porch steps.

“No, I hear you just fine,” he said, waiting for her to unlock the front door. “I think what you mean is that I have a listening problem.”

She laughed; she couldn’t help it. “If I say I’ve got it from here, and it’s been a long day and I’m tired, is there any way I’m going to stop you from coming in?”

He considered that for several seconds then shook his head. “Probably not. I’ll just make up some lame excuse like needing to use the bathroom and we both know that you’re too polite to say no.”

He was right. Damn those pesky Southern manners her parents had drilled into her. She couldn’t decide if it was more disturbing or pathetic that she had little to no ability to deny him anything. Like the tornado, he’d blown into her life and had the potential to make a huge mess of things.

“You could have the decency to look a little less smug,” she said, pushing the door open and letting him inside.

“Kidding aside, I really would like to discuss Janey’s case,” he said, stepping into the foyer, which led into the open-concept great room and kitchen. “We didn’t get a chance at dinner.”

As if she would say no to that. Besides, this time he sounded sincere, and less like he was trying to get into her pants.

She wondered what he would do if she invited him up to her bedroom. There was no point pondering the possibility, as it would never happen. Not in this lifetime anyway. But it was the kind of thing that she liked to think about. When she was alone. Usually in bed. If he was as good as her fantasies...

No man was as good as the fantasy. She had pretty high standards when it came to casual sex. Her philosophy was simple. Why did she need a man around when she could do it better herself?

“I have to make an early start in the morning, so you’ve got thirty minutes,” she said, shrugging out of her coat and hanging it on the coat tree by the door. He did the same, looking even more rumpled than he had at dinner. Since it would be rude not to offer him a beverage—there were those pesky manners again—she said, “I’m going to make myself a cup of tea. Would you like one?”

“I’d love one,” he said.

She gestured to the couch, probably the safest place to confine him. “Make yourself comfortable.”

She stepped into the kitchen and filled the kettle, then set the burner on high. The stove, like the rest of the kitchen, was a chef’s dream. Major overkill considering neither she nor her aunt liked to cook, but her aunt only bought top-of-the line appliances. She bought top-of-the-line everything.

Clare grabbed two cups from the cupboard and set them by the stove, then pulled out a box of chamomile tea. “Do you take sugar or honey?” she asked him, bracing herself for some sort of suggestive innuendo, but he didn’t say a word. She turned to him, and realized that he hadn’t answered because he was gone.

“Where the heck did you go?” she called, and heard him answer from the second floor.

“Up here.”

She was fairly sure that his voice was coming from her bedroom. So much for having to actually invite him to her bedroom. He’d found it all on his own.

Did the man have no boundaries? No shame?

She should have known. She never should have turned her back on him. Hell, she never should have let him into her house.

She charged up the stairs to her bedroom. She found him sitting at the foot of her bed, looking around the room. It had been a really long time since she’d had a man under, or even on top of, her covers and he looked damn good there.

“What the hell, Parker?” she said, realizing, as his name rolled off her tongue, that as long as she had known him she had referred to him as Dr. Reese. This was her first time addressing him by his first name. It felt a little odd, but also kind of natural.

He flashed her a toothy smile. “Hey there, short stuff.”

At five-five she was hardly short, but she let it slide. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You said to make myself comfortable.”

“I meant on the couch.”

“But you didn’t say the couch.”

“I pointed to it!”

“Clearly I don’t take direction well. You’re going to have to be a little more specific next time.” Next time? After this did he seriously think she would let him back in?

Who was she kidding? Of course she would.

She folded her arms. “Get off my bed.”

He grinned. “You didn’t say please.”

“Please get off my bed,” she said, feeling a little desperate. The urge to jump in there with him was almost too strong to fight. She felt a little winded and tingly all over, as if her libido had just awakened from a long hibernation.

“No need to shout,” he said, pulling himself to his feet and walking to the door.

“I don’t like having people in my bedroom. I like my privacy.” She straightened the covers where he’d been sitting. They were still warm from his body heat, and the slightest hint of his aftershave lingered in the air.

She turned to him to say that it was time for him to go, but he wasn’t there!

“Are you kidding me?” she mumbled. “Parker!”

She found him in her craft room next door. He’d switched the light on and was examining the quilt samplers she had sewn and tacked to the wall. “Oh, my God, are you for real? Did I not just say that I like my privacy. You have the attention span of a three-year-old!”

“You said you don’t like having people in your bedroom. This isn’t your bedroom, is it?”

She didn’t justify that one with a response. And her thin-lipped glare only seemed to amuse him further. “The truth is, I just wanted to hear you say my name again. Or shriek it, as the case may be.”

She ignored the warm shiver that whispered across the surface of her skin and raised the fine hairs on her arms. Or tried to at least. He wasn’t making it easy. “I’ll say it a thousand times if it will make you go downstairs.”

“These are fantastic,” he said, gesturing to the wall. She wasn’t buying it. He was the kind of guy who knew quality when he saw it and this was definitely not quality sewing.

“Compliments won’t get you anywhere,” she told him.

“I’m actually serious,” he said, leaning in closer. “Where did you get them?”

“I made them, and for the record, they suck. The fabric is puckered and the rows are crooked. My stitching is totally uneven. Which is why I keep them in here. Where no one will see them.”

“But the colors are striking,” he said, and she realized that he really wasn’t bullshitting her. He was genuinely impressed.

Weird.

“You have a gift,” he said.

“It’s just a hobby. It relaxes me.”

“Did you do these drawings, too?”

He was looking at the pages she’d laid out on her craft table.

“I couldn’t draw my way out of a paper bag. I just colored them in. It’s the new big thing in stress relief for adults.”

“Coloring?”

“Absolutely. There are like a million adult coloring books to choose from.”

“No kidding. It seems a little...pointless.”

“That’s the whole point.” She gestured to a pile of coloring books on the shelf beside her craft table. “I’ve finished all of those. I did a lot of coloring in the park last summer. And look how calm I am.”

“Yeah,” he said with a wry smile. “You looked pretty calm in the stairwell today.”

Of course he would point that out. But it was hard to get angry when he was flashing her that adorable grin.

“May I?” he asked, nodding to the pile.

No one had looked at her coloring books before. It had never even occurred to her to show them to anyone. “Go ahead, but they’re nothing special.”

He took the top book, a panoramic foldout of a magical fairyland. “Wow, you sure do have a way with color.”

The compliment made her feel all warm and squishy inside. “I just pick what looks right.”

“That’s the weird thing. Normally these colors don’t even go together, but you make it seem like they do.”

She shrugged, thinking he was making a way bigger deal about this than he should be. “Maybe I wasn’t clear. You can rave all you want and I’m still not going to sleep with you.”

“You should frame some of these,” he said, looking through a book of flowers, ignoring her completely. Or, knowing him, he was only pretending to. She had the feeling that he didn’t miss much.

“Why?” she asked him. “They’re not art.”

“No, this is definitely art.”

“Okay, but it’s someone else’s art.”

“Yes, the shapes are already there, but the color adds dimension. It brings it to life. That’s the hardest part.”

Maybe, maybe not. Either way, his enthusiasm was giving her warm fuzzies all over the place. Her inability to resist his charms bordered on the absurd.

“How many finished books do you have?” he asked her, flipping through a collection of mandalas.

She didn’t even want to go there. “Too many. I don’t get out much.”

“Me neither,” he said, and she gave him a dubious look. “I’m serious.”

“That’s not how I hear it.”

“Keeping tabs on me?”

She was making it sound that way, wasn’t she? “Word gets around. You’re reputed to have a very busy social calendar.”

“When I first got here I was going out pretty frequently. But I was in a new place and meeting lots of new people.”

“New women, you mean.”

He shot her a sideways glance through the curtain of his unfairly thick lashes, then winked. He actually winked. “Be careful, Clare, you almost sound jealous.”

Probably because she was. A little.

He moved closer, looking like a tiger on the prowl, his eyes shining with male heat. If this were the wild, he would take her in an instant. And because it was the wild she would be helpless to stop him. He looked as if he was going to kiss her, and she wanted him to.

His eyes locked on hers, he started to lean in, slowly, cautiously, as if he was expecting her to hit him over the head with something.

Up until today he had been subtle but consistent. He had never pushed, exactly, but he’d made sure that she knew he was around. Something told her now that all bets were off.

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