

BEST OF THE YEAR MEDICAL ROMANCE

12 outstanding medical dramas

Carol Marinelli
Marion Lennox
Jennifer Taylor
Tina Beckett
Louisa George
Scarlet Wilson
Susanne Hampton
Fiona Lowe
Karin Baine
Melanie Milburne
Amalie Berlin
Robin Gianna

The Best Of The Year - Medical Romance

Серия «Mills & Boon Series Collections»

Аннотация

M&B brings you the very best Medical Romances of 2015 in twelve lovely romances to renew your faith in life – and love!

This wonderful collection includes:How to Find a Man in Five Dates by Tina Beckett A Date with Her Valentine Doc by Melanie Milburne Baby Twins to Bind Them by Carol Marinelli Meant-To-Be Family by Marion Lennox Tempted by Her Italian Surgeon by Louisa George Her Greek Doctor's Proposal by Robin Gianna Unlocking Her Surgeon's Heart by Fiona Lowe Best Friend to Perfect Bride by Jennifer Taylor French Fling to Forever by Karin Baine Falling for Her Reluctant Sheikh by Amalie Berlin A Touch of Christmas Magic by Scarlet Wilson A Mummy to Make Christmas by Susanne Hampton

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The Best of the Year Medical Romance

How to Find a Man in Five Dates

Tina Beckett

A Date with Her Valentine Doc

Melanie Milburne

Baby Twins to Bind Them

Carol Marinelli

Meant to be Family

Marion Lennox

Tempted by Her Italian Surgeon

Louisa George

Her Greek Doctor's Proposal

Robin Gianna

Unlocking Her Surgeon's Heart

Fiona Lowe

Best Friend to Perfect Bride

Jennifer Taylor

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How to Find a Man in Five Dates

When the clock strikes midnight...

Dr. Miranda Dupris is fed up with men! Her ban on relationships is a New Year's resolution she is determined to keep. To prove it, she'll go on twenty-five dates in one year—and that's first dates only. Maybe then Mira will be able to find Mr. Right!

Finding a man is one thing. But when sun-kissed doc Jack Perry arrives in a spray of perfect snow it soon looks as if Mira might be destined to lose her hundred-dollar bet...along with her heart!

New Year's Resolutions!

Resolutions are made to be broken...!

Childhood friends Mira and Ellory each make a New Year's resolution to stay away from love. Little do they know that fate has other things in mind...

When two hunky doctors hit the slopes, escaping their past

in the deep snowy mountains, the last thing they expect to find is two wonderful women who can heal minds, bodies and souls...and maybe these brooding doctors' hearts!

This New Year, lose yourself in these magical snowy romances from Harlequin Medical Romance authors

Tina Beckett and Amalie Berlin

Read Jack and Mira's story in

HOW TO FIND A MAN IN FIVE DATES

Read Anson and Ellory's story in

BREAKING HER NO-DATING RULE

Dear Reader,

I seem to have a love/hate relationship with New Year's resolutions. I love making them. Keeping them? Hmm...not so much.

When the heroine of How to Find a Man in Five Dates makes a crazy resolution one snowy New Year's Eve she has every intention of keeping it. After all, she's fresh out of a disastrous relationship and not looking to start anything new. What she doesn't count on, however, is coming to the rescue of a surfer-dude-turned-newbie-skier when he wipes out on his first run down the slopes. What starts off as one date turns into two, and soon she is doing some slipping and sliding of her own...emotionally.

Thank you for joining Mira and Jack as they make their way down a treacherous slope where trust and self-forgiveness become rules to live by—and hopefully find love along the way.

I hope you enjoy reading their story as much as I loved writing it!

Have fun on those ski slopes of life—and maybe even break a resolution or two of your own!

Love,

Tina Beckett

Praise for Tina Beckett:

"A tension-filled emotional story with just the right amount of drama. The author's vivid description of the Brazilian jungle and its people make this story something special."

—RT Book Reviews on

DOCTOR'S GUIDE TO DATING IN THE JUNGLE

"Medical Romance lovers will definitely like NYC ANGELS: FLIRTING WITH DANGER by Tina Beckett—for who doesn't like a good forbidden romance?"

—Harlequin Junkie

PROLOGUE

HERE'S TO A *brand-new year.*

Dr. Miranda Dupris clutched her empty champagne flute and waited for the dreaded annual countdown to begin. The huge gathering area of her father's lodge—with its vaulted ceilings and blazing fireplace—was packed, the free food and drinks drawing in legions of guests and employees, all hoping the year ahead would be kinder than the one they were leaving behind.

Or maybe that was just her.

A fresh glass of glittery amber liquid was pressed into her hand, while the empty one was plucked free and deposited onto

the tray of one of the serving staff. The smell of champagne clogged her senses, its sharp bite a welcome diversion.

"Mira, we totally forgot to make our resolutions!" Her best friend grinned at her, long blonde curls bouncing as she swirled the contents of her own glass. "Let's do them now. That way you can dump Robert into the universe's nearest black hole and start over."

At the mention of her ex-fiancé, Mira curled her toes into the ankle-slaying red stilettos while the familiar sting of betrayal lanced through her gut.

Never again. Never, *ever* again.

If anyone was jumping into the nearest black hole, it was going to be her.

She was done with relationships. For good this time. Three failed engagements in the last seven years should tell her something.

"I'm all for that." She forced her lips to tilt upward, trying not to ruin their New Year's Eve tradition, something she and Ellory had done for the last ten years in this very room. She lifted her glass. "I'll even go first. I hereby swear off committed relationships for the next twelve months."

Her friend laughed. "What about uncommitted ones?"

What about them?

Oh! Her foggy brain finally put two and two together. Ellory was asking if she was swearing off men altogether. Was she?

Maybe that was a bit too extreme. She did *like* men. Some of

them, anyway. Just not certain bastardly ski instructors.

"Uncommitted is good. More than good, actually." She raised her glass even higher. "Okay, how about this, then? I resolve to date twenty-five men over the next year with no emotional involvement whatsoever. Zip. *Nada*."

Her friend blinked. "Whoa." Ellory now had to yell over the crowd as the clock hands on the huge screen across from them shifted closer and closer to the witching hour. "Are you serious? Miss Monogamy Dupris is going to serial date?"

Um...yes. Why not?

The idea sounded more and more attractive. Or maybe that was the three glasses of champagne she'd had. Whatever. She took another bracing sip. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. Serial date. Twenty-five men...one year."

"This I've got to see. Bet you a hundred bucks you either back out or you don't make it past man number five without getting attached to him."

Ha! Unless the fifth guy was a puppy hiding in a man suit, she didn't see that happening.

"Make it *ten* men. No, wait...all twenty-five. And backing out is not an option." She waggled her shoulders back and forth, her courage growing with each passing moment. "Tell you what. Next New Year's Eve we'll see who pays whom. Your turn. What's your resolution? And it'd better be good!"

"Well, if you can swear off serious relationships, I can swear off men altogether—maybe work on myself for a change, take

on a project. And I'll bet the same amount of money that I *will* follow through." Ellory's expression had taken on a serious note, totally out of character for her fun-loving friend.

But with the hands almost at the top of the dial, she didn't have time to question her. "Okay, so we each have a hundred dollars riding on our resolutions, right?"

"Right."

She'd just gotten the words out when a cacophony of voices began chanting backwards from ten. Ellory clinked her glass against Mira's and they downed the last of their drinks.

Confetti rained all around her, the cheers and laughter of the crowd forming a frothy wave of mirth that carried her up and out of her funk. Mira caught her friend up in a tight hug, so glad Ellory had come to stay with her for a while.

She stepped back, about to say something, when a masculine voice came from behind her. "Well, well, well. Looks like I'm not the only one without a date tonight. Or are you two together?"

Mira's eyes widened when she realized the slightly slurred tones were far too close to her ear for comfort. Still holding onto one of Ellory's hands, she raised her brows in question. Surely not.

"Turn around," her friend mouthed. "He's talking to you."

Knees quivering, Mira released her hand and pivoted on the spiked heel of her shoe until she was face to face with a beefy hunk who could have stepped straight out of an ad for a gym membership. He was tall and buff, and his too-tanned-to-be-real

neck rose from a pressed white shirt and black tux. His blue eyes gleamed with something that looked like...interest. Or boredom. She couldn't decide which.

"I—I..." Her mind went blank, and she scrabbled for the nearest coherent sentence. "Er...hello."

How the hell did one serial date, anyway? She'd have to ask Ellory for some pointers later.

The man's smile grew. "I waited a whole ten minutes to make sure no irate boyfriend was going to bust my jaw for coming over here. I noticed you as soon as you walked through the door. Are you alone?"

Oh, no. Not this fast.

She glanced back at her friend, who opened her beaded purse and tipped it toward her with a knowing jiggle. "You want to pay up now, honey?"

Egads. The woman knew right where to hit.

Straightening her spine, she turned back to the man in question. "Yep. I'm alone."

"What say I buy you a drink, then?"

Since the booze was free, that was hardly an enticing offer. But if her job was to stay unattached, this guy seemed like the obvious choice.

"What say you do?" Mira tried for a purr, but it came off sounding like an asthmatic wheeze.

Before she could chicken out, she handed her empty champagne glass to Ellory, who stared at her with undisguised

shock. Mira leaned forward and whispered two words, drawing them out for emphasis. “Game. On.”

CHAPTER ONE

JACKSON PERRY WAS going to fall.

No matter how many times he tried to stab his ski poles into the snow, they ended up flailing around like twin javelins about to be launched by a drunken athlete.

Make your skis into a wedge to slow your rate of descent.

The instructor’s mandatory lesson played through his skull, but actually obeying that advice was almost impossible, since he was too busy trying to find his center of gravity as his body continued to pick up speed down the slope. He tried to ride it out like a surfer on a killer wave. Only skis were nothing like the smooth, wide surface of his well-waxed board. And the ground looked a whole lot harder than the soft embrace of the ocean.

Wobble.

Correct.

Wobble.

Correct.

Not. Gonna. Freakin’. Work...

A brilliant plume of white spray rose up as Jack belly-flopped onto the snow, his skis detaching from his boots—*thank God.* He bounced his way over some moguls, instinctively tightening his abs to absorb as much of the impact as possible. Fifty yards later he slid to an ignominious halt, still facing the bottom of the hill. He had one pole in his hand, the other was long gone, probably

back there with his skis.

Good thing he hadn't tried a tougher slope.

Sucking down breaths into lungs that felt like they were on fire, he assessed his body bone by bone, tendon by tendon. Knees? Undamaged. Wrists? Still there. Ego? He'd come back to that one later. Skull? Intact, although he wondered about his sanity in agreeing to this damned vacation.

He raised a hand to wipe away some of the snow on his face, only to find his gloves were also covered in the stuff.

Hell!

Take a vacation. Have some fun. You need a break.

Or else.

His coach may not have added those last two words, but Jack had seen them written in the tight lines of the man's face when he'd been late to yet another early morning meeting. The product of a recurring nightmare followed up by a sleeping pill. He hadn't even heard the alarm the next morning.

Go skiing, Jack...or I'm afraid we'll have to find ourselves a new doctor.

So, was the plan working?

Oh, yeah. So far, he was having a blast.

And every damn memory he'd been trying to forget had followed him right down that hill, crashing into the snow beside him.

Several more skiers sailed by, none of them seeming to have any trouble with the so-called "bunny slope." Nothing like wiping

out on your very first run.

A pair of skis came into view. Angled just like the instructor had described. *Perfect*. He glanced up, squinting to see past the blinding midmorning sun.

"Need some help there?"

A vision in a white ski jacket and matching snow pants stood before him, the light seeming to halo around the figure's shoulders and head.

Maybe he'd hit the ground harder than he'd thought.

He shook his head and then struggled into a sitting position, but the slick fabric of his own suit caused him to slide down the hill a few more feet. The person matched his downward trajectory inch for inch, again coming to a halt right as he did. Still on her feet.

A quick feminine laugh met his ears. "Here, take my hand. Your boots should help you gain some traction. I've already picked up your skis and pole."

He glanced up again and saw that the woman—and she was definitely a woman—did indeed have his errant equipment caged in the crook of her arm. A white-gloved hand stretched down toward him.

Definitely not a beginner. At least, he hoped not, otherwise he might as well throw in the towel and stick to football and watersports.

"I'm good." The last thing he wanted was to bring her down with him. He struggled to his feet, somehow succeeding on

the first try. She was right, though, about the boots giving him traction.

"Think you can make it to the bottom?" She flipped her goggles up over her head, causing the fur-trimmed hood of her jacket to fall back, revealing a pink knit aviator hat. Soft brown eyes that were alight with humor regarded him.

She'd probably get a lot of mileage out of this story over drinks with her friends later on.

She was exactly what he pictured when he thought of snow bunnies, from her matchy-matchy suit to her obvious ease in the frigid environment. Even her complexion was pale and frosty, with just a touch of pink warming her lips and cheeks. Cool and untouchable. All except for the flaming locks now visible from beneath her hat.

Just like Paula's hair had been. His teeth clenched.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Right. She was still waiting for him to tell her if he could make it down the hill.

"I'll be fine from here. Thanks again for the help. If you'll just hand me my gear..."

"First time on the slopes?"

Wasn't it obvious? A spark of male pride urged him to tell her that he'd once competed in some of the biggest surfing competitions California had to offer. But that had been before he'd gotten his medical license and changed his focus to football. Before the accident that had changed his life forever.

Coach was right. He'd let himself go over the last four years.

"Yep." His eyes tracked a little girl zipping down the course with ease. "They make it look so easy."

The woman glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "Yes, they do." She turned back and held out her hand again. "Miranda Dupris."

"Jack Perry." He took her hand and gave it a quick squeeze, suddenly glad they both had on gloves. Even so, something in his gut twisted at the brief contact.

A voice came from the side. "Hey, Florence Nightingale, do you mind clearing the slope? I don't want a pile-up on my watch." His instructor from a few minutes ago pushed his poles into the snow and surged past them, heading on down the hill. He didn't glance their way, but something about the wry twist to his voice said he knew Miranda. Quite well, in fact.

Of course the guy knew her. She was a snow bunny. She probably knew all the instructors by name.

Then a strange thing happened. Instead of waving to the man with a laugh, her brown eyes went from smiling and carefree to cool and irritated in the space of a few seconds.

A woman scorned? Or something else?

"Come on," she said. "I'll buy you a hot chocolate once we get to the bottom."

He almost groaned. He'd been hoping to clomp his way down the hill and head straight to his room, where he could lick his wounded ego in private. The last thing he wanted to do was hang

around the bar with a woman who'd seen him at his worst.

He swallowed and retracted that last thought. She hadn't seen him at his worst, but his coach had. Including the twenty pounds he'd shed over the past six months as the dreams had swallowed more and more of his nights and haunted his days. It's what had made the man book this vacation in a frozen wasteland. Why couldn't he have chosen Hawaii instead?

Maybe he could refuse her offer with grace. "No need, but thanks." He held out his hands for the equipment she still held.

"Maybe not, but standing here without working my muscles has made me realize I'm freezing my tushie off, and I could sure use something to warm it back up."

Those words finally yanked him free of his morose thoughts and put them right on...

No, you don't, Perry. Don't you dare look.

Too late. His eyes had already skated over her hips and mentally guessed what lay beneath all those layers of clothing. And it was good.

Wow. If she knew what you were thinking, she'd dump your gear in the snow and march her oh-so-cold tushie right back down the hill.

Damn. Time to renew his gentleman card. Paula would have given him a single raised eyebrow if she could hear him now.

But she couldn't. Thanks to him. And the coach. And the team.

No. That was no one's fault but his.

Suddenly the last thing he wanted was to be alone. Even if it meant spending a half-hour with a woman who'd probably made the rounds more than he had during his entire internship. "Hot chocolate sounds good. Thanks."

She gave him a quick grin and handed him his equipment. "Don't hurry, unless you enjoy sliding down the hill. I'll meet you at the bottom."

With that, she turned around and pushed off, her skis flashing as she leaned forward and took the slope like an expert.

Sighing, Jack juggled his poles and his skis and took his first shaky step.

* * *

Did forcing someone to drink hot chocolate count as date number five? Mira scrunched her nose as she waited for her next victim to finish trudging his way down the hill. She wouldn't have pushed so hard if it hadn't been for that Florence Nightingale crack Robert had made as he'd sailed past her.

Yes, it was spiteful to head for the bar with another man when she knew her ex was there on his break, but she wanted to make it as plain as the icicles hanging from the man's heart that she was done. No amount of sweet-talking would get her to take him back. Seducing your female students was not part of a ski instructor's job description, no matter what most people thought.

Ellory was right. She needed to move on. Not getting emotionally attached was something that came hard for her, but if she kept choosing men who were not her type, it should be a

breeze.

Jack Perry was definitely on the "not" side of the equation. Her newly written "not" side, anyway.

With his chiseled, clean-shaven jaw and refusal to let her help him up, he was evidently a man's man, something she was now avoiding like the plague as far as relationships went. She'd been there, done that—three times, in fact—and had the heartbreak to prove it. The next guy she got serious with was going to be a poet. Or an artist. Someone who was in touch with his feminine side.

There was nothing feminine about the man she'd met on the slopes. She'd bet he was an athlete—from the easy way his wiry muscles had pushed him up off the ground. Yeah, he might have crashed and burned on that slope, but that was from lack of experience, not lack of strength. Those glutes had some power behind them.

Something she was better off not thinking about.

Hot chocolate. Nothing else. She might have joked with Ellory about bedding a man or two during the next year, but she wasn't planning on actually doing that. Too dangerous. For her, anyway. The words sex and casual? An oxymoron. It always became personal.

So far she'd racked up three losers. Three men who couldn't resist the thrill of the chase, even when that chase involved someone other than their fiancée.

No more bad boys for her.

Surely after a year of empty dates she'd be able to tell the

difference between a player and a guy who was capable of monogamy. Until then, she had to stick to the plan.

But, man, oh, man, as Jack sidled the last twenty feet, making short work of each step in those heavy boots, he was making her little heart go pitter-patter.

Reaching down to undo her skis when she realized she'd been watching him instead of attending to her own business, she stepped out of them and hefted them upright. "Ready?" she asked, when he reached her.

"Yes." His voice was a little tighter than it had been up the hill, although she didn't see how that could be, since he hadn't been jumping for joy at the thought of spending some time with her. She'd had the opposite problem with man number three. He hadn't exactly been happy when she'd closed the door to her room with him on the wrong side of it.

Well, from Jack's guarded expression, getting rid of him should be a snap.

They turned in their skis and poles at the equipment center next to the ski lodge and then Mira led the way into the foyer of the main building. The familiar honeyed tones of wood-covered floors and walls welcomed her like a snug, warm cocoon, especially when compared to the vast snow-covered surfaces outside its doors. The crackle of the fire in the huge stone fireplace in the middle of the room only added to that sense of welcome.

Moving over to the long hallway lined with pegs and cubbies,

she shimmied out of her jacket and hung it up along with her hat. As she ran her fingers through her hair to fluff it up a bit, she was far too aware of the man next to her shuffling out of his own coat and snow pants. She smiled at the snug black jeans he had on beneath his clothes. And, man, she was so right about those glutes.

Damn!

He swung back around, catching her in the act. One brow lifted, and his lips tightened just a touch. So he didn't like her looking. Well, it wasn't as if he hadn't checked her out on the slope. She'd seen those dark eyes skim over her in quick appraisal. Right after her ex had zoomed past, like the jerk he was.

Forget about Robert. He was not on her current shopping list. Jack was.

She refreshed her memory about the goals of this particular encounter: have a quick cup of cocoa and then she was free to move on.

To man number six.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK'S SKI INSTRUCTOR was currently staring at his rescuer. And not a subtle kind of stare, either. This was a full-on, you-*will*-look-at-me kind of unwavering attention.

And yet as Miranda set their drinks down, she was chatting away as if she had no idea.

He gave himself a mental palm to the head. Of course. She

had to be a ski instructor as well. No wonder she'd helped him up and made sure he got down the hill. It also explained why the other guy had told her to clear him off the slope.

What it didn't explain was why the man was now staring at them.

Best to settle this right here and now, in case this was a pity drink. Surely he didn't look that badly off. He'd have to work on his cheerful see-ya-later grin. "You don't have to sit with me. I'm fine, really."

She frowned. "Never thought you weren't. I'm sitting here because I'm cold and tired and wanted some hot chocolate."

"I didn't see you up at the top when I was having my lesson."

"That's because I wasn't there. I was skiing one of the harder slopes. I decided to finish up on the bunny. As a cool down."

Cool down. No wonder she was in such great shape. And she was. He might deny it until he was blue in the face, but he'd glanced at her a time or two. Enough to know that her slender legs were strong. So were her arms. If he'd met her anywhere else, he might think she was a distance runner. But she wasn't. She was a skier.

"I bet you have to rescue lots of guys like me." The second the words were out of his mouth he wished he could retract them. He hadn't needed rescuing. Not on the slopes, and certainly not anywhere else, despite what his coach might think.

He could have handled things himself, given a little more time.

Yeah? Like he'd handled those dreams? Popping sleeping pills

like they were candy was not the best prescription—as he'd soon discovered. The good thing was he'd almost weaned himself from them. The nightmares were back, but maybe they were just something he'd have to live with. Like his guilt.

"Not too many rescues. Just the occasional stray."

She picked up her chocolate and took a long sip. "Ah. Just what I needed. Something to keep me warm and happy." Before he could dwell too long on those words, she continued. "So where are you from?"

Four years ago that would have been an easy question to answer. He would have asked whether she meant originally or at the moment. As it was, he wasn't sure of his actual location. Halfway between anger and grief, if he had to guess, a place he'd been stuck at for far too long. "California, originally, but I live in Texas now. And you?"

"Silver Pass. Born and raised right here on the mountain." She raised her mug and took another drink.

So why didn't she seem thrilled to live in a gorgeous place like this? He took a gulp of his own hot chocolate and then sputtered when an unexpected burn slid down his throat.

"Hot?" She gave him a grin that could only be described as mischievous.

"No. Spiked." His brows drew together. "How do you know I'm not an alcoholic?"

"Are you?"

He could have been, but a couple of years ago he'd realized

drinking was not only *not* helping him but it could get someone hurt. His team relied on him to make good decisions. One wrong move and a career could be finished forever. Much like his had almost been.

It's why he'd agreed with the coach about this vacation spot. The cold climate kind of fostered isolation. At least in his head it did. With all that gear on, it wasn't very easy to talk to strangers. It wasn't the same as lying on a beach or surfing. Because the waves always carried you back in to shore. With skiing, you could simply race away from strangers who were a little too anxious to start a conversation.

Like this one?

"No, I'm not an alcoholic," he admitted, although the steamy brew slid down his throat in a way that was a little too comforting. He took one more long pull and then set it aside. He wasn't going to switch one habit for another.

Miranda studied him for a few seconds. She started to say something then the instructor who'd been watching her from across the room appeared beside the table. "You headed back for the slopes, Mira? If so, I'll ride up the lift with you."

The guy pointedly ignored Jack, which was fine. He had no intention of stepping in between these two.

"I think I'll go back to my room and read instead. And I can catch up on some reports, while I'm there." The chill in her voice was unmistakable.

"Mira—"

She held up her hand. “I’d rather not do this right now.”

The man’s lips thinned. “You can’t avoid me forever, you know. We both live here. Eventually, we’re going to have to sit down and talk.”

Jack’s glance went to where her left hand gripped her mug. No ring. But there was a definite indentation there.

That’s why he’d been staring at her. These two had been involved at some point. Married? An affair, maybe?

Whatever it was, it was none of his business. In fact, maybe it was time for him to take his pity party somewhere else and let these two go at it in private.

Mira beat him to it, standing up, her chin angled at a dangerous height. “I don’t see what we have to talk about.”

“How happy do you think your father is going to be once he hears about all this?”

She gave a hard smile. “You’re right, Robert. I imagine he won’t be very happy at all.”

Jack was surprised to see the other man’s face drain of color.

So that’s how it was. The jerk had done something. Something bad enough to make her want to avoid any contact with him. A dark thought came over him.

When the guy reached out to take hold of her arm Jack rose to his feet, no longer trying to remain impassive. He held the man’s gaze for ten long seconds before “Robert” backed down.

“I’ll catch you later,” he said to Mira.

“Don’t think so. Let’s just stick to our own sides of the slopes.”

With an irritated roll of his shoulders the man spun away from them and stalked toward the nearest exit.

Mira dropped back into her seat. “Well, it looks like we’re even. I rescued you. You rescued me. Thanks.” She sighed. “Sorry you had to witness that, though.”

“No problem. Ex...” He had no idea why he gave that leading sentence.

“Fiancé. But that’s neither here nor there.” She pursed her lips. “You shouldn’t go up on that slope again without another lesson or two. Next time you could really get hurt.”

If she was worried about her ex pulling something, she needn’t bother. He could take care of himself. “I’ll do that.”

She must have sensed he was just handing her a line. “No, I’m serious. Robert’s not going to be a happy camper, so I wouldn’t count on him playing nice.” She eyed him. “I could give you some pointers if you want. Make sure you stay out of trouble.”

That was pretty much impossible. He’d stayed in trouble in one form or another for the last four years. Maybe he should have asked for the beachfront condo vacation despite his earlier thoughts. At least surfing was something he was actually proficient at.

“I don’t want to put you to any trouble. I think I can manage.”

“Like you did today? Come on. I really do want to show my appreciation.”

It was either accept graciously or be a jerk about it. “Did I look that bad out there?”

She laughed. “You want honesty or a gentle lie?”

He found himself smiling back. “Hmm...I’d take the lie, but I think it’s already too late for that. Okay, I’ll accept the pointers, but I don’t guarantee I’ll show much improvement. I’m a beachside kind of guy.”

“So you’re better on the surf than on the turf?”

His smile grew. “No, the turf I can handle. It’s cold, slippery surfaces that I struggle with.”

“Interesting. So, are we on?”

Why did that seem like a loaded question all of a sudden? But unless he wanted to make a big deal out of what was probably an innocent offer, it was better to let it slide on by. “Yep.”

“Great!” She paused to wave at someone across the room. A blonde grinned and held up five fingers.

Mira nodded.

They must be meeting up in a few minutes or something. That was his cue to leave. “What time were you thinking tomorrow?”

“Does tennish work for you?”

“Sounds perfect.” He stood. “Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

“No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow.” With one last smile she picked up her cup and headed over to where the other woman was standing. And heaven help him if he didn’t watch her hips bump and sway for a couple of beats before forcing himself to turn away.

It’s not a date. She hadn’t even used that word.

Why he needed to explain that to himself he had no idea. All

he knew was that his heart rate had just kicked up a notch and a zing of anticipation was edging through his veins, picking up momentum as it went.

This could be bad.

Very, very bad.

Unless he nipped it in the bud right here. Right now.

The only question...was how.

* * *

"Where did you get your goggles?"

Mira peered into her patient's red, streaming eyes as he sat on the exam table in her tiny clinic. Around twenty-two years old, he was here for a week with several buddies. Yesterday evening, after coming off the slopes, his eyes had begun burning. When he'd looked into the mirror that morning, he'd been shocked to see his lids were swollen and his eyes looked terrible.

"I picked up all my gear at a second-hand store right before coming. It was a bargain."

And like any other bargain, sometimes you paid the price later on. Mira had found that out the hard way when it came to relationships.

She clicked off her penlight and leaned back to check out the eyewear lying beside him. They had the customary reflective surface, but there were no markings that indicated the UV protection the lenses offered. "Your goggles and skis are two pieces of equipment you really shouldn't skimp on. This is why."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever hear of snow blindness?"

Her patient scrubbed moisture from his cheeks. "Snow blindness. Doesn't that only happen to people who are stranded in the snow?"

"Nope. I see it fairly often up here. It's basically a sunburn of your corneas."

He blinked, squinting one eye to look at her. "Can you treat it?"

Swiveling around to her desk, she pulled her prescription pad forward and started writing. "I'm going to give you a prescription for some eyedrops, but you need to stay off the slopes for the next couple of days. Believe me, your eyes aren't going to want to face any light, much less what you'll find up there on the mountain."

"But we're only here for a week."

She felt for him, really she did. "I know. I wish there were a quick treatment, but it's just like any other sunburn. You have to stay out of the sun for a while." She glanced up. "Oh, and make sure you see an eye doctor when you get home."

The man swore a couple of times before finally nodding and taking the slip of paper. He then took his goggles and dumped them in the trash. "I guess I won't be needing those any more."

She smiled. "We have some regulation eyewear at the rental kiosk. Make sure your friends are covered, so they don't wind up in the same boat."

"I will. Thanks, Doc."

"You're welcome."

Once he left, she locked up the clinic and headed up the mountain to meet Jack. It was still a little early, but she wanted to make sure she arrived before he did so she could prepare herself.

Man number five.

Okay, so the guy was cuter than the other men she'd met for drinks or a quick trip down the slopes. In fact, she'd been with one such guy yesterday on the advanced slopes. She had finished on the bunny slope in order to cool down—like she'd told Jack—but only because guy number four had seemed to have hands that never stopped finding excuses to touch her in little ways. Add him to the guy she'd been with two nights ago, and she began to wonder about the wisdom of her resolution. How did serial daters go about avoiding the creeps...and worse?

She needed to be a little more careful about picking these guys. She certainly didn't want to get in over her head. Ellory had forced her to put her cellphone number on speed dial, so Mira could reach out with the touch of a button in case she got into trouble.

She didn't plan on that happening. So far it had just been the two weirdos. Of course, since she'd only been out with four guys in all over the last several weeks, that wasn't much of a track record.

And what about Jack? She'd never been out with a surfer dude before. Although the serious guy who'd sat across from her at the table yesterday did not match her image of a California beach bum.

Just look at the way he'd stood up to Robert.

Yeah, that had been a little heady. She hoped seeing her with Jack had drilled it into her ex's brain that she was moving on—whether it was true or not. Robert had blown it. She'd learned the hard way not to give people second chances.

That included him, and it included her father.

This might be her dad's resort, and he technically might be her boss, but that didn't mean she was going to fall all over him. He'd hurt her mother badly. And even though her mom had been the one to convince her to come back to the lodge and work after she graduated from medical school, she didn't forgive him for his transgressions any more than she'd forgive Robert or her two other exes.

It was exactly why she'd sworn off men. And if she could just get past man number five and move on to the next guy, she'd officially win her bet with Ellory.

Should be a snap.

She leaned on the rail and surveyed the line of chairs on the ski lift.

Speaking of bets, she spied Jack about halfway up the mountain. His safety bar had not been pulled down, making her frown. She'd have to add that to the lesson.

She sucked down a deep breath as he drew closer. She'd just about convinced herself that he wasn't as good looking as she'd thought he was yesterday. But he was. Even from this distance. With streaky brown hair that was in need of a cut and those broad

shoulders, he pretty much filled the chair. She'd have to tuck herself under his arm to fit on there with him if they ever rode up together.

The image made her swallow. Silly. *You're here to teach him to ski and put a notch in your...* Hmm, what should she notch, since she had no intentions of sleeping with him or any other of her dates?

Her skis, that's what. Okay, so he'd be one more notch in her skis.

He slid off the chair with lithe grace that had been lacking yesterday when he'd smacked the ground and slid to a halt. How that must have cost him in the ego department. Except he just stood there.

"Slide over here."

He glanced over and saw her then eased down the hill to meet her, a little less shaky than he'd been yesterday.

She had a feeling he'd be a quick study when it came to skiing. Well, whether he was or wasn't, it didn't matter. This would be his one and only lesson with her—a favor for saving her from Robert's pestering. Tomorrow he'd be on his own.

"Hi." He pulled a hat down over his head, juggling his poles as he did so.

At least he'd remembered to put his skis on before getting on the lift. She checked out his eyewear, nodding at the item in his hand. "Did you get those here at the resort?"

He glanced down at them. "Yes, why?"

"Just wondering. Don't want you to get snow blindness."

His brows went up, but he didn't question her comment.

"You ready?" she asked.

"I have to admit I thought about standing you up."

Interesting. He had seemed a little skittish at the bar yesterday.

"Yeah? Well, I'd have had to come and track you down." Ellory had spied Jack from across the room yesterday after her encounter with Robert and claimed that this time she was going down hard. This one was just too yummy for her to resist.

Oh, she could resist him all right. He was just one more guy. In fact, it was quite liberating to be with a man and know there was no future in it. She didn't have to worry about whether or not she'd have to watch her words or get all prettied up.

The time she'd spent in front of the mirror this morning had been strictly about personal grooming. She'd do that for anyone. No need to send people scurrying for the nearest exit with her morning rat's nest and dark under-eye circles. And her lips were chapped from the cold, so of course she'd had to put on something to soothe and protect them. The fact that it had a little dab of shine was just a coincidence.

He smiled. "I guess it's a good thing I showed up, then."

"Absolutely." Luckily, Robert was off this morning, so one of the other instructors was working with a small group of newbies. She could have sent Jack to the class, since her professed reason for meeting him was because her ex might do or say something she would end up feeling badly about. But since she'd told Ellory

he was man number five...

Really, who would know she didn't meet him?

Ellory, for one.

Yeah, and why was that? Because she couldn't tell a lie worth a damn.

"So, let's start with your skis. You got them on, but it'll help if you know how to click in and out of them quickly."

She gave him a quick lesson on doing just that. Once they were back on, she had him face the bottom of the hill, but with the fronts of his skis pointed toward each other.

"I'm sure Robert showed you, but once you start out, you're going to want to stay like this. Think of it like a wedge of pizza, only made with skis instead of food. If you keep your skis completely parallel to each other, you'll pick up too much speed, as you found out yesterday. So wedge them just a bit until you get the feel of your angle and speed." She pulled her goggles down over her eyes. "Let's do a practice run. I'll go first and you follow me down, trying to imitate my movements."

He muttered something that she couldn't quite catch before she used her poles to push off. A hard swish behind her said that he'd done the same thing. She concentrated on going as slowly as possible, not an easy task when you were used to zipping down difficult slopes at top speed. Her father had had big plans for her after she'd won several competitions, plans she'd thwarted when she'd decided to become a doctor. What father in his right mind was disappointed when his child decided to become something

other than a professional athlete?

Hers.

Then again, he'd disappointed her as well.

She'd changed courses right after her parents had divorced, and, yes, maybe it had been partly to get back at him. But she loved being a doctor, even more than she loved the slopes and the snow. Jack had talked about surfing. The ocean didn't appeal to her at all. She was a mountain girl through and through. She didn't think she even owned a bikini other than the underwear kind.

Jack came up beside her, showing a pretty good sense of balance. And every time she changed the angle of her wedge, he imitated her. Out of nowhere came the thought that it might be worth a trip to the ocean just to see him up on a surfboard, that streaky hair of his catching rays of sunlight.

He hit a mogul and wavered for a second or two, the tips of his skis wiggling back and forth, but he caught himself. His speed increased fractionally and Mira let off her brake and matched him. "Good job!"

His face was a mask of concentration, so she wasn't even sure whether he'd heard her or not. At that moment someone passed them on the left at a much quicker pace—which wasn't all that difficult, considering she and Jack were creeping along.

Two more people went by.

Mira was concentrating so much on the man beside her that she almost missed the screams from the pair of teens who'd just

passed them. They'd gotten too close, and the left ski of the girl closest to them had overlapped the other girl's. Both were struggling to remain upright.

"Move away from each other!" Her training kicked in, knowing if they didn't get their skis apart one or both of them would fall.

They either didn't hear her or were too panicked to do what she said, because they were still tangled. Then one of the girls shoved the other one, maybe to try to push off her and get away. Instead of working, the girl who'd been shoved careened sideways, taking her friend with her. They fell down hard, landing in a heap in the middle of the slope. The girl who'd pushed the other one sat up laughing, but her giggles soon faded when she saw the other teenager lay still in the snow.

Every muscle in Mira's body went on high alert as she drew closer and saw the girl's right arm sticking out at an odd angle.

The uninjured teen must have seen it as well, because she suddenly leaned back and gave out an unearthly shriek.

CHAPTER THREE

"YOU GO DOWN the hill," Mira said. "I need to stay here."

"I can help."

"Just do as I say." Her tone was a little more impatient this time.

He didn't care. "No can do. I'm a doctor."

Mira gave him a sharp look. "Yeah, well, so am I. I'm the concierge doctor for the lodge."

His heart stalled for a second, and he stared, fumbling a bit as he tried to remain upright. "I thought you were a ski instructor."

"Pizza it, Jack, if you want to stop."

He forced his mind back to what she was saying, using his skis to form a barricade and coming to a halt beside the still-screaming girl.

"What's your specialty?" She nudged him aside so she could get to their patients, sinking to her knees in the snow to look at the unconscious teen. She laid a hand on the panicked girl's shoulder, and like magic she quieted.

He was still struggling to process the fact that he was up on the slopes with a doctor, of all things. "I'm in sports medicine."

Mira's eyes widened when he mentioned the name of the team.

"The Hawks? Are you kidding me?" She gave him another quick glance. "What are you doing skiing, then? Isn't this your busiest time of year?"

No way was he going to tell her he'd been sent off to recuperate. Especially not knowing what he did now. "I'm taking a short break."

Speaking of breaks, they might have a bad one on their hands here. The teen hadn't seemed to fall hard enough to do any real damage, at least it hadn't looked that way, but the human body was a strange animal.

"Let me check her arm." Carefully unzipping the girl's jacket enough that he could slide his hand down the limb, he found the

fracture immediately. Although the bone wasn't protruding from her skin—a good thing—it was pressed right against it. A little more force and it would have come through. The edge felt jagged, though, so it could still break through, if they weren't careful.

The girl was also out cold.

Mira spoke softly to the uninjured girl, while Jack focused on the friend.

"She's still breathing," he said. "Can you get her vitals, while I check her head?" He clicked his boots out of his skis, just like Mira had shown him, and then slid around until he was kneeling beside her shoulder.

Mira nodded, pressing her fingers against the girl's right wrist, while Jack carefully undid the strap to her helmet. He checked it for cracks before running his fingers over her hair, looking for obvious signs of trauma. Her white beanie cap, which had probably been pulled down to hide the unfashionable headgear, lay a short distance away, knocked off by the impact. He couldn't feel any bumps, but he knew that didn't necessarily mean anything. Peeling apart her eyelids one at a time and wishing he had his medical kit, he peered at them to judge pupil size. Equal, and they reacted to light in a way that appeared normal.

Two guys who were evidently with the ski patrol slid to a halt beside them, asking Mira what she had.

"Broken arm at least." She glanced at Jack.

"No contusions on her head that I can see, but I want to stabilize her neck and back just in case."

Her friend stifled a sob. “Is she going to be okay? I wasn’t trying to knock her down. I was trying to get my ski loose before I fell. Instead, I made us both fall.”

Mira reached over and squeezed her hand, giving the two men a warning look when one of them started to say something. “Of course you didn’t. Where are your parents?”

“At—at the lodge. They said we could come ski, but that we had to stick to the easy slopes.”

Smart parents.

“And you did what they asked,” Mira said. “What’s your name?”

“Sandy. And that’s Marilyn.”

“Okay, Sandy, if you’ll go with Hans and help him locate your parents, we’ll take care of your friend.” Mira stood and helped the girl to her feet, waiting until she’d stopped swaying before saying anything. “Does anything hurt?”

“No. I’m okay.”

“Do you feel well enough to ski to the bottom?”

“I—I think so.”

The man she’d called Hans patted the terrified girl on the shoulder and gave her an encouraging nod. Then they slowly made their way down the slope, while the other guy went in search of a stretcher and called in the accident, telling the instructors and employees at the top to hold everyone right where they were.

Jack glanced at her. “At least they were wearing helmets. Let’s

hope she's out because of the pain and not anything else."

"My da...er...the lodge requires all minors to use helmets on the slopes. Her pulse is steady. If we're lucky, she just fainted." She reached her fingers out and smoothed back her hair. "The EMS guys are pretty familiar with the routine up here, they should have something to stabilize her arm."

"I'm beginning to think surfing is a hell of a lot safer."

One curved brow went up. "I can think of a few things that make me think differently. At least you can't drown on a ski slope."

Maybe not, but when her brown eyes met his, looking all soft and warm as she kept her hand protectively on the injured girl's head, he thought it was possible to drown in something other than the ocean.

He shook away the thought.

She's a doctor, Jack. Not someone you want to play around with.

He was glad when a pair of emergency service guys came clomping down the hill, heavy-duty boots making easy work out of the packed snow.

After a quick rundown of her vitals and injuries and explaining what they'd seen, one of the paramedics asked where the girl's parents were.

"We sent her friend and a member of the ski patrol to find them."

In short order, the pair had immobilized the teen's injured

arm and done their own assessment of her injuries, coming to the same conclusions as he and Mira had. Then they stabilized her neck and removed her skis before loading her onto a blue stretcher with a metal pull bar attached to it. The girl started to come to, moaning as her eyes fluttered open.

Mira leaned close and whispered to her.

The sight made a pang go through his chest. If he and Paula had had any kids, is that how she would've looked as she comforted them?

Not the time, Jack.

He cleared his throat. "They're going to pull her down the hill?"

"That's the safest way. It's hard to keep your balance on the snow, if you haven't noticed." The right side of her mouth curved slightly, as if she was fighting a smile.

"Oh, I noticed all right." In fact, he was having a little trouble keeping his balance right now, and it had nothing to do with skiing. He felt like the wind had been knocked from his lungs the second he'd realized she was a doctor. He was still struggling to catch his breath fifteen minutes later.

She stood and went over to retrieve the girl's hat and skis. "I'll bring these down with me," she told the men. "Hopefully they've located her folks. I want to be on hand if something changes."

"Sure thing, Mira." One of the medical workers threw her a quick smile.

It seemed everyone knew her around these parts.

The paramedics started down the hill, leaving them to follow.

"Do you want to walk down or ski?"

"At the rate I go, it's probably faster to walk." He took the girl's skis from her and lumped them together with his, tucking them under his arm with his poles.

Together, they trudged down the bunny slope, staying a few yards behind the rescue team. His mind couldn't help wandering back to her instructions on how to maneuver with his skis and how her words had yielded much better results than the lessons her ex—the professional—had given him.

Wanting to show off for the pretty doctor, Jack?

Self-preservation was more like it. Something he should probably remember. Because the fact that she was a doctor was all the more reason he should avoid her for the rest of his stay. If his coach were here, he'd be calling for a time-out and hauling Jack's ass off the playing field.

And the man would be right. Injured players should remain on the sidelines until they had time to heal.

Yeah? Well, he'd had four damn years. How much longer would it take?

Some players never recovered. Maybe he was one of them. He could just throw in the towel right now.

His body gave a quick tug of irritation, one that grew when Mira glanced back at him with a smile. "Keeping up okay?"

Oh, he could keep up just fine. He balled his hands into fists when his mind immediately headed into more dangerous

territory. Of Mira saying those words under very different circumstances.

Sidelines, Jack, remember?

Thankfully, they reached the bottom of the slope, and he had other things to occupy his mind, like the small crowd that had gathered near the door of the lodge, and the woman in a pink parka rushing forward to meet the EMS guys as they headed for the pick-up site where their truck was probably parked. Forced to stop, the guys lifted the stretcher just as he and Mira arrived.

Habit made him start toward the group to brief the girl's parents, but Mira beat him to it, smoothly maneuvering right into the center of the gathering. Besides, he wasn't here with his football team. This was her gig, not his.

He could see her gesturing as she explained the situation, but he couldn't hear the words. Whatever she said, it seemed to have the right effect. People started to move away until all that was left were a man and a woman who looked like they were in their early fifties—Marilyn's parent's probably—standing near the stretcher. Jack debated slipping through the glass doors of the lodge and escaping while he could, while Mira's attention was fixed on something else.

Coward's way out. He'd decided four years ago that he wasn't going that route ever again. He'd lost his head in a bottle for a while after his wife's death. Once he'd picked himself up off the bathroom floor after a particularly bad hangover, he'd decided to live a life Paula would be proud of rather than throwing it

away in a booze-filled haze. He obviously wasn't there yet—this temporary exile and the sleep aids were proof of that.

What he needed was something to take his mind off himself for a few hours.

His eyes slid back to Mira, whose glossy hair showed beneath her cap as she leaned over the stretcher to talk to the injured girl once more.

Nope. No matter how tempting that might be, it wasn't smart. He needed something light and easy. Something other than skiing with pretty women.

Large black letters from a flyer taped to the door of the lodge caught his attention:

Not a Ski Fan?

Ha, you could say that. He continued reading.

Check out Silver Pass's other exciting offerings.

The bullet points proceeded to list things like evening sleigh rides, trips down the mountains on inner tubes, gondola lifts that boasted spectacular views, and even snowmobile rentals.

The snowmobiles sounded interesting. Maybe even a little bit like jet skis.

He pulled out his smartphone to store the number in his address book.

"The gondola ride is a lot of fun. And there's only room for two in each car."

A sultry voice came from just over his left shoulder. Not Mira's, since she was still over by the stretcher.

He turned around and found a brunette with darkly penciled brows that matched the carefully modulated tones of her voice. Overdone. Whispering of desperation. And when the woman smiled, nothing happened to the skin around her eyes.

Botox.

He'd thought of Mira as a professional snow bunny when he'd first met her, but her sparkling eyes and sunny disposition had dashed his suspicions away. This woman, however...

Swallowing, he nodded. "I'll keep that in mind, thank you."

She took a step closer, her jacket pulling tight across her breasts. "Did I overhear someone say that you're a doctor?"

Oh, Lord. Not what he wanted to deal with right now.

Why was it that a quick fling with Mira appealed to him, despite its dangers, while the thought of spending the night with this woman just left him cold? He didn't want to hurt her feelings —if they hadn't already been paralyzed by the overzealous needle of her surgeon.

"I am. Just here for a couple of days' R&R." Okay, a couple of days was on the verge of being a lie, since he still had three weeks left of his vacation.

"That's enough time to squeeze in a fun activity or two, isn't it? It'll be a tight fit, but it would be well worth the effort."

She said the words with a completely straight face, but she had to know how they sounded.

Hell. He was surprised *she* wasn't listed on that flier as one of the lodge's alternate activities, along with her name, phone

number, and measurements. And that she promised a tight fit.

"Well—"

Mira suddenly appeared beside them, looking from one to the other. "I wondered where you went." She glanced at the advertisement and then the phone in his hand. "Planning something fun?"

"Thinking about it. Did Marilyn get off okay?"

"She's on her way to the hospital right now."

The brunette quirked a brow. Wow, maybe there wasn't as much happy juice in her face as he'd thought. "Girlfriend?" she asked, her voice not quite as sultry as it had been.

He wanted to say yes, just to get rid of her without having to be rude. Would Mira kill him? He could always explain later.

"She's—"

"Definitely a girlfriend. And you are?" Mira wrapped her hands around his right bicep, giving it a quick squeeze as if to say she knew he was in a tight spot.

Squeeze. Tight spot. Well the woman might not have done anything for him with those words, but Mira's touch was definitely doing something to his gut. It clenched, one muscle group at a time, until his whole abdomen was a mass of tension.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" The brunette tossed her head.

Mira's hand ventured from his arm, sliding low across his back until it curved around his left side. She left a trail of heat in her wake that he felt even through his coat. "He's too nice. Women get the wrong idea all the time."

Evidently she didn't have any of the same reservations about hurting the woman's feelings as he did, because she continued. "So did you get the number for that sleigh-ride company, Jack, or what?"

"I was just doing that."

"Good." Her glance shot to the brunette. "Thanks for keeping him company for me. I've got it from here."

With a strangled sound the woman wheeled around and then jerked open the door to the lodge before disappearing inside.

The breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding whistled out through his teeth as relief swept over him. "How did you know?"

She let go of his side and lifted her hand to pat his cheek. "Your face is about as red as the walls in the dining hall." She laughed. "And she's a regular. She comes on to all the men."

There was a bitter edge to her words.

So much for thinking she'd singled him out. Ouch. The punch to his ego stung.

"So I wasn't in any real danger."

"I didn't say that. She's dangerous all right."

As much as he tried to school his face into a blank slate, a smile crept up from somewhere inside him. "How do you know I don't thrive on danger?"

"Do you? I didn't take you for the type."

There it was again. That quick one-two to his pride. "I might surprise you."

"Really? In that case, I think you owe me a sleigh ride. For

bailing you out of what could have been an awkward situation. Especially if her husband had found out."

"She's married?" Maybe he did owe her something.

"Aren't they all?"

He wouldn't know. He hadn't been on the dating circuit since he'd met Paula. "I guess you wouldn't accept a simple thank-you."

"I would, but I couldn't promise I'd bail you out a second time. If her being married doesn't stop her, do you really think me saying I'm your girlfriend is going to scare her off? But if she knows you not only *have* a girlfriend but that you're *happy* with that girlfriend, she'll probably leave you alone."

Jack's head was spinning, partly at the audacity of married women propositioning men who were taken and partly just because of the clean crisp scent of the woman at his side. It reminded him of frosty days and mocha-filled nights. He leaned in closer. "Did you just have coffee?"

Why he asked that he had no idea.

She blinked at him in surprise. She could match that look and raise it. His face heated again.

"I just ate a coffee-flavored candy."

"Sorry. I think my brain is misfiring over what just happened."

"You've never been propositioned by a married woman before?" Her voice was shocked, like it was something that happened all the time.

"Never. If you were married, would you do it? Proposition

someone who wasn't your husband?"

"Oh, but I'm not married." Although light and delivered with a smile, her words contained a hint of darkness. Because of her ex? Had he slept with Mrs. Botox or something?

He decided to change the subject entirely. "So this sleigh ride. Is it worth going on alone?"

"Um, yeah, but if she finds out you're planning on going solo, she's going to show up and invite herself along for the ride."

He glanced through the glass to see that the brunette in question was indeed eyeing them while sipping on something boozy that looked like it had a tiny plastic ski sticking out of it. He guessed ski resorts didn't want little umbrellas reminding people they could be in a tropical paradise instead. "As much as I never thought I'd say it, would you mind going with me? To ward off trouble..." He wasn't sure that "warding off" trouble was the right way to put it. Because it sure felt like he was busy cultivating it at the moment.

"No problem. I haven't been on a sleigh ride in ages, actually."

So her ex hadn't taken her on one? Maybe they'd had fun in other ways.

Something that made his jaw tense.

She grabbed his hand. "And now for my last good deed until our sleigh ride." She hauled him through the door and paraded him right in front of Mrs. Botox, their hands firmly joined. They were about halfway to the receptionist's desk when she turned to grin at him and then promptly plowed into an older man who

stepped into her path.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She turned around. "I didn't see..."

Her voice died away, and her face drained of all its color as she looked up at the man she'd just run into. She let go of Jack's hand in a rush.

The stranger's brows came together, and his eyes narrowed as he studied Jack and then Mira. Then he addressed her, saying, "I think you have some explaining to do."

Her arms went around her waist, and she drew in a shaky breath. "Daddy, what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER FOUR

MIRA TRIED TO give off an appearance of calm.

But her heart was ticking at an alarming pace, and she was aware of Jack standing just behind her. He had to be wondering what the hell was going on.

He wasn't the only one. She was pretty much wondering the same thing.

Why was her father here? He rarely put in an appearance at the lodge these days. And he wasn't exactly what she would call "involved" in her life any more. Although much of that was her own fault. Even when he'd tried to get close over the past several years while she'd been at med school, she'd tended to pull away. Her mom had let his infidelity go, why couldn't she?

"Well?" he said, evidently waiting for that explanation he'd asked for.

She lifted her chin, refusing to act the part of the meek little

girl he'd once carried around on his shoulders. "You want an explanation? Maybe you should ask Robert for one."

"Robert, what's he got to do with this?" He looked genuinely puzzled.

Gulping, she scrambled to figure out what else he could be talking about. She figured her ex had called her father—like he'd hinted he would do—to cry on his shoulder or ask him to intervene on his behalf. And that her dad had hightailed it up to Silver Pass to give her hell. Okay, so if that wasn't the case, it could only mean he was asking for an explanation about why she was holding hands with a strange man. She glanced back at Jack and blew out a breath at the grim expression on his face. Her dad wasn't the only one asking some mental questions. Better get the introductions out of the way.

"Sorry. I'll talk to you about Robert later." She motioned Jack closer. "Daddy, this is Jack Perry. He's the team doctor for the Texas Hawks. He helped out with an accident on the slopes a few minutes ago."

"The Hawks? I'm impressed." He stuck out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

He proceeded to grill Jack on his opinion of this team or that and what he thought of Texas and Colorado's chances for making it to the playoffs next year.

She felt bad about throwing Jack to Papa Wolf, but if anything could distract her dad it was football. It would at least give her time to think before the subject eventually swung back to her

and what she feared would be the subject *du jour*: why she was holding hands with a man who wasn't her fiancé, team doctor or no team doctor.

Not that she owed him any explanations after the way he'd treated her mom. But, still, it would be awkward to tell him to mind his own business in front of Jack.

So, what could she tell him?

How about: Jack was blind, and she was helping him find the reception desk.

Nope, that wouldn't work, since the Hawks probably wouldn't hire a blind physician.

That left... Yeah. She was drawing a complete blank.

"Mira?" Her dad's voice dragged her from her thoughts.

Her head came up. "Sorry?"

"I invited Jack to have dinner with us tonight at eight. Hope that was okay?"

She couldn't have been any more shocked if her dad had suddenly started doing the chicken dance in front of everyone in the crowded lobby. She'd expected a scene and had gotten a dinner invitation instead. Although with her dad, it normally came out sounding more like an ultimatum. "No, of course I don't mind, if it's all right with him."

Jack glanced at the lobby, and Mira noted that Predator in Pink was still watching them closely. "It's fine with me," he said.

Did this make two or three dates with guy number five? She was supposed to be moving on to the next eligible bachelor and

then the next. Her gaze slid back to the woman across the room. Yeah, she so did not want to become that. Maybe she should stop being so anxious to zip from man to man.

Besides, she and Jack hadn't actually had their first date yet. Right? Because the hot chocolate didn't count, and the ski lesson had been interrupted by the rescue on the slope, so that didn't count either.

And the sleigh ride?

Hmm, that could definitely be classified as a date. Which would officially mark the end of their association.

Her father gave her a quick hug. "Do you want to ask Robert to come as well?"

"Robert?" Nothing like her emotions swinging from relief to panic. She was going to have to break the news to her father. But not now. Not in front of Jack. "I'm sure he's busy with lessons."

"Okay, if you're sure." He smiled as he released her. "You know, that boy's future father-in-law is the owner of this joint. I could probably pull a few strings and have him let off early."

Jack visibly stiffened beside her. "It was nice meeting you," he said to her father. "But I need to turn in my equipment and get cleaned up. Thank you for the dinner invitation."

The last thing she wanted was to be left alone with her father. "I can go with you to the rental kiosk, if you don't remember where it is."

"I remember. Thanks for your...help earlier. I think I've got it from here."

That must be one of the man's favorite phrases. How many times did that make now? Three?

About as many times as she'd been with him. Well, that was just great.

Waiting until Jack was three or four strides away, she raised her voice just enough for the woman across the room to hear. "Don't forget about making the reservation for the sleigh ride. Believe me, you won't want to miss it."

Now, why had she said that? Maybe because it stung that he couldn't seem to get away from her fast enough.

Jack stopped in his tracks for a second or two before throwing her a look that was filled with lazy amusement totally at odds with his abrupt departure. And when his voice came back, it was much lower than hers had been. "Believe me, I haven't forgotten."

A shiver went over her at the dark intensity of his words. She glanced sharply up at her father to see if he'd noticed, but he seemed lost in his own world at the moment. Once Jack had gone through the door she turned her attention back to her father, bracing herself for a confrontation. Better to just tell him the truth and get it over with.

"Dad, I have something to tell you," she began.

"I have something to tell you as well. Actually, I wanted to ask you for a favor. It's why I came up here today."

She gulped. A favor? "Is it about Robert?"

If he was going to ask her to give her ex a second chance, she might just blow her top. One cheater asking her to forgive

and forget the transgressions of another cheater? Not hardly. Especially when one of the women Robert had cheated with was standing on the other side of the room.

"It's not about Robert, it's about..." He focused on her face. "Is everything okay between the two of you?"

She frowned, trying to figure out exactly what was going on.

"Things are a little complicated." *A little, Mira? Really?* "Anyway, what's this about a favor?"

A sliver of worry went through her as she noticed for the first time the taut lines of his face. If he hadn't come here because of her breakup, then why had he come?

"Not here. Let's go back to my office, Mirry."

She hadn't heard that nickname in forever. The sliver grew to the size of a stake. "Dad, is something wrong? Oh God, is it Mom?"

"No, your mother's fine. I spoke with her this morning."

Mira's eyes widened. He had? More alarm bells went off as he crossed the honey-planked flooring and headed for the door that led to a different wing of the lodge, one that wasn't open to the public. She followed him, winding through the narrow corridors until they reached the small annex where his office and the business areas were housed. Once the door shut behind them, he motioned her to one of the leather wingback chairs across from his desk.

She dropped into it, the creak of leather matching that of her nerves. "Daddy?"

All the differences of the past several years seemed to vanish as her unease continued to grow.

Instead of going behind the desk to face her, he went to the bar on the left and got down a tumbler from the open wooden shelves above the liquor bottles and dumped a few cubes of ice into it. He stared at the selection of alcohol for a long time—as if he'd never seen it before—and finally grabbed a decanter, uncapping it and pouring himself a healthy amount. He rarely drank, and only kept the liquor here for VIP meetings and gatherings.

He took a good-sized swig then sighed and added another splash of whatever was in the decanter. "I know I haven't done right by you and your mother. I've often wished I could go back and change some things, but I can't."

He turned around to face her, leaning against the counter and taking another sip from his glass. As if realizing his oversight, he frowned. "Do you want something?"

It was probably better if she didn't have anything this early, but she suddenly felt the need to brace herself for whatever he was about to say. "Maybe a little red wine?"

He fixed her a glass then brought it over and handed it to her before dragging the other chair around so it faced her.

She clenched her glass. Something was definitely wrong. "Are you ill?"

"No, Mirry, but it might be better if I were."

Her heart squeezed. "Don't say that," she whispered. Suddenly the years she'd wasted being angry with him flew by at an

alarming rate, dropping her into the here and now. She set her untouched drink onto the marble-topped table next to her.

He smiled and took another drink, the ice clinking against his glass. “That comment surprises me, to be honest.”

“We might have our differences, but you’re still my father.”

“Yes, I am. And something has come up that’s made me aware of all the mistakes I made with you. With your mom. It has made me want to do all I can to make things right and to not...” he gave a visible swallow “...repeat those mistakes with anyone else.”

“What is it?”

“Stella’s pregnant.”

Stella. It took her a minute to put a face with a name.

Paramour number six? Or was it seven? Pregnant?

Mira would have asked if he was sure, but from the redness in his eyes and the unsteadiness of the hand holding the drink she’d say he was dead certain. Instead, she ventured, “Are you happy about that?”

He held her gaze for a long time before nodding. “I screwed up with you. With your mother. Maybe I can learn from those mistakes and do a better job this time around.”

He wasn’t dying. Her mom wasn’t dying. That’s all that mattered. She stood and went over to him, taking his drink and setting it on the table behind him. Kneeling beside the chair, she put her arms around him and laid her head on his chest, feeling a love and affection she hadn’t felt in a very long time. “I’m happy for you, Daddy. Really happy. If I know Mom, she is too.”

His hand came up to stroke her hair. “I plan to marry Stella. I came to ask you for your blessing.”

She leaned back to look at him. He’d surprised her yet again. Her father of old would have simply declared his intentions and dared her to say a word against it. It was one of the reasons they hadn’t reconciled over the years. He’d acted like the world was his to own...to possess at will.

And yet now he wanted her blessing. If she wanted to blast him with accusations, now was the time. Only she didn’t want to.

“You have it, Daddy. Of course you do.”

“I know I haven’t even walked you down the aisle yet, but I want to ask if you’d do me the honor of standing beside me as I take my vows.”

A wave of emotion rolled over her, bringing with it a prickling at the backs of her eyelids. She blinked it away as best she could. “Is that okay with Stella?”

“Yes. She wants to meet you. I called your mom as well, to ask her permission. She told me to ask you, and that she’d support your decision whatever it was.” He paused. “Stella’s a wonderful woman, Mirry. I want to do right by her. And by you this time. This is the only way I know how.”

“Then, of course, I’ll stand beside you. I’d be happy to.”

A ragged sigh went past her ear. “Thank you. It means the world to me.”

She squeezed him tight before leaning over to kiss his grizzled cheek. She stood and took a step back, noticing for the first time

the heavy streaks of gray in his still thick hair. When had that happened? When she'd been too busy with her anger to look directly at him?

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, princess." The man who'd always seemed larger than life to Mira dragged his fist across his eyes then stood as well. "Now, what's this about you and Robert?"

It was tempting to just put it off, to pretend that things were fine, but her dad had been honest and real with her for the first time in years. She could do no less.

"I broke our engagement."

He stood there silent for a long time before saying anything. "What happened?"

Honesty, Mira.

Although maybe she could put a little spin on that honesty so she wouldn't mar his moment of happiness or endanger the tentative bridge they'd just built between them.

"It just wasn't working."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"About that? Not a thing." She nodded toward her untouched glass. "But I think I've changed my mind about my drink. If you have something festive in that wine cooler of yours, like champagne, I vote we pop the cork and toast to your good fortune. And to my new baby brother or sister."

* * *

The first snowfall since his arrival met Jack as he stepped into

the lobby for his "date."

Why he'd booked that sleigh ride he had no idea. Maybe because Mira had reminded him again at dinner two nights ago with her father—which he'd found he couldn't get out of, no matter how badly he'd wanted to. He'd had no idea Mira was a doctor, let alone that her father owned the whole damn resort. Neither of them had mentioned her ex fiancé. In fact, they'd both seemed pretty set on avoiding that whole subject during their meal.

Did her father even know?

He'd gotten very little sleep last night. His bottle of pills had whispered to him from the drawer of the nightstand, but he'd ignored it. And the dreams had come back with a vengeance.

As tired as he was, the last thing Jack wanted was to get involved in some huge family drama. He'd had enough of that to last him a lifetime. The blame game had made the rounds after his wife's death with every finger in her family—including his own—pointed directly at his chest, where there was still a gaping hole that no amount of shoveling could fill.

Jabbing his fists into the pockets of his dark slacks, he stared out the window at the whisper-soft flakes dancing in the night breeze, the outside lights making them glimmer and sparkle as they made their way to earth. There were a few footprints across the snow, but for the most part the new layer stretched across the acreage of the resort like a blanket. The walkways had yet to be shoveled. Mira said the sleigh would pull up at the far edge of

the drive, a hundred yards or so from the front entrance of the main building. There was no sign of the sleigh, or of Mira, for that matter.

Maybe he could just go back to his room and try to get some rest.

As if hearing his thoughts, the far door opened, and the woman herself appeared. His breath caught in his chest. Unlike her puffy white ski jacket, which did a good job of concealing her figure, tonight she wore a long wool coat that skimmed her body and almost reached her ankles. Open at the front, it gave a tantalizing glimpse of a shiny green top tucked into slim black pants that hugged her hips and legs. A belt of silver metallic links encircled her waist, the ends trailing down her left thigh. She made her way over to him, shrugging her way out of the coat as she did and draping it over her left arm.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be outside yet or not," she said.

"Our ride isn't here, so I thought I'd wait by the door and watch for it." No reason to tell her he'd been about to make his escape.

Her subtle scent drifted up, a melding of vanilla and pine, a combination that wound around him. His exhaustion suddenly vanished.

"You should have worn boots," she said, glancing down at where his loafers peeked from beneath the bottom edge of his pants legs.

"I didn't bring any. Just the rental snow boots."

Her brows went up. "Really? You live in Texas, and you didn't

at least bring some cowboy boots?"

"I don't own any."

"Wow, no boots. At all."

"My recreational choices normally involve water. No need for boots. Or even shoes."

Her lips twisted in a wry smile that made her eyes sparkle. "A man who prefers to go shoeless, huh? You wouldn't survive long up here. Not if you wanted to keep those toes."

He peered down at her feet and noted that, unlike him, she did own boots, but these had a tall chunky heel to them. "And those don't look any more practical than my own footwear."

That got a laugh out of her. "I know, aren't they great? I don't get much of a chance to wear them in my profession."

He came back to earth with a bump. That's right. She worked here. *Dr.* Miranda Dupris. "You don't have to entertain me, you know. I'm sure that's not part of your job description."

"Oh, it's the best part. Fraternize with all the handsome bachelors and make sure they're happy."

He shot her a look, only to have her grin again. "I'm kidding. I'll leave that to your buddy from the other day."

Mrs. Botox. Thankfully he hadn't seen her since they'd parted ways in the lobby, despite Mira's warning. Even in the dining room over the last two evenings there'd been no sign of her. But during his dinner with Mira and her father the blonde who had waved to Mira several days ago had made her way over to their table and given Mira a quick squeeze. Then she'd hugged Mira's

dad.

As she'd said goodbye a few minutes later, she'd thrown one last wink Mira's way. "Still five, I see."

"It's not quite five. Ask me again in a couple of days," Mira had replied.

It was the same number they'd tossed back and forth the other day, when he'd wondered if they were meeting up for a drink or something. Neither of them expanded on the comment and after that cryptic exchange the blonde had flounced away, waving off attempts to get her to stay and eat dinner with them. "I'm going on a quick hike to work on my own resolution."

Only afterwards did he notice that Mira had made no effort to introduce her to him.

Mira touched his arm, drawing him back to the present. "Do you want to head down the path to wait?"

"Are you going to be okay in those boots?"

"As okay as you'll be okay in your shoes." Her gaze slanted over him. "You look good, by the way."

"So do you." It was true. For once she was hatless, her red hair flowing over her shoulders where it complemented the green of her blouse. Her warm brown eyes seemed darker than usual, although that could be the result of make-up or something. Whatever the cause, the woman was a knockout. And with her heels on, those legs of hers looked endless, her chin coming right to his shoulder level. Unusual for him. At five feet five, the top of Paula's head, even in her tallest shoes, had barely come to the

middle of his chest.

Why was he suddenly comparing the two? Turning away, he picked up his leather jacket from across a nearby chair and shrugged into it, zipping it halfway up his chest. Putting on his armor? He forced a lightness to his voice that he didn't feel. "You sure the sleigh company is going to send someone in this snow?"

"They usually do. If not, we can go for a walk instead."

"With your boots and my shoes."

She tossed her head. "Why not? It's just a little snow." When she went to put her own coat on, he took it from her and held it out so she could slide her arms inside. His fingers brushed the warmth of her neck as he set it on her shoulders, the sensation of smooth silky skin branding itself on his senses.

He forced his hands back into his pockets. "Shall we?"

They strolled out the door and started down the pathway as the snow fell around them. It wasn't deep on the sidewalk, more like a dusting, but Mira pulled the collar of her coat up around her neck anyway.

"Are you going to be cold without a hat?"

"I have one in my pocket. Besides, they have blankets in the sleigh that we can hunker down under."

Images of the two of them snuggled together beneath a pile of blankets came out of nowhere. And hell if they weren't followed up by other images of what the parts hidden beneath the blankets could do.

This was *so* not a good idea. He'd known if from the second

she suggested they go together. Maybe he should start hoping that sleigh didn't come after all.

He zipped his jacket even higher, though it wasn't in reaction to the cold that was trickling down his spine but because of a wave of warmth he couldn't fight off.

It had been far too long since he'd been with someone. Maybe he should have taken Mrs. Botox up on her offer. Except he wouldn't hit on *Mrs.* Anything. As messed up as he was these days, he still didn't believe in that.

"How long is this ride, anyway?" A question he should have asked at the reception desk when he'd booked this little excursion. But he'd been too relieved at having survived dinner with Mira and her dad and too busy wondering if she'd told her father that the infamous future son-in-law was now an ex. How many of those did she have, anyway? He'd seen her with a couple of different guys when he'd arrived. Since he and Paula had been childhood sweethearts, he'd never been down the date-'em-and-leave-'em path. He'd had a couple of one-night stands since his wife's death, but that was the extent of it. And it had been over a year since his last rendezvous.

One of Mira's feet slid for a second, and Jack put his hand out to steady her.

"Sorry," she said. "Guess I laughed at your choice of footwear a little too soon, since you're doing better in yours than I am in mine."

"Here." Holding out his elbow to her, he wasn't sure if he was

elated or disturbed when she took him up on the offer and looped her arm through his and hugged close. It was too much like what she'd done when rescuing him from Mrs. Botox's advances.

And he liked the feel of her next to him a little too much. It felt warm and companionable. Just like Mira herself.

The woman didn't talk nonstop, like he'd been expecting. And he found himself wishing she did. He liked the sound of her voice.

How the hell did he even know what her voice sounded like?

He did, though. He could hear it in his head. Hear the words they'd exchanged since their first meeting less than a week ago.

Was that all it had been?

"We should be good here," she murmured.

"Good?"

She nodded at something next to them. A signpost with rustic hand-painted arrows pointed in various directions. The top arrow said, "Sleigh Ride Pick-up Point Here."

"How long has your dad owned this place?"

"He built it. He inherited the land from his grandfather and decided to do something with it. He and my mom lived in a little cabin a mile or two down the road before he decided to build the resort. He's tried to preserve the natural beauty and disturb the surrounding area as little as possible." She let go of his arm and stuffed her hands in the pockets of her long coat, shifting her weight slightly away from him.

"I'd say he succeeded. It's a restful place. Did you spend your

childhood here?"

"Until I got out of high school."

She didn't offer any other explanation than that, but her voice had hardened slightly. Better not to press her for anything more on that subject.

A musical *chink-chink-chink-chink* sounded in the distance, growing closer. A minute or two later a large cream-colored horse came into view, pulling a sleigh that looked like it had come straight out of a Christmas song, complete with sleigh bells. With shiny black side panels, the sled sat atop gracefully curved silver runners. The interior was lined in red velvet and the whole vehicle gave the impression of an "S" that had been tilted onto its side—the driver sitting up front on a high plush bench, while a second seat sat further back and much lower to the ground. The passenger area had a very private appearance that didn't do anything for his already taut nerves. And true to Mira's words, a pile of folded blankets sat next to the driver.

The horse snorted and shook its head, making the bells attached to his harness jingle again. Mira moved over to the animal and stroked its neck. "How are you doing, Patsy?"

Patsy? The huge animal looked nothing like its name.

The driver tied the reins to a bar on the front of the sleigh and clambered down from his seat. "Hello, Mira. It's been a while since you've ridden with us. Patsy's missed you."

"I know. I've missed her too. And you." She glanced back at Jack. "This is Norman, our driver. Norm, this is Jack Perry, one

of the resort's guests. He's never ridden on a sleigh before. In fact, there are quite a few things he hasn't done before."

Jack's neck and face grew hot at the way she'd said it, as if he were an inexperienced teenager being let out into the world for the first time.

Actually, that might not be too far from the truth. It had been a while since he'd let *himself* out into the world. And that hadn't even been his idea. He had his coach to thank for this awkward little mountaintop excursion.

"Nice to meet you." Norm—an older man with a close-cropped silver beard and matching hair—reached out to shake his hand. His top hat and black wool coat gave him a formal air that went well with the sleigh. "If you two are ready...? Patsy's glad to be out of that barn and is raring to go."

The man then reached up to his seat, snagged two thick plaid blankets and handed them to Jack. "It gets chilly back there—better bundle up." He smiled. "Mira used to look like a baby polar bear when she was young, she'd wrap up in so many layers. She'd fall asleep in the back and let us pull her and Ellory all over the place."

Perfect. He'd been hoping to ignore the whole hunker-beneath-the-blanket thing. He covered it up by asking, "Ellory?"

Mira came over to stand beside them. "The woman who stopped by our table at dinner. She's a good friend of mine."

That's why her name sounded familiar.

Giving the harness a quick check, Norm said, "Ellory came

out to say hello to me a few days ago. I didn't realize she was back in town."

"She's here for a visit. I'm trying to talk her into staying."

Jack shifted the blankets to the other hand. "She's also the one who gestured she'd meet you in five minutes when we were in the bar, right?"

"Five...?"

Jack couldn't be sure if it was just a trick of the old-fashioned gas streetlamp, but her face seemed to grow pink, the tip of her nose taking on a warm glow. "Yes, that was her."

Before he had a chance to wonder if something was wrong, the driver gestured to the back seat. "Climb aboard." He tweaked Mira on the nose. "You want me to take the scenic route up by the silver mines?"

"Would you? I'm sure Jack'll want to see them."

"For you? Anything. I'll let you point out the sights, since you know them as well as I do by now."

The scenic route. He had no idea what that meant, but had a feeling it was a whole lot longer than the traditional route.

The snow had let up as he climbed into the back of the sleigh and then held out a hand to Mira and helped her up. The velvet seats were warm and inviting against the chill of the air. "Are these heated?"

Mira took the blankets from him and shook them out, placing them over their laps. "Mmm-hmm. Norm installed them. They're powered with a rechargeable battery pack beneath the seat."

She snuggled deep, pulling one of the blankets up to her chin. "Comfortable?"

With the seats or with the company? At the moment he couldn't really answer that. Despite his misgivings about coming on this little outing, he felt himself relax in a way he hadn't in quite a while. It could be the lack of sleep, or it could just be from having a pretty woman sitting next to him. He could just glimpse a patch of stars through a break in the heavy cloud cover, and although the little pinpoints didn't throw off much light, the streetlamps made up for them, providing a nice glow that ran down the path as far as he could see.

Norm clucked to the horse and turned her around in the small cul-de-sac, and then they were on their way, the metal runners making a slicing sound as they cut across the frozen earth.

The back of the vehicle was clearly built for romance and late nights under the stars. The walls surrounding them forced them close enough together that their shoulders touched.

Mira rested her head against the back of the seat with a sigh. "It's been ages since I've been out on the sleigh. It always used to put me to sleep."

Funny, because, despite his earlier thoughts, the last thing Jack felt like doing right now was sleeping. "How's he going to find his way in the dark?"

"The paths are all lit, even the back ones, and the resort has its own plow to keep the snow from getting too deep on these throughways." She angled her head to the side so she was facing

him. “Thanks for letting me tag along.”

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. “I should be thanking you again for bailing me out of an awkward situation.”

Not that the one he was in now was any less awkward.

“Mmm, well, you saved me from dining alone with my dad. Once you get him talking about football, that’s all he wants to discuss. That lets me off the hook.”

That surprised him. The two of them had seemed close. “Do you not get along?”

“We haven’t for a long time, but things are changing.” She sighed and turned toward the front again. “I’m hoping we can make a fresh start.”

He shifted to his right so he could see her better in the shadows. “You didn’t tell him about your breakup that night at dinner. Did you let him know later?”

The sleigh rounded a corner, pressing him against her for a second or two, before heading down a slightly darker path. He didn’t try to move away. With their heads close together, as well as the shared space beneath the heavy blankets, they could have been children whispering in the dark. Only Mira was no child. The rise and fall of her breasts as she gave another sigh reinforced that fact. “I told him that first night, although I just shared the bare essentials. Daddy always liked Robert, so I didn’t want to disillusion him.”

“About your ex?”

She nodded. “And the reasons we broke up. I’m afraid telling

my father about that will reopen some old wounds between us."

Had she cheated on her fiancé? Somehow he didn't think so. From the way she'd talked about Mrs. Botox and the men the woman targeted, Jack couldn't help but think Mira was cut from very different cloth.

"Your ex was an idiot for not wanting to work things out."

That got a laugh out of her. "I agree with the idiot part, but it was actually me who didn't want to work it out. Why bother when you obviously don't have what it takes to make someone happy."

Have what it took. Was she kidding? He was sitting here trying to think of anything but the warm, soft body hidden beneath those blankets and how easy it would be to simply lean forward and kiss her.

He swallowed, trying to rein in his wayward thoughts, but it wasn't easy. "I had no idea there were silver mines up here. Is that where the town gets its name?"

"Yes. This whole area is riddled with them. It was a big industry once upon a time. The best thing my grandfather ever did was make sure he held onto the mineral rights, even though my dad has no interest in mining the mountain."

Another turn had the wind blowing right at them. Mira shivered and gripped the covers tighter.

"Cold?"

"I'm okay. The breeze is just chilly."

Before he could stop himself, Jack slipped his arm around her shoulders and tugged her against his body, pulling the blankets

up around both of them. “Better?”

“Mmm. Much.” She laid her head on his shoulder, her arm going across his abdomen and making him all too aware that if she shifted it four inches lower, an uncomfortable reality was going to meet her.

He closed his eyes and let the cold of the outside air flow deep into his lungs in an effort to cool himself from the inside out. Instead, he found himself absorbing the feel of her, and thinking about how long it had been since he’d felt a woman against him in anything other than a quick round of sex.

This felt a whole lot more intimate than that because he was aware of Mira on more than just a physical level.

She surrounded him. Her scent. Her touch. The sound of her breathing. It was all right there. Coaxing him closer. A siren’s song that was growing harder and harder to resist, even though he knew he should.

The snow-covered path helped muffled the clip-clop of Patsy’s hooves, but the jingling of the bells on her harness sounded with each footfall.

And Mira was right. The whole experience was hypnotic. Soothing.

“Jack?”

“Yep?” He laid his cheek against the top of her head.

To keep the wind from hitting it.

Sure, buddy. Keep on telling yourself that.

“I think I’m supposed to be giving you Norm’s tourist spiel.

What do you want to know?"

He chuckled. "I'm too comfortable right now to really care." As soon as he said the words he knew it was true. He also knew it was the last thing he should have admitted.

Instead of kicking him away from her in horror, she murmured, "That's good. Because I'm too comfortable to play tour guide."

"We're even, then."

He reached up to smooth a strand of her hair that tickled his nose. Then, instead of dropping his hand back to his side, he allowed it to trail down the side of her face, touching the cool softness of her flesh for the first time. Not really, but it was the first time he'd purposely touched her for a reason other than being hauled up off his ass or letting her pretend to be something she wasn't.

She could be, though. The insidious thought whispered through his mind just as his fingers reached her chin, his thumb strumming across the little indentation he found there. And hell if she didn't have the silkiest skin known to mankind.

Her sigh let him know she wasn't unhappy with what he was doing. If anything, she nestled closer, her hand splaying over his abs and sending a heady wave of warmth rolling down to his groin. This was a dangerous game to be playing in the back of a sleigh. A literal one-horse open sleigh.

His lips twisted. Scratch that. This was a dangerous game to be playing anywhere...with anyone...although, since the vehicle

was in motion, there was almost no likelihood of having a police officer flash his spotlight on them, warning them to move along.

He explored the line of her jaw, his eyes traveling up to the seat in front of them for a second, but Norm and the horse had their attention focused on where they were going rather than on what was happening behind them. And there was no rear-view mirror that he could see.

No one would ever know.

No one would see if he... He slid his palm across the side of her throat, allowing it to rest there for a moment to gauge her response.

She didn't move. He swallowed, the need to do something crazy growing by the second.

It had to be sleep deprivation.

Still, he raised his head to look down at her. Her eyes were closed, her lips barely parted as she breathed. If not for the frantic beat of her pulse against his skin he might think she was asleep. But she wasn't. His thumb went to the bottom of her chin and exerted a slight upward pressure. As if she knew what was coming, her head tilted back to the perfect angle. Her eyelids parted, warm brown irises meeting his gaze. In their depths he saw the answer to his unspoken question.

She wouldn't stop him.

He murmured her name into the cold night. Softly, so that only she could hear. Then he lowered his head and covered her lips with his.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNEXPECTED.

That was the only word she could come up with to describe the moment his mouth slid over hers. Oh, she'd wanted him to. Her heart had been screaming for him to do this ever since she'd curled into his side and let him pull her close.

She leaned her head a little further back so she could feel the full effect of his firm warm lips as they moved over hers.

A tiny sound exited her throat, and her mouth opened.

He hesitated. For a brief heart-stopping second he paused as if unsure whether to stop or continue.

Please, Jack. I just want this for a minute. Maybe two. Then I'll let you get back to your nice shiny life with your fancy football team. I just need to know that someone, somewhere wants me.

Even if it's just for a moment.

His hand went from her neck to the back of her head, his fingers sliding deep into her hair as he remained poised over her mouth, lips just barely touching.

Then he did it. His tongue slid home with a smooth stroke that had her closing her eyes half in triumph, half in the heady luxury of the moment.

Norm wouldn't look back. He was used to giving his customers their privacy. And surely he'd had people make out in the back of his sleigh many times in the past. Not her, but generic people. She and Robert had certainly never done anything like this. She slid her hands beneath his coat, seeking the warmth

between it and his shirt and debating whether or not she dared to duck beneath a second layer until she encountered bare skin.

Jack's fingers tightened in her hair, and he tugged her head back so their lips came apart. "What are you doing?"

Maybe he'd read her mind.

"I could ask you the same thing," she whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Right now, I'm wondering how long this ride is."

"At least an hour. But it can be as long as we want it to be."

Wow, had she really just said that? Evidently, because he gave a low groan that only she could hear and plastered his lips back to hers.

This time there was no question or hesitation, just a hard demand that she was more than happy to answer. Beneath the blanket, she worked his shirt free of his slacks until she had access to that smooth, firm skin she'd been thinking about. She allowed her fingers to slide to mid-abdomen.

Did he work out with the football players he took care of? Because there was some defined musculature beneath all these clothes. The sleigh turned another corner and her hand slipped further up, running over a hard masculine nipple.

Oops. She hadn't meant to do that, but now that she was here...

He moved from her mouth to her ear. "Don't."

Oh, but she already had. Her fingers circled again, testing, bumping and finally giving a little squeeze that had him hissing in a breath. "Mira."

And, oh, if she didn't love hearing her name muttered in that rough, sexy way.

Never had she gone out of her way to drive a man wild, but this one was different. He seemed so uptight. So...*unexpected*.

There was that word again.

Any other guy would have been happy to oblige by returning the favor. But not this one. He was acting like a stick of dynamite with a very short fuse.

He bit her earlobe once, twice, sending a desperate shiver over her. Deep down inside her, things were changing. Moistening. Transforming want into need at an alarming pace.

As if sensing the shift in her, he turned his body into hers, using his broad back to shield her from any prying eyes. Then one hand splayed low on her abdomen, taking her breath away as he held it there with firm pressure.

Yes. Please, Jack.

She wasn't sure what she was asking for—it wasn't like they could just have sex in the back of Norm's sleigh. But she wanted something. Wanted to feel him in her hand, wanted to drive him over the edge into insanity. Even if she got nothing more out of it than that. She squeezed his nipple between her fingertips again to see if he felt the same way.

"You're playing with fire."

She blinked up at him. "Fire is the best known antidote to freezing temperatures, didn't you know?"

His hand skimmed up her hip and ducked beneath the hem of

her shirt. His skin wasn't icy, like she'd expected, but yummy and warm with slight callusing on the pads of his fingers. He glanced back as if making sure their driver was still facing the front. "This is not a smart idea, you know."

"Never said it was." She squeezed again.

"Hell, woman." Just like that his hand swept up her side and cupped her breast, his thumb stroking across her bra-covered nipple and sending a shot of pure pleasure straight to her center.

Okay, maybe she hadn't been playing fair. But neither was he, sitting beside her looking good enough to eat. And she was a little hungry. She could nibble, even if she couldn't get a full meal, right?

But the second she started to trail her fingers back down his stomach, she found her wrist gripped in a steel band. "No."

All playfulness was gone from his voice, and when she glanced at his face his eyes were dark, intense, a muscle working in his jaw. He slid his hand free of her shirt and tugged her clothing down. Pulled her coat back into place and buttoned it.

Her breath caught. Was he angry? Maybe she had carried this game a little too far. She started to withdraw, only to have his grip tighten, and he jerked her closer. His mouth moved back to her ear. "If we ever do this—and I'm not saying we will—it's not going to be some furtive little quickie, Mira. I want time, lots of it, and room to maneuver. Got it?"

She gulped. "Yes."

Whether she was acknowledging what he'd said or giving him

permission she had no idea. But what else could she say? He'd taken her pass and intercepted it. The next play was with him.

With one last heart-stopping nip to her earlobe, he sat back and calmly straightened the blankets, while her pulse pounded madly in her ears.

"Now," he said as the first flakes of snow began falling again, "tell me about the local silver mines."

* * *

Jack wasn't sure where he'd gathered the willpower to stop her. It had been pretty obvious where she'd been headed once her hand had left his chest and traveled south. He could have let her continue...a few pumps and he'd have been done. Sated. But that's not what he wanted. If he was going to have her, he'd told the truth. He wanted hours. And he wanted to be able to use his hands. His mouth. He wanted to see her red hair spread out on a pillow and breathe in that purely feminine scent of her body.

Yes, he'd thought of having a fast encounter with some generic woman in his hotel room. But there was nothing generic about Mira. And he wasn't interested in a few brief seconds of pleasure.

Compared to what he really wanted from her, a hand job was like settling for a grilled cheese sandwich when what you craved was a sixteen-ounce rib eye.

She'd seemed a little glassy-eyed when he'd asked her about the mines, but he'd needed to get his own mind off of what he'd wanted to do and put it on something a little less explosive. Between that and the snow that had started to fall more freely he'd

been able to cool his body down enough to keep from snatching her up and laying her down on that heated red velvet bench, driver or no driver.

By the end, she'd giggled as he'd reached into the pocket of his leather bomber and pulled out a beanie cap, pulling the black headwear down over her head to protect her from the white, powdery precipitation.

"I have my own, you know."

He couldn't resist a little shrug. "You look good in mine."

Once the ride was over, Mira thanked Norm and gave him a quick hug before moving to Patsy and rubbing her thickly furred neck. "Thanks for that, you guys. It was great."

She promised to visit the stables more often, and the man tipped his hat and gave a courtly bow before climbing back on his sleigh and heading off again with another round of jingling bells and clip-clopping of hooves.

Then Jack—still in the throes of shaky reasoning and even shakier impulse control issues—had done the unthinkable. He'd asked Mira out again. Up on the slopes this time and ending with dinner in the restaurant.

And she'd done something just as unthinkable. She'd accepted.

* * *

"You have another date with him?" Ellory took a sip from her glass of Merlot and leaned a hip against the bar.

Mira squirmed. There was no way of avoiding it this time.

Number Five might have become a problem. “Yes. But it’s not like it’s a big deal or anything. And the sleigh ride kind of got snowed out.” But not before they’d done some necking in the back seat...and not before Jack had hinted he wanted to do darker things that involved time and lots of space.

She gulped a mouthful of her own wine.

How could she turn her back on something like that? Besides, it wasn’t as if she was looking for a long-term relationship. This might even work in her favor. If they did have sex, she could prove to herself that she could have a one-night stand without it necessarily evolving into something permanent. Wasn’t that what she was trying to avoid? Jack didn’t live in the area. He’d soon be heading home to Texas. Back to his team.

No strings. No unexpected visits. No occasional sightings, like she had with her ex.

But did she want a one-night stand? Was she built that way?

If not, she’d better figure out how to change her personal blueprint because unless she never wanted to have sex again she was going to have to play by a new set of rules. One that involved a quick roll in the sheets and kicking the man in question out on the other side of the bed the next morning.

No regrets. No heart involvement.

It was the perfect solution, which was why she’d made that toast on New Year’s Eve.

She glanced at her friend and took another—smaller—sip of her wine. “Don’t worry, Elle, I’m sticking with the program. I’m

not getting hung up on him. I'm following the spirit of the bet. You said that I wouldn't make it *past* Number Five. I never said I wouldn't go out with any of them more than once."

"Hmm...really? I understood that you would go out on a single date with twenty-five different men over the course of the year."

Mira tried to think back to the exact wording of that resolution. Had she said only one date apiece? She decided to play dumb. "So are you suddenly going to go all legalistic on me? The queen of all things loose and free?"

"*Touché.* You know me way too well." She sent Mira a grin and lifted her glass in salute before taking another drink of the dark red wine.

Relaxing onto one of the tall leather seats that surrounded the kidney-shaped bar, Mira swiveled around to face her friend. "Okay, so we'll say *intent*, then." She lifted her own glass. "Here's to intent. That I intend to steer clear of serious male-female relationships."

They clinked their glasses together. Ellory set her wine down on the polished wooden surface of the bar. "So let me get this straight. You're going to have no serious relationships with males or females? Well, that's a damn shame."

Mira swatted her arm. "Very funny. You know what I mean."

She laughed again. "Rats. Of course, I've sworn off men, too." She sighed. "So you're going to let man number five have another shot at getting this date thing right."

"Yep, although there's nothing to get right. We're just going

to hit the slopes one more time tomorrow and get a bite to eat afterwards. Then it's done." Maybe. That was if she didn't fall into bed with the man right afterwards. A tingle of anticipation ran through her.

"Uh-oh. Speaking of hitting the slopes, ex-beau jerkwad at oh-three-hundred."

Mira blinked before she realized what her friend meant. She glanced to the right and saw Robert nursing a beer far closer to them than she'd like. Their eyes met, and her ex lifted his glass to her. She just barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Was he worried she was going to run to Daddy and tattle about what he'd done? She should. Really she should, but she wanted nothing more to do with him. She was willing to let Robert save face to make that happen, although the creep didn't deserve it.

She turned away and met her friend's worried eyes.

"Did you take a good look at him?" Ellory asked.

"What?"

"Robert. I want you to memorize every last flaw that man has and imprint it on your memory." She leaned over and squeezed her hand. "Don't let someone do that to you again."

"I won't."

Ellory was right. She needed to use Robert as a cautionary tale and not toss away one bad apple only to immediately pick up a second one. Even if at least one part of that apple tasted as sweet as honey. Because who knew what she'd find when she turned it around and looked at the other side?

Although she suspected the back side of Number Five would look just as crisp and tasty as the front. And that was the biggest problem of all.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE WAS LATE.

Jack wasn't sure if he was happy about that or ticked. They'd agreed to ride up to the slopes together for another couple of lessons and then have dinner afterwards.

Propping his skis and poles against one of the heavy pillars that held up the wraparound porch, he inspected his snow boots for the fifth time. Yeah, yeah, yeah, all the laces were well tied and nothing dangled where it could trip him up. He'd leave that to the infuriating woman he'd almost mauled in the sleigh.

He hadn't been able to get her out of his head all weekend, which had seemed to drag. It had been made worse by a phone call from his coach making sure he was resting and having plenty of "fun."

As far as the resting went, it was hit and miss. He'd slept fairly well one night, only to wake up in a cold sweat the next.

But was he having fun?

A little too much, if you asked him. He'd had no business letting things get so out of hand on that ride through the snow. His only excuse was the same pathetic one he'd given himself each time he'd been around the woman. It had been far too long since he'd gotten any.

And how crude did that sound? Paula would be so proud of

what he'd become.

Except he remembered her having a little bit of naughty wrapped up in her nice. Maybe that's why Mira's outrageous behavior had bothered him so much. It struck too close to those memories he'd done his best to bury.

Bury. Not a good word to use. Since he'd literally buried the woman he'd loved since high school. The woman he'd gone through medical school with.

Maybe he should just do what he'd said and go to bed with Mira. Be done with it. Except she hadn't shown up yet, and she was now—he glanced at his watch—over a half-hour late. Even knowing she wasn't coming didn't stop him from waiting here like a pathetic loser, going over the thousand and one excuses she might have for standing him up.

None of them, except maybe her father becoming ill, held up. Especially since he'd just seen Mr. Dupris a few minutes earlier and had given him a half-wave as he'd strode through the entrance.

Well, nothing to do but go ahead on up and ski back down. He might as well get some use out of his rental fee. But somehow doing it alone held no appeal any more.

He grabbed his skis and poles and started toward the chairlifts that lay about fifty yards to his left.

"Jack, wait!"

A familiar voice sounded behind him. If he were smart, he'd just keep going and pretend he hadn't heard her. But, of

course, he didn't. He turned around and all thoughts of leaving disappeared.

Mira, in the same all-white snow outfit she'd worn the other day, hurried toward him, equipment slung over her left shoulder, her hair streaming around her shoulders. "Sorry. I thought you'd be gone by now."

Thought...or hoped?

"Sorry to disappoint you." The words were more difficult to force out than they should be.

She frowned, falling in step beside him. "Disappoint me? I had a patient this morning and didn't have your cell number. I tried calling your room, but you'd already left, evidently."

His cell number. It hadn't even dawned on him to give it to her. And he had left early that morning, deciding to go for a walk in the crisp air to clear his head and to try to talk himself out of actually sleeping with the woman. When she hadn't shown up, he'd thought she'd regretted that terrible—or was it amazing?—kiss they'd shared.

Now she was here. And he was just as torn over what to do as ever.

Catching the next flight out of Silver Pass would be the smart thing. But his coach would probably not welcome him back with open arms at this point. In fact, he might not welcome him back at all.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, although what would he do with his life then? Allow it to spiral back down to dark places he'd

rather not revisit? And if he sat around at home, that's exactly what would happen.

Regrets, he'd discovered, were a poison that didn't quite kill.

Two and a half more weeks.

He could always find Mrs. Botox and be done with it. He could guarantee there'd be no emotional entanglements on his part after spending a night with her.

So why did sleeping with Mira have to be any different?

It shouldn't, but he had a feeling it would be.

"Sorry about the cell number. I didn't even think to give it to you last night."

She grinned up at him. "I don't think either one of us was doing much thinking."

His own smile took him by surprise. "Probably not. How is your patient, by the way?"

"A child with an upset stomach. Judging from the stack of crumbled candy wrappers on her nightstand, I think I found the culprit."

"Such an exciting practice you have here, Doctor."

She gave a slight grimace as they arrived at the chair lifts. "I'm sure it's not as action packed as yours, but it has its moments." She gestured at the line of running seats that swooped by before starting their ascent. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"I've somehow gotten on them during both of my other outings, but I have to admit it wasn't pretty." He eyed the chairs. Mastering them certainly hadn't been as easy as it had looked.

At least with surfing he simply lay on his board and paddled out from shore. Everything was done under his own power, which was how he preferred it.

She moved over to the bench and snapped her boots down onto her skis. “Put on your skis, and I’ll talk you through the process.”

Once they both had their skis situated, she had him stand and move over to the line with her, handing their passes to one of the attendants. While various people got on the two-man lifts, she explained what they were doing. “We’re next. Move to the mark.”

He shuffled with her over to a blue line painted on the ground, and they waited for the couple ahead of them to sit on a chair and be carried up the mountain. Then they moved to the second line. “Look behind you,” she said, “and keep the chair in sight. Once it gets to us, the attendant will hold it long enough for us to sit.”

And just like that they were on, the lift swaying as it moved up over the snow. Mira snapped a protective bar down over them. He’d been so worried about his balance the last time he’d ridden up that he hadn’t even realized the safety feature.

“Have you ever fallen off one of these?” he asked.

“Yes, as a child.” She shifted her poles. “Did you fall the last time?”

“Off the ski-lift itself? No. But the first time I tried to move away from the chair? Yes.” That had not been one of his better moments, and probably what had contributed to his fall down the slope itself little a while later. The one Mira had rescued him from.

The lift continued up the long ascent, and Jack tried to settle back and enjoy the view. It was beautiful, the range of white mountains stretching out, skiers looking much smaller than they actually were, even though the lift wasn't carrying them all that high.

But more than the view, or the worries about getting on or off the lift, was his concern about how aware he was of the woman next to him. Like the other times they'd skied, she was decked out all in white, but her helmet wasn't on her head yet, just the pink beanie she'd worn during their last outing on the slopes. The chair was small enough that their shoulders and arms touched, whether he wanted them to or not. And along with each bump or wobble came the memories of what they'd done in the sleigh. The way the motions of that vehicle had shifted them together until he hadn't been able to resist her.

This woman ramped him up, almost to the point of not caring who saw them. The truth was he hadn't wanted to stop during that ride, and he wasn't all that sure what had made him grab her hand just before she reached the belt on his slacks.

Maybe the realization that once she touched him there'd be no turning back. Or was it really as simple as what he'd said, that he wanted more time? More space?

Her fingers slid across the top of his hand, and he jerked his mind back from those chaotic thoughts to listen to what she was saying.

"There's the entrance to the silver mine I told you about." She

pointed to something off in the distance about a half-mile away from the lodge. He could just make out brown wooden boards, but it appeared tiny from here. "It's closed to the public?" For some reason he thought maybe they'd made some of the mines into tourist attractions.

"Oh, yes. Not a safe place at all. There's a risk of avalanches out that way as well. We've had some snow, so the safety teams are monitoring the area. There are some off-piste skiing areas not far from there that could be affected."

"Off-what?"

"Off-piste. It means off the trail. Areas between the groomed runs. Some of them are open for skiing and some of them aren't. But here in Silver Pass those sections are reserved for advanced skiers, since there can be rocks and debris hidden beneath the snow—although we try to keep things marked well enough that people are aware of what's there."

"I don't think I'll be tackling any of those this trip."

"Chicken," she said with a smile. "We're almost at the end of the line." She nodded at the sign on the pole to the left that warned skiers to put the tips of their skis up.

Somehow, once they got to the offloading area, Jack managed to keep his skis pointed skyward and slide his ass off the chair, where he then glided down the little slope that led away from the circling chairs. And this time he didn't fall or careen into any other people who were exiting the lifts.

Grabbing onto a rope that was on the far side of the space,

Mira slid smoothly beside him. “Good job!”

“Mira!” Her name came from across the way, and when she glanced over with a roll of her eyes he couldn’t help but try to figure out who it was.

Ah, his former ski instructor and her ex. Standing at the top of the bunny slope, he was with a group of about twelve novice skiers. Even from here, though, he could sense the man’s frown when Mira didn’t answer him.

“You ready?” she said, her tight voice indicating she wanted to get away from there.

Judging from the steam he sensed gathering behind the other man’s eyes, he nodded. “Why don’t you go on? Unfortunately, I’m going to need to start with that beginner’s hill again.”

Mira gave him a cool glance. “Do you think I’m going to scamper off like a frightened rabbit?”

Hardly. He’d just thought she might want to avoid the guy.

They made their way over to the gentle slope, using poles and sidesteps until they were at the top. Although the instructor kept on teaching his charges how to slow their speed going down the hill, the man’s eyes were obviously on them, probably wondering what the hell Jack was doing with her again.

Deciding to play by the other man’s rules, Jack stared him down for a few seconds. Once the guy looked away and began to actively teach again, he noticed that Mira’s attention wasn’t on them but on the abandoned mine she’d pointed out from the ski lift. “What is it?” he asked.

"I don't know. Probably nothing." She gave a quick shrug then pulled one of her gloves off with her teeth before reaching in her pocket. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through something, glancing at the gray cloud cover a time or two. "Weird," she muttered, half to herself.

She put the phone in her pocket and then shoved her glove back on. "Do you want to lead or follow?"

"I always believe in letting ladies go first."

"Perfect. Because I like going first. That way, I can concentrate on getting to the good stuff."

Before he could decide if she was purposely being suggestive or not she'd used her poles to shove off the flat surface and start down the hill. He followed her, watching in awe as she expertly picked up speed and maneuvered from side to side. His balance felt pretty good today, but even so he couldn't match her speed, even using his poles to give himself some additional impetus from time to time. She was halfway to the bottom by the time he'd made it fifty yards.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of another skier, coming just as fast as Mira had gone. Only this person sliced to the right just as he passed Jack, his skis sending out a large burst of snow that pelted him right in the chest. "Sorry about that, Number Five."

What the hell? Struggling not to lose his balance or his temper, he watched as the jerk proceeded on down the hill and did a quick zigzag as he came to Mira and then pulled in front of her,

forcing her to come to a quick halt.

Jack frowned. That damn instructor again. He pushed his ski poles into the snow and forced himself to go faster, making sure his skis were aimed straight down the hill to speed his progress. By the time he reached her, though, the idiot had already left, heading toward the bottom in a series of moves geared to show off his skills to their best advantage. Well, that was all the man had going for him, from what Jack could tell.

"What was that all about?"

Mira's jaw was tight. "Nothing I can't handle."

"What is a number five? Is it some kind of skiers' code for 'make way' or something?"

"What?" Her face went very still.

"He skidded in the snow, hitting me with the stuff, then threw me an apology and said 'number five'."

"I..." She took a deep breath and then tried again. "It doesn't mean anything."

Somehow he didn't believe her, because she hadn't given him a blank stare or said she had no idea what it meant. She'd said it didn't mean anything, as if she knew what the guy was talking about but was discounting it.

She scooted closer and brushed some snow off his jacket. "Sorry he's such an ass."

What Jack couldn't understand was what Mira could have seen in a man like this. But he did like the way she'd sidled closer and the touch of her hands on his chest, even if there were ten tons

of clothing between them.

"Did he get you too?"

"No. He was just trying to show off for his students."

It was more than that, but if she didn't want to get into it, who was he to try to force the issue?

She again pulled out her phone and glanced at it. "Do you mind if we head toward the mine? We won't go all the way or anything. There's another easy slope or two that we'll need to cover, but they're not much harder than this one. I just want to get a closer look at something."

"That's fine." The further away they got from her ex, the better Jack liked it. He wasn't worried about himself, he was pretty sure he could take the guy on solid, non-snow-covered ground, but he didn't want the bastard bothering Mira. "What do you want to look at?"

"I'm not sure. One of the snowdrifts looks a little iffy from here, but it could just be the angle. I'm not seeing any alerts on the weather site." She nodded at the sky. "But I think we might see another inch or two before the day's out."

Jack had noticed the thick cloud cover as well. He'd been glad for the shade, actually, as the sun glinted off the snow in a way that made his eyes burn, even with his goggles. "Will that be a problem for the resort?"

"It shouldn't be. I'll let you know when we get closer." She glanced back at him. "Follow me, okay, and don't go off the trails."

As if he would.

Slowly, Mira guided him down one slope, taking it slow and easy before sidestepping across a plateau and arriving at another well-groomed slope. No one seemed to take any notice of them, but Mira had checked her phone several more times. Jack had no idea what she was looking at, or even for.

A flick of ice hit his cheek and then another. He reached out to touch her jacket before they started down the next hill. "Do you feel that? I think the snow's started."

"That's what I was afraid of." She put her hand over her brow and seemed to scan the area.

Jack followed her line of sight, but all he saw were skiers going down various slopes, as well as another ski lift on the far side of the resort carrying people up the hills.

Jamming her poles into the snow, she scrolled through her phone, her finger sliding up the screen repeatedly as the occasional flake turned into a light snow shower. Then she bit her lip. "Jack, do you think you can make it back to the lodge on your own?"

"Why?" Was she texting her ex, getting ready to hook up with him or something?

No, she seemed genuinely worried about something.

"I'm not sure."

Jack heard a low rumble then it stopped. He cocked his head, listening. "Does it normally thunder during snowstorms?"

She didn't answer, just shoved her goggles on top of her head

and jabbed her finger at her phone. Then she put it up to her ear. She waited and waited then someone evidently answered. She stared off into the distance. “It looks like some snow may have shifted over by the Vendry Mine.” She waited and then continued. “No, I’m not positive, but I don’t remember seeing it that far down on Friday evening.”

Friday evening. When they’d been kissing in the back of the sleigh? She’d paid attention to the snow cover by the mine? That’s the last thing he’d been thinking about on that crazy ride. It stung his pride a bit that she’d been able to concentrate on things other than his mouth on hers.

She paused again. “And in case you haven’t noticed, it’s snowing again, and we got a couple of inches last night. I’d like you to let my dad know. He’s not answering his cell.” Her brows went up. “What do you mean, he went into town?”

Jack pulled his goggles up over his head as well when the snow kept hitting them and then melting, leaving behind droplets of water. Another roll of thunder came and went.

“I think you should call him and ask him to come back. I’m telling you, you need to be ready, just in case. Something’s going on. Do you want me to have them clear the slopes?”

She waited for the other party to respond. “Are you sure?”

A puff of something that looked like a lazy roll of smoke sifted into the air over by the mine. A fire? There weren’t many trees in that particular area, so he didn’t think so. And Jack hadn’t caught sight of any lightning, neither could he imagine anyone smoking

while skiing.

"Okay. I'm going to stay up here for a while. I'll call you in a half-hour or so." She scrubbed her cheek against her shoulder. "Will do. Yeah, me too. Bye."

She hung up and scrolled again, then dropped the phone back into her pocket.

"Problem?" he asked, when her jaw remained tense. Had she been talking to the instructor?

As if realizing for the first time that he was still there, she slowly turned toward him. "Not really." She hesitated and then lifted her chin. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but maybe it would best if you headed back to the lodge."

Suspicion immediately flared in the back of his head. "Conversing with the ex?"

Why he'd said that, he wasn't sure. Even if she'd called him, it was pretty obvious it hadn't been to meet up with him or anything. She was worried about something over on that hill. Enough to want whoever was on the other end of that line to call her father and ask him to come back to the resort.

But his veiled accusation didn't go unnoticed. Her eyes chilled. "What I do or don't do is none of your business."

Okay, that had backfired. He'd hoped she'd give him a hint as to why she'd suddenly changed course, going from flirty to worried to angry in the space of a few minutes.

He touched her hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I was digging for information, actually."

A thin layer of snow now covered the cute pink cap on her head and dotted her lashes. She smiled. “Okay, in case you’re wondering—or even if you’re not—I’m not going to get back together with my ex. Not now. Not ever. But I need to check something out, and I don’t really want an inexperienced skier on any of those harder slopes.”

“The ones closer to the mine.”

She nodded. “The snow looks like it’s moved, to me, shifted downward since our ride the other night.”

“I heard you mention that, but what does it mean?”

“We got some snow last night. And we’re due for more tonight. Not a ton, but enough to add more weight to the already thick layer. If it slides any further there could be trouble.”

He brushed a couple of flakes of snow off her nose with a gloved fingertip. Her cheeks were pink with cold, as was her nose, and she looked pretty damned adorable right now. In spite of her worried frown.

The thunder rolled again, and Mira immediately jerked around to the side and stared at the mine, where, sure enough, another puff of white erupted into the air. Not smoke. Snow. Just like when Mira’s ex had sent a burst of it shooting toward him. Once disturbed, the finer stuff drifted into the air, while the heavier stuff had hit him and then fallen to the ski slope, where it had slipped downhill a few feet. Then it had rolled to a stop.

So if the puffs he saw over by the mine were snow vapor, then something was disturbing it. But what?

At that second the rumbling started up again, this time growing in volume. He vaguely heard Mira's "Oh, my God!" before what seemed like half the mountain began to move, sliding downward, giant plumes of vapor rising into the air. And below the action—on another set of slopes—was a group of about twenty skiers.

He finally understood what Mira was panicking about, his own chest tightening and his breathing shooting through the roof in response to what he was currently witnessing.

Because, like a tsunami that churned its way toward shore, an avalanche was slowly building up momentum. And it was headed right for that unsuspecting group.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"STAY HERE." MIRA'S only thought, once the rumbling stopped, was getting over to the site and helping get those people out.

One second skiers had been whizzing down the side of the mountain, and the next about seven people had been flattened by a crush of snow. The rest of the group had successfully outraced the front edge of the avalanche, joining those near the bottom of the slope who'd escaped unharmed. A few of them were trying to climb back up the steep hill to get to their companions. But who knew if or when the snow would shift again?

"I'm going with you."

"Jack, those slopes are very different from the one we're on now. I don't want to have to worry about you too."

"You won't have to." He motioned to the bottom of the hill. "I'll ski the rest of the way down and walk over. I've done some rock-climbing. I'll make my way back up. You can't handle that many injuries on your own."

He was right. Until help arrived, she was going to have her hands full.

"Okay, go."

He started down the hill, while Mira made the call to the office. They would already know about the avalanche, but she wanted to make sure they knew the numbers. When Chuck Miller answered, she was brief and to the point. "About seven skiers buried. Call in search and rescue. Tell them to get Anson Graves and his dog up here, just in case."

She'd worked with the search and rescue expert before. He was the best there was. She only hoped he could get here in time.

Pushing off with her poles, she began to quickly make her way across the slope in sweeping lateral motions—like a sailboat that had to go against the wind. She used the downward momentum to drive her to the side. The off-piste areas were more challenging, but Mira had been on the slopes all her life. They were nothing she hadn't done before. It wasn't normally under these kinds of circumstances, though.

One of her skis skated over a buried rock, and she lurched sideways before correcting herself, her heart loping across her chest for a few seconds. In the silence that followed the avalanche she could now hear muffled screams of those on the affected

slope, as well as cries of dismay from other nearby skiers. Her ex caught up with her halfway to the site.

"What can I do?"

This wasn't the time for a war of words or anything else, and they both knew it. She needed as much help right now as she could get. "Gather up some of the other instructors and send them over to the slope. We have to see if we can get those people out, and fast." If the avalanche victims weren't rescued almost immediately, they'd die.

"On it." He didn't question her authority, just thumbed his phone and spoke to someone, before starting back down the slope with a quick salute.

Her glance went back to Jack. He was already at the bottom and had his skis off, leaving them where they were while he sprinted toward the other slope in his heavy boots.

Mira skied faster, taking a group of moguls in her stride as she stayed the course.

She glanced at her watch, keeping track of time as she knew oxygen deprivation caused by suffocation was a very real concern for avalanche victims, although the cold was one thing in their favor in that respect.

Two minutes. One more off-piste and she'd be there.

She took a deep breath as she ventured off the groomed slopes and onto the rugged terrain that separated her from her patients. This was one of the most challenging off-piste sections on the resort, and she'd only attempted it a couple of times. It was also

one of the reasons she'd insisted that Jack not follow her across. She couldn't concentrate on getting to where she needed to be if she had to rescue Jack from a bad spill or crash.

She bypassed one tree, only to whizz past another so close that a branch caught at the sleeve of her jacket. She had to jerk her arm free to avoid being dragged sideways and off her feet. The sound of ripping fabric told her it had worked.

A few more yards of bumps and swerves as she made her way across, and then she came out of it, sailing onto the much smoother section to her left. The slope was steep and slick and it still took most of her concentration to navigate around unstable clumps of snow. Keeping her gaze focused on where she'd seen the small group of people go down, she sliced to a halt when her skis bogged down in a thicker drift. A few skiers had made it back up and were out of their skis, poking their poles into the snow. One person was digging about ten yards away.

"Found someone here," said the man closest to her.

Mira clicked out of her skis and slogged several yards in snow up to her thighs before dropping to her knees beside the man.

"Try to uncover the face first," she directed.

She immediately joined in scooping snow, hitting a jacket a few inches down. A black zipper ran down the middle of it. Thank God the person wasn't face down. They quickly worked their way up and found a young woman. Mira leaned down to feel her pulse and listen for signs of breathing.

There! A gasped breath and the flicker of eyelids.

"Can you stay here and uncover her as much as possible? Don't move her at all, though. I'm going to see if I can help some of the others."

Robert and Jack arrived within seconds of each other, and while Robert sent the other man an angry glare he didn't question his right to be there. He'd probably already heard that Jack was a doctor. And judging from the snide comment he'd lobbed at him on the way down the slope, her ex had overheard her and Ellory's conversation in the bar and knew about that stupid resolution of hers.

No time to worry about any of that right now. They had to get these people out of the snow. And fast. "Robert, I saw at least two others go down about twenty yards to your left."

"Right." Her ex headed toward to the spot.

"Help!" yelled someone to her right. "I found someone, but he's not breathing."

Suffocation and crush injuries were their biggest worries right now, although the last person she'd found had been closer to the surface than she'd expected.

Jack motioned to her. "I'll get it, you keep looking."

Waiting to make sure he successfully navigated to the location, she paused and her cellphone went off. She mashed the button. "Can't talk now."

"Anson's five minutes out." Chuck's voice came through.

"Got it."

She dumped her phone back into her jacket pocket while she

fought her way through snow that was now almost hip deep as she joined in the search. No one that she'd seen had been much higher up on the slope than she was now, and even if they had been they'd have been knocked downhill some way from the force of the snow.

"Any idea how many are missing?" she yelled into the general melee. She'd counted seven, but it had been hard to tell how many had actually gone down.

"I don't know, but my brother is in here somewhere," a woman called back to her from ten yards down the hill.

Thank God this was a more advanced slope. She'd seen no children on it when that thing had come thundering down the mountain.

She pushed toward the woman, whose black tracks of mascara bore witness to her distress. "Where was he when you last saw him?"

"Right here." The woman pointed her pole in an arc.

"Okay, let's start there and work our way down, okay?" She came alongside the distraught woman. "Side by side." Glancing again at her watch, she saw that five minutes had now passed. Time was running out.

She turned her ski pole upside down so she didn't hurt whoever was down there.

Chop, chop, chop. She pushed the metal end into the ground repeatedly, hoping to hit something that was obviously not snow.

Chop, chop, chop.

In the background, she heard others as they shouted that they'd also found someone, but she couldn't worry about that right now. All of her father's ski instructors were certified in CPR, and they knew the drill about not moving anyone. Her biggest worry right now was finding everyone who was missing before they suffocated.

Chop, chop, thunk. There!

About two feet beneath the white surface, she'd hit something soft. "Here!"

The woman beside her immediately joined her in digging as fast as they could.

They uncovered a hand. Pale and still.

Move up. Hurry, Mira!

The angle of the arm told her the victim was pointed down the slope, but the snow had buoyed the back part of him up, so that his head was buried deeper than the rest of him. It seemed like forever before they'd dug down far enough to reach him. Hair. Hell. He was face down. Mira frantically scooped deeper, digging around his face, until she could reach beneath him.

No breath. She felt the side of his neck. No pulse.

She swore under her breath.

"We need to turn him over." And pray he didn't have a fracture along his spine or neck. If they couldn't get him breathing, that wasn't going to matter, though. He'd die.

It took an additional fifteen seconds before they'd uncovered enough of his body to try to shift him. He was a big guy. And

heavy.

"Get on this side with me."

They both tried to lift him to turn him over, but there was so much snow packed tightly around him. Tears of frustration came to her eyes. Then Jack was there beside them.

She threw him a look of utter gratitude.

Getting between her and the victim's sister, he said, "Grab hold of whatever you can on his far side. We need to pull him up sideways first, in order to flip him. There's not enough room to turn him where he is. On three."

"One, two...*three*!" They all pulled as hard as they could. The man budged, started to turn, and then Mira slipped, losing her grip on the man's jacket. She swore, louder this time.

"Again," she said.

Robert evidently saw their struggles, because he came up beside her. "Anson's just gotten here. Let me help."

He urged the man's sister to move so he could take her place.

Jack didn't even spare her ex a glance. "On three."

This time, when he hit three, they pulled and the victim flipped onto his side as the trio used the momentum to haul him up out of the hole.

Mira glanced over the surface of the snow long enough to see that Anson and his dog were indeed on the scene, the rescue animal already with his nose to the snow.

Jack did what she'd done a moment ago and checked for a pulse. "Nothing. You start chest compressions."

In the background, the man's sister started crying.

"Robert."

That was all she needed to say. Her ex moved toward the woman to keep her back, while she and Jack worked. She ripped open the guy's jacket, no longer worried about hypothermia or anything that didn't relate to his heart or lungs.

Quickly finding the sweet spot on his chest, she lapped one hand over the other, her palms thrusting downward in quick bursts as she counted aloud. His body sank in the snow a few inches from the force of her compressions, but the weight helped pack it down to form a solid enough surface to do some good. "One, two, three..."

No liquid came out of the man's lungs as she continued compressions, so his airway wasn't blocked by melted snow. Jack had evidently known to wait a few seconds to make sure of that fact, because by the fifth beat he'd tilted the man's head back and leaned over him to give mouth-to-mouth between her measured pulses. He lifted his head long enough to say, "Tell me when you need me to spell you."

She couldn't think about that or anything else right now, except what she was doing. With each push of her joined palms she chanted, "Breathe, breathe, breathe," willing the victim to fight. To live.

About a minute later she heard the most beautiful sound in the world. A gasp. Then a cough. Mira stopped what she was doing and reached for his neck, only to find that Jack's fingers were

already there. Icy cold without his gloves, but real and alive. Just like their victim, whose eyes now moved beneath his eyelids.

Mira glanced at Jack. Without his quick thinking they might still have been trying to figure out how to turn the man in that hole. A few minutes longer and this scene might have ended very differently.

Jack's gaze met hers, and he gave a quick nod of triumph. She couldn't hold back her smile or her mouthed, "Thank you."

Her fingers were still over his, and he turned his hand and captured them, giving a quick squeeze. The backs of her eyelids prickled, before she forced herself to pull back. Robert still stood over them, his arm around the victim's sister.

"Thanks," she said to her ex. "Can you go find out who else needs help? Check with Anson and see what he wants us to do."

Robert's jaw tightened, and he eyed her for a second before giving a stiff nod and moving away.

Motioning to the woman, who was staring down, both hands over her mouth, Mira said, "He's breathing. Why don't you sit next to him and talk to him while we check him for other injuries?"

The woman dropped to her knees, her hands reaching into the depression in the snow and cupping her brother's cheeks. "Marty, I'm right here."

The man's eyes finally opened, focusing on the woman. He tried to say something but his sister stopped him, tears streaming down her face. "Let them make sure you're okay."

Mira worked on one side of the victim while Jack stayed on the other. No obvious broken bones, and by the way the man's limbs were starting to move around, his spinal cord was intact. Thank God, after the way they'd had to haul him up. They still had to be careful, though. Just because he could move it didn't mean he was out of the woods.

"Your other resus? Did you get him breathing?"

"Yes." He glanced at her. "They've accounted for everyone we know of. All doing okay."

Mira lifted her head so she could look over the snow. The woman she'd dug up at the beginning was now on her feet, someone braced beneath one arm as they watched the rest of the rescues. Anson and his dog were further to the right, far away from the rest of them. Could someone have been carried that far away?

It was as if Jack had heard her thoughts. "It reminds me of an undertow. It just drags you down and carries you with it."

She nodded. She'd never been around the ocean very much but she could see how the two might be similar in nature. Whether you suffocated in the snow or drowned, it was the same death. The same terror.

The man beneath them began struggling in earnest. "You need to lie still. You might have injuries we can't see."

His sister shushed him and gave him a fierce frown. Whether he was just exhausted or had realized what he was doing, he did as they asked.

"Can you zip his jacket back up?" Mira asked. "I don't want him to get any colder than he already is."

EMS arrived on the scene—several squads of men from the looks of it—swarming toward them, stretchers either in tow or folded into packs that were strapped to their backs. It was slow going, though, because this section of the ski resort boasted steep inclines geared toward the most experienced of their guests. But the rescue workers were prepared, the snow cleats attached to their boots grabbing at the surface, whether snowy or slick, with each step they took.

Jack climbed to his feet and made his way over to one of the workers, probably giving him an abbreviated version of what had happened.

A moment later a megaphone sounded through the group. "If you're with an avalanche victim, please raise your hand, and one of us will make our way to you."

Seven hands went up in all, including hers. Everyone was alive, from what she could tell.

Mira glanced anxiously at Anson to see if they were having any luck. She'd assumed there were only seven victims. Had she missed one somehow?

One of the emergency workers reached her. She recognized him. "Hi, Mike. Thanks."

"No problem. What've you got?"

She quickly went through the rescue and then helped get a fresh set of vitals and stabilize the patient's neck. Mike took the

pack off his back and unfolded it into a kind of stretcher-sled combo that could be eased down the hill.

Jack helped with another victim, while a handful of ski instructors helped with some of the others.

From around a hundred yards away Anson's dog gave a quick set of plaintive barks that sent a shiver through her. He'd found someone. She glanced down at her watch then closed her eyes and said a short prayer. Twenty minutes.

It had seemed like no time at all, they'd all been working so hard, and yet for whoever was buried it had been an eternity.

Jack reached Anson first and they went to work, shoveling snow. Mira cleared her current patient and got to her feet, giving the victim's sister a quick smile of encouragement to hide her own anxious heart. She made her way toward the pair, who'd now stopped digging. They'd located whoever it was.

Jack hopped down into the depression in the snow and did some quick maneuvering before his head disappeared as he knelt. In less than a minute he climbed back out again. Even from there she could see his tight jaw. The way he shook his head at Anson.

Oh, no!

She stopped where she was, her eyes shutting for a second or two. Then she wrenched her lids apart. There was still time. The snow could slow body processes down for a while. Jack knew nothing about the mountains, he could assume things that weren't necessarily true.

Surely Anson wouldn't give up that easily. Anger unfurled

within her and she moved quicker, her boots slipping a time or two as she tried to run through the drifts.

They were wasting time!

When she reached the pair, she snarled at them, "Help me get the victim up."

"It's too late." Jack grabbed her arm.

"It's not. The snow sometimes lowers the body temperature so that..." She glanced down at the victim and her words caught in her throat.

Snow-clouded eyes stared up at them from about three feet beneath the surface. And his neck...

She swallowed. Jack was right. There was nothing they could do.

The dog whined a time or two and pawed at the snow as if he didn't understand what they were waiting for. Anson dropped a hand onto the animal's head and gave him a quick scratch behind the ears, although when his eyes met hers they were grim. How often had the rescuer gone in search of a live person and come back with a body instead?

"Damn." She scrubbed her palms over her cheeks, surprised to find them moist and cold. "Let's get the others out first." She lowered her voice. "No one has mentioned not finding someone, and by now everyone at the resort must know about the avalanche. He's either here alone or someone's waiting back in one of the guest rooms. We'll need to see if he has some ID."

Jack came over to stand beside her. "Even if we'd found

him sooner, it wouldn't have changed anything. You know that, right?" He put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. "There wasn't enough time to clear the slopes before it hit, even if we'd started across right after you noticed the first movement."

"I know." She couldn't stop herself from leaning a little closer, and then glanced over at Anson. "Thank you for coming."

"Any possibility that anyone else could be under here?"

"I tried to keep count as the avalanche came down. I thought there were only seven people buried, but..." she motioned toward the victim "...this makes eight."

Anson nodded. "I'll go ask at the lobby to see if anyone is missing and then do one more sweep of the area." He paused. "I don't want to leave until we're sure everyone is out."

"Agreed," Mira said. "While you're at it, can you ask Security to start contacting the guests to make sure everyone is accounted for? My dad should be back by now."

"No problem."

"Thanks again."

As she watched Anson and his dog head down the slope, a shudder swept through her body. She was freezing cold, even with all her gear on.

Jack pulled her closer and eased her several yards to the right, away from the poor avalanche victim. Most of the other patients had either been transported or were in the process of being loaded onto stretchers. "You need to get back to the lodge."

"Not before everyone is out. It's part of my job—and it's the

right thing to do." She straightened. "But you go ahead. Thanks. You're not having much of a vacation, are you?"

"That's okay. Wasn't my idea to take a vacation in the first place."

He'd mentioned that before. Who came to a ski resort against their will?

A horrible thought came to her. "Are you married?"

He pulled back, dropping his arm from her shoulders and meeting her eyes with a frown. "Are you serious? Have you forgotten that sleigh ride?"

She swallowed. No. Not for a second. "That doesn't always mean anything." Who knew that better than she did? Her dad hadn't respected his vows, and neither had her ex. She and Robert might not have been married but they'd been heading that way.

"It might not mean anything up here, but it does where I come from."

"Meaning?"

"Evidently people up here on the slopes play loose and easy with their marriage vows."

And how did he know...? Oh! Mrs. Botox.

"Those kinds of people live all over the world. Even in Texas."

"Well, I'm not one of them." His eyes, dark with some intense emotion, stared right through her for a second before he took a deep breath. "Sorry. That was uncalled for."

Yes, it had been. But she could see how he might have taken her words. "It's okay." Another shiver went through her. Her

hands went into her pocket to find her gloves, only to remember that she'd ripped them off to do chest compressions earlier. They were still over on the other side of the slope.

She turned, thinking she was going to retrieve them, when Jack pulled his out of his pocket. "Put these on."

"Oh, but—"

"Do it." He touched his fingers to hers. "I'm not as cold as you are."

It was true. His hands weren't warm, by any stretch of the imagination, but next to her stiff fingers his were like a tropical paradise.

One she didn't dare think about right now.

"Okay." She slipped her hands into the thickly lined fingers, smiling when Jack pulled her hat further down over her ears. "Thanks."

"No problem." He smiled back at her. "Lady, I have to tell you, you have a strange idea of a date."

"I wouldn't exactly call this a date." It may have started out that way, but it certainly hadn't ended the way she'd envisioned.

"Neither would I." His thumb slid along her cheek. "It's one thing after another when you're around."

"Believe me, I'd rather there were no such things as avalanches." Her eyes went to the shovel sticking up out of the snow near the last victim. The whole lodge would mourn the man as if he were one of their own. These guests, even though they knew the risks of winter sports, never expected it to happen to

them. And as careful as her father was, Mother Nature could—and sometimes did—trample right over the resort's precautions. "I hate that this happened."

"I know." His arm went back around her.

It felt good. Comforting. She was used to being the only doctor around this place. It was nice to have someone to share this particular burden with. And she honestly wasn't sure she could have handled this on her own. The worst thing she'd encountered other than the odd ski injury had been a norovirus outbreak that had swept through the ski resort three years ago, making a third of the guests and staff sick before they'd finally been able to contain it.

"Thank you for your help."

"I'm glad I was here."

"Even if being here wasn't your idea?" She couldn't help tossing his earlier words back at him.

He was tugging her further away from the site when two rescue workers arrived with a basket and some more digging equipment.

Now that most of the patients had been cleared from the area, the other skiers had also headed down, no doubt urged by the ski instructors to clear this part of the mountain until further notice.

Anson came by and gave her a half-wave and said her dad and some others were working on contacting the rest of the guests. He was fairly confident no one else was under the snow, so he was headed back to the station to check in and fill out a report.

As soon as he was gone, Jack turned to her. "It might not have

been my idea to come but I'm beginning to think my coach might have known what he was talking about."

"And what was that?"

He hesitated, then finally said, "Long story."

"Fair enough." He didn't owe her any explanations. He was simply man number five. It was better if she didn't know anything about him—well, except for the marriage thing. She'd have to remind herself to verify the marital status of any other man she went out with. She'd looked for the obvious thing, like a ring, but hadn't bothered doing that with anyone else.

Then again, she hadn't expected to go out multiple times with the same man.

She frowned. Now was probably as good a time as any to make her escape and move forward, otherwise she would just end up in the same old rut. Attracted to a man who wasn't what she needed him to be. He'd said it himself. He hadn't wanted to come. Preferred the surf to the snow.

Definitely not compatible. If she hadn't been able to make it work with a man—make that *three* men—who were from the Silver Pass area, why would she even think about getting attached to someone who not only wasn't from here but had no interest in sticking around?

Before she could say anything, though, he reached over and gripped her hand. "Walk you down?"

"Thanks. I'd like that."

Okay, so she could put off this whole separation process

until she got back to her room. She wasn't even going to worry about dinner. Then, with their date officially over, she could sleep knowing this little bump in the road had been successfully navigated. She could tell Ellory she was moving on.

Life would continue, and Jack—no matter how tempting it might be to linger for a while and let him throw that rare smile her way—would be in her rear-view mirror, his reflection growing smaller and smaller with each day that passed. Until, finally, he was gone. Back to his home team. Back to his life with his coach and his friends.

And out of her life, forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MIRA HAD DESERTED HIM.

With dinner behind them and the night closing in fast, Jack sat at the bar, wondering exactly how he'd gotten here. After the shock of the avalanche and subsequent rescue efforts had worn off, it would have been easy to just cancel their plans to eat at the restaurant and go back to their rooms. Alone.

And yet once they'd come off that slope and stood in the arched doorway of the lodge, the words had come out of his mouth of their own volition. "Are we still on for dinner?"

She hadn't paused, even for a second, before saying yes.

Jack wasn't sure why he wanted it so badly, but he did. Maybe he wasn't quite ready to be by himself. Seeing that person's death earlier today had shaken him. Would someone grieve for the victim the way he'd grieved for Paula?

He ordered his first drink of the trip—other than that spiked hot chocolate—from the bartender and took a healthy swallow.

His wife had helped so many people. Worked tirelessly for her young patients, even when hope had seemingly been lost, to make sure they'd been cared for and comfortable all the way to the end. And he'd taken that away from her—had taken it away from those she could have helped in the future. She had been brilliant in her field. One of the best. And now she was gone.

All because he'd wanted to play doctor with a damn sports team. Lining up their specialties side by side, he'd known which one gave more value to mankind. But none of that had mattered at the time. Because he'd wanted that job. Had wanted it badly. And now none of it meant anything.

He'd seen that same special spark that Paula had possessed in Mira today. She'd been up on that mountain when the avalanche had hit. No one had known if that snow was going to shift again or not. She could have simply called in the rescue teams and waited for them to get the survivors out before she'd begun treatment.

But she hadn't. She'd been one of the first on the scene, digging right alongside the relatives and friends of the victims. And the way she'd run toward him and that rescue worker, fire in her eyes as she'd yelled at them to pull the last man out of the snow, saying there was still hope.

Something his wife had said constantly. *There's always hope.*

Until, of course, there wasn't. Until a plane—a plane Jack had asked her to be on—had gone down in a ball of fire. Until hope

had been snuffed out by reality.

Just like in Mira's eyes when she'd looked into that hole in the snow and seen the truth. That there had been no hope.

His brain headed down familiar dark paths. He took another sip of his drink. Relished the steady burn of the alcohol as it trickled down his throat and hit his gut.

Dinner had been good, helping him relax and forget all the reasons he should be avoiding Mira like the plague. She'd made him smile time and time again, her animated expressions changing with each subject. She was passionate and beautiful, and he'd decided he could watch her talk all evening.

Only now she was on the other side of the room, talking just as passionately to her friend, the blonde.

Ellory, wasn't it?

An argument? No, he didn't think so. It looked more like Mira was trying to get the other woman to agree with her, palms facing up, their faces close together. In fact, it resembled some of the huddles he'd seen during games, when players had planned their next move.

Except this was hardly a play on a football field.

Break! A quick hug and a smile and then they were done.

Sometime during dinner, as he'd watched her laugh, he'd had some very bad thoughts. He'd entertained them all the way up to the last few minutes when guilt had wormed its way through him, devouring everything in its path. It happened every time he let his guard down.

Mira glanced his way and her shoulders went back, as if she'd come to some kind of decision.

What the hell?

As quickly as she'd left she was back, standing in front of him, hands on her hips, eyes on his face.

"What?" he asked, setting his glass on the bar.

"Nothing." She stopped for a second and cleared her throat. "Just seeing if I can get up the nerve."

"The nerve to...?"

"Ask you if you want to get out of here."

The words were so unexpected they shoved the breath from his chest. He sat on his barstool like a lump for several seconds. Had he just walked into an alternate universe? One where his wildest imaginings suddenly became reality?

Whatever universe it was, his body decided it much preferred this one to the one he'd just been in, reacting to the innuendo with a slow unfurling of a certain flag.

He decided to make sure he wasn't mistaken before he let his thoughts run any further ahead.

"Get out of here and go where?"

"Your room. My room. Take your pick." She looked closer at his face, her brows puckering. "Unless you don't want to."

Nothing plainer than that. In fact, the man sitting on the next barstool looked at her so quickly that his head nearly flew off his neck. And the expression on his face? *Hey, buddy, if you're not going to take her up on it, then clear out.*

Like hell!

"My room." Better stick to his own territory. Only...

Damn. He hadn't brought anything with him. This whole vacation had been taken under duress, he certainly hadn't expected to have a woman invite him back to her room.

The guy on the barstool was still ogling Mira from behind. Jack sent him a scowl that told him to back off in no uncertain terms. Then he threw some bills onto the bar, got off his seat, and grabbed Mira by the hand. In the distance, her friend watched them.

So what?

He got as far as the hallway and then glanced down the length of the space to make sure they were alone. Then he moved in. Close. Chest to her breasts with just enough pressure to send a jolt of desire arcing through his gut.

His cheek slid along hers, scooping up her scent—vanilla and snow—and absorbing the soft feel of her skin. He journeyed toward her ear. Arrived.

"Now, see, Mira, you have me at a disadvantage. I want nothing more than to drag you back to my room, but unless your gift shop carries...certain items..."

"I have no idea, but it doesn't matter." Her head went back, and she stared at him for a second. "Ellory thinks I need to sleep with you. Get whatever..." she motioned between the two of them "...this is out of my system."

Ellory. The friend.

So he wasn't the only one who'd felt the sparks. Who'd experienced the chemical heat that sizzled any time they were together. "So, am I 'in' your system?"

"Definitely. She thinks it's why I can't move..." She shook her head. "I don't normally do flings, but I think I want to make an exception in your case. So if you're clean, I'm on the Pill."

On the Pill.

Because she'd been sleeping with that oaf of a ski instructor?

Not fair, Jack.

Another thought came to him. "Are you trying to make your ex jealous?"

He couldn't say for a certainty he would refuse to go with her, even if that were the case. He'd wanted this woman ever since she'd stood over him in the snow and offered him her hand.

Why? Why now?

He had no idea, unless it was because he was out of his comfort zone—away from his team. Maybe he was just tired of wallowing in a vat of grief and self-pity. Paula would be horrified to see what he'd become.

Mira shook her head. "My ex will remain my ex for evermore. But if you're trying to get me out of the mood, it's working."

She started to slide out from beneath his body, and instinct had his hands going to the wall on either side of her, caging her in. "Sorry. Yes, I'm clean. And if you're looking for a fling, I'm your man." His lips found her jaw and skated along it. "I have to warn you, though. I wasn't expecting company, so my room

might be a mess."

Tilting her head back as he made his way down the side of her neck, she murmured. "If you think I'm interested in looking at your...room, you're very much mistaken."

Part of his anatomy went haywire at the image of her reclining on his bed looking him over and putting her own special seal of approval on him. "I think I can find other things to occupy your thoughts."

She relaxed. "Think so?"

"Pretty sure."

He forced himself to stand upright, although all he wanted to do was take her mouth and make it his. But he could wait. He *would* wait.

Wrapping his fingers around her hand again, he started down the hallway toward the elevators. "Do you have to check on any of those patients from the avalanche?"

"They've all been taken to the hospital. The staff has my cell number, if they need to get in touch with me."

He got into the elevator and punched the button for the top floor. Mira's eyes widened. "You're in one of the penthouse suites?"

"My coach, remember? I didn't book the room."

She leaned against the wall. "Your coach has good taste. And a hefty bankroll."

He snagged her hips and dragged her against him. "They spared no expense."

"They must like you an awful lot," she murmured, looping her arms around his neck.

The last thing he wanted to do was talk about his coach, or how much they were or weren't willing to fork out to get him back up to snuff. "And what about you? Do you like me?"

A shadow went through her eyes before it was gone. "I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't."

At least they both knew where the other stood. Jack didn't have to worry about Mira getting hung up on him or deciding she wanted to take things to the next level, because he couldn't. Not now. Probably not ever. She wanted a fling. And he'd been thinking that it had been too long since he'd been with a woman. They were both on the same page. And after tonight they could turn that page and never revisit it.

* * *

Mira waited outside the door as Jack slid his keycard into the lock and listened for the familiar snick as it released. She'd been in these rooms before, of course, but never as a guest. She'd forgotten that pro football players made millions of dollars a year. But even if she'd remembered, she wouldn't have expected Jack to make as much.

Besides, after her talk with Ellory—where Mira had grilled her about whether or not she'd told Robert about their bet—she'd wondered if her friend was right. Whether a naughty romp with the man in question would solve her problems once and for all—or if that was a plan doomed to fail. She was attracted to Jack.

Very attracted. Which is why she couldn't quite move on to the next guy.

So, Ellory's answer? Sleep with the man. Kind of a wash-that-man-right-out-of-your-hair move that would clear him from her system. It had worked for Ellory in the past, so it should be just as easy for her.

Jack pushed the door open, and she stepped into the large marble foyer. While the downstairs portion of the lodge was a study in rustic furnishings, this room went in the other direction, its sleek, modern touches hinting at wealth rather than shouting it from the rooftops. From the white plush carpet to the glimmering stainless-steel accents, the room reflected the snowy setting outside.

He shoved the door shut with his foot. "I thought you weren't interested in my room." The words had a smile behind them, but she jerked around to look at him anyway.

"I'd forgotten how nice the penthouse suites were." Where was that mess he'd mentioned? The room seemed as clean as a whistle.

He glanced around. "They are nice." Motioning toward the tiled wet bar on the other side of the living room, he asked, "Do you want a drink?"

Yes. She did. And now that she was here she was beginning to wonder what she was thinking. She couldn't believe she'd actually propositioned the man, something she'd never done in her life. But she hadn't been able to think of a way to casually head him

in this direction, and she had no desire to hang around the bar, hoping he'd make a move. So she'd decided to pull an Ellory and take the bull by the horns.

And now that she had him? What exactly did she do with him? Tell him to strip naked and get to work?

A drink. She'd start with that. "I'd love one. Red wine, if there's one of those mini-bottles somewhere around."

"I'm afraid this room doesn't have a mini-anything. It's all big."

He was right on that front. Her eyes went to the man as he walked toward the bar. The room was huge, but Jack's height and frame made it seem almost ordinary. And that butt she'd admired a week ago...

She swallowed, changing her mind about the wine. "Jack?"

"Mmm?" He walked behind the bar and retrieved two glasses from a stand beside the sink.

"Would you mind if I skipped the drink?" She twisted her hands in front of her, wishing she was better at this whole seduction gig.

He set the glasses down, and brown eyes bored into hers. "I was just thinking the same thing." He leaned his elbows on the polished wood surface. "Come here."

On legs that were suddenly shaking she made her way toward him, until she was on the other side of the counter. He crooked his finger. "Closer."

She licked her lips then leaned over the surface until she was

within inches of him.

"Nice." One of his hands came up to cup the nape of her neck, fingers threading through her hair. He tugged her nearer until they were mouth to mouth. "Is this more along the lines of what you were thinking?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good." His mouth met hers with a sweet pressure that made her want to melt against him, made her wonder if she could leap across the barrier and grab handfuls of his shirt and haul him against her. But she didn't act on any of those thoughts. She stood there, leaning as close as she could get while his lips slid over hers time and time again. His teeth played with her lower lip, teasing it, until all she wanted was him hard against them, thrusting into her mouth like he'd done on the sleigh ride. Only tonight there was no Norm or Patsy to catch them in the act. It was just her and Jack. And this time she had no intention of stopping.

Her hands went up and caught his head when he started to move away from her mouth.

Uh-uh. That hadn't been nearly enough. She wanted him right there.

She eased him back to her mouth, and this time she opened, hoping to tempt him into sticking around for a while. With a low sound his hand tightened in her hair and the kiss morphed into something else. Harder. More demanding. His tongue pushed past her lips with a quick thrust that made her gasp. He filled her, head turning sideways so he could reach even deeper.

A moan worked its way up from inside her as he released the pressure, only to surge forward again. When he finally lifted his head she dragged in deep breaths, trying to clear her fuzzy brain.

"You're still too far away," he murmured. Taking her hand, he led her around the bar until she was at the spot he'd been standing seconds earlier. "Better."

He proceeded to drug her with several long, wet kisses that had her insides quivering with need. His hands slid down her sides, until he came to her waist, which he gripped. "When I say three, jump."

Her breathing still erratic, she somehow managed to spring up when he hit the number, finding herself perched on the glossy wood bar, looking down at him. When she frowned, wondering what he was doing, he backed up with a smile and then yanked his dark shirt up and over his head.

Ooh, she liked that. Her glance skated over his bare torso. Strong and muscular without being bulky, his tanned skin had obviously been kissed many times by the sun.

Surfer dude...football doc. That's right.

A smattering of dark hair started at his chest and flowed downward, narrowing until it was just a slim, fascinating line that disappeared beneath the waistband of snug black jeans. When her eyes finally came back up, she found him watching her. Her teeth gnawed her bottom lip when he came forward, his warm palms landing on her thighs just above her knees and slowly smoothing along the surface of her legs. Her mouth went dry the

higher he got, his thumbs grazing the sensitive area just inside her thighs.

Oh, man.

Then his hands were on her hips, and he jerked her forward until she was balanced on the very edge of the high bar, her thighs parting on either side of his chest. She felt open and exposed and the slow smile he gave her said that's exactly how he wanted her.

"Remind me to thank whoever put this bar in my room."

Since that was probably her dad, there was no way she was reminding him of anything.

He moved deeper between her legs and leaned over to plant a kiss on her stomach, sliding his hands beneath her shirt and pushing it up, until his lips grazed bare skin rather than her white tee shirt. His tongue dragged up her stomach, her muscles rippling in the wake of his touch.

Almost against her will, her eyes fluttered closed and her fingers went to his shoulders as he continued to kiss his way across her belly. When he reached the hip that lay just above the top edge of her jeans, he nipped at the bone, sending a quiver of electricity arcing right down to the parting of her legs. She ached for some type of pressure, but there was only air between her and his chest with no way of inching any closer. Not unless she wanted to fall off the bar. And there was no way she wanted to distract him from his current task.

His fingers went to the button on her jeans and had it open within a second, the zipper following soon afterwards. For once

she was glad she'd put on feminine lacy panties and not her utilitarian black cotton undies.

As if reading her thoughts, his growled "Nice" hit her ears, making her smile.

The smile disappeared when he looked up the length of her body. "I'm going to need your help for a second. You lift, and I'll slide."

Why that raised a decadent picture, she had no idea, but the image of her hips coming up while he slid home swamped her brain, making it difficult to obey his command.

Lift. He said lift.

Bracing her hands on either side of her hips, she lifted up while Jack tugged her jeans down her thighs and then her legs as she returned to her seated position.

His fingers trailed around the top band of elastic on her panties and slid under the lace ties at the sides. "I am going to enjoy undoing these. But first let's take care of that shirt."

He stepped back, making her frown.

What?

Wasn't he going to help her with that as well? When his arms went over his chest she had her answer.

It was either put up or shut up. And she was definitely aiming for the "put up" side of the equation. As in...grabbing the bottom of her shirt, raising her arms and dragging it over her head. She then let it drop onto the floor behind the bar.

Her bra matched her panties, both peek-a-boo pieces of

lingerie that did a whole lot more peeking than anything else. She found her courage from somewhere. “Bra?”

“Not yet.” Stepping forward again, he planted his hands on her knees and slowly pushed them apart until he was back between them.

Too late, she realized what he was planning when his lips pressed against the skin of her rib cage, just below her bra, and moved on a slowly winding path that headed south. He reached her belly button, dipping inside for a second, then the tip of his tongue toyed with the upper edge of her panties.

“Jack.”

Plea? Or protest?

She wasn’t sure. Only knew that he’d finagled things so she couldn’t clamp her legs closed, and all the parts that mattered were well aware of that fact, pulsing with a heavy need she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

His fingers came up and found the ends of the ties on either side of her underwear. “Do you want me to stop?”

If she said yes, it would be all over. He hadn’t said it, but she knew herself well enough to know it was true. She’d be too embarrassed to continue. And in truth she didn’t want him to quit. Wanted him to show her exactly what he wanted from her.

And she had a feeling she wouldn’t be sorry.

“No. Please, don’t stop.”

His eyes closed for a beat or two, hiding those gorgeous brown irises. Then they opened back up. “I’m going to make you say

those words again in a very short while."

She gulped as a wave of awareness swamped her just as he tugged those ties and released the knots. Her underwear fell away, the front and back panels dropping to the bar. Jack wrapped his arms around her butt and pulled her hard against his chest, until that center part connected with his bare skin.

"Ah." She wanted nothing more than to grind against him in a frenzy but, as suddenly as he'd made contact, he pulled away again, the cool air flowing against her and making her squirm with need.

Lord. What was he doing to her?

"Take me to the bedroom." She was more than ready to have him right there, inside her, giving her the relief her body was starving for.

He kissed her stomach. "Soon." The warmth of his breath rolled across her skin. "Do you remember what I said up on that mountain?"

He wanted her to remember...*words*? At a time like this? With the heat his body was putting out? "No."

His hands were back at the tops of her thighs, thumbs pressing just enough to let her know he was there. "That's a shame. Because this would be such a great demonstration of that gentleman's rule."

Ladies first. That's what he'd said.

As his lips lowered to the top of her right thigh and kissed it, a shudder rolled across her. "That's not necessary. Let's just go

to bed. I—I want to."

"Oh, sweetheart. So do I. More than you can possibly know." He kissed the inner surface, teeth nipping at the tender flesh. "But I can't. Not yet."

He pushed her legs wider as his lips ventured closer to a very dangerous area. "Intoxicating. Your scent. The taste of your skin." The words muttered against her sent fire rushing through her veins and anticipation clenching through her stomach. Then he was there, and the shock of his tongue making gentle inroads made her go completely still. She had to prop herself up on her elbows to keep from falling backwards at the rush of sensation as he slid up and around, avoiding that one tiny part that craved his attention more than anything.

"Please. Jack. Oh, God."

He pulled her closer, until everything came into contact with his mouth all at once and her legs draped over his shoulders as he finally gave her what she wanted. Her back arched, and she couldn't stop herself from using the soles of her feet to push closer to that incredible source of pleasure. He didn't disappoint, his lips surrounding her and sucking gently—tongue rubbing against her.

That was all it took. She grabbed a breath and then let go with a loud moan, pumping herself against him as her body flashed red-hot, the lights in the room fading to almost nothing. Again and again her inner walls clamped, finding nothing to grab onto, and yet the ecstasy was still stronger than anything she'd experienced

in her life.

She lay there for a few seconds, mouth open, eyes closed, her lungs snatching for air and still feeling deprived.

When random thoughts finally started trickling back into her brain, she was stunned. Winded. Unnerved. Then she looked down to find his eyes on her, his mouth still poised between her legs.

She couldn't believe she'd let him do that to her. On a hotel-room bar, of all things. But she couldn't bring herself to regret it.

"You're bad," she said, unable to come up with a more sophisticated expression at the moment. "Very, very bad."

He laughed and stood, reaching behind her—to help her down, she thought. She was wrong. Snap went the clasp on her bra, and he eased her upright, removing the garment before he finally gave her a response.

"Sweetheart, you have no idea just how bad I can be."

CHAPTER NINE

HE SCRABBLED FRANTICALLY *at the heavy lid, trying to pry it open. How could she breathe inside there?*

She couldn't.

Putting the tips of his fingers beneath the smooth, shiny surface, he put all his force into opening it, breath whistling out through his teeth, muscles shaking with exertion as he strained upwards. His grip failed, hands slipping and throwing him back onto the plush carpet behind him. Soft music played in the background and people milled around, holding plates piled with food.

Why wasn't anyone helping him? Couldn't they see she was trapped?

He glanced around for something. Anything. His eyes fell on a crowbar that had been tossed up against the wall beside a dainty blue velvet couch. Crawling toward it, he grabbed it with both hands, the weight of it surprising him. He stood to his feet, dragging the metal bar behind him until he was in front of the box once again. The music got louder, and what had been soothing elevator music became a little more sinister in tone. Nothing that he could put his finger on exactly as it seemed to be the same tune.

Time was running out.

It was as if everyone else had finally noticed as well. They gathered around him, plates in hand, as he swung the heavy crowbar up, like he would one of those carnival hammers, and somehow got it to hook under the lid. He swallowed, suddenly not so sure about what he was doing. But they were all watching now. Waiting. Including a familiar blonde near the back of the room.

Where had he seen her before?

He shrugged and turned back to his task. Taking a deep breath, he silently counted to three.

One...two...

Three!

He put his full weight onto the metal rod, pushing down, down, down, the splintering of wood telling him he was getting somewhere. With a groan the top released and popped up an inch or two before the crowbar fell out of the groove. But no matter,

he'd broken whatever seal was holding it closed.

He dropped the tool beside him and once again placed his fingers beneath the lid and slowly lifted. The sheen of blue satin met his eyes, the color matching that of the sofa behind him. He pushed the top higher and saw the cool white skin of her cheek. Her nose. Her pale lips.

A shot of horror went through him as he finished opening the top of the box.

It wasn't Paula. And she wasn't sleeping.

Mira!

He let go of the lid, and it fell in a series of disjointed frames, like a stack of still shots ruffled with a thumb to form movement. Then it hit the lower half of the box with a craaack!

Jack jerked, his eyelids flying apart and meeting darkness. Panic swept through him. He reached next to him to see if Paula was still there. His fingers met warm flesh, and he let his head drop back to the pillow in relief.

Just a dream.

More thoughts sifted through. Memories of making love. Groaning as he'd touched each silky inch of her body. Trying to hold off the inevitable until it had become too much, and he hadn't been able to resist pouring himself into her. Holding her until his breathing had slowed.

He swallowed hard, his head turning to the left. But it hadn't been Paula.

It had been Mira last night.

It was still Mira this morning.

And he'd enjoyed himself far too much. Had laughed and played the wicked rogue to the very end.

Hell.

He threw his arm over his eyes and tried to figure exactly what had happened last night.

A fling.

Yes. She'd used that word. So had he, in his head.

The bed shifted as she moved. Sighed.

Jack couldn't resist turning his head again. It was morning, it had to be, but it was still some time before dawn, judging from the darkness that hovered around the edges of the curtains. His adjusting eyes caught the first glimpse of a bare shoulder peeking from beneath the thick duvet cover. Her back was to him, her arm curled up to rest on the pillow beside her face.

The face he'd just seen lying in a satin-lined coffin.

Damn. And his bottle of sleeping pills sat on the bedside table untouched. The "mess" he'd been worried about her seeing.

He swung his legs out of bed and sat on the edge of the mattress for several long seconds, trying to stamp out the images still flickering in his mind. To distract himself, he opened the drawer on the table and knocked the medicine inside it. No need to let Mira see them. She'd just ask questions.

Questions he couldn't answer.

Like why he'd put her in Paula's place. The dream was the same as always, but the face had changed.

It had to be the aftereffects of the avalanche. Of those people suffocating, and one of them dying. Mira had been there, so maybe that's why she'd been in the nightmare this time. His wife's coffin had been closed. In reality, there hadn't been a body to go in it as Paula had been incinerated along with most of the other passengers.

Or maybe Mira had been in his dream because his subconscious was telling him to slam the lid down on this particular relationship and to seal it tight. But they didn't have a relationship.

They had a fling.

Just the word had a calming effect on him.

He'd had fun. There was no crime in that.

So why did he feel like the lowest form of low?

Guilt, probably. A false sense of loyalty to a woman he'd loved and lost.

She'd want you to go on.

Yes, she would. But that's not what he wanted. He remembered all too well facing that polished coffin and wondering how he was going to pick himself up and go on living.

Never again.

Standing, he made his way to the bathroom, suddenly wishing they'd gone to her room instead. Then he could just quietly get dressed and let himself out. No awkward goodbyes. No wondering if you should say thank you or I'm sorry.

He took his time, brushing his teeth and showering, then

toweling off, all the time rehearsing exactly what he was going to say when he opened that door. But all he could see was the way Mira's back had arched like a cat as she'd moaned.

Please, don't stop.

Yes, he'd made her say it again. And where male pride should be, there was a slight sense of something else. Shame?

No.

He wasn't sure what the emotion was, but he didn't like it. It felt like something was poised to break loose, like that snow on the mountain that had gotten heavier and heavier until it had finally thundered down that slope, wiping away anyone in its path.

And from what Jack could see, he was standing right in front of it. Only it wasn't snow. But something just as devastating.

Staring at himself in the mirror, he wrapped a towel around his waist, wishing he'd thought to bring in a fresh set of clothes. Getting dressed would send an obvious hint that the night was over and that it was time to make their way back to reality and their own separate beds.

Except that tiny images of the pleasure he'd given and received last night circled in his head, bringing with them a whole new set of ideas. Ones that whispered that this was only a fling, no need to fear. Just get back in there and do a little more flinging.

The more he thought about it the more he relaxed. Why not? He wanted her. Wanted to slide his hands over that lithe body and roll her beneath him again. She'd seemed to like it as much

as he had. In fact, there was a sore spot on his shoulder he was pretty sure had been made by Mira's nails as they'd reached yet another pinnacle.

Yes. He wanted that. Wanted more of those scratches. More of those kisses.

It was okay. The dream had been nothing more than the stupid workings of his mind and that avalanche.

He undid the towel and let it drop to the floor, his body already anticipating what he wanted to do to her next.

Sweetheart, I hope you're ready.

He turned out the bathroom light so it wouldn't disturb her, then carefully opened the door. He was halfway across the room when he realized the bed seemed a little flatter than it had been. He frowned, moving closer. It looked different because it *was* different.

Mira was no longer there under the covers. His eyes skated around the room, going through the door to the living area and seeing just a silent hotel room.

No sound. No flash of movement.

He glanced at the floor next to the bed. No clothes. Although his were now folded and placed neatly on the seat of a chair on the other side of the room.

She was gone.

She'd done exactly what he would have done had he woken up in her room that morning. She'd crept out of bed and thrown on her clothes while he'd been in the bathroom. And then she'd

turned tail and raced as fast as she could out of the door and out of his life.

* * *

Sleep with him, she'd said. *It'll do you both good,* she'd said.

Mira slammed her hairbrush down on the small vanity in her room and berated herself for running away like a coward. It would have been better to just lie there and pretend to be asleep, and then when Jack came back into the room give a big stretch as if she'd just woken up. She could have nonchalantly said she had to get dressed for work and say, "Thanks for everything."

Yeah, like propping her up on the bar and making her see stars.

In reality, she hadn't slept a wink once they'd made love a second time—in his bed this time. She'd lain awake for hours, totally blown away by what had happened between them. Rather than kick the attraction in the teeth and send it skidding down the road, it was now crouched in the left-hand corner of her mirror, grinning at her with that all-knowing smile. No matter how many times she blinked, it was still there.

Maybe because the smile belonged to the stuffed Cheshire cat Ellory had sent her for her birthday last year.

"Yeah. Keep grinning and it's under the bed for you."

When the smile remained where it was, she found the corners of her own mouth lifting. "Oh, Ellory. What have I done?"

But, of course, her friend wasn't there to tell her what she should do the morning after.

She wanted to see him again. Something she hadn't expected.

Gulping, she scrubbed her hand over her stomach. She was going to go and get all attached to him, she just knew it.

"Idiot."

She laid her head down on the dressing table and thought through all the options.

Option one: she could remain in her room for the next two weeks...or however long he was scheduled to be here.

Option two: she could wear a Gaga-ish mask and pretend she was musical royalty.

Option three: she could forget about this whole bet-slash-resolution thing.

But she knew Ellory would worry about her if she really did go and jump into a new relationship. Hell, she would be worried about herself, if it came to that. She had three failed relationships under her belt. *Serious* relationships. To jump into a new one almost on the heels of breaking her engagement to Robert...

Stupid.

Which brought her back to thinking up more options.

She yawned. Option four: she could fall asleep and hope she didn't wake up for a couple of weeks.

Or she could just be a grown-up and go up to him and say, "Hey. Thanks for last night. I had a lot of fun. See ya around."

Quick. To the Point. Truthful.

She liked it.

She dragged herself up off the chair and headed to the bed,

crinkling her nose at Chessie, who was still grinning madly at her. She knocked him sideways.

There. Just grin into the pillow for a while.

She decided to jump in the shower and try to pull herself together. As soon as she stepped under the spray she knew it was the right thing to do. The warm water helped soothe her nerves. Maybe she really would take a nap. Everything looked worse when you were tired. Scrubbing herself down with a soapy loofah, she tried to put what had happened last night out of her mind.

If she could just get his scent off her body and out of her head...

From a distance she heard her cell ring.

Please, don't be Jack. Not right now.

Despite her thoughts, by the second ring she'd sluiced off the rest of the soap and stepped out of the shower, feet slipping for a second on the bare tile floor in her hurry to get to the phone.

Damn, damn, damn.

She picked up the thing and glanced at the readout, adding a fourth "damn" for good measure. Robert. Not Jack.

"Hello?"

"Mira, are you free?"

Oh, Lord. Now what? If he thought they were getting back together he was mistaken. "Why?"

"Number Five is up here with me, and he might need some help."

"Jack? What happened?" Her heart started crashing around in her chest, making her vision swim for a second or two. Here she was agonizing over what they'd done last night, and he was already up on the slopes first thing this morning.

"He's fine. But someone fell off the ski lift and...uh...Dr. Perry says she has multiple broken bones. Can you get up here? EMS has already been called, but it'll be a little while, there's evidently a lot of ice after the freeze we had yesterday, and they're having to deal with some accidents on the roads. Your guy wants to stabilize the guest and then get her someplace warmer."

"On my way. Which slope?" She probably already knew. Jack wouldn't risk his life on one of the bigger ones.

"Grade two." There was a pause. "Mira, we think she was a jumper. There were a couple of witnesses who saw her go over."

Her heart stuttered.

A jumper. Oh, God. Every couple of years someone decided life was too painful to bear and threw themselves off the lifts and onto the slopes in a suicide attempt. Normally it was onto one of the more advanced slopes, though, as the lifts servicing those areas went higher.

Her throat was so tight she wasn't sure she'd be able to respond. But when she opened her mouth, somehow the words were there. "Give me a few minutes. I'll keep my cell with me, so call if there's any change."

Throwing the phone onto the bed, she rushed around yanking her clothes on and then her snow pants and parka. Her coat still

had a ripped spot on the sleeve—just like the shredded portion of her heart.

Please, let her be okay.

She searched around for her gloves for a minute or two, and then frowned at the unfamiliar pair she found in her pocket.

Jack's gloves. He'd given them to her after the avalanche yesterday.

Her throat tightened further.

Had that just been yesterday? It seemed like it had happened weeks ago.

In reality, there were plenty of accidents to go around at a ski resort, but not usually on a day when she'd gotten so little sleep. Although, with the adrenaline now coursing through her veins, she felt wide awake. Her hair was still wet, but it would have to stay that way for now. She hauled it back into a quick bun and secured a rubber band around it. She'd just pull a hat on and then her parka hood over the top of that. She could blow-dry it when she got back to her room later.

She knocked Chessie back upright. "Watch the room for me, okay?"

Five minutes later, she hurried out the door, telling the front desk where to reach her. She snapped on her skis. It would be faster to go up the lift and then ski down to their position. Slope number two. A little harder than the bunny slope but still an easy ride for beginners like Jack.

Sliding past those in line with an occasional murmured

"Excuse me", along with the fact that there was a medical emergency on one of the slopes, she cut to the front and allowed the next chair to scoop her up and carry her on her way. Her eyes scanned the area. There. About halfway up there was a small crowd of about five people. The one at the center of the group, nearest the patient, was Jack, the sun glinting off the lighter strands of his hair.

Her heart squeezed again.

At least the injured woman had someone capable helping her. As a sports medicine doctor he'd have specialized in orthopedics and be well versed on serious breaks. There could be no better person attending that patient, and that included her.

Impatient to get down there, she had to wait another three or four minutes for the lift to reach the top of the slope. Then she was off and with a couple of pushes from her poles was heading down the mountain at a good clip, mentally playing through her mind how far she had to go before she reached the scene. Thankfully the trip down was a lot faster than the trip up. She turned her body and skis sideways and skidded to a halt next to the little group.

Robert nodded at her from the edge of the ring, where his job was to keep gawkers at bay. She'd really have to say something to him about using Number Five when referring to Jack. Yeah, yeah, she'd referred to him that way in her head as well, but that was so she could keep some emotional distance.

A lot of good that had done.

Right now, though, that was the least of her worries.

She knelt beside him, noting that he had several splints laid out and was currently binding one to the patient's arm. The girl — Oh, Lord, and that's all she was. A teenager. On her back, with her eyes open wide, she whimpered in pain as Jack worked on her. The sleeves on both her jacket and her sweater had been slashed up past her right elbow, revealing a bloody spot on her forearm that looked ominous.

Compound fracture. A hint of pearly bone protruded from the site.

Dragging in a shuddered breath, she murmured, "What have you got?"

He glanced up, and his lips tightened for a second then he said, "Stacy Painter, sixteen. Broken right radius, compound at the ulna, and two fractured femurs—both at the neck, from what I can guess, based on her leg position. And she has tenderness on her right side as well...possible fractured ribs."

She closed her eyes at the mention of the femur fractures. "At the neck" meant the bones had broken off at the ball where they went into the socket. And if those sections went too long without oxygen, it could mean a double hip replacement. In a teenage girl.

Now wasn't the time to think of that, though. They needed to have her ready to transport once the EMS crew arrived. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm stabilizing the compound fracture and need to protect it. But I've got her radius and hips to deal with." He glanced up at

her again. “We have to do this without any meds. Can you talk to her while I work?”

No pain meds. She knew that was protocol when they didn’t know what a patient’s other injuries might be, but it had to agonizing for Stacy to have Jack manipulate her bones. It was one of the worst parts of being a doctor. Once again, she found herself glad he was there.

She didn’t argue about what he’d asked her to do. Didn’t say she was a doctor too so she should be doing some of the work. She simply scooched over until she was by the girl’s head and then leaned down. “Hi, Stacy. My name is Mira. Dr. Perry is going to get you all fixed up.”

The girl blinked, a few tears breaking free and sliding down her cheeks. Then her eyes focused on Mira. “He—he said to call him Jack.”

Mira glanced up to find that the man’s eyes were on her. She pulled her attention back to the patient. “Is that so?” She forced a smile. “You’re lucky. He doesn’t let just anyone call him that.”

In fact, some of us call him Number Five.

She pushed that little voice away and continued. “What happened?”

The girl’s chin wobbled and another tear escaped. She wouldn’t quite meet her eyes. “I—I fell. Off the ski lift.”

Had she hesitated before using the word “fell” or was that her imagination?

There were witnesses.

Mira glanced up at the chairs going overhead—people in them were now staring at the scene below. It seemed like a long way down from here. The teen had to have tumbled a few feet once she hit, to have broken so many bones.

"Was the safety bar down on your seat?"

The girl winced as Jack touched her leg. "No. I—I forgot."

Another coincidence.

Oh, honey, what would drive you to do something like this?

She forced out her next words. "Do you know where your parents are?" Had anyone contacted them yet?

Stacy started to shake her head and then screamed, the sound ending on a group of sobs.

Jack had slid a long splint beneath her right leg and hip and was strapping it in place.

Sliding onto her side, so that her head was as close to Stacy's as possible and blocking the view of what Jack was doing, she said, "I know it's painful, honey. Dr...er, Jack is putting something called splints on your legs so they won't hurt as bad once the ambulance comes." Mira wanted to squeeze her hand, do something to comfort her, but she couldn't. The girl had bones broken in both arms. She settled for murmuring to her instead.

The girl closed her eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again, looking at Mira. "It was so stupid, you know?"

Jumping? Oh, God...

She was afraid to ask. Afraid the girl would clam up. So she settled for asking her earlier question again, while Jack secured

her leg. “I know. Can you tell me where your parents are?”

“At home. I’m here with my cheerleading squad.”

A cheerleader. It just kept getting worse. An injury like this could be life-changing for anyone, even more so for a high-school girl who needed strength and agility in order to do something she loved.

Down below, the sound of a siren came through.

Thank God. The EMS team was here sooner than she’d expected, despite the icy road conditions. She touched Jack’s shoulder. He didn’t look up from what he was doing but said, “I hear them. I want to get this other leg in place so they can take her right away.”

He glanced up, his eyes meeting hers. Mira saw her own fear and horror reflected back in his gaze. “Last one. Can you keep her calm?” he asked.

“We’ll be fine.”

He nodded then pulled a second long splint toward the girl. Thank heavens her father kept a full array of those on the premises for times like this.

“Get ready.” He took hold of the teen’s leg to stabilize it.

“Ahhhh!” The agonized shriek tore right through Mira’s insides, leaving her trembling. “It hurts,” the girl sobbed. “It hurts so bad.”

Mira touched her cheek. “I know, he’s almost done.” At least the pain brought with it a little good news. Stacy had feeling in her legs, so her spinal cord was intact. If she had landed differently

she could be paralyzed or worse.

She glanced up to see if Robert was still there. He was. Watching over the proceedings with a brooding expression. No time to worry about that now. "Robert, can you go find one of the girls' chaperones—?"

"Th-there aren't any." Stacy bit her lip. "A friend got us some driver's licenses. We came on our own."

Another layer of shock pressed down on her chest. "*None* of your parents know you're here? How many of you are there?"

"Five." She turned her head away. "Th-they think we're at a training camp."

This was bad. Very bad. That meant there were no "permission to treat" forms on file. No adults to give verbal permission. "Are you all the same age?"

Stacy nodded. "We skipped school yesterday. We're planning to go back tomorrow. But m-my boyfriend called to break up with me a few hours ago." She closed her eyes again. "So stupid. I thought it would change things."

Change things? As in her boyfriend might decide he didn't want to break up with her if he heard she'd tried to jump from a ski-lift?

Although on the one hand that made no sense, at least the girl seemed to acknowledge she shouldn't have done whatever it was.

She motioned to Jack to wait. He frowned, but stopped with the second splint still a few inches from the teen's leg.

"What's your phone number, honey?" They needed to get in

touch with her parents...or someone. Soon.

Stacy gave it to her, and Mira wrote it in the snow with her gloved finger. "You aren't going to tell them about any of this, are you?"

Any of this. The girls' secret little trip to the mountains? Or Stacy's fall?

"They're going to be happy you're safe." It was the only answer she could give at the moment that wouldn't upset her. Because, yes, the parents needed to know, as did the authorities. Especially if she really had attempted suicide. Although Mira hoped she was reading the girl right and that it had been a bid for attention from her boyfriend. Either way, she needed counseling.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes." That was what was important right now.

She underlined the digits she'd written in the snow then fixed her attention on Robert. "Can you read that?"

He nodded.

"See if you can find the rest of her group. And get a hold of her parents."

"Okay." He hesitated. "After this, we need to talk."

"Just find her parents. Nothing else matters right now."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jack's hands tighten on the splint and wondered what he was thinking. What she'd said was true. Nothing else mattered right now, except for treating their patient. She took a deep breath and murmured to the girl, laying a hand on her forehead, "Jack has to finish securing your

leg. Are you ready?"

The EMS guys were already trudging up the slope, one pulling a stretcher, while the other one carried a medical kit.

"Yes."

She nodded at Jack then looked at Stacy. "Keep your eyes on mine. It'll be over with in just a minute."

Behind her came the sound of something sliding on the snow. The splint as it went under her leg.

Stacy's head went back and she cried out, the hoarse scream rising along with the level of pain. Mira's eyes watered, despite the number of times she'd worked on injuries like this. But never on a minor who was up here all alone. Or one who'd decided being without her boyfriend had called for drastic—and very possibly permanent—measures. Mira smoothed the girl's hair as she settled into wrenching sobs once again.

She herself had made a drastic change, in the form of a resolution, because of what had happened with Robert. But never in her darkest moments had she thought of ending her life.

"Done." Jack's low word made her draw a relieved breath.

"The worst is over, Stacy." At least physically. Any other treatment would happen with pain medication at the hospital. But once her parents found out what the teen had done, the emotional pain would begin—along with healing, hopefully. The resort was required to report any suspected suicide attempts, which meant Stacy would receive a psychological evaluation at some point. She hoped the girl got the help she desperately needed.

The paramedics arrived, and Jack explained the situation while Mira stayed with the girl, talking to her. Jack had hoped to get her down to the hotel where it was warm, but at least this way she'd only have to be moved once.

The rescue workers secured Stacy's neck in case there were other injuries and gently slid her from the snow onto the rescue stretcher. Up on skids, the lightweight plastic frame would stabilize her back and keep Stacy off the snow, while allowing it to be pulled rather than carried, like a traditional stretcher.

Mira snapped her skis back on and spoke in a low voice to Jack. "I need to go down and see about the other girls. I think we'll need to call in child services."

Jack nodded. "I'll go with her to the hospital." He moved over to Mira and slid his fingers beneath her chin. He had gloves on—he must have rented them, because she was wearing his. "And then I'm going to come knocking on your door. And you're going to tell me exactly why I have the number five attached to me wherever I go. And what it means."

With that he was gone. Back at Stacy's side, helping fill the workers in on what he'd done and what he suspected.

Leaving Mira to ski the rest of the way down the hill and wonder exactly how she was going to tell him that he was man number five in a long line of men. And hope he'd understand why she now had to move on to number six.

CHAPTER TEN

A RESOLUTION.

Jack wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly. "What kind of resolution?"

In Mira's hotel room, he listened as she told him about what she and the blonde had decided to do for their New Year's resolutions.

"So..." His jaw hardened to stone. After five hours of sitting at the hospital while Stacy's parents drove up from Aspen to be with her, this wasn't what he'd expected to hear. "Sleeping with me was just part of some...*hilarious* New Year's prank."

"Oh, it was no prank." Her eyes skipped away from his. "And what happened between us wasn't supposed to happen at all."

Seated on her bed, clutching some kind of weird stuffed animal, he felt like he'd been sucker-punched, landing in some crazy dream sequence. One that was almost worse than his periodic nightmares.

"So you're only planning on dating twenty-five men. Not sleeping with every single one of them."

"Correction. I wasn't going to sleep with *any* of them."

Jack wasn't sure if he should be pleased she'd made an exception in his case or insulted. "Maybe I would have been better off going with Mrs. Botox last week. It would have been a whole lot less complicated."

A flash of what might have been hurt swept through her eyes before she blinked it away. "Maybe you should have."

Hell. This was not how he'd wanted this talk to go down. But never in his wildest imaginings had he thought she'd gone out

with him as part of some cockamamie scheme to date as many men as possible over the course of a year.

"Why did you decide on this for your resolution?"

"I was hurt. I didn't want to get involved with anyone after what happened with Robert."

"Your broken engagement."

She hesitated and then nodded.

"So you thought this was an acceptable alternative."

"No. It was a spur-of-the moment thing. Ellory and I have a tradition..." She shifted the animal on her lap. "Never mind. Anyway, she didn't think I could see it through to the end, thought I'd get stuck part way through."

"Really? It looks like you're doing pretty damn well to me." Good. Anger. At least that was an emotion he was well acquainted with. He grabbed it with both hands. "Exactly when were you planning on telling me about it?"

Mira's teeth came down on her lip.

Ah, so she hadn't planned on telling him at all. "Were you going to tell any of them?"

"No." The word came out as a whisper.

The thought of her parading around with three or four more men while he was still at the resort made his gut roll around inside him, although he wasn't sure why he cared. Probably just part of his male pride. As much as he didn't want to get involved with anyone on a permanent basis—in that, he and Mira were definitely alike—he also hadn't liked the way her ex had said he

wanted to talk to her.

He wondered what the man thought about what Mira was doing. Robert evidently knew about it, had actually called him by a damned number rather than by his name.

And that just made his anger burn brighter. Hotter.

"So it was okay for your ex-fiancé to know and get a couple of good chuckles out of it. I'm surprised you didn't give each of us a hand stamp. A kind of one-day pass into your magic kingdom."

She stood, dropping the stuffed cat onto the bed. "It wasn't supposed to be like that. It wasn't a joke. At least, not to me. I was trying to avoid being hurt again. Trying not to repeat the same mistakes."

Isn't that what he'd done—avoided getting involved with anyone to keep from losing them? But he hadn't decided to go out with a million different women in order to achieve that goal. He'd avoided going out with any of them, for the most part.

"So how does your ex know about any of this?"

She shrugged. "I think he heard me talking to Ellory about it at the bar one day."

"He wants you back, you know."

"He doesn't. Not really. He only thinks he does now that he can't have me." Her chin went up. "Remember that lady who came on to you? She and Robert are well acquainted."

That made him blink. Her ex had been with that bimbo? "You know that for a fact?"

"I didn't see them going at it, if that's what you mean. One

of the female instructors saw them making out in a supply shed. When I confronted him, he admitted to it. And then I found out there were others—some of them his students." Her eyes swam for a second before she forced back the remembered humiliation of breaking off their engagement amid the swirling rumors.

"Bastard."

"That goes without saying." She gave a hard smile. "But it's happened to me with more than one man. Since I seem incapable of telling the good guys from the bad, I figured it would be better if I stuck to 'shallow and meaningless' when it comes to dating. This year was supposed to show me how that's done."

It didn't make him feel any better that she lumped him into the shallow and meaningless category. "So, I'm man number five."

"Don't call yourself that."

"That's what you called me, isn't it? And your friend. And your ex."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

He picked up a hat on the table, the pink one she wore when out on the snow. "Are you going to date other men over the next couple of weeks? While I'm still here?"

"I don't know. It's not like I pick up a new guy every night."

No, but he doubted she had a lot of trouble attracting them. The woman was gorgeous. And smart. And her ex was an asshole above all others.

He suddenly knew what he was going to do.

"What if I asked you to stick to me for the remainder of my

stay?" He wasn't sure why, but if she was going to have random dates with random men, then he wanted to be the guy she went out with more than once. More than twice.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

He set her hat down then moved toward her, sliding his hands along her cheeks and easing her face up. "I want you to date me. Just a group of outings, nothing serious. You can show me the sights—when you're not on duty, of course. I'll get the vacation my coach was looking for, and you'll get a man who's not interested in passing anything but the time."

The words tasted bitter on his tongue as they passed over it, as if he were asking her to be a paid escort or something. He wasn't.

But he couldn't promise her any more than that. They were from different worlds. His wife had left a thriving practice to be with him. He'd taken her not only from the children she'd treated in California but from every sick kid who might have come under her care in the future.

He would never ask that of anyone again.

"Why would you want to do that?" Mira asked.

"For exactly the reasons I mentioned."

"You're not mad about the whole number thing?"

He wouldn't go so far as to say that. "It's not what I expected but, then again, not much in this life is."

"Remind me how long you'll be here."

He calculated the days in his head. "I have to go back in a little less than two weeks." And why did his stay suddenly seem

far too short?

Because the trip was working?

Or because he was an idiot?

She paused for several seconds and stared just beyond his face as if doing some heavy thinking. "These wouldn't be real dates. Just going around together and seeing the sights."

Letting go of her, he nodded. "If that's how you prefer to think of it, I'm okay with that." He caught her eye. "But you can't move on to number six until after I'm gone."

"Okay." She stepped closer and touched his arm. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. You weren't just a number last night."

The words went a long way toward soothing his bruised pride. "For what it's worth, neither were you."

And that was exactly what he was afraid of. His strange dream came back to him in all its horrifying detail. The fact that Mira's face had been the one he'd seen in that coffin seemed like a clear warning: *This is what could happen if you allow yourself to get too involved.*

Rational or not, it was the truth.

So what was he doing here, asking her to see him exclusively? Exactly what he'd said. It was time he poked his head back out into the world. Last night had at least shown him that much. He'd had a genuinely good time. And his reasons for sleeping with her hadn't been a whole lot purer than hers had been. He'd been upset by that death up on the slope, and so he'd turned to her in order to escape for a few hours. Wasn't that was she was doing? Trying

to escape a painful situation?

He could act all holier than thou about her resolution, but the reality was right there in front of him.

"So. If we're going to do this, what would you like to see first?"

How about what was under those clothes?

He wasn't going to say it, even if it was what he was thinking. And he already knew what she looked like naked. It seemed that having her last night had not quenched his thirst. In fact, the memories of them together just served to make him feel even more parched. So he would just ignore the feeling and hope it went away.

"Well, I didn't get a chance to see the rest of the property, since I wasn't exactly concentrating during our sleigh ride."

She smiled. "I think I can remedy that."

"Another sleigh ride?" One brow hiked up. He didn't see how their ride would fare any better this time than it did last time.

"How about a ride without the sleigh?"

No way was he touching that one.

"If you're talking about on horseback, I don't know how to ride."

"Wow. You don't? You don't know how to ski. You don't know how to ride. Were you born in a monastery or something?" She stepped up close and tilted her head back. "Don't worry. While I do have some horses in mind, they don't have four legs."

"Really? Then what do they have?"

She smiled. "I have some things I need to get done today, and I

want to check with my father on something, but if you're up for it I'll show you exactly what I mean first thing tomorrow morning.

* * *

Mira revved up the snowmobile. Owned by her dad, she'd often used it to get away from the crowds and go off by herself. There were a series of private trails that only she and the other employees knew about.

She and Robert had ridden around a couple of times, but he'd always been in the driver's seat when they'd been together. But this time she was the one in front. Jack didn't know how to ride one of these either. He was a warm-climate boy through and through.

"Put your helmet on and climb aboard!"

Looking the slightest bit dubious, Jack slid the helmet onto his head and fastened the strap before swinging a leg over the back of the vehicle. "You're sure you know how to drive this."

"I've done it my whole life."

He chuckled. "You are just full of surprises."

"Am I? You have no idea." She let go of the steering-wheel to fasten her own strap. "Ready? You're going to want to hang on tight."

His hands went to her waist as she eased them away from the equipment barn, skirting the ski-lift area. His grip reminded her of the way he'd lifted her onto that bar. She had to fight to banish the image from her mind and concentrate.

The two ski-lift attendants waved at her as she went by. Mira

waved back. Maneuvering down a slight incline, she rode onto a section of the property that was partially wooded but which had a path carved out of it.

"Where are we going?" he asked, above the roar of the motor.

"I know a little place." She'd let her father know she'd be gone for the day—possibly until tomorrow, depending on how things went. And in the back of the snowmobile she'd packed a lunch, along with wine and a thick blanket. There was firewood at their destination, but it could still get pretty chilly. "Okay, I'm going to crank it up a bit."

Mira pressed the accelerator lever with her thumb and the track on the bottom of the vehicle picked up speed, grabbing onto the snow and propelling them forward. The destination she had in mind was about five miles away through some of the most gorgeous country known to man. Jack settled in closer, his body molding to hers from behind, legs pressed tight to hers. Was he doing that on purpose?

"This is similar to a Jet Ski," he yelled in her ear. "Except we push water through the engine to propel us forward."

"Never ridden on one."

"You'd like it."

Yeah, she probably would. Too bad he'd never teach her how to ride one. Or a surfboard, for that matter.

That's not in the cards, Mira. Just enjoy today.

Silence reigned between them for a few moments as they ate up some more terrain. She slowed to go around a tree and then

accelerated once again, the tracks kicking up a blast of snow.

When she'd begun her yearlong journey to become footloose and fancy-free, she never dreamed she'd wind up riding on her dad's snowmobile with one of her dates. Or making out on a sleigh ride. Or working side by side to rescue avalanche victims.

Or helping a girl with emotional wounds much deeper than her own.

She and Jack worked well together. Which was probably why it was harder just to mosey on past him. During their confrontation yesterday he'd seemed offended that he was just a number on a list in her head, and he was right. She knew there might be a blip or two but hadn't expected to crash and burn quite so soon.

And that was the problem. She had no idea whether she should keep on trying to do something that seemed to be against her nature. Or if she should just forfeit her bet and agree with Ellory that this had been a royally bad idea.

She could pay up and be done.

With Jack's arms wrapped around her waist, it was easy to imagine just snuggling down in the here and now and enjoy their remaining time together.

His helmet bumped against hers once as she made another turn, re-emphasizing just how close he was. Maybe she should bypass the cabin and just keep driving around for the rest of the afternoon. She was enjoying have him next to her just a little too much.

But all too soon the small log building came into view.

Her parents' original home, and the place she'd been born.

Her dad had kept it to remind himself of where he'd come from. She could probably live out here, rather than at the hotel, but she preferred to visit the cabin periodically as a treat. She knew all too well how mundane the things in life could become if you weren't careful.

Like her and Robert's relationship? So it would seem. At least on his part.

Looking back, though, she wondered if that spark had really been there to begin with, or if she'd assumed that since they'd had so much in common their similarities would see them through.

Pulling up to the front door, she used the handbrake to stop. Jack hesitated and then let go of her and climbed off. She started to follow, swinging one leg over the front, then sat sideways on the seat instead, looking up at him while she tried to re-gather her composure.

"So how was your first snowmobile ride? Did you like it?"

He gave her sideways smile. "It was interesting."

She'd expected a little more enthusiasm than that. Then again, Jack seemed to have cornered the market on measured reactions. That's why his behavior in his hotel room had shocked her so much. Who would have known he had a bit of caveman wandering around inside him.

And on that note she'd better shut down this line of thought before it got her into trouble.

"Okay." She laughed. "We'll go with interesting." She stood up and opened a storage compartment in the back of the snowmobile and pulled out a small chest containing their lunch. Jack took it from her with a raised brow.

"I thought you might be hungry." She tugged the blanket from the compartment as well, draping it over her arm.

"I might." He nodded toward the cabin. "I didn't know this was out here. Is it yours?"

"No. It belongs to the fam...to my dad."

"He doesn't rent it out?"

She paused. "He likes to come out here to stay every once in a while."

"He and your mother are divorced."

She headed for the cabin, peeling off her gloves and checking her pocket for the key to the front door. "They are." She and her dad had made their peace last week, but there were still some tender spots when it came to the reasons for her parents' divorce.

"Sorry." His voice came from behind her. "Is your mother still living?"

"Mmm-hmm. She lives in Aspen. How about your parents? Still living?"

"Yes. They live on the east coast of Florida."

She stuck the key in the lock and turned. "Let me guess. They live on the beach too?"

Jack laughed. "How did you know?"

"Surfer dude. Plenty of beach knowledge and almost

no mountain knowledge. You had to have gotten it from somewhere."

He followed her into the house and looked around. "Wow. Not what I expected."

Mira peered at the interior of her parents' old home and tried to see it through his eyes. Rustic on the outside, the house was modest but modern. Hardwood floors ran throughout the cabin, and her dad had done most of the work inside himself, from the plank walls to the oak trim. There were so many memories attached to this place. Some of them good. Some of them not so good.

"Not quite as swanky as the lodge, is it?"

"It's not that." He moved over to the oversized fireplace. "Does this work?"

"Dad keeps the wood box in here filled with split logs. The bigger chunks are outside. You'd be surprised how well it warms the place. Do you want to start a fire while I take our lunch into the kitchen?"

Mira took the basket and headed for the space across the room. The cabin was built on an open concept, so the dining and kitchen areas were all visible from the living room. And as she set the box down and gazed across the space, she couldn't help but admire Jack's strong back as he gathered wood from the compartment behind the wall and knelt in front of the fireplace.

By the time he had the fire going, she'd unloaded lunch, which consisted of fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans and some

cheese and crackers. All hearty picnic food that would do well on the cold trip over here. She got out a pan for the beans and set it on the stove. "Do you want me to heat up the chicken, or do you prefer it cold?"

"I'll like whatever you do." His voice came from right behind her, making her jump.

She spun around. "You scared me."

"Join the crowd. You scare me too, lady." Something about the way he said it made her think he wasn't talking about being startled but about something a little deeper.

No. No *deeper* allowed. She'd lectured herself on this very thing. They'd only known each other for less than two weeks, but she was already feeling much too close to this man. It had to be the sex. Women felt an emotional response to sleeping with a man, right, whereas men could just shrug it off? At least, that's what she'd always heard. But maybe that wasn't always the case. Maybe Jack was struggling with some of the same issues she was.

She forced her voice to remain light. "Well, one thing that isn't scary is this lunch. Marie always makes a great fried chicken."

"Marie?"

"The chef at the lodge. She's been there ever since I was a teenager."

"You've lived here your whole life?" He unzipped his coat and moved around the bar, perching on one of the stools.

"My whole life. I lived with my mom for a year or two after the divorce but, yeah, I grew up here. Once I finished college and

med school, I came back."

"Wow. I've always lived near the ocean, but my parents moved around quite a bit. My dad was in the service. He retired in Florida."

Mira put the burner on low and turned around to face him. "My friend Ellory—the one from the resolution—likes to travel as well. She's been all over the place. But she grew up here too, her mom worked at the lodge when she was little."

"You can't see yourself doing that someday? Traveling?"

The funny thing was, lately she'd been thinking about that very thing. About whether it was time for her to spread her wings and move away from her childhood home. Make her own memories somewhere else. Maybe she'd stayed for so long to make peace with her dad. Now that she had, something inside her was itching with discontent.

"I went to college and medical school away from here, obviously. I don't know. It's certainly something to consider, but I'm not to that point yet. Maybe I just need to find a reason."

His jaw got tight. "Make sure that reason has to do with you, Mira. Not someone else."

Was he speaking from personal experience? Had he resented moving around as a kid?

She turned to stir the beans, the heat from the burner as well as the fireplace beginning to warm her. Shrugging out of her coat, she laid it over the bar behind her, deciding to ask. "Was it hard, moving from place to place when you were young?"

"What? Oh..." He shook his head. "No, that was just part of normal life—it didn't bother me. Anyway, you were right. The fireplace does a great job."

He picked up her coat and moved away from the bar, hanging their outerwear on the hooks her father had installed next to the door. Then he poked at the fire with his back to her.

Frowning, Mira gave the beans another couple of stirs as steam began to rise from the pot.

Make sure that reason has to do with you. Not someone else.

If he hadn't been talking about moving around during his childhood, then what? Had he moved as an adult because of someone else? No, he was a sports medicine doctor. He'd obviously taken the job in Texas because he'd wanted to—because he'd loved football and his team—not because someone had made him. But his coach had made him go on this vacation in the first place. Why?

She reached up to one of the overhead cabinets and pulled out two plates and wineglasses, rinsing and drying them. She did the same with the silverware in the drawer before setting everything on round twig placemats on the bar. "I think we're about ready."

When Jack joined her, she helped dish everything up and poured them each a glass of wine. "That fire feels good. Thanks."

"You're welcome." He pushed the food around on his plate for a minute or two. "You asked about it being hard to move. That wasn't what I meant about making sure you did it for yourself and not someone else."

Mira tensed, wondering where he was going with this and not sure she really wanted to know. “Okay.”

“Did I tell you I was married at one time?”

Her eyes widened. She’d asked whether he was married and when he’d said no, she’d just assumed he’d been single all his life. “No.”

“I was. Paula was a pediatric oncologist with a thriving practice in California. She loved her patients. Her staff.” He paused, staring at the handle of his fork as if it were suddenly fascinating. “Four years ago, I was approached by the Hawks and asked if I’d be their doctor. At the time I was working with a smaller team in California, so it would have been a big promotion for me. I asked Paula to go with me. Told her that with her skills she could open a practice anywhere in the U.S.—could keep helping sick kids, just like she did where she was.”

Had the strain been too much, and they’d divorced over it? “Did she decide not to go?”

He shook his head. “Oh, she decided to go. But it would have been better if she hadn’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

Dropping his fork back onto his plate, he turned his stool to face her. “My wife got on the plane to fly out to Texas and never made it off.” He took a deep breath. “It crashed in the Gulf of Mexico. Her body was never recovered.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MIRA WAS SHOCKED.

He saw it in her face. But was she shocked at the fact that he'd been married or that his wife had died because of him?

Her fingers touched his. "God, Jack. I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

Yeah, well, so was he. Sorry he'd been so eager to climb up that career ladder. Sorry he'd dragged Paula with him as he'd gone up one step and then another without any thought as to how it would affect her career or the lives of her patients. Sorry that he never got to hold her and tell her that before she'd slipped away.

"I didn't tell you to gain your sympathy. I told you so you'd never make a decision you regretted."

She stared at him for several seconds, a bunch of emotions running over that beautiful face of hers. Then her mouth tipped to the side in a half-smile. "Too late. I've done plenty of things I've regretted."

"Like your ski instructor?"

Her brows went up, and her smile grew. "I'm sure you didn't mean that as in, 'Do you regret *doing* your ski instructor?' That does not sound good, Jack Perry."

Relief swept over him. She wasn't going to sit here and make him dissect his every regret or say that he shouldn't feel guilt over his wife's death. Or that he shouldn't take pills to sleep. She'd catalogued what he'd shared and was okay with moving past it. He was just as happy to keep the ball rolling in that direction.

"Well, how about this, then. Do you regret *doing* me?"

She drew imaginary circles on the wooden surface of the bar

with her finger. “I think you have that event reversed, Doctor. I seem to remember *you* doing *me*.”

“Is that so?” His body began to show a definite spark of interest in where this conversation was headed. “I think there was a little give-and-take going on there at the end.”

“Your beans are getting cold,” she said innocently, scooping up a bite of her own and popping it into her mouth.

He couldn’t prevent a smile. “That’s about the only thing getting cold.” He’d indulge her. But now that she’d thrown open the door, he had no intention of slamming it shut again, agreement or no agreement.

Why not enjoy each other for the next week or so? There was nothing wrong with that, and as long as they were both okay with it...

So he dug into his own food with gusto. Putting off the inevitable would only make it that much sweeter. “What time do you have to be back?” He wanted to make sure he enjoyed every decadent second of their time together.

“Actually, I’m not due back until tomorrow, unless there’s an emergency.”

“I didn’t pack clothes for an overnight stay.”

Her lips pursed as she looked him over. “Who said you needed clothes?”

Okay, so there was no mistaking those words. “Did you bring me out here just for this?” Not that he’d mind. At all.

“No, but now that we’re here I’m thinking it might not be a

bad idea. Unless you'd rather go back to the lodge."

Oh, sure. He was just going to smile and say, "Thanks but, no, thanks." Not hardly. Not with this particular woman.

"Going back is not on my agenda. In fact, my schedule just became wide open."

"Good, because I'm thinking the thick blanket I brought would look pretty darn good in front of the fire."

He picked up his chicken. "I can think of something else that would look even better." He took a bite, still staring at her.

"Mmm. So can I." She blew out a breath. "Wow. I don't know if Ellory is rubbing off on me or if it's you. I'm not usually this forward."

He swallowed his food, chasing it down with a slug of wine. "I like it. It's a whole lot easier knowing where you stand than having to guess."

That was one of the things that had bothered him most about Paula's death. He'd never been entirely sure whether she'd wanted to move to Texas or if she'd been doing it just to please him. The heart of his guilt lay in that uncertainty. If she hadn't wanted to come and had just spoken up, he would have stayed in California. Gladly. Now he'd never know. He pushed back the thought.

Mira sipped at her own wine. "It's funny. I've always been a good girl. Quiet. Obedient. It's why I love Ellory so much. She's spontaneous and fearless. She always goes after what she wants, rarely letting anything stand in her way."

"And you do?"

"Sometimes." Her mouth twisted. "I think I work too hard to meet other people's expectations of me. I forget who I am at times."

He set his glass down and touched a finger to her cheek. "I think you're the girl who's sitting at this bar right now. And the girl who worked so hard to rescue those people after the avalanche. There's more to you than you realize, Mira Dupris." His fingertip traveled along her jaw and then down her neck. "And you blow me away. Every time I look at you. Talk to you. I haven't been with many women since my wife's death. And never more than once, but with you..."

Taking a deep breath, he decided to go for broke. "But with you I find myself wanting a next time. And a next."

And maybe that revelation was where the healing finally began in earnest.

She gave a visible swallow then said, "I feel the same way. You were supposed to be just one more guy. But you're not."

He planted his hands on either side of her stool, gripping it tight and turning it toward him. Then he hauled it closer and leaned in. "I'm glad."

His mouth met hers and that familiar rush of heat washed over him, undiminished, just as strong as it had been the first time they'd kissed. That combination of sweet and sexy that went straight to his gut.

Hands touched the back of his neck and then curled around it as if afraid he was going to back away. Not likely. All he wanted

was more.

Beneath her winter coat she'd worn a creamy turtleneck that, when he reached up to touch her, met his fingers with a buttery softness he wanted to lose himself in. Just like he wanted to lose himself in her. Skimming up her sides, he laid his palms on her back, luxuriating in the feel of her.

God, she just did it for him.

He didn't want to examine the whys right now, just wanted to enjoy being with her, absorb a little bit of that *joie de vivre* she had, just like a vampire.

Mira made a little sound in her throat, the kind that slid over a man like silk...that made him want to draw more of those sexy gasps and capture them inside his mouth.

"Hey," he whispered. "Let's break out that blanket."

She blinked at him with glazed eyes for a second before nodding and getting off the stool. She walked over to the sofa, and hell if his gaze didn't stick right to her ass, admiring every little twitch and jiggle it made as she moved.

Yeah, he had it bad.

He joined her, taking an edge of the blanket and spreading it in front of the fire. He couldn't wait to see the warm glow worship every inch of her skin. Because he planned to kneel at that particular altar himself for most of the night.

When he moved toward her, she shook her head, making him frown. Then he realized why, when she pulled the turtleneck over her head, revealing a peach bra that was so thin he could see the

buds of her nipples pressed tight against the satiny fabric. Jack's mouth watered.

Her hands went to her back.

"Don't take it off," he murmured.

She bit her lip but did as he asked, leaving the garment in place. Her fingers toyed with the button on her jeans, glancing at him in question.

"Definitely."

His body hardened, a thumping going through his head as she undid her pants and slowly pushed them down her hips.

Her panties matched her bra, just like they had the last time they'd been together, but there were no ties on the sides this time. That was okay. There were plenty of ways to get those off her. Or not. Depending on how he felt when the time actually came.

Right now, his brain was tapping out *Hurry* in some kind of weird Morse code. He ignored it. No hurrying. Not tonight.

She stepped out of the jeans and kicked them to the side, before getting on her knees on the blanket. Crooking a finger at him, she motioned him closer. When he went to kneel in front of her, she gripped the knees of his jeans and hauled him closer, keeping him on his feet.

Did she know how close she was? How suggestive her position was?

"Your turn," she said. With that, she used both hands to open his button and then unzip his fly.

His turn to what? Get undressed?

He had his answer soon enough when she tugged his pants and briefs down to his knees, freeing him. He gave an internal curse. He was right. He was in line with a very warm and wet area, and his body was sending out all kinds of messages. But he wasn't going that route. Not without a clear sign from her.

Her hands went around him, and she glanced up at him. "Like I said, it's your turn. Come here."

It suddenly dawned on him. She was referring to their last encounter when he'd put her up on that bar and had his way with her.

She was about to turn the tables.

Sinking his fingers in her hair, he slowly closed his fist around the silky strands and edged her closer. That gorgeous mouth opened right on cue. So very, very close.

Hell.

"Do it." His muttered words were rough, surprising even him.

Mira closed the gap, the heat of her mouth engulfing him in a slow glide that had him shuddering with need. Hot flames licked at his body as her hands left his erection and went to the backs of his thighs, curling around them, hauling him even closer.

His vision went white, all sensation pooling at the points of contact between them, her tongue sliding over his length in a single smooth stroke that made him wonder if he was going to lose it right here. Right now.

No. That's not what he wanted.

When he went to step away, though, she followed him, forcing

him to reach back and grip her wrists, tugging them away so he could put some space between them. The popping sound of lost suction created an agonizing mixture of triumph and despair inside him that he was in no hurry to erase. But he was in a hurry for something else.

Still holding her wrists, he hauled her to her feet, insides steaming with heat when she gazed up at him and licked her lips. "Not fair," she murmured. "I wasn't done yet."

"You were done all right." In another few seconds he would have been as well. He moved her wrists behind her back and held them there with one hand, while he palmed the back of her head with the other, holding her still so he could capture her mouth. His tongue plunged inside, a demonstration of what he had in store for her, and he used his hold on her wrists to press her abdomen against him, trapping himself between their bodies. It wasn't nearly enough, but he had to somehow slow this train wreck down.

He let go of her hands, sliding up to find the clasp on her bra and releasing it. Then he stepped back yet again, taking the straps with him, allowing the silky garment to drop onto the blanket. Then he tugged his shirt over his head and finished losing the rest of his clothes.

Allowing his gaze to slide over her, he reveled in the toned limbs that came with skiing and working in the snow and ice, and the pale creamy skin that went so perfectly with a chilly climate. No tanning beds for this ice princess.

Only she wasn't made of ice. She was hot and smooth and made him ache like no one ever had before. He held out his arms, and she came into them willingly, her nipples pressing against him, her silk panties welcoming his hands as he slid beneath the back of them and cupped her bottom. Hell, he wanted to be inside her. Wanted to thrust and grunt all the way to completion, but part of his pleasure was watching her come apart beneath his hands. So he set about making that happen, allowing his lips and teeth to trail from her face to her neck and finally to the tips of her breasts until her low moan washed over him.

Yes.

This was what he wanted more than anything: to be what brought her to life and led her down that sensual path until she could no longer resist its pull.

His tongue scrubbed over her nipple, letting the sounds she made guide how long he visited, how much pressure he used. And the woman could take a lot, fingers thrust into his hair pressing him closer and urging him to be just a little rougher.

Jack's body let him know in no uncertain terms that it wanted in on the action, the ache ramping up to almost painful proportions. When she moaned again, his flesh jerked in a silent plea.

Soon.

Still beneath her panties, his hand slid from her butt around to the front and edged deeper, his fingers finding a familiar sweet heat...and damp readiness. He stroked over her, moving

to kiss her mouth as those delectable little sounds increased in frequency.

Making his decision, he pulled free, wrapped one arm around her thighs and slid the other beneath her shoulders. He swept her off her feet and onto the blanket, following her down.

He kissed her hard and wet and long, feeling her arch against him.

Off came the panties. One knee went between her legs.

Anticipation roared through him as he slid a finger deep inside her, thumb going to that sensitive nub of flesh and stroking over it in gentle flicks that had him quivering with need.

"Jack." Her back arched again.

That was all the encouragement it took for him to slide his body into the gap between her thighs and surge forward. He found her, just as he'd expected. Hot and tight and slick with her own need.

He swallowed, knowing he'd waited too long. His body was tightly wound, full, ready to burst open at the slightest move.

"Hold on, sweetheart, it's going to be a bumpy ride."

Struggling to keep himself in check, he thrust again and again, concentrating on hitting that one vital spot at the top of her legs. Legs that wrapped around him, pulling him deeper and harder as she lifted her hips and plastered herself against him the second they made contact again. She ground and gasped and wiggled, eyes closing tight as that final wave of sensation swept toward them. It crashed over her first, the sudden tightening of her flesh

around his unleashing a torrent inside him. He rode the crest a second or two longer before finally succumbing and tumbling headlong into the surf, allowing it to carry him all the way back to shore.

He lay there for several seconds, not sure if he was stunned into immobility or if he'd died and rocketed straight into heaven. All he knew was that there was no place he'd rather be than right here in this woman's arms.

And that fact terrified him. Paralyzed him.

Because one act had just cost him everything.

In rushing to the finish line, Jack had lost much more than the fight with his body. He'd also lost the battle with his heart.

* * *

Jack had been quiet the whole ride back to the lodge the next day. They'd gone to bed the previous night, where he'd held her, looping his arm around her as they'd slept. But he hadn't tried to make love to her again, unlike the previous time they'd been together.

She wasn't sure if she'd done something wrong or if it was just him.

Part of her was afraid she'd appeared too desperate and needy, grabbing at him and giving herself that last burst of pleasure. But it had been too late to stop by that point. And he'd seemed to like it at the time, groaning encouragement into her ear and increasing his pace.

But afterwards he'd seemed strange, rolling off her and staring

at the ceiling for several long seconds. He'd recovered and pulled her to her feet, giving her a quick kiss on the mouth before offering to let her use the shower first.

First. Not together.

They'd eaten a canned dinner of stuff they'd found in the pantry, but the mood had been somber as they'd sat on the couch later, facing the fire, Jack's arm around her.

What had he been thinking?

If she'd said something, he'd responded, but emotionally he'd seemed to have withdrawn.

Today she'd treated a couple of patients, giving one teenager a lecture on helmet usage when he'd appeared with a lump on his forehead after falling on the slopes, and hugging a child who'd had a boo-boo on her finger—courtesy of a sharp pinch from a door. Neither were serious injuries.

Unlike the weird volley of emotions that soared through her chest one second and fell into the pit of her stomach the next, only to bounce up and start the cycle all over. It was exhausting.

She slumped in a chair in the dining room, picking at her salad. Ellory was off hiking by herself for the day. She'd left a note at the front desk that she'd check in with Mira later and that she hoped her outing with Number Five had been productive—and hot. She had a "feeling" about this one.

So did Mira. And it wasn't a good feeling.

In fact, it was as ominous as the weather forecast for the coming week. There was the threat of the first big storm of the

season. Moisture was gathering to the southwest and there was a high-pressure system in the northeast that was preparing to send a frigid blast of air their way. When those two forces combined, things could get dicey over the next five days. At just over twelve thousand feet elevation, Silver Pass was almost sure to get a large portion of that snowfall, if it arrived. Already the resort was busy preparing behind the scenes while trying not to worry any of their guests. The storm could very well peter out. She'd met with her dad this morning for breakfast, but he'd been distracted about the preparations.

If only she could be just as diligent to prepare for any eventuality with Jack. But without even a vague forecast to go by, there was nothing she could do. Oh, she could tell him she was reneging on their deal, that she didn't want to see him any more for the duration of his stay. But what if she was overreacting?

A man's shoes came into view beside her table. Her heart leap-frogged over itself as she jerked her head up, only to land with a clunk when she realized it was Robert. Great, just what she needed.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

She motioned to the chair across from hers. "Help yourself."

He set his coffee on the table and then dropped into the seat. "We never did get a chance to talk."

"About what?" Lord, she really didn't want to rehash their whole breakup.

"Your dad came out to see me a few hours ago," he said. "Did

you tell him about us?"

"Yes. Why? Did he say something?"

He shook his head, lips pursing. "No. He really just talked about how long to keep the slopes open, if this storm hits."

Leaning back, he ran a hand through wavy blond locks that had always reminded her of a Norse god. She could see why women were attracted to him. But he no longer did anything for her.

"Okay, I'm not sure I understand, then. Are you worried?"

"I just want to know exactly what you told him. Do I need to look for another job?"

Ah, so that's what he was worried about. With his snarky comments of late, maybe she should let him sweat for a while. But since she was finding out first hand how it felt to be kept in the dark about someone's intentions, she didn't wish that on anyone. Not even Robert.

"Whether or not you look for another job is up to you. If he asks for specifics, I just plan on telling him the truth, that we both realized it wasn't going to work and decided to break our engagement." She shrugged. "So as long as you keep doing your job, you should have nothing to worry about."

"Thank you." In a move that was not in character for the self-assured cocky man she knew, he covered her hand with his and gave it a squeeze before tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I know it doesn't mean anything, but I want you to know I'm sorry for how things went down. I should have had the courage to tell

you up front that I wasn't ready to settle down."

You mean before you made out with that bimbo and several others? Yeah, you could have saved us both a whole lot of grief —and saved me from a clunker of a resolution.

One she no longer wanted to keep.

She didn't say any of that, though. "What's done is done. I recommend honesty the next time you get involved with someone."

His lips gave a rueful twist. "Understood." He hesitated. "If later on down the line—"

"If you're going to say what I think you are, then no. You're right. It wouldn't have worked."

"Is it because of that guy you've been hanging around?"

Mira swallowed, trying to divert her thoughts to something else. It didn't work. Jack's face popped into her mind—the way his eyes had darkened as he'd settled over her last night.

Lord. Robert was right. It was because of Jack. That's why she was so sure it could never work with him, even if she found out he hadn't been cheating.

She was in love with Number Five. Someone she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt would never cheat on the person he loved. He'd shown that in how he talked about his wife...the guilt he carried about how she died.

Mira just...knew.

Maybe she really could tell the good guys from the bad.

And she loved him—for that reason and so many more.

The knowledge was both exhilarating and devastating. He'd made it clear he wasn't looking for anything serious.

But with you, I find myself wanting a next time. And a next.

Jack's words from last night whispered through her mind, then rewound and played back all over again.

It certainly wasn't something she was going to admit to Robert, though.

"I'm not involved with anyone. Nor am I planning to be. I'm just not interested in giving us another chance."

He gazed at her for a second before giving a slow nod. "Okay. Let me know if you change your mind. I'll be around."

With that, he picked up his insulated drink carrier and walked away.

Right past Number Five, who was standing not three feet away, his own coffee cup in hand. His eyes were on them.

Oh, God. How much of their conversation had he just heard?

Enough, evidently, since he veered away and chose a table twenty feet away.

Oh, no, he didn't. If he wanted nothing to do with her, he was going to have to tell her flat out.

Leaving the remainder of her salad uneaten, she got up and went over to his table and pulled out a chair. Unlike Robert, though, she didn't ask if she could sit. She just did.

"Hi," she said. For all her bravado, her heart was slipping around in her chest like a skier who'd just realized the run he was on was way above his skill level.

Jack's fingers tightened on his mug. "Hey. Hope I didn't run him off."

"You didn't." She licked her lips. "How are you?"

"That's the question of the year, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry?"

He blew out a rough breath. "Nothing."

After several beats went by, she decided to test the waters. "About yesterday—"

"Yeah, I was just coming to talk to you about that." Another pause. "You love it here, Mira, don't you?"

"Silver Pass? Yes, of course I do. I grew up here. Why?"

"No reason. Just curious."

That was a strange thing to be curious about. Besides, what did it have to do with yesterday?

Before she could turn back to that particular subject, Jack started in again.

"I don't know if you've seen the weather forecast, but I'm due back in Texas in a little over a week, just after that storm is supposed to hit. I don't want to take the chance on my flight being canceled if it's worse than predicted, so..."

He was leaving. Not in a week. But soon. Maybe even today.

"When are you going?"

"They're trying to book me on any flight they can get, so I figured I wouldn't have time to track you down and say goodbye. The reception desk told me you were in here, so I thought..." his jaw tightened "...now was as good a time as any."

As good a time as any? As if she were no more important than any other business acquaintance. She guessed that put her in her place. If he wanted to tell her exactly where she stood, he couldn't have chosen a better way to let her down easy.

Only it wasn't easy. But she wasn't going to drop to her knees and beg him not to go. He had a job back in Texas. She'd known that from the very beginning.

That was one thing living at a ski resort taught you, that people were not permanent fixtures. They came and they went. An endless cycle that could bring heartache, if you let it. Isn't that what she'd been trying to teach herself with her resolution? That she needed to let them wander through while keeping her heart away from those high-traffic areas?

God. And look how successful she'd been at that.

"Well, it's been fun. Thank you." She swallowed. "Have a good flight."

When she stood to go, he grabbed her wrist, fingers tight against her skin. "It was more than fun, and you know it. I just can't do...this."

This. *This?* What the hell "this" was he talking about?

She had no idea. But whatever it was, he didn't want it. Didn't want her.

Her chin went up. "I don't remember anyone asking you to."

There. Way to lob it right back at him, Mira.

Instead of pride, though, all she felt was sadness...and that same weird desperation she'd felt in his arms last night.

Number Five was leaving, and she hadn't even had to tell him to go.

She could try to convince him not to. Tell him how she felt. But did she really want to grasp at someone who...what was it that Robert had said? Oh, yes, who just "wasn't ready to settle down"—with her or with anyone.

Jack released her and the fingers of her other hand rubbed at the spot, trying to erase the memory of his touch. It didn't work, though. He'd branded himself on her. Not last night. Not that time in his hotel room. But that very first time their hands had gripped each other's in the snow.

And now she had to find a way—like he had—to uncurl her fingers and let him go.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, he's leaving early?"

Ellory's face was a study in disbelief as she stood in Mira's room, hands on her hips.

"There's talk of a winter storm blowing in, and he's afraid of getting stranded."

"Oh, he's afraid all right, but not of getting stranded. What happened?"

Mira went through the whole story, about how they'd gone to the lodge, how everything had seemed to be going really well, about how he'd talked about his wife's death.

"He told you about that?"

Mira nodded. "Why?"

"That's not something you tell someone you have no intention of ever seeing again. Why would he bother, unless he felt it was something you needed to know?"

Mira dropped onto the foot of her bed and grabbed her Cheshire cat. "He started acting funny right after we..." she rolled her hand around in the air "...you know."

"After you boinked like bunnies in front of the fire?"

"Elle!"

Her friend grinned and then sprawled next to her, poking the stuffed cat in its furry little belly. "You were supposed to teach her a thing or two about loosening up."

Oh, she'd been plenty loose. That was her problem. If she'd held on to her emotions just a little bit tighter, she could have avoided this whole mess.

That wasn't true, and she knew it.

"Okay," Ellory said. "Let's go down the list of things we know. One, his wife died in a plane crash. Two, he asked that you two see each other exclusively while he was here at the resort. Have I got it right so far?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'm thinking here." She put a finger to her lips and tapped. "Three, after he tells you about his wife, you get down to business and then he seems weird afterwards."

Mira nodded. "I thought I was being too forward."

"Get real, ninny. Men love that stuff. So what happened after that?"

Impatience flared to life. She'd wanted hugs and a sympathetic shoulder, not to write a dissertation on what had gone wrong. "What does it matter?"

"It matters."

Mira's brows went up. "Okay. Four. He asks me if I like it here in Silver Pass. Five. He says there's a storm coming...says he's leaving early." Her voice sped up as another wave of hurt rolled through her. "I reply that it's been fun, bye. He grabs me and says it was more than that, and that I know it, but he just can't do..." she drew quotes in the air "...*this*."

"This."

"Yeah, one minute he's asking me about Silver... Oh, my God." Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she let Chessie slide to the floor. "He can't ask me to leave. That's what it is."

"What?"

"Silver Pass. His wife died on the flight to Texas. She'd left her job to be with him."

Ellory picked up the cat and tossed it onto the pillows behind them. "He's afraid you'll die?"

"I don't think so. Or at least I hope he's not irrational enough to think it could happen twice. I think his guilt won't let him ask me to choose between him and the resort. He asked me if I loved Silver Pass. Right out of the blue, after he saw me talking to Robert. It didn't go along with anything we were talking about. I thought it was strange at the time, since he said he wanted to talk about what had happened at the cabin."

"I think you're right, Mirri." Her brows went up. "So what's stopping you?"

"From what? He's probably already left."

"So? It's not like you can't find Texas. It's freaking huge. Right there on every map."

Mira closed her eyes. Her friend was right. What was stopping her?

Fear.

Fear of rejection. Fear of what she'd find when she saw him. Fear...that he didn't love her.

And?

What more did she have to lose? She'd let him walk away—so he was gone already as far as that went. If she confronted him, and he said he didn't want to be with her, she hadn't lost anything more. Just a small chunk of her pride.

But she deserved to know how he felt once and for all.

"You're right. It's on the map." She reached over and grabbed her friend and squeezed her hard. "Thank you, Elle. Wish me luck."

"I already did that when you made your resolution." She laughed. "I sent out a little note to the universe, asking them to let *me* win our little bet. Which meant that Number Five—well, like Obi Wan Kenobi, he was my only hope."

* * *

Jack slid his sunglasses higher on his nose as he waited in line at the airport. It had taken more than one attempt to finally walk

out of the door of the resort this morning, two weeks to the day from when he'd first set foot on that ski slope and seen Mira standing over him.

He'd left two things behind. One thing meant nothing. And one meant everything.

The nothing: his pills, which he'd flushed down the toilet the day after his and Mira's little trip to the cabin. He wouldn't be needing them any more. It was time to face his fears and his dreams.

The everything: Mira. He still couldn't believe he'd found the strength to walk away.

But he wasn't going to ask her to leave. The words had been on the tip of his tongue, but he'd bitten them back. The storm was just an excuse, but she didn't need to know that. It had come just in the nick of time, saving him from making the same mistake with another woman that he'd made with his wife.

If she wanted to stay in Silver Pass, he wasn't going to be the one who urged her to leave.

And what if Mira had asked him to stay, rather than the other way around? Would he have?

His mind toyed with that idea for a few minutes. Yeah. He probably would have. But he'd never given her the opportunity to do anything except say goodbye. He'd cut her off before she could even have her say.

And what if she'd wanted more? More of their days together? More of making love? More...of everything?

Hadn't she earned the right to be heard?

Yes. He sucked down a breath. And maybe he should do something about that.

Whether it had been a mistake to ask his wife to move for the sake of his job was a moot point. What was done was done—he couldn't go back and change it, no matter how much he might wish to.

But he could change how he went on from here. What if—instead of asking Mira to leave—he asked her if he could stay in Silver Pass? With her?

It would mean giving up his job with the Hawks, but he could practice medicine anywhere. It didn't even have to be with a sports team. In fact, he could imagine his services might be in high demand in any of the hospitals around a ski resort.

His heart hadn't been in his job for a while. The coach knew it, which was why he'd sent him on this vacation in the first place. To clear his head. To help him make a choice.

It had worked. What he wanted out of life had never been clearer to him than it was right now.

Decision made, he tore the plane ticket in half and then in half again, continuing the process until the stack was too thick to rip any further. Then he stuffed all the pieces inside his coat pocket and got out of line, his pace quickening as he caught sight of the exit across the concourse.

"Jack!" A familiar voice came from somewhere behind him.

The sound stopped him in his tracks.

In slow motion, he turned. But he didn't see anything other than folks hurrying to the security check-in area. It must have been his imagination. Then a hand waved from the line he'd just vacated.

Mira. What was she doing here?

He stood there for a second, before making his way back to the line. She met him halfway.

"What's going on?" he asked, taking in the hair she'd tugged back in a ponytail, her lightweight jacket. Much too light for the mountains.

She held out a slip of paper. "I have a plane ticket to Texas. On your flight, in fact. If you want me."

He blinked, staring at her hand, her words not registering for a second or two.

She'd chosen to come with him. Of her own volition. Just like he'd chosen to stay here in Silver Pass.

Jack laughed—the first really free chuckle he'd allowed himself in almost four years.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

He pulled the torn pieces of his ticket from his pocket. "This."

"I don't understand."

"You just bought a ticket. And I just shredded one."

Shock flashed through her eyes. "You did? Why?"

"Because I don't want to leave. Not yet."

"But the storm... Your job—"

"Can all wait," he said. "I needed to come back and find you."

He blew out a breath, not sure where to start. "When I went to the restaurant two days ago I had everything planned out in my head. What I was going to say. What I was going to do. How hard I was going to kiss you."

"You were?"

He nodded. Oh, how he'd screwed up his courage, only to have it desert him at the last minute. "And then I saw you there with Robert. Heard him try to win you back and realized you could have so much more if you found someone from Silver Pass. If you spent your life loving a man who shared your life, your passions...your location."

"But—"

"Wait." He set his bag down and slung an arm around her shoulders, his heart growing lighter by the second. This was what he should have done at the restaurant. Especially after seeing her beautiful face standing in the line of passengers behind him. "As I was in that line, I started thinking. Why couldn't *I* be that man?"

"What?"

"I love you, Mira. I know nothing about the mountains, and I don't know how to ski or how to ride a snowboard or even a snowmobile. But I swear I'll be true and that I'll spend the rest of life learning about all those things. If you'll have me."

Mira stared up at him for a minute and then turned toward him, burying her face in his chest, her shoulders shaking.

What the hell?

She'd bought a ticket. Surely she couldn't be that blind that she

hadn't read the signs...figured out how he felt. But then again, he wasn't sure about her feelings either, just assumed that buying a ticket to Texas meant she cared about him. "What's wrong?"

She leaned back, her eyes streaming, swiping away the tears with her palm. Her body still shook. It was then he realized she wasn't crying. She was laughing.

"Wh-what's wrong?" she asked between gasps. "I was going to say the exact same thing. I even ordered a surfboard to be sent to the team's address—guess they'll be surprised when that package is delivered, huh?"

"You ordered a surfboard?"

She sucked down a deep breath. "I did. I love you too. And I *want* to be where you are, Jack. You're not forcing me to leave. I *want* to." Her teeth came down on her lip. "Although I have a confession to make."

His chest tightened. "What's that?"

"I'm deathly afraid of sharks. Think you can still teach me how to surf?"

He smiled and planted a hard kiss on her mouth, forcing himself not to linger more than a minute or two. "I think that's something we should discuss in detail. Back at the lodge. Because I suddenly have a very urgent need."

"Anything I can help with?"

He kissed her again. "Actually, you're the only one who can."

* * *

Three hours later they were snuggled together under the

covers in her room, perspiration still drying on her skin. Jack lay behind her, his body pressed tight to hers, thumb brushing back and forth over her bare hip. A shiver went through her.

God, she loved this man. No matter where the future took them, she wanted to be right in the middle of it.

"Does this mean you're not moving on to guy number six any time soon?" The low gravelly tones slid across her temple, carrying more than a hint of possessiveness.

"Mmm. I'll think about it."

The hand caressing her hip dropped a quick slap to her butt.

"Oww. Okay. No more men." She blinked as the stinging in her backside morphed into a wave of heat that washed over her. "Although your reaction to that *was* kind of hot."

Something came to life against the swell of her bottom.

"Woman, you are going to be the death of me."

She rolled onto her other side. "What about the storm? Are you sure you don't need to go back? I'll go with you." She touched his face. "Because I want to. Not because I have to. My dad is getting married in a few months, and I've already talked to him about finding a replacement for me."

"I still have a few things to work out in my head, and you need to know what you're getting into. I've struggled over the last four years."

"It's okay. We have plenty of time to figure things out. It doesn't even matter where we end up."

He drew her closer. "For now, I just want to ride out the storm

here at the lodge. With you."

"Emphasis on the riding part, I hope."

"Mira!" He gave a half-strangled laugh that lit her up inside.

She snuggled back against him. "I guess this means I owe Ellory a hundred bucks. She bet I wouldn't make it past man number five without falling for him."

Jack turned her over and took her mouth in a long kiss that had her clinging to him, breathless for more. "A hundred bucks, huh? Not sure I'm worth that kind of money."

She reached beneath the covers and found him, already hard and ready.

"Well, then," she said. "I guess you'd better start earning your keep."

She stroked him once and then again, relishing the low groan of pleasure he gave at her touch.

"Mmm...I think I could get used to this." He rolled her beneath him and parted her legs. "How long do you think it'll take me to pay off that debt?"

She arched into him, her own need beginning to rise out of control. "How does forever sound?"

* * * * *

A Date with Her Valentine Doc

A VALENTINE TO REMEMBER *One day they will never forget!*

A DATE WITH HER VALENTINE DOC by Melanie Milburne

Bertie Clark really *shouldn't* be fantasising about Dr Matt Bishop—he's her boss, and is 100% off-limits! But, working on the hospital's St Valentine's Day Ball with him, Bertie knows she can't ignore the sparks flying around for ever—surely a girl deserves a little fun?

Dear Reader

The question I am asked most frequently is: *Where do you get your ideas?* It's not always easy to answer as inspiration for stories can be a deeply subconscious thing and I often don't have a clue where the idea came from. But in the case of Bertie and Matt's story I know exactly what inspired it.

On St Valentine's Day in 2014 I was interviewed on national television about 'How to Write a BestSelling Romance Novel'. One of the panel hosts, Joe Hildebrand, had recently published *An Average Joe*, a memoir of his quirky childhood, and I just happened to be reading it at the time of the interview—which was kind of spooky! But then, Bertie's mother would say that was the stars or the planets aligning, or something. :)

Last year I was asked to write a short story for *The Australian Review of Fiction* (the first romance author ever to contribute—yay!). I wrote EM AND EM in the first person and couldn't wait to do it again in a full novel, so when my lovely editor Flo Nicoll offered me a chance to write a special St Valentine's Day book I jumped at it—but on the proviso that I could do it in the first person.

I hope you enjoy Bertie and Matt's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. BTW—watch out for Bertie's sister Jem's story, coming soon in Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™!

Best wishes

Melanie Milburne x

From as soon as **MELANIE MILBURNE** could pick up a pen she knew she wanted to write. It was when she picked up her first Mills & Boon® at seventeen that she realised she wanted to write romance. After being distracted for a few years by meeting and marrying her own handsome hero, surgeon husband Steve, and having two boys, plus completing a master's of education and becoming a nationally ranked athlete (masters swimming), she decided to write. Five submissions later she sold her first book and is now a multi-published, bestselling, award-winning *USA TODAY* author. In 2008 she won the Australian Readers' Association most popular category/series romance, and in 2011 she won the prestigious Romance Writers of Australia R*BY award.

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

Each year I am part of the silent auction for the Heart Foundation in Tasmania. I offer a book dedication and this year's winner was Maria Chung, who wanted this book to be dedicated to her husband:

Dr Stephen Chung, a wonderful husband, father and doctor.

Thank you to both of you for your continued support of the Heart Foundation in Tasmania.

MM

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST THING I saw when I walked into the ICU office on my first day back to work after my honeymoon was my postcard pinned to the noticeboard. Well, it was *supposed* to be my honeymoon. I'd booked the leave for months ahead. It's hard to get three weeks off in a row at St Ignatius, especially before Christmas. There are a lot of working mums at St Iggy's and I always feel guilty if I'm stuffing up someone's plan to be at their little kid's Christmas concert. Which was why I hadn't come back to work until the 'honeymoon' was over, so to speak.

My postcard was right in the centre of the noticeboard. In pride of place. Flashing like a beacon. The last time I'd seen it had been in my chalet room at the ski resort in Italy, along with two others I'd written to my elderly neighbours. I swear I hadn't actually intended to post them. It had been a therapeutic exercise my mother had suggested to rid myself of negative energy, but the super-efficient housekeeping staff must have seen them lying on the desk and helpfully posted them for me. That's service for you.

If I turned that wretched postcard around I would see the lies I'd scrawled there after consuming a lonely cocktail or two … actually, I think it was three. *All went amazingly well! Having an awesome time!*

Now that I look back with twenty-twenty hindsight I can see

all the signs. The red flags and the faintly ringing alarm bells I ignored at the time. I hate to sound like a cliché but I really was the last person to know. My mother said she knew the first time she met Andy. It was his aura that gave him away. My dad said three of Andy's chakras were blocked. My sister Jem said it was because he was a twat.

I guess they were all right in the end.

The chance to get rid of the postcard escaped me when Jill, the ward clerk, came in behind me with a couple of residents and chorused, 'Here's the blushing bride!' I was blushing all right. Big time. Looking at that sea of smiling faces, I didn't have the heart or the courage to tell them the wedding hadn't gone ahead. I smiled inanely and made some excuse about seeing an elderly patient and scooted out of there. I had only been at St Iggy's a little less than a year so I didn't know anyone well enough to consider them close friends, although some of the girls were really nice, Gracie McCurcher—one of the intensive care nurses—in particular.

And as to anyone finding out on social media, I'd closed my profile page a couple of years ago after someone had hacked into my account and used my image in a porn ad. Try explaining *that* to your workmates, especially the male ones.

My home village in Yorkshire is a long way from London—in more ways than one, but more on that later—so I figured it didn't matter if I didn't tell everyone I'd got dumped the night before the wedding. Cowardly, I know, but, to tell you the truth, I was still

trying to get used to being single. Andy and I were together—not actually living together, because I'm idiotically old-fashioned, which is ironic when you consider my unconventional upbringing—for five and a half years.

I know what you're thinking. How could I *not* have known he wasn't in love with me after all that time? I'm not sure how to answer. I loved him so I expected him to love me back. Naïve of me perhaps but that's just the way I'm made. But maybe on some level I'd always known he was marking time until someone better came along.

I stood by the bedside of Mr Simmons, a long-term elderly patient, on that cold and dismal January morning and watched as he quietly slipped away. There is something incredibly sacred about watching someone die. Mind you, it's not always peaceful. Some struggle as if they aren't quite ready to leave their loved ones. Others slip away on a soundless sigh the moment their absent loved one arrives. It's as if they've waited until that moment of contact to finally let go. I've lost count of how many deaths I've seen. But I guess that's one of the downsides of working in ICU. Not everyone walks out with a smile on his or her face. Not everyone walks out, period.

I can cope with the death of an elderly person like Mr Simmons. I can even manage with a middle-aged person's death if they've lived a full and happy life and are surrounded by the people they love. It's the kids that get me. Babies in particular. It seems so unfair they don't get a chance to have a go at screwing

up their life like I've screwed up mine.

Mr Simmons's grandchildren and great-grandchildren had been in the night before and said their final goodbyes. His wife died a couple of years ago so there was only his son and daughter by his bed. I watched as they each kissed his forehead, and then stroked his papery hand, and each shed a tear or two for the long and happy life that was coming to a close.

ICU is a pretty public place to die, which was why I had wrangled for months with the CEO to give me a quiet corner—if there is such a thing in an ICU department—so relatives could spend an hour or two without nurses or orderlies or whatever interrupting their last moments with their loved one. I had even had special permission granted to light candles of reflection and operate an aromatherapy infusion machine so the patients and their relatives and friends could breathe in their favourite scents instead of the smell of hospital-grade antiseptic.

Because it was my baby, while I'd been away things had fallen a little by the wayside, but I was back now and intent on finalising the introduction of my stress cost abatement model. I proposed to show how improving the environment in which relatives experienced illness or death in ICU ultimately reduced costs to the hospital—less demand for later counselling, reduced incidence and costs of litigation, and even reduced stress leave for ICU staff. I planned to present it at an upcoming hospital management meeting because I knew I could prove there would be benefits to the whole department with reduced stress in the

ICU environment, not just for patients but for staff as well.

I softly closed the door—yes, not a curtain but an actual door!—on the grieving relatives and headed back to the glassed-in office where the registrars, interns and residents were being briefed by one of the consultants. I hadn't yet met the new director. He'd started the day after I'd left for my … erm … break.

I was looking at the back view of the consultant. At first I thought it was Professor Cleary—we call him Professor Dreary behind his back because he's such a pessimist—but when I got closer I realised it was someone much younger. He had very broad shoulders and he was tall. I mean *really* tall. He was at least a couple of inches taller than the registrar, Mark Jones, who we affectionately call Lurch.

I'm not sure if someone said I was coming over or whether the new director heard me approach. But he suddenly turned and his eyes met mine. Something fizzed in the air like a stray current of electricity. I actually felt the hairs on the back of my neck lift up. I had never seen such startling grey-blue eyes. Piercing and intense, intelligent and incisive, they looked at me in a frank and assessing manner I found distinctly unnerving.

'Dr Clark?'

'Bertie,' I said with a smile that felt a little forced. 'It's short for Beatrix with an X.'

He stood there looking down at me as if I were a strange oddity he'd never encountered in ICU before. I wondered if it was my

hairstyle. I have longish wavy honey-brown hair, which I like to keep under some semblance of control when I'm working. That morning I'd tied it in two round knots either side of my head like teddy-bear ears.

Or maybe it was my outfit that had caused that quizzical frown to appear between his eyes. I'm the first to admit I'm a little out there in my choice of clothing. No white coat—not that we doctors wear them any more—or scrubs for me unless I've come from Theatre. I like colour and lots of it. It can have a powerful effect on patients' moods, particularly children. Besides, all you ever see in winter is black and brown and grey. That morning I had on skinny-leg pink jeans and a pea-green jumper with blue frogs on it. The new director glanced at the frogs on my breasts before returning his gaze to mine. Something closed off at the back of his eyes, as if he were pulling up a screen.

I didn't offer him my hand but, then, he didn't offer his. I'm normally a polite person but I wasn't sure I wanted to touch him until I had better control of myself. If his gaze could make me feel like I'd walked in wearing a string bikini then what would his touch do?

'Matt Bishop,' he said in a deep, mellifluous baritone that had an odd effect on the base of my spine. It felt loose … unhinged. 'I'd like to see you in my office.' He glanced at his watch before zapping me again with his gaze. 'Five minutes.'

I watched as he strode away, effectively dismissing me as if I was nothing but a lowly serf. Who the hell did he think he was,

ordering me about like a medical student? I was as qualified as him. Well, almost.

I was aware of the staff's collective gaze as the air rippled with tension in his wake.

'You'd better not be late, Bertie,' Jill, the ward clerk, said. 'He's a stickler for punctuality. Alex Kingston got hauled over the coals for showing up two minutes late for a ward round.'

Gracie McCurcher gave a grimace and huddled further into the office chair she was swivelling on. 'He's nothing like Jeffrey, is he?'

Jeffrey Hooper was our previous director. He retired the week before I left for my … holiday. Think benevolent uncle or godparent. Jeffrey was the kindest, most supportive ICU specialist I've ever come across. He could be gruff at times but everyone knew his bark was just a front.

'That's part of the problem,' Jill said. 'Jeffrey was too lax in running this department. The costs have blown out and now Dr Bishop has to rein everything in. I don't envy him. He's not going to make any friends doing it, that I can tell you.'

I moved my lips back and forth and up and down. My sister Jem calls it my bunny-rabbit twitch. I do it when I'm stressed. Which is kind of embarrassing when my whole research project is on reducing stress. I'm supposed to be the poster girl for serenity. But the truth is I'm like the ducks on the Serpentine in Hyde Park. They look like they're floating effortlessly on the surface but underneath the water their little webbed feet are

paddling like crazy.

'You'd better keep the photos until after work,' Gracie said.

Photos? I thought. Oh, *those* photos. I pasted on a smile that made my face ache. Everyone was looking at me. Here was my chance to come clean. To tell them there hadn't been a wedding. I could see my postcard out of the corner of my eye. It was still in pride of place on the noticeboard. Hadn't anyone else been on holiday, for God's sake? I'm not sure how long I stood there with my mouth stretched in that rictus smile but it felt longer than my 'honeymoon'. I wondered if I could edit some wedding-ish snaps on my phone. Set up a temporary social network account or something. It would give me some breathing space until I plucked up the courage to tell the truth.

'Good suggestion,' I said, and, taking a deep breath, headed to the lion's den.

I gave the closed door a quick rap and winced as my knuckles protested. It was a timely reminder I would need to develop a thicker skin if I were to survive the next few rounds with Dr Matt Bishop.

'Come in.'

I walked into his office but it was nothing like his predecessor had left it. Gone were the lopsided towers of files and patient notes and budgetary reports. There were no family photos on the cluttered desk. No empty or half-drunk cups of coffee. No cookie crumbs. No glass jar full of colourful dental-filling-pulling sweets. The office had been stripped bare of its character.

It was as sterile and as cool as the man who sat behind the acre of desk.

'Close the door.'

I paused, giving him an arch look. I might have had an alternative upbringing but at least my parents taught me the magic word.

'Please,' he added, with a smidgeon of a lip curl.

Round one to me, I thought.

The door clicked shut and I moved a little closer to the desk. The closer I got the more my skin prickled. It was like entering a no-go zone monitored by invisible radar.

I wondered what my mum would make of his aura. Matt Bishop had a firm mouth that looked like it wasn't used to smiling. His jaw had a determined set to it as if he was unfamiliar with the notion of compromise. His skin was olive toned but it looked as if he hadn't been anywhere with strong sunshine for several months … but, then, that's our English summer for you. His hair was a rich, dark brown, thick and plentiful but cut short in a no-nonsense style. He was closely shaven and in the air I could pick up a faint trace of lime and lemongrass, a light, fresh scent that made my nostrils widen in appreciation. I'm a sucker for subtle aftershave.

I hate stepping into the lift with a bunch of young male medical students who've gone crazy with those cheap aerosol body sprays. I once had to hold my breath for six floors and the lift stopped on every one. I was wheezing like I had emphysema

by the time I got out.

My mum reckons she can read auras. I'm more of a wardrobe reader. Matt Bishop was wearing a crisply ironed white shirt with a black and silver striped tie with a Windsor knot and black trousers with knife-edge pleats that spoke of a man who preferred formality to casual friendliness. But to counter that the sleeves of his shirt were folded back past his wrists, revealing strong forearms with a generous sprinkling of dark hair that went all the way down to his hands and along each of his long fingers. His nails were neat and square, unlike mine, which had suffered the fallout of the last two weeks after months of coaxing them to grow, and were now back to their nibbled-to-the-quick state.

I curled my fingers into my palms in case he noticed and sat down in the chair opposite his desk. I sat not because he told me to. He didn't. I sat because I didn't care for the schoolgirl-called-into-the-headmaster's-office dynamic he had going on. It was much better to be seated so I could look at him on the level. Mind you, with his considerable height advantage I would have had to be sitting on a stack of medical textbooks to be eye to eye with him.

His unreadable gaze meshed with mine. 'I believe congratulations are in order.'

'Erm … yes,' I said. What else could I say? No, I found my fiancé in bed with one of the bridesmaids' sister the night before the wedding? And that *he* dumped me before I could get in first? And how I tipsily wrote postcards that were subsequently sent

about what a fabulous time I was having on my honeymoon? Not going to happen. Not to Matt Bishop anyway. I would tell people on a need-to-know basis and right now no one needed to know.

I *needed* no one to know.

There was a pregnant silence.

I got the feeling he was waiting for me to fill it, though with what I'm not sure. Did he want me to tell him where I went on my honeymoon? What I wore? Who caught the bouquet? I thought men weren't all that interested in weddings, even when it was their own.

I stared back at him with my heart beating like a hummingbird had got trapped in one of my valves. *You could tell him.* The thought slipped under the locked door of my resolve. *No way!* the other side of my brain threw back. It was like a tennis match was going on inside my head. I was so flustered by it I shifted in my seat as if there were thumbtacks poking into my jeans.

His eyes drilled into mine. 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes.' I smiled stiffly. 'Sure. Fine. Absolutely.'

Another silence passed.

Here's the thing. I'm not good with silences. They freak me out. It's because my parents went through a no-speaking phase when Jem and I were kids. They wanted us to pretend we were living in an abbey like at Mont Saint Michel in Normandy in France, where talking is banned in order to concentrate on prayer. It would have helped if they'd taught us sign language first. Thankfully it didn't last long but it's left its mark. I have

this tendency to talk inanely if there's even a hint of a break in the conversation.

'So, how are you liking St Iggy's so far?' I said. 'Isn't it a nice place? Everyone's so friendly and—'

'Harrison Redding, the CEO, tells me you're doing a research project on stress reduction,' Matt Bishop said.

'Yes,' I said. As much as I didn't care for his clipped tone, at least I was back on safer ground. I mentally wiped my brow. Phew! I could talk all day about my project. 'I'm looking at ways of mitigating the stress on patients, relatives and staff when a patient is in ICU, in particular when a patient is facing death. Stress is a costly burden to the unit. Staff take weeks—sometimes months—of stress leave when cases are difficult to handle. Patients lodge unnecessary and career-damaging lawsuits when they feel sidelined or their expectations aren't met. My aim is to show how using various stress intervention programmes and some physical ways of reducing stress, such as aromas and music tones and other environmental changes, can significantly reduce that cost to the hospital. My stress cost abatement model will help both staff and patients and their loved ones deal better with their situation.'

I waited for his response … and waited.

After what seemed like a week he leaned forward and put his forearms on the desk and loosely interlaced his fingers. 'You've had ethics approval?'

'Of course.'

I watched as he slowly flicked one of his thumbs against the other. Flick. Flick. Flick. I tried to read his expression but he could have been sitting at a poker tournament. Nothing moved on his face, not even a muscle. I was having trouble keeping my nervous bunny twitch under control. I could feel it building inside me like the urge to sneeze.

His eyes bored into mine. 'I have some issues with your project.'

I blinked. 'Pardon?'

'I'm not convinced this unit can afford the space you've been allocated,' he said. 'I understand Dr Hooper was the one to approve the end room for your use?'

'Yes, but the CEO was also—'

'And the room next to the relatives' room?'

'Yes, because I felt it was important to give people a choice in—'

'What sort of data have you produced so far?'

I wished I hadn't gone on leave for more reasons than the obvious one. It felt like ages since I'd looked at my data. Most of it was descriptive, which was something the survey questionnaire over the next few critical weeks would address. I understood the scientific method. Data had to be controlled, repeatable and sufficient; otherwise, it was useless. But I also wanted a chance to change the thinking around death and dying. Everyone was so frightened of it, which produced enormous amounts of stress. 'I'm still collecting data from patient and staff surveys,' I said.

'I have a series of interviews to do, which will also be recorded and collated.'

I wasn't too keen on the sceptical glint in his eyes. 'Multiplication of anecdotes is not data, Dr Clark.'

I silently ground my teeth … or at least I tried to be silent. Jem says she can always hear me because she listened to it for years when we shared a bedroom when we were kids. Apparently I do it in my sleep.

I *so* did not need this right now. I had enough on my plate in my private life, without my professional life going down the toilet as well. I understood how Matt Bishop was in brisk and efficient new broom mode. I understood the pressure of coming in on budget, especially when you'd inherited a mess not of your own making. But I wasn't going to be intimidated by a man who had taken an instant dislike to me for how I dressed or wore my hair.

He would have to get over himself. *I* wasn't changing.

'Will that be all, Dr Bishop?' I asked in mock meekness as I rose from the chair. 'I have some pre-assessments to see to on the ward.'

This time a muscle did move in his jaw. In and out like a miniature hammer. A hard sheen came over his gaze as it held mine—an impenetrable layer of antagonism that dared me to lock horns with him. I'm not normally one to pick fights but I resented the way he'd spoken to me as if I were a lazy high-school student who hadn't done their homework. If he wanted a fight then I would give him one.

I felt a frisson pass through my body, an electric current that made my nerves flutter and dance. I can't remember a time when I felt more switched on. It was like someone had plugged me into a live socket. My entire body was vibrating with energy, a restless and vibrant energy it had never felt before.

Without relaxing his hold on my gaze, he reached for a sheet of paper on the desk in front of him, which I presumed was an outline of my research. His top lip lifted in a sardonic arc. 'Your project name has a rather unfortunate acronym, don't you think?'

I looked at him blankly for a moment. And then I got it. I was annoyed I hadn't realised it before. Stress Cost Abatement Model. S.C.A.M. Why on earth hadn't someone pointed it out earlier? I felt like an idiot. Would everyone be snickering at me once Matt Bishop shared his observation around the water cooler? My stomach knotted. Maybe they already were … Was that why everyone had looked at me when I came to the office just now? Had they been talking about me … *laughing* at me?

I was incensed. Livid to the point of exploding with anger so intense it felt like it was bursting out of each and every corpuscle of my blood. I could feel the heat in my cheeks burning like the bars of a two-thousand-watt radiator. I had spent most of my childhood being sniggered at for my unconventional background. How would I ever be taken seriously professionally once this did the rounds?

I don't often lose my temper, but when I do it's like all those years of keeping my thoughts and opinions to myself come

spilling out in a shrieking tirade that I can't stop once I get started. It's like trying to put a champagne cork back in the bottle.

I hissed in a breath and released it in a rush. 'I *detest* men like you. You think just because you've been appointed director you can brandish your power about like a smart-ass kid with a new toy. You think your colleagues are dumb old chess pieces you can push around as you please. Well, I have news for you, Dr Bishop. This is one chess piece you can't screw around with.'

I probably shouldn't have used *that* particular word. The connotation of it changed the atmosphere from electric to erotic. I could feel it thrumming in the air. I could see the glint of it in his grey-blue gaze as it tussled with mine. I'm not sure where his mind was going, but I knew what images mine was conjuring up —X-rated ones. Naked bodies. His and mine. Writhing around on a bed in the throes of animal passion.

Thing is … it's been ages since I've had sex. I'm pretty sure that's why my mind was running off the way it was. I'd put Andy's lack of interest over the last couple of months down to busyness with work as a stock analyst. I put down my own to lack of interest, period. I blamed it on the contraceptive pill I'd been taking. But then I changed pills and I was exactly the same. Go figure.

I saw Matt Bishop's eyes take in my scorching cheeks and then he lowered his gaze to my mouth. It was only for a moment but I felt as if he had touched me with a searing brand. I bit my tongue to keep it from moistening my lips but that meant I couldn't say

anything to break the throbbing silence. Not that I was going to apologise or anything. As far as I was concerned, he'd asked for a verbal spray and, given another chance, I would give him one again.

He sat back in his chair, his eyes holding mine in a lock that made the backs of my knees feel fizzy. It took an enormous effort on my part not to look away. I had an unnerving feeling he could see through my brief flash of anger—the overly defensive front that disguised my feelings of inadequacy. I'd spent most of my life hiding my insecurities but I got the sense he could read every micro-expression on my face, even the ones I thought I wasn't expressing. His gaze was so steady, so watchful and so intuitive I was sure he was reading every thought that was running through my mind, including—even more unsettling—the X-rated ones.

'I'll keep that in mind,' he said. 'Close the door on your way out.' He waited a beat before he added with an enigmatic half-smile, '*Please.*'

CHAPTER TWO

I FINISHED MY pre-assessment clinic and walked back to ICU. Stalked would be more accurate. I was still brooding over Matt Bishop's treatment of me. Why had he taken such a set against me? I wasn't used to making instant enemies. I considered myself an easygoing person who got on with everyone. Mostly.

Come to think of it, there have been a couple of times when I've run up against someone who didn't share my take on things. Like my neighbour, who kept spraying the other neighbour's cat with a hose every time it came into his garden. That's just plain cruel and I didn't refrain from telling him so. I got myself hosed for my trouble, but at least I felt good about standing up for Ginger.

And then there was the guy who'd been ripping off another elderly neighbour a few doors down. Elsie Montgomery employed him to do some gardening and odd jobs but it wasn't long before he was doing her shopping and taking her to the doctor or on other outings. At first I thought he was doing it out of the goodness of his heart, but then I found out from Elsie—reluctantly, because she was embarrassed—he had been taking money out of her bank account after he'd got her to tell him her PIN.

I wanted Elsie to press charges against him for elder abuse but she thought he'd been punished enough by me shouting at him in

the street in front of all the neighbours. That and the naming-and-shaming leaflet drop. That was a stroke of genius on my part. I got a team of local kids to help me distribute them. It will be a long time before he gets to cut any lawns in our suburb, possibly the whole country.

I was walking past the staff change rooms when Gracie appeared. 'How did it go? What did he say to you?'

I rolled my eyes. 'He has issues with my project.'

'What sort of issues?'

I gave her a disgruntled look. I wasn't going to spell it out for her. Word would spread fast enough. 'The rooms I've been allocated, for one thing. He thinks we can't afford the space.'

Gracie frowned. 'But you're doing amazing things with the patients and families. Everyone says so. Look at what you did for the Matheson family. You brought such comfort to them when they lost their son before Christmas.'

I pictured the Matheson family collected around Daniel's twenty-one-year-old body as he breathed his last breaths after a long and difficult battle against sarcoma. I spent hours with them, preparing them and Daniel for the end. I encouraged them to be open with Daniel about their feelings, not to be ashamed of the anger they were feeling about his life being cut short, but to accept that as a part of the journey through grief. I taught Daniel's father, who was uncomfortable showing emotion or affection, to gently massage his son to help him relax. When Daniel finally passed it was so peaceful in the room you could hear the birds

twittering outside.

I let out a breath as we walked along the corridor back to the unit. 'I can't stop now. I'm only just beginning to see results. I've had three nurses tell me how much they got out of the meditation exercise I gave before I went on leave. When nurses get stressed, patients get stressed. It's not rocket science. It's common sense.'

'But surely Dr Bishop can't block your project now,' Gracie said.

I held my hands out for the antiseptic gel from the dispenser on the wall, my mouth set in an indomitable line. 'I'd like to see him try.'

I got busy doing a PICC line for a chemotherapy patient and then I had to help one of the registrars with setting up a patient's ventilator. I was due for Theatre for an afternoon list with one of the neurosurgeons, Stuart McTaggart. Not my favourite person at St Iggy's, but while he had an abrasive personality there was certainly nothing wrong with his surgical skills. Patients came from all over the country to see him. He had a world-class reputation for neurosurgery and was considered to be one of the best neurosurgeons of his generation.

I went to the doctors' room to grab a quick bite of lunch. It was a medium-sized room big enough for a six-person dining table and chairs, a couple of mismatched armchairs, a coffee table, a sink and a small fridge. The daily newspapers were spread out on the table, where a bowl of fruit acted as a paperweight.

Personally, I thought the place could do with a facelift, maybe

a bit of feng shui wouldn't go astray, but I was fairly new on staff, considering some people had been here for their entire careers, so I picked my battles.

I reached for an apple out of the bowl as the door opened. I looked up to see Matt Bishop enter the staffroom. His expression showed no surprise or discomfit at seeing me there. In fact, I thought I caught a glimmer of a smile lurking in his eyes. No doubt he was still enjoying the joke he'd made of my project. I hadn't heard anyone say anything about it so far but I knew it wouldn't be long before they did. He wouldn't be able to keep such a gem of hilarity to himself.

I felt my anger go up another notch. Why did I attract this sort of stuff? Why couldn't I go about my life without people making fun of me? Now, you might ask why would a girl wear bright, fun clothes and twist her hair into wacky hairstyles if she was afraid of people laughing at her? Duh! If they're laughing at my clothes and my hair I don't have to feel they're laughing at *me.* There's a difference and to me it's a big one.

I bit into the apple with a loud crunch. I was down a round and I had some serious catching up to do. I chewed the mouthful and then took another. And another. It wasn't the nicest apple, to tell you the truth. But I was committed now so I had to finish it. I can be stubborn at times—most of the time, to be honest. I *hate* giving in. I hate being defeated by something or someone. I'd spent a lot of my childhood being bullied so I guess that's why. It's not just about losing face. I hate failure. It goes against

my nature. I'm positive in my outlook. I go into things expecting to achieve my mission. I don't let the naysayers get to me … or I try not to.

'So where did you go on honeymoon?' Matt Bishop asked, just as I'd taken another mouthful.

I swear to God I almost choked on that piece of apple. I thought he'd have to give me the Heimlich manoeuvre—not that we do that any more, but still. I coughed and spluttered, my eyes streaming, my cheeks as red as the skin of the piece of apple I was trying to shift from my airway.

He stepped towards me. 'Are you okay?'

I signalled with one of my hands that I was fine. He waited patiently with his steady gaze trained on mine. Of course I couldn't pretend I was choking forever, and since—technically speaking—I had been on honeymoon/holiday I decided to stay as close to the truth as possible once I got my airway clear. 'Skiing … Italy.'

'Where in Italy?'

'Livigno.'

He acknowledged that with a slight nod as he reached for a coffee cup. 'Good choice.'

I put the rest of my apple in the bin. It wasn't my choice. I'm a hopeless skier. I'd only agreed to it because it was what Andy wanted. And rather than waste the money—because he hadn't paid the travel insurance as I'd asked him to—I'd doggedly stuck with the plan. I must admit I was proud of myself in that

I progressed off the nursery slopes, but not very far. 'You ski?' I asked.

'Occasionally.'

There was a silence broken only by the sound of coffee being poured into his cup. I waited to see if he put milk or sugar or sweetener in it. You've guessed it. There's a lot you can tell about someone from how they take their coffee. He was a straight-up man. No added extras. And he drank it smoking hot. I watched as he took his first mouthful without even wincing at the steamy heat.

'What does your husband do?'

The question caught me off guard. I was too busy watching the way his mouth had shaped around the rim of his cup. Why had I thought his mouth hard and uncompromising? He had the sort of mouth that would make Michelangelo dash off for a chisel. The lower lip was sensually full and the top one neatly defined. I don't think I'd ever seen such a beautifully sculpted mouth. I began to wonder what it would feel like pressed to my own …

'Pardon?'

'Is your husband a doctor too?'

Something about the way he said the word 'husband' made me think he was putting it in inverted commas or even in italics. It was the way he stressed the word. That, and the way his mouth got a slight curl to it as if he thought the notion of someone wanting to marry me was hilariously unbelievable.

'No, erm, he's a stock analyst.'

'In London?'

'Yes.'

There's an art to lying and I like to think I'm pretty good at it. After all, I've been doing it all my life. I learned early on not to tell people the truth. Living in a commune with your parents from the age of six sort of does that to you. I wouldn't have lasted long at school if I had Shown and Told some of the things I'd seen and heard.

No, it's not the lying that's the problem. That's the easy part. It's keeping track of them that gets tricky. So far I hadn't strayed too far off the path. Andy was a stock analyst and he worked in London. He was currently seeking a transfer to the New York branch of his firm, which, to be frank, I welcomed wholeheartedly. London is a big city but I didn't fancy running into him and his new girlfriend any time soon. It was bad enough having him come to my house to collect all his things. I made it easy for him by leaving them in the front garden. Yes, I know, it was petty, but I got an enormous sense of satisfaction from throwing them from the second-floor window. It wasn't my fault it had snowed half a metre overnight. I'm not in control of the weather.

I decided in order to keep my lying tally down I had to ask some questions of my own. 'Are you married?'

'No.'

'In a relationship?'

He paused for a nanosecond. 'No.'

I wondered if he had broken up recently, or if the break-up—if there had been one—still hurt. 'Kids?'

He frowned. 'No, of course not.'

'Why of course not?'

'Call me old-fashioned but I like to do things in the right order,' he said.

I tilted my head at him. 'So let me guess … you haven't lived with anyone?'

'No.'

I pondered over that for a moment while he took a packet of sandwiches from the small fridge and sat down at the table. He opened one of the newspapers on the table and began to eat his sandwiches in what I could only describe as a mechanical way. I'm the first to admit hospital food isn't much to get all excited about, but the sandwiches for the doctors' room were always freshly made and contained healthy ingredients, or at least they had since I'd spoken to the head of catering a few weeks back.

'That's bad for you, you know,' I said. I know it was none of my business what or how he ate but the silence was there and I wanted to fill it. Needed to fill it, more like.

Matt Bishop didn't bother to glance my way. He turned the newspaper page over and reached for another sandwich. 'What is?'

'Eating and reading. At the same time, I mean.'

He sat back in his chair and looked at me with an inscrutable expression. 'You have something against multitasking?'

I didn't let his satirical tone faze me. 'Eating while performing other tasks is a bad habit. It can lead to overeating. You might be full by page three but you keep on eating until you get to the sports page out of habit.'

He closed the newspaper and pushed it to the other side of the table. 'How long were you going out with your *husband* before he asked you to marry him?'

There, he'd done it again. I wasn't imagining it. He'd stressed the word 'husband'. What was with the sudden interest in my private life? Or did he think it impossible anyone could be remotely interested in me? With the end of my engagement so recent I was feeling a bit fragile in terms of self-esteem. Come to think of it, my self-esteem has always been a little on the eggshell side. 'Erm, actually, he didn't ask me,' I said. 'I asked him.'

He lifted one of his dark eyebrows. 'Oh?'

'You don't approve.'

'It's none of my business.'

I folded my arms and gave him a look. 'I fail to see why the man has to have all the power in a relationship. Why should a girl have to wait months and months, possibly years for a proposal? Living every moment in a state of will-he-or-won't-he panic?'

'Don't blame me,' he said mildly. 'I didn't write the rule book.'

I pursed my lips, not my most attractive pose, but still. Jem calls it my cat's-bottom pout. I had the strangest feeling Matt Bishop was smiling behind that unreadable look he was giving me. There was a tiny light in his eyes that twinkled now and again.

'So how did he take it when you popped the question?' he asked.

'He said yes, obviously.' Not straight away, but I wasn't going to tell Matt Bishop *that* little detail. Andy and I had discussed marriage over the years. He just hadn't got around to formally asking me. I got tired of waiting. I know it's weird, considering my non-traditional background, but I really longed to be a proper bride: the white dress and veil and the church and the flowers and confetti and the adorable little flower girl and the cute little pageboy.

My parents had never formally married because they didn't believe in the institution of marriage—any institution, really. They have an open relationship, which seems to work for them. Don't ask me how. I've never said anything to them, but every time I looked at the photos of their thirty years of life together I've always felt like something was missing.

Matt picked up his coffee cup and surveyed me as he took another sip. 'How long have you been at St Ignatius?'

'Ten and a half months.'

'Where were you before here?'

'St Thomas',' I said, and tossed the question back, even though I already knew the answer because I'd overheard two of the nurses talking about him in the change room. 'You?'

'I trained in London and spent most of my time at Chelsea and Westminster, apart from the last twelve months in the US.'

I wondered why he had gone abroad and if it had anything

to do with a woman, here or over there. I hadn't heard anything about his private life. Word has it he kept it exactly that—private.

My phone beeped with an incoming message and I glanced down to see it was a text from Jem.

How r u doing? it said.

I quickly typed back. Fine.

Within seconds she typed back. What did everyone say?

I typed back. I haven't told them.

She came back with, Y not?

I typed back the emoticon smiley face with red cheeks. She sent me a smiley face with love hearts for eyes. It was times like this I was truly glad I had a sister. She knew me better than anyone. She knew I needed time to sort my feelings out, to get my head around the idea of being single again.

I had a feeling she also knew it was not so much my heart that was broken but my pride. It's not that I didn't love Andy. I loved him from the moment I met him. He was charming and funny and made me feel as if I was the most important person in his life … for about a month. I know all relationships take work and I put in. I really did. It's just he hadn't factored in my career. His always came first. It caused many an argument. I mean, it's not as if someone's going to die if he doesn't show up for work. He never seemed to understand I couldn't take off a day whenever I felt like it because he was bored and wanted company.

I put my phone back in my jeans pocket and met Matt Bishop's inscrutable gaze. I wondered if he could see any of the thought

processes of my brain flitting over my face. I like to think I can keep my cards pretty close, but something about his intense grey-blue eyes made me feel exposed, as if all my insecurities and doubts were lined up on show for his perusal.

'Any further questions?' I asked, with a pert look.

He held my look for an extra beat. 'Not at the moment.'

I turned on my heel and scooted out of there. Colour me suspicious, but I had a feeling there was not much that would get past Dr Matt Bishop's sharply intelligent grey-blues.

Theatre was tense but, then, Stuart McTaggart always operated that way. He wasn't one of those surgeons who chatted about what he did on the weekend or how well his kids were doing at Cambridge or Oxford—yadda-yadda-yadda. He didn't have classical music playing, like a couple of the other surgeons on staff did. He insisted on absolute silence, apart from when he had something to say. I'd had to learn early on to button my lips while in Theatre with him. He was gruff to the point of surly and he barked out orders like a drill sergeant. Some of the junior theatre staff found him terrifying. Some of the more senior staff hated working with him.

Funnily enough, I didn't find him too hard to handle. I understood the pressure he was under. Patients were more demanding of good outcomes than in the past, or at least they had better access to legal representation and were more aware of their rights. The litigious climate meant a lot of clinicians at the pointy end of medicine were under far greater pressure and scrutiny

than ever before. That could be a good and a bad thing depending on the circumstances. It was part of why I wanted to pursue my research. Reducing the stress of the hospital experience was a win-win for everyone. Apart perhaps from the greedy lawyers, of course, but don't get me started.

Stuart McTaggart was operating on a twenty-seven-year-old man with a very vascular and awkwardly placed benign brain tumour. Jason Ryder was a recently married man with a baby on the way. He was a keen sportsman, playing semi-professional golf. He had collapsed whilst playing in a tournament and been admitted to St Iggy's via A and E. All was going well until he developed a bleed. Alex Kingston, the surgical registrar, was the first to cop the flak from Stuart.

'Suck the blood out of the way, Kingston!' he said. 'I can't diathermy bleeders if they're underwater!'

Next in line was Leanne Griffiths, the scrub nurse.

'Be aware of what's happening in the operation, Sister Griffiths. I can't wait around while you call for more swabs. They should be open, on the table, ready when I need them. Which is now!'

Then it was my turn. Woot. Woot.

'What blood pressure have you got this patient running at, Dr Clark? He looks hypertensive to me and that's not assisting with this blood loss!'

And on it went. Everyone was to blame except Stuart. But, then, really, no one was to blame—it was just the nature of the

tumour and the stress of trying to remove it with minimal damage to the normal brain. The human body was not always predictable. Things didn't always work out. They weren't working out now. The only way to eventually stop the haemorrhage was to ligate a couple of largish vessels, causing irreparable damage to a large part of what had been a normal brain.

The person I'd anaesthetised wasn't going to be the person who woke up … if he woke up. I hated even *thinking* those words. I always focussed on the positive. It gave great comfort to loved ones if they could hold onto hope for as long as possible.

I went down to ICU with the patient, keeping an eye on the monitor as we went. I was trying not to be influenced by the air of doom and gloom that had blown up in Theatre. I had seen patients much worse than Jason recover. It was a setback, certainly, but with time and patience and careful monitoring he had a chance, maybe even better than expected, given his level of fitness.

Once Jason was settled on the ventilator I went out to the family waiting in the relatives' room. His wife, Megan, was about six months pregnant and stood with Jason's parents as soon as I came in. 'How is he?' she said, holding her hand over her belly as if to protect her baby from hearing bad news.

'The operation was very difficult, Megan,' I said in a gentle but calm tone. 'The tumour had a lot of blood running through it. Mr McTaggart was able to get it out, but not without bleeding, and there is likely a bit of damage to some of the surrounding brain. It's impossible to tell at this stage how he's going to be. There's

no choice but to wait and see what effect the tumour and the operative trauma has had. But it's important to keep positive and try not to feel too overwhelmed at this stage. Everything that can be done is being done to bring about the best possible recovery for Jason.'

There was a sound behind me and I turned to see Matt Bishop come in. 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting,' he said, briefly shaking hands with Jason's parents and then Megan. 'I'm Matt Bishop, the head of ICU.'

Jason's father Ken swallowed thickly. 'What's happening to our boy?'

'He's being ventilated and kept in an induced coma,' Matt said. 'During surgery there was a major bleed from the tumour bed. Mr McTaggart was able to stop the bleed, but it's possible normal brain may have been damaged in the process. When the brain swelling has decreased, we'll gradually reduce the sedation, and see what effect the surgery has had. But I should warn you that surgery to a vascular tumour like this, and the bleeding that goes with trying to remove it, can cause a lot of damage. I'm sorry but there's a possibility he won't wake up.'

Jason's mother put a shaky hand against her throat. 'You mean he could … die?'

Matt's expression was grave. 'A bleed like the one Jason suffered can damage vital areas of the brain. In the morning we'll repeat the CT scan and try to assess what physical damage has occurred. We might be able to predict from that how he might

recover. In the end, though, we just have to wait, try to wean him off sedation and see if he wakes up.'

The word lingered in the air like a toxic fume.

If, not when he wakes up.

I watched as the hope on Jason's mother's face collapsed, aging her a decade. I saw the devastation spread over Megan's, distorting her young and pretty features into a mask of horror. Jason's father's face went completely still and ashen. All their hopes and dreams for their son had been cut down with one two-letter word.

Matt answered a few more questions but it was obvious to me that the poor family weren't taking much in. They were still trying to get their heads around the fact the son and husband they had kissed that morning on his way to the operating theatre might not come back to them.

My heart ached for them. I know as a doctor you're supposed to keep a clinical distance. And I do most of the time. But now and again a patient comes along who touches you. Jason was such a normal, nice type of guy. He was exactly the same age as me. His family were loving and supportive, the sort of family who loved each other unconditionally. I thought of the baby in Megan's womb who might never get to know his or her father. I thought of the implications for Megan, trapped in a marriage to a man who might be permanently disabled, unable to talk, to eat or drink unassisted. Then there were the bathing and toileting issues —the whole heartbreaking scenario of taking care of someone

who could no longer do anything for themselves. Her young life would be utterly destroyed along with his.

Once Matt left I took the family to my relaxation room where my aromatherapy infuser was releasing lavender and tangerine, which had a calming effect and was shown to be beneficial in helping with anxiety and depression. I sat with them for a few minutes, handing them tissues scented with clary sage, another stress reliever, and listened as they talked about Jason. They told me about his childhood and some funny anecdotes about him as a teenager, and of his passion for golf and how hard he worked at his game. How they had mortgaged their house and forgone holidays for years in order to sponsor his career because they believed so unreservedly in his talent.

That's the thing about busy hospitals these days. No one has time to sit with patients and their families and chat. Nurses are under the pump all the time with other patients to see to. The doctors have the pressure of clinical work and administrative duties, and in a teaching hospital such as St Iggy's the responsibility of teaching medical students, residents and interns and registrars leaves little time to linger by a patient's bedside. Often it was the cleaning or catering staff that counselled patients most, but even they were under increasing pressure.

I made a point of keeping some time for the patients, even though it meant my days were a little longer than normal. Looking back, I think that was one of the reasons Andy strayed.

I just wasn't around enough for him. That, and the assumption that because my parents had an open relationship I, too, would be happy with the same arrangement. Shows how little he knew me. But he knew how much I love my work. It's not so much a career for me but a vocation. I love being able to help people and being with them through the darkest times is the most challenging but in many ways the most rewarding.

I caught up to Matt half an hour later just as he was coming out of his office. I didn't wait to be invited in. I put my hand flat on the door just as he was about to close it. 'Can I have a word?'

He drew in a breath and released it with a sound of impatience. 'I have a meeting in five minutes.'

'I'll be brief.'

He opened the door and I walked past him to enter his office. My left arm brushed against his body as I went. I brush past people all the time. It's hard not to in a busy and often crowded workplace, especially in ICU or Theatre. But I had never felt a tingle go through me quite like that before. It was like touching a bolt of lightning. Energy zapped through my entire body from my arm to my lady land. I was hoping it didn't show on my face. I'm not one to blush easily … or at least not until that morning. I stopped blushing when my parents went through their naturalist phase when I was thirteen. I think my blushing response blew a gasket back then. But right then I could feel warmth spreading in my cheeks. I could only hope he would assume it was because of the message I was there to deliver.

I got straight to the point. 'Did you have to be so blunt with Jason Ryder's wife and family? Surely you could've given them a little ray of hope? You made it sound like the poor man is going to die overnight or be a vegetable. I've seen much worse than—'

'Dr Clark.' His curt tone cut me off. 'I don't see the point in offering false hope. It's better to prepare relatives for the worst, even if it doesn't eventuate. It's much harder to do it the other way around.'

'But surely you could have dressed it up a little more—'

'You mean *lie* to them?' he said, nailing me with a look.

There was something about his stress over the word 'lie' that made my skin shrink away from my bones. I tried not to squirm under his tight scrutiny but I can tell you that hummingbird was back in my heart valve. 'I think you could have found a middle ground. They're completely shell-shocked. They need time to process everything.'

'Time is not something Jason Ryder has right now,' he said. 'That was a significant bleed. You and I both know he might not last the night.'

I pressed my lips together. I wasn't ready to give up hope, although I had to admit Jason's condition was critical.

'Have you mentioned organ donation to the family?' Matt said.

I frowned. 'No, but I'm surprised you didn't thrust the papers under their noses right then and there.'

His dark blue gaze warred with mine. 'If Jason's a registered donor then it's appropriate to get the wheels in motion as soon

as possible. Other lives can be saved. The family might find it difficult at first, but further down the track it often gives comfort to know their relative's death wasn't entirely in vain.'

I knew he was right. But the subject of organ donation is enormously difficult for most people, including clinicians. Relatives are overwrought with grief, especially after an accident or a sudden illness or surgery that didn't go according to plan. They want to cling to their loved one for as long as they can, to hold them and talk to them to say their final goodbyes. Some relatives can't face the thought of their son or daughter or husband or wife being operated on to harvest organs, even when those very organs will save other lives.

It was another thing I wanted to cover in my research. Finding the right time and the right environment in which to bring up the subject could go a long way in lifting organ donation rates, which were generally abysmal. All too often organ donation directives signed by patients were reversed because the relatives were in such distress.

I let out a breath in a little whoosh. 'I'll talk to them tomorrow. I think they need tonight to come to terms with what they've been told so far.'

There was a little silence.

I was about to fill it with something banal when he said, 'Would you like Jason moved to the end room?'

I looked at him in surprise. 'But I thought—'

'It will give the family a little more privacy.'

I couldn't read his expression. He had his poker face on. 'That would be great,' I said. 'Thank you.'

He gave me the briefest of smiles. It was little more than a little quirk of his lips but it made something inside my stomach slip. I suddenly wondered what his full smile would look like and if it would have an even more devastating effect on me. 'How do you get on with Stuart McTaggart?' he said.

'Fine.'

He lifted a dark eyebrow as if that wasn't the answer he'd been expecting. 'You don't find him … difficult?'

I gave a little shrug. 'He has his moments but I don't let it get to me. He's under a lot of pressure and he doesn't know how to manage stress. Stress is contagious, like a disease. You can catch it off others if you're not careful.'

He leaned his hips back against his desk with his arms folded across his broad chest. His eyes never once left mine. I would have found it threatening except I was so fascinated by their colour I was practically mesmerised. In certain lights they were predominately grey but in others they were blue. And now and again they would develop a tiny glittery twinkle as if he was enjoying a private joke.

'So what are your top three hints for relieving stress?' he said.

'Regular exercise, eight hours' sleep, good nutrition.'

'Not so easy when you work the kind of hours we work.'

'True.'

He was still watching me with that unwavering gaze. 'What

about sex?'

I felt a hot blush spread over my cheeks. Yes, I know. I'm such a prude, which is incredibly ironic given my parents talk about their sex lives at the drop of a sarong. 'Wh-what about it?' I stammered.

'Isn't it supposed to be the best stress-reliever of all?'

I ran the tip of my tongue out over my suddenly parchment-dry lips. The heat in my cheeks flowed to other parts of my body —my breasts, my belly and between my legs. Even the base of my spine felt molten hot. 'Erm, yes, it's good for that,' I said, 'excellent, in fact. But not everyone can have sex when they're feeling stressed. I mean, how would that work in the workplace, for instance? We can't have staff running off to have sex in the nearest broom cupboard whenever they feel like it, can we?'

I wished I hadn't taken the bait. I wished I hadn't kept running off at the mouth like that. Why the hell was I talking about sex with Matt Bishop? All I could think of was what it would be like to have sex *with* him. Not in a broom cupboard, although I'm sure he would be more than up to the challenge. But in a bed with his arms around me, his long legs entangled with mine, his body pressing me down on the mattress in a passionate clinch unlike any I'd had before.

Just to put you straight, I'm no untried virgin. I've had three partners, although I don't usually count the first one because I was drunk at the time and I can't remember much about it. It was my first year at med school and I was embarrassed about still

being a virgin so I drank three vile-tasting cocktails at a party and had it off with a guy whose name I still can't remember. What is it about cocktails and me?

But I digress. The second was only slightly more memorable in that I wasn't drunk or even tipsy, but the guy had performance anxiety, so I blinked and missed it, so to speak. I guess that's why Andy had seemed such a super-stud. At least he could go the distance and I actually managed to orgasm now and again. Told you I was good at lying.

Matt kept his gaze trained on my flustered one, a hint of a smile still playing around the corners of his mouth. 'Perhaps not.'

My phone started to ring and I grabbed at it as if it were the lottery office calling to inform me of a massive win. It wasn't. It was my mother. 'Can I call you back?' I said.

'Darling, you sound so tense.' My mother's voice carried like a foghorn. I think it's from all the chanting she does. It's given her vocal cords serious muscle. 'He's not worth the angst.'

I could feel my cheeks glowing like hot embers. 'I *really* can't talk now so—'

'I just called to give you your horoscope reading. It's really amazing because it said you're going to meet—'

'Now's not a good time,' I said with a level of desperation I could barely keep out of my voice. 'I'll call you later. I promise.'

'All right, darling. Love you.' She made kissy noises.

'I love you too. Bye.' I ended the call and gave Matt a wry look. 'My mum.'

‘Who’s causing you the angst?’ he asked. ‘Not me, I hope?’

I backed my way to the door, almost tripping over my own feet in clumsy haste. ‘I’d better let you get to your meeting.’

‘Dr Clark?’

My hand reached for the doorknob and I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder. ‘Yes?’

A glint danced in his eyes. ‘Check the broom cupboards on your way past, will you?’

CHAPTER THREE

I WAS ABOUT to leave for the day when the CEO's secretary came to see me. Lynne Patterson was in her late fifties and had worked at St Iggy's for thirty years in various administrative roles. I had only met her a handful of times but she was always warm and friendly. She reminded me of a mother hen. She oozed maternal warmth and was known for taking lame ducks under her wing. Not that I considered myself a lame duck or anything, but right then I wasn't paddling quite the way I wanted to.

'How did the wedding go?' Lynne asked as her opening gambit. *What is it with everyone and weddings?* I thought. People were becoming obsessed. It wasn't healthy.

My smile felt like it was set in plaster of Paris on my mouth. 'Great. Fabulous. Wonderful. Awesome.' I was going overboard with the superlatives but what else could I do? In for a penny, as they say, but now I was in for a million. I had to keep telling lies to keep the others in place. I was starting to realise what a farce this was becoming. I would have been better to be honest from the start. But now it was too late. I would look completely ridiculous if I told everyone the wedding had been cancelled. Maybe in a couple of months I could say things didn't work out, that Andy and I had decided to separate or something. But until then I had to keep the charade going. *Oh, joy.*

'Well, that's why I thought you'd be perfect for the job,' Lynne

said with a beaming smile.

'Erm … job?'

'The St Valentine's Day Ball,' she said. 'We hold it every year. It's our biggest fundraising event for the hospital. But this year it's ICU that's going to get the funds we raise. We hope to raise enough for an intensive care training simulator.'

I'd heard about the ball but I thought it was being organised by one of the senior paediatricians. I said as much but Lynne explained the consultant had to go on leave due to illness so they needed someone to take over.

'Besides,' Lynne said, 'you're young and hip and in touch with everything. The ball was becoming a little staid and boring. Ticket sales have been slow. We thought you'd be fabulous at putting on a great party.'

'We?'

'Dr Bishop.' Lynne beamed again. 'He said you'd be perfect.'

I did the teeth-grinding thing. Silently, I hoped, but I wouldn't have put money on it. 'Right, well, then, I guess I can do that,' I said, madly panicking because it was barely four weeks away. I comforted myself with the fact I didn't have to organise the venue or catering as the consultant had already done that, according to Lynne. My job was to make the ball entertaining and fun for everyone.

As soon as I got out of the hospital I called Jem. She's a teacher —another irony, given our parents went through a no-schooling phase. It lasted three years but then the authorities cottoned

on and we were marched back into the system. Interestingly, I was a year ahead of my peers academically but well behind socially. For Jem it was the other way around. She had no trouble fitting in but she struggled to catch up in classwork. She's never said, but I'm pretty sure that's why she ended up a teacher. She understands how hard it is for kids who aren't naturally academic. Mind you, she's no dunce. Once she caught up there was no stopping her. She whizzed her way through university, landing the vice chancellor's prize on the way through. Now she teaches at a posh girls' school in Bath.

'Jem, you got a minute to talk?' I asked.

'Sure,' Jem said. 'What's up? I mean, apart from being betrayed by your fiancé with the slutty sister of your bridesmaid, and then jilted at the altar, and going on honeymoon all by yourself.'

That's another reason I love my sister. She doesn't sugar-coat stuff. She doesn't just take the bull by the horns. She wrenches the darned things off. Unlike me, who tentatively pets the bull in the hope it will become my best friend and won't gore me to death. But one thing Jem and I have in common is a love of black humour. It's how we dealt with our wacky childhood. If we hadn't laughed we'd have cried. 'It's way worse than that,' I said, and told her about the postcard fiasco.

'What? You mean you still haven't told anyone? No one at all?'

'No.' I kept my head down against the icy cold wind as I walked along the frozen footpath. The last thing I wanted was to slip and

end up in the orthopaedic ward. Although come to think of it …

'What about your friend, what's her name? The nurse you said was really sweet.'

'Gracie.'

'That's the one. What about her?'

I sidestepped a sheet of black ice. I decided I didn't want to break a leg. How would I explain no husband coming in to visit me? 'I'm going to tell her … soon.'

'It's not that hard, Bertie,' Jem said matter-of-factly. 'You have nothing to be ashamed of. Andy's a twat. You don't have to protect him. Tell the world what a flipping jerk he is.'

I guess you can tell by now Jem is not the sort of girl to get screwed around by guys. In fact, I think she terrifies most men, which kind of explains why she hasn't had a steady boyfriend for ages—years, actually. She dated a Sicilian guy once but it didn't last. It was a whirlwind affair that ended badly. She's never talked about it. Won't talk about it. I know better than to ask.

'I got caught off guard because of the new director at work,' I said. 'It was too embarrassing to go into the gory details.' *Understatement.*

'What's he like?'

'How do you know he's a he?'

'Because you wouldn't have been caught off guard if it was a woman.'

Got to hand it to my sister. She knows me so well. 'He's … annoying, but kind of interesting too.'

'Woo hoo!' Jem crowed.

I rolled my eyes. I knew what she was thinking—the best way to heal a broken heart was to find someone else and soon. But I'd had enough trouble finding Andy. I didn't like my chances in the dating game. Besides, I'm not sure I wanted all the drama. Maybe I was destined to be on my own. My heart sank at the thought. I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be with someone who loved me. I wanted a family. I wanted it all. 'He thinks my research is dodgy,' I said.

'What's he look like?'

'Did you hear me?' I said.

'Is he hot?'

'He's okay.'

'How okay?' Jem said.

I blew out a breath. There was no point fighting it. Jem would get it out of me eventually. Might as well be sooner rather than later. 'He's six foot four and has dark hair and blue-grey eyes that change in different lights. He's got a nice mouth but I don't think he smiles at lot. Although he gets this little twinkle now and again that makes me wonder if he's laughing at me.'

'Way to go, Bertie!'

'Like that's going to happen,' I said. 'Besides, he thinks I'm married.'

'Some men get off on having an affair with a married woman.'

'Not him,' I said. 'He's too conservative.' Which was kind of what I liked about him, even though I was supposed to dislike

him on account of him being so mocking about my project. But for all that I felt drawn to him. He intrigued me. All those shifting shadows in his eyes suggested a man with layers and secrets that were just waiting to be explored.

'So what doesn't he like about your research?' Jem asked. 'Apart from the funny title, of course.'

I almost tripped on a crack in the footpath. 'Why didn't you say something earlier?'

Jem laughed. 'I thought you did it deliberately. You know how everyone is always poking fun at New Agey things. I thought it was really clever of you, actually.'

'Yeah, well, Matt Bishop thinks it's a big joke,' I said. 'It will be all round the hospital tomorrow. I just know it. Everyone will be laughing at me.'

'You've been laughed at before and lived to tell the tale,' Jem said. 'We both have.'

I couldn't argue with that. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep I heard the mocking taunts from my childhood echoing in my bedroom. They were like ghosts from the past who wouldn't leave me alone. Mean ghosts who delighted in reminding me I wasn't part of the in-crowd. I was a misfit. A reject. A loner. Alone.

I said goodbye to Jem and walked through the park to my house a couple of streets back from Bayswater Road. I was really proud of my home. I had a shockingly high mortgage, which would take me the rest of my life to pay off, but I didn't care. I loved my three-storey Victorian house with its quaint pocket-

handkerchief front garden.

I was teaching myself how to paint and decorate, not just to save costs but because I found it therapeutic. There was something incredibly soothing about painting. I was doing a room at a time and really enjoyed seeing the transformation happen before my eyes. Cracked and peeling paint replaced by smooth fresh colour. I'd done the master bedroom and now I was working on the sitting room. I scrubbed and sanded back the woodwork and applied the first undercoat before I left for my … well, you know. Andy was going to help me finish it. Or at least that's what he'd said. Not that he'd helped me with any of it, although I do seem to remember once he carried some old wallpaper out to the recycling bin.

My dad isn't much help. He can barely change a light bulb, mostly because he and Mum went through a no-electricity phase, which lasted about ten years. Solar power is great when you live in a place like Australia where the sun shines just about every day. Not so good on the Yorkshire moors.

I had a bite to eat and set to work but I had barely got the undercoat lid off the paint tin when there was a knock on the door. I peeped through the spy hole. It was the neighbour who lives six houses up from Elsie. Margery Stoneham was in her mid-seventies and was our street's neighbourhood watch. Nothing escaped her notice. She had an annoying yappy little dog called Freddy who humped my leg any chance it got. Don't get me wrong. I love animals, dogs in particular, but Freddy was the

most obnoxious little mutt I'd ever come across. He looked like a cross between a ferret and a rat and had the sort of wiry fur that felt like a pot scourer.

I felt on the back foot as soon as I opened the door. I had—inadvertently—sent Margery a postcard, along with Elsie. Who could believe three little pieces of cardboard could do so much damage? The dog was at Margery's feet, looking up at me with a beady look not unlike hers. 'Hi, Mrs Stoneham,' I said, with a bright smile. 'What a lovely surprise.' *Not.*

Margery peered past my shoulder. 'Is your hubby at home?'

'Erm, not right now.' *Here we go again*, I thought. But Margery was the last person I wanted to announce my failed wedding to. I might as well take out a billboard ad or announce it in *The Times.* 'How's that leg ulcer? Healed up now?' Freddy had taken a nip at her, not that she admitted that to me. She told me she'd scratched it on the coffee table. I checked out the coffee table when I was over there, dressing the wound for her. As far as I could tell it didn't have any teeth.

'Just about.' Margery looked past my shoulder again. 'Are you sure I'm not intruding? You're only just back from your honeymoon. I wouldn't want to—'

'It's perfectly fine,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

That's one thing I did know for sure. Margery nearly always wanted something. She didn't just drop in for a chat. I can't tell you how many prescriptions I've written for her and I've only been living there just under a year.

'I wanted to ask a little favour of you,' she said. 'I'm going to visit my sister in Cornwall and I need someone to mind Freddy for a few days. I'd ask Elsie but she's not confident walking him and he does so love his walk.'

I wanted to say no. Jem would have said no but, then, she's a lot stronger than I am. I have this annoying tendency to want to please everyone. I say yes when I really want to say no because I'm worried people won't like me if I grow a backbone. 'Of course I'll mind him,' I said. See how good I am at lying? They just slip off my tongue. 'We'll have a ball, won't we, Freddy?'

I knew better than to lean down and try and pat him. He lifted one side of his mouth in a snarl that showed his yellowed teeth. Did I mention his foetid breath? Oh, and he farts. A lot.

When I got to work the next morning there was no change in Jason Ryder. He had been moved to my end room and was surrounded by his family. I spent a bit of time with them before I did a central line on a new patient. The morning was almost over before I ran into Matt Bishop. Literally. I was walking past his office with my head down, thinking about my ridiculous and steadily increasing web of lies, as he was coming out, and I cannoned straight into him. He took me by the upper arms to steady me and a shockwave went through me as if he had clamped me with live voltage. I couldn't smother a gasp in time. 'Oomph!'

His hands slid down my arms before he released me. I couldn't help noticing he opened and closed his fingers once or twice as

if trying to rid himself of the feel of me. 'Sorry. Did I hurt you?'

I looked into his eyes—they were a darker shade of blue than grey as he was wearing a light blue shirt and a dark tie—and I felt like something tight and locked flowered open inside my chest. 'No. Not at all. It was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going.'

He continued to look down at me. He had to look down as I'm only five feet five and I wasn't wearing heels. I felt like a Shetland pony standing in front of a thoroughbred. And, going with the equine theme, Matt's nostrils gave a slight flare, as if he was picking up my scent. I hoped to God it was the dash of the neroli oil I'd put on and not the musty smell of Freddy, who'd been dropped off that morning. 'Did Lynne Patterson speak to you about the ball?' he said.

'Yes. Thanks for the vote of confidence.' I couldn't quite remove the hint of sarcasm from my tone. 'I hope you don't live to regret it.'

'I'm sure you'll do an excellent job.' He gave me one of his enigmatic smiles. 'Planning a wedding can't be too dissimilar.'

Every time the word 'wedding' was mentioned I felt my cheeks burn up. I was going to have to wear thick concealing make-up or something at this rate. Or maybe I could pretend I had rosacea. 'I'm going to check out the venue after work,' I said. 'And I'm thinking we should make it a costume ball. What do you think?'

'That could work.'

I angled my head at him. 'What costume would you wear?'

The twinkle was back in his gaze. 'Now, that would be telling. You'll have to wait and see.'

'Will you bring a partner?' I'm not sure why I asked that. Actually, I did know. I wanted to know what sort of woman he dated. I bet he would be a wonderful partner. He would be polite and respectful. He would open doors for his date and walk on the road side of the footpath. I bet he could dance, too, proper dancing as in a waltz. Andy mashed my toes to a pulp on the one occasion we waltzed. And he got horribly drunk and I had to get two security guards to help me bundle him into a taxi. Talk about embarrassing.

'No.'

'Why not? Surely you could ask someone.'

He gave a loose shrug. 'I'm too busy for a relationship just now. I have other priorities.' He waited a beat before asking, 'Will you bring your husband?'

He'd done it again, that ever so slight stress on the word 'husband'. Every time he did that it made me feel as if he thought I was too hideous to have landed myself a man. I know I'm not billboard stunning or anything but I've been told I've got nice brown eyes and a cute smile. Well, I know parents are always biased, but still. 'Erm, I think he'll be away with work,' I said. 'He travels … a lot.'

'That's a shame. I was looking forward to meeting him.'

I wrinkled my brow. 'Why?'

His expression was impossible to read. 'You said he was a

stock analyst, right?'

'Yes …'

'I thought I'd ask him about some stocks I've had my eye on for a while.'

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. I felt a heat rash moving all over my body. It was like ants marching underneath my skin. Maybe my talent at lying was deserting me. 'Don't you have a financial planner?' I said.

'Sure, but it's always good to get inside information, don't you think?'

I couldn't hold his penetrating gaze. I lowered mine and mumbled something about seeing a patient and left.

I was walking Freddy in Hyde Park in one of the dog exercise areas after work. It was freezing cold and flakes of snow were falling but I was determined to wear out the little mutt. While I'd been at work he'd chewed my favourite hippopotamus slippers Jem gave me for Christmas two years ago and one of my computer cables. I decided to let him off the lead so he could have a good run around and play with the other dogs. What I hadn't realised was that Freddy didn't *like* other dogs. Before I knew it he was at the throat of a corgi and it looked like Freddy was winning. The howls and growls and yelps and cries of 'Help!' from me created such a ruckus that people did what people normally do in that situation—they stopped and stared and did absolutely nothing.

Except for one man who came out of the shadows and pulled

the dogs apart with his bare hands. Except his hands weren't bare. He was wearing gloves, lovely butter-soft black leather ones that Freddy's teeth immediately punctured. I grabbed Freddy and snapped his lead back on but the stupid mutt was straining at the leash, trying to get to the overweight corgi, who was doing the same on the end of its lead, which its owner had now refastened.

'I'm *so* sorry,' I said. 'It's not my dog. I didn't realise he would … I blinked as the man's face was suddenly illuminated by one of the park's lights. 'You!'

Matt Bishop gave me a rueful look. 'It's not my dog either. It's my great-aunt's.'

'Your great-aunt isn't the Queen, is she?'

He threw back his head and laughed. I stood transfixed at the sound. It was deep and unmistakably masculine and made something deep and tight in my belly work loose. It wasn't just his laugh that was so captivating. It was the way his normally stern features relaxed, giving him an almost boyish look. At work with the pressures of lives in his hands he looked as if he was nudging forty. Now he looked no older than thirty but I knew he had to be at least thirty-three or -four to be as qualified as he was to head the department.

He was wearing casual clothes under a dark blue cashmere overcoat. Jeans and a sweater with the tips of his shirt collar showing. I don't think I've ever seen a more handsome-looking man. Not in a pretty-boy way but in a totally testosterone-oozing way that made the breath catch in my throat.

His gaze went to the cup-cake beanie I was wearing. It was pink and white and had a red pom-pom on top that looked like a cherry. I was pretty proud of it, actually. I taught myself to knit, making novelty beanies. So far I've made a mouse, a zebra and a bee.

The dogs were still snarling at each other. I had Freddy on such a tight leash I could feel the muscles in my arm protesting at the strain. Who needed the gym when you had an unruly dog? Freddy hurt more than three sets of ten-kilogram biceps curls.

'Quiet, Winnie,' Matt said. The corgi slunk down into a submissive pose but not before giving Freddy another murderous look. Freddy growled like something out of a horror movie and completely ignored my command to be quiet. I guess because my voice wasn't as deep and authoritative as Matt's, because as soon as Matt said it to Freddy he sat and shut up. He even held up his paw for a shake.

'Nice job,' I said. 'You don't happen to be best friends with Cesar Millan, do you?'

Matt smiled and my breath caught again. 'Dog training's pretty simple. You just have to show them who's pack leader.'

I'm not sure how it happened but somehow we started walking together. The dogs kept eyeing each other warily, but after a while they seemed to forget their ignominious start and got on with the job of sniffing every blade of grass … well, the ones that weren't covered in snow, that is. A light dusting had fallen, making the park look like a winter fairyland. I love winter. I think

it's the most romantic time of the year. That's why I wanted to be married in early December. Everyone gets married in spring or summer. I wanted to be different. But, then, sometimes you can be too different, which I've found to my detriment.

'Where does your great-aunt live?' I asked into the silence. Actually, I was quite proud of the fact I'd waited at least thirty seconds before speaking. That's a record for me.

He named the street running parallel to mine. I was so shocked I stopped and looked up at him. 'Really?'

'What's wrong?' he asked.

I gave a shaky laugh. 'Whoa, that's spooky. I live in the next street. Number forty.'

'Why spooky?'

'As in weirdly coincidental,' I said. 'London's a big city.'

'True, but it's close to the hospital and I'm only staying there until I can move back into my place once the tenants move out in a couple of weeks.'

He was living a street away from me?

'Where is your place?'

'Notting Hill.'

Of course, I thought. I'd had a feeling Matt came from money. He had the right accent and the well-groomed and cultured look. It had taken me years to shake off my Yorkshire vowels. Now and again when I was overtired one would slip out. I privately envied people like Matt. They hadn't been dragged around the countryside in search of the next New Age trend, living in mud

huts or tents or straw houses, not eating animal products or wearing them, not using chemicals or eating sugar or salt or processed food.

Don't get me wrong. I love my parents. They're good people, loving and kind and well meaning. But I couldn't imagine Matt Bishop's parents cavorting around a stone circle stark naked and chanting mantras. They probably wore Burberry and sipped sherry in the conservatory of their centuries-old pile in the countryside while a host of servants tended to their every whim.

'How long have you got the dog?' Matt asked.

'Until the weekend after next,' I said. 'My neighbour is visiting her sister in Cornwall. I don't know why she didn't take him with her. Maybe her sister won't let her. Can't say I blame her. He needs to go to reform school.'

I heard him give a soft, deep chuckle and another shiver shimmied down my spine.

'My great-aunt is visiting my parents for a few days,' he said.

I cast him a sideways glance. 'Your parents don't like dogs?'

Nothing showed on his face but the tone of his voice contained a hint of something I couldn't identify. 'My father.'

'Is he allergic?'

His mouth tightened for a nanosecond. 'You could say that.'

'Do you have siblings?' I asked, after we'd walked a few more paces. See how good I was getting at silences? Maybe there was some hope for me after all.

'No,' he said after a slight pause. 'There's only me. You?'

'A sister called Jem—short for Jemima. Our mum was really into Beatrix Potter, in case you hadn't guessed. Jem's ten months older than me.'

He flashed me a quick glance. 'That was close.'

I rolled my eyes. 'My parents were using natural contraceptive methods. So natural they fell pregnant straight away.'

He smiled again. 'Are you close to your sister?'

'Very, although we're quite different.'

'What does she do?'

'She's a teacher.'

We walked a few more metres in silence. Yes, in silence! But for some reason I didn't feel awkward or pressured to fill it. I wondered about his parents, whether he was close to them or not. I sensed tension between him and his father but that might just be my imagination. Although a lot of men of Matt's age had the young stag, old stag thing going on. It could be quite a competitive dynamic, especially as the father neared retirement age.

'What does your father do?' I asked.

'He's in corporate law.'

'Does your mother have a career?'

'She used to work as a legal secretary but she didn't go back after she married.' He waited a beat before adding, 'My father likes having her at his beck and call.'

I frowned at his tone. 'Is that what *she* wants?'

He shrugged the shoulder nearest me. I felt it brush against

mine. 'She seems happy enough being the trophy wife. It's either that or get traded in for a newer model. At least he's spared her the indignity of that.'

I was surprised—and secretly delighted—he'd revealed that to me. I wondered if he felt I was someone he could talk to about stuff. It's hard for doctors, particularly specialists at the top of their field. Everyone comes to *them* to solve their problems. No one ever thinks to ask if the specialist has problems of his or her own. I suspected Matt had some frustration towards his mother for settling for a life of sherry mornings and bridge club. Did his father play around? Openly or furtively?

I thought of my parents with their easygoing lifestyle. They loved each other. No one could ever be in doubt of that, least of all Jem and I. They were open about their—thankfully occasional these days—other partners, which Jem and I still found totally weird, but they always came back to each other and would never dream of stopping each other from reaching their potential. If my mum wanted to do something, my dad would support her in it one hundred percent, and vice versa. They didn't have secrets, or at least none Jem and I were aware of.

I decided against telling Matt about my background. He didn't ask, which either meant he wasn't interested or he was tired of small talk. Or maybe he regretted revealing what he had. I glanced at him covertly to find he had a frown on his forehead.

The dogs were walking to heel like star graduates from obedience school. I felt a little proud of myself, actually. Maybe

I could win over Freddy by the time Margery got back. Have him eating out of my hand instead of biting it.

'Have you checked out the venue for the ball?' Matt asked.

'No, I thought I'd do that once I wore out Freddy.'

He stopped and looked down at me. I couldn't see his eyes because his face was in shadow but I could see the misty fog of his warm breath as it met the cold air. 'How about I come with you? That is, if your husband wouldn't mind?'

My heart gave a little stumble as I gave him one of my fixed smiles. 'Believe me, he won't mind at all.'

CHAPTER FOUR

MATT CAME TO pick me up in his car forty-five minutes later. I'd had just enough time to feed Freddy and wash his musty wet feathers smell off me. I spritzed myself with my neroli oil spray and brushed out my hair, which had been in a knot at the back of my head for work and then squashed flat by my beanie.

I'm not in the least bit vain but I will say one thing for myself —I have great hair. It's thick and healthy with just enough wave in it to give it loads of body, or I can straighten it, and it's long enough to put up or leave loose. Jem hates me for it, as hers is a riot of corkscrew blonde curls that makes her look like she's poked her fingers into a power outlet.

I was waiting on my front step as Matt's car double-parked. There are never any spaces in front of my house, which is usually my biggest bugbear, but tonight I was glad about it. The last thing I wanted was for Matt Bishop to park his car outside my door and invite himself in. One step inside and my charade would be blown. There wasn't a single thing to suggest I was a recently married woman, and it wasn't just the absence of a husband either. I had sent back all the wedding gifts … apart from the really gorgeous art deco standard lamp Jem had given me.

Before I'd taken a step off my front porch Matt got out of the car and opened the passenger door for me. His gaze ran over my hair and my outfit in a way that made me feel as if he was

seeing me for the first time. I actually saw him blink a couple of times as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. I had changed into a raspberry-red knee-length dress and I'd teamed it with black leather boots—I tell my parents they're synthetic—and I was wearing fishnet tights. I was wearing a fake-fur coat—even *I* am with my parents on that—but I have to admit there was a hint of high-street hooker about my get-up. But, then, I love playful clothes. Not just so people will laugh at them instead of me, but more to put my finger up at the world for making snap judgements about appearances. We are all the same naked … well, more or less.

Mind you, I was having hot flushes thinking about Matt Bishop in his birthday suit. Even though he had a tall, rangy build, his neat, conservative clothes weren't quite able to hide the firm tone of his muscles. I could imagine how taut and toned his abdomen was, unlike mine, which was paying the price of a two-week stint of comfort eating.

I slipped into the low-slung sports car, the rich, soft leather seat cupping my body like an expensively gloved hand. I could smell Matt's subtle aftershave and took a deep breath to take more of it in as I pulled down the seat belt and clicked it into place.

He got in behind the wheel and I covertly watched the muscles bunching in his thigh as he put his foot down on the clutch and put the car into gear. There's something about a manual car that's intensely masculine. Surging through all those gears, the guttural

sound of all those throaty revs, the G-force as the rubber hits the road. I felt myself being pushed back further into the seat as we headed to the corner.

The hotel where the hospital ball was being held was a boutique one owned by a former patient. We were getting the use of the ballroom at a cut price. The hotel was popular with A-list celebrities because it was both intimate and luxurious. I hadn't been there before so I felt like a Hollywood superstar walking up the runner of red carpet on the front steps leading into the polished marble foyer. Uniformed staff were behind the shiny brass and marble reception desk and there was a concierge and three porters in another section. There was a massive arrangement of flowers on a marble stand and a veritable waterfall of crystals hung from the ceiling in a gloriously decadent chandelier that tinkled musically as we walked under it.

I didn't want to appear too kid-in-the-candy-store overwhelmed by all the glitz and glamour surrounding me, but given I hadn't stepped into a proper hotel until I was eighteen I still had a lot of catching up to do. My parents didn't even stay in motels or caravan parks, let alone posh five-star hotels. They camped. And before you start picturing a nicely erected tent and a crackling fire and us four sitting around it singing 'Kumbaya', let me tell you it was nothing like that. We didn't have a proper tent. My parents always borrowed one that looked like it had a past life in the circus. It was huge. But that was because there were usually ten other families with us, which meant Jem and

I had to hang out with a bunch of feral kids we had nothing in common with apart from having hippy parents.

It nearly always rained, and we were bitten to death by midges, or it was stinking hot and ants would get in our food, which was ironic given there was never any sugar in it.

So you can probably see why walking into the boutique hotel in Mayfair was such a big deal for me. Oh, and the fact that I was walking in with Matt Bishop was even more thrilling. We were getting looks. You know, the sort of double-take looks people give when they think they're seeing someone important walk by.

I can tell you, I *felt* important. I only wished I really was with Matt, I wished his hand was holding mine or his arm was around my waist. I was a little shocked at where my thoughts were straying. I hoped he couldn't read my mind. It was hard enough keeping my body language under control.

Matt had had the foresight to call the hotel ahead of time and make an appointment to see the ballroom. Typical me, I was just going to wing it, pop my head through the door and see what it was like. But, no, he had organised a guided tour.

The staff member left us in the ballroom while he took a call. Luckily for us the ballroom wasn't being used. The chairs and tables were against the walls, which made the floor space seem the size of a football field. The décor was a stylishly neutral one in cream and white with a touch of taupe, which gave wonderful scope for thematic decorations.

I did a three-sixty about the room and pictured stunning

colours and costumes and wonderful food and wine and fabulous music with live musicians playing. I momentarily forgot about the hospital budget, but still …

'What do you think?' Matt said from beside me.

'It's perfect,' I said. 'We could have helium balloon trees and a chocolate fountain and a prize for the best costume.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

I was about to respond when the hotel staff member returned. He had an apologetic look on his face as he handed Matt a key card. 'I'm afraid I've been called away to deal with a little matter in Reception. The manager asked me to give you access to our honeymoon suite. It's the only suite that's vacant this evening so you won't be disturbed. A light supper will be sent up shortly, compliments of the hotel.'

'Oh, but we couldn't possibly—' I began.

'That's very kind,' Matt said, smiling at the staff member.

The honeymoon suite?

As we made our way to the lift my heart was skipping all around my chest cavity like a hyperactive kid on a pogo stick. I didn't say a word as the lift zoomed up to the top floor. Not one word. I did what most people do in lifts. I stared at the numbers, then at my feet, then at the 'In Case of Emergency' instructions, which I studiously memorised. Anywhere but at the tall, silent man standing within arm's reach of me. I kept my arms close to my body, clutching my purse across my belly, which was doing a series of super-fast somersaults that would have made an

Olympic gymnast proud.

The lift opened and Matt led the way to the suite down the wide, velvet-soft carpeted corridor, holding the door open for me once he'd unlocked it. 'I feel as if I should be carrying you over the threshold or something,' he said with a deadpan expression.

I gave him a wry look. 'The last time someone carried me they herniated a disc.'

It was true. My dad picked me up as a joke a few years ago and ended up having months of physiotherapy. Not that I'm a big girl or anything but ever since then I've been self-conscious about my weight. It doesn't help that my father keeps reminding me of it every time he sees me by leaning over and groaning, 'My poor old aching back!'

Matt closed the door, looking at me with one of those quirked-brow looks. 'Not your husband, surely?'

I had to work hard to get myself together. 'Erm … no. He didn't carry me over the threshold. He's not very … erm … traditional.'

'Is that why you don't wear an engagement and wedding ring?'

I mentally kicked myself. I never wear rings of any sort at work because it's all too easy to lose them when I scrub up for a central line procedure or Theatre. But I should have thought of wearing a dress ring or something tonight. I'd given back Andy's engagement ring … after I'd got the plumber to find it in the S bend of my bathroom basin. I curled my fingers into my palm—as if that was going to help—and gave Matt a tight smile. 'I forgot

to put them on when I got home from work. Silly me.' I spun round to look at the suite rather than have him study me in that penetrating way. 'Wow! Look at this place. It's totally awesome.'

I wasn't exaggerating. It *was* awesome. The suite was in four compartments separated by different levels. The décor was lavishly decadent, lots of velvet and satin, with soft lighting creating a sensual mood. The sitting-room area overlooked the Thames with views over Tower Bridge and the brightly lit London Eye. A wide flat-screen television dominated one wall. Seriously, who needed a television while on honeymoon? Mind you, I was glad I had one on mine but that's because, well, you know, but at least I'd caught up on the complete box set of *Downton Abbey*. There was a well-stocked bar and a coffee table and side tables with gorgeous lamps that created an intimate atmosphere.

I caught a glimpse of the bathroom through the open door. It was bigger than my sitting room and was a luxurious affair of marble and gold with a white claw-foot bath in the centre of the room. A shower stall big enough for a hockey match was on one side and twin basins and gilt-framed mirrors above them on the other. Gorgeous fluffy towels, which looked as big as sheets, were on the gold towel rails or folded on a gold luggage rack-style holder.

On the top level of the suite there was a king-sized bed. I wondered if there was such a thing as emperor-sized—or maybe dictator-sized—as I'd never seen one as big as that before. The

bedhead and sashed curtains either side of it were plush scarlet velvet, and teamed with the snow-white linen it looked not just stunning but temptingly inviting. I wasn't tired but I had a childish desire to bounce up and down on that big bed, like Jem and I used to do when we visited our grandparents, which was rare because our parents hadn't wanted us to be corrupted by capitalist greed. Like *that* worked.

There were dried rose petals artfully arranged on the bed and scatter cushions in the same rich scarlet were positioned against the bank of feather pillows. The bedside tables held twin lamps with sparkling crystal stands and the shades were the same pure white as the bed linen.

I stole a glance at Matt but he seemed totally unfazed by all the luxury. I suspected he was no stranger to five-star hotels. He was checking his phone, scrolling through messages or emails. 'Nice view,' I said to break the silence.

He looked up and smiled a lazy half-smile. 'Yes.'

I could feel my face blushing like the colour of a stoplight. Something about his gaze as it held mine made me feel like a teenager discovering she was attractive to the opposite sex for the first time. I felt aware of my body in a way I hadn't been before, all of its secret zones lighting up like a Christmas tree. Not just lighting up but fizzing with energy. I moistened my lips and watched as his gaze followed the pathway of my tongue. I saw his eyes darken as they came back to mine.

A knock on the door jolted me out of the moment. I whipped

around and opened it before Matt could take a step. I knew I was acting like a gauche fool but I had never been so far out of my depth.

A hotel staff member wheeled in a trolley full of silver dome-covered dishes. There was a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and two crystal flutes. The champagne had a scarlet ribbon tied around its neck the same shade as the cushions and drapes. I felt like I had stepped into a fairytale. I was suddenly a princess being served in the royal suite with a handsome suitor.

The handsome suitor discreetly tipped the hotel staff member and the door closed with a soft little click that had a hint of finality to it that was strangely disquieting. For some reason an anticipatory shiver coursed over my flesh. I sensed we had crossed a threshold, one I hadn't crossed in a long time. Maybe ever.

I was alone with a man I had only met the day before.

He was my boss, sure, but if things had been different—like if I weren't pretending to be married—I would have been perfectly happy if we were left alone for the next week. Month even.

'Might as well make the most of the situation,' Matt said, as he reached for the champagne bottle.

I watched as he poured the bubbles into the two glasses. My fingers brushed against his as he handed me my glass. My heart fluttered and thumped like it had developed wings and a limp. My pulse raced. I took a sip … more than a sip, to be honest. It's why I don't drink too often. If I'm feeling nervous I drink more

than I should.

Before I knew it the glass was empty. I could feel the alcohol hit my bloodstream like rocket fuel. I felt light-headed but maybe that had more to do with the fact that Matt was standing close enough for me to hear him breathing. I could smell those grace notes of lemongrass and lime. I could see the shadow of stubble on his jaw, so dark and so sexy I wanted to trail my fingertips across it to see if they would catch like silk does on something rough.

He put his glass down after only taking a sip. I saw his eyes move between each of mine, back and forth, and then his gaze dipped to my mouth. I stopped breathing as his head came down as if in slow motion.

I know I should have stepped away. All it would have taken was half a step. But my feet were glued in place. Bolted to the floor. I lowered my lashes as his warm breath danced over my lips. I'm not sure how long we stood there like that, with our breaths mingling so intimately. It felt like no time at all and yet it felt like forever. I ached for him to close the distance. Every cell in my body was throbbing in eagerness. I could feel the entire surface of my lips tingling for his final touchdown.

And then it happened.

I'm not sure which one of us moved first but suddenly his mouth brushed mine, a feather-light touch that triggered a seismic reaction in every nerve in my lips. I felt them tingle and fizz as his mouth came back for more, harder this time,

an increase in pressure that made my heart bang against my breastbone like a church bell pulled by a madman. His lips were warm and dry and firm and commanding. They were hard and then they were soft, tempting and then teasing. I stepped up on tiptoe, my breasts pushing against the hard wall of his chest; at the same time one of his hands settled in the small of my back and brought me closer.

I felt the outline of his body from chest to thigh. It was imprinted on my flesh, setting off spot fires everywhere we touched. My breasts swelled and ached and my nipples tightened. My belly quivered against the ridged plane of his. My pelvis throbbed as I felt the length and potency of his growing erection.

I hummed with pleasure against his lips, and then he deepened the kiss with a bold sweep and thrust of his tongue into my mouth. The sensation of our tongues meeting was like an eruption. I leaned into him, into his kiss as if it was my only source of sustenance. I tasted the hint of champagne he had sipped, but it was the mint and maleness of him that was even more addictive.

I took succour at his mouth, letting my tongue wrangle with his in a catch-me-if-you-can game that made my spine shiver in reaction. Fireworks went off in my head. My brain was so jazzed by the sensations I was feeling it was like being short-circuited. Thoughts and rationality were pushed aside as lust and need took over. I had never had a kiss so exciting, so utterly captivating I forgot all sense of time and place. I was swept up in the moment

of rapture, of feeling desired and desirable, of feeling feminine and powerful in a way I had never experienced before.

His hands were suddenly cupping my face, his fingers splayed across my cheeks as he savoured my mouth as if it were his last meal. The desire that arced and burned between us took me by surprise. I had a feeling it took him by surprise too. I felt it in the way he groaned as his tongue tangled with mine, the way his body ground against mine in that primal search for satisfaction. I could feel the potency of him against my belly, the blood surging in him, extending him. Hardening him.

My own body was in raptures of excitement. I could feel lust blasting through me like dynamite blasts through shale. My inner core quivered, moistened, swelled and ached. My breasts felt fuller and more sensitive where the wall of his chest was abrading them. My lips were swelling under the mounting pressure of his mouth, my tongue fizzy with delight as it danced with his. He took my lower lip in his teeth in a soft little play-bite that made every hair on my scalp shiver at the roots. Then he swept his tongue over the spot he'd nipped, salving it, teasing it into wanting more.

I nipped at his lip, taking the flesh between my teeth and gently tugging, my insides shuddering with pleasure as he made a guttural sound of approval. I went at him again, not just his lip this time but his neck as well. I practically turned into a vampire. I sank my teeth into his skin and sucked and sucked. I probably would have drawn blood but for the fact he took me by the hair

at the back of my head to control me.

But I didn't want to be controlled. Something inside me had got out of its cage. It was on a rampage. It was hurtling through every boundary or barrier I had put up in the past. My wild woman was on the loose. She was wanton and shameless and hot for action.

I went for his mouth again, crushing my lips to his, searching for his tongue with a brazen stroke of mine. He was ready and waiting for me. It was hard to tell who was more in control or if we both were on some crazy out-of-character roller-coaster ride of wild animal-driven lust.

His hands were at my breasts, shaping them through my clothes as his mouth kept up its passionate assault on mine. The feel of his hands cupping me was so wickedly delightful. It didn't matter that three layers separated his flesh from mine. I felt his touch as if he had stripped me stark naked.

I wasn't letting him cop a feel unless I got one too. I put my hands on him through his trousers, shaping him, teasing him with the bold stroke of my fingers. He was so hard I could feel the blood pounding through him. And he was getting harder. That thrilled me more than anything. There's nothing more of a turn-on than feeling a man's ardent desire for you. It made my desire flare like fuel exposed to a naked flame. I practically exploded with a fireball of lust that shook me to the centre of my being.

Every part of my body quaked with need, with longing so primal and so intense I felt like a stranger to myself. I realised

then how lacklustre Andy had been. He had never touched me through my clothes as if he was too impatient to take them off before he had me. He had never growled and groaned against my mouth as if he was imbibing a potent drug and it was the only thing keeping him alive. He had never made me feel as if I was the only woman who could bring him undone with just a kiss.

I should *not* have thought of Andy. Talk about taking a cold shower. It was like a bucket of ice water had been dumped down the back of my dress.

What was I doing?

I pulled back from Matt as if he had suddenly turned to fire. 'What do you think you're doing?' I said, acting like an outraged virgin in a Regency novel. I know it was a little late for such histrionics but I had to make up some lost ground. What sort of woman did he think I was? Or was he the type who got off on dallying with married women? I had met plenty of men like that. They disgusted me. They had no sense of loyalty. No sense of the damage they were causing.

His expression was unmistakably mocking. 'What's wrong?'

'What's wrong?' I all but spluttered the words at him. 'You know exactly what's wrong! This is wrong. Us kissing like this. It's tacky. It's gross. It shouldn't have happened.'

He arched a brow. 'Because I'm your boss?'

I swallowed so tightly I could hear it. *Gurhdt.* 'Not just that. I'm not … available.' For some reason I couldn't say the word 'married'. I was thoroughly fed up with the word. I wished I never

had to hear it again. Married. Yukkety-yuk. Every time I said it I felt sick with shame at how everyone had looked at me back at home when I'd told them the wedding was off. Of course Andy had left that awful task to me. All those exchanged glances that spoke volumes. The I-told-you-something-wasn't-right-about-those-two looks that made my stomach lining corrode with nausea. The pitying looks were the worst. I would do anything to avoid seeing someone look at me that way again.

And I mean *anything*. Including carrying on a charade that was causing me more angst than anything else in my life so far. And that was saying something because my life has not been a tartan-blanket-and-wicker-basket picnic, let me tell you.

Matt's eyes held mine in a lock that made me feel raw and exposed. 'That wasn't the message I've been getting from the moment I met you.'

I was frowning so hard I reckoned even if I'd had Botox in my forehead it would have run off scared. 'I've met men like you before. You get off on the challenge of scoring with someone who's off limits. It's all a game to you. Once you achieve your goal you move on to the next target.' I stepped up close again and poked him in the chest with my index finger. It hurt like hell because his chest was like a wall of marble but I wanted to drive home my point. But on a subconscious level I think I just wanted to touch him again. 'Find someone else to play with, Dr Bishop. I'm off the market. Got it?'

His smile was lazy and his eyes sexily hooded, and trained

on my mouth as if he couldn't wait to devour it again. His hand captured mine before I could pull it away and he held it firmly against his chest, right over where his heart was beating. I could feel every thump. The doctor in me couldn't help noticing how fit he was. He had a resting pulse of forty-five bpm, which was pretty damn good. Right now mine was running as if I had arrhythmia. 'If you change your mind, call me,' he said. 'We could make an interesting pair.'

I curled my lip. 'Friends with benefits?'

His eyes glinted. 'Do you need a friend, Dr Clark?'

I needed my head read. That's what I needed. Because when he looked at me like that I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted to push him backwards towards the bed and crawl all over him and climb into his skin. But somehow I managed to get my wild woman back in her cage and snick the lock back in place.

I put up my chin and gave him an icy glare. 'Get your hands off me and keep them off me.'

He held my look for a heart-stopping moment.

I felt the tug of war between our wills. It was like two strong forces that had never encountered that level of oppositional power before. The energy in the air was electric. Supercharged. Crackling like a high-voltage current along a tight wire.

I was the first to look away. I had to otherwise I would have confessed all then and there. But I didn't want his pity. I didn't want him to think I was on the lookout for a rebound fling. That I was so desperate to be found desirable that I would get down

and dirty with a man I had known less than twenty-four hours. I wanted to salvage my dignity in the only way I knew how. Pretence. Anyway, I was good at it. I'd been doing it all my life in order to fit in.

I gave my hand an almighty tug and stalked over to where I had left my bag. I shoved it over my shoulder in an affronted manner, tossing my head—even though I know there is no way on earth anyone can *actually* toss their head, or roll their eyes, come to think of it—and wrenched open the suite door.

'Honeymoon over?' he said.

I looked at him over my shoulder. His mouth was lifted in what I was coming to know as his trademark sardonic smile. I let fly with a very rude two-word phrase that basically told him he could … well, I guess you get the idea.

I closed the door with a satisfying snick. I was glad I'd had the last word.

It's not often I get the chance.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'D BEEN HOME half an hour when I suddenly realised how quiet it was. Not just my house, which was like a proverbial tomb —even the rickety floorboards had stopped creaking. No, it was my phone. I would normally get a call from the hospital about a patient, or Jem would text or call or Mum or Dad would check in. Yes, in spite of their anti-capitalist ranting, they both have smartphones.

But nothing. Zilch. *Nada.*

I picked up my bag and searched in its depths for my phone. I usually slip it into one of the inner pockets so I can access it quickly. Sometimes it switches to silent if I'm not careful, or vice versa, which was incredibly embarrassing the last time I went to the cinema. The looks I got! Of course it went off right in the middle of the most important scene in the movie. And it was set on one of my *Looney Tunes* ring tones, which kind of wrecked the poignantly romantic mood.

Anyway, my phone wasn't where I normally put it so I had to go deeper. I swear to God all those jokes about what a woman carries in her handbag are true. I carry my life around in mine. I'm sure one of my shoulders is permanently lower than the other from lugging around the weight of my bag. I fished out my diary —I know there's an electronic one on my phone, but I still like writing things down because I remember them better that way—

and then I took out my lip gloss and a wand of mascara and a little pack of tissues with red kisses on them.

I grimaced as I thought of the kisses I'd just exchanged with Matt Bishop. What on earth did he think of me? I had acted like a wanton slut. I had pressed my body against his in the timeless keen-to-mate manner. I'd acted like a tigress in oestrus. It was utterly shameful. What on earth had got into me? I'd been kissed before and nothing like that had happened. In recent times when Andy had kissed me I'd mentally made lists in my head—the wedding invitations, the flowers, the place-setting cards, which aunt to sit next to which aunt—that sort of thing. I had never burst into molten heat like lava blowing out of a volcano.

I tossed the tissues aside and dug deeper. I took out my purse, which is so loaded with loyalty cards I can no longer close it properly. Finally I upended my bag and let everything fall out on the kitchen bench. But apart from a shower of receipts and loose change and the spare key to Jem's place, and two tampons and a furry cough lozenge, there was no phone.

I frowned as I thought of the last time I used it. I didn't have a landline so there was no point in trying to call it. I didn't fancy going out in search of a public phone box, which were as scarce as alley cats with morals in my area. It was too late to knock on Elsie's door to ask to use hers and since Margery Stoneham was away … That's when it hit me. My place wasn't just quiet because my phone was missing.

Where the flipping hell was Freddy?

I called out as I searched in every room. I looked behind doors and in corners. I pulled back the curtains to see if he was playing a game of hide and seek but all I found that was remotely animal-like were dust bunnies. My heart was going into arrhythmia again. I was a cardiac infarct waiting to happen. My hands were shaking and my legs trembling as I stumbled through the rest of the house. Up the stairs I went, calling out at the top of my voice. I didn't care if I woke the neighbours. I didn't care if I woke the dead. I didn't care if I lost my voice in the effort. I had to find that dog! Margery would kill me if anything happened to her precious baby.

I came back down the stairs with a clatter, my feet almost tripping over themselves. I was breathing so hard it sounded like I was wheezing. I was close to crying too but I didn't want to admit it. I'm not a crier. Not any more. Not since the fifth grade in primary school when everyone laughed at my hair. My parents were in their no-shampoo phase. They believed every shampoo and conditioner contained toxic chemicals that would give us all cancer.

We didn't wash our hair with anything but homemade soap for months. Thank God that phase didn't last any longer. Jem and I got head lice, so our parents decided a few toxic chemicals would come in useful after all.

I checked the back garden but there was no sign of Freddy. Even his paw prints in the snow from when I'd taken him out for a pee before I left with Matt had disappeared as another fresh

fall had come down.

I bit my lip to stop it from quivering and rushed back into the house. He had to be hiding somewhere. A dog didn't just disappear into midair. This wasn't a sciencefiction show or one of those Las Vegas illusionist's acts. This was my life! My totally screwball life, admittedly. I had been watching Freddy the whole time … Or had I? I had been so worked up about getting outside on the footpath to wait for Matt. Had I let Freddy out without realising it? There was no other way he could have got out. I hadn't left any windows open and, anyway, none of them were low enough for him to jump out. Could he have slipped past me without me noticing? He was only a little dog, and a devious one at that.

I raked my hand through what was now a bird's nest of my hair. I felt sick and sweaty and icy cold at the same time. My overactive imagination was conjuring up horrid images of Freddy squashed flat on Bayswater Road, or mangled underneath a car and dragged for miles. Or kidnapped and held for a huge ransom. Or sold into one of those ghastly fighting dog rings that operate underground. I choked back a sob as the doorbell rang. It was the police, I was sure of it. They were here to tell me the dog *I was supposed to be minding* was deceased.

I wrenched open the door but it wasn't the police. It was Matt Bishop. For a moment I just looked at him numbly. The siren of panic screaming in my head had taken away my ability to speak. I was barely able to string two thoughts together. My head was

pounding with the effort of trying to keep control of myself and not fall into fits of wild hysteria.

He held up my phone. 'You left it in my car.'

I didn't care about my wretched phone. I took it from him and all but tossed it on the little table in the front hall. 'Have you seen Freddy?' I asked.

His brow furrowed. 'Freddy?'

'The little dog I had in the park,' I said, my breathing still all over the place. 'He's gone. Disappeared. Vanished. I can't find him anywhere.' I could hear my voice cracking and swallowed to clear the blockage of emotion strangling me. 'He must have got out. I have no idea how. He was here when I left with you. I'm sure he was.'

'Where have you looked for him?' Matt asked in a deep, calm voice, which kind of made mine sound all the more hysterical.

'Everywhere,' I said. 'Inside and outside, back and front. He's not *he-e-e-re*.' I dragged 'here' out like a whiny kid having a tantrum. I know. Dead embarrassing.

'What about his owner's house?' he asked. 'Have you looked there?'

I swear to God I could have kissed him. I almost did. I had to physically restrain myself from throwing my arms around his neck and smacking a big fat smoocheroo on his gorgeous mouth. I hadn't thought about Margery's place. It was the most obvious place to look but in my panic I hadn't even thought about it. 'Let's check,' I said instead, and scooped up my coat and scarf off the

peg.

I was in such a rush to put it on I got myself in a tangle. Matt came to the rescue and held my coat behind me like a well-bred gentleman does and helped me guide my arms through the sleeves. Was it my imagination or had his hands given the tops of my shoulders a gentle and reassuring everything-is-going-to-be-all-right squeeze?

For a nanosecond I breathed in the scent of him. I allowed myself a tiny moment of feeling him standing behind me like a strong tower I could lean on. I wasn't used to leaning on anyone for support. I hadn't even let Andy do it, well, because he was rubbish at it, to be honest. But for that tiny fraction of a heartbeat I caught a glimpse of what it would be like to have a partner who would stand by me, who would be strong when I was falling apart, who would take control and sort out the mess I had stumbled into and make it all work out, like unpicking a really hideous knot.

We walked the few houses down to Margery's place. The snow was falling in earnest now. It was really quite romantic, come to think of it. It was like a scene from a film—a guy and a girl walking along the street in search of a missing dog. I just hoped this one had a happy ending.

Matt used the light app on his phone to shine on the footpath so I didn't lose my footing. I guess he must have worked out by now I was pretty clumsy when I got stressed.

When we got to Margery's front porch there was Freddy, sitting on the doormat, shivering so hard he vibrated like a two-

stroke engine. I rushed to him without thinking and bundled him into my arms, only to get one of my hands nipped for my trouble. Even though I was wearing woollen mittens—my ones with kitten faces on them, including whiskers, which might have had something to do with why Freddy attacked me—his teeth sank into my flesh almost to the bone. Well, not quite to the bone, but it sure felt like it.

'Ouch!' I said another word, actually, but you get the idea.

Freddy jumped out of my arms—I might have dropped him but I'm not sure—and started whining and scratching at Margery's front door.

'Are you okay?' Matt asked.

I shoved my hand in my pocket. 'Fine.' I looked at the pathetic sight of the shivering dog desperately trying to get inside his house and felt a wave of compassion flow over me. 'Poor little boy. He misses his mum.'

'Separation anxiety,' Matt said. 'It's because his owner treats him like a human instead of a dog.'

I glanced at him in the light being cast from the streetlight. His face was cast in shadow but the light was still strong enough to show the dark, unreadable sockets of his eyes and the long blade of his nose and his unbelievably gorgeous mouth. 'Yes, well, Freddy is all Margery has now her husband is dead. She has no family other than a sister who doesn't let her bring Freddy with her when she visits so what sort of sister is she?'

'I once minded my sister's pet rat. That's sisterly love for you.

I hate the things, but I did it because I love her.' I guess the throbbing pain in my hand was making me run off at the mouth or something. I finally got my motor mouth under control and gave Matt a sheepish look from beneath my half-mast lashes. 'Sorry. Rant over.'

He gave me one of his crooked smiles. 'No problem.'

I looked back at Freddy. 'So, little guy, we'd better come to some sort of understanding. I'm filling in for your mum so you have to do things my way. No more Houdini pranks, okay?'

Matt produced Freddy's lead, which he had wisely taken from my hall table. I'd been in too much of a state to even think about it. He snapped it on the dog's collar and led him away from Margery's front door. 'I'll walk back with you,' he said.

I felt foolish and embarrassed as we walked back to my house. In the last thirty-six hours I had given Matt Bishop an impression of myself that was comical rather than competent. Panicky rather than professional. And—even worse—sexually available instead of committed.

I considered telling him about my cancelled wedding. I had just enough time in the distance between Margery's house and mine. Surely he would understand, given what he'd hinted regarding his parents' marriage? What if I just told him about my stupid postcard fiasco and how I'd been caught off guard when I'd arrived at work? How I had felt too embarrassed to explain and lied to save face. It was a perfectly understandable reaction. I wasn't the first person in the world to utter a little white lie or

two. Maybe he'd told a few himself. Surely he'd understand. Who didn't tell a few lies now and again? It was part of being human.

I formed the words in my head but I couldn't get them past my lips. I couldn't bear to tell anyone, least of all him. I felt sick at the thought of it spreading throughout the hospital. I could just imagine the looks I would get. The behind-the-hand comments people would murmur. I had seen the gossip network operate in every hospital I'd worked in. It was the same as the schoolyard network. It was cruel and unstoppable.

I thought of the way Matt had criticised my research project. I couldn't bear to have him mock my personal life as well.

Besides, I wanted to keep my distance from him. He was far too potent for me to handle. He was clearly a man of the world. The world in which his father moved, one where women were prizes to be collected, toys to be played with and then discarded when they lost their appeal. He might have given the impression he didn't approve of his father's treatment of his mother, but wasn't he doing the very same thing with me? He knew I was off limits and yet he'd kissed me. He'd made the first move … hadn't he? Or even if he hadn't he had been the one who had come and stood right in front of me, looking at me in that intensely mesmerising way until I'd had no choice but to meet him halfway.

I wasn't used to feeling such wild, out-of-control feelings of lust and longing. I needed time to get my self-control reconditioned.

We came to my door and I took Freddy's lead from Matt's

hand. Even though we were both wearing gloves I felt the jolt of his touch. It travelled through my body like a hot wire firing up my core so it was thrumming like a tuning fork.

'Erm, thanks for helping me find Freddy,' I said. 'I don't know what I would've done if we hadn't found him. He might've frozen to death.'

He looked at me for a long moment. 'It's a big responsibility, minding someone's pet for them. Did you offer or did your neighbour pressure you?'

How had he guessed that? I wondered. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, suddenly uncomfortable he was sensing more about me than I cared to have on show. 'I was just trying to help.'

He gave a nod as if that made sense. 'I'd better get going before I freeze to death. Good night.'

I watched him walk down my street from my front door. It was bitterly cold standing there on the doorstep but I couldn't take my eyes off his tall, rangy figure as he walked along the snow-covered footpath. I let out a long, foggy breath as he disappeared around the corner.

Oh, boy, was I in trouble.

I was in the female change room, putting my bag in the locker, the next morning when Gracie McCurcher came bursting in. 'Guess what?' she said, her eyes bright with conspiratorial excitement.

'What?'

'Matt Bishop has a girlfriend.'

I hoped my face hadn't shown my surprise. If he had a girlfriend then why the heck had he kissed me last night? I felt a rumble of anger roll through me. What was it about me that attracted two-timing guys? Did I have a sign on my head that said 'Exploit me'?

I shoved my bag in the locker and turned the key. 'How do you know?'

'He's got a hickey on his neck,' Gracie said. 'I saw it when he took off his scarf when he came in this morning.'

I was glad I was facing the locker bay instead of Gracie. I was so hot in the face I was sure the lockers would melt and drool, like Salvador Dali's clock. 'Are you sure it's a hickey?' I said in a vaguely interested way. 'He might have scratched himself shaving.'

'I know a hickey when I see one,' Gracie said. 'I wonder who it is? Do you reckon it's someone from the hospital?'

'I have no idea.' I was scaring myself at how easy it was to lie.

Gracie was watching me in the mirror, where I was attempting to put my hair in some sort of order. 'I heard he went to the US after he broke up with a long-term girlfriend. She was a speech pathologist.'

'How long term?' I asked.

'Not sure.' Gracie gave me a speaking glance. 'For some men a couple of weeks is long term.'

I turned around and gave her arm a squeeze. She hadn't had much luck with boyfriends. Her first one left her for her best

friend and her last one cheated on her the whole time they were together. She was a lot like me, she wanted the fairytale but so far it had eluded her. 'Don't give up hope, Gracie,' I said. 'You'll find your handsome prince one day.'

She gave me a thoughtful look. 'Is it better once you're married?'

I disguised a gulping swallow. 'Better?'

'Your relationship,' she said. 'More stable. Secure. Happier. My cousin told me she felt really let down after she got married. She said there's all that build-up to the big day. Months and months of planning and then it's all over. Was it like that for you?'

'A little, I guess,' I said, which at least was the truth. I was let down. Massively. Everything I had planned and dreamed for myself had been blown away as soon as I'd opened that bedroom door and seen Andy in bed with another woman. Someone younger and far more beautiful than I could ever be. And taller and thinner. She looked like one of those bikini models on a billboard. I'd felt short and dowdy and fat ever since.

'When can I see the photos?' Gracie asked. 'Have you got time now?'

'Sorry.' I glanced at the clock on the wall. 'I have to get going. I have to check on a patient before Theatre.'

I came back from Theatre and Jill Carter, the ward clerk, looked up from some filing she was doing. 'Have you heard the latest gossip?' She shut the filing-cabinet drawer and gave the same conspiratorial gleam Gracie had shown earlier.

I prided myself on my indifferent expression. I'd been practising behind my surgical mask in Theatre. 'No.'

'Apparently Dr Bishop is—'

'Right behind you,' Matt said from the office doorway.

Jill and I both turned around like schoolgirls caught out smoking behind the toilets. Jill recovered quicker than I did but, then, she probably hadn't spent half the night lying awake fantasising about his mouth kissing her.

'Oh, hello, Dr Bishop,' she said, smiling brightly. 'How did your heads of department meeting go?'

Matt's expression had the high wall with barbed wire at the top look about it. 'Fine. Dr Clark?' His gaze nailed mine. 'My office in ten minutes.'

I couldn't stop my gaze drifting to his neck. His shirt collar covered half of it but anyone with a history of necking as a teenager would have recognised it for what it was. I could feel the slow, hot crawl of colour spread over my cheeks as my eyes came back to his. 'Sure,' I said. 'I'll just check on a couple of patients first.'

I was longer than ten minutes as I wanted to talk to Jason Ryder's parents about a new type of therapy I was keen to use with him. Childhood awakening therapy was still in its experimental stage but there was some anecdotal evidence of people in comas responding to stimuli from their childhoods. Playing music, favourite movies or reading well-loved childhood stories had produced responses in some patients. I felt sure it

wouldn't compromise the care Jason was already receiving, and I was quietly confident it might be the key to getting him to wake. From what I'd gathered from his parents, he'd had a happy and contented childhood, which made him a perfect candidate.

Jason's parents were keen to try anything to get their boy to wake up and his young wife, Megan, was also supportive. I didn't want to offer them false hope but I was keen to try whatever I could to get the breakthrough everyone was hoping and praying for. The human brain had much more plasticity than the scientific community had realised up until recent times. It was an exciting time to be involved with neurosurgery as there were new techniques and advances in technology that brought relief and hope to patients who in the past would have had little or no hope of recovery.

I was on my way to Matt's office twenty-five minutes later when Professor Cleary stopped me in the corridor. He was Head of Geriatrics and I generally avoided him as I found him so negative. He drained my energy if I hung around him too long. I often wondered how his patients put up with his bedside manner. I always had to remind myself to call him Professor Cleary instead of Dreary. One of the residents almost got fired when he let slip the nickname on a ward round.

But this time Prof Cleary wasn't frowning or glowering in his usual doom-and-gloom manner. 'Hello, Bertie,' he said with a broad smile. 'I've been hearing about your research project at the heads of department meeting.' He gave a chuckle. 'Best joke I've

heard in years.'

I lifted my chin and eyeballed him. 'What did you find so amusing about it?'

'S.C.A.M.' He chuckled again, a deep belly laugh that made the already frayed edges of my nerves rub raw. 'Harrison Redding is kicking himself for not seeing it earlier. Clever of you to poke fun at the establishment like that. But it won't win you any favours with the boss. He's a sharp tack, isn't he? Got a good reputation for getting the job done. You'll have to watch yourself. I can't see him letting you read his palm or his aura or whatever else it is you do.'

I clenched my jaw so hard it clicked audibly. I didn't respond other than to give him a hard, tight smile and continued on my way to Matt's office. But the sound of Professor Cleary's chuckle followed me all the way down the corridor.

My skin rose in a hot prickle. Who else would be laughing at me by the end of the day? I had walked down a lot of corridors during my childhood and adolescence with that sound ringing in my ears. My face boiled with embarrassment. I was furious with Matt but I was even more furious with myself. I had set myself up for mockery and I hadn't even realised it.

Honestly, a transactional analysis psychologist could conduct a whole conference on me.

I knocked on Matt's door and he issued a curt command to come in. I stepped inside his office to see him sitting behind his desk with a grim look on his face. 'You're late.'

I pulled my shoulders back. Jem calls it my bracing-for-a-punch-up pose. I wouldn't know the first thing about throwing a punch but I can look intimidating when I have to. Well, sort of. 'I'm not at your beck and call, Dr Bishop,' I said. 'I have responsibilities and commitments that have nothing whatsoever to do with you. And while I'm on the subject of commitments and responsibilities, you had no right to use my project title as a source of amusement at your heads of department meeting.'

A challenging light came into his grey-blue eyes. 'Are you asking to be fired?'

I held his look with equal force. 'Are you threatening me?'

His eyes moved over my face, settling on my mouth as if he was remembering how it felt against his own. I couldn't stop myself from moistening my lips. It was an instinctive reaction and my belly quivered when I saw him follow the movement.

His eyes came back to mine and I heard him release a short, whooshy sort of breath, as if he'd had a long, trying day. 'I wasn't responsible for that,' he said. 'One of the other department heads commented on it. It created a few laughs, sure, but I encouraged everyone to stick to the agenda. What you need to concentrate on is producing data.'

I wasn't ready to be mollified even if he had stood up for me, which I very much doubted. I could imagine him smirking along with the rest of them, having a laugh at my expense. 'I don't appreciate being the butt of puerile boardroom jokes,' I said. 'My research is important to me and I know it can bring about better

outcomes. I just need time to prove it.'

'I have no issue with that,' he said. 'But that's not why I asked you to come in here.'

I hooked one of my eyebrows upwards. Jem calls it my schoolmarm look. *'Asked?'* I said. 'Don't you mean commanded?'

He gave me a levelling look. 'One of the nurses mentioned you're planning to do some extra therapy with Jason Ryder. I'd like you to explain to me exactly what it is you intend to do.'

I could see the scepticism in his expression. He had already made up his mind. He would rubbish my childhood awakening therapy like he'd rubbished my project. 'What would be the point?' I said. 'You'll just call it a whole lot of hocus-pocus.'

'Hocus-pocus it may well be, but I would still like to know about it first rather than hear it second-hand from a junior nurse. That is not how I want to run this department.'

The clipped censure in his tone made my back come up. I could feel every knob of my spine tightening like a wrench on a bolt. 'Even scientists have to have open minds, Dr Bishop. Otherwise they can be blinded by bias. They only see what they expect to see.'

His eyes battled with mine as his hands came down hard on the desk in front of him. 'I'll tell you what I expect to see, Dr Clark. Patients being treated with proven, testable treatments, not sprinkled with fairy dust or having crystals waved over them. I'm running an ICU department here, not a freaking New Age mind and body expo.'

I clenched my fists by my sides to stop myself from grabbing him by the front of his shirt. 'Is there any space in that closed mind of yours for good old-fashioned hope? Or do you always expect the worst just to keep your back covered?'

A muscle moved in and out in his jaw as he straightened from the desk. 'It's not fair to offer hope when there is none. People's lives—the ones left behind—get ruined by empty promises. Jason's family needs reliable information and support right now, not sorcery.'

My eyes flared in outrage. I was so incensed I wanted to hit something. 'Is that all you wanted to see me about? Because, if not, I have some spells to work on in my cauldron.'

A flicker of amusement momentarily disrupted the hardened line of his mouth. I got the feeling he was trying not to laugh. Somehow that made my anger cool a little. I liked it that he had a sense of humour. I liked it a lot more than I wanted to admit. 'There's one other thing,' he said.

I folded my arms like a sulky teenager. I even pushed my bottom lip out in a pout. I know it was childish but he deserved it. *Sorcery?* Good grief. I hadn't been to one of my parents' seances in months. 'What?'

'We have a situation.'

'We do?'

I was the one with A Situation. It was getting more and more ridiculous by the minute. Why, oh, why had I been so wretchedly cowardly about being jilted? Why hadn't I told everyone the truth

right from the start? I felt like all my lies had followed me into his office. They were stealing all the oxygen out of the air. It was like being in an overcrowded lift. I was finding it hard to breathe when he looked at me in that all-seeing way.

'Last night—'

'Was a mistake and it won't be repeated,' I said, before he could go any further. 'I can't believe I did that … we did that. I blame it on the champagne. I never drink on an empty stomach. It was totally out of character and I apologise for any …' my eyes glanced briefly at his neck '… erm … inconvenience.'

His eyes continued to hold mine but his gave nothing away. It was like a drawbridge had come up. 'I like to keep my private life out of the corridors of the hospital.'

'Because of your ex?' I said.

A flash of something hard moved in his gaze. 'As I said, I like to keep my private life private.'

'Fine. Me too.'

He gave me a long, measuring look. 'If people were to put two and two together, things could get rather awkward for you.'

They couldn't get any more awkward than they already are, I thought. 'How is anyone going to know that what happened last night had anything to do with me?'

His poker face was back on but I was pretty sure there was a glint of amusement lurking in the back of his gaze. 'So I take it you didn't tell your husband?'

I pressed my lips together. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because … he wouldn't understand.' It sounded like a tawdry cliché. The bored and lonely, misunderstood wife looking for a bit of fun on the side.

Matt came around his desk and perched on one corner, his ankles crossed, his arms folded across the broad expanse of his chest. It was the sort of casual but incommand pose that signified a man who knew what he wanted and exactly how to get it.

It hit me then.

He wanted me.

I saw it in the gleam of his eyes as they held mine. I felt it in the electric charge of the air we shared. I felt it in the core of my body where a throb had started like a low, deep ache, slowly building to a pulsating need that radiated throughout my system. I folded my arms, as if that would help contain the fire that was raging in my blood.

'Have you thought about my offer?' he asked.

I swallowed tightly. 'Um … your offer of what?'

His eyes tethered mine. 'Exploring this thing between us.'

This thing between us … It was more than a thing. It was taking me over. My insides coiled with desire. I wanted him as much as he wanted me. The thought of an illicit affair with him was suddenly very tempting. I'd had such a boring sex life. This would be my chance to stretch my boundaries a bit. Gain a bit more experience with a man who truly wanted me. I could throw off my inhibitions and have a fling, like every other girl my age.

But how could I agree to such a thing while he thought I was married?

I unfolded my arms and held them stiffly by my sides, shooting him a caustic glare. 'I suppose you think just because I allowed you to kiss me that it means I'm desperate to jump into bed with you. Well, guess what? I'm not. Going to jump into bed with you or kiss you or allow you to touch me or even look at me like that.'

'Look at you like what?'

I glowered at him through eyes so narrowed I could barely see out of them. It was like peering through the eye of an embroidery needle. 'You know exactly what I mean. You're doing it now. You're looking at me as if you'd like to strip me naked and have me on your desk.'

I really should think before I speak. It's a bad habit of mine. The erotic premise of my words filled the air with a crackling tension that made the hairs on the back of my neck lift. The heat of his gaze seared its way through my body to gather in a molten pool between my legs. I even felt the skin on my body tingle and tickle all over, like the rapid spread of goose bumps.

In fact, I don't think I'd ever been more aware of my body before that moment. All my erogenous zones—including some I hadn't known I had—were flashing red hot, like a computer motherboard malfunctioning. My breasts tightened behind the lace shield of my bra. They felt twice their size—which would have been fabulous if it were physically possible—and overly sensitive. My mouth ached to feel his against it, in it, conquering

it, devouring it. I ran the tip of my tongue over my lips and watched as he tracked its moist passage. My body silently screamed for him to close the distance, to crush his mouth to mine and do exactly as I'd so crudely said.

He moved away from the desk and came a step closer. I should have stepped back but, just like the time before, my feet felt clamped to the floor. He lifted my chin with the tip of his finger, just like those romantic heroes do in the movies. No one had ever done that to me before, which was kind of why I was acting so bunny-in-the-headlights. His fingertip felt warm and strong and yet gentle at the same time. I felt the tingle of his touch all the way to my toes. His gaze locked on mine, his pupils flared to deep pools of black ink. 'What are you doing for dinner this evening?' he asked.

I glared at him even harder, which was quite hard to do with him that close and smelling so lemony and citrusy. 'Did you even *hear* what I just said?'

'I'm free if you are.'

I tried for my best haughty tone. 'It's none of your business what I'm doing.'

'You made it my business by kissing me.'

'I did *not* kiss you!' I stamped my foot for emphasis. 'You kissed me. I just responded, which is perfectly understandable given I'd had a full glass of champagne.'

His eyes smouldered darkly as they held mine. 'How about we try it without the champagne this time? See if we get the same

response. That would be more scientific, wouldn't you agree?'

I should have got away while I could but before I knew it his hands were on my upper arms and his mouth was on mine. It was a hard kiss, a proving-the-point kiss, but it was no less mind-blowing. My mouth opened under the heated pressure of his, my tongue mating with his in an erotic duel that made my insides shiver with lust.

I was hardly aware of doing so but suddenly my arms were snaking around his neck, my fingers lacing through the silky thickness of his hair as his mouth plundered mine. My breasts were so tightly jammed against him I could feel my nipples poking into his chest. My pelvis was on fire; I moved it against his in an attempt to assuage the grinding, empty ache of my body. His erection surged against me, potent and hard, powerful and dangerously tempting. I imagined him entering me, dividing my moist, hungry flesh and driving hard and repeatedly into me. I was so turned on I could feel the tingle of arousal tightening my core, the sensitive nerves pulsing in anticipation.

His hands cradled my head, his fingers strong and firm against my scalp. His teeth nipped and pulled at my lower lip, cajoling me into a payback game that made the base of my spine splinter into a million pieces like party glitter. I could barely stand upright. The sensations were earth-shattering as they coursed through me like the shot of a powerful drug. I was so pliable in his arms I was like a rag doll. I was melting into his hard frame as if I never wanted to be separate from him. I wanted to be fused

to his body, to have him possess me and make me feel alive in a way I had never quite managed before.

'God, this is crazy,' he said against my mouth. I loved the tickling and tingling sensation his words created against my lips. It had an incendiary effect on me, making me kiss him with all the more shameful, wanton enthusiasm. I went back in search of his tongue, warring with it, teasing it to come and play with me.

His hands slid down my body to grasp me by the hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as if he never wanted to let me go. I could feel the throb of his arousal against me. It excited me to think I'd had that effect on him. But his hands didn't stay for long on my hips. One went to the base of my spine to bring me hard against him while the other cupped my breast through my clothes. It wasn't enough for me. I wanted his mouth on my breast. I tugged my shirt out of my jeans and guided his hand to my lace-covered breast.

He stroked his thumb over my budded nipple, creating a maelstrom of sensation that travelled through my body. He pushed my padded bra out of the way and lowered his head and took my breast in his mouth. Yes, it's actually small enough to do that. Well, maybe not quite all the way into his mouth, but you get the idea. But it didn't seem to matter to him that my breast was a little on the small side. He treated it like it was the most gorgeously ripe breast in the world. Seriously, you would've thought it was a Playboy Bunny's breast. His tongue played with my nipple, circling it and teasing it into a tight pucker. I tilted

back my head as he moved his mouth over the upper curve of my breast.

He did the same to the under-curve, which was even more tantalising. I hadn't realised how sensitive my skin was there until his warm mouth and the sexily raspy skin of his chin and jaw moved against it.

He left my breast to come back to my mouth, subjecting it to a passionate onslaught that had me breathless and throbbing from head to toe with longing. I was aching with the need to have him inside me. I hadn't even felt this turned on as a teenager. It was like discovering my female hormones for the first time. They were surging through my system like an unstoppable force. I wanted him and I wanted him now.

One of my hands went for the waistband of his trousers but he stilled my hand, pressing it against the turgid length of him. 'Not here,' he said.

The words brought me back to my senses like a slap across the cheek. What was I doing, undressing my boss in his office? What was *wrong* with me? Besides the fact he thought I was married, I wasn't the type of girl to act so unprofessionally. I was annoyed that he was the one to bring things to a halt. In my mind it gave him the moral edge, making him far more principled than me. It made me feel as if I was the one who had no self-control, which was a whole lot nearer to the truth than I wanted it to be.

I relied on my usual cover-up tactic and gave him a disparaging look. 'Do you really think I was going to let this go further than

a kiss and a quick grope?'

His eyes were a dark blue-grey as they held mine, the pupils still widened in arousal. 'If you change your mind you know where to find me. I'll be home all evening.' I drew in a scalding breath. 'You'll be waiting a long time before I make a house call.'

A hint of a smile lifted the edges of his mouth. 'We'll see.' He went back around his desk and rolled out his chair. His eyes glinted as he added, 'Close the door on your way out, will you?'

I huffed and puffed for a moment before I whipped round and stomped out of his office, but I didn't close the door.

I slammed it.

CHAPTER SIX

'GOOD GRACIOUS, BERTIE.' Stuart McTaggart jumped about a foot in the air as the framed prints rattled on the wall as he came towards me. 'What on earth's the matter?'

I pressed my lips together so tightly they hurt. 'Nothing,' I muttered.

'Is it about your project?' He gave a chuckle not unlike Professor Cleary's. It was the first time I'd heard him laugh, so at least I'd achieved something, I thought wryly. 'I thought it was brilliant, actually. Very witty.'

'I can assure you it wasn't meant to be,' I said, as I walked down the corridor with him.

'I've just been in to see Jason Ryder,' Stuart said. 'His parents mentioned you want to try some new therapy with him.'

'That's if Dr Bishop will allow it,' I said through tight lips.

Stuart stopped walking to look at me. 'But he was very supportive of you in the meeting. He was the one who brought the meeting to order when we were all having a laugh about your research title. In fact, if I didn't know you'd just come back from your honeymoon I would've said you and he were an item. Did you see that love bite on his neck?' He gave another chuckle. 'Takes me back to my old courting days.'

I could feel my blush like a spreading fire. 'Personally, I think love bites are dreadfully tacky.'

He gave a grunt and continued walking. 'So, what have you got in mind for Jason?'

I explained what I planned to do and he listened—patiently, for him—before giving me the go-ahead. 'Can't see how it can hurt,' he said. He waited a beat before adding, 'I hope to God the family don't sue.'

I glanced at his worried expression. 'They don't seem the type and, besides, you didn't do anything wrong. It's a recognised complication of that type of neurosurgery.'

'Doesn't seem to matter to litigation lawyers, does it?' He gave me a cynical look. 'They want their pound of flesh and don't care who they slice it off.'

'I'm sure it won't come to that, Stuart,' I said, hoping it was true. Stuart was a highly competent surgeon but his gruff and autocratic manner often put people off side. When things went wrong, which they occasionally did because that kind of surgery on the human body wasn't an exact science, some people thought their only option was to sue for damages, but they didn't take into account the impact on the doctor.

Medicine today was far more of a team approach than in the past. Mistakes could be made anywhere along the chain of care but it was the doctor who ended up being the fall guy. It was especially difficult if the case was reported in the press. Biased reporting could smear a doctor's reputation, tearing down a lifetime of hard work in a sensationalised phrase or two. And then there was the well-documented expert witness dripping

with hindsight bias. And coroners' cases, in which months could be taken over dissecting decisions that doctors had to make under pressure, in real time, with incomplete information in a badly constructed system. Insurance companies battled it out with their case-hardened lawyers but the doctor, usually with no medicolegal experience, was left as the scapegoat, with often devastating psychological fallout.

At my previous hospital a dedicated obstetrician had walked away from a thirty-year career after parents of a baby who suffered oxygen deprivation at birth and subsequent brain damage sued her for damages. The sensationalised reporting in the press besmirched her reputation to such a degree she felt she could no longer practise.

Stuart let out a tired-sounding sigh. 'Well, I'd better get a move on. I've got a clinic and then a tutorial with the students and I'm on call for the second time this week. It's a wonder my wife doesn't call a divorce lawyer.' He gave me a sideways glance. 'How does your husband cope with the demands of your job?'

'Erm …'

'Should've married a doctor, Bertie.'

I gave him one of my strained smiles. 'There's a thought.'

For the next week I changed my roster to night shifts. I know it was cowardly but I really wasn't ready to face Matt Bishop until I got my willpower under some semblance of control. Besides, there's nothing more lust deadening than lack of sleep. One good side of working the night shift was that I could walk Freddy in

daylight … I use the word loosely because the sort of daylight we get in London in January is pretty insipid.

The other benefit of being on night duty was that I could spend a bit more time with patients without the hustle and bustle of ward rounds and relatives visiting. ICU was quiet all but for the hiss and groan of ventilators or beeping of heart monitors and heart-lung machines.

I sat by Jason Ryder's bed in the end room and watched as his chest rose and fell with the action of the ventilator. It was coming up to two weeks since his surgery and he was still in a deep coma, and every time we had tried to bring him out of it his brain pressures had skyrocketed. It wasn't looking good but I refused to give up hope. I couldn't get his wife, Megan, out of my mind. I could imagine how devastating it was for her to be expecting a baby at a time like this. The stress she was under wasn't good for her or the baby. Studies indicated that high cortisol levels in expectant mothers could cause epigenetic changes in the foetus, leaving them at higher risk of heart disease or some types of cancers in later life.

And then there were Jason's parents. I could imagine how my parents would feel if either Jem or I were in a coma. They would be frantic with worry, desperate for some thread of hope. No parent wanted to outlive his or her child. It wasn't the natural order of things. Every time I looked at Jason's parents I felt a pressing ache inside my chest, like a stack of bricks pressing down on my heart. I so wanted a good outcome for them and for

Jason, who'd had such a bright future ahead of him.

I picked up the children's book Jason's parents had left earlier. It was one of my own favourites, *The Indian in the Cupboard* by Lynne Reid Banks. Apparently Jason had loved it when he'd been about nine or ten years old. I, too, remembered being captivated by the idea of a toy coming to life. I picked up where Jason's mother had left off before they'd left for the night and read a few pages.

I looked up after a few minutes to see Matt Bishop standing in the doorway, watching me. I had no idea how long he'd been there. I hadn't seen his name on the night-shift roster but, then, he might have been called in for a patient. I knew he worked ridiculously long hours. It had taken me quite an effort to avoid running into him. I even darted into the broom cupboard next to the doctors' room a couple of evenings ago when I heard him speaking with a colleague around the corner.

I can tell you I got a bit worried when he stopped right outside it and talked to Brian Kenton from Radiology. I had a sneaking suspicion he might have known I was in there. He took an inordinately long time to discuss a patient before moving on. I felt a fool, sneaking out of there a few minutes later, but what else could I have done?

I put the book down on the bedside table and rose to my feet. 'Did you want me—I mean something?' I asked, mentally cursing the fact I was blushing.

'How's he doing?'

'Much the same,' I said. 'His IC pressures spike every time I try to wean him off the ventilator. Stuart wants to keep them low to maximise perfusion of what might be marginally viable brain around the tumour bed. But before we ramp up sedation each time, there's no sign of consciousness. He's having another CT tomorrow to look at perfusion. And an EEG is planned after that.'

I handed him the notes, which he read through with a frown of concentration pulling at his brow. He drew in a deep breath, closed the notes and put them back on the end of the bed. He picked up the children's book and turned over a few pages. 'I remember reading this when I was about eight or nine.'

'I read it too,' I said. 'I can tell you I never looked at a toy the same way again.'

His mouth curved upwards in a half-smile as he tapped the book against his hand. 'So, this is part of your childhood awakening therapy?'

I searched his features for any sign of mockery but he was either keeping it under wraps or was genuinely giving me a fair and unbiased hearing. Or maybe he'd looked up some of the fledgling research online and was prepared to keep an open mind. 'Reading familiar stories, playing favourite music, relating family memories of holidays or whatever to the patient can sometimes trigger an emotional response,' I said. 'There've been a few cases reported now where patients have woken from comas when exposed to something particularly emotive from their childhood.'

'One assumes it would be beneficial to have a happy childhood

in order to expect that sort of response.'

I frowned. 'You didn't have a happy childhood?' I asked it as a question, but it could easily have been a statement of observation, given the way his features were set.

'Not particularly.' He put the book back on the bedside table before he gave me a little quirk of a smile. 'What about you?'

'Mostly.' I gave him a rueful look and then added, 'My parents are a little out there, if you know what I mean.'

'I would never have guessed.'

I couldn't help a short laugh escaping. 'I'm ultraconservative compared to them. At least I turn up at work fully clothed.'

His eyes darkened as they meshed with mine. 'What time's your break?'

I glanced at my watch. 'Ten minutes ago.'

He took my elbow with a firm but surprisingly gentle hand. 'Come on. Boss's orders. Caffeine and sugar.'

We took our coffee and a packet of chocolate biscuits to his office. I got the feeling this was his way of calling a truce. He pulled out his office chair for me to sit on. 'Here, you play the boss for a while. Tell me how you would do things around here if you were me.'

I sat on his chair but I'm so short my feet didn't reach the floor. I tucked my ankles beneath its centre stand and hoped he wouldn't notice. I took a sip of coffee and looked at him over the rim of my cup. He was sitting in the chair I'd used the last time, his features showing the signs of the stresses of his job.

It looked like he hadn't shaved in over eighteen hours, his eyes had damson-coloured shadows beneath them, his hair was ruffled, as if he'd recently combed it with his fingers, and there were two lines down each side of his mouth I hadn't noticed before. I knew for a fact he wasn't on that evening because I'd checked. After the broom cupboard hideout I wasn't taking any chances. He had worked day shifts for the last week, presumably so he could keep in closer touch with the hospital management staff while he ironed out the problems he'd inherited.

It made me wonder if he had anything outside work to distract him. A hobby or interest that gave him some respite from the human tragedy he dealt with day in, day out.

He was a dedicated workaholic. The type A personality who found it hard to be anything but task-oriented. Emotions were not to be trusted. It was facts and data and completing the job that motivated him. I knew from my study how important it was to search for balance. I'm not sure I had found it, given the way things had turned out between Andy and me, but at least I understood the dynamic.

I was starting to realise why Matt had taken such a stand with me on that first day. For a man who valued facts over feelings I must have come across as a complete nut job. He wanted the unit to be one of the best in the country, if not the world.

No wonder he had taken the line he had with me. I was like a loaded cannon to him. Someone who was unpredictable, perhaps even—in his opinion—unstable. I had some ground to make

up to make him see me as the dedicated professional I was. Sure, I wore wacky clothes and did interesting things with my hair, but that didn't mean I wasn't a competent and committed anaesthetist. I took my responsibility with patients seriously. I literally had their lives in my hands. I would never do anything to compromise their safety. I just had to convince Matt Bishop I wasn't the airy-fairy flake he thought I was.

I put my coffee cup down. God knows I sure didn't need the caffeine. My heart was already pounding as if I'd had a dozen espressos with an energy drink chaser. Matt had that sort of effect on me. 'I'm sorry about the other day in your office,' I said.

'No apology necessary.' He sat watching me with his steady, measuring gaze, his coffee cup cradled in his right hand, one ankle crossed over his knee.

I glanced longingly at the chocolate biscuits on the desk but I knew if I started on them I might not stop till the whole packet was gone. My parents banning sugar had had the unfortunate effect of making me a sugar binger. I could eat a box of chocolates in one sitting, especially if I was feeling down about myself. I just hoped my liver wasn't going to hate me for it some time in the future.

Matt leaned forward and pushed the packet of biscuits closer. 'Go on. One won't hurt.'

I gave him a twisted smile as I took a biscuit out of the packet. 'My mum does that.'

'What?'

'Reads minds.'

He smiled back. It relaxed his tired and drawn features and made me realise all over again how incredibly attractive he was. I looked at the biscuit in my hand rather than look at his mouth, as I was so tempted to do. All I could think of was how his mouth felt as it moved against mine, how his hands had felt, touching my body. How I wanted him to touch me again. How I wanted to feel his body inside mine, making me come apart with ecstasy.

I was shocked at my behaviour. Shocked and bewildered. If my life had gone according to plan I would now be married and trying for a baby. Instead, I was single and feverishly attracted to a man I had only met a matter of two weeks ago. It was like my body had hijacked my mind. It was acting on its own initiative, responding and sending subtle and some not-so-subtle signals to him that I was attracted to him and available. No wonder he had offered me an affair. I would have to try harder to disguise my reaction to him. Definitely no more getting close to him. And absolutely *no* touching. I would have to limit my time alone with him, keeping things on a professional basis at all times.

I took a small nibble of my biscuit and chewed and swallowed it, acutely conscious of his steady gaze resting on me.

'You mentioned your parents are alternative,' he said. 'How alternative?'

'They're hippies,' I said. 'They both come from families with money, but for as long as I can remember they've moved from place to place around the country, following whatever lifestyle

guru takes their fancy, or their money, or both.'

'Not an easy way to spend your childhood.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Tell me about it. There's only so much teasing or tofu a kid can take. But don't get me wrong. My parents are really cool people. I love them dearly and I totally understand their desire to live an alternative lifestyle. They're not the sort of people who could ever do the nine-to-five suburban thing. It's just not the way I want to live my life.'

'How did you cope, growing up?'

I gave him one of my sheepish looks. 'I rebelled now and again.'

'How?'

'I became a closet carnivore.'

He laughed. 'Wicked girl.'

I smiled back. He had such a nice laugh. Deep and rich and full-bodied, like a top-shelf wine. Seriously, I could get drunk on hearing it. 'I can still taste my first steak,' I said. 'What an awesome moment that was. Jem and I used to sneak out at night, not to sleep with boys or drink alcohol, like normal girls did. We'd find a restaurant and indulge ourselves in a feast of mediumrare steak.'

He put his coffee cup on the desk, a smile still curving his lips. 'Did your parents ever find out?'

'Not so far.' I licked the chocolate off my fingers. 'I'm good at keeping secrets.'

'Handy talent to have.' There was a glint in his eye that made

something in my stomach quiver like an unset jelly.

I looked away and buried my nose in my coffee cup. I couldn't envisage how I was ever going to confess my folly. The only way I could think to wriggle out of it would be to put in my resignation and start over in a new hospital. It was the only way to save face. But the thought of resigning and reapplying somewhere else was daunting. I loved working at St Iggy's. It was the first place I'd felt as if I belonged. I was part of a team that brought top-quality health care to the public, and the fact that I had—so far—been allowed to trial some alternative therapies was an added bonus.

I put my coffee cup down with a little clatter. 'I'd better get back to work. Thanks for the coffee.'

'You're welcome.'

I walked to the door but before I could put my hand on the doorknob to open it his hand got there first. My hand brushed against his and I pulled it back as if I'd been zapped. His right arm was stretched out against the back of my right shoulder. I could smell the grace notes of his aftershave as well as his own warm male smell, which was even more intoxicating.

I made the mistake of looking up at him. Our eyes met in a timeless moment that swirled and throbbed with sensual undertones I could feel reverberating in my body.

His gaze dropped to my mouth. 'You have chocolate on your lip.'

'I do?' I swept my tongue over my lips. 'Gone?'

He brought the pad of his thumb to my lower lip and gently

blotted it. ‘Got it.’

Our eyes met again. Held. Burned. Tempted.

I drew in a shaky breath and pulled out of his magnetic field.

I turned and walked down the corridor, but it wasn’t until I turned the corner that I heard his door click shut.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER ANOTHER WEEK I was completely over doing night shifts. My circadian rhythms were so out of whack I was practically brain dead. My eyes were so darkly shadowed I looked like I'd walked off the set of a zombie movie. I had a couple of days off, which I spent painting my sitting room, something I'd had to put on hold while I'd had Freddy staying. Margery was back from her sister's now so I could stop worrying about muddy paws and mad yapping, not to mention obsessive chewing.

I'd given Freddy a big marrowbone to chew instead of my shoes and electronic appliance cords, but he'd buried it in the back garden and then brought it in covered in mud and slush and left it on my pillow. Nice.

The time off had also given me some space to work on the hospital ball. I'd gone back to the hotel and talked to the catering manager and I'd ordered the decorations and got posters printed and had them hung around the hospital. The ticket sales had been slow until I had taken over, which was rather gratifying. It seemed everyone was delighted with the idea of a fancy-dress ball and were madly ordering costumes online or in stores.

When I got back to work after my days off I was pleased to hear Jason Ryder had been gradually weaned off the sedation, but while his brain pressures hadn't soared and he was breathing on his own, he was still not responding to verbal commands.

I encouraged his family to continue with the therapies I'd suggested and hoped they would see some improvement over the next week or so.

The EEG had encouragingly shown brain activity. There was something going on in Jason's head, but it wasn't getting out, a possible case of 'locked-in syndrome'. But *what* was locked in was still an unknown. Just how much loss of brain function had resulted from the surgery was anyone's guess at this stage.

Matt Bishop was alone in the central ICU office when I came in from checking on Jason. All the nurses, including Gracie, were occupied with patients. Jill was on an errand to another ward and the registrars were with one of the other consultants with a patient in Bay Five.

'Good news so far on Jason,' I said, by way of greeting. I was going to stick to my plan of keeping things professional and distant.

Matt was less optimistic. 'He's not responding to any stimuli.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'But his CT shows reasonable blood flow in most of the brain, and his EEG shows activity.'

He put the file he was holding down on the counter desk and momentarily leaned forward and rested his hands on top of it. There was a deep frown line between his eyes, his olive-toned skin looked even paler than usual and he had a pinched looked about his features.

If a zombie movie director had been looking for walk-on extras, I thought Matt and I would make a great pair.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

He drew in a breath and straightened, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. 'Fine.'

'You don't look fine.'

'Thanks.'

I peered at him up close. 'Your eyes are bloodshot. Have you been on the turps?'

He gave me a look. 'No. I was up all night. And, no, I wasn't on night shift.'

'At least on night shift you get paid to feel like crap.'

He managed a quarter-smile and then it faded as he dragged his hand down his face this time, wincing as if the movement caused him pain. 'You have no idea of the mess this place is in. Jeff Hooper might win a popularity contest over me any day but he had no idea how to balance a budget. We're four months from the end of the financial year and the budget is blown. The CEO says there is no more money. How the hell can we pay staff and provide a service with an empty bank account? I've been told to come up with a solution.'

I stepped back and folded my arms across my chest before I was tempted to smooth that canyon-deep furrow off his brow. 'Is there anything I can do?'

He looked at me then. *Really* looked at me. His eyes went to mine, holding them in a lock that contained the sensual heat of everything we had experienced together in private—the kisses, the touches, the mutual arousal of primal desire. It went back

and forth between our gazes like a fizzing current of electricity. I swear it was almost audible.

Lust unfolded deep inside my body like a lithe cat stretching its limbs. I could feel my body heating and beating with want, the little tingle of nerves, the flutter of my belly, the rush of my blood and the pounding of my heartbeat.

His gaze went to my mouth, stayed there for a pulsing moment, as if he was wondering if he could steal a kiss and get away with it. The thought thrilled me. The illicitness of it spoke to the wild woman in me I tried so desperately to keep contained.

I found myself stepping up on tippy-toes, leaning towards him, my mouth slightly parted in anticipation of the press of my lips to his.

'Oh, um, er, sorry,' Gracie said from the door.

I sprang back from Matt as if someone had fired a cannonball between us. Gracie was looking at me as if she had never seen me before. But then her eyes took on a wounded look, her pretty freckled face drooping in disappointment.

'It's not what you think—'

'I don't want to hear about it,' Gracie said crisply.

Matt straightened his tie, cleared his throat and moved past us both. 'I have patients to see,' he said, and left.

I closed my eyes for a second. My life was such a farce.

'Bertie, how *could* you?' Gracie said in a shocked voice.

'Nothing happened,' I said. 'We were just … talking.'

'I saw you lean towards him,' she said. 'What's *wrong* with

you? You've just come back from your honeymoon, for God's sake. I never would've taken *you* for a player.'

'Who's being a player?' Jill asked, as she came breezing in with a stack of paperwork. She looked between Gracie and me and raised her artfully pencilled brows. 'You're not talking about Matt Bishop, are you? The man's entitled to have a private life, you know. Mind you, I'd give my back teeth to know whom he's seeing. No one seems to know but I'm sure it's someone from the hospital.'

I mentally rolled my eyes. Could this get any more ridiculously entangled?

'I believe he has a thing for married women,' Gracie said, shooting me a hard look.

Jill gave a disbelieving cough of laughter as she rolled back her chair to sit down. 'Can't see him following in his old man's footsteps.'

'What do you know about his father?' I asked.

Jill swivelled her chair to face me. 'Richard Bishop's a well-known womaniser, the younger the better, apparently. His wife Alexis turns a blind eye, has been doing so ever since their other son died.'

My insides lurched. 'What other son?'

'Matt's brother.'

I could feel my eyes popping. 'He has … *had* a brother?'

Jill gave me an odd look. 'Lots of people have siblings, Bertie.'

I brushed her comment aside with an impatient wave of my

hand. 'I know that, it's just he told me he was an only child.'

'Well, he is now,' Jill said flatly. 'Tim died when Matt was fifteen. Tim was two years older. He had a rock-climbing accident. He was in a coma for over a year before they finally turned off the ventilator.'

'How did you find out all this?' I asked.

'My sister-in-law went to school with Alexis,' Jill said. 'They'd lost touch over the years but recently reconnected on Facebook. I mentioned we had a new boss and when my sister-in-law heard Matt's name she gave me the background.'

Gracie was still eyeing me as if I were Jezebel incarnate but I was beyond caring about that right now. I was still trying to get my head around Matt's tragic background. The loss of his older brother, the long stint in ICU before Tim was finally allowed to die. Was that why Matt was so adamant patients' relatives should be told the truth straight up? Had his parents clung to hope for months and months on end because they hadn't been told—or hadn't taken in—the reality of their eldest son's irretrievable condition?

Gracie muttered something about changing a patient's IV fluids and left.

'So, who do you think Matt's seeing?' Jill asked.

'I hardly see how it's anyone's business.'

She let out a little sigh. 'You're right. Hospital gossip is like a virulent virus. Once it starts you can't stop it.'

Tell me about it , I thought.

Jill looked up at me again. 'Speaking of which, I heard in the tearoom there's a twenty-four-hour bug doing the rounds. They're isolating the cardiac ward. I reckon we might be next. Don't come into work if you get it.'

Right then I wished I never had to come to work ever again.

Gracie was in the change room when I went in to get my things before leaving for the day. She was getting her bag out of the locker and turned as I came in. 'Well, I'll say one thing. As new brides go, you have far more reason than most to blush.' She slammed the locker door. 'And here I was thinking you were different. More fool me.'

'Gracie—'

'I suppose that's why you didn't want to show me the wedding photos,' she went on. 'You didn't want to be reminded you were married while you're sleeping with another man.'

'I'm not sleeping with—'

'Do you know what it feels like to be cheated on? *Do you?*' Her eyes watered and her voice shook. 'It's the worst feeling in the world.'

I knew all right. I took a deep breath. 'I didn't show you the photos because there aren't any.'

Her forehead puckered. 'What do you mean? Did they get deleted or something? That happened to a friend of mine. The photographer accidentally deleted them. If it hadn't been for other people's phone cameras, there would've been no photos at all.'

‘They weren’t deleted,’ I said. ‘They weren’t taken in the first place.’

Her eyes were as round as the top of the linen bin next to the washbasin. ‘Why not?’

My shoulders went down on a sigh. ‘The wedding was called off. Andy was having an affair. I found out the night before the ceremony. It’d been going on for months.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Gracie clasped her hands over her mouth.

‘I walked in on him with one of my bridesmaids’ sister,’ I said. ‘It was … Anyway, there wasn’t a wedding.’

She dropped her hands and asked, ‘But why didn’t you say something? You sent a postcard saying what a wonderful time you were having. Why have you let everyone assume—’

‘Because I’m stupid, that’s why.’ I sat down on one of the bench seats and looked at my feet. I was wearing my piglet socks. There was a hole in one of the toes from Freddy chewing them. I should have darned them but I hadn’t found the time.

‘But surely you could’ve told me?’ Gracie sounded so hurt I could barely bring myself to look at her. ‘I know we’ve only known each other a few months but I thought we were mates. I told you all my stuff. And yet you didn’t say a word. What sort of friendship is that?’

‘I know. You’re right. But I was too embarrassed,’ I said. ‘I didn’t want everyone to feel sorry for me. To pity me. Poor old Bertie, dumped the night before her big day. The day she’s been planning ever since she was five years old.’

Gracie's eyes were almost popping now. '*He* dumped *you*?'

'Yeah.' I let out another despondent sigh. 'That's the most embarrassing thing. If he hadn't pulled the plug I probably would've gone through with it to keep up appearances. Sick, huh?'

Gracie took one of my cold hands in hers and clasped it warmly. 'It's not sick. It's completely understandable. All that money, all those guests, all that food and—'

'God, don't remind me,' I groaned. 'Lucky it wasn't a huge wedding. We travelled around so much as kids I don't have a lot of friends.'

'You have more than you realise, Bertie,' she said, giving my hand another squeeze.

I looked into her china-blue eyes and somehow managed a vestige of a smile. 'Thanks.'

Gracie chewed her lip for a moment. 'Sorry about what I said back in the office. But don't you think you should let people know? I mean, what about that thing I saw between you and—'

'You didn't see anything.' I stood and wrapped my arms around my body as if the temperature had dropped twenty degrees. 'I was the one at fault. He was just standing there. I don't know what came over me.'

'So you're not involved with him?'

'How can I be even if I wanted to?' I asked. 'He thinks I'm married.'

'Then you should tell him and everyone else you're not.'

I swung back to face her again. 'No. I can't. What will everyone think? You have to keep it a secret. Please, Gracie, don't tell anyone. Promise me?'

She gave me a worried look. 'I'm hopeless at keeping secrets. I always leak stuff. I can't help it. It comes spilling out.'

'You have to promise me, Gracie.' I was almost to the point of begging. It was pathetic. I was even thinking of offering her money. 'You can't tell anyone. No one must know. No one. Do you hear me? No one.'

'But—'

'No one will be interested in my private life in a month or two,' I said. 'You know how it is with everyone here. We're all so busy we hardly have time to chat about what's going on in our home lives. After a couple of months I'll tell everyone I'm separated or had the marriage annulled or something.'

Gracie chomped on her lower lip again, her expression doubtful. 'But what if you want to date someone else? Dr Bishop, for instance.'

I tried to laugh it off but I didn't sound convincing even to my ears. 'He's not interested in me. Not in the long term anyway. I'm too out there for him.'

'I've seen the way he looks at you,' Gracie said. 'And he was the one who organised for Jason Ryder to be transferred to your room that first day. It was a heck of a job moving the ventilator but he insisted it be done. Not only that, if anyone dares to make fun of your project he cuts them off quick smart.'

Something in my chest spilled like a cup of warm treacle. It was the thing I found most attractive about Matt. Although he had reservations about my project, he still managed to keep an open mind. That, and the fact he stood up for me. How could I not find that the most appealing trait? For as long as I can remember I had dreamed of a knight in shining armour. The sort of man who would protect me, shelter me and support me in everything I attempted to do. Someone who believed in me, in my potential, who helped me reach it without hindering it with their own self-serving interests.

But wasn't I dreaming an impossible dream? I was twenty-seven years old. I'd already wasted a chunk of my life on a man who wasn't right for me. Could I risk squandering another period of my life with a man who had offered me nothing but a behind-closed-doors … what? A fling? He hadn't exactly been specific about the terms. 'We'd make an interesting pair,' sounded more like an experiment than a relationship. Was that how he saw me? As a test sample?

What if I failed?

I'd had a full day in Theatre the following day so didn't get to ICU until we had to transfer the last patient. None of the other cases needed high dependency care so they went straight to Recovery. Once I was finished with the transfer I went to Matt's office. The door was closed and I gave it a tentative knock. There was no response so I knocked louder.

'He's gone home.'

I jumped about a foot when Jill Carter spoke from behind me. 'Oh.'

'He left a couple of hours ago,' she said. 'He was in most of the night with Rosanne Finch, the leukaemia patient. I told him to go home. I told him he looked worse than some of our patients.'

I frowned. 'Is he unwell?'

'He wouldn't admit it but I reckon he's got the bug. Gives you a blinding headache and a fever for twenty-four hours, give or take nausea and vomiting.'

'Sounds like a heap of fun.'

Jill smiled wryly. 'At least our husbands have us to wait on them hand on foot. What's yours like as a patient? If he's anything like mine, you'd rather be at work.'

'That just about sums it up,' I said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I FOUND MATT'S great-aunt's house without any trouble. I asked one of the neighbours who was walking by with an overweight labrador which house had a corgi called Winnie.

Here's what I've found out recently. Dog owners have their own network. It's like the medical community—everyone knows everyone. The only difference with dog owners is they only know the dogs' names, not each other's. They call each other things like Fifi's mum or Milo's dad. Weird but true.

The house was a lovely Victorian mansion—personally, I thought it was way too big for a single old lady—with a lovely knot garden at the front, which was currently covered in snow. There was a light on downstairs but the upper floors were dark. I pressed my finger to the brass doorbell and listened as it rang throughout the house. I heard Winnie bark and then the click-clack of her claws on the floor. After what seemed a long time I heard someone coming down the stairs. They weren't happy footsteps.

The door opened and Matt stood there dressed in nothing but a pair of drawstring cotton pyjama bottoms. I stared at his chest and abs. He was so cut it looked like he had stepped off a plinth in the Uffizi in Florence. My fingers itched to touch him, to trace my fingertips over every hard ridge and contour. I dragged my eyes up to his. His weren't pleased to see me, or at least that was

the impression I got. 'I thought you might like some company,' I said.

'Now's not a good time.'

I looked at his forehead, where beads of perspiration had gathered. The rest of his features looked pale and drawn. 'Consider it a house call,' I said.

He managed to summon enough energy to lift one of his eyebrows but I could tell it caused pain somewhere inside his head by the way he winced. 'I thought you didn't make house calls?'

I pushed past him in the door. 'I'm making an exception.' I bent down to ruffle Winnie's ears. 'Besides, this old girl could do with a walk, surely?'

'It won't hurt her to miss a day.'

I turned back to face him. 'Stop frowning at me like that. It'll make your headache worse.'

'How do you know I have a headache?'

I gave him a look. 'Have you taken something for it?'

He dragged a hand down his face, wincing again. 'Paracetamol.'

'You probably need something stronger.'

'What I need is to be left alone.'

I put my hands on my hips. Jem calls it my 'taking-charge pose'. I can be quite bossy when I put my mind to it. 'Come on, off to bed with you. I'll sort out the dog and rustle up something for you to eat and drink.'

He made a groaning noise. 'Don't mention that word in my hearing.'

'When was the last time you ate?'

He gave me a glare but it didn't really have any sting in it. 'Yesterday.'

I shifted my lips from side to side. 'Fluids?'

'A couple of sips of water.'

'When?'

He let out an exhausted-sounding breath. 'You don't give up easily, do you?'

'I've been playing doctors and nurses since I was three,' I said. 'Now, where is your bedroom?'

He scored his fingers through the tousled thickness of his hair. 'Second floor. First on the right.'

I made my way to the kitchen and boiled the kettle and made a cup of chamomile tea, which is really good for settling an upset stomach. I had brought herbal tea bags with me as I know from experience that not everyone has them in their pantry. I was right about Matt's aunt. She only had English Breakfast and Lady Grey. I took the steaming cup up on a gorgeous silver tray I found in a display cabinet and carried it upstairs. I felt like one of the chambermaids in *Downton Abbey.*

Matt was lying in a tangle of sweaty sheets, his forearm raised at a right angle over his eyes. I got a good look at his chest and abdomen. Ripped muscles, just like an old-fashioned washboard, lean and toned with just a nice sprinkling of chest hair that fanned

from his pectoral muscles into a V below the drawstring waist of his pyjama bottoms.

I hadn't realised how sexy male pyjamas could be, way more sexy than sleeping naked. It was the thought of what was hiding behind that thin layer of cotton that so tantalised me. He was lying with his legs slightly apart, his feet and ankles turned outwards, his stomach not just flat but hollowed in like a shallow cave. I looked at it in unmitigated envy. My stomach was more domelike than the one on St Paul's Cathedral. I sucked it in and approached the bed. 'I have a cup of tea for you.'

He cranked open one eye. 'You don't have to do this.'

'Here.' I held the cup up to his mouth. 'Just take a few sips. It'll help with the nausea.'

He raised his head off the pillow and took a small sip but then he sprayed it out as if it were poison. 'What the freaking hell is that?'

'Chamomile tea,' I said.

He gave me a black look. 'It tastes like stewed grass clippings.'

I put the cup on the bedside table and mopped the front of my jumper with a tissue I'd plucked from the box near the bed. 'You won't feel better until you get some fluids on board. Maybe I should bring an IV set from the hospital and run a couple of litres into you.'

'Don't even think about it.'

I got up from the edge of the bed and went through to the ensuite bathroom. It was a beautiful affair, with black and white

tiles on the floor and a freestanding white bath with brass clawed feet. The shower was separate and had brass fittings the same as the bath taps. There were black and white towels hanging on a brass rail, although there were another couple on the floor next to the shower, as if Matt hadn't had the energy to pick them up after he'd showered.

There was shaving gear on the marble counter where the washbasin was situated and one of those shaving mirrors, the one with one side magnified. I absolutely loathe them as they always show up my chicken-pox scar above my left eye. You guessed it. My parents went through an anti-vaccination phase.

I ran the tap to dampen a facecloth. I wrung it out and sprinkled a couple of drops of lavender oil, which I'd brought with me, on it and took it back to the bedroom.

Matt was still lying in that body-fallen-from-a-tall-building pose. I swear I could have drawn a chalk line around him like in one of those film noir murder mysteries. I gently pulled his arm away from his eyes and laid the facecloth over them. He gave a deep sigh, which made his whole body relax into the mattress.

'Did you hear that?' he said.

'What? Your sigh?'

'That hiss of steam.'

I laughed. 'You certainly are running a fever. Do you have a thermometer anywhere?'

'I have a doctor's bag in the study downstairs.'

I got up from the bed. 'I'll be back in a tick.'

I was at the door when his voice stopped me in my tracks. 'Bertie?'

I turned and looked at him. 'Yes?'

He opened his mouth to say something but then he closed it. 'Doesn't matter.'

'No, go on, tell me.'

He looked at me for a beat or two. 'Why did you come here tonight?'

I pulled at my lower lip with my teeth, not quite able to hold his gaze. I'm not sure I knew exactly why I'd come myself. I had acted on automatic, as if it had been programmed for me to walk the block that separated our places of residence and call on him. 'I know what it's like to come home to an empty house when you're feeling rotten.'

There was a little pulse of silence. I was feeling pretty proud of myself for not trying to fill it.

He closed his eyes. 'Forget about the thermometer. I need to sleep.'

'If you're sure.'

'I'm sure.'

I left him upstairs sleeping and took Winnie out for a walk. I found a spare key on the hall table so I didn't get locked out. Matt looked so exhausted I thought he might not hear me on my return. Winnie and I didn't go far as it was freezing but she seemed to enjoy the outing. She stopped at just about every lamppost for a sniff and a minuscule pee, before trotting on to the next one and

doing it all over again. *That is quite some pelvic floor she has*, I thought.

I took her back and fed her and then had a good old snoop around. I love looking at other people's houses. I get lots of ideas for decorating my own. Well, that's my rationalisation anyway. Matt's great-aunt had excellent taste and clearly money was no object. The place was decked out in the most luxurious soft furnishings and the furniture was mostly antique, and not just charity-shop antiques either. I mean *real* antiques, like centuries-old pieces that were heirlooms that looked like they should be in the Victoria and Albert museum.

But it wasn't a house I could imagine a young family growing up in. I began to wonder what sort of house Matt had spent his childhood in. Was it like this one, a showpiece of wealth but without the warmth and heart of a house where children's laughter was always welcome? I wondered too about his older brother. Whether they were close and how Tim's death had impacted on him.

Was that why he was so driven and focussed on work? His blunt honesty about a patient's prognosis made a lot of sense now I knew his brother had spent so long in ICU before he finally died. I had seen enough relatives do the long stints in the unit, watching for any sign of change, their hopes hanging in the air like fragile threads that could be destroyed with a look or ill-timed word from a doctor.

That final walk from the unit once a loved one has passed

away is one of the saddest things to watch. Some people hold themselves together, walking tall and straight, or putting their arms around other family members, keeping strong for the rest of the family. Others cry and wail and scream in denial and some have to be physically escorted, as they can't bear to bring themselves to leave. Others look for scapegoats, lashing out at staff or other relatives, apportioning blame as a way of dealing with overwhelming grief.

I wondered how Matt had handled his older brother's death. Had he stood tall and quiet and dignified or had he railed and ranted against the injustice of a young life cut short? Or had he buried his grief so deeply it rarely got an airing?

He was a complex man, caring and considerate, strong and capable and disciplined, but with a sense of humour that countered his rather formal, take-no-prisoners demeanour. I wondered if he would have turned out a different, more open and friendly person if his brother hadn't died. His real self was locked away behind layers of grief, only getting an airing when he felt safe enough to let his guard down.

I suddenly wished I were that person. The person he would open up to in a way he had never done with anyone else. Hadn't he already let me in a tiny bit? He had mentioned all had not been well with his childhood. He had mentioned his father and mother's relationship. Would he eventually tell me more, reveal more of the man he truly was? I hoped so. I had a sense we could be allies. Our childhoods couldn't have been more different but

there was an air of loneliness … of otherness about him I could definitely relate to.

I found Matt's doctor's bag in the study downstairs. It was a beautiful room kitted up like an English country estate library. There were wall-to-ceiling bookshelves and there was even one of those extendable ladder-like steps to reach the top shelves. There was an antique desk with a Louis IV chair and an old world globe. The only modern thing in the room, apart from the electricity and Matt's doctor's bag, was a laptop on the desk. I admit I like a little snoop from time to time but I draw the line at reading other people's emails. Matt's computer was in sleep mode in any case, but there was a part of me that dearly would have liked to know if he'd mentioned me to any of his friends.

But then I saw a handwritten note lying on the desk next to an old inkwell and quill. My reading speed was faster than my moral rectitude. I was halfway down the page before I realised I was reading something that was meant to be private, but by then it was too late.

Matthew,

It's your father's birthday next month. I know you're not speaking to him after the last time you visited but he didn't mean it. He'd had too much red wine. You know he can never remember what he's said the next morning.

Anyway, I know you're busy but it would be lovely if you'd pop in. You don't have to stay long. I'm not doing anything too big. Just having a few friends around for cocktails. I wouldn't

want Eleanor Grantonberry next door to think I couldn't put on a proper do for my husband.

Feel free to bring a date. Are you seeing anyone? You never tell me anything! Isn't it time you got over Helena? She wasn't right for you. You're too much of a workaholic. She and Simon are very happy. Did you know she's pregnant? The baby's due in June. I wish you could find a nice girl to settle down and have babies with.

Love Mum x

I sat on the chair and looked at that piece of paper for a long time. I wished my mum were there to do a handwriting analysis. But I could pick up enough between the lines to realise Matt had a complicated background.

And here I was, thinking mine was a little weird.

I went back upstairs with some chicken broth I'd made while Matt slept. I'd found some ingredients in the pantry and fridge and freezer and whipped up my classic cure-all. I set it out on a tray with a starched doily I'd found and carried it upstairs.

Matt opened his eyes as I came in. 'You're still here?'

'I haven't got anything on this evening.' I set the tray on the bedside table. 'Do you think you could manage a bit of broth once I take your temp?'

'Did you make it?'

'Don't worry, it's not laced with poison.'

He frowned. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to sound—'

'I did, however, sprinkle some eye of newt in it.'

He smiled a crooked smile. 'Don't make me laugh. It makes my head hurt.'

'Poor baby.'

I popped the thermometer in his mouth and waited for it to beep. I took it out and looked at the reading. 'Hmm, it's back to normal. The rest must've done the trick.'

I sat beside him on the bed as he worked his way through the bowl of broth. He didn't manage it all but he seemed to enjoy what he had. He even had a glass of mineral water with a squeeze of lemon I'd brought up.

Once he was finished I got up to take the tray back down to the kitchen. 'Why don't you have a shower and I'll sort out your bed for you? I'll even do hospital corners.'

He frowned again. 'Seriously, Bertie, you don't have to do this.'

'I know, but I want to.'

His eyes looked into mine. 'Why?'

'Everyone needs a friend now and again.'

His frown deepened as his eyes moved away from mine. 'I'm not sure I'm the sort of friend you need right now.'

'Because you haven't got over H-her?' I caught myself just in time. I didn't want him to know I'd been reading his private mail, although he might put two and two together once he realised I'd been in the study to get his doctor's bag. I'd left everything as I'd found it, but if he knew anything about women at all, he must know I would have read it.

He let out a long, uneven breath. 'I'm not good at relationships,

any relationships. I hurt and disappoint people without even trying.'

'So you keep things casual with anyone who comes along who interests you.'

He gave me a measured look. 'Is that how you see us? As something casual?'

I wasn't sure how to answer. What exactly was he offering? Come to that, what was *I* offering? I couldn't hope to hide my attraction to him. My body had its own silent language. I could feel it calling out to him even then. The tightening of my core, the flush running over my skin, the way my eyes kept going from his to his mouth and back again. The way my tongue moistened my lips. Even the way I'd turned up tonight, playing nursemaid, surely told him all he needed to know. But how could I have what I wanted without causing even more mayhem in my life?

His eyes had a dark glint in them. 'I can see how it's risky, given your … situation.'

My teeth sank into my lip. Here was my chance to confess what a fool I'd been. The words were assembled on my tongue like paratroopers about to leave a Hercules aircraft. I knew once I let them out I couldn't take them back. How soon before he would tell someone at work about my game of charades? But there was no way I could allow him to make love to me while he thought I was married. 'There's something I have to tell you … I should've told you earlier.'

'I know.'

I kept talking, barely registering he had even spoken. Now that I'd made up my mind to confess I had to get on with it without distraction. I had to get it out there before he kissed me or I lost my courage. Not that I'd had much to begin with. 'I've been lying to you about my … situation,' I said. 'There was no wedding. I was jilted the night before. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone. I went on my honeymoon alone and I stupidly wrote a couple of postcards when I was tipsy, pretending everything had gone ahead as planned.' I shook my head at my own foolishness, not wanting to look at Matt in case I saw the derision I was sure he must feel. 'Postcards. Can you believe it? Who writes postcards these days? How *dumb* is that?'

'I know.'

'But the thing is I never intended to post them,' I said, without even acknowledging Matt's calm insertion. 'The housekeeping staff took them when I was out of the room and kindly posted them for me. I should've known something like that would happen.' I took a breath and went on, 'I seem to always get myself into ridiculous situations. And then when I came back to work that first day there was my stupid postcard on the noticeboard. If I'd been sensible I would've phoned or emailed ahead or something. But walking in like that to their smiling faces, I … I just couldn't do it. How could I tell them that …?'

Somewhere in the workings of my fevered brain I finally registered what he'd just said. Twice. I looked at him with a quizzical expression. 'You know what?'

His eyes had that spark of amusement shining in them again. 'I know you're not married.'

I gaped at him with my mouth so wide open you could have backed a London bus into it. *'You know? '*

His smile had a teasing element to it that made my blood start to tick with anger. 'I knew from the start.'

He knew?

A red mist came up in front of my eyes.

He'd known from the start?

My veins were so bloated with anger they felt like they were going to combust. It was rocketing through my body like a cruise missile. He'd known and not told me? Not given me a single hint?

Why?

I clamped my lips together to force myself to think before I spoke. But I was too upset to think. My thoughts were tumbling around my head like a handful of marbles in a glass bowl. It physically hurt to try and make sense of them. Had he been laughing at me behind all his casually posed questions? Questions about my 'husband' and where I went on my honeymoon. *Grrr!* He'd known the *whole time* how awkward I would find those questions and yet he had continued each time we interacted as if I were a new bride. What had motivated him? Had he *enjoyed* my discomfiture, my wretched squirming every time we spoke?

Of course he had. He'd led me on, teasing me, mocking me with his enigmatic looks and half-smiles. The crushing hurt was worse than my anger. It pressed down on my sternum like a chest

of drawers. He had deliberately led me on—for what? To have a joke at my expense? So he could laugh about me with all my colleagues?

'How did you know?' I fired the question at him like a round of bullets. 'How could you possibly know? No one at the hospital knows, apart from Gracie McCurcher, and she's sworn to secrecy.'

He was still looking at me with an amused expression, which wasn't doing my escalating anger any favours. I felt like a pressure cooker inside me was about to explode. I could feel it expanding in my chest until I could scarcely draw breath.

'I heard about it via an old school friend of mine who works in the same company as your ex,' he said. 'We met for a drink a couple of days before you returned to work. He told me how he'd just come back from Yorkshire where the wedding of his colleague had been cancelled at the last minute. I wouldn't have taken any notice except he mentioned your name. *Bertie* is quite unusual so when you turned up at work I put two and two together.'

I gave him a livid glare. 'So why didn't you blow my cover then and there? That would've been quite a laugh for you, along with my project title.'

The amused look was exchanged for one that suspiciously looked like pity, or at least something very close to it. 'I figured you had your reasons for keeping quiet about it. I decided to play along for a bit.'

I sent him another paint-stripping look. Seriously, I could've taken my new paint burner back to the hardware store and used my gaze on my house instead. 'Why?' I shot back. 'So you could have a joke at my expense? Mock me while you pretended to be interested in me?'

His eyes darkened to a deeper bluey grey as they held mine, his voice deep and gravelly. 'I wasn't pretending.'

My heart kicked against my breastbone. 'You weren't?'

He shook his head.

'Oh, well, then …'

'You have to tell everyone, Bertie. Surely you see that?'

I stood from the bed and crossed my arms over my body. 'No. No. No. I can't. I just can't.'

'Why are you so worried about what people will say?'

I turned back to look at him. 'I spent most of my childhood being laughed at. I can't bear people sniggering at me, or—worse—pitying me. If I were to tell everyone now I was jilted the night before my wedding they'll howl with laughter or cringe in pity. It's too late. I have to keep it quiet. I *have* to.'

'Come here.' His voice had a commanding tone to it I found wonderfully soothing. It was like he was going to take charge—please, don't tell my bra-burning mother I said that!—and make everything right for me. I sat beside him on the bed and he took one of my hands in his. 'You don't have to keep pretending. The longer it goes on the harder it'll be to undo. People will understand. They really will, sweetheart. Trust me.'

It really got me when he called me that. A lot of men utter endearments without making them sound genuine. But I wasn't convinced a tell-all in the staffroom was going to work for me. Besides, I didn't have the guts to do it. My childhood scars were too deep, too raw to have them scraped open by even one giggle or chuckle. 'Please,' I said. 'Please, try and understand.'

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze, his eyes holding mine in a tender look. I don't think anyone—no man at least—has ever looked at me like that. He looked like he really cared about me, about my feelings, about my insecurities. 'I do understand. It's tough when things don't work out the way you'd planned. But you'll get over it in time.'

I gave him a narrowed look. 'Please, don't tell me you feel sorry for me.'

He stroked his thumb over the back of my hand. 'I feel sorry you feel so pressured to fit in that you can't be honest with people. But you don't have to hide or pretend with me, okay?'

I could feel a little wobble of my chin, which was the closest I've got to crying in a very long time. 'Okay.' It was barely a whisper but it sure felt good to say it. To admit I trusted him to keep my secret safe.

He trailed a finger over the back of my hand. 'There's a way around this.'

I suppressed a shiver as his finger travelled to the underside of my wrist where my pulse was skyrocketing. 'There is?'

His eyes scorched mine. 'We could have a secret relationship.'

I noted the word 'secret'. Not my favourite word right then, but still. I swallowed as his finger made a lazy circle against the skin of my palm. It felt like he had touched me intimately, stroking me to arousal. 'I want you to know I don't do this sort of thing normally.'

'I know.'

I looked at him again. Directly. Staunchly. 'I mean it, Matt. This is totally out of character for me.'

He gently brushed a strand of hair back from my face. I had always longed for a man to do that to me. Andy never seemed to notice my tendrils, even the ones I'd deliberately staged to hang loose so he could push them back. 'Maybe we need to get this thing between us out of our system. What do you say?'

'Well,' I said, tapping my finger against my lip for a moment, 'I do have a couple of stipulations.'

'Which are?'

'This bed, for one thing.' I stood up and put my hands on my hips again. 'If I'm going to have bed-wrecking sex with you, then we at least need to start with a bed that's not already wrecked.'

He gave another lopsided smiled as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. 'You are one crazy girl.'

'But you like me, right?'

He stood and brushed his fingertips down my cheek, his smile, even as it faded, still making my insides turn over. 'I hope you don't catch my bug.'

'Thanks to my parents, I have a robust immune system.'

He gave one of my Dorothy from Oz pigtails a gentle tug. ‘You’re going to need it.’

CHAPTER NINE

I REMADE THE bed with fresh linen and dumped the other in the laundry downstairs. I would have set on a load but I had other priorities right then. When I came back up Matt was standing next to the bed with just a towel draped around his hips. I went to him as if I'd been doing it all my adult life. It felt so natural to walk into his open arms and feel them come around me like strong, warm bands.

He smelt divine, soap and shampoo and his own male smell, and he was warm and still a little damp from the shower. I was damp too. I could feel my body stirring in response to his closeness; the maleness of him against my softer contours was enough to send my senses spinning.

His mouth came down to the side of mine, touching and teasing the corner of my mouth in a tantalisingly little prelude of what was to come. I turned my head so his lips came into full contact with mine. I wasn't in the mood for preludes. I wanted the whole damn symphony and in forte.

His mouth was warm and firm and moved against mine with devastating expertise. There was amazing choreography in our kisses. There were no nose bumps or tooth scrapes; instead, there was a natural affinity between our mouths, a graceful coordination like watching two brilliant dancers working the ballroom floor. My response to him was purely instinctive. I

hadn't even thought I was a particularly good kisser until I had come into contact with his mouth.

His tongue stroked along my bottom lip and I made a sound of approval as I welcomed him inside. The warm glide of his tongue over and under and around mine made my insides contract with lust. His hands pulled me against him, his fingers digging into my buttocks to hold me against where his blood pounded with desire. I could feel the hard ridge of him swelling against me. It made my body restless to get even closer. I could feel the tingling and tickling of my inner core, an ache and pulse of longing growing more intense by the second.

His hands began working their way under my jumper, sliding his palms over my bare skin to find my breast. I made a little gasping sound as his fingers pushed aside my bra and made flesh-to-flesh contact. He cupped me first, and then he rolled the pad of his thumb back and forth across and around my nipple. It was the most exquisite torture. All the nerves beneath my skin leapt and twirled and pirouetted.

I wanted to touch him to give him the same pleasure he was giving me. I tugged at the towel covering him and it fell to the floor. I stroked my fingers down his hard, flat abdomen, stringing out the anticipation for him as I slowly made my way to my target. He sucked in a harsh-sounding breath as I claimed my prize. He was iron hard and yet his skin felt velvet smooth. I felt the throbbing pulse of his blood against my hand. I squeezed and stroked in turn. I circled my fingertip over his tip, where

pre-ejaculate fluid was beading. It was an erotic reminder of the primal impulses going on in my own body, the silky dew that moistened my inner walls in preparation for the thrust and glide of his body.

He helped me out of my clothes with gentle but urgent hands, using those same hands to stroke over my flesh as he uncovered it. I felt like a present he was unwrapping, a present he had waited a long time to claim. He kissed every inch of my décolletage, along the scaffold of my collarbones, dipping his tongue into the suprasternal notch between.

His mouth came back to mine, plundering it with increasing vigour, as if the tight hold on his self-control was under enormous strain. I kissed him back with passionate enthusiasm, my tongue dancing and duelling with his. He tasted so fresh, a combination of mint and salt and sexy maleness. He had shaved during his shower but his skin still rasped against mine in a way that made me feel incredibly feminine.

Once I was in nothing but my knickers, his hands came up and cupped my face. I liked it that he hadn't stripped me naked, that he'd allowed me that final barrier to make me feel less pressured, less exposed. I could still feel him against me, the hot probe of his erection making my body ache behind the lace of my underwear.

His lifted his mouth off mine so our lips were almost touching, our breaths mingling in the intimate space. 'Are you sure about this?' he said.

That was another thing I liked. He hadn't taken my consent for

granted. He'd allowed me time to back out if I wasn't comfortable with taking things further. I don't want to make Andy sound like a predator or anything but there were a few times when he hadn't really picked up on my change of mind or mood.

'I'm sure.' I put my hand to his face and stroked it down the chiselled plane of his jaw. 'But thanks for asking.'

He rested his forehead against mine. 'It's been a while for me.'

'Me too.'

He lifted his head to look at me. 'How long?'

'It's been a couple of months.' I gave him a wry look. 'Actually, it's probably longer.'

He brushed his lips against mine. 'Good girl.'

'Why'd you say that?'

He smiled at me. 'You're being honest.'

The words I was going to say were obliterated in the combustible heat of our mouths meeting in a scorching hot kiss that spoke of the deep, irresistible yearnings going on in both of our bodies. Our tongues tangled and teased, stroked and swept and chased each other in a sensual dance as sexy as any Latin tango.

I was standing up on tiptoe, my breasts pushed almost flat against his chest in an effort to get as close as possible. His hands gently peeled away my knickers; his palms warm as they cupped my bare behind. He moved against me, the strong pulse of his body sending mine into a frenzy of want.

He pulled back from me slightly. 'I need to get a condom.'

He left me briefly to find one in his wallet. He didn't have a supply in the bedside drawer, I noticed, which seemed to suggest he hadn't brought anyone back here before. I liked the special feeling it gave me, the feeling that I was the only woman he'd considered making love with since he'd got back from the States.

He came back to me sheathed and gently guided me to the bed, where we ended up in an erotic tangle of limbs. That was another thing I noticed. There was no awkwardness about who was going to put which limb where. We fitted together like one of those complicated puzzles that only a Mensa member can solve. The feel of his naked skin moving against mine, the glide and stroke of his hands, the caress of his lips and tongue and the heat of our connection went through every pore of my body like a current.

I stroked my hands over his back and shoulders, discovering every knob of his vertebrae as his mouth savoured mine. Our tongues did that sexy little tango again that mimicked what our lower bodies were aching and straining to do. I shifted beneath him, urging him to take things to the next stage, but he was taking his time to ensure I was properly aroused. He stroked my entrance, felt the wetness of me and then slid one finger inside. I almost came right then and there. He stroked his fingertip across my clitoris, just enough to make me aware of him.

The sensations gathered like an approaching wave, building momentum with a force that threatened to overwhelm me. I felt the tension building in my body as he stroked me again, softly, slowly, then varying the speed, getting to know what I liked and

what I didn't.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more he moved down my body, kissing my breasts, down my sternum to my belly button and then to the top of my mons pubis. Instead of using his fingers, this time he used his lips and tongue. I know I sound like a ridiculous prude but I've never really understood all the fuss about oral sex. Andy did his best, but I always felt he couldn't wait to get it over with so he could get on with the main event, so to speak. I would freeze up or fret that I hadn't waxed or that I might not be as fresh as I should be down there. I would end up pretending I'd had a good time just to get it over with.

But with Matt I forgot about all those insecurities and hang-ups. His caresses were so perfectly timed, so cleverly orchestrated my body went on a feverish journey of discovery that left me completely breathless. The orgasm rolled over me like a massive wave, spinning and tossing me into a world of sensation that left no room for conscious thought. I was reduced to that one part of my body, my most primal part. I writhed and clawed and cried and gasped as the ricocheting pulses went through me, finally leaving me in a limp heap as the afterglow flowed through every muscle in my body.

Matt came back over me, cradling the side of my face with one of his hands. He didn't ask if it was good for me. He didn't need to. Instead, he kissed me again, the taste of my own body on his lips stirring me into a new round of arousal.

I reached for him to guide him into my body but he really

didn't need any help from me. He knew exactly where he was going. But he didn't thrust in hard, not at first. He took his time, inching in to allow me to get used to his length. I felt like a virgin having sex for the first time with someone who really knew what they were doing. I felt special and respected and worshiped, instead of exploited and used.

Once he sensed my body was fine with him being fully enclosed, he began to move. It's a rhythm as old as time but each couple has their own take on it. I never found my groove with Andy, or my other partners. I always felt I was three steps behind, like a novice dancer trying to join a complicated line dance. I was always out of sequence, out of time with my partners.

But with Matt I felt everything fall into place. He moved and I responded. Our bodies rocked together as if they had been programmed to do it. When he groaned with deep pleasure it made my flesh shiver all over. But instead of taking his pleasure, he hadn't finished giving me mine. He somehow got his hand between our bodies and found my clitoris again and stroked and coaxed it into an earth-shattering orgasm. It was so powerful I could feel it rippling through me, the tight contractions triggering his release. I felt the deep shudder of his body as it drove into mine in those last desperate pumps as he emptied. I felt his skin lift in goose bumps and stroked my hands over his back and shoulders and down over his lower spine and taut buttocks.

Neither of us spoke.

I didn't want to break the mood with banal conversation. I

wanted to dwell in that quiet sense of physical harmony, the soothing mutual relaxation of two bodies that moments ago had been strung tight with sexual tension but which had now found peace.

It was a while before I realised Matt was soundly asleep. I know a lot a men fall asleep after sex, but at least he hadn't rolled away to the other side of the bed and started snoring like a wild boar.

He had quietly slipped into a deep and relaxing slumber while still holding me in his arms. For some strange reason I felt like crying. Not because he hadn't stayed awake long enough to tell me I was the best sex partner he'd ever had—as if *that* was going to happen—but because he felt comfortable enough with me to truly relax. I got the feeling he didn't do it too often.

After half an hour or so I gently extricated myself from his hold. He made a soft, deep murmur of something that sounded a little like protest but he didn't fully wake up. I covered him with the quilt and tiptoed about the room to collect my clothes. I dressed in the bathroom, and then, once I had restored some sense of order to my hair, I went downstairs. I gave Winnie a last pat and made sure she had doggy biscuits and a fresh bowl of water, and then I let myself out.

CHAPTER TEN

I HAD A pre-assessment clinic first thing the next day and then a meeting with the other anaesthetists about some minor changes to the training scheme. Then I had a list in Theatre that went over time due to the weirdest case of appendicitis I've ever seen, or the surgeon for that matter. Despite the patient only being seventeen, the appendix had been massively expanded and completely replaced by what looked like a tumour.

It meant I was nowhere near ICU until quite late in the day. I hadn't seen or spoken to Matt since I'd left his place the night before, but I knew he was at work because I'd overheard two of the theatre nurses talking about him.

'I walked past Matt Bishop on my way to work this morning,' Leanne said. 'Talk about hot. Do you know who he's seeing?'

'No, but I wish it was me,' the other one, called Kathy, said in a tone that suggested she was waggling her eyebrows.

I tried not to eavesdrop but my ears were out on cornstalks.

The girls must have sensed my interest as they turned to me, where I was tidying up my equipment. 'Who do you think it is, Bertie?'

'Why would you think I would know?' I sounded a bit defensive. Way too defensive.

'Someone said he's seeing a married woman and she works at St Iggy's,' Kathy said.

'That's just malicious gossip and you shouldn't be spreading it,' I said. I immediately regretted it. I saw the way their eyebrows went up in unison.

'Touchy,' Leanne said.

'Anyway,' Kathy pitched in, 'why would you be so worried about what's said about him? Isn't he going to pull the plug on your research?'

I tried to keep my composure cool and indifferent but I could feel a hot tide of colour sweeping up from my neck to my face. 'Not if I can produce results.'

'You'd better watch out, Bertie,' Leanne said. 'If it's true Dr Bishop has a thing for married women, you might be his next target.'

'That's ridiculous,' I said. 'I'm not—'

'Interested?' Kathy said. 'Come on, you might've just got back from your honeymoon but you wouldn't be human if you didn't find him attractive.'

I could have told them then and there. *I'm not married.* But I could just imagine the fallout. The news would spread like wildfire. I would be the topic of every locker room and staff tearoom conversation. Everywhere I went people would give me those looks, the looks I'd faced for most of my twenty-seven years. Pity. Ridicule. Mockery.

Just as well I got a call about a patient in Recovery. I made good my escape and left.

I went to ICU after I finished in Recovery to check on Jason.

His wife, Megan, was there, his parents having gone home after spending most of the day with him. She looked exhausted so I sat with her for a while, just listening as she told me about the plans she and Jason had made. Their excitement over finding they were to become parents, how they had chosen names and decided against finding out the sex of the baby, as they wanted the thrill of the surprise.

She even showed me the ultrasound images. Seeing a baby in utero in 3D stirred my own maternal longings in my body. I had squashed them down for years as I'd concentrated on my career, but now, as I got closer and closer to the big three-oh, I was hearing some very loud ticking.

Andy hadn't been so keen on having kids straight away but, like a lot of women, I'd assumed he'd change his mind once we were married. It was only when I saw him with that girl that I realised he wasn't mature enough to be a father. He was too selfish to want to give up his freedom and take responsibility for someone other than himself.

I berated myself for being so blind about him. I had let the years roll on, reassuring myself things would get better when they had got progressively worse. Why hadn't I acknowledged it? Why had I let it get to the night before the wedding to see my relationship with him for what it was?

Once I was sure Megan was comfortable with a fresh glass of juice and some sandwiches from the doctors' room—I was bending the rules, but the ones in the relatives' room weren't as

nice, in my opinion—I left the unit.

Matt was coming out of his office as I was coming along the corridor to leave for the day. I'd thought of nothing else but him ever since I'd left his great-aunt's house the night before. I wanted to see him again. I wanted to explore the amazing chemistry we had together. My body was still aware of him. It still tingled every time I thought of the passion we had shared.

He stopped in the process of closing his door, pushing it open instead and indicating with his head for me to come inside. 'Got a minute?'

I walked past him in the doorway, my body zinging with awareness as one of his shirtsleeves brushed me on the way past. I turned and faced him once he'd closed the door. It was hard to read his expression. I wondered if he was regretting last night. I wasn't his usual type. But, then, I wasn't anyone's usual type. Maybe he was regretting making love to me now he was over his bug. Maybe I'd caught him at a weak moment. Maybe he didn't even like me. See how insecure I am? It's ridiculous.

'How are you feeling?' I asked lightly.

'Good. You?'

'Great. Fine. Peachy.' I always go overboard when I'm feeling nervous. I wasn't sure how to handle the morning-after routine, especially in the context of our relationship. I wasn't even sure what the context was. I couldn't have a proper relationship with him while I was pretending to be married, but what was he offering if I came clean? Hadn't he said he wasn't interested in

anything lasting? He was too busy with other priorities or some other get-out clause he'd used.

He leaned back against his desk in his usual manner. 'That was the best chicken broth I've had in a long while, perhaps ever.'

'It's my own secret recipe.'

'I could tell.'

I wasn't sure we were talking about chicken broth, especially the way he was looking at me. I tried not to blush but all I could think about was how his body had felt inside mine. 'So … what did you want to see me about?'

'I suppose you've heard the gossip?'

I chewed at my mouth. 'Yes.'

'Any more thoughts on coming clean?'

I crossed my arms over my body. 'No.'

His eyebrows drew together. 'Even after last night?'

I affected a casual look, as if I had amazing, mind-blowing sex with men all the time. 'Why after last night?'

He looked at me in a frowning way. But then he closed off his expression. The screen came up and I was locked out. Something pinched inside my stomach. 'So you're still determined to run with this crazy charade,' he said.

I sent him an intractable look. 'I'm not ready to have my private life the subject of everyone's amusement.'

His brow furrowed back into a deep frown. 'Do you really think people will find it funny that you were jilted?'

I jerked up my chin. '*You* obviously did. Stringing me along

for three flipping weeks, asking all those stupid husband and honeymoon questions.'

He let out a whooshing breath. 'I suppose I deserve that.' He scraped a hand through his hair again, before dropping his hand back down by his side. 'Look, I wasn't really laughing at you. I was amused by the lengths you were going to when all you had to do was tell everyone the truth. People go through break-ups all the time. Relationships either work or they don't.'

I glared at him again. How absolutely typical to dismiss the emotional turmoil of what a break-up like mine had entailed. Easy come, easy go was obviously his credo. Well, it certainly wasn't mine. I was the one who'd had to face all those guests. I was the one who'd had to endure all those looks of abject pity. I was the one who was still trying to pick up the pieces of my life.

'I was twelve hours away from my wedding,' I said. 'The wedding day I'd been planning since I was a little girl. I'd been going out with Andy for five and a half years. We'd been engaged for eighteen months. That's a little different from being dumped after a lousy date or two.'

His expression stilled with seriousness. 'I know how hard a break-up is. But it's not as if you were in love with him.'

My eyes rounded in affront. 'Oh, and you're suddenly an expert on *my* feelings, are you? What gives you the right to say such a ridiculous thing? Of course I loved him. I was going to marry him, wasn't I?'

The look he gave me reminded me of the look a disappointed

parent gives to a wilfully disobedient child. It made me angrier than I had any right to be. He had touched on a nerve that was still a little sensitive.

But I wasn't prepared to admit just how sensitive.

'If you were still in love with him you would never have come to my place last night,' he said. 'You must've known what would happen between us, or are you lying to yourself now as well as everyone else?'

Of course he was right. I would never have slept with him if I'd had feelings for another man. But I was confused about my feelings for Matt. They were a jumbled mix I couldn't make sense of right now. Was I so fickle that I could fall in love so soon after losing Andy?

I paced a couple of steps across the floor, hugging my arms close to my body. 'I know I'll have to tell everyone eventually … I just don't know how to do it without looking completely ridiculous.'

'Sometimes the anticipation of something is worse than the actual thing itself,' he said.

I swung back to look at him. 'So why haven't you let everyone in on the secret?'

'It's not my secret to tell.'

I was used to a lifetime of being teased and exploited, of having my weaknesses and flaws broadcast publicly. The fact he hadn't breathed a word of my single status to anyone made something warm spill inside my chest. He'd had a perfect

opportunity to make an absolute fool out of me and yet he hadn't done it. Why?

'Want to tell me what happened?' he said.

I let out a long breath. 'I guess, looking back, we'd always had a pretty sketchy sex life. But then I got caught up in the wedding preparations and … well, he got caught up in having an affair with someone more … available.' I bit my lower lip until it was mostly inside my mouth. I released it, along with a sigh. 'It was the most embarrassing moment of my life and that's saying something because I've had some doozies.'

He closed the distance between us and stroked a wisp of hair off my face. 'My ex was having an affair too. To the guy she's married to now. They'd been friends for years but I didn't realise how friendly until I called on her one night unexpectedly. Simon answered the door. Not a great moment for either of us. I had to give him credit for coming up with an excuse for why he was standing there in nothing but his boxers.'

'What did he say?'

'He was hot.' His mouth gave a rueful little quirk. 'But, then, Helena obviously thought so.'

Behind the humour was lingering hurt. I could see it in his eyes. Or was he like me, and the betrayal was more of a wound to his pride and sense of honour? 'Were you in love with her?'

His mouth twisted again. 'I thought so at the time.'

'And now?'

He stroked his thumb over my bottom lip. 'You read my

mother's note.'

I gave him a sheepish look. 'I didn't mean to. It's just I'm a bit of a speed-reader so I took it in at one glance.'

He leaned down and pressed his mouth to mine in a long, warm kiss that sent my senses into chaos. I reached for him automatically, stroking my fingers through his hair.

I leaned into him, relishing in the familiarity of his touch, the naturalness and ease of it.

After a few breathless moments he pulled back to look at me. 'You didn't stay last night.'

'I wasn't sure what the protocol was.'

He frowned a little. 'What do you mean?'

I shrugged beneath the cups of his hands, which were holding the tops of my shoulders. 'I wasn't sure if it was a one-off or … or something else.'

His hands tightened for a moment before he relaxed them, but he didn't let me go. 'You want to go and grab some dinner somewhere after work?'

I bit my lip again as I thought of the implications of us being seen out in public. There was already gossip about him seeing a married woman in the hospital. I hadn't realised until then that my lies were not just hurting me, they had the potential to hurt him. 'Can we just get some takeaway and have it at your place?'

He gave me a levelling look. 'The longer you leave it the worse it's going to be.'

I dipped out of his hold and crossed the floor, hugging my

arms to my body again. 'I know. I know. It's just not that simple.'

'It seems simple enough to me.' There was a thread of impatience in his voice. Hard and tight, like a fine wire under strain. 'You just have to be honest, Bertie. People will talk for a while but it'll eventually go away.'

'I need more time.'

'For what?' he said. 'For you to rule out the possibility your ex will come crawling back to you?'

I looked at him in affront. 'You think that's what's stopping me? *Really?*'

His expression was marble cold. 'Be honest with yourself, if not with anyone else.'

'Maybe you should take a lesson from that pulpit you're preaching from,' I threw back.

His eyes were suddenly flinty. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

I flashed him a little glare. 'You've waited for over a year to get involved with someone else. Doesn't that suggest you're still moping over the one who got away?'

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets as if he was trying to stop himself from reaching for me. 'We haven't got a hope of this progressing past a one-night stand if you don't tell everyone the truth about your situation.'

I drew myself up to my full height, which isn't saying much as I barely came up to the top of his chest. 'I'll tell you why it won't progress past a one-nighter. Because *you* won't allow yourself to feel anything for anyone because you're frightened they'll pull

away from you when you least expect it. You'll never give anyone that power again, will you?'

A muscle worked in his jaw. 'I have work to do, so if you've finished listing my faults, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get on with it.'

I swung away with a haughty toss of my head. Not literally. It was still firmly on my straightened shoulders. 'Fine. I'm out of here.'

I glanced at him when I got to the door but he had already dismissed me. He was sitting behind his desk and scrolling through his emails or whatever was on his computer screen.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BY THE TIME I got home I'd cooled down, although that might have had something to do with the weather. The snow was falling in earnest and I'd heard on the news they were expecting more overnight. I didn't fancy a long, lonely night alone and I didn't have the enthusiasm for a session of painting and decorating. I looked around the half-painted walls and the threadbare carpets, the tired kitchen with its out-of-date appliances.

My house suddenly looked a bit like my life. A mess.

I was considering what to do about food, not that I had much appetite, when the doorbell rang. I peered through the peephole, toying with the idea of pretending not to be home if it was Margery. It wasn't.

I opened the door and Matt stood there, with snow falling all around him. There was even some clinging to the ends of his eyelashes. He was carrying a bag with takeaway food containers in it and a bottle of wine in a brown paper bag. 'Have we just had our first fight?' he said.

I felt every last residue of anger melt away. 'I'm sorry.'

'No apology necessary.' He held up his peace offering. 'I took a gamble on food. Curry all right?'

'Perfect for a cold winter's night.' I ushered him through to the kitchen. 'I'm sorry the place is a bit of a mess.'

'Was your ex a home handyman?'

I gave him a cynical look. 'Are you joking?'

He frowned. 'You're doing it yourself?'

'I'm trying to … but as you can see it's not going according to plan.' Was it my imagination or did the paint job I'd done the other night look patchy? There was a drip of paint on the skirting board I hadn't noticed before.

'It's a big job for one person.'

'Yes, well, it was supposed to be two people doing it but you know how that turned out.'

He took the wine out of the paper bag. 'You want some help with it?'

I wasn't sure what he was suggesting. But as olive branches went it was a good one—even better than the curry and the wine. 'Don't tell me you're handy with a paintbrush, otherwise I mightn't let you leave.'

He gave a sudden grin. 'I did up my place in Notting Hill before I went to the US. I enjoyed it. It was a change from work, where stuff can't always be fixed.'

I knew exactly what he meant. Sometimes the hopelessness of some patients' situations ate away at me. 'I spent some time with Jason's wife today,' I said, as I handed Matt a couple of wine glasses.

'How's she doing?'

'I think she's struggling a bit, as anyone would in her situation.' I took the glass of wine he had poured for me.

He looked at me across the Formica kitchen table that separated us. 'You're doing a good job. I can see how the things you've set up help. The little touches that make people feel less alienated by the environment.' He waited a beat and then continued, 'I had a brother two years older than me. He died when I was fifteen.'

'I know,' I said. 'Jill told me. She said her sister-in-law is your mother's school friend or something.'

He gave me a quirk of a smile. 'What used to be six degrees of separation is now two with social media.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Tell me about it.'

There was a little silence. I didn't feel so uncomfortable with them now. But after a moment I asked, 'What was it like for you and your parents when Tim was in ICU?'

He looked at the contents of his glass, swirling it as if searching for the memories in the dark cherry-coloured pool. 'Awful. No one told us anything. It was different back then. Doctors didn't always communicate that well with relatives. They only told us what they thought we needed to know. It wasn't enough. My parents thought Tim was going to make it right up until the day he died of pneumonia. It made the grief so much harder for them to cope with. I felt that if only we'd been told from the outset that things were pretty hopeless the grief would have been dealt with earlier. Instead, it's dragged on for years.'

'Grief doesn't have a use-by date.'

'No, I know. But it might've helped my parents prepare

themselves a little better.' He put his glass down.

'Did *you* think Tim was going to make it?'

His eyes met mine. 'I hoped he would. I couldn't imagine my life without him. We were close. I looked up to him. He was my role model, the one I turned to for advice or help with homework or whatever. My father was hopeless at that sort of thing. The bottom dropped out of my world when I walked out of the hospital that day. I swore I would do everything I could to make sure other people didn't have to go through that the way we did.'

'So you became an intensive care specialist with a reputation for telling it as it is.'

He gave me a rueful smile. 'That pretty much sums it up.'

I came over to him and touched his shadowed jaw. He hadn't shaved and the stubble caught on the skin of my palm, making something inside my belly shift like a foot slipping on a sheet of black ice. 'Thanks for telling me about Tim. It helps to understand you better.'

He brushed a tendril of hair away from my face. 'I haven't spoken of him in years. It's a no-go area at home. My father goes off his head if Tim's name is mentioned. In his mind the wrong son died.'

'Oh, no, that's terrible,' I said. 'Did he actually *say* that?'

'Only when he's had one too many drinks.'

'Is he an alcoholic?'

'He wouldn't say so, but I have my suspicion he sneaks a few

empty bottles into the recycling bin without my mother knowing. Or maybe she does know but keeps quiet because it's not worth the effort of standing up to him or the risk of losing her social standing or both.' His mouth was set back in a grim line. 'God, I *hate* talking about my family. We're not a family any more. Not since Tim died. We're just three people who happen to be related.'

I reached up and smoothed the taut muscles surrounding his tight mouth. 'I'm sorry things have been so tough for you. But look at what you do for others. The way you work so hard, so tirelessly to save lives. So what if you don't have a perfect family? Just wait till you meet mine.'

He smiled and I practically melted on the spot. I watched as his eyes darkened as they went to my mouth, the ink-dark pools of his pupils flaring as he brought his mouth down to mine. His hands buried themselves in my hair, his fingertips sliding along my scalp as he plundered my mouth with feverish intensity. His tongue played with mine, darting and diving and seducing it in a dance that made every cell in my body shudder in delight.

My arms went around his neck, my body pressed so tightly against him I could feel the buttons on his jacket digging into me. I began to undo them, roughly, urgently, impatient to get my hands on him. He shrugged off his jacket and tugged up his jumper and shirt, and I slid my hands along the flat plane of his chest and abdomen. He hauled the garments over his head and they fell to the floor. He set to work on my clothes: my jumper

went first, followed by my top and bra. His hands were cold at first on my breasts but they soon warmed as I pressed into his caress.

I tugged at the belt on his trousers, sliding it out of the lugs and letting it slither to the floor. I unzipped him and freed him from his underwear, holding and stroking him as his mouth continued to subject mine to a sensual onslaught that made every hair on my head shiver at the roots.

This was the sort of passion I had been missing in my relationship with Andy. The firestorm of lust and longing that was totally consuming. Before I knew it, Matt had lifted me onto the kitchen counter, parting my thighs so he could come between them. Somehow he'd sourced a condom and got it on before he entered me with a fast, thick thrust that made me whoosh out a breathless gasp.

'You okay?'

Okay? I was in heaven. 'You feel so good,' I said against his mouth, as he came back to kiss me.

He began to move inside me, taking me with him on a roller-coaster ride of passion. Every thrust brought me closer and closer to that final moment of oblivion. It was just frustratingly out of my reach, but then he slid his hands underneath my bottom, lifting my hips just enough to intensify the friction. I came in a cataclysmic storm of sensations that showered and shook and shuddered through me in turn. I felt his own orgasm as it powered through him, the deep quaking of his body and the sharply cut-

off groan as he spilled, making my own body respond with another shudder of delight.

He let out a deep, satisfied sigh and leaned his forehead on mine. 'Our dinner is probably cold by now.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'It's pretty hot in this kitchen.'

He smiled against my lips. 'Damn right it is.'

I was walking down my street on my way to work the next morning when I ran into Margery, who was taking Freddy out for a walk. She gave me a look that was colder than the snow that had settled overnight. 'A fine way to behave, I must say,' she said. 'And here I was thinking you were a nice old-fashioned girl. Seems I was wrong.'

'Pardon?'

Her eyes narrowed. 'I saw him.'

My heart gave a little lurch. 'Him?'

'The man who left your house in the early hours of the morning,' she said. 'It wasn't your husband. He wasn't blond and he was much taller.'

I pressed my lips together. How was I going to get out of this? If I told Margery, it would be all over the neighbourhood within minutes. I would have people coming to gawk at me as I walked past their houses. I would be a pariah. I know it's the twenty-first century and all that but people can still be really judgemental about other people's lives.

'Marriage isn't easy, Bertie, take it from me,' she said. 'I was married to my Ralph for thirty-eight years. The first couple of

years are always the worst. But what you're doing is plain wrong. What would your patients think if they were to know you were taking men in while your husband is away working in New York?'

I let out a breath that came out in a misty fog. 'The man in question is a friend. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get to work.'

Gracie was in the change room when I came in. 'I can't do this any more,' she said. 'It's killing me. I'm so stilted with everyone. I have to keep watching what I say. Everyone thinks I'm cross with them or something.'

'I can't,' I said. 'Can't you see that? It would be social suicide.'

'Don't you mean you won't?' Gracie's look was accusing. 'This isn't just about you, you know. It's about other people now. Me. Matt Bishop. Your friends and colleagues. The longer you keep this up the more hurt you're going to cause.'

I shoved my things in the locker and closed the door. 'I'm working on it, okay?'

'Then work on it a little faster, will you?' Gracie said, and stormed out.

Jill swivelled around from the computer when I came into the central office. 'Can I have a quick word?'

'Sure.' I tried not to look at my postcard on the noticeboard. I was waiting for the opportunity to come in when no one was around and take it down.

'What's going on between you and Gracie?'

I felt my cheeks flare with heat. 'Nothing. Why?'

She leaned forward and gave me a beady look. 'Sure?'

I controlled every micro-expression on my face. 'Why are you asking?'

'I thought you must have had a squabble or something,' Jill said. 'She's asked for her shifts to be changed so she's not on when you're on. *Have* you got an issue?'

'No, of course not.' I hated myself at that point. Truly hated myself. Gracie might be a relatively new friend but she was loyal and caring. I had dragged her into a nightmare of my own making and now she was doing everything she could to avoid me. It was an uncomfortable reminder of my childhood, where I would be standing alone on one side of the playground while the more popular girls were on the other. I wanted Gracie back on my side but I couldn't do what she asked. I just couldn't.

Jill was still watching me with a contemplative look. 'It wouldn't have anything to do with Matt Bishop, would it?'

I assembled my features into an expression of shocked affront. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'You two have a certain chemistry. Everyone's commenting on it.'

'So?' I said. 'I get on with most people. You do too. It doesn't mean anything illicit is happening.'

'You don't seem happy for someone who's just got married,' Jill said. 'You seem … preoccupied. Is everything all right between you and your husband?'

I clenched my hands instead of my teeth because that would

be less audible. 'What is this? Why is everyone so fascinated with my private life?'

Jill tapped her fingertips on her knees. 'Bertie, this gossip that's going around is not doing Matt any favours with the management team. The CEO is talking about terminating his contract.'

I frowned. 'On what grounds? His private life is no one's business!'

She gave me a worldly look. 'You know how conservative the hospital management team is. They're concerned about the image of the hospital.'

'They should be concerned about the welfare of the patients and less with the private lives of their staff,' I threw back.

'I'm just saying—'

'Haven't people got better things to do than gossip?' I said.

Jill let out a sigh and turned back to the computer.

I stared at her back for a moment. I trusted Gracie but I didn't know Jill well enough to share my secret with her. I hated it that she thought I was a cheating wife but what else could I do? If I told her, I'd have to tell everyone. I wasn't prepared to do that. I had a plan. I was going to activate it. There was a way around this. I would resign and find another placement. Problem solved.

'I'm sorry, Jill, it's just things are a little difficult for me right now. I'm finding it hard to settle back in after being on my … on leave.'

She tapped a few keys before turning around again. 'Marriage

is hard work. Just be careful, okay?'

I didn't see Matt at work because I did everything in my power to avoid being seen by him or with him. Thankfully I had other duties that kept me out of ICU for most of the day. I finally left for home after some overtime in Theatre when Stuart's list got blown out with a complication. I was walking out of the hospital when I saw Matt's tall figure coming towards me. He must have been waiting for me to come through the front exit. I pretended not to notice him and kept my head down.

'Bertie?'

'Don't draw attention to us,' I said, out of the side of my mouth.

'I thought I'd walk you home.'

'Please, don't,' I said, huddling further into my coat.

'We need to talk.'

'Not here. There are CCTV cameras everywhere.' I sounded completely paranoid. But, then, I was. Completely and utterly paranoid. Were the curtains twitching on every floor as staff and patients looked down at us or was I just imagining it?

Matt took me by the arm and turned me to face him. 'Listen to me.'

I was overwrought with the stress of it all. Gracie, Jill, the thought of Matt losing his job over my stupidity. I looked into his eyes and saw what he was going to say before he said it. And there I'd been, thinking my mum was the only one who could read minds. 'I know what you're going to say.'

'Bertie, you have to choose.'

'Choose what?' I pretended I didn't know what he meant. But really I was just delaying the pain. I couldn't have him and my secret. I had to make a choice.

His expression was gravely serious. 'If we're going to go somewhere with this relationship then you have to tell everyone the truth.'

'I thought you said you weren't interested in a relationship. You said you had other priorities.'

His eyes were implacable as they held mine. 'I'm not going to lose my job because you're too immature to face up to what you should've faced before Christmas.' I glared at him. 'That's rich, coming from you! You took a whole year to get over what's-her-name.'

His jaw tightened like a clamp. 'We're not talking about me. We're talking about you.'

'I'm going to put in my resignation,' I said. 'I'll move to another hospital where no one knows about Andy. You and I can still see each other and no one will ever—'

'Will you listen to yourself?' he said, his eyes dark and glittering with disdain. 'What are you, fourteen?'

I stiffened my spine. 'Fine. I'll accept your ultimatum.'

He shook his head at me. 'Don't do this, sweetheart.'

I put up my chin. 'I'm not throwing my professional reputation away for a fling. I'm fine with it ending. I never wanted it in the first place.'

'You've made lying into an art form,' he said, with a cutting

edge to his voice. 'But when you get home and start lying to the person you're looking at in the mirror, you'll know you're really in trouble.'

I was in trouble from the moment I laid eyes on him, but now was hardly the time to tell him. I was trying to salvage what was left of my pride. 'It's over, Matt. It was fun—or at least it was for you—while it lasted.'

'I didn't sleep with you to make fun of you,' he said. 'I slept with you because I …' He stopped and shoved a hand through his hair.

I raised a cynically arched eyebrow. 'Because you …?'

He dropped his hand. His mask was back in place. For a moment there I'd thought I'd seen a glimmer of pain in his gaze but it was well and truly gone now. I figured I'd probably imagined it. 'Never mind.'

'I have one question,' I said. 'Why did you ask me to take over the planning of the ball?'

He let out a long breath. 'I thought it would help you get over your break-up. I thought it would give you something to distract you. But if you don't want to follow through with it, I'll find someone else.'

'I'm sure it won't take you too long to find a replacement,' I shot back.

He gave me another I'm-over-this look and turned away and walked back through the front doors of the hospital.

I typed up my resignation that night and printed it out and

signed it with a flourish. I looked at it for a long time before I folded it and slid it into an envelope. I left it lying on the desk —I don't have any helpful housekeeping staff so there was no prospect of it being posted until I was ready to do so myself.

Jason's parents asked to speak to me when I got to ICU the next day. They were waiting in my relatives' room but I hadn't had time to turn on the essential oil infuser as I'd been caught up on the ward. Ken Ryder was holding his wife, Maggie's, hand. Megan was still by Jason's bedside. I'd caught a glimpse of her on my way past, crying as she held one of his hands.

'We want the truth,' Ken said. 'Mr McTaggart is saying one thing. Dr Bishop is saying another. We want your opinion. What's our son's prognosis?'

I looked at their haggard faces, their drawn and tired features. The shadows, in and under their eyes, and the lines on their faces that had seemed to deepen like trenches by the end of each long, heartbreaking day. I took a deep breath, feeling as if I was stepping out of a part of my personality like someone taking off a warm, thick coat. I felt exposed and vulnerable without it but I could no longer hide beneath its comforting folds. 'There's a very real possibility Jason will never recover.'

Saying the words felt like speaking a different language, one without hope as part of its vocabulary. I watched as Jason's parents took them in. It wasn't the first time they'd heard them but hearing it from me—the one person who had offered them hope and positive thinking from the get-go—was clearly

devastating.

'I'm sorry,' I said, blinking back tears. I never cried at work. I was always so self-contained but I could no longer keep that professional distance. In that small, private room I became Bertie instead of Dr Clark. I hugged Jason's parents and offered what comfort I could but it wasn't enough. It could never be enough because I could not—no matter how hard I tried—bring back their boy.

Jem had a student-free day that coincided with my next day off so she met me in Knightsbridge for lunch in one of our favourite haunts. 'So, what gives?' she said, when she noticed I wasn't eating my steak with any of my usual gusto.

I stabbed a French fry but didn't bring it up to my mouth. 'Don't want to talk about it.'

Jem reached over and pinched one of my fries. She had already finished all hers. She has this amazing ability to eat loads of food without putting on an ounce. I should hate her for it. 'You're in love with him.'

I pulled back my chin against my chest. 'With Andy?'

'No, you goose,' she said. 'With this Matt guy.'

'Don't be ridiculous. I've only known him, what, three and a half weeks? That's not long enough to fall in love.'

'Don't bet on it.'

I raised my brows. 'The Sicilian guy?'

Jem got that stony, closed-off look on her face. 'We're not talking about me. We're talking about you.'

Why are all the people in my life saying the same *thing?* I wondered. 'Everyone is talking about me. Or at least they will be when my resignation hits the HR department tomorrow.'

Jem frowned. 'You're resigning?'

'What else can I do?'

She gave me one of her big-sister, older-and-wiser looks. 'What about your project?'

'I've got enough data to go on with and once I get a new placement I'll set it up again.' Even as I said it I realised how difficult it would be. I had developed a high level of trust at St Iggy's, which was why Jeffrey Hooper had allowed me to be so innovative. I might not find the same enthusiasm in another hospital.

Jem filched another fry. 'What about the St Valentine's ball? Aren't you the one organising that?'

I felt a twinge of guilt at how I'd walked away from my responsibilities. I'd heard Matt had found someone to take over —a nurse from the cardiac unit. I wondered with another pang if he was seeing her outside work. 'I was but it's been handed to someone else. I can do without the stress on top of everything else. Anyway, I haven't got a costume.'

'You could always go as yourself.'

I gave her a droll look. 'Ha, ha.'

'What about your neighbours?' Jem wiped her fingers on her napkin. 'You're not thinking of moving too, are you?'

I was ashamed to admit I was. I was even thinking about

emigrating. No one would be able to gossip about me then. *Siberia should just about do it*, I thought. 'None of them are talking to me. Clearly Margery's been busy.'

Jem leaned across the table and patted my hand. 'Never mind. At least she won't be asking you to mind her horrible little dog any more.'

'Like she should throw the first stone,' I said. 'Her Freddy humps anything that's—' I stopped speaking when I saw the colour leave Jem's face. She was looking at the entrance of the restaurant, her eyes widening with horror. 'What's wrong?' I said.

She grabbed the bill the waitress had left moments earlier and thrust it at me. 'Do you mind getting this? I'll meet you in Harrods at the chocolate counter.'

'But—'

I frowned as I watched her slip out the back way through the kitchen. Then I turned and looked at the tall, stunningly handsome Italian man walking in with a beautiful blonde woman by his side.

It seemed I wasn't the only coward in the family after all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MY RESIGNATION CAUSED quite a stir amongst the staff when I came in the day after it had been lodged. I had to dodge a few twisty questions, including one about whether I was pregnant. Gracie kept giving me looks I stubbornly refused to acknowledge. It was all right lecturing me about telling the truth but she wasn't the one who'd have had to live down the ignominy of pretending to be married. It was easier this way. I was making a new start and in a few months no one would even remember me.

My heart gave a painful squeeze when I walked past Matt's office. I hadn't seen him other than in passing since our conversation in the car park. I wondered if he was feeling even half the distress I was. The thought of not seeing him again was like leaving a part of myself behind. A part I'd only just discovered. I hadn't realised I was in love with him until I'd lost him. I guess it had crept up on me. Each kiss, each touch, each time we'd made love a bit more of my heart had been won over.

But if he loved me then surely he wouldn't have made me choose. It was his reputation he was most concerned about, not me. It proved what a fool I'd been to allow our relationship to get to that stage. Hadn't he said from the start he had other priorities right now? I had foolishly agreed to getting involved and now I was paying the price.

But if he'd only wanted a casual fling why had he revealed

so much to me about his past? It wasn't just the red-hot passion I longed for in a relationship. It was that wonderful sense of intimacy, of being able to talk about painful things without fear of judgement or lack of interest. Matt had opened up to me in the same way I had opened up to him. Why, then, had he made me choose? It wasn't fair to push me. To blackmail me.

I was getting my things out of the central office on my last day when Jill came in with a bundle of files to be entered into the computer. 'I can't believe you're not coming to the ball,' she said. 'Why not use it as a send-off? We haven't had time to do a drinks thing for you or anything.'

'I don't want any fuss,' I said, eyeing that wretched postcard. If only I could get it off that board then maybe my life would magically return to normal, or whatever normal for me was.

'This all seems rather sudden,' Jill said. 'Did the CEO pressure you to leave or something?'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'It was my decision.'

She eyed me doubtfully for a moment. 'It won't be the same here without you, Bertie. You've brought a lot of fun to the department. Even Stuart is saying how much he's going to miss you. And Prof Cleary. Do you know what he said? He said you're like a bright red poppy in a field of oats.'

I blinked back a sting of tears. 'That was sweet of him.'

There was a short silence.

'You weren't really having an affair with Matt Bishop, were you?' Jill asked.

I couldn't hold her look and turned to the noticeboard and unpinned the postcard. 'You don't mind if I take this?'

'Of course not,' she said. 'It'll just get thrown out. You might as well keep it for sentimental value.'

I pasted a tight smile on my face. 'That's what I thought.'

I felt like Cinderella on the night of the ball, except I didn't have two ugly stepsisters and a horrid stepmother keeping me away. I was keeping myself away. I watched as the clock ticked towards midnight. I imagined all the guests arriving, walking up the red carpet, couples arm in arm. My stomach clenched at the thought of Matt arriving with some gorgeous date on his arm. I thought of him dancing with her, his arms around her as I'd dreamed of his around me. I hadn't even had the chance to see if we could actually dance.

But if our lovemaking was anything to go by, I thought we would've had a chance to be *that* couple on the dance floor. You know, the couple you see at weddings or functions who look like they've just come off a reality dance show, their movements together so beautifully synchronised it was spellbinding to watch. I wanted us to be that couple. We were a great team at work. We balanced each other out. Matt's cold, hard science needed softening with my more feelings-based intuition. We were like a perfect cocktail. The flavours by themselves weren't too flash, but put them together and, wham. What a knockout combination.

I looked at the clock again. The ball didn't end until one a.m. If I got my skates on I would have just enough time to poke

my head in the door to see if everything had gone according to plan. I was deeply ashamed at not following through with my commitment. People had been relying on me and I'd walked off the job. What if not enough money was raised, or what if there was some last-minute hitch and I wasn't there to sort it out? Since when had I become a quitter? I still had my ticket and I had a choice of costumes from previous fancy-dress parties. It was a choice between Princess Fiona from *Shrek* or Kermit the Frog.

I didn't fancy being either so I decided to do what Jem had suggested. I pulled out a nineteen-fifties ball gown I'd bought for twenty pounds in a charity shop a few years ago. I'd never worn it in public because I'd always thought it was too glamorous for me. But when I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror it was like looking at myself for the first time.

I put my hair up and put on a bit of make-up. I spritzed myself with perfume and picked up a little drawstring evening purse that matched the white organza of my gown. Actually, it wasn't really white any more. It was more of an off-white, leaning towards yellowed with age, and it had a couple of moth holes in the flared skirt, but I was hoping no one would notice that. I slipped on some heels and prayed my toes would forgive me for the ensuing torture.

I called a cab—there weren't any pumpkin coaches on duty that night—and went to the hotel.

The ball was in full swing when I slipped in to stand by one of the red-rose arrangements with heart-shaped helium balloons

sticking out of it. The dance floor was full of dancers in a variety of costumes. Some had taken the fun aspect of the night to extremes but there was a nice sprinkling of elegance amongst the frivolity.

I saw Matt dancing with one of the nurses from A and E. My heart gave a painful spasm as I saw his hand in the small of her back as they waltzed around the dance floor. They looked so good together. Not quite as good as a couple from a dance show … in fact, I thought I saw Matt tread on her toe at one point but that could've been my wishful thinking in overdrive. But then, as if he had a sixth sense, he suddenly stopped dancing and said something to his partner. She nodded and slipped away to dance with someone else.

Then he turned and met my gaze across the crowded room.

I know it sounds like a cliché but I felt my heart come to a standstill. Tears sprouted in my eyes as he came towards me. He was dressed in an old-style tuxedo with a red rosebud pinned to his lapel—no silly cartoon or superhero characters for him. He took my evening-gloved hands in his. 'So Cinderella made it after all,' he said.

'Yes … a close call but so far my glass slippers are intact.'

'Dance with me?'

He didn't give me time to say yay or nay. Suddenly I was in his arms and we were moving around the dance floor. Yes, you guessed it. Just like one of *those* couples. In fact, we were so good everyone else stopped dancing to look at us. I would have

enjoyed it more if I hadn't realised there were two reasons they were staring. One: we were pretty fantastic together. Two: I was still pretending to be married to someone else.

It was exactly five minutes to midnight.

I stopped dancing and slipped out of Matt's hold. 'Will you excuse me for a moment?' I said. 'There's something I have to do.'

Everyone was still standing on the perimeter of the dance floor as I walked over to the podium, where a microphone had been positioned for the fundraising auction that had been conducted earlier. I waited for the musicians to stop playing the last bars of their song and then I took a deep breath. 'Hi,' I said, waving to all of the familiar faces and the not-so-familiar ones.

'For those of you who don't know, I'm Bertie Clark.' I felt like someone at a support group owning up to some sort of vice. 'There's something I have to confess. I'm not really married. I was jilted the night before the wedding. I didn't mean to send that postcard. That sort of happened by accident. I've been pretending ever since. I'm sorry for all the hurt I've caused. It was stupid and immature and I'm terribly, unreservedly, unequivocally sorry.' I thought I'd better stop there. I was starting to sound like a thesaurus.

There was a moment of stunned silence and then everyone gave me a round of applause as they started to surge forward on the dance floor. I felt like a rock star at a concert. I wondered if I should take a bow or do an encore or something. It was almost worth all the angst of the last few weeks to be the centre of

attention in such a celebratory way. Almost.

I saw Matt carve his way through the crowd towards me. I stepped down off the podium and straight into his open arms. 'So proud of you, sweetheart,' he said. 'So very proud.'

'This doesn't mean I'm coming back to work at St Iggy's,' I said.

'That's a shame as there's a patient who's pretty keen to see you,' he said, with an excited twinkle in his blue-grey eyes.

Something lifted inside my chest like a sudden updraught of air. 'Jason's awake?'

Matt grinned. 'I got a call from the registrar half an hour ago. Megan was reading *Chicken Little* to him and he opened his eyes and spoke a couple of words.'

I threw my arms around him and danced up and down on the spot. 'That's the best news! I'm so thrilled for him, for all of them.'

Matt swung me around in his arms so high that my dress ballooned out in an organza circle. I was glad I'd put on my best knickers as everyone was probably getting a good eyeful of them. 'I swore I would never do this in public, but will you marry me?' he said.

I hadn't realised until that point the ballroom was completely and utterly quiet. You could have heard a pin drop. Or maybe that was my jaw hitting the floor. I blinked and opened and shut my mouth a couple of times. 'What did you say?'

He smiled that dancing smile that always made my insides turn

over. 'I know it's too early to be proposing. How long's it been, four weeks? But I don't see the point in wasting months and years waiting to ask you. I love you. I fell in love with you that first day in my office when you stood up to me with your beautiful brown eyes flashing.'

I looked at him in stunned amazement. 'You love me?'

'I adore you,' he said. 'I love everything about you. I love the way you screw up your nose and twitch like a rabbit when you're stressed. I love the way you never gave up hope on Jason. I love the way you fight for what you believe in. You're wacky and a little crazy and I never know what to expect when I see you because you wear such way-out clothes, but I want to see you every day for the rest of my life. I want to have babies with you. I want us to be a family together. So will you do it? Will you marry me?'

'You love me …' I said it as if I was dreaming and that someone was going to tap me on the shoulder any minute and tell me to snap out of it.

Someone did tap me on the shoulder. It was Gracie. 'Congratulations,' she said, with a huge smile.

'But I haven't given him my answer,' I said.

The crowd began to applaud again, louder and louder, and there was a fair bit of foot-stomping as well. Even the band joined in with a big theatrical drum roll.

Then everything went absolutely quiet again and it was as if it were just Matt and I in that room. It was like we were the only

people left on the planet. I saw the love he had for me shining in his eyes. I felt it in his touch as he tenderly brushed back a stray tendril of my hair from my face. I felt it in the energy that passed from his body to mine where we touched thigh to thigh, chest to chest, heart to heart.

I smiled a smile that felt like it was splitting my face in two. 'Yes,' I said, and then his mouth came down and met mine.

Baby Twins to Bind Them

CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as 'writer'. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation. After chewing her pen for a moment Carol put down the truth—'writing'. The third question asked: 'What are your hobbies?' Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered 'swimming and tennis'. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she's got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, I'm sure you can guess the real answer!

Dear Reader,

Sigh …

I completely *loved* writing this book. The only down side to loving my hero, Dr Guy Steele, so much is that he has spoiled any future relationships—because I will for ever be thinking *Steele wouldn't have said that …* or *Steele wouldn't have done that …* Yes, he's really that delicious—just so assured and sexy, yet nice.

I'm actually jealous of my own heroine!

Happy reading!

Carol x

Praise for Carol Marinelli

'A compelling, sensual, sexy, emotionally packed, drama-filled read that will leave you begging for more!'

—Contemporary Romance Reviews on *NYC Angels: Redeeming the Playboy*

CHAPTER ONE

Before

'YOU PAGED ME to see a patient.'

'No, I didn't.' Candy, holding an armful of sheets, smiled when it would have been far easier to stand there and gape. He was stunning—tall, slender, wearing a suit and a tie. His dark brown hair was cut short and his voice was so deep and commanding that it stopped Candy in her tracks. She met his chocolate-brown eyes fully and it took a moment to respond normally. 'Who are you here to see?'

'A Mr Thomas Heath.'

Candy walked over to the board. Emergency at the London Royal Hospital was quiet this afternoon but as she was in Resuscitation Candy didn't know which patients were in the cubicles. After a quick scan of the board, she located Mr Heath. 'He's in cubicle seven. Trevor's the nurse looking after him. He must be the one who paged you.'

'Thanks for that. By the way I'm Steele.'

'Steele?'

He watched as her very blue eyes moved to his name badge. 'Well, Dr Guy Steele, if you'd prefer to be formal,' he said.

'Steele will do.' She must look like a dental commercial, Candy thought, for she simply couldn't stop smiling at him. He must be thirty or mid-thirties, which was a lot more than her

twenty-four years, and he was also way older than anyone she had ever fancied, yet he had this impact, this presence, that had Candy's heart galloping in her chest.

'And you are?' he asked.

'Candy. Candy Anastasi.' She watched a smile twitch on his lips as she said her name. 'I know, I know, I should be tall, leggy and blonde to carry off a name like that!' Instead, she was short and a bit round with long black ringlets and piercing blue eyes. 'There's a story there.'

'I can't wait to hear it, Nurse Candy.'

He had the deepest voice that she'd ever heard. Like a headmaster, he was stern and bossy, yet it was all somehow softened by a very beautiful mouth that she could barely drag her eyes from. 'You'll never hear the story of my name,' Candy said.

'Oh, we'll have to see about that.'

Had they been flirting? Candy wondered as sexy-as-hell Steele walked off.

'Who's that?' Kelly said as they started to strip one of the resuscitation beds.

'Steele!' Candy said in a deep low voice, making Kelly laugh. She continued speaking gruffly while they bent over and tucked the sheet in. 'Or Dr Guy Steele if we want to be formal and, young lady, I'm going to make your eardrums reverberate with my deep—'

'Nurse Candy?'

Candy froze when she realised that Steele was behind her.

'Could I borrow your stethoscope?' he asked.

She laughed at being caught impersonating him and turned around and took her stethoscope from her neck and held it out to him, yet pulled back as he went to take it. 'You can,' she said, the stethoscope hovering. 'Just so long as you stop calling me Nurse Candy.'

He just took the stethoscope, smiled and walked off.

They made up all the beds and checked the crash trolleys and then gave up pretending to be busy, given that Lydia, the manager, was in her office. Instead, they took a jug of iced tea to the nurses' station, where Steele was tapping away on the computer. It was a lovely early summer day but the air-conditioning was struggling and it was nice to sit on the bench and gossip, though Steele had a couple of questions for her.

'How do you get into the pathology lab to check results?' he asked, not looking around.

'You've got your password?' Candy checked.

'I have and I've got into …' He tapped again. 'Got it.'

'Have you told your parents about Hawaii yet?' Kelly asked Candy, resuming the conversation they'd been having in the kitchen as they'd made their drink.

'No.'

'You go in four weeks' time,' Kelly pointed out.

'They might not notice that I've gone,' Candy said hopefully, then let out a sigh. Her parents were Italian, strict and very prone to popping over to her flat unannounced. They also spoke every

day on the phone. 'I know I'll have to tell them or I'll be listed on Interpol as a missing person.'

Candy had, on a whim, booked a holiday to Hawaii. Well, it hadn't been purely on a whim—she had already been aware that she needed to get away when the infomercial had appeared on her screen with a very special offer for the first ten callers. She'd been tired, a bit jaded and upset over a stupid fling with Gerry, one of the head nurses here. Thankfully he was in Greece for a couple of months, which spared Candy her blushes, but when she'd reached for the phone and, lucky her, been amongst the first ten callers, she'd known she needed this break.

She couldn't wait for two weeks in which to lie on a beach and explore the stunning island at leisure while she attempted to sort out a few things that were on her mind.

'They're going to freak when I tell them,' Candy admitted. 'They know that I can't really afford it.'

'It's all paid for?' Kelly checked, and Candy nodded.

'All except for spending money, but I've just spoken to the hospital bank and I've got loads of shifts. Actually, I haven't got a single day off until I fly.'

'Where are your shifts?'

'In the geriatric unit.'

Kelly pulled a face. 'Yuk.'

Candy didn't mind. She had enjoyed working in the geriatric unit during her training and was really grateful for the extra work. Even if she was exhausted at the prospect of nearly four more

weeks without so much as a day off.

As her parents would point out, when she finally got around to it and told them about her holiday, it was foolish to be working extra shifts because you were so tired that you needed a break—but Candy just wanted to get away for a while.

'When do you start working there?'

'The weekend. I'm working Friday night and then I've got a four-hour shift on Sunday morning, then back here Monday.'

'Okay.' Steele turned around. 'I want Mr Heath pulled over to Resus. He needs to be monitored while I start him on some medication. His bloodwork's dire.'

'Sure.' Candy jumped down from the bench and she and Trevor brought Mr Heath over.

Candy wrote his name on the whiteboard and turned to Steele. 'Sorry, what specialty is he under?'

'Geriatrics,' Steele said, then he gave her a thin smile. 'Yuk!'

Candy's cheeks went pink; she wanted to point out that she hadn't been the one who had said that.

'It's okay,' Steele relented when he saw her uncomfortable expression. 'You hit a nerve—I hear that sort of thing a lot.'

'So are you a new geriatric consultant?' Kelly asked, but Steele shook his head.

'No, I'm only here temporarily. I'm covering for six weeks while Kathy Jordan is on extended leave.'

'Just six weeks?' Kelly asked shamelessly.

'Yep,' Steele said, and walked off.

'Wow, talk about bringing the schmexy into geriatrics,' Kelly said. 'And you're going to be working there, you lucky thing. I bet you're not complaining now.'

She hadn't been complaining in the first place, Candy was tempted to point out.

They soon paid for the lull in patients because, not an hour later, the department had filled and she and Kelly were busy in Resus, Kelly with a very ill baby and Candy attempting to calm down Mr Heath. He was rather shaky from the medication and was getting increasingly distressed and trying to climb down from the resuscitation bed.

'The medicine makes your heart race, Mr Heath,' Candy tried to explain to the gentleman. 'It will settle down soon …' But he couldn't understand what she said and kept trying to climb off the bed so Candy tried speaking louder. 'The medicine—'

'You do it like this.' Steele saw that she was struggling and came over. 'Mr Heath!' he boomed.

The people in the Waiting Room surely heard him, Candy thought as he gave the same explanation to Mr Heath that she had been trying to give. The gentleman nodded weakly in relief and then lay back on the pillows. 'Good man,' Steele barked and smiled at Candy and, in a comparatively dulcet tone, added, 'I have the perfect voice for my job.'

'You do,' she agreed.

'So you're going to be doing a few shifts up on the geriatric unit?'

'Yep.'

'For a holiday that you can't really afford?'

'I know,' Candy groaned.

'Well, good for you,' Steele said, and Candy blinked in surprise. 'Okay, once Mr Heath's medication has finished I want him monitored for another hour down here. Then everything's sorted for him to be admitted. We're just waiting on a bed, which might be a couple of hours. I've spoken to the ward and they have said that they'll ring down when they're ready for him to come up.'

'Ha-ha,' Candy said, because there was no way that the ward was likely to ring down. Instead, she would have to chase them and push for the bed to be readied.

Steele well understood her sarcastic comment. 'Well, I hope that they do ring down in a timely manner. I'm less than impressed with the waiting times for patients to get into a bed at the Royal.'

With that he stalked off, possibly to return to whatever fluffy white cloud he'd just drifted down from, Candy thought.

She'd never, ever been so instantly captivated by someone.

Candy left Kelly watching Mr Heath when she was told to go for her lunch break. She'd forgotten to bring lunch so she bought a bag of salt-and-vinegar crisps from the vending machine and put them between two slices of bread and butter. Sitting down in the staffroom, she smiled at Trevor, who was having his lunch too, and checked her phone. Yes, her parents had called,

wondering why she hadn't been over.

She'd tell them about Hawaii tonight, Candy decided. Just get it over and done with and then maybe then she'd feel better. Yet she was incredibly tired and really just wanted to go home, have dinner and an early night.

'Here!'

That delicious voice tipped her out of introspection and she looked up at Steele, who was holding a stethoscope, which she took from him.

'Thank you,' Candy said, 'though you didn't have to rush to bring it back down. It's only a hospital-issue stethoscope.'

'Oh,' Steele said. 'I thought I'd pinched yours. Still, it doesn't matter, I was coming down anyway. I'm waiting for a patient to arrive—a direct admission from her GP, though she's refusing to go straight to the ward. She's just agreed to a chest X-ray and some blood tests, and then she thinks she's going home!'

'Thinks?' Candy asked as Steele sat down beside her and stretched out his long legs. It was nice that he sat down next to her when there were about twenty seats to choose from. She turned and smiled as he spoke on.

'Her GP is extremely concerned about her. He thinks there's far more going on than she's admitting to. Macey has had the same GP for thirty years and if he's worried about her then so am I. He thinks she's depressed.' He turned and looked right into her eyes and Candy felt her heart do a little flip-flop. 'It's a big problem with the elderly.'

'Really?'

Steele nodded and looked at what she was eating. 'That looks so bad it has to be good.'

'It's fantastic,' Candy said, and ripped off half her sandwich and gave it to him. 'The trick is lots of butter.'

'That's amazing!' Steele said, when he'd tasted it.

'I'm brilliant with bread,' Candy said. 'Toasted sandwiches, ice-cream sandwiches, beans on toast …'

'I thought a nice Italian girl like you would be brilliant in the kitchen.'

'Sadly, no,' Candy said. 'I'm a constant source of concern to my mother. Anyway, who said I'm nice?'

They smiled.

A smile that was just so deliciously inappropriate for a man you'd met only an hour or so ago. A smile she had never given to another man before and, really, she had no idea where it had come from.

Candy Anastasi! she scolded herself as she looked into those dark brown eyes.

Step away from the very young nurse, Steele told himself, but, hell, she was gorgeous.

Lydia came in then and they both looked away from each other. Lydia was waving a postcard of a delicious aqua ocean and Candy found that she was holding her breath in tension as Lydia read out the card. 'There's a postcard from Gerry. It reads, "Glad that none of you are here."'

Lydia gave a tight smile as she pinned it on the board and Candy just stared at the television.

Was that little dig from Gerry aimed at her?

'When is he back?' Trevor asked.

'End of July, I think.'

Lydia's voice was deliberately vague and Candy knew why. Gerry, the head nurse in Emergency, had been strongly advised to take extended leave.

Gerry was one of the reasons that Candy wanted a couple of weeks on a beach with no company.

Candy's parents had freaked when, at twenty-two, she had broken up with a man they considered suitable and had declared she was moving out. They had been so appalled, so devastated at the prospect of their only daughter leaving home that Candy had ended up staying for another year.

She'd simply had to leave in the end.

Her mother thought nothing of opening her post. She constantly asked whom Candy was talking to on the phone and when Candy pointed out she was entitled to privacy they would ask what it was she had to hide.

Last year she had moved out and, really, she had hardly let loose. She'd had a brief relationship with Gerry when she'd first moved into her flat but that hadn't worked out and she had been happily single since then.

A couple of months ago, aware that Gerry was having some problems, she'd agreed to go out for a drink with him.

It had resulted in a one-night stand that had left Candy feeling regretful. Gerry had been annoyed to find out that their brief relationship hadn't been resumed.

It was all a bit of a mess, an avoidable one, though. Candy was just grateful that no one at work knew about that regrettable night and Candy wanted it left far behind.

'You'll be sending postcards soon,' Steele said, but Candy shook her head.

'I won't be thinking about this place for a moment.'

That wasn't quite true, though. She would be thinking about work—Candy was seriously thinking of leaving Emergency.

CHAPTER TWO

JUST AS SHE RETURNED from lunch she was informed that Steele's patient was here but refusing to come inside the department and had requested, loudly, that the ambulance take her home.

'I'll come out and have a word with her,' Candy said as Steele was taking a phone call. She headed out to the ambulance and was met by a teary woman who introduced herself as Catherine, Macey Anderson's niece.

'I knew that she was going to do this,' Catherine said. 'It's taken two days to persuade her to come in. She used to be a matron on one of the wards here, and still thinks she is one.' Catherine gave a tired smile. 'She was in a few months ago and she was just about running the place by the time she was discharged.'

'I want to go home,' Macey shouted as Candy came into the back of the ambulance.

Macey was a very tall, very handsome woman, with wiry grey, curly hair, a flushed face and very angry dark green eyes. She had all her stuff with her, a huge suitcase, a walking frame and several other bags.

'Mrs Anderson—' Candy started, but already she was wrong.

'It's Miss Anderson!'

'I'm sorry, Miss Anderson. I'm Candy Anastasi, one of the nurses in Emergency, and I'm going to be looking after you

today.'

'But, as I've told everyone, many times, I don't *want* to be looked after,' Macey retorted. 'I want to be taken home.'

It was all pretty hopeless. The more they tried to persuade her to come into the department the more upset Macey became. The last thing Candy wanted to do was wheel her through when she was distressed and crying and so, instead, she tried another tack, wondering if, given that Macey had once been a matron, she might not want to get another nurse in trouble.

'Dr Steele is already here to see you,' Candy said. 'He's been waiting for you to arrive. Am I to go in and tell him that I can't get you to come into the hospital?'

Macey looked at her for a long moment and then she looked beyond Candy's shoulder and Candy knew, she simply knew, that it was Steele who had just stepped into the ambulance.

'Is there a problem, Nurse? Only I've been waiting for quite some time.' His low voice sounded just a touch ominous and Candy met Macey's eyes for a brief moment.

'No,' Macey answered for Candy. 'They were just about to bring me in.'

'Good,' Steele said. 'Then I'll come and see you shortly, Miss Anderson.'

As he headed back into the department the paramedics lowered the stretcher to the ground and Candy found out perhaps why it was that Steele was so sharply dressed. 'At least he's not twelve and wearing jeans,' Macey muttered.

Candy smiled—yes, Steele's appearance and authoritarian tone had appeased Macey.

They took Macey into cubicle seven, aligned the stretcher with the trolley, and Candy positioned the sliding board that would help to move the patient over easily. 'We'll get you onto the trolley, Miss Anderson.'

'I can manage,' the elderly lady snapped, 'and it's Macey.'

'That actually means she likes you,' her niece said, and gestured with her head for Candy to follow her outside.

'I've got this,' Matthew, a very patient paramedic, said, and Candy went outside to speak with Catherine.

'It's taken two days for her GP to persuade her to come in,' Catherine said. 'Honestly, I'm just so relieved she's finally here. She's got a temperature and she's hardly eating or drinking anything. She doesn't take her tablets or if she does she gets them all wrong …'

'We'll go through all of that.' Candy did her best to reassure Macey's niece.

'She's so cantankerous and rude,' Catherine said, 'that she puts everyone offside, but she's such a lovely lady too. She's always been on her own, she's never had a boyfriend, let alone married, she's so completely set in her ways and loathes getting undressed in front of anyone. You're going to have a battle there …'

'Let us take care of her,' Candy said, 'and please don't worry about her saying something offensive. Believe me, we'll have heard far worse.'

'Thanks.' Catherine gave a worried smile and they went back inside. The cubicle was pretty full, with Macey's huge bag and walking frame, and Candy had a little tidy up. 'Why don't we first get you into a gown and then—'

'Get me into a gown?' Macey shouted loudly. 'You haven't even introduced yourself and you're asking me to take my clothes off.' Candy said nothing as Steele came into the cubicle. She had, in fact, introduced herself in the ambulance. 'You're not a nurse's bootlace,' Macey said to Candy just as Steele came in.

'Hello, Miss Anderson,' he said. 'I didn't introduce myself properly back there in the ambulance. I'm Steele, or Dr Steele, if you prefer to be formal.'

Candy smothered a little smile as he repeated a similar introduction to the one he had given her. He must have to say it fifty times a day.

He ran through a few questions with Macey as a very anxious Catherine hovered.

'You had a heart attack three months ago?' Steele checked. 'And you were admitted here for a week.'

'All they did was pump me with drugs,' Macey huffed. 'Where were you then?'

'I believe I was in Newcastle,' Steele said.

'So how long have you worked here?'

'Two days,' Steele answered easily.

'You'll be gone tomorrow.' Macey huffed. 'You're a locum.'

'I am, though I happen to be a very good one,' Steele said,

completely unfazed. 'And I'm here for six weeks, which gives us plenty of time to sort all this out.'

They went through her medical history. Apart from the heart attack it would seem that Macey was very well indeed. She had never smoked, never drunk, and at eighty still did all her own housework and cooking, with a little help from her nieces, Catherine and Linda. Macey had until a couple of days ago walked to the shops every day.

'It's quite a distance,' Catherine said. 'I offered to do her shopping weekly at the supermarket for her but Aunt Macey wouldn't hear of it.'

'I like to walk,' Macey snapped.

'It's good that you do—exercise is good for you,' Steele said. 'Do you have stairs at home?'

'Yes, and I manage them just fine,' Macey retorted. 'You won't see me with bungalow legs!'

'Right, Miss Anderson,' Steele said. 'I'm going to ask Candy to help you into a gown and do some obs and put an IV and draw some blood. Then I'll come and examine you.' He looked at two blue ice-cream containers that were filled with various bottles and blister packets of medication. 'I'll take these and look through them.'

As Steele went to go Macey called him back. 'I'm not having a nurse take my blood. That's a doctor's job.'

'Oh, I can assure you that you're better off with Candy than you are with me,' Steele said. 'I get the shakes this side of six

p.m.'

His quip caused a little smile to inch onto Macey's lips and, after Steele had gone, Candy helped her into a gown while doing her best to keep Macey covered as she did so. But the elderly lady fought her over every piece, right down to her stockings.

'Leave my stockings on,' Macey said.

'Oh, I'll leave them for Steele to take off, shall I?' Candy challenged.

Macey huffed and lifted her bottom but as Candy rolled the stockings down she found out why Macey was so reluctant to get fully undressed—there was a bandage on her leg and around that the skin was very red and inflamed.

'I'll take this off so Steele can take a look,' Candy said. She went and washed her hands and opened up a dressing pack and then put on some gloves.

'Careful,' Macey warned.

'Is it very painful?' Candy asked, and Macey nodded.

'Okay, I'll just put some saline on,' Candy said, 'and we'll soak it off. Has your GP seen this?'

'I don't need a doctor to tell me how to do a dressing.'

Candy soaked the dressing in saline and then covered Macey with a blanket and checked her obs, before heading out to Steele. He was sitting at the nurses' station, going through all Macey's medications. He had a pill counter and was tipping one of the bottles out when Candy came over.

'She's got a nasty leg wound,' Candy said.

'How bad?'

'I haven't seen it,' Candy said. 'I'm just soaking the dressing but her shin is all red and I think it's very painful.'

'Okay.' He started to tip the tablets back into the jar. 'I don't want her left on her own,' Steele said.

'Sorry?'

'I don't like what I'm seeing with these tablets,' Steele said. 'I don't trust her not to do something stupid.'

'Oh!'

'I'll come in and see her now.'

They both returned to the cubicle and Steele examined Macey. He listened for a long time to her chest and felt her stomach, keeping her as covered as he could while he did so, and then they got to her leg.

Steele put on some gloves and took off the dressing and Macey winced in pain. 'Sorry, Miss Anderson,' Steele said. 'How long have you had this?'

'A couple of weeks.'

Steele looked up at Macey. 'That's very concerning. This has developed over two weeks?'

Candy could hear the note of sarcasm in Steele's voice and watched as Macey stared back at him and then backed down.

'I knocked my leg when I came out of hospital. It's just not healed and it's been getting worse.'

'That sounds far more plausible.' Steele smiled at her. 'Well, that accounts for your temperature!' He took a swab and though

he was very gentle the cotton tip must have felt like a red-hot poker because Macey let out a yelp of pain. 'Very sorry, Macey,' Steele said. He put a light dressing over it. 'We'll give you something decent for pain before we dress it properly.' He spoke then to Candy. 'Can you take Macey round for a chest X-ray?'

Just as Candy had finished drawing some blood the porter arrived and Candy went to X-Ray with Macey and Catherine. They were seen relatively quickly but Macey was clearly less than impressed at what she considered a long wait.

Having looked at her X-ray, Steele came into the cubicle and then turned to Catherine. 'Why don't you go and get a drink?' he suggested. 'I'm going to be with your aunt for the next twenty minutes or so—you might as well take the chance for a break now.'

'Thank you,' Catherine said in relief.

'I just wanted to check a couple of things,' Steele said once Catherine had left the cubicle.

'And then I can go home?'

'You're not well enough,' Steele said. 'Now, while Catherine isn't here, I want you to tell me how many you smoke a day?'

'I don't smoke.'

'Miss Anderson, do you want me to bring in your chest X-ray and we can go over it together?'

'Two.' She gave a tight shrug. 'Maybe three a day.'

'We'll say ten, then, shall we?' Steele said, and Candy blinked when Macey didn't correct him. 'I'll write you up for a nicotine

patch. How much do you drink a day?'

'I've told you already, I don't.'

'Six broken ribs of varying ages.' Steele smiled at the old girl. 'Come on, Macey. So am I to worry that you're falling down for no reason?'

'I slipped on some ice,' Macey said, 'and I've got a cat that gets under my feet.'

'Fair enough.' Steele nodded. 'So you don't want me to write you down for a couple of shots of sherry at night?' he checked. 'You can have either your own stuff, or the hospital's cheap disgusting stuff. We just need the bottle if you want to drink your own.'

Macey took in a deep breath before saying anything. 'It's in my bag.'

'Good, we'll make sure it's handed over to nursing staff out of sight of your niece.'

Candy stood there feeling a bit stunned but she hadn't seen anything yet. Steele had brought back in the two ice-cream containers that Macey had brought in with her and he started to go through them.

'Macey, you haven't been taking these regularly.' He held up a pill bottle. 'Yet you're not.'

'There's so many. I can't keep up.'

Steele picked up another bottle that had just a couple of tablets in it. 'And these were only dispensed two days ago,' Steele said, 'and there are only two left.'

'I didn't take them,' Macey said in a scoffing voice.

'I know that you didn't or we wouldn't even be having this conversation. So where are they now?'

'I don't know. My niece puts them into a pill box …'

'Macey?'

'I tipped them down the toilet. I don't trust the drug companies.'

'Are you depressed, Macey?'

'Oh, you're going to put me on antidepressants now. You're in cahoots with the drug companies.'

'Are you confused and mixing up your medication or are you ignoring your health?' Steele asked, and Candy stood there, watching him stare right into Macey's eyes. 'Are you depressed, Macey?'

There was a long stretch of silence before Macey answered.

'I'm not confused,' she said. 'Well, sometimes I am with dates and things.'

'But you're not confused where your medication's concerned?' Steele checked.

'No,' Macey said, and Candy frowned at the serious note to Steele's voice.

'Okay.'

'Could you just leave me, please?' Macey asked.

'Not happening,' Steele said, and he took down the edge of the trolley she was lying on. His legs were long enough that he sat there easily. She would need a ladder to do that, Candy thought,

and then she stopped thinking idle thoughts as she started to realise the seriousness of this conversation.

'Why did you tip the tablets in the toilet?' Steele challenged gently, and Candy felt the back of her nose stinging as he pushed on. 'Were you scared that you might take them all?'

Macey's face started to crumple and Steele took her hand. 'Look at me, Macey. Are you having suicidal thoughts?' Steele asked bluntly, and after a moment she nodded and then started to cry.

'Well done for throwing them away,' Steele said. 'Well done for coming into hospital and speaking with me.' Candy watched as he wrapped his arms around the proud lady as she started to really sob. 'It's okay.' His voice was very deep but so gentle. 'We're going to look after you …'

CHAPTER THREE

CANDY SLEPT FOR a few hours on Friday afternoon before her first night shift on the geriatric ward and then she got ready and took the Underground into work.

She was actually rather nervous about her night shift. She was so used to working in Emergency that she wasn't too sure how she would go on the ward. She also had a short four-hour shift there on Sunday morning.

It will be worth it, Candy told herself as she stepped into the geriatric unit.

Hawaii, here I come!

The handover lasted much longer than it did in Emergency and the day staff went into far more detail about the patients than she had grown used to. Candy sat as the staff discussed in depth the patients' moods and their ADLs: activities of daily living. Steele was sitting at a desk in the room with his back to everyone but didn't leave as the handover started; he just carried on with whatever he was doing on the computer and offered comment or clarification at times.

Candy knew that she was far, far too aware of him.

The staff clearly liked him. If there was a question they would toss it over to him and he would answer as he typed away.

Elaine, a student nurse, was giving her handover to the night staff, watched over by her mentor, Gloria. Elaine was very bossy

and seemed to think she was the only one in the room who knew what she was doing. She had given a sigh of exasperation when Candy had introduced herself and said that she was from the hospital bank. 'Another one!' Elaine had said.

As Elaine gave her handover there were a few times when Candy caught Abigail's eye—Abigail was the senior nurse she would be working with tonight, and they both smothered a smile.

Mr Heath, who had been so unwell the other day in Emergency, was doing a lot better and Candy was allocated to look after him for the night.

She was also given Toby Worthington, a terminal patient who was on a lot of morphine for pain control and, Elaine said, liked to have his radio on till eleven at night and then turned on again at six.

'Then we have Macey Anderson.' Elaine moved on to the next patient.

'I know Macey,' Candy said. 'I was in Emergency when she was admitted.'

'Could you have her tonight as well, then?' Abigail checked and Candy nodded. They went through her history, which was pretty much what Candy already knew. How Macey had been since admission had changed rapidly, though. 'Since she's come to the ward she's been very withdrawn,' Elaine said. 'She doesn't want to eat, or wash. She's on an IV regime but if she continues to refuse meals and drinks she'll need an NG tube. Steele has taken her off a lot of her medications and has also started her on a low

dose of antidepressants …' Elaine went through her medications. 'Make sure she takes them and she's not hiding them,' Elaine warned, and Candy nodded. But that wasn't enough for Elaine. 'You have to ask her to lift her tongue.'

'I shall,' Candy said, trying to keep the edge from her voice. Elaine was a funny little thing, with a very long, wide mouth that opened often.

She reminded Candy of a puppet.

'Why does she have to lift her tongue, Elaine?' Steele asked from the computer, and Candy felt her lips stretch into a smile because clearly he had Elaine worked out too.

'To make sure that she's not hiding any under there,' Elaine said, and looked at Candy to make sure that she understood the instruction.

'Thanks,' Candy said. 'I'll make sure that she takes them.'

As Elaine left the room Abigail winked. 'Matron Elaine!'

'Her heart's in the right place, though,' Gloria, the sister in charge of the day shift, said. 'But, oh my, she's hard work. Elaine insists on calling everything by its technical name. The patients haven't a clue what she's asking. Just this evening she asked Mr Heath if she could check for scrotal oedema.' Gloria smiled as she recalled it. 'He said, "Do you mean my balls, dear?" It was too funny.'

They were all very nice and after handover Elaine gave Candy a quick tour of the ward before she headed for home.

Actually, it wasn't that quick—Elaine was incredibly

thorough, going through everything in detail when really Candy wanted to get started.

'I think that covers everything,' Candy said. 'Thanks for the tour.'

'I'll just show you where the torches and things are kept,' Elaine said, but Candy looked at the clock and it was already nearly ten. 'Go.' Candy smiled. 'It's Friday night. Enjoy it!'

Elaine gave a little nod and finally headed for home and then Candy went to check on her patients for the night.

Mr Heath was indeed looking better.

'Hello, Candy.' He smiled when she came over and he put down the book that he was reading.

'You remember me?' Candy asked in surprise, because Mr Heath had been so distressed in Resus that he hadn't seemed very aware of his surroundings or able to hear what anybody except Steele was saying.

'Of course I do.'

'Well, it's lovely to see you looking so much better,' Candy said. She then did his obs and gave him his medications for the night and, as she did so, they chatted for a while.

'I'm hoping to go home on Monday,' Mr Heath said. 'My granddaughter gets married next week.'

'How exciting,' Candy said. 'Is it a big wedding?'

'Huge!' Mr Heath nodded. 'She's marrying an Ital …' His voice trailed off.

'Don't stop on my account.' Candy grinned. 'I know what

Italian weddings can be like. I must be the only girl in the world who's dreaded her wedding day since she was little rather than dreamt of it.'

Mr Heath laughed. 'Will it be big?'

'You have no idea,' Candy said. 'I have four older brothers, all married, and my mother is itching for it to be my turn. She buys sheets and towels for me when she shops—oh, and washing baskets and the like. I'm all set up!' Candy smiled. 'Apart from the groom.'

It was, in fact, a very friendly ward and the staff didn't mind that Candy had a few questions every now and then. But as she went to do Macey's medications, Candy frowned and looked around for Abigail, but she was in with Mrs Douglas, who was very sick indeed.

'Problem?' Steele had come onto the ward and was writing up some medication for a patient who wasn't Candy's.

'No, I just want to check something,' Candy said, taking the prescription chart over to him. 'Macey's written up for sherry, but she's on a lot of other medication.'

'No doubt she'll be having the sherry when she gets home,' Steele pointed out. 'Though I don't think you have to worry about it tonight—she's not having her sherry at the moment. She's not really having much of anything.'

He was right. Candy was shocked at the change in Macey. She'd been a fierce, proud woman when she had arrived in the emergency department but now she just lay on her side and

stared into space. She didn't say anything when Candy introduced herself and her arm was listless when Candy checked her blood pressure.

'I've got your tablets for you, Macey,' Candy explained, and she helped her to sit up to take them. The old lady took her tablets without a word of protest and then tried to take the water Candy offered, but her hands were shaking terribly so Candy held the glass and helped her take a drink to wash them down. 'Sorry, Macey, but can you lift your tongue for me?'

She lifted her tongue and, yes, she had swallowed all the tablets rather than hiding them. Then she lay back down on the pillow.

'Can I get you anything else?' Candy offered. 'A drink?'

Macey gave a small shake of her head and Candy looked at the fluid balance and food charts. She was on an IV, and that was, apart from the water she took with her medicines, practically all that Macey was having at the moment.

'Macey,' Candy suggested as she put another blanket on and turned her pillows, 'why don't I get you some milk?'

Her lethargy was troubling. Candy would far prefer her to be shouting at her and telling her that she wasn't a nurse's bootlace.

'Some warm milk,' Candy elaborated. 'I know your hands are a bit shaky at the moment but I can help you to drink it. Will you have some milk?'

Macey didn't say yes but at least she didn't shake her head this time.

Steele looked over and saw Candy hovering, sorting out pillows and blankets on Macey's bed. He half expected Macey to shout for her to get off as she had done when she'd been with the other nurse that afternoon, but he was pleased to see that tonight Macey didn't seem to mind the small attention.

Steele liked Candy, which had certainly come as a surprise to him.

The attraction had been instant, yet Candy was nothing like the women Steele usually dated.

Oh, he dated.

A lot.

Steele went for sophisticated women. He liked women who understood right from the start that this could only ever be a fleeting thing for he was never anywhere long. Six months here, two years there and now just six weeks here.

Steele glanced at the date. He had been here almost a week, so make that five weeks he had left at the Royal.

And Candy was away for the final two of them.

Steele had already done the marriage-and-settle-down thing and it hadn't worked.

Or rather, it had worked, possibly more than he had realised, because ten years on his ex-wife, completely out of the blue, had rung him. Her second marriage had failed and she had suggested that they give it another go. Even before Steele could answer her and say he had never heard a more ridiculous suggestion in his life she had added her little postscript—there was one proviso to

them getting back together.

There had been a lot of advances in technology after all.

Ten years on the hurt was there and she had just hit it with a sledgehammer again. His one raw nerve, the one chink in his confident persona, had been exposed again. Steele had promptly hung up on her without response because otherwise he might well have exploded and told her exactly the words that were in his head.

They weren't pretty.

For Steele, finding out that he was infertile had been a huge blow. His wife's response to the news had been devastating.

He made sure now he was never in a position to reveal that part of himself again. He kept things light; he kept things intimate sexually rather than emotionally.

Then he moved on.

Candy walked past just then, carrying a feeding cup, and she went over and helped Macey to sit up.

Candy didn't say anything; she just gave Macey a smile as the elderly lady took sips of the milky drink. That was all Macey wanted for now: no conversation, just a warm drink and the comfort of companionable silence.

Candy was fine with that—she was used to it, in fact.

When she'd been ten, her *nonna* had come to live with them. Candy's job in the morning had been to make sure Nonna got her *biscotti* and milky coffee and then to see her to the bathroom and make up her bed. Candy had loved the mornings—the chatty

ones when Nonna had told her all about the village that she had grown up in. The reminiscent ones when Nonna had spoken about falling in love and the parties and dancing. The sad ones—leaving Italy and the death of her husband, Candy's *nonno.* Candy had been comfortable too with the silent mornings, when Nonna had just eaten quietly, lost in a world of her own, as Macey was now.

'Do you want a bedpan?' Candy offered Macey when the milk was gone.

'I'll go …' Macey sighed and pulled back the bed covers.

Glad to see that she was making the effort to get out of bed, Candy helped her with her slippers and got Macey her walking frame and they walked over to the bathroom.

Candy waited outside and when Macey came to wash her hands Candy sorted the taps and squeezed the soap for her. Macey washed her hands very thoroughly. Her nail varnish was chipped and Candy watched her examine her nails for a moment, clearly less than impressed with the state of her hands.

'I'll sort your nails out for you on Sunday,' Candy offered, and then took Macey back to her bedside, where she asked her to sit for a moment. 'Sit there and let me make it up all nice and fresh for you to get into.'

Candy made the bed so nicely that she wanted to climb in it herself. 'You'd better get in quickly or I will.'

'You look tired,' Macey said, and Candy smiled at the first invitation to conversation.

'I am, though I shouldn't be,' Candy said. 'I slept all afternoon.'

She got the older woman into bed, put up the bed rails and tied the call bell to the side. 'Press it if you need anything,' Candy said. 'I hope you have a lovely sleep.'

Candy sorted out her other patients and, by one a.m., when Abigail asked if she'd mind taking the first break, Candy was more than ready for an hour to rest. It would seem she wasn't the only one who needed a doze, because when she walked into the break room there was Steele, asleep on a sofa with the television on in the background.

'Aloha,' he said sleepily, when Candy disturbed him as she took a seat.

'Aloha.' Candy smiled. 'How come you're still here?'

'I'm waiting for some relatives to come in for Mrs Douglas.'

Candy remembered from handover that Mrs Douglas wasn't expected to make it through the night.

'How long is it now till your holiday?' Steele asked.

'Three weeks,' Candy said, and set her phone alarm for an hour's time. She saw the date and that it was now Saturday morning. 'Actually, just under three weeks. I fly on a Friday night.'

'Are you working right up till then?'

Candy nodded and then yawned at the very thought. 'I almost go from here to the airport.'

'Is it just you going?'

'Yep.'

'I thought Hawaii was more a couples' destination,' Steele said, fishing shamelessly.

'I think you may be right but I saw an advert and I couldn't resist,' Candy admitted and nodded to the television, where an infomercial for knives was showing. 'It was a limited offer, with a huge discount for the first ten to call … I fall for it every time'

'Yep.' Steele nodded. 'And me. I bought the juicer, the chopper and some blender thing until I finally worked out that nothing is going to make me like vegetables.'

'It's one of the perils of working nights,' Candy agreed. 'What looks appealing at two a.m. seems stupid when the parcel arrives. Anyway, I saw the advert for the holiday when I was feeling particularly miserable. It looked absolutely beautiful and I really needed to get away …'

'How come?'

'Lots of things really.'

'Such as?'

Candy hesitated. She hadn't really spoken to anyone about the fact she was considering leaving. She glanced at Steele and realised that by the time she got back from Hawaii he'd be gone, so it really made no difference. 'I'm not sure if I still want to work in Emergency.'

'It must be a pretty stressful job.'

'It is at times.' Candy nodded. 'Though it's not just that. I made a mistake couple of months back.' She didn't elaborate; instead, she lay down on the sofa, determined to squeeze in some sleep

during her break.

'A professional mistake?' Steele probed, and Candy let out a small laugh at his very direct question.

'No, it was a personal one.'

'Do tell.'

'No way.'

'So there are two things I have to find out about you now,' Steele teased. 'The story behind your name and the mistake that Nurse Candy made.'

'You can try, but it won't get you anywhere,' Candy said, and closed her eyes. 'I'm going to have a little rest.'

'Hopefully you talk in your sleep.'

She smiled with her eyes closed and was mildly surprised when after a moment or so Steele continued to speak.

'We all make mistakes, Candy,' he said. His lovely deep voice was soothing and broke into her semi-doze. 'If I've learnt one thing in this job, it's that everyone makes so-called mistakes and also that everyone wastes way too much time regretting them.'

She opened her eyes and looked at him. 'You really do like your job,' Candy said, and it wasn't a question, more an observation, and Steele nodded.

'I really do.'

Yes, she should sleep and her aching body might regret it later but she chose to forgo the full hour of sleep just to find out a little more about him. She lay there and peeked over to Steele, who was still looking at her.

'Did you always want to work in geriatrics?'

'Not really,' Steele said. 'It sort of found me, I guess. I was pretty much raised by my grandmother …'

'Are your parents …?' Her voice trailed off and Steele grinned.

'They're not dead.'

'Good.'

'My parents are both doctors and were very serious about their careers. I was a late accident. I don't think they ever really wanted to have children. My mother was a top thoracic surgeon—which means she had balls.'

Candy laughed.

'My grandmother looked after me till I went to boarding school and in the holidays I stayed with her.' He saw her frown. 'My parents are good people. They were just very, very focused. Anyway, when I went to my grandmother's for Easter one year, she was very confused. Just completely off the wall. I rang my mother and she pretty much would have had her shipped off to a nursing home that day.'

'Really?' Candy said.

'Really!' Steele nodded. 'But the GP came and it turned out all she had was a urine infection. He explained the confusion it could cause in the elderly. Anyway, two days later she was completely back to herself. It just stayed with me, I guess.'

'My *nonna* lived with us.' Candy yawned. 'I think my mother thinks she'll be living with me …'

'Did your mother work?' Steele asked, and Candy shook her head. 'You do, though. You have a career.'

Candy looked at him. Right there, right then, she felt as if he knew the wrestle in her heart because though she loved her parents they clashed a lot as Candy struggled to be independent when they didn't want her to be. 'I do have a career,' Candy said, 'and I had to fight to have one.'

'Have your rest.' He smiled and Candy nodded.

She'd had to fight to simply be here, Candy thought as she closed her eyes. Her parents had wanted her to marry Franco, and for her to work in the family business. They hadn't understood that she'd wanted to study to become a nurse.

Candy fell asleep but it felt about twenty seconds later that her phone bleeped and told her that her hour was up and it was time to go back to work. The staffroom was empty and when she went round to the ward Steele wasn't there either.

She liked him.

Candy knew it properly then because she preferred the feel on the ward when he was around.

The rest of the night flew past quickly. Candy helped out with Mrs Douglas while Abigail took her break and then it was time to start her morning routine. At seven-thirty, after handover, Candy said goodbye to her patients and told Macey that she would be in tomorrow morning and, if Macey liked and Candy had time, then she would do her nails.

Macey said nothing.

As Candy walked along the main entrance corridor she saw Steele on his way into work. His hair was damp from his morning shower and he was wearing a dark grey suit and fresh shirt, though he hadn't yet done up his tie. He was standing looking at one of the pictures that lined the corridor, images of the hospital and the changes over the years. Renovations were taking place throughout the Royal.

'What are you looking at?' she asked.

'Come and see,' Steele invited, and as she stood beside him he started to do up his tie. 'Do you recognise anyone?'

Candy peered at the image that he had been focused on. It was a group of nurses and doctors standing in the gardens at the rear of the hospital. It looked like a presentation had just taken place as some of the nurses were sporting medals. Candy smiled when she saw the long dresses and aprons that the nurses were wearing as well as their hats and capes. Then she saw just who it was that Steele was looking at. 'Oh, my goodness, it's Macey.'

'It is indeed.'

She had the same wild curly hair, though it was tamed by a frilly white cap. Her cheekbones were high and her lips, though smiling, looked a touch strained. Her cape was around her shoulders and Candy smiled at the red cross that it made on her chest.

She looked incredibly young but certainly it was Macey.

'Do you think she'll come out of her depression?' Candy asked.

'Now I do.'

'What do you mean?'

But Steele didn't answer her directly. 'You were very good with her last night. I'm glad she had a drink and got up to the bathroom. How was she this morning?'

'Still very quiet, but she had another drink and I made her *biscotti*, which she ate.'

'Biscotti?'

'Biscuits in warm milk, all mashed in.' Candy smiled and then groaned as her stomach rumbled just at the thought. 'Now I've gone and made myself hungry, I'll have to have some when I get home.'

'Did you feed her?'

'I did.' Candy nodded. 'She's very shaky.'

'It's all the new medications,' Steele said, 'and a lack of sherry, but it should soon start to settle down.'

'How did you know that she was drinking?'

'Because drinking is incredibly common in the elderly. Far more than people realise. It's not all bad.' Steele smiled. 'Macey can't ask her niece to get her four bottles of sherry a week, or however much it is that she actually drinks. At least it keeps her walking to the shops each day. I admit that I worry what will happen when my oldies all discover online shopping.'

Candy realised she was doing her dental commercial smile at him again.

He made her smile.

'I'm going home.' Candy hitched up her bag. 'I'll say goodnight

because it's night-time to me.'

'Have a good sleep,' Steele said, 'and don't talk too much.'

'I *don't* talk in my sleep.' She smiled back at him. 'At least, I don't think I do.'

As she walked off his deep voice caused her shoulders to stiffen.

'Make that three things that I have to find out about you.'

Oh, my God, Candy realised.

They *were* flirting.

More than that, she was considering revising her recently put in place rule—to never again get involved with someone at work.

He was *that* good.

CHAPTER FOUR

'CAN I HAVE a hand to turn Mr Worthington, please?' Candy asked Elaine the following morning.

She had slept all of Saturday and had then got up for dinner and gone out for a couple of hours with Kelly, only to be in bed by ten and asleep again in a matter of moments.

And she was *still* tired.

Elaine was very brusque and efficient and they soon had Mr Worthington turned. 'Why isn't his radio on?' Elaine asked, turning it on. 'Toby likes to have his radio on, especially on a Sunday morning. I wrote it down in his care plan.'

'Sorry,' Candy muttered as Elaine marched out.

As bossy as she was, though, Elaine's heart really was in the right place because Toby started humming a little as Candy shaved him and all too soon she found herself singing along to the Sunday morning hymns. It made Toby smile and his eyes encouraged her and he even started singing along to some of the choruses, which only made Candy sing louder.

'Mr Worthington!' Gloria popped her head in. 'Your family are here to see you.' She smiled at Candy. 'They'll be pleased to see him looking so cheerful. Steele was just having a word with them.'

Candy quickly tidied up the room and moved the trolley out of the way as Toby's family thanked Steele and then smiled at

Candy as they made their way in.

'Did you enjoy your little singalong?' Steele asked when she came out.

'Actually, I did,' she said, 'although I'm not sure quite what Toby would have to say about it if he was able to talk.'

'Oh, I'm sure that, with the amount of morphine he's on, your voice sounded pretty fantastic.'

'Are you telling me that I'm tone deaf?'

'Ooh, just a touch,' Steele teased, but it didn't faze Candy.

'I'm going to sing louder next time.'

They would have chatted for longer but Matron Elaine was back and ready to move things along. 'Come on, Candy, we're falling behind. I'll help you with Macey.'

Candy would really prefer that she didn't.

'Have fun!' Steele said as Candy rolled her eyes.

The strangest thing was, though, that Candy did enjoy herself.

In fact, she had more fun then she'd had in a long time and so did Macey!

'Good morning, Macey.' Candy smiled as she pulled the curtains around the bed. 'Would you like to have a shower?'

Macey gave a slow shake of her head.

'Well, Elaine and I will give you a wash in bed, if that's okay, and we'll give you some nice fresh sheets and things. Then I'll do your leg dressing.'

'I'll do Macey's leg dressing,' Elaine said. 'I need to practice my aseptic technique.'

'Sure,' Candy agreed, and then spoke to Macey. 'Would you like me to wash your hair? We can do it in bed. I just need to take the bedhead off. It might make you feel a little bit better,' Candy pushed gently, but again Macey shook her head.

Elaine had everything set up on the trolley to wash Macey and she was busy collecting sheets and pillowcases for the bed change as Candy washed Macey's face. She then offered her the cloth to wash her hands but Macey didn't take it so Candy washed Macey's hands in the bowl. 'I'll take that nail varnish off in a little while and do your nails.'

'There isn't time to do nails,' Elaine said as she returned.

'I'll do it on my coffee break,' Candy said as they turned Macey and washed her back. Elaine was starting to seriously get on her nerves. 'I like painting nails.'

Delightfully, though, as Macey was turned back from her side she caught Candy's eye and gave her a tiny wink. This showed Candy she was coming back to the world and that Macey understood how difficult Elaine might be to work with.

She returned the wink and soaped up the cloth again.

'Would you like to wash yourself down there?' Candy offered, so that Macey could wash her private parts herself, but both Candy and Macey blinked at the same time when a loud voice interrupted them.

'No!' Elaine said. 'We do not speak down to our patients. You are to call it by its proper name.'

Candy shared a brief *yikes* look with Macey.

'I apologise, Macey,' she said, looking into Macey's eyes as they both tried to fathom what it was that she was supposed to say.

'Would you like to wash your private parts?' Candy offered and saw Macey's lips start to twitch into a smile, especially when Elaine chimed up again.

'No!' she said. 'You're to call it by its proper name.'

Given that Candy was the qualified nurse, she could have told Elaine to simply be quiet, but there was a glimmer in Macey's eyes that hadn't been there for a long time and, Candy guessed as they shared a smile, she was more than happy for the exchange to continue.

Macey presumably had a nurse's sense of humour after all.

'I'm sorry, Macey,' Candy said again as she stretched her brain as to what she should say. She rinsed out the cloth again and then mouthed to Macey, 'What do I say?'

Macey offered a tiny shrug.

Was she supposed to ask if she wanted to wash her vagina? 'Macey,' Candy said, and cleared her throat. They stared seriously at each other, though they were both laughing on the inside. Each knew the other's thoughts. 'Would you like to wash your genitals?'

'No!' Elaine, clearly incensed by Candy's apparent ineptitude, took the cloth from Candy. 'This is how you do it,' Elaine said, and soaped up the cloth again. 'Macey,' she said, holding out the cloth, 'would you like to wash your muffy?'

Macey and Candy cried from laughing.

Not in front of Elaine, of course, but as Elaine went to set up for the leg dressing Candy had to wipe the tears from Macey's eyes as they tried to keep their laughter quiet.

They clearly didn't succeed because Steele popped his head in.

'Did Elaine do her muffy thing again?' he asked.

'She did.' Candy grinned. 'Has she done it before, then?'

Steele nodded. 'Somebody has to tell her that that's not the technical name for it.' Steele grinned. 'Please, God, it's not me.'

'She'll be a wonderful nurse,' Macey said, still smiling. 'At least she's thorough.'

Candy was told to go for her coffee break and so she made a mug of coffee and put it beside Macey's bed, ready to set to work on her nails.

'Have your break,' Macey said.

'I honestly like painting nails,' Candy said. 'I do my mum's every week and I just wish I had four sisters instead of four brothers. It really does relax me.'

She held up a bottle of coral nail polish. 'Is that colour okay?'

Macey gave a small nod.

Macey sat quietly as Candy set to work. Candy didn't chat very much because she really was concentrating. There was something so soothing about painting nails that she truly did enjoy doing it. The immediate improvement was instantly gratifying and having nice nails was also a very easy lift to the sprits.

'Four brothers?' Macey said suddenly.

'And then came a daughter.' Candy gave a wry smile.

'Are they very strict?'

'They are but they're also very lovely. I know that I really have nothing to complain about, but …' Candy shook her head. 'I'm still plucking up the courage to tell them that I've booked a holiday to Hawaii. They're not going to be pleased.'

'Why?' Macey asked. 'Because you're going with your boyfriend?'

'I don't have a boyfriend,' Candy said, taking Macey's other hand and starting to work on those nails. 'That won't appease them, though … me in America on my own …'

Macey looked across the ward and saw that Steele was looking towards them, or rather at Candy. When he realised that she was watching him he gave her a very brief smile and then looked away.

She might not say much but Macey knew everything that went on in the ward.

'There,' Candy said, finishing off and admiring her handiwork. 'Let them dry for a little while before you do anything.'

'No washing my muffy for the next half-hour, then,' Macey joked and smiled at Candy as she rested her head back on the pillow. 'Thank you, my dear.'

As she went to take her mug through to the kitchen Candy passed Steele. 'What time do you finish?' he asked.

'Eleven-thirty,' Candy said.

'Do you want to get lunch?'

He'd completely sideswiped her but, then, Candy thought, he had been doing that since the moment she'd clapped eyes on him. 'The canteen?' she suggested.

'If you like but I think we can do better than the canteen.'

Oh!

Did she want to have lunch with the sexiest man she had ever met? There really wasn't an awful lot to think about.

'Yes,' Candy said, 'that sounds great.'

'Good.'

'But aren't you on call?'

'My registrar can earn his keep for a couple of hours,' Steele said.

Wow.

There really was no messing with Steele; she had never really known anyone as direct as him before.

'Anyway,' Steele added, 'I've got a few questions that I'd like to know the answers to.'

'Question one,' Steele said as they sat in a very nice café that was just a short drive from the hospital. 'I want to know about your name—Candy?'

'You'll never know,' Candy said as she looked through the menu. 'It's the reason I'm never getting married. It's the reason I'm going on holiday alone. No one is allowed to see my passport!'

'I'm determined to find out.'

‘You can be as determined as you like.’ She smiled. ‘It doesn’t mean that you’ll get anywhere, though.’

‘What do you want to eat?’ Steele asked.

‘I would like …’ She looked through the menu. What would she like? ‘I fancy a roast.’

‘Have a roast, then.’

‘I shall.’ Candy nodded. ‘A Sunday roast is exotic to me. It was pasta and pasta and more pasta when I was growing up.’

‘Well, I’ll have the pasta, then.’ He smiled, glad to be out with someone who seemed to enjoy their food. ‘That’s exotic to me.’

‘Please.’ Candy rolled her eyes.

‘Okay, second question—what was the mistake?’

Candy let out a breath; if this was leading anywhere, and it felt as if it was, then possibly she ought to tell him. Or possibly not, given that Steele would be long since gone by the time Gerry returned from Greece.

It wasn’t just a question of that, though. She liked Steele’s eyes, she liked his smile, she liked that she felt she could be honest with him. It would be such a relief to share what had been eating her up for these past couple of months.

‘Have you ever slept with an ex?’ Candy asked, quite sure, as she did so, that she was blushing from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

‘Doesn’t everyone sleep with their exes?’ Steele checked. He was so at ease with it all that she let out a breath that she felt as though she’d been holding in since it had happened.

'Well, I've only had two exes, and I only made that mistake with one of them.'

'Actually,' Steele added, 'I've never slept with my ex-wife. I knew from the day we broke up that we were done.'

He saw her swallow. And swallow Candy did—she had certainly thought him worldlier than her and that he had been married and divorced confirmed it.

'You sound bitter,' she said, and was somewhat surprised when he didn't deny that he was.

'I am a bit when I think about it, which I don't often do.' He smiled. 'She rang a few weeks ago and asked if we might consider getting back together. I long ago decided that I would never settle down with anyone again.'

He didn't reveal the initial reason for their break-up. There was no point. There was no need for in-depth explanations about his infertility, given that he wasn't going to be hanging around in any one place or in anyone's space for too long.

Though perhaps he needed to make that a little clearer to Candy, he realised. She was seriously gorgeous. The attraction had been instant for both of them, of that there was no doubt, but she was several years younger than him and a lot less jaded and he did not want to cause hurt.

'So you slept with your ex?' Steele checked, and she gave a glum nod.

'Do you know Gerry?' Candy asked. 'One of the head nurses in the emergency department.'

'I've never met him,' Steele said. 'But I heard a bit about him when I was looking into the waiting times in Emergency. He's an arrogant jerk apparently.'

'That's Gerry!' Candy rolled her eyes. 'He didn't used to be. He got beaten up by two patients a few months ago and it seems to have changed him.'

'He's the one currently in Greece?' Steele checked. 'The one who wrote "Glad you're not here" on his postcard?'

'That's the one.' Candy nodded. 'When I first moved out of home last year we went out, though not for very long.'

'You only moved out last year?'

'Believe me, twenty-four years of age is way too early in my family, unless it's to get married. I should only have moved out to marry the boyfriend they had sort of pressed onto me … Instead, I dumped him and rented a flat.'

'That would have been tough,' Steele commented.

'Yes, it caused a lot of arguments with my parents and I mean a *lot*, but in the end it was far easier to do that than marry someone just because my parents considered him suitable. Anyway, Gerry helped me a bit with the move, given that my parents were sulking. We went out for a while, like I said, but pretty quickly I ended it. That was last year but he's been having a few problems of late. He asked if we could go out for a drink a couple of months ago …' Candy gave an uncomfortable shrug.

'One thing led to another?' Steele checked, and she nodded.

'It was a complete mistake on my part—he thought that

signalled we were back together and he wasn't best pleased to find out we're not. Since then he's been making things difficult for me at work. No one knows that we slept together again, thank God.' She looked at Steele, surprised she could meet his eyes after her big revelation. 'It should serve as a reminder—never get involved with anyone from work.'

'Too late,' Steele said. 'I think we both know we're heading for bed—guilt free.'

He liked it that she blushed and he liked it even more that she didn't disagree with him. Now was the time to make it clear that, though this could be incredibly pleasant, there was no question of it lasting for very long.

'I can assure you that I won't turn into a monster when we're over,' Steele said, not very gently spelling it out for her. 'I have very many exes who will tell you the same.'

Candy sat there as a delectable plate of roast beef, with all the trimmings, was placed in front of her. She was glad of the chance to think over his words rather than react immediately to them as she smiled and thanked the waitress. Steele was sitting there basically telling her that he was a playboy and warning her that before they started they had a use-by date hanging over them.

The strange thing for Candy was that she didn't mind. His openness was, in fact, refreshing. She was tired of games, tired of pretending she was enjoying herself. Tired of simply going along for the sake of going along. Gerry had got way too serious too soon, and Franco had been happy to marry her before they'd

had so much as a coffee. She had been brought up with the expectation that any man she dated was a potential husband and had to somehow be a suitable provider. It drove Candy insane. She wanted to be twenty-four, she wanted to have fun, and with Steele she could. With him it was different—there were no games, just pleasure to be had with no expectation or end aim. There was something so unique about him, something that said she *deserved* to have sex with him at least once in her lifetime.

'What are you smiling at?'

'My thoughts,' Candy said. 'And they're not for sharing.'

'Would your parents be disappointed in you if they knew what they were?'

'Very.' She smiled.

'Good.'

'So you're here for six weeks?' Candy checked.

'Five now,' Steele said, 'and the last two of them without you, given that you'll be off on your holiday.'

Getting over you, she thought.

But, oh, at least she'd get to be under him.

That was the only sex Candy knew.

'Then where will you be living?' she asked.

'Kent,' Steele said. 'It's an amazing opportunity. I'm overseeing a complete overhaul of their geriatric department. I'm implementing an acute geriatric unit, where all medical patients will be admitted first.'

He had such energy for his job. Candy could hear it in every

word he spoke. They had the loveliest lunch, chatting about work, about them, oh, about lots of things, but then Steele said he had to get back.

'I'm speaking with Macey's nieces at two. I'll give you a lift home …'

'I don't need a lift,' Candy said. 'I'm only two stops away.'

'You're sure?'

'Very.'

'So how will I know where you live when I come over to take you out tonight?'

'Where are you taking me?' Candy smiled.

'I haven't decided.' Out on the street he took her wrist and turned her to face him. 'Where would you like to go?'

Bed, she wanted to answer, when she had never felt or given that answer before. 'I'll leave it up to you. Though I warn you, I'm pretty wrecked. Night duty hasn't left me at my most sparkling.' She told him her address and he tapped it into his phone. 'I'll see you tonight about seven?'

'Sounds good.'

It was the middle of the day, there were people everywhere and yet when he took her in his arms it could have been the end of the most romantic night.

'Thanks for coming to lunch.'

'Thanks for asking me.'

It was a very new thing to her, to be somewhere simply because she wanted to be. It should be wrong, except it felt

completely right. He was older, wiser and sexier than she had ever dealt with and she was more turned on than she had ever been in her life, and he hadn't even kissed her.

That was about to be corrected, though. Her heart was galloping even more than it had the first day they'd met. Right now it was almost leaping out of her throat in anticipation. An anticipation she had never known because when their lips met it seemed to set off a chain reaction. *This is what a mouth should feel like*, Candy thought, and *This is what a tongue was surely designed for*, she decided as his stroked hers.

Yes, there was a building anticipation because when first his body melded with hers Candy couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like if his hand moved a little higher, or how it would be if she moved in a little closer. Each question was answered —the sound of the traffic dimmed as their kiss intensified. She had never been kissed expertly before and his hand moved just a little higher than her waist to the edge of her rib cage and she ached for it to move higher still. His mouth, the pressure of his lips, the constant beckon of his tongue made her move in closer and she felt breathless.

Both rested their foreheads on the other's for a moment. Trust time to make things complicated, because if it had been nearly two a.m. they would be racing home right about now.

It was daylight, people were talking, a lazy Sunday afternoon was going on all around as they pulled back and met each other's eyes.

‘Tonight’ was the unspoken word between them.

Candy had never really looked forward to the night in that way before.

‘I’m going to be late for my meeting,’ Steele said as she got back to his mouth.

‘You can be two minutes late,’ she said.

She just needed one more taste.

CHAPTER FIVE

THANK GOD THAT she'd just had her period.

It had used to be Candy's excuse not to have sex, but as she had a lovely long bath and shaved and plucked and buffed her body into suitable Steele shape, she was grateful for that fact.

Yes, her Catholic guilt was hovering there in the background but she told it to please be quiet as she took her Pill.

She still hid them in her handbag. It was a matter of habit and her mother would freak, just completely freak, if she knew that Candy was on it. She'd come off it last year but, given what had happened with Gerry, she had gone back on it. She and Gerry had used condoms but what had happened had been such a surprise that she did not want to take any risks.

She hadn't gone home after lunch with Steele; instead, she'd dashed to the shops and bought fabulous underwear that she was now tearing the labels off. There was a silver-grey bra that gave her the best cleavage ever and silver panties that made her dimply bottom look fantastic. In fact, she was so impressed with them that Candy had bought a set in purple also.

She'd always felt fat, but she felt curvy now.

I'll regret it later, she promised her conscience as she looked in the mirror.

Just not yet!

With no idea where they were going Candy decided on a pale

shift dress that would look casual with ballet pumps or fab with heels.

It didn't work with her new bra, though.

Second go.

A grey wraparound dress worked better, though showed a little more cleavage than her parents would consider suitable.

Perfect!

Not big on make-up, Candy put on some mascara and a slick of lipstick and when there was a knock at the door she was nervous, but nicely so.

'You're no help,' Candy said as she let him in and he handed her a bottle of wine. Steele was wearing black jeans and a black shirt. He looked incredibly handsome and had that air about him that meant he was suitably dressed for any venue.

'Meaning?' Steele asked.

'I was trying to decide whether to wear flats or heels given that I don't know where we're going.'

'We're going to the movies,' Steele said. 'I figured it might be nice if you're tired—though we shan't be making out in the back row. I like watching a film properly.'

'What are we going to see?' she asked. The movies was possibly the nicest place he could take her if they *had* to go out. It would be nice to turn her brain off for a couple of hours.

'Two choices,' he said. 'One is very dark, apparently funny in part. One is very sad … See what mood you're in.'

'I don't mind,' she said as she led him through her lounge and

put the wine down on the bench of a very small kitchen.

'So this is what all the arguments with your parents were about?' Steele said, looking around the living room of her small but cosy flat. The front door opened to the living room. Off that was a small kitchen and to the side a hall that led to the bathroom and bedroom. 'It's nice.'

'I love it,' Candy said. 'It's a ten-minute walk to the Underground, a five-minute walk to my favourite Indian restaurant.

'We can eat before or after …' Steele said.

The thought of Indian before sounded too good to pass up, but then other senses were calling, the attraction wafting between them as potent as any delicious aroma from food.

Candy knew she was eons behind him sexually. She wanted to have slept with him, in part to have jumped that hurdle without knocking it over, in part just to dive onto the track …

And Candy usually hated even the thought of sport, but, oh, he was handsome.

And he was here.

'Do you want a glass of wine?' she offered, even though he'd brought it, but Steele shook his head.

'Not for me,' he said. 'I'm driving. You have one, though …' He went to open the bottle he'd brought but she stopped him.

'Not for me.' Candy shook her head. 'I don't really drink and anyway I'm on early tomorrow. I'll just get my shoes.'

She went to her bedroom and put on flats but as she came out

Steele frowned.

'What happened to the heels?'

'For the movies?'

'For me.'

She smiled and went and put on said heels, with Steele watching her from the doorway.

He made her shiver. If Gerry had stood watching her she'd have found it invasive, but with Steele she just wanted to strip off her dress, pull back the covers on the bed and climb in.

She could feel his eyes on her calf muscles and then on her bum and she turned and it was nice to feel provocative. It was something she had never felt before. He made her feel like this.

And he made her want to kiss him.

It was as simple as that, as natural as breathing to stand in the doorway of her bedroom and wrap her hands behind his neck and share a kiss for no other reason than they both wanted to. She didn't feel naïve or inexperienced with him. There wasn't enough space in her mind for those sorts of thoughts because it was filled instead with pleasurable ones as they got back to where they'd been on the street in record time.

Steele's hand did move higher than the base of her rib cage this time. He was stroking the underside of her breast as they kissed, and her nipples hardened and ached for his fingers to attend to them. She had one hand at the back of his head, just to feel his silky hair, not for pressure for there was plenty of that from Steele, and she had the other on his bum. His buttocks were

taut and she checked again. Yes, they were still taut and it was that hand that demanded he press into her.

His moan to her mouth as he did so, his hand at the tie of her dress, told Candy there was no way they would be making the movie.

It was evening, not even semi-dark, and that was seriously uncharted territory for her. End-of-evening sex was all she was used to.

But this wasn't, oh, okay, then, it had been a week after all. This was, let me get this shirt open and this zipper down because I need you to take me now.

Her dress was open, his shirt too, and his fingers were at the back of her bra, ready to undo it, and Candy could barely breathe at the thought of their naked chests pressed together and his hot hands roaming her. She'd never had sex standing, never considered it, because she wasn't the tall, leggy version that a good Candy should be. She was a shorter, chunkier one, who any second now was going to scale Steele's body with the grace of a feline. It was that essential, that natural, that …

'Ignore it …' Steele said as there was a loud rap on the door.

'No …' She could barely breathe now but for a different reason. It was her father's very loud knock and she froze for a second.

'It's my parents.'

'Just ignore it,' he said again.

'They'll let themselves in.'

That her parents had a key came a close second to a bucket of water—actually, it beat the bucket of water because Steele was dressing her and himself with his hands as Candy stood there.

Then he chose to concentrate solely on her for now.

He did up her dress, a little loosely, and wiped off some lipstick and wished the flush on her cheeks would fade by the time she got to the front door. She looked as if she'd just come, or had just been about to. Her nipples were like the dials on his washing machine. Even her lips were swollen.

'Breathe,' Steele said.

'If they find you here …' Candy shivered as he knelt down and changed her heels to flats as there was another knock on the door.

'Will they have us married?'

'You have no idea.'

'Where do you want me?' Steele smiled.

'On my bed.'

'That's what I like to hear,' Steele said, then stopped joking. 'Are they likely to come in here?'

'I hope not.' Candy let out a breath. 'Probably not.'

'Relax,' he said as she closed the bedroom door on him and went to greet her parents. He checked under her bed and he could possibly fit there but first he smiled as he saw the scissors and labels from her brand-new underwear.

She was seriously gorgeous, Steele thought as he did up his shirt and wiped lipstick off. He was unused to thinking *seriously* anything about his dates yet she was so lovely, so focused on

fighting for her independence and living her life and yet so kind.

Actually, right now, as Candy opened the front door all she was was stressed!

There were her parents buckling under the weight of jars filled with home-made tomato sauce.

'I said I'd pick them up next week,' she said.

'Why are you all dressed up?' her mother asked, instantly accusing.

'Because I'm just about to go out,'

'You need to wear a top under that dress!' Her mother warned.

They walked through and put the jars of tomato sauce on the bench and Candy got out the coffee machine. There was no such thing as her parents coming over and them not having a coffee, though her father's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree when he saw the bottle of wine on the bench and Candy poured him a glass.

'Where are you going tonight?' her father asked.

'To the movies with a friend.'

'What friend?' her mother checked.

'Kelly.' Candy glanced at the clock. 'Ma, I really do need to get going soon.'

'We've barely seen you these last few weeks.'

They chatted in Italian for twenty minutes or so. Candy had promised herself that the next time she saw them she'd tell them about her trip to Hawaii, but with Steele hiding in the bedroom she chose not to. It was not a conversation that would take twenty minutes—it would be an entire evening of tears and threats and

shouting.

Her dad's wineglass was empty, her mum's coffee was gone and though they looked settled in for the evening and her father would no doubt love another glass of wine, Candy stood. 'I'm already late for Kelly,' she said. 'I really am going to have to get ready.'

She felt guilty kicking them out, and then cross that she'd had to. Couldn't they simply ring before they dropped around?

They'd be offended if she asked them to.

Talk about kill the mood, she thought once they had gone and she headed to her bedroom. Steele was lying on her bed, his legs crossed and reading her book.

'I'm so sorry about that,' she said.

'Why?' Steele shrugged. 'Your parents dropped around. It's no big deal.' He smiled at her as she came and sat on the bed beside him. 'I understand, though, that it would be a big deal if they found me here.'

'Thanks.' Candy smiled.

'Do they drop around a lot?'

'They do,' she said. 'They don't drive and, as a sweetener, when I moved out I said I was only moving nearby, which was a big mistake.' She let out a long sigh. 'Another one. I seem to be making rather a lot of them lately. Have I made us late for the movies?'

'I haven't even got the tickets,' he said. 'I didn't know if you'd like the idea.'

'I do,' Candy said, 'I haven't been in ages.'

'I go all the time,' he said. 'Well, not all the time, but I guess going to the movies, for me, is like reading a book is to you. I usually go on my own,' Steele said. It had surprised him that he'd considered taking Candy along. He really did prefer his own company when watching a film.

'How come you go alone?' she asked, gently poking him in the ribs as he lay there. 'Don't you have any friends?'

'I have a lot of friends but not any I'd want to go to the movies with. You should try going by yourself,' he said. 'I loathe trying to concentrate while getting the *What the hell did you bring me to this for?* vibe coming from my right or left.'

Candy started to laugh. 'I get that with my friend Kelly.' She told him about the time she'd suggested to Kelly that they see what Candy had thought was a romance and he laughed as she described Kelly's reaction as she'd sat beside her, watching someone being tied to the bed.

'She said I was never allowed to choose the movie again,' Candy said, and then she looked down and saw that her hands were now on his chest and fiddling with his buttons and that his hands were playing with her hair. It was as if their bodies were having a little conversation of their own as they carried on talking.

His hand pressed the back of her head a little and she started to kiss him. Her heart was still hammering a bit from her parents' unexpected visit, and a long, slow kiss did nothing to calm it

down, but slowly the turmoil of the sudden invasion by her family was fading.

His shirt was open again and beneath her hands were lovely flat nipples that she could not stop stroking, and her dress was open again and how she wished she had a front-opening bra, because she did not want to move her hands from his skin to get naked.

Steele peeled off her dress as she sat over him.

Till this point, till this evening, she had always felt that brief moment of judgment as she undressed. She felt only adoration now; she didn't even try to define what was going on in her head as her dress slid off. She did not care what he thought, safe in the knowledge he thought only good things.

He did think only good things. More used to slenderness, he adored her generous curves and her ripe breasts spilling as he undid her bra, but more giddying and satisfying was the mutual eagerness, as if they had somehow known this was where they were leading.

'I've got something I ought to tell you …' Steele said, pulling back.

'What?' she breathed. 'What do you have to tell me?'

He smiled at the dart of concern in her eyes.

'I'm not sleeping with you till I hear about your name.' His hand stroked one generous breast. 'Tell me,' Steele said.

'No.'

He pulled her onto him and then flipped her onto her back and

she lay looking up at him, aching for his kiss. She had already kicked off her ballet pumps. All she had on were her panties and it was he who looked down at her now.

'I'm never going to tell you,' Candy said.

He stood and picked up his shirt.

'Come on,' he said. 'Get dressed.

'That's bribery.'

'Yep.'

Well, two could play at that game. 'Fine,' she said, half-heartedly sitting up, putting her legs over the bed and reaching for her clothes. 'Let's go and get something to eat …'

She picked up her bra and Steele took it from her hands.

He placed it beneath her breasts and did it up at the back and while he did so she could feel his breath on her shoulder and she was more than a little aware of his erection through his trousers. He took one of her breasts and gently stuffed it into the fabric but his hand stayed in there, stroking her, teasing her, and she sat still as his lips started to nuzzle the other one, licking and sucking at her nipple, stretching it with his lips as her hands moved to his head and urged him for more contact. But then he stopped. She looked down as he went to tuck her wet, very aroused breast back into her bra, and she decided he was cruel, so cruel that she knew if she didn't relent they would be sitting eating a curry or watching a movie about half an hour from now.

'Okay.' Her voice was all husky and she didn't really recognise it as hers. She cleared her throat, but it still sounded the same.

'As you know, my parents are Italian,' Candy said, and her head was on his shoulder as he unhooked her bra again.

'Okay.'

'Strict,' she said. His hands were now on her hips and she lifted her bottom to allow for him to take her panties down.

'Go on,' Steele said, which was contrary to his words because he was kneeling with his mouth on hers as she spoke.

'And they chose the most beautiful name that means pure and innocent …' she said, and she felt the stretch of his lips on hers as he smiled as she told him what she had sworn she wouldn't. 'And then when I hit my teenage years I noticed that people started to snicker and …'

'What is it?' Steele asked.

'What's the medical term for thrush?'

He pulled back and smiled. 'Candida.'

'Which is why I became Candy. Sadly, not to my parents. They still insist on calling me by my full name.'

'Were you teased?' he said to her mouth as his hand parted her thighs and his fingers slipped inside her.

Mercilessly.

'Poor baby …' Steele said.

'Oh …' Candy moaned, her thighs quivering.

He felt her thighs clamp around his hand and her head rest on his shoulder and there was that blissful choice whether to feel her come now or dive in for the pleasure.

Greed won.

He removed his hand and she let out a small sob of frustration combined with bliss as he stood and she sat naked, a breath away from him as he slid down his zipper and undressed. He handed her a condom and she shook her head.

'You do it.'

'You.'

Okay, she was bad at this part, except his erection was at her cheeks and she was licking her lips as she undid the foil. She had never seen something so lovely, so fierce, so tempting, and the quicker she did this and the quicker she came were very good incentives to get it on.

She played for a moment, loving the feel of him naked in her hands, teasing him with hot breaths to the head, cupping him in her hand.

'Candy.'

His voice was deeper, if at all possible, impatient and deliciously stern, and she would have loved to find out what might happen if she teased him further, dragged this out a little longer. Instead, she briefly looked up at chocolate-brown eyes that made her feel as sexy as hell.

'Put it on,' he said.

She did as she was told, unravelling it along his lovely thick length and deliberately taking her time, loving the sound of his sharp breathing and then the impatient way he pushed her hands away when the job was done.

He pushed her shoulder lightly and it was like dominoes

falling, because she toppled back on the bed and he lifted her legs abruptly for daring to keep him waiting. She was compliant, wonderfully so. *Talk about boys to men*, Candy thought as he seared inside her and then she wrapped her legs around him. It was like comparing apples to oranges. He knew exactly what to do as he moved deep inside her. His erection was so strong and fierce that each thrust took her to a place she had never been before.

'I'm going to come,' she said almost in apology, watching, feeling, arching to the bliss of him searing inside.

'I think that's the point,' he said, trying to hold on, revelling in the tight grip of her muscles and the tension of her as she came. It was so deep, so heavy, so intense that Candy briefly wondered if she'd even had an orgasm before.

He kept making love to her through it. She wanted to catch her breath, but then she didn't, for she loved the feel of him taking her as she came. Then she lost her head a little, stopped thinking about anything other than a very small bedroom and a whole lot of pleasure. Steele was looking down at her and then he stilled and she sobbed in pleasure as he started thrusting faster and released into her. To not come again would have proved impossible, to feel his tension release, to see this beautiful man above her and feel him come deep inside shot her into orbit again, her hand pushing at his chest, at the delicious hurt of a sensitive orgasm.

No regrets, never, she swore as, still inside, he collapsed onto

her and they breathed their way back to consciousness.

He lay there, inhaling the scent of her hair, feeling her legs loosen and lower to the floor, and he knew this was different. Never had he been more perfectly matched in the bedroom. Her inexperience counted more than she knew for she melded to him, moulded to him. It was all he could do not to gather her things and carry her home.

And then normal service returned to his brain and he kissed her instead of saying the thoughts in his mind.

They ate at her favourite takeaway. A Formica table and cheap plates yet they fell on their food like savages, rather aware that sustenance might be needed later in this night, and then they headed for the movies.

'Sad or dark?' Steele offered.

'Dark,' Candy said.

They went to the blackest, grimmest, yet funniest film. He did watch it intently, yet the only reason he couldn't concentrate fully wasn't the *What the hell did you bring me here for?* vibe.

It was the *I really have to touch you* vibe that was coming from him.

'Stop it,' Candy said as his hand moved up her warm thigh and his mouth went for her neck. 'Concentrate.'

Futile words.

They were like teenagers, and that had been a long time ago for Steele and never for Candy. Those years she'd been keeping Franco at arm's length, not dropping her popcorn on the floor

and necking.

'I'm going to have to come and see this alone.'

'So am I.' She smiled and got back to kissing him.

This was heading for morning, Steele knew.

This was heading to tomorrow evening and tomorrow night and the next morning too.

He had this vision of her parents arriving on the doorstep as her legs were behind her ears.

'Come back to mine tonight,' he said between kisses.

'Yes, please,' she agreed.

They weren't ready to be apart any time soon.

CHAPTER SIX

'HOW ARE YOU, Miss Anderson?' Steele asked the following Monday morning as he did his rounds.

'Macey.'

'How are you feeling, Macey?'

'A bit better.'

'That's very nice to hear,' he said as he examined her.

'How was your weekend?' Macey asked him.

'It was very nice,' he said, and she gave a soft smile.

He and Candy had been with each other for a week now. It had been the most intense week of either of their lives. Every available moment they had was spent together. Perhaps, aware how limited their time was, they were determined to make every moment count and were completely into each other. They were both exhausted but in the nicest of ways—between work and sex and eating, and dancing and drives at night just so Candy could find out what it was like to do it in a car, they were sleep deprived and loving it.

'Is Candy on this morning?' Macey asked, oh, so casually.

Steele answered a beat too late. 'I'm not sure what nurses are working this morning.'

'Well, I hope that she is. I haven't seen her for a few days.'

'I think she works in Emergency as well,' Steele said. 'From memory.'

'Does that mean that I won't get to see her again?' Macey fretted, or rather pretended to fret.

Steele knew when he was being played and he didn't mind a bit; he liked it that Macey was starting to notice things that were going on around her. 'I think Candy might be on duty later in the week.'

'Oh, that's good to know.' Macey smiled.

He had, on admission and again last week, interviewed Macey extensively and she had revealed nothing more but Steele pushed on. He knew where they were heading.

'I saw your picture in the corridor,' he said. 'They're putting up pictures of the history of the hospital as a part of the renovations. Emergency is getting a makeover at the moment and so too is the entrance corridor.'

Macey said nothing at first. She didn't want to hear about the changes to the hospital she had loved. It had been such a huge part of her life. 'I don't like hearing about renovations,' she said finally. 'I like remembering it as it was.'

'Things change,' Steele said. 'Not all things, though. Anyway, I saw you in one of the photographs. It looked as if you were getting a medal or a badge in the gardens …'

Macey's eyes filled with tears as she remembered those days.

'Can you talk to me?'

She shook her head.

'I want to see if I can help.'

'Well, you can't.'

'Okay.' He knew not to push her. Macey was starting to come out of her emotional collapse a little. The medicines were starting to help and she was engaging with the nursing staff and the occupational therapist.

He knew there was more, though, and that night he told Candy as he cooked them a stir-fry.

'Macey's holding out on me.'

'Maybe not,' Candy said.

'Oh, I'm pretty certain that she is.'

'How do you know?'

'I just know.' He smiled. 'Can you pass me the oyster sauce?'

She jumped down and went to the cupboard and got it for him.

'I hate this kitchen,' Steele said. 'It's really badly thought out.'

'I hate kitchens, full stop,' she said. 'You like cooking?'

'Not really,' he said, 'but I like eating.'

'Did you …?' Candy stopped. She'd been about to ask if he'd done the cooking when he'd been married. It was, she guessed, a no-go area, so she swiftly changed what she had been about to say. 'So why did you buy it if you hate it so much?

'It's just a serviced apartment.' Steele answered her question while knowing what she'd been about to say. He was used to avoiding such subjects with women he dated but Candy, or rather his feelings for her, was unlike any he had known and he was starting to come to grips with answering the tricky questions for her. For now, though, he was glad she had changed what she'd been about to say. 'All my stuff is in storage. Which is why I have

to work out things like the coffee machine.'

'Oh! I thought you just need glasses. Well, I guess that accounts for the terrible pictures on the walls.'

'I was about to say all my stuff is in storage apart from the pictures,' he said, and then grinned at her pained expression. 'Joke.'

'Thank goodness.'

She opened the bottle as he stirred in the beef. The smell was incredibly strong, and she headed to the sink for a drink and took a few breaths, not wanting to show how the smell had affected her.

Tiny spots were dancing in her eyes and she was sure that if she said anything then Steele would simply tell her, as her parents had, to cut down on the extra shifts that she was working.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'Fine,' she said as she ran a glass under the tap. 'I'm just thirsty.'

'You're wrecked,' Steele said. He turned off the wok and came over and turned her to face him. 'You need an early night.'

She smiled up at him. 'Our early nights are possibly the reason that I'm so tired.'

'I'm serious,' he said. He looked at her pale features and felt a touch guilty that she had been burning the candle at both ends. 'Why don't you go to bed?' he suggested. 'To sleep—a decent sleep.'

'It's seven o'clock.'

'Go to bed,' Steele said, 'and I mean to sleep. You need it.'

'I think I might.'

Because they could, because they were both tired, for no other reason than they wanted to, when Steele had served up their meals they headed to the bedroom, stripped off, Steele closed the curtains and they ate dinner in bed while watching the news. Candy felt very spoiled and very lazy as he took their empty plates through to the kitchen.

'I don't think I've been to bed at this time since I was seven years old,' she said as Steele climbed back into bed. 'I used to beg to stay up then!'

'Do you want to watch a movie or just go to sleep?' he asked, and they shared a very nice kiss.

'I just want to sleep.' She sighed, wriggling down in the covers and getting comfortable with him.

'Then do.'

She lay on his chest, delighted with their early night, feeling the lovely crinkly hair on his stomach and wondering if she'd ever been happier. 'I love your stomach,' Candy said.

'If you want to sleep you'd better stop playing with it, then.'

She didn't.

She thought back to what she'd been about to ask in the kitchen. Whether Steele had done the cooking or if his wife had was irrelevant, she knew. There was other stuff she'd like to know, though. 'Can I ask you something?'

'You can,' he said, staring into the semi-dark and sort of

knowing what was coming and wondering how he'd answer it.

'Why did your marriage break up?

'We just didn't work out,' Steele said. Then he went to add his spiel about they'd been too young, or they'd just grown apart, yet he and Candy had always been honest with each other. They were *so* honest with each other that it sometimes took his breath away. Which meant he didn't want to be evasive now, yet he had never told anyone the reason for the break-up. He'd never told anyone apart from his ex-wife that he was infertile.

And when he had told Annie, she hadn't taken the news well.

'I haven't really talked about it before,' Steele admitted.

'Were you a wife basher?' Candy whispered.

'No.' He laughed.

'Then it doesn't matter,' Candy said, and gave him a light kiss on the chest. 'You don't have to answer.'

He wanted to, though.

'Annie and I got married when I was twenty-three and she was twenty-six. We'd been going out for years,' Steele said. 'We bought the house, the dog, all good …'

Candy didn't like that.

It was funny but she felt the little stiffening of her body as he gave his past a name and an age but then she breathed out through her nostrils and lay there, waiting for him to continue. 'Then Annie decided, or rather we both decided, to start a family.'

'She decided or both?' Candy checked.

'I thought we should wait but Annie really wanted children

so we went for it but nothing happened,' Steele said. 'And then nothing kept on happening. I went and had a test—they usually check for issues with the guy first as it's far less invasive—and so we found out, pretty much straight away, that the problem was me. I'm infertile.' He waited for her to stiffen again, or some sign of tension, or what, he didn't know, but instead she looked up at him through the darkness. '*That's* why you broke up?'

'Pretty much. Annie was devastated. I mean, the news completely sent her into a spin.'

'You broke up just because of that?' Candy asked. She really didn't understand.

'It causes a big strain in a marriage. Then there was all her family and how they dealt with the news.' Steele let out a sigh. 'Can you imagine your family's reaction if you told them that your husband was infertile?'

Candy thought for a moment and she could and so she answered him honestly. 'One, I'm not very keen on getting married …'

'Come on.'

'Seriously, I'm not,' she said. 'Two, I wouldn't tell them—it's none of their business. I might tell them that *we* were having problems if they nagged enough.' She thought about it some more. 'Steele, I do everything I can not to discuss sex and such with them—I still hide my Pills in my handbag.'

'I guess.' He smiled. 'After all, you hid me in the bedroom.'

Candy nodded to his chest. 'So I certainly wouldn't be

discussing my partner's sperm count with them.'

Steele gave a low laugh.

'You said that she'd been back in touch?' she ventured.

'Yep, her second marriage has broken up and she asked if I would consider giving us another go, though with one proviso—there have been a lot of advances in technology apparently …'

'What a cow!'

He smiled. 'My thoughts at the time—well, a little less politely put in my head. I just hung up on her.'

'You didn't consider it.'

'I don't love her any more,' he said. 'I haven't for a long time.'

He looked a little more closely into the timeline of his marriage and divorce, something he rarely did. 'When I found out that I probably couldn't be a father and Annie had wrapped her head around the news, she lined us up for this battery of tests and investigations. She started to talk about donor sperm and, to be completely honest …' Steele hesitated; it hurt to be honest at times. 'I think I knew then that we had more problems than my infertility.'

'Like?'

He had never really examined it. He'd just shoved that into the too-hard basket, but lying there, her fingers on his stomach and her breath on his chest, he felt able to go further. 'Well, I'd always planned on being the complete opposite to my parents with my children. I didn't want boarding school or that sort of thing. I wanted to be a real hands-on father. When we first started

trying to have a baby, though I thought we were maybe jumping in rather too soon, I was also looking forward to it. I think we all assume, or at least I did, that I'd be a parent one day. When I got the results I suddenly lost all that. I told Annie and she sobbed and she cried and then she had to go to her family and wail with them. It went on for weeks, and do you know what, Candy?'

She heard the bitterness in his voice and now she could understand it. 'What?'

'I was feeling pretty awful at the time. Seriously awful. I wanted some time to get my head around it. I wanted to process the knowledge that I couldn't have children. In hindsight we'd had it really good till that point. We'd never had to deal with anything major. And when we did, I found out that I didn't like the way Annie dealt with the difficult things that life flings at us at times. She made it all about her, not even about us. It was all about Annie. I tried to understand where she was coming from, yet she never did that for me. I think I fell out of love. If I was ever properly in love in the first place …' he mused. 'So, yes, while I've always thought that it was infertility that broke us up, I don't think it's that neat.'

He loved it that she was still there. She hadn't even jolted when he'd told her. Maybe because they were temporary, Steele pondered. Maybe because she wasn't worried about his ability to make babies, but it was nice to have said it and to have got such a calm reaction.

'Was she blonde?' Candy asked, and it made him smile.

‘No.’

‘Tall and leggy?’

‘Go to sleep.’ He was really smiling now as he kissed the top of her head.

‘Can I ask another thing?’ she said sleepily.

‘You can.’

‘Why are we using condoms?’

‘Because I always have.’

‘So have I.’ She gave him a little nudge and Steele lay there smiling at the potential reward for his little confession. ‘Well, they do say that every cloud has a silver lining.’

Candy didn’t answer.

She was fast asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CANDY HAD NEVER slept better than she did when Steele was beside her. His breathing, his heartbeat, the way he held her through the night were like a delicious white noise that blocked out everything else other than them. They wrapped themselves around each other, then unwrapped themselves when they got too hot and then when they got too cold found the other again. It was a seamless dance that lasted a full ten hours and had them on a slow sultry simmer that, by morning, started to rise to boiling point.

Candy awoke slowly, face down on the pillow and with her arms over her head. Steele's arm lay over her waist. The scent in her nostrils was Steele and as she started to wake up she remembered what they had been talking about before she'd fallen asleep. She knew it wasn't something that he'd discussed with others and the privilege of him confiding in her gave her a warm feeling. She loved it that he'd told her. She loved lying in bed next to him and feeling him start to wake up. She loved every minute of her time with him.

She felt his hand roam her spine. Steele's slow, lazy explorations made her melt into the mattress. It was as if each vertebra, right down to the lowest, was an individual treasure worth examining. His hand moved up her back and then to the exposed flesh on her side. Her rib cage received a significantly

slower perusal, and his fingers found the softness of her flattened breast. She wanted to lift herself up to let his hand in but he rolled heavily onto her. His mouth buried beneath her hair, reaching for her neck, and then kissed his way to her ear.

'You do talk in your sleep.' His lovely voice greeted her ear and was just as effective in turning her on as his hands.

'Don't believe a word I say.' Candy smiled as he whispered to her the rude things that she *hadn't* said.

'How are you feeling now?' he asked, because it had been a very long sleep after all.

'Better than I ever have,' she admitted. 'I never want to move.'

'Then don't.'

There was a thrill low in her belly and Candy, who had never, till Steele, had morning sex, was fast becoming a fan as, still face down on the pillow, she felt Steele's delicious weight come fully on top of her.

Temptation beckoned as she parted her legs just a little, closing her eyes as his fingers checked that she was ready, which of course she was. Clearly last night's conversation was still on his mind because there was no pause in proceedings to reach for a condom and put it on. Instead, she felt his naked warmth nudging her.

He entered her slowly and Candy let out a moan and so too did Steele, because to feel her wet warmth along his length was intimate, way more intimate than he had been in a very long time.

His mouth was at her ear. 'Cross your ankles,' he said.

Candy did so and she thought she might collapse with the pleasure as together they started to rock—she could feel every long generous inch of him, hear his ragged breathing. Her face was red and sweaty in the pillow, and Steele took her hand and placed it between her legs and got to work on her breasts.

Oh!

She'd feel guilty later, Candy decided, but he didn't seem to mind a bit that she touched herself. They were barely moving, just rocking, his mouth was at her ear, his fingers stretching her nipples, and then his fingers slid down and took over from hers.

'You're bad for my conscience,' she said.

'No conscience needed,' he said.

He could go for ever like this.

Usually.

Her buttocks were so soft and ripe and they started to lift and press into his groin, and the soft muffled moans of pleasure had Steele tip just as she did and it was bliss to feel him come unsheathed inside her.

'Oh …' Candy lay feeling his weight on her and never wanting him gone. Even the alarm clock that was going off seemed a mile away.

'Can you wake me up like that tomorrow?' she said.

'I can.'

He rolled off and they lay, Candy still on her stomach, facing each other, and sharing a smile.

'I'm going to try and swap so I can get this weekend off,' Steele

said, because she flew out the following Friday. 'It's not long now till you go.'

She didn't want to go.

Well, she did, because she was probably going to spend the entire first week of her holiday in bed. With all these extra shifts and sex marathons she was looking forward to sleeping round the clock.

She just wished that her holiday was scheduled for after he'd gone.

Then she stared into his eyes and wondered who she was kidding because she knew that she was going to spend her entire holiday sobbing. Despite starting off with the best of intentions to keep things light, to simply enjoy, Candy knew she was in way over her head. Her feelings for this man were so intense, so instinctively right that she simply could not imagine how she was possibly going to begin to get over him.

'Steele …' She took a breath. She wasn't sure if what she was about to say would sound too pushy, but she'd never held back from the truth with him and she chose not to now. 'Why don't you come for a few days?'

'To Hawaii?'

'Yes.' Candy nodded.

'I don't want to intrude on your holiday …'

'It wouldn't be intruding. It would be nice if you came in the middle. You've got a long weekend coming up.'

'It would be nice,' Steele said. 'I'd be pretty wrecked, though.'

'Well, I'll have slept for a week by the time you get there,' Candy said. 'I'll have enough energy for both of us. Think about it,' she offered, and then she climbed out of bed and grimaced when she saw the time. 'I'm going to be late. I'll have a quick shower and then I need to stop by my flat.'

'I'll drive you in,' Steele said. To keep things well away from work Candy was still taking the Underground and he watched the little flash of worry flare in her eyes.

'We might be seen,' she said. 'Steele, you've no idea how gossip spreads at that place.'

'I'm sure I do.' He smiled. 'It doesn't bother me if we're seen, unless of course it's a problem for you.'

She thought about it for a moment. 'Actually, no.'

'I can have broken your heart and put you off seeing anyone for ages after I've gone.' Steele grinned, giving her an excuse to give to Gerry if he pushed her to go out with him when he returned from Greece. But then Steele met her eyes and his tone changed slightly and she, though late for work, stood there in the bedroom and felt her heartbeat quicken. 'You could even say you were still seeing me,' he said, and they just looked at each other.

'I guess he wouldn't know either way,' Candy said, though something told her this conversation had little to do with excuses to give to Gerry.

There were two, possibly three, conversations going on.

That Steele would be gone and that Candy could say what she liked about them if it made things easier for her with Gerry.

That he would be gone, Steele thought, and he was saying that possibly this might last longer.

That he would be gone, Candy thought, and she didn't want him to be.

'Get ready,' he said.

They stopped at her flat and Candy quickly changed into jeans, which was what she usually wore for arriving at work, and rubbed some serum into her hair as she chatted to Steele.

'We came back here for this?'

'I can't leave home without it,' Candy said, trying to tame her long wild curls. 'I should buy another bottle and leave it at yours.'

'Why don't you just pack some things now and put them in my car?' Steele said, and she hesitated because she'd been thinking exactly the same thing. 'It would save us dashing back and forth all the time.'

She packed a case and they loaded it into his car and drove to work. It was all so new, so exciting that neither could help smiling.

As they pulled into the staff car park, Louise, a midwife who had done a stint in Emergency last year, was walking past. She and Candy had got on well. Louise was blonde and gorgeous and rather pregnant and she waved to Candy and gave a little wink.

'We're public knowledge now.' Candy smiled as she waved back, because Louise was a terrible gossip, which was surprising, considering that she was married to Anton, an obstetrician whose middle name was discretion.

'I'm fine with that,' Steele said.

He had long ago stopped playing games and this felt nothing like a game with Candy.

'We'll keep it discreet on the ward, though,' Candy said, because she was working on the geriatric unit today till lunchtime.

'Yes,' Steele said. 'I just don't want to be dropping you at another entrance and things. Come back to mine after work. I've got a meeting at six, though,' he continued, 'so I won't be back till about eight.'

'I'll have bread waiting in the toaster for you,' Candy said as he peeled off a key, which he had never done before. She snapped it onto her key ring as if it was no big deal.

It was a big deal. Both knew it. It was way too soon, but in other ways it was not soon enough.

Neither knew where this had come from or fully what it was.

They were planning holidays, her suitcase was in his boot, his key was now in her bag and they were kissing in the front seat as if one of them had just stepped off a plane after a year's absence. When she pulled back from his kiss, she returned to her question from before she'd fallen asleep. Candy was curious about his ex-wife and that spoke volumes in itself.

'*Was* she tall and leggy?' Candy smiled, watching him cringe just a little as he shook his head.

'Gamine?' Candy ventured. 'Please say no.'

'Not gamine *exactly* …' Steele said, and she groaned.

'Careful, Steele,' she warned. 'You may live to regret your next choice of words.'

He just smiled as they got out of the car.

There was nothing about their time together to regret.

Just that it was running out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'I'M GOING TO take off your dressing, Macey,' Candy said. 'Steele wants to have a look at it.'

'Are you working tomorrow?' Macey asked, because Candy only had a four-hour shift and finished at lunchtime.

'I am, but I'm working down in Emergency.'

Macey was improving. Her medications were starting to kick in and she was engaging with the staff and other patients. She was also taking her meals unaided but she was still far from the feisty woman who had arrived in Emergency.

Steele came in just as Candy had got the dressing off. It was clearing up but it was very sloughy and still a bit smelly and as she saw it, Candy blew out.

'I'm just going to get the phone,' she said, even though it wasn't ringing, but she felt a bit sick. 'I won't be long.'

'I was like that,' Macey said to Steele, 'when I was …' Macey quickly changed what she had been about to say mid-sentence. 'When I was nursing.'

'No, you weren't,' Steele said. 'You weren't some young pup who couldn't stomach a bit of pus.'

Macey looked at him.

He knew. She was sure of it.

Steele did know because he had seen the cape carefully held to hide Macey's stomach in the photo in the entrance hall. He'd

also done a little delving and it would seem that Matron Macey Anderson had gone to Bournemouth to recover from polio, though she'd made no reference to it when Steele had asked her for her medical history.

Tell me, his eyes said as Macey's own eyes filled with tears. Steele sat on the bed and took her hand. 'Talk to me, Macey.'

'When I was *carrying*, I was like that.' She started to cry as a fifty-five-year-old secret was finally released and Steele let her cry. He passed her tissues from her locker, not saying a word as Macey wept.

As Candy came in to do the dressing he briefly looked up to her. 'I've got this, thanks,' he said.

Candy saw that Macey was upset and left them.

When Macey stopped crying, he didn't press her for more information; instead, he did the dressing on her leg and afterwards he sorted out the covers. 'Do you want a cup of tea?' he asked.

'I'd like a sherry.'

'I bet you would,' he said. 'I'll be back in a moment.'

He took away the trolley, leaving Macey alone for a little while to gather herself. He left the curtains closed around her.

Candy was having a glass of water at the desk and he asked her for the keys to the cupboard where the sherry and things were kept and poured Macey a glass.

'Is she okay?' Candy asked.

'She will be. I'm going back in to talk to her,' Steele said.

'Macey saw you get a bit dizzy and has got you down as pregnant. I told her you're not and that they don't build nurses as strong these days.' He gave her a grim smile and then explained what was happening. 'As it turns out, she had a baby.'

'Oh …'

'Macey has never told anyone until now so it's a huge deal to her. I'm just giving her a few moments to gather herself,' Steele said, 'and then I'm going to go in and speak with her. Would you tell Gloria to make sure that we're not disturbed?'

'Sure.'

'If she has any visitors …'

'I'll say that the doctor's in with her.'

'Thanks.'

He walked back behind the curtains. Macey had stopped crying and she gave Steele a watery smile.

'Sorry about that,' she said.

'Why should you be sorry?' Steele asked, handing her the glass of sherry. 'I'm glad that you told me. Would you like to talk about it?' he offered.

'I don't know how to,' Macey admitted. 'It's been a secret for so long.'

'Not any more,' Steele said. 'It might help to talk about it.'

'I got pregnant when I was twenty-seven,' Macey said. 'He was married. I was never much of a looker and I suppose I was flattered. Anyway, my parents would have been horrified. They would have said that I was old enough to know better. We're never

old enough to know better when it comes to matters of the heart, though. Instead of telling them, I confided in one of the matrons here. I thought she'd be shocked but she was more than used to it and took care of things. I was sent down to Bournemouth to have him. Everyone thought that I had polio and that was the reason I was away so long. Instead, I had my son and he was handed over for adoption.'

'I'm sorry, Macey,' Steele said. 'That must have been so painful.'

'It still is.' She nodded. 'I was very sick when he was delivered. I did everything I could not to push because I knew that as soon as he was born he would be taken away. I passed out when he was delivered and I never got to hold him and I never even got to see him. When I came around the next day I asked if I could have just one cuddle but I was told it was better that way. It wasn't.'

'Have you ever tried to look him up or make contact?'

'Never,' she said. 'I've thought about it many times but I didn't want to mess up his life if he didn't know he was adopted. I was told that he had gone to a very good family and that I was to get on with my life. I came back to work and threw myself into my career, but I've thought about him every single day since.'

'And his father?'

'I had nothing to do with him after that,' Macey said. 'We worked alongside each other for a few years afterwards. I think at first he thought he could carry on with me as before but I soon put him right. I told him to concentrate on his marriage. I'm very

ashamed that I had an affair with a married man.'

'Try not to be ashamed,' Steele suggested. 'Perhaps it would be better to view that time with remorse but do your best to leave the shame out of it.

'I know you must have felt very alone at the time but I can tell you from all my years doing this job that what happened to you happened to a lot of women from your generation.'

'He was married, though.'

'You weren't the first and you certainly won't be the last person to have an affair with a married man. My guess is you've more than paid the price.'

'I have.'

'Forgive yourself, then,' Steele said. 'Have you thought about discussing what happened with your nieces?'

'Sometimes,' Macey said. 'I wake up some nights, imagining them finding out what happened after I'm gone and not being able to speak about it with me.'

'Maybe consider speaking with them again,' Steele suggested. 'And if you want help telling them, or if you want me to do it for you, let me know.' He watched as Macey frowned, though it wasn't a dismissive frown. He could see that she was thinking about it. 'And if you never want to discuss it again, then that's fine too.'

'I might think again about telling them …' she said. 'There's just so much guilt. Sometimes when I'm enjoying myself I feel that I don't deserve to.'

'Let the guilt go, Macey,' Steele said. 'You are allowed to be happy.'

Candy sat at the nurses' station, staring at Macey's curtains, but, though usually she'd be curious, right now she wasn't wondering what was going on behind closed curtains.

Steele's throwaway comment about Macey thinking that Candy was pregnant had immediately been disregarded but now a small nagging voice was starting to make itself known.

She felt *so* tired.

Seriously tired.

There were many reasons that could account for that but the usually energetic Candy could barely walk past a bed without wanting to climb into it.

And she *had* felt sick a couple of times.

Actually, she'd had a bout of stomach flu a few weeks ago. Or she'd assumed it was stomach flu.

But she'd had her period, though it had been light, but she was sure that was because she had gone back on the Pill.

God, was it that fabulous bra that had given her such cleavage?

Stop it, Candy told herself.

Except she couldn't stop it.

'How is she?' she asked, when Steele came out from behind Macey's curtains.

'She's having a cry so keep them closed.' He told her a little about it. 'She doesn't want her nieces to know at this stage but at least she seems to be thinking about telling them.' He frowned at

Candy's distraction. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she said.

She wasn't, though.

Macey's words had seriously unsettled her.

Candy did her best not to let them.

She headed for home and looked around her flat. She opened the fridge to sort out the milk and things but let out a moan when she saw that it had already been done.

Her parents had been around.

Candy looked at a letter on her kitchen bench and saw that it had been opened.

It was her bank statement.

And there were flashing lights on her answering machine that Candy knew would be messages from her parents—they were really the only people who called her on her landline.

Candy took a breath and called her mum. She sat for five minutes wondering why it had to be like this as her mum demanded to know where she'd been and what she'd been doing.

'I've been really busy with work,' she said, loathing that she had to lie and then deciding not to. 'I've been doing a lot of extra shifts,' she explained, and took a deep breath. 'I've booked a holiday. It was a last-minute thing.'

'Where?'

'Hawaii. I go next Friday for two weeks.' Candy closed her eyes and tried to answer in calm tones as the questions started.

'I'm going by myself,' Candy said. 'I just felt that I needed to

get away.'

No, she couldn't afford it and as she was told that Candy thought of the first day she had met Steele, who had simply said, 'Good for you.'

'Mum,' Candy interrupted. 'I'm going on holiday, I want to go and I'm not going to argue about it with you.'

'You listen—'

'No,' she said. 'I love you very much, you know that I do, but I'm not going to run everything that I do by you.'

It hurt to have this discussion but she knew it was way overdue. She knew they loved and cared for her and that they expected to be involved in every facet of her life. It just wasn't the way Candy wanted to live any more.

'Ma, I'm not arguing,' she said. She took a breath, wanting to tell them to please ring in the future before dropping around. She wanted to ask for the return of her keys but baby steps, Candy decided, so she dealt with that morning's events. 'Mum, I don't want you opening my mail and I've told you over and over that I don't want you coming around and letting yourself in when I'm not here.'

She meant it. So much so that when her mother pointed out she was just trying to help and, anyway, she'd need someone to take care of the flat while she was in Hawaii, Candy snapped in frustration. 'It's not a stately home that needs taking care of. It's a one-bedroom flat!'

It didn't go well.

Candy knew her requests would be, as always, simply ignored so after she put down the phone she did what she didn't want to but felt she had to.

She made a trip to the hardware store, but not just for locks. She also bought a drill.

Then she had to go back to the hardware store a second time because after numerous attempts her shiny new drill wouldn't screw in a nail but a very nice guy explained what a drill bit was for!

She loathed that she'd done it.

She loathed more than that that she'd had to, but she had realised that despite the move she hadn't really left home. Her parents saw her flat as a bedroom with a slightly longer hall to walk down. Candy thought of Steele hiding in her room that night and knew that was the reason they stayed at his place.

No, Candy thought as she turned the new lock on her door and then headed for Steele's, it was her life.

It was a long day for Steele.

A very long day.

He stopped by Macey's bed at the end of his shift and she asked if he would speak with her niece when she visited tomorrow.

'Of course I will,' Steele said.

Then he had a meeting to sit through, which really had nothing to do with him, given that he'd be gone in a few weeks. Not that it stopped him putting his point across about the lengthy waits in

Emergency. Oh, and a few other things too.

By nine he should be more than ready for home but for once Steele was tentative.

There was no bread waiting for him in the toaster.

Steele walked through his apartment and put Candy's case, which he had bought in from the car, down in the hallway. He knew she was here and he knew where she probably was.

He walked through to the bedroom and, sure enough, there was Candy, fast asleep in bed with the light still on. He looked at her black curls all splayed out on the pillow and he looked at the dark circles under her eyes and he stood there for a full two minutes, watching her sleep deeply.

Steele made his own toast and then had a shower and tried to watch a film. It was a film that he had been meaning to watch for ages but, unusually for him, he couldn't concentrate.

There was something else, far deeper, on his mind.

He turned off the television and lights and got into bed next to Candy, and she rolled into him.

'Sorry,' she said sleepily. 'I saw the bed and couldn't resist. When did you get back?'

'Just now,' he said, though it had been a good hour.

'I changed the lock on my front door.' Her voice was groggy with sleep.

'Good for you,' Steele said. 'Go back to sleep.'

She did.

He didn't.

Instead, he lay staring at the ceiling.
Yes, there was a lot on his mind.
Macey's words had now seriously rattled him too.

CHAPTER NINE

After

CANDY WOKE IN Steele's arms and listened to the sound of his breathing.

She wanted him to wake and roll over and make love to her. She wanted the pregnancy thought in her head to be obliterated by his kiss.

Then she didn't want his kiss because she felt sick.

Candy's mind flicked over the past few weeks.

Yes, she'd been sick last month, but it had been one of those bugs.

Surely?

She really felt sick now and she crept to the bathroom and tried to throw up as quietly as she could.

It was exhaustion, Candy told herself, brushing her teeth and then showering, but when she glanced in the mirror she could see the fear in her eyes.

Steele lay there listening to Candy flush the toilet to drown out her gags and he blew out a breath.

'Morning,' he said a few moments later, when he came in and she was already in the shower.

'Morning.' Candy smiled but she couldn't quite meet his eyes.

There was an elephant in the room that they both chose to ignore and they dashed around, getting dressed, finding keys,

exclaiming they were running late when really they were actually doing quite well for time.

There was the first uncomfortable silence between them as Steele drove Candy and the massive elephant in the car to work.

There was no frantic kissing and they walked through the car park in silence, Candy making the decision to do a pregnancy test as soon as she got there, Steele wondering what the hell he should say.

If anything.

The sound of an ambulance siren had her look up and she saw Lydia standing in the forecourt, frantically gesturing for her to run. Clearly there was something big coming in.

'I've got to go,' she said.

'Go!' Steele said, and he watched her run through the car park and to the forecourt, where not one but three flashing-light ambulances were now pulling up. Kelly ran past him too and as Steele walked up the corridor the anaesthetists and trauma teams were running down it towards Emergency.

Candy, Steele thought, was in for one helluva morning.

She was.

She raced into the changing rooms and stripped off her jeans and T-shirt and got into scrubs as Kelly did the same.

'What is it?' Kelly asked.

'Multi-traumas.' Candy passed on the little Lydia had told her as she'd dashed past. 'Four of them.'

'Four are coming here?'

It was rare to get four all at once but apparently there were several more critically injured patients going to different emergency departments. A high-speed collision, involving several vehicles, meant there would be nothing to think about other than the patients any time soon.

It was on this morning that Candy fell back in love with Emergency.

Yes, it was busy and stressful but it was what she loved to do. Helping out with a little girl who had looked dire when she'd first arrived but who was now coughing as Rory, the anaesthetist, extubated her was an amazing feeling indeed.

'It's okay, Bethany,' Candy said as the girl opened her eyes and started to cry. 'I'm Candy. You're in hospital but you're going to be okay.'

Thank God! She looked up at Rory, who gave her a wide-eyed look back because it had been touch and go. Bethany had had a chest tube inserted as her lung had collapsed in the accident and her heart hadn't been beating when she'd arrived in the department.

To see her coughing and crying and alive, Candy knew why she'd fought so hard to do a job she loved.

Rory and the thoracic surgeon started talking about sedation and getting Bethany up to ICU, and it all happened seamlessly.

'Busy morning?' Patrick, the head nurse in ICU, smiled when Candy came up with her patient.

'Just a bit.'

'You look exhausted,' Patrick commented. 'So this is Bethany?' He looked down at the little girl, who was sedated but breathing on her own. He nudged Candy away for a moment. 'I'm going to put her in a side room. I thought about putting her next to Mum but I think it's going to scare her more for now.'

'How is her mum doing?' Candy asked, because she had been so busy working on Bethany that she didn't really know what was going on with the rest of her family.

'Won't know for a while,' Patrick said. 'They'll keep her in an induced coma for at least forty-eight hours. Is it settling down in Emergency now?'

'I don't know,' she admitted. 'I haven't looked up yet.'

'Go and grab a drink,' Patrick said.

He was nice like that and Candy headed round to the little staffroom and had a quick drink from the fridge, pinched a few biscuits and then headed back to the unit.

It was quiet. One elderly man was being wheeled in on a stretcher and Candy rolled her eyes at Kelly as she walked into Resus to start the massive tidy up.

It was going to be a big job.

'Let's get one bed completely stocked and done,' Kelly said, 'just in case something comes in, then we can deal with the rest.'

They got one area cleared and restocked and were just about to commence with the rest when Lydia came in.

'I've asked if everyone can come through to the staffroom.'

'Now?' Candy checked, because there was still an awful lot

to do.

'Just make sure that one crash bed is fully stocked,' Lydia said, 'and then come straight through. I need to speak to everyone.'

Steele's morning flew by too.

He had a video meeting with some of his new colleagues in Kent and arranged to go there next Thursday as he wanted to see how the extension was coming along. He also had a house lined up with a real estate agent and wanted to take a second look.

Mr Worthington passed away just after eleven, his radio on, his family beside him. Steele spent a good hour with the family afterwards in his office at the end of the ward.

As they left, instead of heading back out, he sat and thought about Candy. He didn't know how he felt and he didn't know what to do.

He looked up when there was a knock at the door and he called for whoever it was to come in then remembered that he'd asked Gloria to send Macey's niece in once the Worthington family had gone home.

'Hello, Dr Steele.' Catherine smiled. 'Gloria said that you wanted to talk to me.'

'I do,' he said. 'Come in.'

'Aunt Macey has just gone for an occupational therapy assessment,' Catherine said. 'It's nice to see her walking again.' She took a seat and then looked at Steele. 'It's bad news, isn't it …?' she said, and her eyes filled up with tears.

'No, no.' Immediately Steele put her at ease. 'I haven't called

you in to break bad news about your aunt's health.' He watched her let out a huge breath of relief. 'Her physical health anyway,' Steele amended. 'But as you know, Macey's been depressed.'

'She seems to be getting better, though,' Catherine said. 'The tablets seem to be starting to work.'

'They are,' Steele said. 'She's talking a bit more and engaging with the staff. The thing is,' he said, 'it isn't just medication that your aunt needs at the moment. She's asked that I speak with you. There's something that's upsetting her greatly and it's been pressing on her mind.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Your aunt has something she wishes to discuss with you, a secret that she has kept for many, many years, and it's one she doesn't want you to find out about after her death …' He told her that Macey had had a baby more than fifty years ago and that he'd been given up for adoption at birth, but Catherine kept shaking her head, unable to take in the news. 'We'd have known.'

'Very few people knew,' Steele said. 'That's what it was like in those days.'

'But my aunt's not like that …' Catherine said, and then caught herself. 'When I say that, I mean she's so incredibly strict—she's always saying that women should save themselves and …' She stopped talking and simply sat there as she took the news in. 'Poor Aunt Macey. How can we help?'

'I think speak with Linda and then perhaps you can both come in together. Talk it over with Macey, maybe ask if she wants to

look for her son, or if she simply wants it left. Her fear is that you'll find out after her death, whenever that may be, and you might judge her.'

'Never.'

'I know it's a shock,' he said.

'It is.' Catherine smiled. 'My mother would have had a fit if she knew. Is that why she's been depressed?'

'I think it's a big part of it,' Steele said. 'Maybe when she's got it off her chest and spoken with her family, things can really start to improve.'

He was about to head down to Emergency to check to see if his new admission had arrived, but before he left he quickly checked some lab results and then scrolled through his emails. Then he checked the intramail as they were hounding him to go and get another security shot for his lanyard. He saw an alert that the Emergency Department had been placed on bypass and let out a sigh of frustration, because he really didn't want his patient ending up in another hospital.

He clicked on the intramail and, for a man who dealt with death extremely regularly, for a man who usually knew what to do in any given situation, Steele simply didn't have a clue how to handle this.

We are greatly saddened to inform staff of the sudden death of Gerard (Gerry) O'Connor, a senior nurse in the Emergency Department.

Gerry passed away after sustaining a head injury in Greece.

Currently the Emergency Department has been placed on bypass as his close colleagues process the news.

He blinked when his pager bleeped and saw that his patient had, in fact, arrived in Emergency.

Steele considered paging Donald, his registrar, to take it. He wanted some time to get his head around things.

Yet he wanted to see how Candy was.

Steele walked into the war zone of Emergency. Resus was in shambles, though some staff, called down from the wards, were trying to tidy it up.

There were just a few staff around and he was surprised when, after checking the board, he walked into the cubicle where his patient was, to see Candy checking Mr Elber's observations.

'I'm Steele,' he said to his patient.

'Dr Steele, if you want to be formal.' Candy smiled at the elderly man as she checked his blood pressure. She was trying to keep her voice light but Steele could hear the shaken notes to it.

'I thought the place was on bypass,' he said to her as she pulled off her stethoscope.

'Mr Elber arrived just before we closed.'

'Can I have a brief word?' he said, and he watched her eyes screw up at the sides a fraction but she nodded and followed him outside.

'I'm so sorry,' Steele said, but Candy shook her head.

'Please, don't.'

'Candy—'

'Please, don't. I can't talk about it. I think I'm going to go home,' she said. 'Lydia offered.' She thought about it for a moment. 'I think I just want to go home.'

'Come round tonight,' Steele said, 'or I'll come over to you.'

'I don't want you to,' Candy said. 'I don't want to sit and cry over my ex with you. It's too weird.'

'It's not,' he said, but he didn't push it. 'Call me if you change your mind.'

'Thanks.'

Candy headed off and spoke with Lydia and said that, yes, on second thoughts, she was going to go home.

The news had come completely out of the blue. All the staff were stunned. Candy had headed straight back out to the department, not really knowing what to do, when she'd seen that Mr Elber was sitting on a trolley and had been pretty much left to himself.

Now the complete numb shock that had hit her after finding out that Gerry was dead was wearing off and she was very close to tears.

And very scared too.

She changed and as she headed out of the department she saw Louise walking in on her way to work.

'Candy.' Louise came straight over. 'I just heard about Gerry. It's such terrible news …'

Candy started to cry but as Louise wrapped her in a hug, feeling Louise's pregnant stomach nudging into her was just

about the last straw.

'I know you had a bit of a thing going on last year,' Louise said. 'It must be so—'

'Louise,' Candy begged, 'it's not that that I'm crying about.' Well, it was, but she certainly wasn't about to tell Louise the entire truth either. 'I think that I might be pregnant and I don't know what to do …'

'Come on,' Louise said, and led her to the canteen. There were groups sitting and talking, some from Emergency and in tears, so it didn't look out of place that Candy was crying.

Louise went and got them both drinks and then came over.

'How late are you?' Louise asked, knowing full well that Candy was seeing Steele—she'd seen them in the car after all.

'I'm not late,' Candy said. 'But I've been feeling sick and I'm so tired …' She knew it didn't sound much to go on. The awful thing was that she *knew* that she was. 'I simply can't be pregnant,'

'It will be okay,' Louise said. As a midwife she was extremely used to a woman's shocked tears when they first came to the realisation that they were pregnant.

'I don't think it can be,' Candy sobbed, 'and I can't tell you why.'

Louise sat and thought for a moment. If Steele was only here for a few more weeks, which was what she'd heard, then it wasn't any wonder that Candy was upset.

'I don't know who to talk to,' Candy said, and then blew her nose and told herself to get it together.

'Can you talk to me?' Louise offered. 'Do you want to do a pregnancy test? I'll come with you.' When Candy said nothing Louise pushed on. 'Could you talk about it with Anton?' Louise asked. Anton was Louise's husband and one of the most sought-after obstetricians in London. 'I was just on my way to have lunch with him so I know that he's got time to see you.'

Candy nodded.

It was time to find out for sure.

Louise took out her phone and sent a text and a few moments later she got a response. 'He says to come to the antenatal clinic and he'll see you. I'll take you over there now.'

'People will wonder what I'm doing in the antenatal clinic.'

'People will think we're just two friends catching up for lunch,' Louise said. 'Don't be so paranoid.'

As they arrived at the clinic Candy felt a moment's reprieve as she looked around at the pregnant women all sitting waiting for their turn to be seen.

She was overreacting, she told herself.

This world didn't apply to her.

'You might as well come in,' Candy said to Louise as they arrived at a door that had a sign with Anton Rossi written on it. 'He'll only tell you what's happening anyway.'

'God, no.' Louise rolled her eyes. 'Unfortunately for me Anton's all ethical like that. If you tell him not to tell me, then wild horses wouldn't drag it from him! You don't have to worry about that.' Louise gave her a lovely smile. 'But if you do want

to tell me then I'm dying to know!' She gave Candy a cuddle just before she went in. 'You'll be fine.'

Candy really hadn't had anything to do with Anton before this. She just knew him by reputation and had seen him occasionally when he'd come down to Emergency to review a patient there.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch break,' she said. 'Thank you for seeing me so quickly.'

'Louise said that you were very upset.'

Candy nodded. 'I know that everything is confidential but the thing is, this is terribly delicate and—'

'First of all,' Anton interrupted, 'you are right—everything you tell me is completely confidential. I never gossip.'

'Thank you.'

'I'm not even taking notes. Do you want to tell me what's happening?'

'I think I might be pregnant,' Candy said. 'The thing is, my partner …' She didn't even know if Steele was that but she pushed on. 'It can't be his.'

'Because?'

'He's infertile.'

'Have you been seeing someone else?' Anton asked gently—he was used to that being the case—but Candy shook her head.

'I've only been with my current partner for a couple of weeks. We weren't supposed to be serious, but …' It sounded so terrible put like that but Anton's eyes were sympathetic rather than judgmental. 'I had a one-night stand with my ex a couple of

months ago.' She thought back. 'Three months, maybe. We used condoms.'

'Nothing is fail-safe,' Anton said.

'I went on the Pill afterwards,' Candy said. 'I wasn't expecting anything to happen again but I just decided I wasn't coming off it. I have had my period.'

'A normal period?' Anton checked.

'It's been light but I thought that was because the day I got it I started the Pill.'

'The first thing we need to do—' Anton was very calm '—is to find out if you are indeed pregnant.'

He gave her a jar and a few minutes later she sat in his office and she knew, she simply knew that she was. A few moments later Anton confirmed it.

'Candy, you are pregnant.'

He let it sink in for a moment.

'How do you think your partner will react?' Anton asked.

'I don't think I'm going to find out,' Candy said, and she just stared at the wall. 'There's really no point telling him. We both agreed from the start—'

'What about the father?'

Oh, that's right. Candy's brain was moving like gridlocked traffic. It was like telling a joke and forgetting the punch line, because she hadn't told Anton the good part yet. 'You know Gerry, the head of nursing in Emergency …'

'Oh, Candy.' Immediately he took her hand. Anton didn't

gossip—in fact, he had been in this office all morning—but he had seen the email twenty minutes or so ago informing everyone that Gerry had passed away while on holiday in Greece and that Emergency was on bypass.

'I don't know what to do.'

'Of course you don't know what to do at the moment,' he said. 'This is all too much of a shock. How long have you been worried that you might be pregnant?'

'Since yesterday,' Candy said. 'A patient said something. I know I'm a bit overweight, it just …'

'Hit home?'

Candy nodded.

'I knew you were pregnant before I did the test,' Anton said, which concerned him a little as it did not seem to fit with her dates. 'We could do an ultrasound now, here, and see exactly where we are,' he suggested. 'Are you ready to do that?'

She nodded.

'Go to the examination table and undo your jeans. He came over and had a feel of her stomach but said nothing—though he was starting to think that Candy would soon be in for another shock.

He squeezed some gel on and turned the machine away from her. 'Can you turn the sound off, please?' Candy said, because she didn't want to hear its heartbeat.

'Of course I can.'

He took a few moments, running the probe over her stomach

and pushing it in over and over.

'I really am sorry to interrupt your lunch break,' Candy said, more for something to say because she was dreading the next conversation.

'My wife would have been nagging me to do an ultrasound on her anyway.' He smiled and then he looked across at Candy. 'I shan't be discussing this with her.'

'Thank you.'

He had finished.

'Stay there,' Anton said as she went to sit up. 'You are close to thirteen weeks pregnant, which means conception was eleven weeks ago.'

'I've had my period, though.'

'Breakthrough bleeding,' Anton said. 'Nothing to worry about. All looks well on the ultrasound. Obviously your hormones are everywhere right now.'

'Would the Pill have harmed it?'

'No. Many, many women I have seen have taken the Pill while not knowing that they are pregnant. You've had no symptoms?' Anton checked.

'Not really.' Candy shook her head and then lay and thought back over the past few weeks. 'I had what I thought was a bug and I've felt sick a couple of times and been a bit dizzy, but I never really gave it much thought.' She looked up at Anton. 'I've been so tired, though. I mean *seriously* tired. I actually booked a holiday because I was feeling so flat.'

'Candy,' Anton said gently, 'I'm not surprised that you have been feeling exhausted—it's a twin pregnancy.'

It was just as well that he had kept her lying down.

Candy lay there, stunned, trying and failing to see herself as a mother of twins. Finally she sat up and when she took a seat at the desk Anton gave her a drink of water.

'I don't know what to do.'

'As of now,' he said, 'I would expect that your mind is extremely scattered. Is there anybody that you can talk to about this?'

'Not really. My parents will freak,' Candy said, panicking just at the thought of telling them. 'I can't tell anyone at work or it will be everywhere.'

He nodded in understanding but he was practical too. 'You are going to start showing very soon—in fact, you are already,' Anton said. 'I could feel that you were pregnant before I did the ultrasound. Your uterus is out of the pelvis and you will show far more quickly with twins.'

'I can't have it, Anton,' Candy said, but then she started to cry because it wasn't an it. It was a *them.*

'Candy, you do need a little time to process this news but you also need to come and see me next week. You don't have much time to make a decision. I do want you to take the time to think very carefully about this.'

She didn't need the time. In that moment, she had already made her choice.

'I can't …' Candy said, and then took a deep breath. 'I'm not having an abortion.'

'Well, you have a difficult road coming up,' Anton said, 'but I can tell you this much—I will be there for you and in six months from now you will have your babies and today will be just a confusing memory.'

'Thank you.'

They chatted some more and Candy told him that she was booked to go to Hawaii next week. 'Can I still go?'

'Absolutely!' he said. 'It will be the best thing for you. Let your insurance company know. Put me down as your obstetrician. I do still want to see you next week, though. You need to have some blood tests and I want to go through things more thoroughly with you. Right now, it's time for the news to sink in.'

Poor thing, Anton thought as she left his office. He had looked after many women whose partner and even ex-partner had died and knew that it was a very confusing time.

He smiled as there was a knock at the door and Louise came in. 'How was she?'

'She's fine,' Anton said, and then rolled his eyes as Louise picked up the gel. 'Step away from the ultrasound machine, Louise.'

'Please,' Louise said. 'It's wide awake. I can feel it kicking.

'Because it probably knows its lunchtime,' Anton said. 'Come on, I would actually like to get some lunch.'

'Is Candy okay?' Louise shamelessly fished as they walked

down to the canteen. Anton absolutely trusted his wife but part of what he adored about her was that she could not keep a secret and so, to be safe, he said nothing.

'She's on with him …' Louise nudged.

'Who?' Anton frowned.

'The sexy new geriatrician that just walked past,' Louise explained. 'Candy is on with him.'

He loathed gossip, he truly did, but, unusually for Anton, he turned his head.

He felt sorry for her new partner too and tried to imagine how he would feel if his gorgeous wife had already been pregnant when they'd met.

Anton was man enough to admit that he didn't know.

Candy stepped into her flat and put down her handbag and she didn't know where to start with her thoughts.

Just after seven there was a knock at the door and Candy opened it to the angry questions and accusations of her parents.

'Where were you?' her mother asked, and demanded to know where Candy had been last night and the night before that.

'We came over and you were not home.'

'Please, not now,' Candy said.

Yes, now.

'For the last two weeks you are hardly home. We call around and the lights are off. We telephone and you don't pick up.'

'I'm twenty-four years old, Mum,' Candy said. 'I don't have to account for my time …'

She might as well have thrown petrol on the fire because all the anger that had been held in by her parents since Candy had moved into her flat came out then.

She was heading for trouble, her mother warned.

They didn't raise her to stay out all night.

Who was she going to Hawaii with?

Candy thought of Steele then and stood there, remembering the beginning of tentative plans.

How much simpler life had seemed then.

'I'm not discussing this,' Candy said. 'I'm very tired. It's been an extremely long day.'

She simply refused to row.

When they finally left she stood in the hall.

No one understood. Her friends at work thought she was ridiculous to worry about what her parents might think, but she did. Candy loved them. She just didn't know how to be both herself and the daughter they demanded that she be.

Imagine telling them that the she was pregnant.

She simply could not imagine it.

Not just pregnant, but pregnant with twins and the father was dead.

Candy dealt with things then as any rational, capable adult would.

She undressed, climbed into bed and pulled the covers over her head.

CHAPTER TEN

'HI.'

Steele could hear the tension in her voice when Candy called him on Saturday, though she was trying to keep her voice light.

'Hi, Candy.'

'Is it okay if we give it a miss tonight?' she asked. They had planned to go to a stand-up comedy and the tickets had been hard to come by.

'Of course it is,' he said. 'I doubt you're in the mood for laughing out loud. Do you want me to come over?'

'I'd really just like a night on my own,' she said.

Another one.

And then another.

And then another.

On Tuesday, four days before she flew, Steele saw her briefly in the admin corridor. She was coming down from Admin, where she had been trying to sort out her salary for her annual leave when she bumped into him.

'How are you doing?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' she said. 'I actually can't stop and speak. Lydia has messed up my annual leave pay and I've been trying to sort it out.'

He walked in the direction of Emergency with her. 'How's the mood in Emergency?'

'Pretty flat,' Candy said. 'His funeral is being held in

Sunderland, where he's from, but the hospital is holding a memorial service for him. They're naming the new resuscitation area after him,' She gave a tight smile. 'Thankfully I'll be in Hawaii when it's held.'

'Thankfully?'

She shook her head. She really didn't want to discuss how mixed up she was feeling right now, especially with Steele. She had considered changing her holiday so she could attend the memorial service but the thought of facing his parents there was too much for Candy. While she knew she had to tell them, she wanted to get her own head around it first. As for them naming Resuscitation after him! Well, the thought of wheeling patients in and out of Gerry's Wing, day in and day out, had her stomach in knots.

Then she turned and looked at the man she was quite sure she loved with all her heart and she wanted to break down and tell him. She wanted the pregnancy to go away and to be back to where they had once been, but it certainly wasn't Steele's problem so she gave him a very tight smile. 'I do have to go.'

He nodded and watched her dash off.

Leave it, the sensible part of his mind said as he headed back to the geriatric unit and went and hid in his office.

He was certain now that Candy was pregnant. In a matter of days her body had changed and she was completely unable to meet his eyes.

He was roused from his introspection by a tap at the door and

he called for whoever it was to come in.

'Sorry to trouble you.'

'No trouble at all.' Steele smiled at Catherine, Macey's niece and another woman.

'This is my sister, Linda.'

'Good afternoon, Linda.' He expected Linda had some questions, that they perhaps wanted to know how best to broach things with Macey. But, as Steele found out every day in his job, there were always surprises to be had.

'When Aunt Macey had her heart attack,' Catherine started, 'Linda took care of her home, fed the cat, that sort of thing …'

'I see.'

Linda spoke then. 'A letter came while she was in hospital. I was doing her mail and paying her bills so she didn't have to worry about being cut off. I opened this letter and it was from a charity that deals with adopted children. It explained that Macey's son wanted to make contact. I didn't know if it would make things worse. She was so sick …'

'Of course you didn't know what to do,' he said.

'I didn't even tell Catherine,' Linda said. 'I just didn't know what to do with the news. I spoke to my husband and he suggested that we wait till Aunt Macey was feeling better. Really, though, she's been slowly going downhill for so long …'

'Do you have the letter with you?' Steele asked, and she nodded and handed it to him.

'He wants to make contact,' Linda said. 'I feel bad for not

telling her.'

'Don't feel bad,' Steele said. 'It could have been an awful shock for her, though now I think it will be very welcome news. Why don't you go in now and speak with her? Facing it will be hard and I'll be around if she gets upset but, to be honest, I think it will be a relief.'

He did hang around, but all seemed calm with Macey. He sat at the desk next to Elaine. He could see Macey and her nieces talking earnestly and at one point Macey actually laughed.

'It's good to see her laughing,' Steele said, and turned and smiled at Elaine.

'Sorry?'

'Macey,' Steele explained, then he saw Elaine's swollen eyes. 'Are you all right, Elaine?'

'I am.' She gave a small shake of her head. 'I'm worried about my assessment.'

Steele frowned. 'Elaine, you're doing really well. I know I'm not a nurse, but I do know how well you look after the patients.'

'Even if I get my words wrong at times,' Elaine said, because Abigail had had a small word with her about the muffy thing.

'Even if you get your words wrong.' He smiled, and was pleased to see that she did too. 'Is there anything else on your mind?'

'No.' She shook her head and stood up and left him sitting alone.

Steele looked over again at Macey and her nieces and knew it

was time for him to take his own medicine.

It was time for him to face things.

When he arrived in Emergency he saw the smudges beneath Candy's eyes and she was still refusing to meet his gaze.

Direct as ever, Steele asked the question. 'Are you avoiding me?'

She stood there and went to lie to him, to say of course not, or whatever, but his beautiful eyes demanded the truth so she nodded. 'Yes.'

'Can I ask why?'

There was no point in telling him about the pregnancy so she made up an excuse. An excuse that was partly true. 'I've been a bit mixed up about Gerry and I had a big argument with my parents. They've realised that I've been staying out at night …'

'Really?' He looked at her for a long moment. He knew she was lying, knew how she'd fought for her independence and knew too that she wouldn't give in to them.

'I think we should just leave things,' Candy said. 'I don't want to upset them.'

'I don't believe you,' he said. 'While I understand you might need a bit of space after what's happened to Gerry, I don't believe that's it.' When Candy didn't respond he pressed on. 'Do you know, one thing that I've really enjoyed about our time together is how honest we have always been. It's fine if you want to end things, but at least tell me the reason why.'

'Can we go somewhere private?' she asked.

'Sure,' he said, his voice clipped. 'My office?'

They walked through the hospital in silence and then onto the geriatric unit and it felt to both of them as if they were walking to the gallows—which they were, for this killed them.

Through the ward they went and to his office at the end, and Macey watched their strained faces as they passed by.

Candy stepped into his office and didn't take a seat. She had a feeling she wouldn't be here for very long.

'Do you want to tell me what's going on?' he invited.

'Not really,' she said.

'Okay. *Are* you going to tell me what's going on?'

'I'm pregnant,' Candy said.

For Steele it was the strangest sensation. Ten years ago he had wondered how he might react when the woman he was crazy about told him such news.

Now, ten years on, the woman he was seriously crazy about was telling him such news.

'With twins,' she added.

He hadn't been aware that she'd brought a cricket bat with her when she'd come into the office. Of course Candy hadn't but it felt like that as she added her little postscript and he was left with one thought, one regretful, sad thought.

They're not mine.

'They're not yours,' she added, like an echo to his brain, and Steele snapped his response, in his gruff, low voice.

'I think I'd already established that, thank you.'

Yes, he actually felt as if he'd been knocked on the back of the head because his reactions, his words did not belong to the man he knew he was, yet, concussed by the impact of her news, he continued to speak. 'What do you want me to say here, Candy?'

'I don't know,' she admitted.

He honestly did not know how to react. Was he supposed to step in and say, *That's fine, darling, I'll raise his babies*? Or, *How convenient, Candy*, he should perhaps say with a smile, *given that I shoot blanks.* Or was he supposed to say that it was no big deal?

It was a massive deal.

He should, Steele knew on some level, take her in his arms and tell her that things would work out, that she could get through this.

His arms couldn't move, though, and his mouth was clamped closed so that no words could come out.

'I'm going to go,' she said.

'Wait.'

'Why?' Candy answered. 'Steele, we agreed to three weeks. We managed two. I was hoping to get through this week without telling you.'

'But you have.'

'Because you're right—we *have* always been honest. Yes, I've been avoiding you. I didn't want to spoil what we had.'

'Have you told your parents?'

Candy shook her head.

'Have you told anyone?'

'I have now,' she said, and she looked straight through his eyes and to his heart. 'I've got the hardest part out of the way now.'

And telling Steele *was* the hardest part. Her parents, Gerry's parents, all of that she would deal with in time, but this part hurt the most.

'I'm going to go,' she said again. 'If you could drop my case off that would be brilliant. Just leave it at the door.'

She walked out then and he sort of came to and opened his office door and stepped onto the ward. There was Candy, walking out quickly, and he closed his eyes in regret for his lack of response. Then he turned and saw that Macey was watching him.

No, Steele did not smile.

Instead, he walked up to the nurses' desk. 'I'm going home,' he said to Gloria. 'Page Donald if you need anything.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS A long lonely night for both of them.

Candy woke in her flat and was more tempted than she had ever been in her life to ring in sick this morning. She had a shift on the geriatric ward, her last one. She was desperate to avoid Steele yet she wanted somehow to see him. And to see Macey too and say goodbye.

Then she had two more shifts in Emergency and then she flew to Hawaii.

Alone.

Or rather not alone—she ran a hand over her stomach and felt the edge of her uterus.

She had no idea how she felt about being pregnant.

No idea how to tell her parents or friends or anyone.

Right now, none of it even seemed to matter.

She loved Steele.

It wasn't like the crushes she'd had on other men, which Candy was rather more used to.

It felt so much deeper than that, like an actual concrete thing that now resided within.

Except the twins resided within also.

Twins?

As he did up his shirt that morning Steele was thinking about them too.

He was also thinking about her words—how telling him had been the hardest part.

He knew how impossible her parents were and he knew telling Gerry's parents would be supremely difficult.

Yet telling him …

As he did up his tie, he found himself closer to tears than he had been at his marriage break-up. Closer to tears than he had been at his grandmother's funeral.

In fact, Steele wasn't even close to tears—he was sitting on the edge of the bath in a serviced apartment, bawling his eyes out, for the fact they were over and the grief that her babies were not his. He'd never cried. Even when he'd found out that he couldn't have children, Steele hadn't broken down. He'd been too busy mopping up Annie's tears. Now, ten years later, he let out what had long been held in. He cried alone.

He was as nice to himself as he had been to Macey.

At seven a.m. it was a bit early for sherry but he made a strong mug of tea and put in extra sugar and then sat and thought what best to do.

He could avoid Candy, Steele knew. He could call in sick today. He had a day off tomorrow and then it was just her final shift in Emergency on Friday—he could send Donald to deal with anything that came up in Emergency, and he would never have to see Candy again.

He couldn't do that, though.

'Morning,' he said as he came into the kitchen on the geriatric

ward, and there was Candy, making a mug of tea.

'Morning,' she said, though she brushed past him pretty quickly and headed off for handover.

Steele headed into his office and checked his emails.

Oh, joy.

There was Gerry.

His smiling face was surrounded by flowers, and Steele, along with the entire hospital—as long as cover could be arranged, of course—was invited to attend the memorial service next Tuesday and the naming of the resuscitation area as Gerry's Wing.

Candy was trying to get her head around that terrible name too.

Lydia, who had been on the edge of taking disciplinary action against Gerry, was now talking about him as if he'd been an angel—an angel with one wing—a wing named after him that Candy would work in, walk through, deal with day in and day out …

As Candy helped Macey shower, she was wondering how the hell she could continue to work there. Kelly had given her an odd look in the changing room yesterday and a little huddle at the nurses' station had suddenly gone very quiet when she had approached.

No one had had the nerve to outright ask her. Candy was quite plump and they were clearly trying to work out if she'd been hitting the doughnuts or if indeed she was pregnant.

Imagine them knowing she was pregnant by Gerry.

'You're very quiet this morning,' Macey said as Candy turned

off the taps and helped her to get dried and dressed.

'I'm sorry, Macey, I was miles away.'

'Dreaming of Hawaii, no doubt,' Macey said. 'Are you looking forward to your holiday?'

'I am,' Candy said. 'I fly on Friday night.'

'It's Wednesday today.' Macey smiled. 'I think for the first time in years I actually know what day it is.'

'You're so much better,' Candy commented, as Macey dressed herself with just a little help. When they got back to the bed, Candy would remove Macey's dressing for Steele to have a look at her leg ulcer, which was doing much better. After lunch, Macey would lie on the bed for a couple of hours' sleep, but apart from that she sat in the chair or walked to the day room. It was wonderful to see the improvement in her.

'Steele says I should be able to go home next week.'

'How do you feel about that?' Candy asked as she walked with Macey back to her bed.

'I'm looking forward to it very much,' Macey said. 'I'm having some modifications done to the bathroom and kitchen, which my niece Linda is sorting out for me. Things will be a lot easier now.'

'Your nieces seem very nice.'

'Oh, they're wonderful women.' Macey nodded, taking a seat by the bed and putting her leg up on a footstool. She watched as Candy made up the bed. 'You've earned your holiday,' Macey said. 'I wish I could be here to see the postcard.'

'I'll send you one, Macey.' Candy smiled, despite her earlier

declaration about not sending any. 'If you're okay with that?'

'Oh, yes, please! It would make my day! Is it just you going?'

Candy nodded.

'Hawaii would be a beautiful place to go with the right man …'

'It would,' Candy agreed, her heart twisting as she thought how close she had come to sharing a part of her holiday with Steele.

'You don't have a boyfriend, though,' Macey continued. 'If I remember rightly.'

'No.'

'And you're carrying?' Macey said gently, and Candy's eyes filled with tears as she nodded.

'I'm having twins.'

'Congratulations, my dear.'

Macey was the first person to offer congratulations and she said it so nicely that Candy started to cry.

'Pull the curtains,' Macey said.

'No, no.' Candy sniffed. 'I'll go to the staffroom.'

'You'll pull the curtains and sit with me for a while.' Macey's orders were clear and Candy did as she was told.

'Have you told …?' Macey hesitated. She had been about to ask if Candy had told Steele, if that was what the argument the other day had been about, but her sharp mind was returning. Macey sat quietly for a moment, remembering when she had been admitted and had snapped at Steele for being a locum. It had only been his second day here, Macey recalled.

Certainly there had been a romance between Candy and

Steele. She had seen it unfold in front of her own eyes.

'Have you told the baby's father?' she asked instead.

'Macey …'

She saw Candy swallow and reached out to take the hands of the younger woman to encourage her to speak on.

'I made a mistake a few months ago, so please don't feel sad for me when I say this—I'm not a grieving widow. The baby's father died a week ago.'

'Gerry?' Macey said, and watched Candy's eyes widen in surprise. 'I hear all the gossip.'

'Yes.' Candy gave a watery smile. 'It was him.'

'That's very sad.'

'It is,' Candy said. 'I don't know how he'd have felt about it,' she went on. 'We wouldn't have got back together but I'm sure we'd have sorted something out.'

'What about Steele?' Macey asked, and she watched the tears spill down Candy's cheeks, though she neither confirmed nor denied there was anything going on.

'You have your holiday to look forward to,' she said, and Candy nodded. 'It's a good job you booked it before you knew.'

'Oh, yes,' Candy said, because it would be her first and last overseas adventure alone. 'I don't think I'll be lounging around on the beach next time I go. It will be buckets and spades …' She shook her head. 'I can't see how I'll manage,' she admitted.

'You know, I can remember being alone and pregnant,' Macey said. 'I expect it's still a very scary place even fifty years on, even

with all the choices you girls have these days. I still remember how scared I felt when I got pregnant but I'll tell you this much —by the end of my pregnancy I wasn't scared about having a baby. I wanted him so much and I know you'll feel the same way about your two.'

Candy nodded. She knew Macey was right. 'I'm sorry for what happened to you, Macey.'

'I know you are but don't be sorry. My nieces are getting into contact with him. If I can see him just once I'll be happy …' Her voice trailed off and she looked up and Candy followed her gaze and saw that Steele had popped his head in.

'Sorry,' Candy said, standing up from the bed. She was supposed to have removed Macey's dressing and she was embarrassed at him seeing her cry.

'It's fine,' Steele said. 'I'll come back later.'

He left them to it. He was glad that Candy was having a chat and a cry with Macey and when she came out a little while later and told him Macey's dressing was down, instead of ignoring what he'd seen he addressed it.

'Do you feel better after speaking with Macey?'

'I do,' she said. 'I'm going to miss her.'

And I miss you, Candy thought, but she could not say that without starting to cry again.

'Could we go somewhere after work?' he said. 'Just to talk.'

She didn't really want to say goodbye to him here, not like this, so she nodded.

They returned to the café he had first taken her to, yet it felt so different now—the innocence and fun of before had left them.

'What would you like to eat?' he asked.

'I'll just have a cup of tea,' she said. 'I'm meeting my parents tonight.'

'Have you told them?'

Candy shook her head 'I'll tell them about the twins when I get back.'

'They'll know very soon.' He'd tried not to notice her bump but now that he had he couldn't not see it. 'I'm not a very good doctor, am I?'

He somehow made her smile.

'I think it popped out about ten seconds after I found out …' Candy said. 'I'll just wear a big baggy top tonight. They're not talking to me anyway, because I changed the locks and I'm going to Hawaii, so I doubt I'll be there for very long.'

'Yet you still go.'

'I love them. I don't agree with them a lot of the time but I still love them very much and I know when I do tell them I'll break their hearts.'

'For a little while,' Steele said.

He took a breath. He could do this type of thing so easily for his patients but when it came to matters of a very private heart, things were very different, but he forced himself to step up.

'Would you like me to tell your parents for you?'

Candy frowned. 'Why would you do that?'

'Because I'm used to breaking news to difficult, stubborn, immutable people. I do it every day,' he said, and then made her smile. 'I promise to leave out the part that we've been at it like rabbits. I'll just say I'm a colleague. A doctor …'

Candy smiled. She really understood why he wore a suit and tie for work—the older people liked it. And he was right, her parents would respond very differently to Steele from the way they would to her. If not at first then fairly soon, they would calm down for the *dottore.*

'I need to do this myself, Steele. It's really nice of you to offer and I admit I'm tempted to pass it over, but … no. Thank you, though.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'It's not your problem, Steele.' Then she looked over to him. 'Actually, this has helped and talking to Macey too. It makes it feel a bit more real.'

'Keep talking, then,' he said, but she shook her head.

'I can't really. I mean, I'm upset about Gerry too and I'm trying to work out how to tell his family and I don't think getting upset about Gerry is fair to you,' Candy said. 'I know I felt jealous when you spoke about your wife. I got an Annie burn.'

He loved her openness and he smiled when she admitted to having felt jealous. 'Candy, you *can* talk to me about that.' Ten years older, there were some things he did know. 'Two days before I turned thirty I found out that a woman who I had gone out with for close to six months, just after my divorce, had died.

Now, she wasn't *the* love of my life. She was one of possibly too many *loves* of my life …' He saw her pale smile. 'And it hurt. I was stunned and devastated. I was all of the things that you probably are now.'

'It doesn't make you feel jealous when I talk about him?' Candy checked.

'I don't know how it makes me feel,' he admitted, touched that even with all that was going on in her world she could be concerned in that way for him. 'But that's my stuff to deal with. Right now you've got enough of your own.'

'Oh, I do!'

'You know there is one teeny positive,' Steele said.

'Tell me.'

'Well, there was one thing about you that was starting to get on my nerves, a potential deal-breaker, in fact,' Steele said. 'Confirmed bachelors are very picky and selfish, you understand …'

Candy smiled. 'Tell me.'

'Your ability to fall asleep. God, I knew you were tired, we both were, but I was starting to wonder if you had narcolepsy or something.'

She laughed but it changed in the middle and she fought from letting out a sob because he'd just reminded her how very good it had been between them.

'Candy …' He took her hand but she pulled hers away.

'Please, don't, Steele,' she said. They had always been honest

and she was never more so than now. 'Please, don't confuse me now. I miss you very much. I think we both know that it was turning into a bit more than a fling. I think we both know that feelings were starting to run deep.' Which was milder than the complete truth but now was not the time to admit to love. She pointed out the impossibility of it.

'You like the single life.'

'I did,' he said, 'but I very much liked being with you.'

'You've geared your life around not having children.'

'I have,' he said.

'You start your dream job in a couple of weeks.'

'I do.'

'And I'm pregnant with another man's babies.'

It dawned on him then that he had only ever known Candy pregnant. That, really, nothing had changed between them, except that they both now knew and he told her so.

'Candy, since the moment we met you've been pregnant with another man's babies. I think we—'

'Steele,' she interrupted. 'I have to work a few things out myself. I've been raised to share everything, to discuss every decision. I don't want to do that now. I want to think. I want to know that I can do this on my own. I have to know that I can do this on my own …'

'I get that.'

'And please don't pretend this isn't difficult for you.'

He thought back to that morning, sitting on the edge of the

bath and crying in a way he never had before, but he felt better for it, clearer for it. He looked at Candy and knew she was right. She didn't need his thoughts now. She needed her holiday, she needed space, she needed to get used to the idea that she was going to be a mother.

'I need to go,' she said. She was on the edge of tears—just one touch of his hand and she wanted more, she wanted his arms, she wanted the comfort of him. She felt as if she had just got off a merry-go-round as they stepped outside. She had felt like that since the news about Gerry's death had hit, since she'd sat in Anton's office, since …

The world seemed to be spinning too fast of late, and Candy took a big breath and tried to steady herself, but big breaths seemed to be working less and less these days. Steele must have seen she was struggling. He wrapped her in his arms, as he had wanted to yesterday but hadn't known how. The shield of him, the feel of him, the tender strength of him brought the first glimpse of peace she had craved, just a tiny glimpse of tranquillity as solo she halted navigated stormy seas.

'You're going to be okay,' he said, and his voice was like the deep bass of a guitar coming up through the floorboards, a rhythm she recognised and understood, and she clung to the delicious familiarity of him and wished it could last. 'I know it's going to be hard, telling your parents, but when you do just remind them that this is their grandchildren they are discussing and that in few months they'll be here …'

'Right now I'm actually not worried about them,' she said. Right now she was wondering how she might ever get over this broken heart, but she daren't be that honest and so, for the first time, she lied to him. 'Right now I'm worried about stretch marks and my boobs reaching the moon and getting fatter …' *And losing you.* 'I'm going to go.'

Still he held her. 'I'll drive you home.'

Still she clung to him. 'I don't want you to.'

'I can drop off your case.'

She hated that he had it in his car.

Steele hated that it was in his car too. He wanted it in his apartment unpacked, he wanted her in his bed, yet he was terribly aware that he must not push her, not confuse her when she was already in such turmoil.

Maybe there was something he could do.

'Do you fancy a day pass?' he said to her ear.

'A day pass?'

'I'm going to Kent tomorrow to look at the new unit and also to look at a few houses that I'm thinking of buying …'

'You're buying a house?

'I always buy houses or flats wherever I work and I renovate them in my spare time and sell them or rent them out.'

'I'm working in Emergency tomorrow.'

'Oh, if anyone deserves to ring in sick, I think it might be you. Why don't we just have a nice drive, a lazy day …?'

'And no talk about pregnancy.'

'You don't have to pretend you're not pregnant, Candy.'

'I want a day away from it,' she admitted. 'I just want a whole day when I don't even have to think about it.'

'Then that's the day you shall have,' he said, and saw her to the Underground. 'I'll pick you up at eight.'

Candy sat on the tube, looking at all the people, and she saw an elderly woman look at her stomach and then her hand. She glanced up and saw that Candy had seen her and the old lady gave her a very nice smile.

Yes, times had changed.

She didn't feel quite so alone now.

It really was time to deal with what was.

Instead of heading home, she went to her parents'.

They were still sulking about Hawaii.

'Do you remember Gerry, who I work with?' Candy said. 'The one who helped me when I moved?'

'What about him?' Her father frowned. 'Is he going to Hawaii with you?'

'He died last week,' Candy said.

There were all the *How terribles* and Candy took a deep breath. She knew there was no easy way to say it.

It just needed to be said.

'I've just found out that I'm pregnant with twins,' Candy said. 'They're his.'

There were sobs and wails from her parents; her mother actually fell to the floor. As if that was going to change anything!

She had never understood Steele more than she did then. She understood fully how his love for Annie might have died as she watched her parents carry on.

This was about her, this was the hardest part of her life to date, and yet they made it all about them.

She had known they'd be upset but, as Steele would say, that was their stuff. How Candy wished they could give some teeny shred of comfort as she tried to deal with hers.

Candy sat there as her father declared he'd like to kill the man who had taken his daughter's honour and then she stood up.

'Lui è già morto,' Candy said, reminding her father that Gerry was already dead, and then she remembered Steele's words.

'These are your grandchildren we're discussing.' Her voice was incredibly clear and strong. 'And these are my babies and I refuse to listen to you calling them a mistake or talking about shame. In a few months they'll be here and you know as well as I do that you're going to love them. So why do this to me now? I'm going to go and I don't want to hear from you till you've calmed down.' She went to the door. 'And if you want to come to my flat, then you're to telephone before you do. Clearly I have a life you don't know about, and if you still don't want to know about it, then you're to telephone first before you come around!'

She left her parents and she could perhaps have headed for home but instead she did as Steele had once suggested she try.

She bought a single ticket for a movie—the one they hadn't seen that night. It was a real tear-jerker from start to end and

she sat there, tears pouring down her face and not trying to hide them.

It was nice, a tiny press of the pause button as she cried over the couple on the screen instead of dwelling on herself.

On Steele.

On what could surely never be.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HER JEANS JUST did up.

Nervous and a little excited, just as she had been the first time he'd come to her door, she opened it the next morning with a smile.

'I'm ready,' she said, 'or did you want a drink first?'

'No, thanks,' Steele said. 'It's probably better that we get going. I've got a lot to get on with today.' He couldn't not comment. 'You've been crying.'

'I had a rather big argument with my parents last night.'

'You told them?'

'I did.' She blew out a breath. 'And I told them a few other things too. Anyway, we're not talking about all that stuff today. I really do want a day off from it.'

'Fair enough.' He smiled. 'But can I just say that I'm really proud of you for telling them.'

'Thank you.'

'You'll enjoy your holiday far more without that hanging over you.'

'I shall.'

They went out to his car and were soon on the motorway. 'First up,' Steele explained, 'I'm going to look at the new wing of the hospital, which might bore the hell out of you. You can go for a walk or to the shops if you like.'

'No, I'd love to see it,' Candy said, 'unless explaining me makes things awkward for you.'

'I never feel the need to explain myself,' he said, and then he amended that slightly. 'Actually, I did cancel dinner with my parents tonight, you would have taken some explaining.'

'Oh, sorry,' Candy said, 'I didn't want you to change your plans for me.'

'I was more than happy to change them. I'm moving closer to them in a few weeks.' He turned and smiled again. 'Though not quite close as you are to yours, but they'll be seeing more of me than they do now.'

'What are they like now?'

'They've mellowed,' Steele said. 'They're much nicer as old people. Though I have to admit that when they start asking questions about my life, my love life, I'm often tempted to tell them to back off, given that they showed little interest in me when I was growing up.' He gave a roll of his eyes. 'I wouldn't do that to them, though.'

Candy knew that he wouldn't. He was too nice.

'You like old people.'

'I do,' he said. 'I don't like *all* old people. It's not a free pass to being a good person but I like how they've let go of the stuff that's not important. I like how they say what they think and share what they know. I like it even when my patients drive me mad with their stubbornness. I learn something every day, every single day, from how to put a brass doorknob on a house I'm renovating to

how to face death.'

They arrived at the hospital and Steele shook hands and introduced her to Reece, a consultant who'd clearly had a lot of input into the new wing.

'Any chance of you starting sooner?' Reece joked. 'Emergency is full.'

'No chance.' Steele smiled. 'I don't need you to show me around if you're busy.'

'You're sure?'

'Of course.'

'I'll see you at the meeting, then.' Reece nodded. 'Make sure you put a hard hat on.'

'I feel like a builder,' Candy said as she put hers on.

'Come on, Bob,' Steele said, and he took her through the building. It was near complete in parts and the roof was going on in others. 'This is going to be the acute geriatric unit,' he explained as he showed her a huge area where the wiring was going in. 'Very high-tech computer system,' he said. 'It has its own occupational therapy assessment area.' He took her in. There were two kitchens and various sets of stairs being built, as well as showers and baths of various heights so that patients could be assessed on how they would manage at home. 'I'm aiming for a forty-eight-hour admission time. Either home afterwards with support or admitted to the correct ward, but most of my patients will first come through here—well, that's the plan.'

'Forty-eight hours isn't very long.'

'Best time frame,' Steele said. 'It gives us enough time to put proper support in place for when they return to their homes.'

Steele showed her the other wards—a palliative care ward and also the acute medical unit—and then he opened a door and they stood in a huge empty space.

'This is the dream,' he said. 'It's not happening yet. We're facing lots of obstacles and red tape, insurance issues and things, but I'm hoping this space will be a gym.' He smiled. 'Actually, I'm not allowed to call it that. I'm hoping this space will be utilised for healthy living …'

'Sorry?'

'Well, I always feel a bit of a bastard when I know someone's lonely and that a cream cake at three in the afternoon means not only a cream cake but a walk to the shops and some conversation too. Instead of asking them to give it up, I'm hoping that they can come here and have a chat with friends and maybe a bit of exercise. I'm hoping for a slimming or exercise club or something like that. It's all a bit of a pipe dream at the moment, but at least we have the space earmarked for it, if we ever do get to go ahead.'

'How long's your contract for?' Candy asked.

'Two years,' he said. 'They wanted five but I wouldn't agree to it.'

'Because?'

'Because I've never stayed anywhere for more than two years. I like fresh starts. I like putting everything into it and building things up …'

Or rather he had.

They drove to a pub and had a lovely lazy lunch overlooking a huge village green.

'Gorgeous, isn't it?' Candy said, and he nodded.

'Even if we don't get the go-ahead for the gym, I'll probably start a walking club over there.'

'You're going to go start a geriatric walking club!'

'Yep, I walk with my dog every morning that I can. Why not have company?'

'You have a dog?'

'I do.' Steele smiled. 'You have me pegged as a loner— no friends to go to the movies with, no pets. I have a dog, I have nice furniture and I have, when I'm not sleeping with Nurse Candy, a very busy social life.'

'Where's your dog now?'

'At my parents',' he said. 'He's a chocolate Labrador called Newman.'

'Newman?'

'You'll …' Steele stopped. He had been about to say she would see why when she met him but that wasn't what today was about. *No pressure*, he reminded himself. Today was doing her good, he could see that already. Her cheeks were pink and she seemed more relaxed than she had since … well, since Macey had opened her mouth and knocked their worlds off their axes, but they were starting to spin again, tentatively, though. 'He's got blue eyes,' Steele said instead. 'And he's the love of my life and he knows it.'

'Does he sleep on your bed, Steele?'

Steele shook his head. 'He sleeps on his bed for about seventeen hours a day and graciously lets me share it at night.'

After lunch they walked across the green and Candy laughed as she looked at it through what she imagined were Steele's eyes. 'I have this vision of all these old people doing Tai Chi …'

'So do I.'

She stopped walking. 'And then you'll leave.'

'That was the plan,' he said. 'Though this is a huge project …' He looked around. Since his divorce he had never been able to imagine staying in one place for very long. Here, though, he was close, though not too close to his parents; here was the job he had been working towards his entire career. He looked over as a car pulled up and a man got out and gave them a wave as they walked over to him.

'That's the estate agent,' Steele explained.

'Oh.'

'And that's the renovator's delight I'm hoping to buy, but I'm not telling him that.'

It was a huge rambling house with a small wooden gate, overlooking the green.

'Are you going to come and take a look?' he said.

'I think I might just take another walk,' she said. She didn't want to see his future home, so she walked on the green as Steele inspected the house.

He looked at the cornices and the hanging-off doors; the

windows would all need to be taken out.

Don't start on the electrics, he thought as he flicked lights on and off.

And as for the plumbing! The estate agent tried to distract him from turning on taps but Steele was not easily distracted and when he turned on the taps the whole house seemed to rattle. Steele grinned as, in his head, he knocked another five grand off the asking price.

It was magnificent, though.

'Could you give me a moment?' he said to the agent. 'I'd like to walk through it again on my own for a minute.'

The estate agent agreed and Steele took way more than a minute.

The last time he had looked at a home this size had been with his ex-wife. The natural assumption at that time had been that the bedrooms would soon be filled.

The natural assumption as he walked around now was that the bedrooms would be filled too.

It was more than an assumption. It was a feeling it was how it should be. He looked out of a window and could see Candy idly walking around. He wanted to go and fetch her, bring her in, ask her her thoughts, yet her thoughts were cluttered enough now.

His weren't.

He thanked the estate agent and said that he'd be in touch then he walked over and joined her.

'Maybe I can explain you after all,' he said.

'Sorry?'

'I could just say to my parents that you're a friend from work who needed a day out. You can meet Newman.'

'No, thanks,' she said.

'Candy, can we talk—'

'Please, not now,' she said. 'I just need this day. I just need a day of not dealing with it and then I need my holiday to start dealing with it on my own.'

Steele nodded. It was what they had agreed to after all.

They drove back to his flat to collect her case, which was no longer in the car, and Candy needed it as she flew tomorrow.

Candy, of course, fell asleep in the car but now it just made him smile.

She awoke to his lovely deep voice and the sight of his flat and then she turned and there he was.

'I'll go and grab your case,' he said.

'Can I borrow your loo?' Candy said, because, as she was starting to find out, this was something she would be saying rather a lot in the weeks and months ahead.

She went to the loo and remembered the last time she'd been here—when her pregnancy had just started to become a possibility. As she looked in the mirror while washing her hands, she remembered the fear that had been in her eyes then.

The fear was gone now.

Yes, she was confused and exhausted and nervous about how she would provide for two children, but the terror was leaving

and, after such a wonderful day's reprieve, she was starting to feel a little more like herself.

'Thank you for a lovely day,' she said.

'Do you want a cup of tea?' he offered, and she nodded.

'Make yourself comfortable.'

'Ha-ha,' she said, and stood and watched him make the tea instead.

Meaning …

She lifted her top and showed him the straining zipper that had simply refused to go all the way back up.

Only Steele didn't really see that. He saw pink lace and a teeny flash of jet hair and the stomach that his mouth had kissed over and over.

And as she put down her top Candy looked at the teabag he was squeezing the hell out of with his spoon and, yikes, there was a sort of gravelly note to his voice as he asked her how many sugars she had in her tea.

'The same as last time,' Candy said.

'Sorry, I'm a bit distracted.' Steele smiled. 'Two?'

'Two.'

'Do you really want tea?' he checked.

'No.'

'Because I don't,' Steele said. 'I want a glass of wine but I'm driving.'

'Poor Steele.' She smiled. 'It really is a problem.' Candy thought for a moment. 'I know!' she said brightly.

'Do tell.'

'Why don't you have a glass of wine and drive me home later?'

He turned and faced her. 'That's so clever, but you're stuck in those uncomfortable jeans. I insist you take them off …'

They started to kiss, the best kiss ever, because she'd got so lost in babies and feeling massive and unsexy but his tongue swiftly took care of that.

It hadn't really entered her head that he might want her again in that way. Now his fingers were at her zipper and somehow she felt back to the woman she had been.

Out of her jeans, she moaned in relief.

'Nice?'

'Nice,' she said to his mouth.

'That bra looks a bit tight too.'

He unhooked it and took it out through her arms and it was lovely to be all loose and floppy and to rest a moment in his arms.

'Feels so good,' she said.

'It does,' he said. There would be no rushing. He loved feeling her all relaxed against him.

'Get your wine.'

They headed over to the sofa and it was nice to be back there. Steele sat and Candy lay down as he drank his wine and played with her hair. It was good not to talk. She remembered the mornings with Macey and her *nonna*, and the bliss of hush when words could only serve to make you sad.

'Are you all packed for Hawaii?' he said finally.

'Nope.' Candy sighed. 'We're here to get my case, remember?'

This time tomorrow she'd be at Heathrow.

'Can I paint your toenails?' she asked.

'Er, why?'

'It relaxes me and my mum's still sulking at me so I haven't been able to do hers.'

'Do you have some nail varnish with you?'

'In my bag.'

He was so laid back and yet so austere. It was a lovely mixture that made her stomach curl and also gave her a peace that she could be herself.

And she was.

He lay down and she sat on his calves and started on his right foot. 'I like men's nails,' Candy explained, 'because they're bigger.'

'Have you painted a lot of men's nails?' he asked, and then let out a moan of surprise. 'Oh!'

'What?' She smiled as she painted his big toenail.

'I have nail-painting jealousy issues,' Steele said. 'I just felt it burn. I'm looking at your bum and enjoying the view when I suddenly got the Annie burn that you had.'

'I've never painted another man's toenails from this angle.' Candy smiled again.

'Take your knickers off, then.'

She did as told and then got back to painting the toenails on his left foot but she made a terrible mess of his long second toe

because she heard his zipper slide down.

'I'm making a bit of a mess here, Steele,' she said.

'I forgive you,' he said.

'Steele.' She was arguably the most turned on she had ever been. She had never thought she'd feel sexy again, had never thought sex would ever be fun again, and yet here they were and it was bliss. 'Can I turn around?'

'You'll finish what you started,' Steele warned.

She gritted her teeth and did the last three toes really quickly. 'Done.' She turned around on his calves to the delicious sight of him and she moved up to sit on his thighs and lowered her head and they shared a long, deep kiss. Her breasts flattened against his chest and she could feel his erection pressing against her stomach.

She brought the kiss to a giddy halt and stared at him. He looked right back at her in a way that had her almost feverish. She started placing small kisses over his cheeks as his hands moved to her breasts, working her nipples.

'Candy …' Steele nearly said something he shouldn't. Today wasn't a day for confusing her, today wasn't a day for declarations, it was about keeping it light and he felt her sudden tension at the tender tone to his voice. 'Time for your hula lesson,' he said, and got the reward of her laugh in his ear.

She lowered herself onto him and he held her hips and had her sway a little and circle, and then Candy could not play any longer and she started moving of her own accord. His hands exploring

her breasts had her greedy for more and she leant forward, lowering her breasts to his mouth, dizzy with the sensation of his hands now on her hips, grinding her down a little harder as his mouth worked her tender nipples.

'Steele …' There was almost panic in her voice, a delicious panic because her body wasn't hers any more but was moving into a rhythm of its own.

His mouth left her breast and she looked down at him. His lips were slightly parted and there was tension in his expression, just as there was in hers.

Steele adjusted the angle of his thrust just a fraction and she let out a sob. It was an actual sob as Steele started to come.

And then another sob and it was one of relief as somehow, some way, as she came to him, all she was at that moment was Candy.

Not pregnant, not scared, not worried at all.

The world felt a lot better when she was in Steele's arms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STEELE STARED AT the morning light as she lay in his arms.

It was the last morning they would share in this room.

'Excited?'

'Very.' Candy nodded.

Despite her misgivings at times, now she was looking forward again to going on holiday. There was so much more to sort out now and Candy truly wanted to get on with it.

Right now, though, here was where she wanted to be, and she lay stroking the crinkly hair on his stomach that she loved so.

'What date do you get back?' Steele asked.

It was the first day of his new job.

'Do you want me to see if I can get away this evening and take you to the airport?'

'No, because then we'll have to say goodbye again.' She looked up at him. He'd been so lovely to her. Her time with Steele had been the most wonderful time of her life but she wasn't foolish. Two weeks away from each other, him starting a new job, very soon he might look at things in a very different light. She didn't want to find out a few weeks or months from now that, despite best intentions, they hadn't worked out … A very big part of Candy wanted it left at this. She wanted it to end while they were crazy about each other, while it was fun and sex and romance—

before it all got too hard.

They got out of bed and got ready and he picked up her case and when they got to her flat he carried it in and he laughed when he saw the lock she'd put on.

'How many holes did you put in the door?'

'I'm very proud of my work,' Candy said.

'I'm not sure your landlord will be,' Steele said, and smiled as Candy went a bit pink. 'Did you ask permission?'

'No.'

'Do you want me to fix it up?'

'No,' she said. 'I want to fix it myself.'

'I know you do.'

They had a cuddle in the hall, a quiet one, just stood there and held each other and the moment was theirs.

He drove her to work and as they went to say goodbye it was too hard to do. 'I'll pop in and see Macey and if you're on the ward …'

'Sure.'

He gave her a kiss and they both did their very best to get on with their day.

'Candy …' Kelly said as she came into the changing room. 'How are things?'

'Sorry?'

'You were off sick yesterday,' Kelly fished.

'I wasn't sick, though.' Candy smiled. 'It was a mental health day.'

'So everything is okay?' Kelly checked.

'It will be about ten hours from now when my plane takes off.' She knew Kelly was fishing—everyone was.

And at midday Candy broke her news as they dealt with a multi-trauma.

'I'm stepping out,' she said as they went to do the X-rays. She always wore a heavy lead gown and so she knew it would not have affected the twins, but she just chose to let people know then. 'I'm pregnant, so I'd rather not take the chance …'

She left the room and let out a breath. Steele was right, she'd enjoy her holiday much more without that hanging over her.

And she dealt with the second question on everyone's minds as she stepped back in.

'I'm not comfortable yet discussing who the father is, but you'll all be very excited to know I'm expecting twins.'

There were smiles and congratulations and even a bottle of iced lemonade to toast her at the end of her shift.

'Have fun!' Lydia said. 'Lots of it.'

'Oh, I shall.'

She headed up to the geriatric unit and said goodbye to a couple of patients before she got to her very favourite one.

'Enjoy yourself,' Macey said. 'You deserve to be happy. A rather clever doctor told me that.'

Candy nodded. She had every intention of being happy, but as she gave Macey a cuddle and said goodbye she asked a question, desperate for the older woman's sage thoughts.

'Macey,' Candy said carefully. 'I want to be happy but what if you're not certain that the other person truly is? What if they might be there only out of a sense of duty?'

'Duty?' Macey thought for a long moment and Candy realised she was holding her breath as she awaited her answer, but Macey clearly didn't quite understand her question. 'Duty to who?' Macey asked.

'It doesn't matter,' Candy said, and gave her a smile. 'Stay well and I shall send you a postcard.'

As she left Macey she saw Steele going into his office and she went and knocked at the door.

'Are you off?'

'I am,' Candy said. 'Well, I've just got to see the obstetrician, buy a bikini, pack, take the Underground …'

'You're sure you don't want me to take you?'

'I'm very sure,' she said, and he took her in his arms. 'Thank you,' Candy said. 'I know we only had a short time and I know it was a bit fraught but you really helped and I just …' She couldn't really finish saying what she wanted to say without crying. 'I might write to you,' she said. 'Or call you. I really don't know …'

'You stop worrying about me and just go and have a wonderful time,' he said. 'Do what you have to do. Oh, one thing …' He took out his wallet and peeled off some US dollars.

'Stop!' Candy said. 'I don't need a sugar daddy.'

'I'm not old enough to be your sugar daddy.' He laughed. 'Seriously, I've had these for about five years, since my last trip

to the States. Have fun with it.'

'Thank you!' Candy smiled.

'Go,' he said.

'But—'

'Go,' he said again, and she was glad that he did because she wanted to say goodbye smiling and if she stayed a moment longer she might possibly cry.

Then it was time for her official appointment with Anton.

'I told you that you were about to start showing,' he said with a smile as she walked in. 'Have people started noticing?'

'Yes, though no one had the nerve to ask if I was pregnant just yet, though a patient told me that I was before I even knew. I've just announced it. I also said that I'm not comfortable with telling them who the father is.'

'Well done.' Anton smiled again.

He checked her blood pressure and all was well then Candy climbed up onto the examination table and he spoke to her about twin pregnancies. He said her babies would probably be born at around thirty-seven weeks and that he would see her more regularly than he would for a singleton pregnancy.

'Have you told your parents?'

Candy nodded. 'They didn't take it very well at all.'

'They'll come around.'

'I know,' she said. 'I told them to contact me when they do. I think I'm going to tell Gerry's parents when I return from my holiday. I think that it is only fair to them to know.'

'What about your new partner?'

'He's not really my partner, I don't think,' Candy said as Anton helped her to sit up. 'It was supposed to be just a casual thing. He starts a new job soon and is moving. He'll be gone by the time I get back from my holiday. I don't know what will happen then, if anything.' She smiled at Anton. 'My bad for falling in love.'

'You have told the insurance companies that you're pregnant?'

'I have.'

'Go and have and amazing holiday. Grieve, cry, smile and heal.'

'Thank you.'

They sounded like pretty straightforward instructions and as she packed the last few pieces into her suitcase she called for a taxi to take her to the Underground.

Usually her parents would go with her to the airport to wave her off as if she were going on an expedition for a year but they were clearly not over the news yet so Candy took the Underground and battled with evening commuters and her suitcase.

She caught sight of a pregnant woman's reflection in the window and it took a second before she realised that it was her own.

We'll get there, she said in her mind to her small bump. She loved them already. The numb shock had worn off. The fear had gone. Already Candy knew she'd cope.

They would get through this.

As she checked in at Heathrow and watched her case shoot away she turned and saw her parents.

'Ma …' Candy ran over and hugged them.

'We love you.'

'I know you do.'

'We'll help.'

'I know you will,' Candy said, and they kissed and made up with much relief.

'You move from that flat and come home,' her mother said. 'We can help you to raise them—'

'We'll talk when I get home,' Candy said. 'Thank you so much for coming to the airport. It means an awful lot to me.'

It had but as she sat on the plane she knew she was moving from her flat but not to her parents' home.

She thought of Steele raised by his grandmother. No, she didn't want that for the twins. She wanted to raise her children herself, her way, and not her parents' way.

There was so much to sort out, so very much, but as she disembarked from the plane nearly a day later and a lei was placed around her neck Candy was the happiest tourist on the planet and knew Hawaii was the right place to be.

'Aloha,' a gorgeous woman said.

Yes, she was happy, yet that evening as she walked along the beach, how she wished Steele was here beside her—dipping his red toenails in the Pacific, making her laugh, making her smile, letting her be who she was.

Candy loved the way he accepted her just as she was.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'ARE YOU GOING to a funeral?' Macey checked, seeing Steele's dark suit and tie the following Tuesday morning. 'Wait till you get to my age. I go to one a month.'

'It's a memorial service,' he said. He really liked speaking with Macey. She was so blunt about everything.

'Oh, is it for that nurse in Emergency?' she asked. 'The one Elaine's crying over?'

'Elaine?' Steele glanced across the ward and sure enough a very flat Elaine, very un-bossy of late Elaine, was sitting at the desk when she'd normally be bustling about. 'He got off with her at a Christmas party,' Macey said, 'from what I can make out. Then he had nothing to do with her the next day. I would say he wasn't a good caretaker of lovely young hearts.'

'Oh, he's St Gerry now.' Steele rolled his eyes.

'And I shall be St Macey for a while after I die and then people will start to remember what a cantankerous old thing I really was.'

He laughed and looked into her wise eyes. 'You don't miss anything, do you?'

'Not with the new medication.' She smiled. 'I'm back.'

'God help us, then.' Steele smiled.

'You wouldn't have met him, though,' Macey said, and the smile was wiped off his face at her perception.

'Sorry?'

'He was in Greece, had been there a couple of months when it happened, well, according to the porter who took me for my X-ray … That's what he said to the radiographer anyway.'

'I believe so.'

'So why are you going to his memorial service if you never met?'

Steele said nothing, just gave Macey a small nod and walked off.

He sat at the desk and tried to write notes, but he ached. He actually ached sitting there.

He missed Candy, more than he had ever missed anyone.

He'd never missed anybody really, apart from his grandmother when she'd died.

It felt like grief. It really did.

It was grief because he missed her. He even missed the bump of her twins, or was he just imagining that?

He pulled up his emails and looked at the image of Gerry and it wasn't jealousy he was feeling. Steele understood that now.

It was guilt.

Guilt because this young man had died. Guilt that he might be swooping in and raising his babies because he couldn't have any of his own.

Steele let out a breath and then jumped slightly as a voice startled him.

'I'm here to see Macey Anderson …' Steele glanced up and saw a good-looking middle-aged man wearing a suit and tie and

carrying a huge bunch of flowers.

He was nervous, he was anxious and he was hers, Steele knew.

'I'll take you over.' He stood and as they walked to the bed he would never forget the small cry of recognition that escaped Macey as she looked down the ward and for the first time saw her son.

He ran to her.

Those last two steps he actually ran and Steele pulled the curtains around them as Macey held her fifty-five-year-old baby for the very first time.

Some things were private but Steele knew he'd just witnessed love.

Steele checked in on Macey a couple of hours later. She had gone to bed for a lie down, but he found her sitting up, smiling, with a huge bunch of flowers beside her bed and a photo album that her son had brought for her.

'I'm a grandmother,' she said, showing Steele a photo. 'And in two weeks I'll be a great-grandmother. He was a bit worried about telling me that.' Macey gave a delighted smile. 'His daughter, Samantha, is only eighteen. They're coming to visit me when I'm home.'

'You're going to be busy, Macey,' Steele said.

'I shall be. I'd say I'm going to have to hang around for a while yet.' She looked at him. 'Do you know, I always worried what sort of home he'd gone to, more than I worried about what he thought of me. He was raised beautifully. They loved him from

the moment they got him and still do … It's a huge weight off my mind.'

'I'm very glad,' he said, and then he moved to go because she was cutting a bit close to the bone.

'I wondered if they'd love him as their own,' Macey said. 'I wondered if he'd resent them if he found out he wasn't biologically theirs, but they were just so open about it …'

'I'm very pleased to hear that,' Steele responded. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go.'

As he went to do that Macey's words stopped him.

'So she's in Hawaii…'

'Sorry?' he said, and turned.

Macey gave him an odd look. 'Are we going to pretend that you don't know who I'm talking about?'

'I don't,' Steele said.

'Do you think you stop being a matron? I used to know everything that went on in my department. Do you really think I just lie here?'

Steele had never had anyone meddle in his love life, or lack of a love life, and he wasn't going to start now. 'I have to go, Macey.'

'You just interrupted me, Doctor. Why is she in Hawaii and you're here?'

'I don't discuss my private life …'

'But you're fine with me discussing mine?'

'You're my job,' Steele said to her, but she just smiled at him.

'And you're hard work!' she said. 'You're certainly not so

chipper these days.'

'I apologise,' he said. 'I shouldn't bring my problems to work with me.'

'How are *you*, Steele?' she said. 'And that's Matron asking.'

Steele remembered Candy sitting here, crying, on this very bed. It had been Macey who had told them both that Candy was pregnant after all. He sat on the bed and this time he was there for himself rather than Macey and he told her how he felt.

'Sad.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I miss her.'

'You don't have to miss her, though.'

'She needs this break.'

'Perhaps, but she'll come back and you'll be gone, living miles away, immersed in your new job. That's not the start that you two need.'

'She needs time to think.'

'Of course she does,' Macey said, 'but you can have too much time and get yourself into a space that it's very hard to get out of.'

She was right. Steele knew that. Of course, Candy's parents would soon come round. From the little he knew about them, he knew that they loved their daughter. They would want to help. They would probably suggest that she move back in with them. He thought about trying to forge a relationship with her parents as gatekeepers.

They didn't need to forge anything, Steele realised.

He didn't need to question himself about his motives towards the pregnancy.

He loved her.

It was that easy.

Macey watched the smile that spread on his face and, yes, some things were private but she knew too that she'd just witnessed the realisation of love.

Steele sat through the long memorial service and heard what an amazing man St Gerry had been, but it didn't hurt him now.

Indeed, he could laugh at a few of his antics.

By all accounts he had been a bit wild, a bit bold, and now, as the shock of his death started to recede, the real Gerry started to appear.

They all stood as his parents cut a ribbon for the new resuscitation ward and everybody headed up towards Admin for drinks and nibbles and more talk about Gerry, but Steele chose not to go there.

'Steele!' Hugh, a surgeon he had asked to consult on a patient, came over and shook his hand. 'Have you met Rory?'

'I have.' He shook Rory's hand.

'And this is Gina. She's also an anaesthetist here,' Hugh introduced, but Steele couldn't place her.

'I *used* to be an anaesthetist here,' Gina said.

'It's lovely to meet you,' he said, and then watched Gina's features tighten as a man made his way over.

'This is Anton,' Hugh said, and Steele shook Anton's hand as

Hugh introduced them. 'Anton's an obstetrician.'

'Well,' Steele said, 'that would explain why we haven't met. We don't have much call for obstetricians on the geriatric unit.'

'I'm also a reproductive specialist,' Anton said. 'Though I guess you don't have much call up there for them either.' He turned to Hugh. 'Are you going up to Admin for drinks?'

'No.' Hugh shook his head. 'I've got to get back to Theatre. Anyway, I've done my duty and put in an appearance but, frankly, he was an arrogant piece of work and I had more arguments with him than anyone else at the Royal.'

Anton watched as Steele gave a wry smile.

'Well, I certainly don't need to be around booze,' Gina said. 'I'm heading for home. I might see you around.' She smiled at Steele. 'I've got an interview next week.'

'Good luck,' Steele said.

Anton, he noticed, made no comment.

Gina walked off and there was an uncomfortable silence for a moment.

'How is she?' Hugh asked Rory.

'How would I know?' Rory said. 'We're not really talking any more.'

The two men walked off, leaving just Steele and Anton.

'Undercurrents?' Steele checked, because around Gina things had seemed incredibly tense.

'Hell, yes,' Anton said, but didn't elaborate. 'I think I might give the drinks in Admin a miss too, although I could use a drink.

Do you want to go over to Imelda's?' he offered. Imelda's was a bar across from the hospital and Steele nodded.

'Sure.'

'Have you worked here long?' Steele asked as they gave their orders a few minutes later.

'Just over a year,' Anton said. 'You?'

'I'm only here for a few more weeks. I move to Kent the week after next.'

'My first intention was to be here for a couple of years and then return to Milan, but my wife works here and she's pregnant. I can't see me leaving here any time soon.'

'You said that you worked in fertility?'

'That's right.'

'Is it hard to do both?' Steele asked.

'I set firm boundaries,' Anton explained. 'I first did obstetrics then moved into fertility. I missed it, though, and so when I moved to England I changed back to obstetrics. I still keep my hand in when I can. I would love somehow to do both but they are both very consuming.'

'There are a lot of changes, I guess?' Steele could not believe he was pushing this conversation.

Anton could. 'There are constant changes.'

'What about for men?' Steele asked. 'I mean, you hear all the advancements for women …' He could not believe he was discussing this. He actually wanted to stop because if there wasn't hope then perhaps it would be better not to know.

‘Things are different for men also. There is a procedure called ICSE now. Basically, if you can get one healthy sperm an egg can be fertilised. Even if the sperm count comes back as negative, you can go into the vas deferens …’

Steele pulled a face at the thought of a needle in his balls.

‘Under local.’ Anton smiled.

He’d do it.

And there was the difference, Steele realised. He’d had a lot of loves in his life but never till now ‘the one’.

One that meant two hours after taking his first sip of a very welcome Scotch and a whole lot of talking with Anton, he was standing in a room, pants around his ankles, filling a specimen jar.

‘That was quick,’ Anton teased as Steele came into his office and he took the jar. ‘You might want to work on that.’ Then he was serious as he prepared the sample. ‘You know that if I find nothing in the specimen I can still go into the vas deferens. I might want to do that sober, though.’

‘Just tell me.’

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