

*A romantic  
journey awaits...*

# SUMMER ESCAPES



**JOSS  
WOOD**

**NINA  
SINGH**

**ANN  
MCINTOSH**

**VIRGINIA  
HEATH**

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*Joss Wood*

# JUST ONE ROOM...

JOSS WOOD

CHAPTER ONE

In the luxurious above-the-garage apartment on the famous Calcott Manor estate, Madigan Howell flung her arms around Eliot Grantham and pulled her into a tight hug. "It's so good to see you. I've missed you so much!"

Eliot, looking happy and utterly in love, danced on the spot. "I'm so sorry we haven't spent much time together, Mads, but between you buzzing all over shooting people and me pushing a human into the world, it's been a bit mad."

Eliot made her sound like an assassin—a more exciting but messier occupation than her career as a portrait photographer.

"How are Soren and Piper?"

Eliot was happily married, but Madi, after numerous relationships with commitment-phobic men that went nowhere, was happy to live her life solo. These days she was content with imaginary relationships, as fantasy lovers were so much easier to handle than flesh-and-blood ones.

"They're great," Eliot replied. "And thank you for agreeing to do a family photo shoot, Mads."

Being asked to do the family portraits for the Granthams, one of the most famous families on the East Coast, was a coup, but Eliot made it sound like she was doing them a favor and not the other way around. It was so typical of Eliot. Despite being a famous ex-supermodel, she was unbelievably modest and down-to-earth.

Madi looked around, taking in the exquisite apartment. The estate was synonymous with the billionaire matriarch Avangeline Forrester-Grantham, and the Grantham family used the Connecticut property as their bolt-hole.

Madi walked out onto the balcony overlooking the private beach. "It's quite a place," she told Eliot.

"It really is," Eliot agreed. "And in a few days, it's going to be crowded. When we decided to revive Avangeline's Spring Ball, we didn't realize how busy we'd be."

It was also going to be the social highlight of the year, if not the decade. As a famous ex-model herself, Madi had attended many exclusive parties all over the world, but the Calcott Manor Spring Ball was generating buzz she hadn't experienced since the wedding of the younger British prince. Along with the portraits, she'd been asked to supply informal photographs of the family and their friends. She couldn't wait.

Eliot took the handle of her suitcase and wheeled it down the short hallway. Madi followed and her eyebrows rose as she took in the enormous bed covered in white linen, the pale gray walls and the huge, restless seascape on the wall opposite the bed. Was that a Homer?

"It's a copy," Eliot told her. "The original, which the family owns, is on loan somewhere. If you're interested, Peyton will know—she's in charge of the family's art."

She'd met the Granthams at Soren and Eliot's "we're married" party. As Eliot's maid of honor, Madi had been intrinsically involved in the wedding drama.

Madi heard the rumbles of a deep voice, rough male laughter and big feet stepping into the living area of the apartment. She'd flown in from Singapore last night and hadn't slept much. She looked in the gilt-framed mirror next to the door and saw that her straight, dark brown hair looked tidy enough but her normally olive skin was paler than she liked. Her lipstick had worn off and there were bags under her deep brown eyes. The photo shoot would happen in the morning but there wasn't much else planned for today other than, according to the itinerary Eliot sent her, lounging around the pool or hanging out on the beach.

Lounging and hanging out she could do.

"El? Where are you guys?"

Madi followed Eliot back into the living area and looked past her friend's former-professional-swimmer husband to the man who stood behind him, equally big and even bolder.

Rigby Kaye.

Oh...

Oh, *crap*. He was here. In real life.

Rigby was her make-believe significant other, the man who'd started renting space in her brain after being pointed out to her at Soren and El's party a year ago. They were never introduced but, somehow, he'd walked into her head, sat his imaginary self down and hadn't left.

Her first impression, then and now, was that he was gorgeous. The second was that he was dangerous. His eyes, like the deep green on ancient fir forests, met hers and drilled through her, pinning her to the spot. His deep auburn hair, the colour of burnt cherries, was cut short, and his pugnacious jawline was covered by dark brown stubble. There were freckles—such a silly word for such a powerful man—on his too-big nose and across his cheeks. He wasn't a pretty boy, but that face packed a helluva punch.

And God, his body. Tall, ripped, muscled... She genuinely could not wait to see him wearing just a pair of swimming shorts. Or, maybe, nothing. She'd have tons of new material to fantasize over when she left Calcott Manor in a few days. She really hoped he was as nice IRL as he was in her head. If he wasn't, she might have to find a new imaginary lover.

Easy enough to do and they were less trouble than the real thing.

Madi felt Eliot's nails digging into her biceps and she jerked her gaze off Mr. Delicious to look at her friend, taking her time to focus. "Yeah, hi."

Eliot grinned at her, amused. "Hi."

Pulling herself together, Madi greeted Soren with a kiss and a quick hug. She had a neutral expression on her face when she looked at Rigby again.

"This is Rigby Kaye, Madi," Soren said. "He was my agent when I was still competing. He's now an informal adviser to our foundation and a very good friend."

Madi managed to say hello, or something close to it. Amused, Soren looked down at the bag at his feet. "I'm just going to show Rig the bedroom, and then we can go over to the house. Jace is making mojitos."

Eliot widened her eyes. "But, honey, I told Madi she could have the apartment!"

Soren frowned, and Madi thought his look of surprise needed work. A *lot* of work. "But I told Rigby he could have it."

Oh, neither of them would win any awards for acting. And, when they were alone, she'd have a strong conversation with her best friend about matchmaking.

"There are two bedrooms, guys," Madi said, wanting to end the charade. "I'm sure Rigby and I can share the rest of the space. I mean, it's not like we're going to be spending a lot of time in the apartment anyway."

Rigby folded his arms across that broad chest and, judging by his cynical expression, he'd also clocked what their friends were up to. "I'm resolutely single and have too much going on to think about having a relationship. You?"

She grinned at Soren's disappointed face before replying. "I've had too many bad or useless boyfriends to want another," she replied. Besides, she was happy for men, and him, to inhabit her imaginary world, not her real one. "You're safe."

Rigby patted Soren's back and looked at Eliot, who'd pushed her bottom lip out in a small pout. "Good try, guys," he said with a devastating smile. "But maybe you need to work at being more subtle, yeah?"

CHAPTER TWO

In his bedroom overlooking the impressive Calcott Manor grounds, British-born Rigby stood by the huge window, gazing across the wide swathe of lawn to what he knew to be the family's favorite sitting room, the one facing the massive rose garden. He'd come here as a young adult, accompanying his godmother, Jocelyn, and her husband, Arthur, when they visited Avangeline and her five grandsons. When he'd established his sports agency business, Soren was the first client he signed. The family had taken an immense leap of faith by appointing him as Soren's agent and he would forever be grateful for their trust in him. It had all started with Soren, and Rigby was now regarded as one of the best sports agents in the world.

Jocelyn and Arthur had been better parents to him than his own and he adored them. But was it wrong to feel a little grateful that they weren't attending this function because of a previous engagement? He'd spent some time with them in London a few weeks ago, and Jocelyn didn't stop nagging him about his love life, or lack thereof. Apparently, she wanted to hold his babies in her arms before she died. Rigby snorted—Jocelyn had more energy than a twenty-year-old and wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Besides, he'd been married. He'd been a husband. Then became a widower and wasn't interested in reliving the past. Why would he want to bang a set of red-hot nails into his heart again? Nope, he had brief flings, shallow encounters, and they suited him.

Rigby watched as Jace, Calcott's ex-housekeeper, raced out of the front door and across the lawn to the driveway. Pasco Kildare, a sculptor he'd long admired, followed her. He turned to see who'd caught their attention and there, climbing out of a stretch limousine, was, *crap*, his godmother.

*Jocelyn.*

"I don't friggin' believe it." He rested his forehead against the window frame and gently banged it. "Let the nagging commence."

"Did you say something?"

Rigby turned around to see Madigan standing in the open doorway to his room, the skirt of her pretty summer dress, a pale mint color, fluttering around her legs. Thick, straight hair dropped past her shoulders, and her cheekbones were high and prominent. He loved the color of her skin—it was a shade deeper than olive and hinted at Greek or Arabic heritage. Her eyes were a deep brown and stunning. With her long-limbed, slim body, he easily understood why she'd been one of the most sought-after models in the world. But these days, she could be found behind the camera and not in front of it.

Seeing her puzzled frown at his silence—she was so gorgeous she stopped the blood from going to his brain—he ran a hand over his face. “Sorry.” He gestured to his window and Madi crossed the room to where he stood. He inhaled her fragrant citrus scent and resisted the urge to bury his face in her neck. And then work his way down.

“Jace and Pasco are greeting Jocelyn and Arthur. They’re close friends of Avangeline’s, almost family, in fact.”

“I know Jocelyn, quite well, actually,” Rigby said, turning his back to the window and resting his butt cheeks on the sill. “She’s my godmother. She’s also intent on setting me up.” He rubbed his hand over his lower jaw before continuing. “Eliot and Soren are amateurs in the art of matchmaking, and Jocelyn has a master’s degree. By the end of this week, I will have been introduced to at least a dozen highly suitable candidates, another dozen who could be brought up to scratch and another handful who would do in a pinch.”

His British accent always deepened when he was frustrated, and he sounded like the private-school aristocrat that he’d been brought up to be. He also sounded like a prize twit.

“Oh, dear.” Madigan laughed. She folded her arms and leaned her shoulder into the window. “So why is Jocelyn so desperate to set you up? Being so ugly and unsuccessful, I assume you have a huge problem meeting women.”

He grinned at her sarcasm. “I was married for a few years and then my wife died.”

“I’m sorry,” Madi murmured.

He nodded his thanks. “Jocelyn thinks we were an advert for the perfect marriage, and she wants that for me again.”

“Weren’t you?” Madigan asked. “Happy, that is?”

She was smart as well as beautiful, but Rigby had no intention of telling her that his marriage, unbeknownst to him, had been a train wreck. He'd thought they'd been happy but had no idea that his wife was having an affair. Love not only blinded him, it also made him stupid.

Rigby pushed his hand into his hair and pulled himself back to the here and now, to this room and the gorgeous woman standing in front of him. He looked out the window and saw Jace guiding Jocelyn, an arm around her waist, into the house and knew that he would have to make his way to the main house and say hello to his bossy-as-hell godmother.

Calcott Manor was a big place. He could avoid her for a day, maybe a day and a half. Okay, now he was being pathetic. But God, she could be relentless.

"So, I take it by that how-soon-can-I-leave look on your face that you are not keen on Jocelyn's matchmaking scheme?"

"I'd rather have my toenails yanked off with acid-tipped pliers," Rigby replied. "I'm a bit of a commitment-phobe, actually."

Madi slapped her hand on her chest, her eyes widening dramatically. "Really? I couldn't tell. I don't think you were very clear earlier when you told Soren and Eliot that you are resolutely single."

"Smart-ass," Rigby replied, but couldn't help his smile. He stretched out his legs and his green eyes met hers. "You told them you had terrible taste in men. Were they really so bad?"

Madigan nodded. "They really were. I have awful taste in men but I'm brilliant when it comes to fantasy lovers!"

What on earth did she mean by that? Before he could ask, she blushed and patted his arm.

"Well, you don't need to avoid me—trust me, I have no intention of falling for you!"

He looked at her and couldn't help thinking that was a very great pity. Because he could, quite easily, just for a few nights, fall for her.

CHAPTER THREE

Later that evening, Madi sat on a blanket on the empty beach, her arms around her bent legs. It was just her and the moon, a silver ball hanging low in the sky. It dropped ribbons of light onto the lazy sea, and a crab scuttled across the sand in front of her. After a few weeks of back-to-back shoots, she was happy for some downtime. And Calcott Manor was the perfect place to unwind, to get her bearings.

“Madigan.”

Madi turned to see Rigby standing behind her. He wore tailored navy shorts and a white cotton button-down, sleeves rolled up to expose his muscled forearms. At the barbecue earlier, he’d been wearing deck shoes, but she had no idea where they were now. Up until today, Rigby—with his hot body and masculine, still-gorgeous face—had been a figment of her imagination, but he was so much smarter and more interesting in real life.

As he came close, Madi noticed the bottle of wine and the two glasses he held. He’d brought alcohol, bless him.

“Are you going to share your wine?’ she asked.

“Are you going to share your blanket?” he replied, arching his eyebrow in a way that made her insides flutter.

Madi patted the blanket and he sat, pulling the partially exposed cork with his teeth. He poured red wine into a glass, handed it to her, and she sniffed. “Berries, chocolate, something spicy.”

Rigby surprised her by shrugging. “I don’t care what it smells like, as long as it tastes good.” He tapped his glass to hers, took a sip and nodded. “Yeah, it tastes good.”

It tasted sublime and Madi held up the bottle to squint at the label in the moonlight. She couldn’t be sure but she thought it might be a Romanée-Conti, from one of the best vineyards in the world. “Did you bring this yourself or did you steal it from the manor’s cellars?” Madi asked.

He grinned at her. “Soren handed it to me, told me you were on the beach and that you needed a drink.”

Madi rolled his eyes. "Matchmaking again, huh?" Her friend's husband had excellent taste in wine, so she might forgive him for trying to set them up. This time.

"He said not. He told me you like red wine and that I should bring some down.'

He couldn't be that naive to buy Soren's BS, could he? "He was matchmaking, Rigby. Probably at Eliot's instigation."

"Of course he was," Rigby replied, smiling. "But hey, we're onto him and we got a damn fine bottle of wine out of him. We're not losing here."

He was right, they really weren't. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and Rigby looked around, taking in the empty beach, the peace and the stunning full moon. It was an incredibly romantic setting, the air was warm and fragrant, and she had a hot man sitting just a foot away from her.

And he looked so good there, lying on one arm, his long legs stretched out, his shirt plastered against a very nice, muscled chest. It would be so easy to lean down and rest her mouth on his...

"Tell me about your wife," she abruptly said, wincing when he frowned. Right, maybe that had been a bit out of the blue. And Madi knew Rigby wouldn't explain anything if he didn't want to. He wasn't, in any way, a pushover.

"Not a request I expected," Rigby replied, sitting up and bending his knees. He rested his forearm on his knee and held his wineglass with just one finger hooked into its rim. "Why do you want to know?"

Madi lifted her shoulders to her ears. "Honestly?"

"I always prefer honesty," he assured her.

"Well, I really wanted to kiss you and I knew that would be a bad idea, so I blurted out that request instead." Okay, he'd think she was a complete fool but did that matter? It wasn't like she was going to see him after these four days spent at Calcott Manor.

"Mmm. I wouldn't mind kissing you either."

"Why?" Madi whispered. And if he said something about her being a supermodel or being pretty or mentioning the moon and the romantic setting, she'd be disappointed at his lack of creativity.

"Because you have a bit of a duck mouth, and Daisy Duck was my first crush."

Madi stared at him, not sure whether or not to laugh. Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile and felt the tickle of a giggle wanting to escape. She wasn't going to laugh, she wasn't...

"You can laugh, you know."

Madi rolled her eyes, chuckled and shook her head. "Points for creativity, Rigby."

"So can we get back to your duck mouth and kissing?" he demanded, lifting his hand to trace her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. And in a flash, the atmosphere flicked over from teasing to temptation, and the air around them grew muggy with hot promise. Madi felt the sparks in her big toes, behind her knees and between her legs. She desperately wanted to be free of her bra and needed his tongue rasping across her nipples.

The intensity of her attraction made her feel deeply uncomfortable. It was too much, too soon and she was a girl who liked to tiptoe into situations, not fling herself, body and soul, into a maelstrom. Rigby, and her attraction to him, wasn't something she'd ever experienced before, and it scared her to death. She could handle him in her make-believe world. In real life? Not at all.

"One kiss, Madigan," he murmured, his face obliterating the space between her mouth and his, and she didn't pull back when his lips touched hers. She expected him to cover her body with his, to deepen his kiss immediately, to invade her mouth with an insistent tongue.

But he kept his touch light, his mouth soft. His lips nibbled hers as he learned the contours of her mouth. She loved the slight rasp of his stubble, adored how his thumb moved up and down her neck, a little reassuring, a lot sexy. But Madi knew that if she wanted more, then she would have to make the next move. Opening her mouth, her tongue traced the seam of his lips. She heard his back-of-the-throat groan and when he opened his lips, she slid her tongue into his mouth. He tasted of red wine and sex, of sin. She tangled her tongue around his, frustrated by his muted response. She wanted to know how this man kissed when he stopped thinking and when he wasn't trying to control the moment.

If he couldn't give her everything, then she wanted nothing. She pulled back and shook her head. When he looked at her, she wrinkled her nose.

"No chemistry?" he asked.

No, that wasn't the problem. His holding back was. "There's lots of chemistry but you're not letting it ignite," she told him, standing up.

*Just One Room...*

She wasn't interested in being anyone's mercy kiss, a token moment of romance on the beach in summer. "The next time you kiss me, bring your A game, Rigby. Or don't bother."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rigby narrowed his eyes at her and followed her to his feet. Madi was about to bend down to pick up the blanket when he wound a strong arm around her waist and, with no effort at all, lifted her up and into him. Her breasts pushed into his chest, and she felt the long ridge of his erection against her stomach. His mouth hovered over hers, just out of reach. Refusing to close the gap between them, she tipped her head, waiting for his next move. Rigby handed her a half smile before clamping his free hand to the back of her head to hold her in place and tunneled his fingers into her thick hair.

His mouth covered hers and this time there was no indecision, no playing around. She tasted his frustration and sipped on his desire. His tongue wound around hers, twisting and turning, and she responded by hooking her thigh over his hip. Rigby placed his hand under her butt and boosted her up, easily holding her off her feet. Madi crossed her ankles behind his back and gripped her knees against his sides. Her hands explored his head, his neck, streaked over his shoulders, down his back as she fell into a kiss that was as sublime as it was dangerous, as sexy as it was intense. There was no one but him in their universe, nothing was more important than having his hand underneath her short skirt, his fingers sliding under the edge of her panties to explore the skin of her butt. She'd fantasized about him touching her, but she'd never imagined that it could be as phenomenal as this.

Madi was about to suggest they explore more of each other on the blanket, but she had no willpower to stop kissing Rigby. In a few minutes she would have to, because if she didn't pull her mouth off his, she wouldn't be able to kiss his strong neck, drag her teeth over his collarbone, or run her tongue down his abs and over that sexy hip muscle all fit men sported. She wanted to wrap her hand around his thick, impressive shaft.

To do any of that, she had to stop kissing him.

Rigby took that decision out of her hands when he pulled away from her mouth to trail kisses across her jaw and down her throat. He ran his hand over her chest and pulled the elasticized band of her off-the-shoulder dress down, revealing her lacy white strapless bra. Without hesitation, Rigby dropped his head and pulled a nipple into his mouth, sucking her through the fabric of her expensive bra, transferring the heat of his mouth to her nipple. His fingers pushed between her legs from behind

and there was nothing she wanted more than for them to slide into her, his thumb rubbing her clit. She couldn't remember when last, if ever, she'd been this turned-on.

They didn't have a condom, but she was on the pill. Would Rigby be prepared to take that chance with her? They could use the blanket as a barrier between them and the sand, and make love under the light of the moon. She wanted his mouth between her legs, to feel his bare butt cheeks under her palms, to cup his sack and drag her thumb up and down his shaft. She'd never felt so out of control before, so desperate to be filled and taken. So this was what passion felt like, how it really felt to be beautiful in a man's arms. After loving her other breast, Rigby lifted his head. Her eyes connected with his and she thought she saw surprise and a little shock there. She liked that she could make this inscrutable man, so in control, look wild-eyed with need and want.

Madi touched his face with her fingertips and lifted her mouth to drag her lips across his. She wanted him, wanted and needed. "Rigby, do you—"

*Holy living crap! What the ever-loving—*

Madi felt the smack of cold sea water splashing onto her now mostly bare buttocks, thanks to Rigby turning her panties into a thong. She yelped as another wave smacked her legs and splashed up, this time hitting her between her open legs. What had been hot was now cold. If she looked down, she might see steam...

She did look down—no steam—and saw that Rigby stood ankle-deep in the incoming tide. Her blanket was a soggy mess. "The tide has come in," she stated.

"Got that," Rigby replied, as her feet hit the soggy sand.

"I didn't notice," Madi stated, a little discombobulated.

"And I didn't care," Rigby replied, holding her arm as she wobbled on her feet. "Are you okay?"

Yep. Just a little overwhelmed by that kiss. She'd asked for real and she'd gotten it, in spades. Now she didn't know what to do with it. Rigby bent down and picked up the bottle of red wine, cursing when he saw that it, too, had suffered from being doused by a rogue wave.

"What a waste," he muttered, bending again to pick up the cork and the knocked-over wineglasses.

He nodded at the wet blanket. "Do you need some help with that?"

Madi flung the corners together—only half of it was wet—and quickly folded it into a square. Luckily it was lightweight, and she could hold it in one hand. She glanced around, nodded and then looked at Rigby. “Well, that was fun,” she told him, trying to keep it light as they started the walk up the beach to the path that would take them back to the apartment.

“Did I bring my A game?” Rigby asked, placing a light hand on her back.

She sighed. Well, she’d asked for it. “And your B, C and D game. Are you as good in bed as you are good at kissing?”

His white teeth flashed as he grinned. “I think I am better.” Oh, she did enjoy a confident man. “Would you like to put that to the test?”

She very much would, but it was one thing fantasizing about a man for a year and another hopping into bed with him after a scorching-hot kiss. In the real world, she had terrible taste in men—was Rigby just another on a long list? She’d been burned so many times before...

It was so much easier living her life alone, only committing to a fantasy man and letting that be enough for her. It was cowardly, maybe—she was imagining life rather than living it—but she was so done with the drama that came with dating.

He might be a sexy one-night stand, but she’d had so-called one-night stands that led to her longest relationships. Rigby could rocket her from zero to sixty with a simple kiss, but she knew that something would go wrong soon enough. All the good guys were taken, and those who were single still had issues...

With a dead wife, Madi was sure Rigby had more than most. No, it was better to be sensible and slam on the brakes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rigby loved his godmother, he did—she was one of his favorite people. But right now, sitting across from her at the exquisitely decorated table in the formal dining room at Calcott Manor, Rigby could quite happily tell her to shut up.

“I’m just saying, I would like grandbabies at some point before I die,” she told him, mischief brimming in her brown eyes.

Rigby pulled in a deep breath, pain ricocheting through him. No one but him knew that Clare had been eight weeks pregnant when she’d died. He had no idea if the baby was his or her lover’s. He fumbled for his wineglass and took a long sip, fighting the urge to storm away from the table.

“At the very least, darling, you should start to date again,” Jocelyn continued. God. The woman just... Did. Not. Know. When. To. Stop.

Rigby felt a hand on his thigh, a cautionary squeeze. He turned to look into Madi’s face and saw the sympathy in her eyes. She was particularly lovely this evening, dressed in a plain but classy black cocktail dress, her thick hair piled up into a loose knot. As usual, she kept her makeup incredibly natural and she wore only diamond studs in her ears. He’d watched her earlier as she took photos of the Grantham clan, and she was as creative as she was beautiful.

“Up until this point,” he whispered, “I was having a great time.”

And he had been. He and Madi, Jocelyn and Arthur were the only guests at the table who weren’t a part of the Grantham family. And while Jacinta Knowles and her son Merrick weren’t Granthams in the eyes of the law, they were an intrinsic part of the family.

They were, despite their wealth, a unit, and they all looked thoroughly happy. And after all the drama they’d gone through to get to this point, they deserved that happiness.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Madi pat her mouth with her napkin and lay it back down in her lap. She waited for a lull in Jocelyn’s conversation—it took a couple of minutes—before clearing her

throat and catching Jocelyn's eye. "Actually, maybe this is a good time to tell you that Rigby and I have been seeing each other, Jocelyn."

The pressure on his thigh increased and Rigby managed to keep his face from reflecting his shock.

"It's fairly new but we're hoping it will work out."

Jocelyn's eyes bounced from his face to Madi's and back again. "You and Rigby are together?"

Rigby twisted a little in his seat to see how Madi would fare under his godmother's interrogation. Like the rest of the table, he was eager to hear how their relationship had developed and at what stage it was.

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Oh, a couple of months," Madi airily replied. "We met through Eliot and Soren, who have been trying to set us up for ages."

Jocelyn released an irritated huff and frowned at Soren. "It was my idea to get them together! Didn't I suggest it ages ago?" she demanded.

Rigby caught the amusement in Soren's eyes, and Eliot hastily lifted her linen napkin to her face to hide her smile. *Don't blow it now*, he silently told them. *If you back me up, I might get some peace for the rest of the weekend.*

"You did and we listened to you, Jocelyn," Soren replied, somehow managing to sound deferential. "Everyone listens to you, you know that."

Because his godmother wasn't an idiot, she caught a trace of sarcasm in Soren's voice, and she frowned. "I'm not sure whether to take you seriously or not."

"Oh, we've all had drinks in the city together," Jack casually added. "Madi and Rigby join us when their schedules, and ours, allow us some downtime."

With a fiancée and a toddler, and co-managing a massive hospitality empire with Fox, Jack didn't have much time for socializing, but Jocelyn, who lived in the UK, might not know that. Rigby sent him a grateful look and caught the way the corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. They'd all, he

remembered, been on the pointy end of Jocelyn's matchmaking efforts and knew the hell he was experiencing. The thing was, unlike before, he didn't want to run out of the room, howling, at the thought of dating Madi.

He could, scarily, see himself doing exactly that.

The conversation moved on and Rigby, because he could, leaned sideways and placed his lips on Madi's bare shoulder. He inhaled her perfume and felt the action happening in his pants. She turned her head, their eyes met, and Rigby fell into her rich brown eyes, the color of a century-old violin. Honestly, he could look into those eyes forever.

Madi leaned sideways and brushed her lips across his in a kiss that was brief and brilliant. "Are you okay?" she asked.

It took a while for his brain and tongue to work together to form words. "Yeah, just recovering from the fact that I have a super-sexy and smart girlfriend."

Her eyes lit up when he called her smart and he realized that her looks were incidental to Madi, possibly more of a hindrance at this stage of her life than a help. She wanted to be recognized for her talent and her creativity, not for the fact that she'd made the cover of *Vogue* a few times.

"I hear she can be quite high-maintenance," Madi told him. She sounded like she was joking but Rigby picked up another note in her voice, which made him curious.

"In what way?" he asked, interested. Frankly, he was interested in everything about her.

"She doesn't tolerate infidelity or being lied to. She'd much rather be hurt by the truth than comforted by a lie," she told him, removing her hand from his thigh. "When someone says he loves her, he'd better love her with everything he has." Madi shrugged and looked away. "She's not prepared to settle for half measures. Oh, and she has an overactive fantasy life."

She wasn't talking about sex, sadly—it was a reference to her inner world and not the first time she'd made that comment.

It was his turn to squeeze her thigh. She deserved everything. "I don't think that's too much to ask in a relationship."

Sadness flickered like a dying candle in her eyes. "But you can't give that to anyone, can you?"

No, he couldn't. He'd tried before but Clare had just thrown it back in his face, told him his love wasn't enough. He'd never risk his heart again. "No, I can't."

Madi pulled a smile onto her face. "Well, then it's a good thing this is just a pretend relationship, isn't it?"

But was it? She excited him, and intrigued him more than any woman, including Clare, ever had. He could spend a lifetime exploring her... Rigby pulled back, surprised at where his thoughts had taken him. This was make-believe. He was taking their pull-the-wool-over-Jocelyn's-eyes stunt a bit too far. He'd resolved to live his life solo, concentrating on his business and keeping his emotional distance.

And a gorgeous ex-model photographer, creative and confident, was not going to change his mind.

CHAPTER SIX

In Madi's bedroom the next night, Rigby dumped his bag on the floor and slapped his hands on his hips. Next door, in what had been his room, another couple was, he presumed, unpacking their bags.

"That...that..."

"Manipulative and interfering?" Madi asked him, sitting on the edge of her double bed. Madi's mouth twitched with amusement. "Well, she certainly called our bluff, didn't she?"

"While I expected some interrogation about you and our relationship," Rigby retorted. "I never expected her to interfere in our living arrangements."

Madi's laugh was part gurgle, part snort. "We've been hoisted by our own petard! We told her we are together, so she assumed we are sleeping together. That assumption led to her remembering that the apartment has a spare bedroom, so when she heard that a Grantham guest was traveling back and forth to the city because they couldn't find accommodation in the town, she offered them your bedroom."

"I wasn't in a position to refuse," Rigby grumbled. "It was either admit that we lied to her or move in with you."

"Moving in here was far the better of two bad choices," Madi agreed. "I'm not sure I could deal with a lecture from Jocelyn about honesty and deceit."

Jocelyn was both a church minister and a spiritual guru to several Hollywood and British A-listers—she was well known for telling it straight and not pulling her punches.

"I've been on the end of her sharp tongue many times before," Rigby told her. "The lectures are never fun."

Madi saw him glance at the big bed and knew he was wondering if she expected him to sleep on the floor. But they were adults and that behavior was more suited to Jane Austen's books than modern-day America. She wanted him...

And she was tired of being sensible. Yes, he might be another bad choice, but she was sure he would be worth it.

It was ridiculous how the space between her legs heated when he looked at her with those green eyes, how her heart skipped—it was the only part of her that had skipped since she was ten!—and her nipples ached. She wanted to feel his beard scraping across her sensitive skin, and she couldn't wait to nibble her way across the fantastically muscled body she'd seen shirtless over the course of the last two days—watching him play beach volleyball was the highlight of her life!

She wasn't a woman who made a habit of asking men to share her bed but, despite her cold feet last night, she wasn't scared of doing so either. It was the twenty-first century and women were allowed to express their sexual needs and wants.

"I can hear you thinking," Rigby said, coming to sit down next to her. He kicked off his flip-flops and shifted back to sit cross-legged on the bed. "So, what do we do now? We can't share a glass of wine on the balcony—Alison and Harry will hear us and I can see them asking to join our party."

The couple to whom Jocelyn had offered the room were extremely gregarious and enthusiastic. They reminded Madi of Labrador puppies who thought they could push themselves into any situation, completely sure of their welcome. They were sweet, harmless even, but God, they couldn't read the room.

Madi turned to face him. "Well, we can always just hang out here." *Hang out? Just say it, Madigan, for God's sake.* "You know...naked."

It only took him a couple of seconds for his attention to sharpen and his eyes to heat. "Naked?"

He swallowed and Madi wanted to smile at the shock she saw on his face. Right, he hadn't been expecting that. She rather liked keeping this too-uptight, too-calm man off-balance.

"What, exactly, are you suggesting, Madigan?"

She liked that he was asking for clarification, that he hadn't pounced. Oh, making him lose control and seeing the emotion on his normally implacable face was going to be fun.

She stood and found the zip at the side of her dress, and Rigby's feet hit the floor. The material of her dress slipped off her shoulders, revealing her deep violet bra. "I'm suggesting that, as your brand-new, albeit pretend, girlfriend, you should make love to me."

He straightened and ran his hand over the ball of her shoulder, down her arms to link his fingers in hers. "Are you sure?" he asked, lifting her hand to place his lips on her knuckles. "You weren't last night."

Madi felt her dress pool around her legs and lifted her other hand to touch his jaw.

"I needed a little more time but now I am very sure. Make love to me, Rigby. Please."

His mouth covered her lips in a soul-stealing, devastating kiss and Madi realized she was in danger of losing complete control. After rediscovering her mouth, Rigby started to kiss her jaw, and moved down her neck, his teeth scraping across her exposed collarbone. She wanted his clothes off and needed to lay her hands on his hot, masculine skin, but he was too intent on learning her curves and she was distracted enough to let him. He reached behind her back to release her bra strap and he groaned when he tested the weight of her breasts. He lowered his head to pull an aching-for-him nipple into his mouth.

Rigby's eyes were hot with need. Having him on his knees in front of her, worshiping her body, was the biggest turn-on of her life. His entire focus was her and her pleasure, and she knew it would take a nuclear threat to get him to stop.

And maybe that wouldn't even be enough.

Rigby traced the band of her low-cut panties, sliding his finger down its side, where it met the crease of her hips, before cupping her butt. His eyes widened in pleasure as he realized she wore a thong. "You are so utterly beautiful, incredibly sexy."

She knew she was a beautiful woman. She'd been paid enough money for portraits to snap her face and body, but up until this moment, she'd never really felt beautiful. With Rigby she did. He placed his mouth on her belly button and licked her exposed skin while she tunneled her hands into his hair.

She tugged at the collar of his shirt, but Rigby simply ignored her, choosing instead to run his nose over her mound and nuzzle her between her legs. In an unconscious movement, her legs fell apart and his tongue pushed the fabric of her panties against her feminine lips.

Pulling back, Rigby looked up at her, a small smile on his face. "As pretty as these are, I think it might work better if we take them off."

Was he expecting a reply to that? She hoped not because she was pretty certain she'd lost her ability to speak. She nodded and watched as he oh so gently, and oh so slowly, pulled her panties down her thighs. She lifted her foot, still encased in her favorite pair of Louboutin heels, and wondered if he'd tackle the tiny buckle on the ankle strap. When he just dragged his finger through her thin, tidy patch of hair, she realized that removing her shoes wasn't a priority.

Okay, then.

Rigby pushed her knees apart, dropped his head and started to love her. And Madi shook and bit down on her fist to muffle her scream.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After making love twice, Rigby suggested escaping the apartment—neither of them could sleep—for a walk on the beach. Deciding she could sleep when she was dead, Madi pulled on a bikini and a cover-up, and Rigby opted for just a pair of swim shorts. They walked through the scented garden, enjoying the hot night. At the edge of the dune, they stepped onto the path leading to the beach, her hand enveloped by his. Madi anchored herself to his side as they kicked their feet through the gently rolling waves, happy to enjoy the night, the peace and the silence.

“I was driving the car when we crashed,” Rigby said, his voice coming from out of the blue.

Madi jerked her head up, jolted out of her thoughts. She’d been thinking about the amazing sex they’d shared and he’d been thinking about his dead wife. Right. She didn’t know what to make of that.

“It was raining hard and I’d collected her from work. I don’t know why because we normally made our own way home,” Rigby said, his voice almost robotic.

His grip on her hand tightened and she looked up to see him gazing out to sea, his face granite hard. “I thought we were going home to have dinner, do some chores, watch some tv, maybe make love. You know, normal stuff.”

It sounded perfect, exactly what she wanted. A nice husband, a sexy lover, a lot of normal. And to be honest, she was a little jealous. She hadn’t come close to the dream that had been ripped away from Rigby in the worst way possible.

“I heard Jocelyn telling Eliot how amazing you were together, how in love you were,” Madi said.

“Except we weren’t,” Rigby said, stopping. He tried to smile but couldn’t. “I mean, I was completely in love with her, wild about her. She wasn’t in love with me. She told me so, in the car as we drove home. There I was, thinking everything was fine, but she just shrugs and tells me that it was not working and that there was someone else.”

No. Way.

Madi's mouth dropped open and her heart cracked at the pain she saw in his face. It was raw and visceral and a part of her wanted to run from it, to slap her hands over her ears so she couldn't hear any more. Yet Rigby had lived this; it had been his life.

"I was trying to drive, to keep the car on the road, in not-ideal conditions, and she's telling me this, in the same voice she would use to order coffee or buy insurance. My world is falling apart, and she doesn't sound in the least bit worried."

Madi didn't know what to say, so she just held his hand with both of hers and waited. "I was shaking from head to toe and I knew I had to pull over, so I did. We sat there on the side of the road in the rain. I remember the howling wind and Clare's face as she told me she wanted a divorce. We'd only been married two years, and our anniversary was the month before. I flew her to Paris for a long weekend."

Madi shook her head and closed her eyes, easily able to imagine how devastated, how rocked, Rigby must've felt sitting in that car as his entire world disintegrated around him. And, while she didn't like to talk badly about the dead, what a bitch! She'd cheated on her husband and asked for a divorce while he drove her home in a thunderstorm.

"She was having an affair?" Madi quietly asked, pushing her hair off her face.

"Yep."

"Apparently, she'd been seeing him, on and off, before we met, while we were engaged and throughout our marriage. She genuinely loved him. I believe that," Rigby continued.

"So why did she marry you, then?" Madi demanded, incensed on his behalf.

"She also liked money and he didn't have any. Back then I had a decent business, and I was Jocelyn's heir, and she's the owner of a few London properties and a healthy stock portfolio."

"You have more than a decent business now," Madi commented. It didn't matter that he was rich, but she was impressed at the company he'd built. "So if your wife liked money, what changed?" she asked him, folding her arms across her chest.

"Her lover came into some money, enough that she decided to bail," Rigby replied, cynicism coating every word. "She was also pregnant and didn't know who the father was."

Oh, God. *No*. Madi wound her hands around his waist and rested her cheek on his chest. “That must’ve hurt so much, Rig. God, I can’t imagine.”

Rigby stared out to sea, a million miles away. “I just sat there for the longest time, unable to speak. Eventually, Clare asked me to take her home and told me that I had to spend the night somewhere else. I knew I shouldn’t be driving—I was upset and angry—but Clare didn’t drive, and I had to get us home. That truck came out of nowhere. All I saw was lights and heard this awful screeching sound.”

She’d heard from Madi that Rigby hadn’t been driving fast but a truck passing a slower vehicle on a blind corner connected with the passenger side of their car and spun it into the barrier. Clare had died on impact, and it hadn’t been Rigby’s fault.

Rigby stepped away from her and pushed his hands into his hair. He stared down at her, looking off balance. “I’ve never told anyone what happened in that car,” he said, his voice raspy. “Jocelyn would be so upset if she found out. She thinks we had a perfect marriage. She really loved Clare.”

Madi lifted her hand and touched his jaw with her fingertips. “I promise I’ll never tell anybody, Rig. It’s your story to tell, not mine.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Everyone thinks I won’t get involved again because I had such a perfect relationship, because she was the love of my life—”

“But it’s actually because you were betrayed in the worst way possible and had your world whipped out from under your feet,” Madi said, her heart sinking to the floor. If she’d thought it would be hard to get Rigby to take a chance before, she now knew, with this new information, that it would be a thousand times more difficult.

And she didn’t blame him. If that had happened to her, she wouldn’t risk her heart again either. It was sad because she knew they could be good together. In bed and out.

“Thank you for telling me, Rig. Thank you for trusting me with your past,” she told him, her voice a little shaky. “But I don’t know why you did. After all, I am just your pretend girlfriend. We’ve only known each other for a few days and when we get back to the city, our very brief, very fake relationship is going to end.”

Instead of telling her he wanted to see her again, instead of assuring her that something was developing between them as she'd prayed, Rigby just nodded. "I wanted you to know why I can't get involved, why having anything more than superficial sex isn't possible."

Right, he'd drawn her the picture and colored it in. Message received.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rigby stood to the side of the Calcott Manor ballroom. The combination of perfume and the strongly scented roses and lilies in the flower arrangements made him want to sneeze. Everyone who'd graced Calcott Manor with their presence tonight was dressed to the nines.

Rigby smoothed down his Hermès tie and checked the button on his Hugo Boss suit. He watched Madi talking to Eliot and Soren on the other side of the room. Her ballgown was a simple but sexy number in a brilliant shade of coral and her shoes were the same black Louboutin heels she'd worn the other night.

The ones he'd left on as he made love to her on her bed that very first time. That was a memory he'd never forget.

Rigby took a sip of whisky from his heavy tumbler and wondered, not for the first or even the hundredth time, why he'd felt the urge to confide in her last night. He now wished he hadn't. He felt vulnerable and exposed.

"I really like her, you know."

Rigby turned to see Jocelyn standing behind him, dressed in a royal purple dress and holding a champagne flute. "If I could, I'd make you marry her."

Rigby shook his head. "You've made that abundantly clear," he said dryly. "Why?"

Madi was funny and smart and so damn sexy it took his breath away, but he was interested in Jocelyn's opinion. His godmother tipped her head to the side and considered her reply. "I've seen some of her portraits and they are truly excellent. She looks at her subjects, and at people, in an honest way. She doesn't flinch when she's shown the rough and raw side of someone's personality."

That was true. Madi had taken his confession about Clare and hadn't handed him obsequious platitudes or clichés. She'd just held him and tried to soak up some of his pain.

“She doesn’t only look for the pretty—she wants the real,” Jocelyn said, placing a hand on his arm. She looked up into his face, and Rigby’s breath hitched at the sadness he saw in her eyes. “I know Clare wasn’t happy, Rig.”

He flinched at her soft words and then frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked, his voice cracking. “How do you know that?” Rigby added, running a finger under his suddenly too-tight collar.

“To me, Clare always wanted more. She was a beautiful butterfly flitting from bloom to bloom, always wanting to see if she could find something bigger, brighter and sweeter.”

Rigby felt both relieved and sideswiped. While he had no intention of ever telling Jocelyn what had happened in the car before Clare’s death, he was glad he could stop pretending that his marriage had been champagne and roses.

“Madi isn’t like that. Firstly, she doesn’t expect anyone else to make her happy. She takes responsibility for herself and her feelings. Once she decides on a course of action, she doesn’t waver.”

Jocelyn held his gaze and in her wise brown depths, he knew what she was trying to tell him.

*Take a chance on Madi. She won’t let you down.*

Rigby knew he didn’t want to live a life without exploring that option. He didn’t want to waste his life by not exploring *her*.

\*

Madi watched Rigby make his way through the crowded ballroom toward her, her heart crawling up her throat. They had tonight, then tomorrow he would be out of her life, and she’d go back to being on her own. The thought made her feel very sad, but she was so grateful to have spent a little time with him, to know that the man she’d woven so many fantasies around was even more wonderful in real life.

“And the magical apartment fairy spell strikes again,” Eliot told her, grinning.

It was an effort to pull her eyes off Rigby, but she managed it. Just. “What are you on about?”

Eliot grinned at her. “We have this theory that the apartment is under a have-great-sex-then-fall-in-love spell. Every one of us fell in love while living in that apartment. Me first, then Ru, then Peyton and finally Merrick.”

Okay, that was nonsense. It was simply a huge coincidence. "Yeah, right," Madi scoffed.

"We'll see," Eliot said and drifted away as Rigby came up to her.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

She'd far prefer to leave the ball and have him to herself, but if dancing was the way to feel his arms around her then she'd take it. She placed her hand in his and shivered when his palm rested on the bare skin of her lower back. As she swayed in his arms, Madi took in the little things so she could remember the details when he left. He had a tiny scar on his right jaw, and a very small bend to his long nose. He had three perfectly aligned freckles to the right of his left ear. He smelled of citrus and the sea, and his body was hard and muscled. And his voice, God, his voice...

"So, tomorrow..."

Madi felt her heart contract and tears blurred her vision. She would not cry. She would not embarrass herself by crying! He'd made her no promises, and she'd gotten far more from their days together than she'd expected.

"What time were you thinking of leaving?" Rigby asked, resting his temple against the side of her head. One tear trickled down her cheek and she lifted a finger off his shoulder to brush it away.

She swallowed and hoped her voice wouldn't betray her. "After breakfast," she said.

He didn't reply but she did feel his lips in her hair. "I was thinking maybe I could drive you back to the city..."

Well, as marvellous as that sounded, she did have her car here, as she reminded him.

"When's your next shoot?" he asked her. "It's at the end of next week, right?"

Madi nodded, struggling a little to keep up with his random conversation. "Yeah."

He stood back and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear with one finger. "Maybe we should take another few days, go somewhere, anywhere, and just be together. Carry on doing what we've been doing."

Madi knew that it wasn't a good idea. Leaving him was hard enough—leaving him after more time would be impossible. "I'm falling for you, Rigby. I don't want to get in deeper and have to miss you so much more," she told him, trying her best to be brave but failing utterly.

Rigby rested his forehead against hers and smiled. "I know that when our few days are up, I'll ask you for more. And then more. Why don't we skip all that?"

"And?"

"And take a chance, believe that this can work. I'm so in love with you, Madi."

Madi knew she'd never feel happier than she did right now. "I've been wild about you from the moment I saw you walk into the room for Eliot and Soren's party, Rig. I've thought about no one but you for more than a year, and I thought I was destined to live my life with you as my imaginary lover."

He smiled at her, his eyes and expression full of love. "Why don't you plan on spending it loving the very real me instead?"

"I can do that," Madi told him, standing on her toes to kiss him. "So, what do you say we grab a bottle of champagne and take it back to the apartment? We'll have the place to ourselves."

"That's an excellent idea, I can't wait to get you out of that dress," Rigby told her as he led her out of the ballroom and into the warm night.

They were halfway across the lawn when they heard Eliot calling their names. They turned to see the entire Grantham clan, and Jocelyn, standing outside the tall doors leading from the ballroom onto the terraced garden. They were all grinning like loons.

"And the above-the-garage-apartment spell strikes again!" Eliot yelled, her hands cupped around her mouth. She danced on the spot and the entire Grantham clan laughed.

Rigby sent Madi a puzzled look. "What's that about?" he asked, as she took his hand and led him away.

"Ah, that. That's going to take some explaining..."

~

If you loved *Just One Room...*, be sure to catch Joss Wood's other books from the Dynasties: Calcott Manor series:

*Just a Little Jilted*  
*Their Temporary Arrangement*  
*The Trouble with Little Secrets*  
*Keep Your Enemies Close...*

*Nina Singh*

A SECOND CHANCE  
AT FIRST LOVE

NINA SINGH

CHAPTER ONE

"Well, if it isn't the besotted groom who once swore he would remain a bachelor forever."

Louis Tamlin rose out of his chair at the sound of his friend's familiar voice behind him. It had been much too long.

"I could say the same thing about you, my man," he answered, shaking the other man's hand before they embraced shoulder to shoulder.

Louis sat back in his chair as Evan took the seat across from him at the wire-rimmed glass table. The outdoor café was one of the Bayfront's most popular lunch spots. It had taken Louis more than a few phone calls to score a table on short notice when Evan had called to inform him yesterday that he'd be in town briefly on business.

"Commitment looks good on you," Louis told his friend with a teasing smile, referring to Evan's recent engagement, which had come about last year after he and his current fiancée had staged a fake one in order to secure a business deal. To their own surprise, Evan and Chiarra had ended up really falling in love.

"And marriage looks good on you," Evan replied. "Tell me again how you duped that smart, successful genius of a woman into marrying you," he added in a joking tone. The way they taunted each other practically since childhood would never get old.

"Darned if I know," Louis answered with full sincerity. Some days he still found himself marveling at the way luck had smiled on him. He'd met and married the woman of his dreams. "Must have been my magical charm," he added.

Their server appeared then to place two tall glasses of lemon water onto the table. "How is Gemma?" Evan asked, taking a sip once the woman had left. "I was sorry to hear she wouldn't be here while I'm in town. It would have been nice to see her, too."

Louis nodded. "She's doing well and is also sad to have missed you. She's in Boston performing as part of their summer celebration. It so happens that her mother spends part of the season on Cape Cod. Gemma's planning to drive down after the concert to spend a few days there with her."

Evan chuckled, amusement shining in his eyes.

"What?" Louis asked. He didn't recall having said anything particularly humorous.

Evan shook his head, still smiling. "Nothing. Just the look of utter adoration on your face as you talk about your wife being gone, as if you can't stand the thought of being away from her even for a few days." He took a sip of water. "You really have it bad, bro. Don't you?"

*Nina Singh*

Louis didn't bother denying it. Gemma's trip was their first time apart since they'd become husband and wife, and he was finding the days long and dull without her.

He did indeed have it bad. In the best possible way.

CHAPTER TWO

Gemma turned her rental car onto the ramp leading to Route 3, the main expressway leading into Cape Cod from metro Boston. The day was beautifully clear and sunny but rather windy. Too windy, in fact, to take advantage of lowering the top of the convertible, so she'd left the top up.

Breathing a sigh of relief to finally be out of the city, she turned on the car radio. Gemma was no stranger to Boston, having gone to university at Berklee College of Music not so long ago.

She was not looking forward to the conversation with her mother that awaited her in a few short hours.

She just wanted to get back home to Singapore and back to her husband.

Did all newlyweds miss their spouses this much when they were apart? As badly as she wanted to return to Louis's side, Gemma had to get this over with once and for all. Through sheer serendipity, she'd been asked to perform in Boston just as her mom had jetted to New England to take up residence in her Cape Cod beach house.

Gemma might take that as a sign. It was past time to tell Ma once and for all that she would be taking a step back from performing and from the violin in general, at least for the next few years. As much as she loved her craft and her violin, Gemma was exhausted. She felt close to burnout. Plus, she was excited to jump into her new life fully with Louis.

She'd already let her manager know. That conversation had been difficult enough. The chat with her mother was bound to be much worse.

As soon as she reached the outskirts of the city, Gemma moved to call Louis on hands-free mode—he'd just be wrapping up his lunch with his childhood friend. She just wanted to hear his voice.

He beat her to it. Before she could press the right button, the panel lit up with an incoming call. A tug of affection pulled at her heart. Her husband couldn't wait to call her as soon as his lunch was over.

She pressed the button to answer, and Louis's voice echoed through the car. "The reviews are in," he announced. "And they all say my wife is a musical genius who entralls her audiences with her talent."

Gemma laughed, "Well, this performer is about to take a long-awaited and much-needed break."

"Don't forget 'well-earned,'" Louis said.

"Once I tell Ma, it will be official."

Louis paused before speaking. "I wish I could be there with you to help you get through it. I know she'll be disappointed."

That was the truth. And Ma could be quite a challenge when she was disappointed.

CHAPTER THREE

Gemma had a hard time hearing Louis over the car speaker. The wind outside seemed to be picking up to an alarming degree. A large branch flew in front of her windshield, startling her enough that she gripped the wheel.

"Gemma? What do you think?" Louis asked now. "Do you want me to fly down? I can hop on a jet and be by your side so you don't have to face her by yourself."

Gemma was tempted enough by the offer that she hesitated before answering him. She had to do this on her own. "It's okay. I think she'll handle it better if I'm alone when I tell her."

She heard him exhale a deep breath. "You certainly have a point there. I know I'm not her favorite person at the moment."

He wasn't. That was no fault of his own. Ma was just stubborn and unreasonable about her new son-in-law. She couldn't see what a catch Louis would be considered by most other parents. She only saw the distraction he caused Gemma when it came to pursuing her ambitions as a musician.

Only, over the years, they'd gradually become less Gemma's dreams and more her mother's.

"Don't worry. I can handle my mom alone," she reassured him. "I learned at a young age." She'd had to as an only child. While her father had the distraction of his many businesses, Gemma had been Ma's primary focus. In many ways, she still was.

A gust of wind blew strong enough to shake the car and rattle her windows.

"What was that?" Louis asked, concern tingeing his voice.

"It's rather windy here," she answered. "I'd forgotten how temperamental New England weather could be."

"Maybe you shouldn't be driving in that, Gemma."

She was touched by the level of worry in his tone. This was a new experience. Of course, she'd dated through college and in her early adult years, but the violin had taken up all her time and most of her focus. None of those dates had led to anything serious. Having a man concerned about her well-being was an alien but pleasing feeling.

"It is getting rather treacherous with all the debris flying about..."

Louis swore.

She could tell he was on edge. "If it will make you feel better, I'll pull off the road and find a place to stop until the wind dies down."

She heard his deep sigh of relief. "That would definitely make me feel better. Promise?"

"I promise."

Gemma hung up once they'd said their goodbyes and took the next exit off the expressway. If memory served, there was a strip mall with a charming café about three miles down the road.

A violently loud cracking sound suddenly tore through the car. Gemma could barely process what was happening as she saw the large trunk of a tree barreling toward her.

Then the world went blank.

CHAPTER FOUR

Louis scanned the spreadsheets in front of him through tired and blurry eyes. He could hardly focus.

It had only been about an hour since he'd ended the call with Gemma, but something didn't sit right in his chest.

She wasn't answering her phone, but he tried to tell himself that was no cause for alarm. That it could be due to all the dead cellular spots the side roads on the Cape ran through.

One thing was certain—if he didn't hear from her within the next hour, he would find a way to get to New England himself. No matter what it took.

Louis rubbed his eyes and slammed his laptop cover closed. No use trying to get any work done. His brain only kept wandering. Maybe he was being paranoid but he was genuinely worried about his wife. Call it a gut hunch.

His worst fears were realized when his phone finally vibrated with an incoming call. But it wasn't Gemma's ringtone that rang. Instead, his mother-in-law's info popped onto the screen.

Addie never called him. There were very few reasons Louis could think of for her to be doing so now.

None of them good. He'd never deserved Gemma. He should have guessed it wouldn't last.

#

*There's been an accident. You need to get down here.*

The words echoed in his head four hours later as Louis ran through the halls of Cape Cod Medical Center just outside Hyannis. He'd called Gemma's mom as soon as his jet had touched down for an update but the woman had been maddeningly unforthcoming.

He saw she was waiting for him in the hallway as he approached the room he'd been told to go to.

Louis didn't bother with a hello. "How is she?"

Addie had dark circles under her eyes and a weary set to her lips. They hadn't always gotten along, but Louis knew the woman cared deeply for her daughter. She had to be a mess, too.

"She's stable. Woke up about an hour ago. All the tests have come back reassuring so far."

"Thank God." He made for the door to her room but Addie stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Wait."

"What is it?" Louis bit out the question. He was in no mood to wait, desperately needing to see his wife.

"You should speak with the doctor first. He'll be here soon."

Louis blinked at her in confusion. "I thought you said she was stable. That she was even awake."

Addie nodded once. "She is."

"Then what? Just tell me, Addie. If we need to have her airlifted to Boston—"

She cut him off. "She's seeing a specialist next week. Right now, the doctors say she just needs to rest."

Alarm bells rang in Louis's head. Specialist? What kind of specialist would Gemma need? How badly was she hurt?

"What's going on?" he demanded to know. "Just tell me."

Addie squeezed her eyes shut as she spoke. His blood turned to ice at her words. "Gemma's lost a good chunk of her memory, Louis. The last several years of her life have been wiped from her brain."

But that meant...

Addie confirmed his thoughts. "She doesn't remember being married. She doesn't remember you."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gemma was very sorry. She really was. A horrible sense of guilt washed over when she looked into the eyes of the man who gingerly held on to her as they walked along the lush pathway of the garden that surrounded the medical center building.

She'd slept for most of the past three days according to the doctors.

The jackhammering inside her brain had only recently relented. She was disoriented and groggy. But there was nothing more they could do for her here. She had a slew of appointments with a neurological trauma specialist in the coming weeks.

She would be going home tomorrow morning. To her, that meant she would be returning to the beach house her mother kept on the Cape in Massachusetts. Ma had bought it when Gemma had gotten accepted into Berklee College of Music five years ago.

She gave her head a shake. In her mind that was five years ago. Apparently it was longer.

"Are you all right?" the man asked. He'd told her his name was Louis. Her husband. She hadn't quite wrapped her mind around it. To her, he was a stranger. At least until she got her memory back.

No one seemed to know how long that might take.

"Do you remember anything the doctors said?" he asked her now.

"Not very well."

Gemma glanced at the wooden bench they were approaching along the path. Though they hadn't been walking long, she could use a bit of a rest. Louis stopped when they reached it and without speaking a word helped her sit down. She hadn't even had to say anything. He certainly seemed to be in tune with her needs and wants.

He was clearly attentive, caring and considerate. If only she could remember falling in love with the man.

Not to mention, he was quite attractive. Jet-black hair with a slight curl framed an angular face. Kind eyes the color of molten chocolate. Toned muscles on a tall frame. He looked like he could be posing for a photo shoot.

"Maybe you could go over it again," she prompted when they were both seated.

"Sure," he answered, his gaze full of patience and understanding. "You were driving down a side road after getting off the expressway when the strong winds that day knocked over a large rotted tree. You happened to be driving by at that very moment. The convertible's soft top meant your pretty head got the brunt of a nasty blow. Luckily, you weren't seriously hurt. Aside from losing your memories."

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She recalled hearing as much but for the life of her didn't remember any of that actually happening to her. Whenever she tried to call up any kind of memory related to the accident, shadows popped up in her mind instead. She blew a puff of air out in frustration.

Louis reached for her then, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

Gemma couldn't help how her body reacted. Her muscles and spine stiffened at his touch. Despite his charm and sheer masculine attractiveness, Gemma couldn't respond in kind.

It was a hug from a stranger.

CHAPTER SIX

Louis swore silently at Gemma's reaction. His wife practically recoiled at his touch now. What a difference from just a few short days ago when she couldn't wait to fall into his embrace. And stay there until morning.

He made himself focus so that he could continue summarizing exactly what had happened. "For reasons the doctors can't seem to explain, the blow took about three years' worth of memories out of your head."

"Huh" was all she responded with.

"You were going in and out of consciousness when they brought you in. One theory is that when they told you where you were, at the Cape Cod Medical Center, your mind latched on to the last time you were in the Cape and took you back there."

Just saying the words felt surreal. Like a bad dream he couldn't wake up from. How was any of this happening? As grateful as he was that Gemma was okay and on her way to recovering, the wife he knew was gone. With no real clues as to when she might return.

A shudder of trepidation rocked through his core. What if the answer to that question was never?

What if Gemma never remembered loving him? Wanting him?

"In any case," he went on, pushing the unbearable thoughts away, "the doctors here and the ones I've consulted internationally all seem to think that your best chance at a swift, successful recovery is to take things slow and avoid any more shocks." Which meant he wouldn't be able to take her back home anytime soon. Not until she remembered. All the experts were saying it would be best if she stayed in an environment she found familiar at the moment.

She chuckled. "Like finding out that I was married, you mean? Because that came as a bit of a surprise." She shook her head. "When I woke up this morning, or what I thought was this morning, I was a music school graduate at my mother's beach house preparing for upcoming auditions. Only to be told I was three years older with a different name and a husband."

Louis was about to tell her sorry, but stopped himself. He refused to utter that word when it came to referencing his marriage in any way.

To his surprise, she was the one who uttered the word. "I'm sorry," she said on a deep sigh. "I'm trying. I really am. But there are only holes when I try to think of anything that happened past that summer I was here."

Louis felt like a heel in that moment. Gemma had just survived a harrowing ordeal that had left her bruised and disoriented. Though it physically pained him not to reach for her again, he fisted his hands

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at his sides. "All that matters is that you're okay. And we take your recovery slowly," he told her, meaning every single word with all his heart.

Everything else could take a back seat to the fact that she was here and she was whole.

In the meantime, he would just have to come up with ways to make his wife fall in love with him again as soon as she was ready.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Her bedroom at Ma's beach house wasn't one she recognized as her own. Her mother had turned it into a guest room of sorts, the walls painted a soft beige, the drapes a dark navy. The throw rug on the hardwood floor was a thick braided pattern in rainbow colors. Nothing she would have chosen for herself. Ma was out right now getting Gemma some essentials. Things like clothing, toiletries, the food and snacks that she liked.

Though she had to wonder just how much of her likes might have changed over the years she'd lost.

Louis carried in her suitcase and set it atop the bureau sitting under the window. Her heart still did a little jump in her chest whenever she saw him, though she couldn't explain why. Since that day walking along the hospital grounds, he hadn't so much as laid a finger on her.

He was being a perfect gentleman, giving her time to get acclimated to her new reality. More than once, Gemma's mind had wandered to dangerous territory.

She couldn't help but be curious. What had it been like to be intimate with him? To share his bed? Her lips tingled at the thought of their first kiss. She wanted so badly to ask when that might have happened but found herself too shy to say the words.

She scoffed out loud. Imagine, her husband was a stranger she felt shy with.

Louis shot her a curious gaze. "What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about how strange this must all feel for you." That was a bit of a fib, but she had been thinking that very thing earlier. After all, she could hardly tell him what she'd really been thinking.

Louis rubbed his stubbled jaw. He clearly hadn't gotten a chance to shave over the past few days. The slight beard lent a look of ruggedness to his features that had her nerves dancing. "It's like we both woke up in some kind of strange *Twilight Zone* episode or fantasy movie."

She didn't recall watching such shows. Maybe she'd started after they'd met. There was so much about him she didn't know. This man she'd fallen hard enough for that she'd married him. What was he really like? Did he have a favorite food? Did she ever prepare it for him? What did their home in Singapore look like? What part of the city was it in?

Would she ever remember any of it?

Suddenly, it was all too much. All the questions, the gaps in her mind. Gemma felt the hot sting of tears behind her eyes and was helpless to stop them from falling.

Louis reached her side instantly. This time, she didn't give him any chance to question whether he could touch her. She willingly collapsed into his open arms. "Does your head hurt, sweetheart? I'll go get you the meds."

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Gemma shook her head, grasped his arm before he could pull away. She may not remember anything about him, but her body seemed to fit perfectly in his embrace.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The ride back to the beach house from Boston was considerably less lighthearted than it had been the way there. During the earlier drive, Louis had kept up a steady flow of conversation to take Gemma's mind off her appointment with the specialist at Massachusetts General.

They'd discussed everything from how they'd met—when Louis had snuck backstage after one of Gemma's performances at the Singapore Conservatory—to her favorite restaurants to the symphony pieces she enjoyed playing the most.

The car was quiet this time. Gemma hadn't spoken a word since they'd left Dr. Sharma's office. Louis had no idea what to say.

After several more miles, she finally spoke. "How can that be? I don't understand." Her voice was full of lament, despair.

"Gemma, that was a very positive appointment," he reminded her. It was the truth. She was recovering nicely from the accident. Her scans and tests were all clear. But she still hadn't recovered her memory. The doctor couldn't explain why. Then he'd said the words that had Gemma going pale in his spacious modern office in one of the hospital's high-rises by the Charles River.

*You may never recover those years, Ms. Tamlin. I've seen it happen before.*

For his part, Louis wasn't sure how to process that bit of information himself. He just knew he couldn't stand to see the agony Gemma was going through. She'd been so hopeful about this appointment.

"Just try to remember what the doctor said about not pushing too hard. That could result in a setback for your recovery in general," he reminded her.

"I couldn't if I wanted to. Every time I try to call up something from those years, an event, a birthday party, anything, I'm just met with a dark spot."

She had to stop trying. Dr. Sharma had been clear about that. Her memories had to come back naturally and on their own. Louis figured there might be a way to nudge them.

"I'm hungry," he announced, completely changing the subject.

Gemma shot him a somewhat annoyed glance. She must've been wondering how he could be thinking about food at a time like this. The truth was, eating wasn't his foremost motivation.

"Ma has the refrigerator full with groceries," she told him, her eyes focused outside her window.

"I have a better idea," he told her.

"What's that?"

"I saw signs for a clambake at Flagship beach."

"A clambake?"

He nodded. "That's right. A good old New England–style feast of steamed clams, sweet corn, salty potatoes and fresh lobster. I say we do that for lunch."

She shrugged, offered a smile that seemed less than genuine. "I'll have the corn and potatoes, I suppose. I don't really like lob—" She paused, her eyes growing wide. "Wait. I do like lobster, don't I? I don't know when or how I changed my mind about it, but I like it now."

Louis gripped her hand. "That's right."

He did a mental fist bump, cheering silently. Darned if his idea hadn't already worked in a small way. He'd convinced her to try steamed lobster on one of their first dates. She'd been pleasantly surprised.

Granted, it was a small victory. But a victory nevertheless.

CHAPTER NINE

Gemma was still buzzing with excitement an hour later when they'd gotten their tray of food from the beachside cabana window and sat down at a wooden picnic table near the beach.

She had actually recalled something that had happened to her during the gap of time her brain had misplaced.

Louis began tearing the netting off their steamed bundles of food. He had to be burning his fingertips in the process.

Gemma eyed the bright red crustacean sitting in front of her without a clue as what to do next. "Um, I have a confession."

"What's that?" Louis asked, picking up a pair of steel lobster crackers.

"I don't exactly recall how to get the meat out of these things."

He chuckled. "That's not your memory, sweetheart."

Why did her heart skip a beat whenever he used the endearment? He said it very casually, the way one might address a friend. The problem was, with each passing day, she was beginning to view Louis as more than a friend. Each night as she prepared for bed, she was plagued with thoughts of how the two of them had spent the night sharing the same bed. One thing was certain—she was definitely attracted to the man.

Gemma couldn't quite decide yet if that was a blessing or a curse. Nor did she know what to do about it, if anything. Married or not, Louis was still barely more than a stranger. This must have been what an arranged marriage felt like. It was the closest analogy she could come up with.

She pulled her focus back to the mound of food in front of her. "What do you mean? That it's not my memory?"

"You can't forget how to do something you never did," he answered with a good-natured smile. "You don't know how to break a lobster open because I always did it for you." After taking in hand the object in question, he effortlessly cracked it open and placed the pieces on her paper plate.

Gemma dipped a small bit in the melted lemon butter and took a tentative bite. Her revelation earlier in the car was confirmed. It was good. Really good.

"How did you get me to change my mind?" A tug at the corner of her mind told her she knew the answer to her own question. But it was locked away tight and she had no key.

Louis shrugged, popped a small potato in his mouth whole. "Basically got you to try it on a dare. You were never one to pass up a challenge."

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There was no way to miss the double meaning in his words. He was telling her to keep her chin up, stay determined. The hopeful expression on his face made her want to try.

She would start with now. She was going to enjoy a beachside picnic with the man who appeared to love her, whom she was growing more fond of by the day. Slowly, the tension squeezing her shoulders since they'd left Boston began to loosen its grip.

Despite the fact that she was as confused about her future as she was about her past.

CHAPTER TEN

*You may never recover those years, Ms. Tamlin. I've seen it happen before.*

Louis braced his hands against the cool tile of the shower as he let the soothing warm spray wash over him. Gemma's doctor's appointment yesterday had only led to more frustration and begged more questions.

Her frustration and anguish had been written all over her face yesterday. Though she'd cheered up during their beachside meal. That gave Louis an idea. They needed a day of frolic and fun. No better place than the summer haven that was the Cape. It hadn't been easy, but Louis had cleared his calendar for the next ten days. His clients and employees would just have to wait. If he lost some business as a result, then so be it. Some things were more important than the next sales goal.

He laughed at that, thinking of how differently his brother's attitude might be in the same situation. Leo was the sort whose sole motivation was to reach higher and higher pinnacles of business success, no matter the cost. Louis wasn't nearly as ambitious.

As his parents reminded him often.

With a muttered curse, he shut the water off and grabbed the thick towel hanging on the hook by the door. He had bigger things to think about right now than his family's general disappointment in their younger son.

Right now, he had a day of sunshine planned for his wife. Hopefully, some of the activities he had planned would have the same effect as the clambake—another nudge at her blocked memories.

He found her downstairs thumbing through a sheet book. Ah, he was wondering when she'd turn her focus back to her music. Much to her mother's dismay, Gemma had yet to so much as touch her violin. Looked like she was beginning to dip her toe in the musical waters.

She tossed the sheet music on the coffee table when she saw him.

"Ready to go?" he asked her.

"Ready as I'll ever be." A crease lined her brow. "You're sure I don't get seasick?"

He shook his head. "Not in the least. We've done our fair share of riding the seas and you were completely fine."

Gemma looked less than convinced, but she followed him out the door. Fifteen minutes later, they were at the marina where Louis had arranged to rent a sailboat. He'd requested the package that included a packed lunch and a stocked cooler of beverages. Soon, they'd left the shore miles behind. Louis picked a spot to drop the anchor and shut off the engine.

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Gemma sat on a port-side bench, staring at the horizon. No sign of seasickness luckily. In fact, she looked relaxed finally. And gorgeous. Louis had to suck in a breath at the sight of her. Her modest tankini swimsuit showed just enough of her curves to have heat flushing through his system. The fashionable straw hat atop her head had him imagining scenarios where it was all she wore. He made himself look away before his imagination got too vivid for comfort.

It wasn't easy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I know how to play blackjack, don't I?"

The realization had come to her as they'd begun eating their sandwiches. Something about the sunshine, the open water and being under the clouds had her thinking of a card game for some reason. Of all things.

Judging by the wide grin on Louis's face, he was beyond pleased at her declaration. Darned if she could guess why.

"I don't know why that came to me," she said. "It's just that I don't think I knew how to play before... I guess before I met you. But now it appears I do. I don't have any idea why it occurred to me just now, though."

"I'll tell you why," Louis said, lifting his hand up to give her a high five. "We spent part of our honeymoon sailing along the French Riviera. We stopped in Monaco for a few days and spent the evenings in the casinos."

She filled in the blank. "Where I learned how to play blackjack."

"That's right."

"Huh. Was I any good?"

His smile widened. "I'm afraid not. We lost a small fortune before leaving. But it was a magnificent time."

How they must have looked. A newlywed couple on their honeymoon. Louis would have struck a dashing handsome picture in a tux. She might have worn a strapless cocktail dress, much like the one she auditioned in.

Louis's description of that part of their honeymoon sounded like something out of a romantic movie. She could just imagine where those nights at the casino might have led once they'd made it back to their boat.

Longing tugged at her heart. "That sounds magical," she told him. "I hope I remember the details some day."

He leaned over to take her hand in his, gave it a gentle squeeze. "No pressure, Gemma. If you don't get those particular memories back, we'll just have to make sure to replace them with new ones."

His words took her breath away. He was right. It occurred to her that's what they were doing now. This moment, this entire day would be seared in her mind forever.

This time, she wouldn't let anything take any of it away.

An electric current passed between them as they sat there. Louis still held on to her hand, his palm warm and reassuring against her.

Gemma didn't think. Finally succumbing to the longing in her heart, she leaned in to place her lips against his in a soft kiss.

But the current sparked into a burning flame. She couldn't even be sure what happened next. The kiss had grown into an embrace full of need and passion. Her mind vaguely registered that she'd moved onto his lap. Louis wrapped his arms around her waist, a low groan sounding against her mouth. The taste of him sent waves of fire along her skin, heat curling in her middle.

She would never get enough.

It was over all too soon. Louis pulled away, his eyes dark with passion. His heavy panting matched her own. Gemma didn't want to know why he'd pulled away.

She just wanted him back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Louis stood shaking with need. It had taken every ounce of discipline he possessed to pull away from that kiss.

The confusion in Gemma's eyes nearly undid him and he almost reached for her again. But some semblance of sanity held him in check. The same way he'd stopped himself from going any further

Who knew he had the willpower of a monk.

He certainly didn't feel like a monk, however, as he gazed upon his wife. Her eyes were several shades darker with desire, her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen from his stubble. He wanted nothing more than to take her by the hand and lead her downstairs to the cabin below.

But that would be selfish of him. He knew she wasn't ready.

Ramming his hand through his hair, he walked several steps away to the other side of the boat. Maybe bringing her out here in the middle of the ocean where they were completely alone wasn't such a great idea. He'd led himself straight into the jaws of temptation.

"Gemma, listen," he began, grappling for the words that might convey all the mixed-up emotions churning in his gut.

She held a hand up to stop him from continuing. "I know. I get it. The doctors all said I need to take things slow and easy. Or risk a setback on my recovery."

She sent him a soft smile that appeared all too sad for his liking. "I guess we both got carried away," she added.

He nodded once. "Right," he answered, beyond grateful that he didn't have to try to find a way to explain something he didn't quite understand himself. Becoming intimate now would only serve to further muddy the already-complicated dynamics between them.

She reached inside the picnic basket. "Let's finish our lunch, shall we? I thought I saw some chocolate chip cookies in here."

As if he could taste anything while the taste of her still lingered in his mouth.

"Think I'll save mine for later," he told her. "There's a stop I want to make. The rental agency said it was included in our package. The coordinates are programmed into the boat's GPS."

Gemma simply nodded. Several silent beats passed between them, so much left unsaid that would simply have to wait. Finally, Louis turned on his heel to make his way back to the helm. His pulse still pounded in his veins as he turned over the engine and started to steer.

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Maybe he'd think clearer on dry land and get himself fully under control. It was worth a shot, though he highly doubted it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The stop Louis had referred to back on the boat was a tiny uninhabited island. The only structure it housed was a historic lighthouse. The rental agency had included a key to allow them entry. She'd never climbed to the top of a lighthouse before. Or at least, she didn't recall ever having done so.

Gemma was glad for the distraction. How could she have thrown herself at Louis the way she had back on the boat? Not only was it a mistake for obvious reasons, but now she couldn't get the kiss out of her mind. Louis had tasted like mint and lemon and savory spice. Replaying the way his mouth had felt against hers sent heat rushing from her toes to her cheeks.

She forced her focus on climbing the circular stairs up to the top of the tower. When they reached the watch railing, she took in the spectacular view. Sparkling blue waves below a crystal clear sky.

Gemma's attention fell to their anchored boat below as it bobbed gently in the waves. "You know how to handle a boat," she said, her voice battling with the wind. Louis seemed to have many talents.

He brought his gaze from the horizon back to her face. "Learned to sail pretty young," he answered. "My dad took both me and my brother out on the water as soon as we could stand upright."

"You have a brother," she said, marveling that she hadn't thought to ask him before about any siblings.

"Just the one," he answered. He huffed a small laugh. "Learning to sail was one of our first of many competitions over the years. Though *compete* is probably the wrong term. Leo typically bests me at most things."

The pain in his voice wasn't lost on her. "That must have been work for your parents over the years," she offered, "having two sons trying to outdo each other."

His chuckle was loaded with irony. "They encouraged it. In fact, they still do. Neither Mom nor Dad has even realized that I dropped out of the contests long ago. Nor has Leo for that matter."

She touched her hand to his arm—his expression seemed to call for a comforting gesture. The lines of his face had gone hard, his lips thinned into a small line.

He turned his gaze back toward the horizon. "That's something you and I had in common, by the way."

Gemma couldn't quite place what he was referring to. Memory problems or not, she knew for a fact she was an only child. A sibling seemed highly unlikely and would have come up before now. "What's that?" she asked.

"Our families always had rather high expectations. You pretty much met them with flying colors. I, on the other hand, fell short time and again. Especially compared to my golden-boy brother."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There he was being selfish again. Gemma was the one who'd survived a harrowing accident. Yet here he was unburdening himself to her about his family dynamics. As if she needed that right now.

Louis leaned his forearms over the railing and studied the water in the distance. Fat clouds dotted the crystal-blue sky.

"I'm sorry."

Gemma immediately shook her head. "Please don't apologize. I may not know the specifics about you anymore. But I do understand the burden of family pressure. I've always loved to play the violin and from a very young age knew that's what I wanted to do with my life. But Ma's strong encouragement and the way she pushed me to excel definitely played a role in how hard I worked."

Louis's parents had been good at pushing their sons as well. It just felt so futile the older Louis got. No matter what he did or how much he accomplished, his older brother always managed to outshine him.

"I'm guessing that's part of what drew us together, huh?" Gemma asked. "Our respective parents' high expectations for us."

Maybe, but it was such a small part of a much bigger picture. How could he explain all the ways he was drawn to her from the moment their eyes had met? There weren't any words adequate enough.

"I guess I was lucky in one sense," she added.

"How so?"

"At least my ambitions for myself meshed with my parents'. Ma in particular. We all wanted the same thing for me."

The statement gave him pause. Of course. Her decision to step back from performing had been swiped from her mind along with the rest of her life right before the accident.

A wave of sadness washed over him. In the back of his mind, Louis had considered one rather impactful result of her amnesia. Gemma was back to being the woman he'd met three years ago, the one whose primary focus in life was her career as a musician. The way things were now, he didn't have a chance of competing with that. He didn't even have a right to.

"You know, I've been too afraid to pick up the violin for fear I've lost any proficiency as a player. But I've decided not to wait anymore. I'm ready to play again as soon as we get back to the beach house." She nudged him playfully, shoulder to shoulder. "Thanks, Louis."

"For what?"

*Nina Singh*

"For bringing me sailing, then up here. This trip has done wonders for my mood and kick-started my motivation to move on with my life."

He was happy for her—he really was. Even if it meant even more uncertainty about how exactly they might return to their future as husband and wife.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next week passed in a blur of activity. Another medical appointment went pretty much like the last one. No new information, no new insights.

There had been one major change: she was playing again. Once Gemma picked up her instrument, her muscle memory kicked in. Her warm-up piece flowed easily, the notes at the forefront of her mind. But she wasn't naive enough to think that nothing had changed. The fact was, she'd essentially lost three years' worth of practice.

Which reminded her—she owed her manager a call. Though she had no idea what to say to the woman, couldn't even recall what she may look like.

Sighing, she carefully placed her violin in its case and snapped it closed. Thoughts of the future brought her to the brink of a panic attack, but she couldn't avoid them forever. Louis couldn't very well stay on the Cape much longer. He had duties and responsibilities back in Singapore that had to be piling up. Eventually, he would have to go back. Then she'd have a decision to make. Was she going to go back with him and face a foreign world? Or did she stay here in the comfort of what was familiar?

Gemma had no doubt Louis would give her all the time she needed. But that wasn't fair to him. It wouldn't be right to keep him in limbo while she waited for a miracle that may never come.

She left her room to go look for him, but he didn't appear to be anywhere in the house. Finally, she found him on the patio outside, sitting at the round table, his phone to his ear.

His voice sounded tense and strained when he spoke. "Yes, as soon as I can." He paused before adding, "I'm sorry. I can't be any more specific than that."

As soon as he saw her, he bid whoever was on the other end goodbye, then ended the call.

"What was that about?" she asked, pulling a wicker chair away from the table and sitting down next to him.

He slipped his phone into his pocket. "Nothing you need to concern yourself about." He offered her an indulgent smile. "I heard you playing. You haven't lost a bit of talent."

"Thank you. I have some work ahead of me to get back up to speed."

"You'll get there," he reassured her. "Don't push yourself too hard."

The concern in his eyes touched her deep in her core. She was equally concerned about him. Dark circles colored his eyes, and worry lines framed his mouth. He looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep for several nights.

Louis had to be exhausted. Trying to work remotely had to be taking a toll. The time difference alone probably ruined any chance of a sound night's sleep. And he was most certainly feeling the pressure that he was needed back home.

Their current situation was simply not sustainable. Time was running even shorter than she thought.

The patio door suddenly slid open then and her mother stepped out. "Can I talk to you, Gemma?" Ma asked. "There's something we need to discuss."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Gemma returned several moments later, she appeared to be deep in thought.

"Everything all right?" Louis asked. "You appear somewhat dazed."

"I guess I am," she answered, retaking the chair she'd left moments ago.

"What did your mom have to say?" Even as he asked, Louis wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer. By the expression on Gemma's face, something had significantly changed since she'd spoken to her mom.

Gemma blinked twice before refocusing on him. "It appears she's been in touch with one of my old professors from Berklee."

"Oh?"

"Ma says he's agreed to work with me one-on-one in Boston until I reach the level I was at before the accident. He's predicting it will take months. If not even longer."

Louis felt his gut tightening as he listened. He couldn't remain in New England indefinitely. He had hundreds of employees back home who depended on him for their livelihood.

He should have seen this coming, should have known that Addie wouldn't be sitting around patiently waiting for nature to take its course with her daughter's predicament. Still, he felt blindsided. Maybe it had been wishful thinking on his part, but this entire time he'd thought he and Gemma were moving closer together toward a path back home as a couple.

He realized now just how much he'd taken for granted.

Gemma sounded nervous when she spoke. "Ma also mentioned informing my manager about the development."

Louis did his best not to react.

Gemma continued, "Apparently, she was very surprised that I was thinking of studying again. It appears that I told her I would be taking a break from music altogether." She paused, bit her bottom lip. "You never mentioned that."

Louis released a deep sigh. "I had to make sure that if you made the same decision again, it wouldn't be due to any influence on my part. You were already so confused after the accident." She had to understand. Such a monumental decision had to be hers alone to make. Just as with the current choice.

Gemma nodded slowly. "I see. Then I guess I'd just like to know what you think I should do now."

What he thought was that accepting this offer would be the first step toward the dissolution of their marriage. That even if he flew up to see her as often as feasibly possible, they were bound to drift apart

if they had to spend most of their days on separate continents. Even strong, established unions often didn't survive long-distance scenarios. Gemma didn't even remember who her husband was, for heaven's sake.

But he couldn't say any of those things. Because one main question hammered in his brain: Would he be able to live with himself if he denied her this opportunity for his own selfish reasons?

But how was he supposed to live without her back home?

"Louis?" she asked after he remained silent at her question.

He took her hand in his and began to tell her the last words he wanted to say. "I think it's too good an opportunity to pass up if you want to regain your full musical abilities."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He wasn't even going to try to convince her to turn down Professor Yang's offer. Which meant Louis was okay with their being separated for the foreseeable future. Maybe he hadn't agreed with her decision before the accident to take a break from her career. Was that the real reason he'd never told her that she'd decided to do so?

Gemma sucked in a breath of disappointment, unable to look her husband directly in the eye. She wasn't naive enough to think that he'd drop all his responsibilities back in Singapore and stay here in Boston with her. But she thought they would at least spend some time going over the various options they had as a couple. Instead, he seemed to want her to pursue this opportunity. Which meant they'd reached a tangent at a most critical point in their marriage.

How could she work to remember him if they were thousands of miles apart? Unable to see each other for days on end? Louis didn't seem to have considered that question. Or he didn't care.

"So I'll go tell my mom to accept?"

He simply nodded and smiled. No argument or counter whatsoever.

"I guess I'll see you later then," she said, rising from her chair and fleeing into the house.

When she reached her room, Gemma released the breath she'd been holding and leaned against the shut door. She thought Louis would talk her out of this, that he'd tell her he loved her and couldn't stand to be apart from her, even if she didn't know the past they'd shared together.

How naive of her. If anything, Louis was probably reaching the end of his patience. It had been weeks since the accident and the only snippets of memory she'd managed to resurface involved eating lobster and a card game. All this time and she couldn't even remember their wedding. Or how he had proposed. No wonder he'd reached the end of his rope.

He was probably tired of waiting. Maybe he was even looking forward to spending some time apart. Gemma had no way of knowing, did she? This version of her didn't really know the man.

All she did know at the moment was who she was before the accident. She may have lost three years of her life, but there was one way to determine how much of her craft had been impacted. It was finally time to determine exactly how much musical achievement she'd lost along with her life memories.

Her mother had mentioned that she'd mastered the Sibelius concerto enough to play it for a paying audience that night in Boston, right before her accident.

With shaky fingers, she pulled out her violin to try playing the piece once and for all. But when she put bow to string, it wasn't the concerto that began to flow from her fingertips. It was something entirely new.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If he'd done the right thing just now, why did he feel so lousy?

Every cell in his body wanted to run inside, up the stairs to Gemma's room and tell her to reconsider her decision. To choose him. The urge to do so was so tempting, he had to grip the wicker chair to keep from standing up.

As if he needed a sign that he should stay put where he was, the sound of Gemma playing drifted from the window upstairs. Looked like she couldn't wait to start practicing for the Berklee professor. That settled it. Gemma was clearly happy with her decision and ready to move forward.

Louis had no clue how he would do the same. He would have to find a way somehow. The thought of returning to his life in Singapore without his wife by his side sent a wave of despair washing through him. There would be no joy, no light without her.

With a muttered curse, he pushed the chair away and stood. He needed to get away. Under normal circumstances, he loved listening to Gemma play. But right now, he couldn't stand to listen to one more note. He didn't recognize the piece she was playing, but it was somehow both haunting and joyful.

He needed a distraction and he needed to get away. He made his way to the paved bike trail a stone's throw from the house. The path wound through some of the most breathtaking scenery in this part of the peninsula, with a perfect view of the ocean in some parts.

Louis hardly noticed his surroundings. He did notice the family of four that biked past him. A couple with two tykes in tow—the older child pedaled his own bicycle, while the toddler sat secured in a bike seat behind her father.

The scene tugged at him.

He and Gemma had been so close to having that. His own family, one in which he felt he truly belonged. Somehow, in one fateful instant, that dream had been snatched away from within his grasp.

He had no idea how many miles he'd walked before he finally decided to turn around. He had things to do, a flight to book, several meetings to reschedule. There was no point in putting any of it off.

A bruised heart to nurse.

By the time he reached the house, he was covered in a sheen of sweat and his pulse pounded from the excursion. He sensed her before he saw her. Gemma sat at the table on the patio. She stood when she saw him, offering him a tender smile. Once he left the Cape, when would be the next time he would see that smile?

"There you are," she said. "I've been waiting for you."

"You have?"

*A Second Chance at First Love*

She nodded and picked up the violin sitting on the table in front of her. "I wanted to play something for you."

Listening to her play now was only going to shatter his spirit further, but he didn't have the heart to tell her that. So he simply sat, forced a fake smile on his lips and motioned for her to proceed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

This was going to take some courage.

Gemma knew how silly that was. Through her career she'd played in the biggest halls for packed audiences, both as a soloist and as part of the nation's most prominent symphonies. But she'd never been so nervous as she was now, playing in front of her husband.

For this might be the most important performance of her life. She was about to lay her heart bare, put her emotions out in the open, in the way she knew best.

With trembling fingers, she lifted the instrument and began. It only took a few notes for the nervousness to ebb. Before long, the new piece was flowing like the water in a winding river. A few glances at Louis throughout told her she had his full attention. He appeared riveted. That was good—it furthered her determination to see this through.

Finally, when she was done, she lowered the instrument, not daring to breathe until Louis said something.

He gave a shake of his head, as if still processing what he'd heard. Finally, he spoke. "Wow."

Gemma couldn't help but chuckle. "Do you like it?"

"*Like* is too weak a word. You played that like your whole soul was pouring out of you."

He had no idea how accurate his statement was.

"I don't recognize it," he said. "Is it a new piece?"

She nodded. "I just composed it."

His jaw fell open. "You just came up with that upstairs? Just this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Wow," he repeated, earning another amused chuckle from her.

"What's it called?"

Gemma cleared her throat, her heart pounding at what his reaction might be when she told him. "*My First Love, Again*," she answered on a breathless whisper. "Dedicated to my husband."

Several moments passed. Louis didn't so much as move.

"Louis?" she prompted, willing him to say something.

Just when she thought her heart might burst out of her chest with the anticipation, he stood and reached her in two strides. The next moment she was in his arms, tight against his chest as his lips found hers.

#

What a fool he'd been.

Louis let himself just take it all in. The feel of her, the taste of her, the sensation of her heart pounding against his. What she'd just declared in her very own signature way. She loved him! That was all he needed to know.

There was no way in the world he'd walk away from her. They belonged together as husband and wife. The location hardly mattered.

"I love you," he whispered against her mouth, not willing to break away from her mouth just yet.

"Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, I want to be by your side."

Gemma reached up to cup his face in her hand. "I love you, too." She laughed, her eyes full of emotion, before adding, "And I know I always have."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The day was sunny, bright and clear. A perfect afternoon for a picnic outside. Breathing in the crisp, fresh air, Gemma slipped her hand into her husband's outstretched one as he reached for her.

Despite all the upheaval, she was going to miss it here in New England. Louis promised they'd be back as soon as feasible. First, she had to reacclimatize herself to her new...well, technically it was her old life, she supposed. Just new to her.

This trip to Beech Front national park on the tip of the peninsula was to be one of their last outings before saying goodbye to this part of the world.

"Hungry yet?" Louis asked. "Ready to eat?"

She shook her head. Food could wait. Right now, she just wanted to admire the view and enjoy his company. "Let's walk the trail a bit."

"As you wish," he answered, clasping her hand tighter.

They followed the dirt path around a flowing stream to reach a small cliff with a gushing waterfall.

*Waterfall.*

The word tugged at the corners of her mind. Gemma halted her step, staring at the water flowing over the rocks. Her eyes blurred. She didn't so much as blink.

Suddenly, her vision grew tunneled, narrowing to the spot she stared at. The next sensation felt like a pop, almost like the uncorking of a champagne bottle.

Then, without warning or preamble, like the water she was staring at, it all came rushing back.

Gemma sucked in a breath. She turned to Louis, her mouth faltering, her voice failing her.

"The waterfall," she finally managed to utter.

Louis gave her a confused and rather concerned look. "Yes, it's very pretty here. "

Gemma swallowed. "No, I mean, I was in front of a waterfall. During our wedding. We were on an island..."

Louis's eyes grew wide and his mouth fell open. He took her in his arms. "Gemma, do you remember our wedding?"

She could only nod. But there was more, so much more. "Yes," she cried out, the joy threatening to overwhelm her. "The orchestra playing. Walking over the sandy beach to where you stood at the altar. Guests dancing on a makeshift dance floor near the beach. Then flying in a jet to our honeymoon." The words were pouring out of her now, just as the memories were pouring into her head.

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Gemma felt dizzy and disoriented but it didn't alarm her. She knew it was due to pure elation and utter relief.

Like a movie, the scenes played out in her head, going backward in time. The night Louis had proposed, atop the Eiffel Tower during a trip to Paris. How he'd slipped the ring on her finger. The way they'd celebrated after she'd said yes.

Louis gripped her tighter in his embrace. "What else? What else do you remember?"

Gemma threw her arms around her husband's waist, leaned tight against his length. "Everything, my love. I remember all of it."

The End

~

If you loved *A Second Chance at First Love*, be sure to catch Nina Singh's title:

*Wearing His Ring till Christmas*

*Ann McIntosh*

A DATE WITH THE  
IRISH SURGEON

ANN MCINTOSH

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Lorcan Connor walked into the doctor's lounge to a scene of jubilation, as Drs. Cora Campbell and Chloe Bailey hugged and jumped up and down, while Dr. Indra Hughes looked on, laughing. But while the wild embrace seemed completely natural, Lorcan knew there was something forced about Indra's reaction.

Sure, she appeared happy, but the smile didn't reach her dark, usually twinkling eyes. And when she said goodbye to the others and turned away, the laughter slid right off her face, leaving it pensive.

It was not a normal expression for the physiatrist. She was habitually pleasant to everyone, even Lorcan, who'd be the first to admit he was standoffish. Indra typically wore a wide, sunny smile, which elevated her looks from pretty to beautiful.

The habit of tossing that grin about had turned many heads, but Indra just politely dodged all interest. She was, Lorcan thought as he poured a much-needed cuppa, his polar opposite in almost every way.

While she was short, dark, curvy and often mistakenly thought to be from India—she was actually Guyanese British—he was tall, slim and pale, befitting his Irish roots. Indra was cheery and approachable, while Lorcan was introverted and had the reputation of being dour.

Turning, he found her almost abreast of him, and as their gazes met, she smiled and nodded, but it was too late. He'd already seen the disappointment in her eyes.

She passed before he could react and was out the door seconds later.

Curious now, Lorcan chose a table close to where the other two doctors were. He was rewarded when Chloe said, "Lorcan, did you hear? We've been chosen for the Kensington Project. Come out and celebrate with us this evening."

"Congratulations," he said, but didn't take them up on the offer—and neither of them seemed surprised or insisted. He rarely socialized with people from work, feeling it wise to keep business and pleasure separate.

He was more concerned with how Indra felt about having been passed over. Being sent to hospitals around the world to share the newest advances made at the Royal Kensington Hospital was a feather in any doctor's cap. Lorcan had gone to Chennai, India, the year before, and it had been an eye-opening journey. Indra probably had set her heart on being chosen and was upset.

Well, hopefully she didn't take the setback as an indication she wasn't good enough. Having worked closely with her for almost a year, researching new treatments, surgeries and therapies for patients with spinal injuries, Lorcan knew she was excellent at her job. The last thing he wanted was for her to decide she'd run the course of her career at RKH and move somewhere else.

He was used to her and hated the thought of learning to work with someone new.

*Yeah, that's the only reason I want her to stay around.*

\*

Indra put the entire Kensington Project matter to the back of her mind until the end of her shift, when it swam up to the surface again. Oh, yes, she was disappointed, but not for the reason most people would suspect.

She'd seen it as a paid two-month break from the crazy her life had become.

As she walked down the alleyway between hospital buildings toward the parking area, she tried to decide what to do next, since her first hopeful plan had gone *kaboom*. She had to do something, and quick. Her temper was reaching boiling point.

Still pondering, she came out into the somewhat chilly parking lot to find a man standing in her way. For a quick second, noting the bronze-toned skin and wide smile, she thought it was her cousin Dharma, but quickly realized it wasn't and started to skirt around him.

He put up his hands, his smile widening. "Indra?"

She paused. "Yes?"

"Ahh, finally. Right this way."

Taking a small step back, she said, "Do I know you?"

"I'm Julian. Your mum told you about me, yeah? I'm taking you to dinner."

"No, you're not," she replied, her voice sharp enough to cut.

His smile didn't fade in the slightest. "Don't give me the evil eye, girl. Look." He pointed behind him. "I brought the Bentley."

She didn't spare the car more than a glance. "Well, you better move it. It's blocking the entrance."

He hooted. "Nobody'll mess with a Bentley. But come on, it's getting late."

Indra glared at him. She'd hoped he'd want to move the car so she could nip back into the hospital, but that hadn't worked. Now all her frustration bubbled to the surface, bringing with it the sort of rage that boded no one any good.

"I don't know you, so leave me alone."

Now his smile fell away, replaced with a narrow-eyed, assessing look. Indra's heart raced, and anger darkened the edges of her vision.

She wanted to scream at him, but bit the words back, holding on to her temper by a hair.

His lip curled. "Nah. Your mum said you're looking for a man, and here I am."

He stepped forward, his hand out as though to grab hers, and Indra jumped back. Letting her bag slide down her arm, she was ready to bash him with it when she slammed into something behind her and a pair of masculine arms banded around her waist to keep her upright.

“Everything alright here?”

Lorcan Connor’s voice snapped her out of her instinctive fight response, and without thought, Indra turned in the neurosurgeon’s arms to twine hers around his neck.

“There you are,” she said, hoping he’d follow her lead. “I thought you’d never come out.”

Icy blue eyes looked down into hers for a moment that seemed to stretch for an eternity, but couldn’t have been more than a few seconds.

“Well, here I am.”

She tugged at his nape, expecting him to resist, but instead, his head came down easily and his lips met hers, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

And, heaven help her, but the miserable so-and-so could *kiss*!

CHAPTER TWO

While they kissed, Lorcan realized some very important things.

Indra Hughes was a toothsome armful.

Her lips were softly luscious and berry flavored.

And he really didn't want to stop kissing her.

In fact, he wanted to deepen that kiss into something *intimate*.

Or *erotic*.

Yet, while decorum had already gone out the window, he'd wager she wouldn't thank him for taking it any further, so he reluctantly uncoupled their mouths.

He felt electrified, more aroused than he'd ever admit, and so strove for casualness. Jerking his chin toward the other man, he asked, "So, who's this?"

Indra looked back. "Some prat whose Bentley's getting towed."

"What?" As though only just hearing the tow truck's beeping, the man spun around. Seeing it reversing up to his car, he took off at a gallop.

Indra slowly dropped her arms and gave Lorcan a long wide-eyed look. He reluctantly let her go.

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate you doing that."

There was a quaver in her voice, and he wondered if it was born of fear or the aftermath of that surprisingly delicious kiss. Either way, he wanted to get her away to safety, so Lorcan gestured her toward the car park.

"Where's your car?"

"I was going to the Tube station." She fell into step beside him.

"I'll drive you home."

"Oh, you don't have to."

But she glanced back, as though apprehensive of being followed.

"I insist," he said, fishing out his keys to unlock his car.

"Thank you."

He opened her door and added, "Besides, I'd really like to hear what that was all about."

Indra gave him a rueful sideways glance as she slid into the passenger seat. "It's bonkers."

He closed her door and, walking around to get in, wondered if that was her way of telling him to get lost. If so, she was going to be sadly disappointed.

Having got into the car, he said, "Well, after being greeted like a long-lost lover and seduced by that kiss, I'm entitled to hear it, aren't I?"

That made her chuckle, the rich sound filling the car. "Seduced? By one kiss? You're too easy."

"Perhaps," he replied, trying to sound like his usual self, even while fighting laughter. "But there it is."

As he pulled out of the spot, they both looked toward the other side of the car park. The tow driver was winching the Bentley onto the truck, while its owner shouted and waved his hands about.

Indra made a sound somehow evincing both amusement and annoyance.

"Have dinner with me," he said impulsively. "And tell me all about it."

She snorted, and he glanced her way in time to see her shake her head. "Alright. I owe you at least that much. In fact, *I* should buy *you* dinner."

"Whatever you prefer," he said casually, but inside he was elated.

\*

They decided on a Greek restaurant that was on the way to Indra's flat. She was still shaken, not so much because of her encounter with Julian, but because of that *kiss*.

If anyone had said she'd have to kiss Lorcan Connor, she would have wrinkled her nose at the idea. Despite his passable good looks, he had the kind of stern, distant persona that did nothing for her. How was she to know there was that kind of fire under the ice?

Because that kiss had set her ablaze in the most surprising way.

So, she wrestled silently with that knowledge, and since Lorcan normally spoke only when necessary, it was quiet from the time they left the hospital until after they'd ordered at the restaurant.

Then Lorcan fixed her with those incredible eyes, and said, "Alright, you. What's going on?"

That brought her back down to earth with a bump.

"Well, my mum has always been a bit flaky, but she's gotten worse recently. Do you know Serena Sooko?"

"The head nurse in Pediatrics?"

"Yes. She's my cousin, and Mum and I were at her baby shower. A woman there was reading tea leaves and told Mum she saw a wedding before the end of the year. Mum immediately decided it was going to be mine. It was all nonsense, of course."

After all, that woman told Chloe Bailey she was going to have a baby, almost making the neurologist cry. Not only had Chloe been in the midst of a divorce, but she was unlikely to conceive because of a medical condition.

“Of course,” Lorcan agreed.

“Since then,” Indra continued, “Mum’s thrown every man—from twenty-five to fifty—at me, no matter how often I tell her to stop.”

Lorcan blinked, apparently trying to digest that.

“So, the man earlier...?”

“Was a complete stranger. Sent by my mother, without a by-your-leave, to take me to dinner.”

Leaning back, Lorcan made a sound Indra couldn’t interpret. “What does your dad say about all this?”

“He doesn’t know. My parents are divorced and hardly speak. If he knew, he’d be furious.”

Lorcan grunted what sounded like agreement, then asked, “What are you going to do?”

Indra sighed, making up her mind on the spot. “First, I’m going to take a few days off and vanish. I have no idea where to, but just out of Mum’s sight. Secondly, I’ll have to get Dad to talk to her. It won’t be pretty, though. There’ll be lots of shouting involved.”

Just the thought made her stomach twist, but Mum had brought it on herself. When it came to putting any kind of rein on Mum, Dad was the only person Indra knew who could.

The waiter brought their drinks and an appetizer, and they munched companionably for a few minutes, before Indra picked up the conversation again.

“What I really need to do is find a way to convince her that I can find someone, on my own, without her interference. Just a ruse, to get me to the end of the year, and then hopefully this’ll die a natural death.”

Lorcan was silent for a moment, but his fingers were drumming on the table, a gesture she’d learned meant he was thinking, hard. Then he looked up and said, “I can help you there. Why don’t you come to Ireland with me to attend my ex-wife’s wedding? Then your mum will think we’re involved and leave you alone.”

CHAPTER THREE

Normally, only torture would get Lorcan to open up to anyone, but Indra was incredibly easy to talk to, even though he knew she'd think the story crazy.

"My ex-wife is getting married to a Canadian, and to make a long story short, it turns out he's a distant cousin of my da. He's invited all his Irish relatives to the wedding, including me."

Indra gaped for a moment—her expression perfectly summing up the matter—before snapping her mouth closed.

"That's...awkward," she said.

"Yes, but not as bad as it sounds. Mae and I've been divorced for years, and there's no animosity."

Yet tension tightened his shoulders as he acknowledged to himself that it wasn't the thought of seeing Mae remarry causing him stress, but that his family would be there.

His parents and brothers loved Mae and, without knowing the details of the breakup, blamed Lorcan for the divorce. There was no way they'd let the situation go unremarked, but if Indra went along, she could act as a buffer.

Hopefully.

"The wedding is at a castle in Galway on the twentieth," he continued. "But I thought I'd take a couple days off at the same time, so I'm leaving on the eighteenth, coming back on the twenty-first."

"A castle?" Indra's eyes widened.

He shrugged. "Mae always does things in a big way. I'd be delighted for you to come, no strings attached, despite your effort to seduce me."

She laughed, as he'd intended, but five days later he was still reeling from their kiss and, about to see her again, wondered how he would react.

They were jointly researching the effect of external electrical stimulation coupled with physical therapy on patients with severe spinal cord injuries. This was one of their regularly scheduled patient appointments, with Joanne Symes, who had tetraplegia.

Walking toward the examination room, Lorcan tried to get his mind on the job ahead, instead of on the memory of those soft, luscious lips beneath his. While in the past he'd looked forward to working with Indra, now he felt off-kilter—his skin prickling, heart pounding.

Opening the door, he let his gaze slide quickly over Indra and settle on their patient, who smiled and replied to his greeting. Yet, as he kept his tone and actions completely professional, he couldn't stop glancing repeatedly at his colleague.

There was something so cheerful and effervescent about Indra, she attracted his attention without effort.

Preparing to attach the electrodes to Joanne, he happened to look up and met Indra's gaze.

His heart flipped, and he froze for a moment. Then Joanne said something, drawing Indra's attention, and Lorcan could breathe again.

And where before it was his fervent hope she'd go with him to Galway, now he was almost afraid she'd say yes to his proposition.

\*

Indra determinedly concentrated on Joanne and ignored her body's heated reaction to Lorcan's presence. She'd wondered how he'd behave when next they met, but from the casual way he'd greeted her, you'd think there was nothing personal about their relationship, and Indra had relaxed.

Then came that look—positively crackling with awareness—and her entire system went haywire.

"I can't believe the improvement," Joanne said, referring to the effects of the treatment. "And to think I almost didn't sign up for the study."

"Was there a reason you hesitated?" Indra asked. Listening to patients and understanding their thought processes was key in rehabilitation.

Joanne hesitated, then said, "After my...accident, the physiatrist at the rehabilitation center was unpleasant and a bully. I left there humiliated and depressed and decided never to go through that again. So, when I heard about this trial, and that there'd be a physiotherapy component, my first impulse was to say I wasn't interested."

"Well, we're glad you changed your mind," Lorcan said, making Joanne smile.

"I'm glad I did too," she replied. "It's made me realize how important it is to see things as they really are, not how you fear they'll be. It's the only way to move forward in life."

After the session, Indra headed for the elevator.

When Lorcan caught up to her and asked, "Have you given any more thought to the trip?" she shrugged, trying to look casual though her heart was pounding.

"I have."

"So?"

"I've put in for leave from the eighteenth to the twenty-second."

"Stellar."

"But honestly, I haven't decided whether to go with you or not."

"Okay," he replied casually, ringing for the lift. "Just let me know when you make up your mind."

Dammit. If he'd tried to cajole her, it would be easy to cry off. From his totally untroubled expression, it seemed he didn't care one way or the other.

"Did you call your dad?"

She nodded, swallowing hard as she stepped into the lift. "I did, and the fireworks started. He's coming to London to deal with Mum."

"I'm glad," Lorcan said. "What she's been doing isn't safe."

"That's what I said."

But Mum hadn't seen the danger. Instead, because Julian was a friend's nephew, and a solicitor, she'd been annoyed Indra had rejected him. Mum was so used to manipulating everyone around her, bullying them with her temper tantrums into doing what she wanted, it was inconceivable to her when anyone balked.

As the lift started down, a thought suddenly struck.

"Wait, is that why you've been around the last few nights when I'm leaving to go home?" She'd made sure to leave with others, and although she'd been aware of Lorcan in the group, he hadn't spoken.

He shrugged. "Would you believe it was coincidence?"

She was speechless, touched at his quiet, unobtrusive concern.

"No," she finally replied. "I wouldn't."

When the lift doors opened onto the busy corridor of the surgical wards, they stepped out, ready to go their separate ways.

But before he could leave, Indra heard herself say, "Alright, I'll go."

The heat that flashed in his eyes sent tingles rushing over her skin. Then, in a blink, it was gone, leaving his habitual solemnity.

"Brilliant. I'll be in touch with the details."

And before she could respond, he was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Indra hoped making a decision regarding the trip would stop her stewing about it, but that wasn't the case. Lorcan continued to take up far too much space in her head for comfort.

Their kiss had left her wondering whether she could keep her hands—and her lips—to herself around him, and if she really wanted to.

It wasn't as though she was looking for a relationship—she'd decided that wasn't in the cards for her a long time ago. Yet there were always dangers, even in affairs destined to end sooner rather than later, especially when the other party worked in the same hospital.

And as if the whole going-to-his-ex's-wedding wasn't strange enough, there was the niggling sense Lorcan was concealing something.

When he'd told her about the wedding, Lorcan hadn't looked too troubled, but the skin around his eyes was tight, as it sometimes got when their research wasn't going the way they hoped. Clearly, despite his apparent sangfroid, he *was* worried about going to Ireland.

Or, perhaps, going to the wedding alone?

She didn't know which he was concerned about, or why, beyond the obvious fact it was his ex-wife's nuptials.

But who was she to pry? She had secrets too, like the fact her entire family had anger issues, which led to epic screaming matches and ugliness. Having grown up in it, she'd decided never to inflict that type of life on anyone else.

She could never trust herself not to snap and do something unforgivable.

Yet there was no need to worry about any of that now, she reminded herself sternly, as her relationship with Lorcan was simply one of convenience.

A very real concern, however, was what to wear to the wedding, which was only two weeks away. Besides the sheer extravagance of it being in a castle, Indra knew she couldn't let Lorcan down. If she was found lacking in any way, it would reflect poorly on him, and she wouldn't have that.

She needed more information, though, so she called him. When she told him what she needed, he was silent for a few long beats.

"Err...I haven't a clue how to answer any of your questions," he admitted. "I mean, I just plonk on a suit and I'm ready to go. The invite said 'formal.' Isn't that enough?"

Indra couldn't help huffing. How like a man! "Could you ask your mum, or your sister?"

Again, there was a momentary hesitation before he replied, “No. Sorry. Only boys in the family, and Mum’s a slacks-and-cardigan type. She’s probably wondering the same things you are.”

Indra rolled her eyes. “Send me a picture of the invitation. If it’s at a castle, there may be *something* online.”

“Why don’t I bring the invitation, and dinner, over to your place this evening?”

Her heart did a flip at the thought of being alone with him, but she kept her voice level. “Alright. But I’ll cook.”

After they’d agreed on a time and hung up, Indra did her best to tamp down her excitement.

But failed.

\*

Lorcan knew it was ridiculous to be so eager, but took the stairs up to Indra’s third-floor flat two at a time anyway. She’d been on his mind constantly since she’d agreed to go to Galway—well, since the night they’d kissed, actually—but even knowing the attraction was one-sided, he couldn’t get himself to care.

It had been years since he’d felt so alive.

Ironic that Mae, who’d caused the initial damage, was responsible for this rebirth of emotion.

Not that he had any expectations from his friendship with Indra. She was beautiful and popular—could have any and every man she wanted—so Lorcan knew he’d never be in the running.

She met him at the door with one of her heart-stopping smiles.

“Come through.” She waved him inside. “I hope you’re not too hungry. My last patient—a six-year-old—had a meltdown over doing his physio, so I was late getting home. Luckily, I had a meat pie in the freezer, but it’s not ready yet.”

“I can wait,” he replied, looking around her flat, which was small, bright and cheerful. Fighting the impulse to pull her close, he held the invitation in his hand out to her. “Here you go.”

Taking it, she went and curled up at one end of the couch, so Lorcan sank down on the other.

“Hmm,” she said, and Lorcan couldn’t stop staring at the way her fingers caressed the envelope. “Quality stationery and calligraphy.”

“Mae always liked nice things,” he said automatically, as Indra pulled out the invitation.

“I’m not surprised,” she said absently. Then, before he could ask what she meant, she bolted upright and turned wide eyes his way. “Wait a minute. Lifestyle maven Maeve Jerico is your ex-wife?”

Unsurprised by her reaction, Lorcan nodded.

“But wasn’t she married to some actor?”

Lorcan couldn't help smiling at the outrage in her tone. "I was her starter husband, and this next one will be number three. She wasn't famous when I met her."

Indra's expression gave him gooseflesh, and he wished—almost desperately—he could interpret it. Then it was gone and she shook her head. "You're full of surprises. What happened between you?"

The wave of shame and anger took him aback. He should have put it behind him after all these years, yet the pain still lingered.

He almost didn't answer, but something about her gaze drew the words from him. "Truthfully, I couldn't deal with her temper."

And that was the truth, but not all of it. Omitted was the way she manipulated every situation to her advantage and never took responsibility for the things she did. She'd played the part of a sweet, almost doting wife around others, but their home life had been hell.

But he didn't elaborate, and Indra didn't ask. Instead, she looked down at the invitation, frowning, for what seemed an eternity.

Then, she gave him a wry glance. "Maeve Jerico's wedding. So as not to embarrass you, I'm going to have to call in the big guns."

And although he had no idea what that meant, knowing she wanted to do him proud gave him a rush of pleasure.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was difficult to hide her disappointment from Lorcan, but Indra felt she did a credible job. They hadn't even eaten dinner yet, and she already felt as if she'd been on a roller-coaster. There'd been the high of seeing him smile, fully, for the first time, followed quickly by the plummeting low of hearing why his marriage had ended.

And it all made her realize that, despite telling herself otherwise, she'd been secretly hoping there could be something more between them. Now she knew for a fact that would never happen. Not when just talking about his ex's temper caused that flash of pain in his eyes.

Pain she understood, having both caused suffering with her rage and experienced the trauma anger created. Growing up with constant strife at home had left scars that would never go away and made her fearful of evolving into her cantankerous mother. Those fears kept her away from developing serious relationships, doing whatever necessary to deflect male interest.

Yet, while she knew there was no way she'd chance hurting Lorcan, she couldn't help also wishing things could be different and that Lorcan would be interested in her too.

*Ugh.*

Her feelings were in a huge muddle, but now wasn't the time to try to figure out what exactly it all meant.

She'd promised to go with him to the wedding, and by gosh, she'd make sure it went off without a hitch.

He was watching her expectantly, no doubt wondering what she meant by "big guns," so she picked up her phone and started texting, while filling him in.

"I'll need something fabulous to wear, and one of my oldest friends has made a name for herself in fashion. Hopefully she's around and can help me out." Tossing the phone back on the table, she continued, "Fingers crossed she gets back to me soon."

"Please don't spend a lot of money on this." The way his brows came together, signally concern, made her melt a little. "You'll look wonderful whatever you wear, and I'll be proud to be seen with you, irrespective."

Flustered, she got to her feet and, ignoring his comment, said, "The pie should be ready now. Let's eat."

As she walked between the coffee table and the couch, Lorcan pulled in his feet to let her pass, but when she was abreast of him, suddenly reached out and snagged her wrist. The sensation of his fingers—warm and strong against her skin—made her breath hitch in her throat.

"I hope you know how much I appreciate this," he said.

How had she ever thought his eyes cold, she wondered, when they were now filled with enough warmth to heat her straight through. But she couldn't give in to the urge to slide into his lap and kiss those slightly smiling lips, so she tugged free.

"Don't be silly. You've helped me too, so it's all a wash."

And then she hurried into the kitchenette, running from the sight of his smile and the rush of desire it brought.

At this rate, if she weren't careful, she'd end up doing something silly—like throwing herself at him—and that was the last thing she needed!

\*

Lorcan rubbed at his palm, where the sensation of Indra's silky flesh lingered. Tilting his head back against the cushion behind him, he closed his eyes and found himself smiling.

He hadn't realized how drab his life had become until the night she'd turned in his arms and they'd kissed.

He'd wanted to tug her down into his lap just now and see if that magic could be repeated. But he'd quashed the urge, not wanting to do anything to make her uncomfortable and perhaps change her mind about the trip.

Also, their joint research project, although close to the end, would throw them together more than usual over the next two weeks. Their last patient session had left him restless with longing, and he knew it would only be worse if he kissed her again.

"Dinner's ready," she called, bringing Lorcan back to the present.

The pie turned out to be delicious and homemade. When he commented on that, Indra shrugged.

"One of the things Mum taught us from an early age was how to cook in batches, so you always have something for another day."

"You have siblings?"

She nodded. "Two brothers, both older."

"Are they here in London?"

There was no mistaking the way her lips turned down for an instant. "No. The oldest lives in Swansea, and the other is in Guyana, working with one of our uncles."

Telling, he thought, that she was the only child still in close proximity to their mother, but he didn't mention that. He just said, "I'm the middle of five brothers. It was brutal growing up. The two pairs on either side of me were thick as thieves, and guess who got picked on?"

Instead of smiling, as he hoped she would, Indra shook her head as she looked down at her plate. "I can only image."

What was it about what he'd said that upset her? He genuinely wanted to know, but wasn't sure how to broach the subject, and when she started talking about their research, the moment passed.

By the end of the meal, Lorcan realized he'd spoken more than he had in eons and about such a wide and interesting range of subjects that he felt enlivened.

Almost elated.

He helped her clear the dishes and then wash up, the two of them still chatting, but now he was fixated on her proximity, beside him at the sink. The hint of perfume each time she moved. The warmth of her arm as it brushed his, and the way they moved in what seemed like perfect synchronicity as he washed and she rinsed.

As he dried the last dish and handed it to Indra to put away, the normality of it—the hominess—left him aching.

He'd often told himself his work was what was most important, that he was content without the closeness of a relationship. Reluctant to risk making another wrong choice, he'd convinced himself he needed no one.

It had been a lie, and Indra was the one who'd revealed the truth.

And when she walked him to the door a little bit later, it took every ounce of control he had to simply wish her good-night and walk away, feeling as though he was leaving something valuable behind.

CHAPTER SIX

The next two weeks seemed to rush by. Between her workload, acting as referee between her battling parents and preparing for the trip to Ireland, Indra could hardly catch her breath.

And, besides their shared research patients, she hadn't seen Lorcan at all. A part of her had hoped he'd call, or text, and suggest getting together again, but he hadn't. Although she should know better, it still hurt.

Her friend Kyanna had come through and somehow created a gorgeous dress for the wedding.

"It's Maeve Jerico, Indra, so the entire affair is going to be over-the-top. There's no way I'm letting you go looking like the poor cousin!"

Although Indra agreed, inside she was more concerned with whether Lorcan would think she looked good than she was with anyone else's opinion.

It seemed that before she had even blinked, they were on the first leg of their trip via train from London to Holyhead.

"I usually drive and take the ferry to Dublin, but it's too short a trip this time," Lorcan explained while giving her the itinerary. "Easier to go by train and ferry and rent a car on the other side. Either way, it's a ten-hour trip, but at least I won't be exhausted when we arrive."

It was, she decided about halfway into the trip, fun to travel with Lorcan. They chatted a lot of the time, but even when silence fell, it was companionable rather than heavy, and the day passed far quicker than she'd imagined it would.

They had reservations at an inn near the wedding venue, and as they were checking in, Indra caught herself wishing they were sharing a room rather than sleeping separately.

She kept that thought to herself.

Lorcan asked if she'd mind going over to his parents' house, in a village outside Galway, after dinner. "I thought it might be easier for you to meet my family before the whole wedding business gets too crazy."

"Of course," she agreed, although her stomach dipped at the thought.

She shouldn't have worried, though. Mr. and Mrs. Connor greeted her with such enthusiasm, she was a little taken aback at first. Then, as she watched the family interact, she realized they were a genuinely gregarious, warmhearted bunch.

Almost too gregarious, she thought, when she realized Lorcan was slowly but surely stepping into the background.

Determined not to let him, she made a point of bringing him into the conversation, although it was a lot more difficult than she expected.

After they'd taken their leave and were heading back to the inn, he said, "I hope you didn't find my family too overwhelming."

"Not at all." She paused as a huge yawn overtook her. "I'd go so far as to say you seemed more overwhelmed than I was."

Lorcan chuckled, making her realize he'd done so a few times that day. How had she ever thought him morose?

"As the middle child, I learned early to keep my thoughts to myself so as not to get in fights. It's a hard habit to break, especially when we're all together that way."

That she could believe. Her own brothers had been overbearing, often shouting down her opinions or telling her to shut up. The difference was, while Lorcan's family got loud and argumentative, from what Indra saw, their discussions probably never devolved into out-and-out battles.

At least not since they'd become adults.

While getting ready for bed, Indra was still considering the dynamics of the Connor clan and couldn't help longing for a similar experience.

How lovely it would be to have the entire family together without needing to walk on eggshells all the time, waiting for someone to lose their temper and go ballistic.

Lying in bed, lonely and a little sad, she allowed herself to fantasize that the friendship she and Lorcan had developed could grow into something more.

He was just the type of man she'd hope for if a relationship was in the cards.

And as she dozed off, the memory of that one solitary kiss they'd shared rose in her mind and followed her into slumber. Which might explain why she woke up the next morning more tightly strung than a piano wire.

\*

Lorcan seemed quieter while they had breakfast, which just increased Indra's tension. So much so that when they set out to go sightseeing, neither spoke much, and when Lorcan finally broke the silence, Indra started.

"I'd like to take you to one of my favorite places. It's about an hour away, if that's alright with you?"

"Sure."

Then, because she sounded curt even to her own ears, she delved in her brain for small talk and prattled away for the rest of the drive.

Eventually, she saw the sign for a town named Clifden, but Lorcan continued through, still going west, until...

“Oh!”

The vista that opened up before them literally stole Indra’s breath. Even though it was a blustery day, with clouds obscuring the sun, the view from the cliff out to the wind-whipped sea was magnificent.

“It’s called the Sky Road,” he said quietly. “And I think it’s one of the most beautiful drives in the world.”

“Yes.” It was hardly more than a whisper, and her gaze stayed glued to the changing landscape, drinking it all in.

They got out at a lay-by, and as they walked toward the protective wall, Indra reached out and took Lorcan’s hand, her heart hammering, although she didn’t know why.

Emotionally, she’d always been caught between her parents’ worlds. Both the tropical heat of Guyana and the cool Welsh countryside spoke to her, each in a different voice, neither stronger nor preferred over the other.

But this? This was different again.

The wild scene affected Indra on what felt like a molecular level, sending flashes of energy through her veins and over her skin. There was no way she could resist turning and reaching for Lorcan. When he dragged her close, and their lips met in a kiss as primal as the sea below, it was more than arousing.

It was perfection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lorcan could have stayed there the entire day—the entire rest of his life—kissing Indra on the untamed Connemara coast. The sensation of her body and lips on his, the taste and scent and sound of her, was more to him just then than food, or drink or even air.

All the words he'd wanted to say to her over the last few weeks, and hadn't, rose together in his throat, and he felt as though they were transmitted through his breath into her.

*I want you.*

*I need you.*

*You make me feel alive.*

*I'm falling in love with you.*

A horn blew. Tires screeched behind them, and Indra jumped back out of his arms as though stung.

They both looked toward the road, but although Lorcan registered the fist-shaking, curse-laden disagreement happening there, all he could think was how much he wanted Indra back in his arms.

But as the two men ended their confrontation, Lorcan realized she was already heading back to the car, her back stiff and straight, her strides longer than usual.

And that told him all he really needed to know.

Following at a slower pace, he tried to figure out what to do or say, so their relationship—their friendship—wouldn't be destroyed. Getting into the car, he looked across at her and found her huddled against her door, her arms wrapped around her waist, as though she were cold.

"Indra—"

She held up a hand and smiled her wide, sunny grin, but he wasn't fooled. That cheerful expression, he now realized, hid whatever other emotions swirled beneath.

"I'm sorry. That view, that outlook, made me lose my head for a moment."

"I'd actually hoped it was me who'd done that," he said honestly. "So please don't apologize."

Something flared in her eyes and then was blinked away. "I don't want things to be awkward between us."

It was her polite way of saying he shouldn't take what happened seriously, and Lorcan could only swallow the bitter disappointment and nod.

"They won't be." He couldn't afford to let his unrequited feelings spoil the best relationship he'd had in years. It wasn't the relationship he wanted it to be, but that was no reason to be foolish. Just being

around Indra made his life a hundred times better. "Now, how about we go and see if Clifden Castle's gate is open? Hopefully the road up to the ruins won't be too muddy."

Now her smile seemed more natural, but the expression in her eyes was shielded, so he couldn't get a read on what she was really feeling.

"Sounds good."

Although Lorcan was able to smile back, he was glad that she turned to look back out over the view, so she wouldn't notice how unsteady his hand was as he pressed the starter.

\*

Indra stared out at the passing scenery but no longer truly saw it. Instead, her entire being was focused on trying to regulate her breathing, slow her heart down and push back against the arousal raging through her body.

She'd promised herself not to get further entangled with Lorcan, knowing there could be no future in it, and what did she do? At the first opportunity, she jumped all over him like a ravenous beast.

Well, she was ravenous, for him, but he was off-limits and it would serve her well to remember that.

It wasn't that she'd be averse to a casual sexual relationship. She'd had them before and probably would again. The problem was that she didn't feel casual about Lorcan, and she never would. He was quiet and thoughtful and had a brilliant, nimble mind. Getting to know him had changed the way she saw him in an instrumental way, and there was no going back from that.

There were two choices: walk away, forever, or hold on to a relationship that had come to mean more to her than she had ever expected it would.

It was a no-brainer.

If staying within his sphere meant hiding her real feelings, then that was what she had to do.

And she thought she did a decent job of it. For the rest of the day they explored and chatted, and although her awareness of him didn't abate, there was no hint of strain between them.

But she was thankful they'd been invited to have dinner with his parents and relatives from out of town. The less time she spent alone with him at this point, the easier it would be.

The dinner was being held at the village hall, which was a scene of lively banter and music when they arrived. As soon as they stepped through the door, Lorcan's mother whisked Indra away to introduce her to the rest of the family.

The older woman threaded her arm through Indra's and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm so happy to have met you. Lorcan never brings anyone home, and I was beginning to worry. He'd become so withdrawn, and it's been more than enough time for him to have gotten over Mae."

Unable to think of anything appropriate to say, Indra just kept smiling. Luckily, they got to an elderly gentleman who appeared to be rather deaf, as Mrs. Connor leaned close to shout, "Uncle Harry, this is Indra Hughes. Lorcan's girlfriend."

And after that, there was hardly a need for any further introductions, since Indra was sure they heard Mrs. Connor all the way in the next village over.

“Oh, and it’s lovely to be meeting you. She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” the old man bellowed in return.

Even as she kept smiling and shook Uncle Harry’s hand, she wanted to turn and run—to get away. Go somewhere private to sort through everything she was feeling and control her emotions.

*Tonight, she thought to herself. Get through tonight and tomorrow, and then you’ll be back home and you can figure this entire situation out.*

In the meantime, all she could do was keep smiling, even though each time she looked at Lorcan, her stomach twisted in agony and her heart broke a little more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lorcan couldn't feel his face, or his feet for that matter, as he watched Indra glide down the staircase toward him.

She wore a hunter green velvet dress that skimmed her shoulders and hugged her breasts and waist. Then it flared into an uneven hemline, which dipped almost to her ankle on one side, but allowed the occasional glimpse of the smooth skin above her knee on the other.

With her long dark hair swept up at the front and then curling down at the back, the sight of her was enough to render him speechless.

At the bottom of the stairs she did a pirouette, which sent her skirt swinging out before it fell to caress her legs once more.

"Will I do?"

Lorcan swallowed and said the first thing that came to mind. "You're gorgeous. You'll be the most beautiful woman there."

She chuckled and took his proffered arm. "I hope not, or your ex won't be happy."

"I don't care if she is or not. That's not my responsibility anymore."

She paused just outside the inn and touched his arm with her other hand. When he looked down at her, her caring expression made his heart clench.

"I know you said you're not upset about Mae getting married again, but I'm sure this must feel so incredibly weird. Why'd you agree to go? You could have cited work or a prior commitment. I doubt anyone would fault you for that."

He hesitated, unwilling—even with Indra—to explain fully. So all he said was, "I don't have any feelings for her anymore, and to skive off would make people think I did. Maybe it's just pride, but I didn't want that."

Smiling softly, she squeezed his arm and replied, "Okay then. Let's go."

Lorcan had a fair idea of what to expect when Mae was in charge, but even he had to be impressed by the sheer grandeur of the castle setting and the tasteful decorations. He knew he wasn't alone. Indra gave a little gasp as they were led into the long gallery and to their seats.

Despite what he'd said, Lorcan wasn't sure what he'd feel when he saw Mae for the first time in so many years. He was glad when, as he caught sight of her, all he felt was a lingering sense of relief and a healthy dose of dislike.

He hoped that, somewhere along the line, she'd gained some control of her wild and destructive emotions. If she hadn't, he was doubly glad to be completely out of her life.

What he hadn't expected was that during the cocktail hour he'd suddenly find himself face-to-face with her, as though she'd sought him out.

"Lorcan." Mae had one of those voices that purred—until it screeched. He used to find it attractive, but now he just saw it as another facade that hid her true nature. "I'm so glad you came."

"Mae, I'd like to introduce my friend, Dr. Indra Hughes. Indra, Mae."

"Oh, hullo."

It was a less-than-enthusiastic greeting, but Indra just smiled. "Best wishes on your marriage."

"Thanks." Mae turned back to him and raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Lor, be a love and get me a glass of champers, would you? This one's already warm."

"Sure."

Although the last thing he wanted was to leave the two women alone, there were no waiters to hand, and to refuse would look churlish. So, with a regretful glance Indra's way, he went in search of champagne.

\*

Mae Jerico, or McKinney as she was now, was the type of tall, willowy, blonde beauty that used to make Indra feel every pound and rue every inch she didn't have.

Thankfully, she'd grown out of that nonsense.

Now, as the point of focus of Mae's very cold green eyes, she smiled again, which made those eyes narrow.

"How long have you and Lorcan been together?"

"A while," she replied mildly, surprised at the turn the conversation had taken. Wasn't this the woman who'd just stood all dewy-eyed before the officiant and said *I do*? Why was she now sticking her nose into her ex-husband's business?

"Did he tell you that I helped him get through medical school, then he dumped me?"

"No. That's none of my business, is it?"

"Maybe not." Mae lifted a hand to smooth her hair. "But you should at least know the kind of man you're involved with."

"I do know," Indra replied, keeping her voice unconcerned, refusing to give Mae the satisfaction of seeing her lose her temper. "He's the kind of man who treats everyone with quiet courtesy and patience. A good, kind, caring man. So, if he left you the way you say he did, then I'd have to wonder what you did to cause that."

Mae's face reddened, and then, without another word, she turned and walked away.

It clicked for Indra. She'd seen it before. Lived it. Mae and Mum were alike. Controlling women with terrible tempers who couldn't bear to see their ex move on and be happy.

They hid it from outsiders—that mean, selfish streak—and saved it for those closest to them, until even those people couldn't deal with it anymore and left.

Indra wished she could say she wasn't like them, but she couldn't be sure. She'd never gotten close enough with anyone to find out.

Until now.

And Lorcan was the last person she'd want to find out she was, deep down, like Mae.

Like Mum.

"She's gone, then?" Lorcan's voice startled her back to the present.

"Yes, thankfully." She accepted the glass of champagne from him and took a sip.

Lorcan put his hand on her wrist, lightly, but the shock of awareness traveled all the way up her arm and through her torso.

"Was she nasty to you?"

His voice had a dangerous edge Indra had never heard before, and when her gaze met his, she was reminded of why she'd once thought his eyes ice-cold.

"Not that I noticed," she said, putting the glass down on a handy table and taking his hand. "Let's dance."

CHAPTER NINE

The next day, they were on their way back to London, once more setting out early in the morning. Lorcan was tired and disinclined to talk, and Indra seemed to feel the same way. Most of the day was spent in silence, punctuated by brief spurts of idle conversation. Once they were on the ferry, Indra leaned her head back and fell asleep.

Lorcan watched her, his heart heavy, his gaze tracing every inch of her face, committing it to memory. His head whirred with confusion.

Going back to England felt, in a strange way, like leaving reality and going back to a shadow world, although it should have been the other way around.

London was where his work was, and his work had both supplied a reason to keep moving forward and kept him sane.

But in Ireland he'd found something even more satisfying.

Friendship.

Love.

Red-hot desire.

There, he'd had Indra mostly to himself, and although they'd exchanged only that one mind-blowing kiss on the Sky Road, he was hard-pressed to imagine life going forward without her.

They were on the cusp of going back to their separate lives, probably only seeing each other periodically at work. Or, at best, being casual friends who'd meet up for a curry or a drink at the pub.

Was that enough for him?

*No.*

But the fear he'd harbored for so long refused to let go.

His marriage to Mae hadn't just been a disaster. It had taken years to admit he'd been battered—emotionally—and to recognize the lingering effects. The withdrawal from family and friends. Holding everyone at arm's length out of fear of falling back into another situation where he would lose all sense of self.

With Indra he'd felt it lifting, but he still wasn't sure he was ready to love again. Not when he knew, without a doubt, what pain loving someone could bring.

The damage it could do.

So, although the words he thought on the cliffs were still true, they were also securely locked in his chest. And when he and Indra eventually made it back to London, he parted from her with just a light kiss on the cheek.

Walking away had never felt harder, but somehow, he did it.

\*

It took him only a month to realize he'd have to take a chance on telling her the truth or quietly lose his mind. Seeing her around the hospital, even just hearing her name, made his heart race and ache at the same time. His nights were disturbed by memories featuring Indra's smile, her voice, and scent and lips—the sensation of holding her close.

The fantasy of making love to her. Of making her his own.

He'd always been the type who needed things clear-cut so he could make his decisions based on facts rather than supposition. Until she told him she would never be interested in him, it would be impossible to move on.

So, he called and asked if he could come by for a word one evening. It was getting close to Christmas, and with no guarantee she'd be available, it was a relief to hear her say "Sure. Everything alright?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say no—that he was dying from wanting her—but instead he said, "Yes. It's nothing dire. I'll bring supper."

"I actually have a day off tomorrow, so come by then and I'll make dinner."

Funny how, when he had something to look forward to, the day seemed immeasurably brighter.

The next evening, though, the nerves all came back. Knowing he was about to put himself on the line again made his stomach clench as he climbed the stairs to Indra's floor.

Once in the hallway, raised voices drowned out the holiday music trickling into the hall, and Lorcan quickly realized they were coming from Indra's flat. His heart in his throat, he rang the bell and, getting no response, used the palm of his hand to bang on the door.

It flew open, revealing a short, stocky man with a red face and flashing dark eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

Before Lorcan could reply, Indra was there, reaching out, grabbing his hand. Hers was icy-cold and trembling.

"This is my boyfriend, Dad."

Instinctively Lorcan pulled Indra close, looping an arm around her shoulder. Her entire body was vibrating, so Lorcan held her tighter, elated she'd turned to him when she was afraid.

The other man's eyes narrowed, then he shouted into the flat. "Here's the nonexistent man, Kitty. What do you have to say now?"

A woman stepped into view, her hands on her hips and her chin tilted up at a pugnacious angle. The resemblance was so strong, Lorcan knew she was Indra's mother.

“I say you’re still a fool, David Hughes, and you don’t know nothing `bout your daughter. How could you, after you run off and leave us?”

“I never—”

“You’re worthless—”

Indra’s parents were cranking up again, and despite knowing it was none of his business, Lorcan was about to intervene when a bellowing shout split the air.

*“Shut it!”*

Who knew Indra had that kind of lung power? Loud enough to actually shock her parents into silence and induce a surge of admiration in Lorcan.

“Dad, Mum, I want you to leave.” Indra’s voice was cold and controlled.

When they both started talking at the same time, she shook her head and spoke over them. “I’d planned to introduce Lorcan to you, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“But, Indra—”

She stopped whatever her father planned to say with a chop of her hand through the air.

“I’m tired of you two—the way you’re constantly at each other and dragging me into your fights. You’ve gone too far this time, coming here, making a scene, embarrassing me. So, neither of you deserve the privilege of knowing him. Maybe I’ll forgive you in five or ten years, but right now I’m sick to death of you and your drama. Just go.”

Her mother huffed and, giving her daughter a baleful look, walked out the door. Indra’s father seemed inclined to try to speak, but Indra shook her head firmly and pointed to the door. He slowly left, and as soon as he was out the door, Indra pulled away, leaving a cold spot on Lorcan’s side.

“I think it best you go too, Lorcan.”

Then she walked away, and all he could do was stare after her, at a loss as to what to do.

CHAPTER TEN

Indra marched into the kitchen, battling the demons rampaging through her system, trying to hold herself together. A haze of smoke hung in the air, testament to dinner burning. Snatching open the oven, she grabbed a pot holder, all the while listening for the front door to close behind Lorcan. Hearing the distinctive click of the latch just as she pulled the pan out of the oven, she let herself go.

Cursing a blue streak usually released some of her tension, but this time, even when coupled with violently tossing the sizzling pan into the sink, it didn't really help.

So she cursed some more, until she caught a flicker of movement in her periphery and spun around.

"Lorcan. I told you to leave."

He shook his head, his blue gaze so intent she couldn't look away. "It didn't feel right to leave a friend at a time like this."

She wanted to tell him they weren't friends, that she didn't want him there, but what came out was "You can't be here right now. I'm too angry."

He was silent for a moment, his gaze searching hers, as though looking for an indefinable something that would tell him whether he should listen to her or not.

"What does that mean, Indra? Too angry? Explain it to me."

Oh, she wanted to scream at him, to smash something. Throwing the pan into the sink didn't seem enough, but it was as far as she could go.

As far as she would allow herself to go with him there.

"Dammit, Lorcan. Please. Just go, before I do something we'll both regret."

"Like what?"

The sound that came from her throat was akin to a growl, and a band tightened across her chest.

"Lorcan, please." She was pleading with him and didn't care. The pressure building inside her was threatening to blow. "Please, don't do this."

He moved then, reaching out to touch her cheek, his finger stroking lightly against her skin. "I'm sorry, love, but I can't leave you like this, on your own, upset and battling with your anger. I care too much."

"You have to." She inhaled, the breath shuddering into her lungs. For the last month she'd longed to be with him, missed him desperately, and this was the last way she wanted him to see her—trembling with rage, barely hanging on to control. No doubt bringing back memories he'd thought he'd put aside. "You don't need my drama in your life."

His eyebrows lifted, and he tilted his head slightly, that warm blue gaze never leaving her face. “Don’t I get to choose?”

She lifted her hands to either side of her head, frustrated he couldn’t—wouldn’t—understand, then she let them drop so as to face him fully and ensure he would understand.

“I met your ex, and I recognized the person she is, because she’s just like my mother. Manipulative and angry, and using that anger to control those around her. That’s in me. That rage. I’ve seen it too many times not to know what it looks and feels like, and how it destroys everything—everyone—around it. Don’t you see? I don’t want that for you. You deserve better.”

“Really?” He moved closer, that focused gaze never leaving hers, holding her effortlessly captive. “What gives you the right to decide what’s best for me?”

“Because I love you. I care about you and want you to be happy.”

She hadn’t realized what she was going to say, nor that she’d shout it, until the words seemed to echo in the silence that fell around them.

The spark that lit his eyes stole her breath all over again, but when he held out his arms, she shook her head.

“No, Lorcan. I can’t trust myself. *You* can’t trust me not to turn into my mother. Or Mae. I’ve never been in love before. I don’t know what that will mean.” Desperate to convince him now, she asked, “Didn’t you see them? My parents? They should never be in the same room with each other, much less have gotten married. But it wasn’t always like that.”

Dashing the tears from her eyes, she met his gaze once more. “I remember, as a young child, that our home was peaceful, loving. I don’t know what changed, so how do I know it won’t happen to us?”

He laid a finger across her lips.

“Listen to me, darling. I know what you’re afraid of because I’ve lived it too, but I don’t see that in you, at all. We’ve worked closely together, spent time in different venues outside of work. I’ve never seen you try to be manipulative, or refuse to take responsibility for your actions or use your temper to browbeat anyone.”

His words fired through her, giving her hope, but also making her more frightened than she’d ever been before in her life—making her heart race and her stomach twist.

Then Lorcan smiled and said, “I love you too, but that doesn’t mean everything will be perfect. Nor will love magically take away all our fears or character flaws. It also doesn’t come with a manual. But if we’re willing to trust, take care of and grow with each other, we can find a way, don’t you think?”

How could she gamble that he was right? She’d spent so long telling herself she couldn’t risk a relationship, didn’t deserve one.

Yet...

It was there, in Lorcan’s eyes. The clear belief they could make this work if they tried.

He'd been through so much, but was still willing to take a chance on her and the love and friendship they'd found together.

The first step she took was tentative.

Hesitant.

It felt like learning to walk again, or stepping into a darkened room, where you couldn't see where your feet would land, but you somehow knew the floor ahead was solid.

He was waiting for her and enfolded her in an embrace so strong and right, she never wanted it to end.

"We can do this, Indra. We'll take it slow and work things out as we go along."

Somehow, she believed him, completely, and sighed in acceptance, her heart dancing in anticipation. He inhaled, his chest rising beneath her cheek, and she could hear the strong, swift pounding of his heart, racing in tandem with hers.

"We'll take it a step at a time, until we're ready," he said with such assurance she had to lift her head to give him a questioning look.

"Ready? For what?"

Lorcan smiled again. "For whatever comes next."

Then, before she could ask any other questions, he was kissing her.

And he tasted like home.

~

To read more stories about the medical professionals at the Royal Kensington Hospital, don't miss *Christmas Miracle in Jamaica* by Ann McIntosh, the first book in **The Christmas Project** miniseries from Mills & Boon Medical Romance!

*Virginia Heath*

A KISS TO SPARK  
A SCANDAL

VIRGINIA HEATH

## CHAPTER 1

*Berkeley Square, the first day of the 1812 Season...*

Lady Dorothea Claremont stared at the bouquet with a sinking heart.

It wasn't the beautiful hothouse flowers which disappointed her, nor was it the arrangement or the thoughtfulness which had gone into sourcing her favourite blooms in her favourite colours out of season. More her own lack of enthusiasm for the gentleman who had sent them. A lack of enthusiasm she was beyond guilty about when there was nothing wrong with him either.

Lord Peter Crawley, heir to the ancient dukedom of Leigh, was handsome, wealthy, affable and kind of heart. The latter two traits being the most important in her humble opinion, although her mama and papa adored that he came from similar stock to them.

Her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Warminster, were in the business of power and so were his. Both dukes lived and breathed parliament and both sat in the prime minister's cabinet. They were well-respected elder statesmen who had dedicated their lives to serving their country, so by default their wives were considered patronesses of society. The subtle arbiters of taste and decorum who set the tone and eschewed the frivolity enjoyed by much of the aristocracy to shine as the twin beacons of how things should be done when one put duty before everything. Ladies to aspire to. The dictionary definition of 'good *ton*'. That their husbands, the Dukes of Leigh and Warminster, had been the best of friends since birth cemented their joy that their two noble houses were finally destined to be joined by marriage.

Or so everyone had speculated since Dorothea and Peter had been in leading strings. A match made while they both played together at their mothers' knees, such a foregone conclusion that neither had ever questioned the expectation. Which was why, in honour of the start of her second Season, the parameters of their lifelong friendship had seamlessly shifted to one of courtship. Peter hadn't yet officially proposed, but their mothers were already planning their wedding, which was conveniently due to happen sometime during parliament's long summer recess.

Neat and tidy.

Done and dusted.

The perfect fairy-tale match made in heaven.

And there, for Dorothea at least, was the rub. Because as much as she adored Peter and always had, she had never harboured a single romantic feeling towards him. Or at least not the sort she had

read about or heard about from her friends, who all sighed over their beaux or potential beaux with a dreamy look on their faces.

To that end, she had never eyed him covetously with feminine interest. Never had butterflies in her tummy each time they collided. Her pulse had never quickened in his presence and neither had her flesh tingled at his touch. She knew this categorically because she had spent the last month expressly scrutinising her reactions to him, yet these were all the fundamental things which seemed to be commonplace in matters of love. She had certainly never felt any desire to kiss him, or any sort of desire for him at all for that matter. If anything, just the thought of experiencing passion with him made her uncomfortable. Surely that was a huge problem if they had a honeymoon looming imminently on the horizon?

That Peter also appeared to be in no hurry to make their lifelong friendship more physically affectionate did not fill her with confidence that theirs would be quite the match made in heaven that everyone else claimed it was. He hadn't even tried to steal a single kiss. Not even when they were conveniently left alone to do just that.

'Oh, those are beautiful!' Her mother fingered the delicate petals of one of the oriental lilies, smiling. 'And they smell divine. What a lucky girl you are to have such a thoughtful suitor.'

That Peter was her only suitor also depressed her. Dorothea understood why, of course, because why on earth would any other man express an interest when her troth had been so thoroughly plighted to another from time immemorial. Yet still, that nobody else had also felt significant. It sealed her fate and hammered another nail in her ill-fitting coffin.

She forced a smile for her mother's sake. 'Yes, I am.'

'I hope one day that I have a fiancé as lovely as Peter.' Beside her, her younger sister, Felicity, managed the dreamy sigh Dorothea couldn't.

'He is not my fiancé yet.' The clarification came swiftly as, for now, that at least gave Dorothea the illusion of leeway and choice that she knew was futile but clung to regardless.

'But he will be very soon, darling.' Her mother tapped her nose, winking. 'Mark my words.' Then she and Dorothea's father shared a knowing look. One which said that the families had it all worked out, just as they had dictated everything about her future so far. Almost as if Dorothea's thoughts on the matter were of little consequence.

Her mother glanced at the clock. 'Good heavens! It is almost five! We must get ready for the ball!'

'But the carriage doesn't arrive till eight!' Three hours of primping and preening for a ball she also had no enthusiasm for would be a fate worse than death. 'And it's not as if I am being launched tonight.' Dorothea had been given a year's grace to enjoy her first Season, and to give Peter the chance to finish his studies at Cambridge and doubtless to sow his last wild oats.

‘Maybe so. But your father and I want you to look *extra* special tonight.’ A comment which, combined with a wiggle of her mother’s eyebrows, did not bode well. ‘Come along, Dorothea!’

She was shooed out of the drawing room and down the hallway, but as they reached the foot of the stairs, her brother, George, strode through the front door.

‘I told you I wouldn’t be late.’ He beamed at the pair of them as he shrugged out of his coat. ‘Even though the absolute last thing I wanted to do was leave the excitement of Brighton to pretend to be interested in a bunch of silly debutantes.’

Disgruntled at his flippant attitude while also relieved he had finally arrived home from his month-long jaunt to that scandalous party town on the coast, their mother bustled over to kiss his cheek. ‘You have managed to cut it fine, as always. And the least said about your comportment while away, the better.’ As usual, George’s escapades had made it to the newspapers. ‘I blame those ill-bred friends of yours for leading you astray.’ Because obviously her only son’s penchant for hedonism couldn’t possibly be his fault despite him never being a sheep.

With perfect timing, those two ill-bred friends also strode through the front door. The charming Jasper, Lord Beaufort, and the vexatious Lord Freddie Fitzroy were as unashamedly scandalous as her brother. Of the pair, her mother despaired of Freddie more, largely because despite all outward appearances to the contrary, his parents, the Duke and Duchess of Avondale, had always been their biggest rivals in society. Where the Claremonts were all about duty and service, the Fitzroys were all about sparkling sociability to such an extent that between them they had split the *ton* into two halves. You were either a respected supporter of the Claremonts or a frivolous friend of the Fitzroys and never the twain should meet.

In theory.

In practice, and being neighbours on Berkeley Square, George and Freddie had been the best of friends as long as Dorothea and Peter had, although she had never felt quite as comfortable around Freddie. Probably because he was a few years older. And exceedingly arrogant and irritating.

‘Hello, Dot.’ The wretch had always called her that to annoy her. ‘I haven’t seen you in forever.’ Over a year in fact, because he, like the rest of the effervescent Fitzroys, had been at their estate where his sister was convalescing after a horrific accident. ‘You’ve grown up nicely.’ Then, and doubtless to vex her disapproving mother, he took Dorothea’s hand and kissed the back of it.

And the unthinkable happened.

Because instantly her flesh tingled and her pulse quickened in a way it never had before.

CHAPTER 2

*Queen Charlotte's Debutante Ball...*

So far, Freddie's evening had been torture. Nothing excited a crop of eager debutantes and their ambitious mothers more than an eligible peer of the realm, which meant he had more eyelashes batted in his direction than even he, a shameless lover of women, could cope with.

As the first waltz began, he slipped out of the ballroom and wandered into the empty courtyard of St James's Palace to stare at the stars, wondering if it would really be the poor form everyone said it was to disappear before midnight. It wasn't as if he wanted to be here. He had come as a favour to his friend George and because his mother had wanted at least one Fitzroy to pay their respects to the Queen after their long absence from court.

Well, he had done that, and staying meant twirling a silly debutante around the floor and they were all too eager to be wed for his taste. When a chap took part in the dancing as good manners dictated, the debutantes got their hopes up that they might one day be his duchess. As much as Freddie wasn't in the market for a duchess, nor likely would be for the foreseeable future because he rather liked the bachelor life, he did still have a conscience. Upsetting young ladies unduly wasn't something he was comfortable with. Probably because he had two younger sisters and would strangle anyone who gave them false hope and clumsily broke their tender hearts.

He heard giggling and groaned.

'I am sure I saw Lord Frederick sneak outside.' The feminine voice sounded no older than his sisters. '*Alone.*' That comment was accompanied by more giggling, suggesting that these determined debutantes had come hunting for him in a pack.

Quick as a flash, he darted through an archway and followed the narrow pathway along the outside edge of the palace. With any luck, it would lead to a convenient exit where he could escape onto Piccadilly into the night. Or perhaps the all-male sanctuary of White's a convenient stone's throw away. A nice brandy and a newspaper in a wingback by the fire appealed so much more than this hellish ball. He turned a bend and stopped dead at the sight of his friend's much too pretty younger sister sat all alone on a bench staring listlessly at nothing, and something odd happened beneath his ribs.

'Hello again, Dot.' She stiffened at his greeting, more awkward at being caught here than horrified to be caught alone with him. 'I see we are both hiding tonight.' Something in her tight smile made him worry about her, so he wandered closer. 'I'm on the run from a gaggle of giggling debutantes. Who or what has precipitated your flight from the ballroom?'

'Nothing.' Her eyes dropped to her lap. 'I just needed some air.'

She was a dreadful liar. 'What has Peter done wrong?'

Instantly her head snapped up. 'Why on earth would you say that?'

'Because he must have done something for you to have avoided him like the plague all evening.'

Freddie could have kicked himself for admitting that he had noticed, but his gaze had been strangely drawn to her after the odd moment he had experienced with her earlier. An odd moment where the floor had shifted, his heart had seemed to swell and the rest of the world had melted away. All so peculiar, it had left him off-kilter all day. 'I'd have thought the pair of you would be dancing the first waltz, staring soporily into one another's eyes, seeing as your imminent engagement is the worst-kept secret of the Season.' He glanced at her finger and was worryingly pleased to see no ring on it yet. 'Or are you simply upset that he is dragging his feet over proposing?'

'Not at all.' She bristled, because she had always bristled around him. 'There is no hurry.' And she seemed grateful about that. So grateful her beguiling face could not hide it.

'Ah...' He sat heavily beside her, shocked. Shocked that the match of the Season was apparently not quite as perfect as all the fervent gossip suggested, and even more shocked that he was relieved by that. 'I see.'

She went straight back to bristling again. 'And what is that supposed to mean?'

'That if you do not want to marry Peter, don't.'

Her outrage melted into instant despondency which she failed to cover with disdain. 'Peter is the perfect man. Any woman would be glad to have him.'

'Except you, Dot. Clearly.'

She opened her mouth to counter this, then clamped it shut. After a significant pause, she chose her next words carefully. 'Peter and I have been the best of friends forever.'

'So?' Freddie twisted so that he could study her properly. 'The love of a friend is quite a different beast from the sort that infects the heart. You can love someone and not be *in love* with them.'

She pondered that before she remembered he annoyed her. When she did, she turned away, folding her arms so tight it did wonders for her cleavage. 'I refuse to take romantic advice from a man like you! One who flits from affair to affair like a bee in a bed of roses. What do you know about the true meaning of love, when for you it is so transient and disposable?'

'For all my rakish ways, the heart of a romantic beats beneath this impressive chest. When the thunderbolt strikes, I shall throw myself headfirst into the parson's trap, just you wait and see.' He had always known that, deep down, as was the Fitzroys' way. They never did anything by half measures. When something was right, it was right, so there was no point in shilly-shallying. 'Until then, I am merely having some harmless fun.'

The silence stretched for a moment. 'Do you really believe love is like a thunderbolt? That it cannot grow slowly over time.'

'Like a fungus?' Freddie laughed. 'Perhaps for some it does, but I want the thunderbolt. We Fitzroys are a spontaneous and devil-may-care lot, whereas you Claremonts are...staid and all about duty.'

'There is nothing wrong with duty.'

'So long as it has a higher purpose. If the only purpose of this union is because your families expect it, then tell them that is unfair.'

'Easier said than done.' She regretted that admission instantly, her eyes so lost it plucked at his heartstrings. 'I did not mean that as it sounded.'

'Yes, you did. You love him as friend, but you are not *in love* with him.'

Because he had to, Freddie reached for her hand, and all at once, it was as if the world shifted on its axis again.

Like him, she stared at their linked fingers, stunned, as if she had felt the earth move too, then she tugged hers away to square her shoulders and stiffen her jaw. 'But I shall be.'

CHAPTER 3

*Lady Bulphan's Garden Party, three weeks into the Season...*

Dorothea watched Freddie flirt shamelessly with a young widow on the croquet lawn and tried not to feel bothered by it. Why should she care who he flirted with? It wasn't as if she had any interest in the wretch. Handsome he may be, but Freddie Fitzroy was too cocky, too wayward and too vexing to appeal to her. Besides, she already had Peter and he was absolutely perfect for her.

If she kept telling herself that, there was every chance she would believe it.

Or not, as the case seemed to be.

Since her two inexplicable odd moments with that scoundrel Freddie, she had made a concerted effort to appreciate her soon-to-be fiancé in the manner in which she should. She had even made a list of the favourable attributes which Peter possessed compared to the unfavourable, and the good outweighed the bad three to one. He was handsome, wealthy, reliable, good-natured, humorous, self-effacing. Kind to servants and animals—which surely spoke volumes—and attentive in all the correct ways. In fact, he was so attentive about so many things they were almost predictable. Like the twice-weekly bouquets he sent every Wednesday and Saturday morning, and always being the first to pencil his name into her dance card, where he claimed both the opening and closing dances. And he remained loyally by her side, exactly as he was now, for at least half of every public entertainment even when they had run out of things to talk about. The written exercise had confirmed that he was a truly lovely man and that she was indeed lucky to have him—even if she wasn't yet anywhere closer to being *in love* with him as she had hoped.

She suppressed a sigh and tried to concentrate on the conversation she was involved in. Her parents and Peter's were reminiscing about the old days when both she and her intended fiancé used to play together. Like her, Peter was listening more than joining in, his gaze often distracted by the revelry going on around them, making her wonder if he was as unenthused about their intended nuptials as she was.

He certainly still hadn't formally proposed, which was a source of much frustration to their mothers, who were doing everything in their power to leave them alone. Yet when they were, by unspoken tacit agreement, they discussed everything but. As if they were both avoiding the subject. Or dreading it.

All very worrying.

Almost as worrying as her silly obsession with Freddie Fitzroy.

'Peter!' his standoffish best friend and constant shadow, Lord Toby Sedgewick, called across the lawn, wielding tennis racquets. 'We urgently need a fourth!'

'Yes, of course!' It was all the encouragement her almost-fiancé needed to jump to his feet, then with his expression a tad pained, he smiled awkwardly at the rest of them. 'That is, if you don't mind?'

As everyone looked to Dorothea to grant the permission, as if she would be inconsolable if he left, she cheerfully nodded her approval. 'Have fun.' Because she certainly wasn't and couldn't blame him for wanting to escape the forced gaiety that had become their relationship. She had been desperate for an excuse to escape herself for the last hour, which did not bode well when they were going to be stuck together for two days here at the Bulphans' picturesque Surrey estate and for all eternity once they married.

'You should go with them.' His mother nudged her. 'Cheer him on.'

'No...' Apart from the fact that she could think of nothing worse than being a fifth wheel, Toby always made Dorothea feel uncomfortable, although why he seemed to dislike her so intensely was a mystery to her. 'I was going to catch up with some friends myself.'

As Peter bounded off, and in case their two mothers gave her another lecture about cajoling him into a proposal, she stood herself and pretended to search for some friends, then strode off across the lawn with purpose. A convenient shrubbery shielded her from view as she veered away from the garden party to the pretty, wild wooded area of the grounds.

Finally alone with her tangled thoughts, Dorothea found a sunny spot amongst the trees where the last bluebells were still flowering and lay flat on her back to stare at the sky, hoping a solution might materialise which would make all her unease disappear.

His shadow fell on her face before he spoke. 'How goes your quest to fall in love with the man of your parents' dreams, Dot?' How typical that he wouldn't beat around the bush, and how convenient that he should find her here in the first place when she had made sure she was well hidden from everyone.

She stood and glared despite her silly pulse quickening at his presence. 'A better question is why you followed me here.'

'I've kept asking myself the same thing.' At least he did not deny it as he shrugged. 'And the only answer I can honestly give is I felt compelled to. Much to my complete chagrin, and despite all my best efforts to the contrary, I appear to be worried about you.' He looked as flummoxed by that as he did about his reasons for following her. 'Nobody should have to marry someone they don't want to, Dot.'

'It's not that I don't want to...' In the absence of anyone else to discuss this with, and because Freddie was apparently the only person on the planet who had noticed her reticence towards her impending engagement, she supposed he would have to do. 'It's more...' How to phrase something she didn't even begin to understand herself? 'Peter and I are used to being friends, so the shifted boundaries in our relationship, like new shoes, take a bit of time to get used to.'

'New shoes?'

'That don't yet fit.' Freddie's disbelief at her hasty analogy made her feel silly.

'In my experience, any new shoes that do not fit like a glove the second you put them on are always a mistake, Dot, and there is nothing worse than ill-fitting shoes. They rub and give you either blisters or bunions.'

'That's not...'

He touched her arm. Just the briefest touch, but she still felt it everywhere. 'If you are worried about breaking Peter's heart, I have to tell you that in the last few weeks I've been watching him almost as much as I have been watching you—' a sentence which thrilled her more than it should '—and he doesn't seem like a man besotted to me. Trust me, I know the symptoms, and he appears to suffer from none of them.'

'Such as?' She folded her arms, both annoyed he had confirmed all her suspicions and because that one slight touch had sent her pulse berserk.

'Their gaze constantly wandering to the object of their desire, for example, especially when she moves. Thinking about the woman incessantly. Dreaming about her. Worrying about her.' He frowned as he ran an agitated hand through his hair. 'Following her into the woods to be alone with her even though you know that you shouldn't when she technically belongs to someone else, but you are powerless to stop yourself.' His bright blue eyes locked with hers, intense but perturbed. 'Burning with a desire to kiss her—just once as an experiment—to see if a single kiss is as profound as every brief touch seems to be.'

Dorothea blinked back at him, stunned, her feet rooted to the spot despite knowing she should march away outraged by his impertinence. How dare he say such outrageous things to her!

How dare he!

Yet when he reached for her hand, of their own accord her fingers laced with his, and when he gently tugged her towards him, she went willingly. Sighing against his mouth in contentment when his lips whispered over hers, because that was exactly where they had apparently always needed to be.

## CHAPTER 4

She might not have slapped him for kissing her, but after stomping off with murder in her eyes yesterday afternoon, Dot had avoided him ever since. No mean feat when they were two of just twenty people all staying under one roof in the middle of nowhere, and the brief kiss had been so spectacular he hadn't been able to forget it for a moment since.

Who knew a simple kiss could knock him sideways? But like a thunderbolt, hers had. Freddie had lost all sense of time and place, all of his wits and, this bit really worried him, he suspected he might well have lost some of his heart too as it wasn't behaving as it should. It felt odd in his chest. Bigger yet lighter. And every time his mind wandered to her, which it did with alarming frequency, it beat faster with nervous anticipation and joyous excitement. As if it suddenly had some purpose now that it had found somebody it could beat for.

That was a new, worrying development, made all the more worrying by the depressing fact that hers did not appear to be similarly afflicted.

Blinking stunned shock had been her first reaction when she had torn her lips from his, closely followed by abject horror before she had fled. At the time, he had put that down to her innate sense of duty to comply with her stuffy family's wishes and extreme guilt for being almost engaged to Peter since birth.

He had continued to think that when she had taken dinner in her room last night after pleading a headache, then successfully ignored him in the breakfast room this morning while safely sandwiched between her parents. Now, as everyone else was currently involved in a dreary archery contest on the lawn while a veritable feast was being served up on tables nearby, she was wandering towards the woods on one of her almost-fiancé's arms while his other swung a picnic basket. Laughing at his jokes and smiling up at him as if she suddenly adored him.

That was yet another worry to add to his many woes, because while, for him, that fateful kiss apparently held the power to drastically alter the current path of his life if he was contemplating relinquishing his bachelor ways, for her it seemed to have reaffirmed her path. Especially as she was skipping up it with Peter!

Freddie had no clue how to feel about any of that beyond confused, jealous and aggrieved. Yesterday her lips had given him a very mixed message indeed. One minute they had been kissing him back with passionate gusto, then they had thinned as they lectured him on propriety and common decency.

Powerless to do anything about it beyond bristle, Freddie nudged George as he tested his bow. 'Are you happy for your sister to go wandering in the woods with a man unchaperoned?'

His friend chuckled.

Chuckled! Had it been one of his sisters, Freddie would have been after them like a shot to ensure there was no funny business.

'They are getting married, Freddie.'

'I've seen no ring on her finger!' A truth which shouldn't have slipped out. 'Or did I miss the announcement in *The Times*?'

'It is an imminent fait accompli.' George lined up an arrow and stared down it to test its straightness. 'Besides, the picnic was our mother's idea, so if she doesn't have a problem with it when she is a complete stickler for propriety, it has nothing to do with me.'

'But what if Peter ravishes her? What if, you know...?' He nudged George again. 'What if one thing leads to another?' He would have happily ruined them both in those bluebells given half a chance.

'Then I dare say any *consequences* will be explained away by the honeymoon. They are going to Dorset apparently.' As if Freddie cared about that! 'His parents have a house by the sea which I apparently visited twice as a child. Not that I remember. Anyway, they are going to spend the entire summer...'

Freddie stopped listening to concentrate on the happy couple who were now mere yards from the seclusion of the trees and the seductive clearing filled with bluebells where he had kissed her. Furious, he selected his own arrow, and as he arranged it in his bow, he seriously contemplated firing it in Peter's direction. An arrowhead in the backside would dampen his rival's ardour...

'Luncheon is served.' Lady Bulphan began to herd them all towards the tables like sheep.

'Thank the lord, I'm starving!' In a gross dereliction in his duty as Dot's brother, George discarded his bow and bounded after the others at the exact same moment as she disappeared into the trees.

Alone, Freddie stared at the horizon for all of twenty seconds before he decided to go after her.

'Isn't this lovely.' Dorothea smiled, her toes cringing inside her slippers because Peter had chosen this precise spot for their parentally enforced picnic. The spot where she had kissed Freddie and would likely still be kissing Freddie if that lone scrap of common sense hadn't battled its way into the forefront of her addled mind and reminded her that she was taken. And clearly it had been addled to have lost herself so completely in a kiss with a man like him!

But, heaven help her, it had been quite a kiss. Certainly enough of one to ensure the imprint of it on her wayward body was still present a whole day later. She had been in a peculiarly wanton state ever since, and no amount of guilt or determination to get over it were helping one bit.

Peter smiled in response, but tightly. He did that a lot around her of late. 'Yes, it is lovely. Perfect in fact...' He patted down his waistcoat, his movements jerky and a little panicked as he searched inside his coat. 'So... I suppose we should get the formalities over with at last.'

Formalities? *Oh dear.*

Dorothea managed to paste on a smile before he produced a ring box and thrust it towards her. 'It's a family piece. Very old. Toby thinks it's hideous, but it's a Crawley tradition, so...'

She opened the box, the tiny hinge squealing ominously, and stared at the ring inside. Toby was right. She hated it on first sight. It was big, the twisted gold band thick and ungainly, the slightly yellow diamond held between six spiky claws, enormous and impractical. The sort of ring which would catch on everything and ruin clothing. 'It's lovely.'

Peter removed it from the box and wedged it on her finger. It felt tight and uncomfortable—like an ill-fitting shoe. An irony that wasn't lost on her. 'Anyway...' There was that tight smile again. 'I thought we could announce our engagement tonight. Seeing as both of our families are here. Two birds with one stone and all that...' His voice trailed off as he awaited her response to the most lacklustre and unromantic proposal possible.

She nodded, dying a little inside like one of those two birds hit by a flying stone. 'Yes...tonight makes perfect sense.'

'Splendid.' Awkwardly, Peter rifled in the basket for an apple and polished it on his thigh to fill the void of silence.

Surely it shouldn't be like this? So impersonal and indifferent. Not at all like the kiss she had shared with Freddie on this exact spot. That hot, molten, searing first kiss had been a promise of more to come. Would Peter's? Would her body ever yearn for her future husband in the way it yearned for her brother's scandalous friend?

'Shouldn't we celebrate our engagement with a kiss?' Her bold question shocked her new fiancé, who looked ready to bolt for the hills at the suggestion.

'If you like.'

Such enthusiasm was underwhelming, but Dorothea had to know for sure, so she leant closer and pressed her lips to his. Exactly as she feared, she felt nothing.

Nothing but despair.

CHAPTER 5

Freddie had arrived at the edge of the bluebell clearing just in time to witness Dot and his rival leave it, so he remained hidden behind a tree until they were long gone, then pounded Lady Bulphan's grounds for the next hour while he considered what to do. By the time he marched back to the house, he was resolute. He was going to tell her how he felt, throw his hat into the ring and to hell with the consequences. He had never properly courted a woman before, had always avoided it, but for some inexplicable reason this felt right.

Downstairs was deserted, with all the guests off resting before the final evening's entertainment, so he resigned himself to having to wait for dinner. He was en route to the stairs when he saw her coming out of the library—alone.

'Dot! Wait!' He sprinted down the hallway towards her, skidding to a stop while she hugged a book to her chest like a shield. He wished he had rehearsed something to say because he had no earthly idea how to start what was probably the single most important conversation of his life so far. 'Can we talk?'

In case she said no, he caught her elbow and gently led her back into the library. Fortunately, there was nobody else there to witness his discomfort and potential humiliation, but that did nothing to make him feel any better. Neither did she, because she stood before him as silent and still as a statue.

'You see, the thing is...' He raked an agitated hand through his hair while he searched his mind for some words. Any words. 'Yesterday...our kiss...' Her eyes widened at that, which did not fill him with hope. 'Well, it turns out that kiss rather knocked me sideways and...'

*Good grief, man! Stop shilly-shallying and get to the point!*

'It meant something, Dot. Something wonderful. And it confirmed all the suspicions I have had since the day of the Queen's Ball...that I have feelings for you. Strong feelings.' Now he was being cowardly! 'Romantic feelings. Not my usual sort either—where I am that bee you accused me of being who flits from rose to rose—but the serious sort. The contemplating forever sort.' *Forever! Good grief!* 'In fact, I think I am falling in love with you.' He sighed at that because those exact words did not feel quite right. 'Actually, I think I might have already fallen in love with you, which I know sounds like utter madness after just one kiss, but there it is. But love *is* utter madness, isn't it? Or so all the poets say, and I think...in fact I am pretty certain...that you are my thunderbolt...' That had to be what had knocked him sideways. Why this all felt so necessary and pressing.

'So, I was wondering...' Freddie was light-headed now. Giddy. Excited for his future and scared she wouldn't be in it. Yet was still resolute that this was the right thing to do, so he sucked in a calming breath and blew it out slowly. 'I was wondering if you would consider me as a suitor.'

Her reaction at that was not at all what he expected.

As much as he hoped she would throw herself into his arms, he wasn't daft enough to believe it would be that simple. He had prepared himself to witness shock, some resistance and perhaps even rejection. What he wasn't prepared for was for her lovely blue eyes to instantly fill with tears or to hear her say, 'It's too late,' as she hugged the book she was carrying closer. Nor was he prepared to see the jewel glistening on her wedding finger.

'Peter finally proposed—' there was an unmistakable catch in her voice, as unmistakable as the bitter regret in her eyes '—and I had to say yes. I had no choice.' And with that, as his poor heart shattered, she scurried away without a backwards glance.

\*\*\*\*

*Bond Street, six weeks into the Season...*

'Oh, it's perfect!' Her mother clapped her hands at the new gown as the modiste fiddled with the final pin. 'You shall be the belle of your own betrothal ball!'

The ball tonight had been planned months in advance, because her parents always hosted one of the most lavish balls of the Season, but after Peter's proposal, they had hastily changed its purpose. That change had been announced in *The Times* alongside their engagement notice within a day of the ugly ring arriving on her finger.

That, like everything else which had happened since, had all been taken out of her hands in a flurry of preparations. The wedding date was set for three weeks hence to coincide with parliament's summer recess signalling the end of the Season, St George's was booked, the invitations sent and the first of the banns would be read tomorrow at the Sunday service. Even this gown had been made without any of her involvement at all, and while it was quite lovely, it wasn't what her heart would have chosen, any more than her fiancé was.

It was impossible not to feel depressed by that, especially now that she knew Freddie loved her. Worse, if indeed her situation could be any worse, all her symptoms suggested that she loved Freddie back.

She couldn't explain why, because it *was* utter madness to fall in love on the back of one kiss. Yet while they had avoided one another at all costs, she had thought about him constantly. Every single time she had seen him across a ballroom since, her poor heart bled at the mirrored yearning in his eyes and another part of her died.

'Peter is in for a lovely surprise when he gets home later.' Her mother was still cooing over the gown. 'And they do say absence makes the heart grow fonder.' Dorothea sincerely doubted that, as her new fiancé's prolonged visit to his friend Toby's estate since the official announcement had been a blessed relief to her. It had meant that, with him at least, she hadn't had to pretend to be excited about their nuptials, when if anything, she was dreading them more.

Her mother followed the modiste to discuss her trousseau, so a superfluous Dorothea dressed and wandered outside to wait in the sunshine. To her horror, her brother, George, turned the corner with the only man she couldn't stop thinking about.

Freddie's feet faltered mid-step before he pasted a bland smile on his face.

'Is your betrothal gown a triumph?' Her brother grinned. 'Or is it a much too tight disaster.'

'Of course it's a triumph and it fits a treat.' Her own smile felt so fake it hurt. 'What brings you to Bond Street when you hate shopping?'

'We are on a quest to buy books to cheer up Freddie's sister while she convalesces. The wretch is headed home and abandoning me to face all those hideous debutantes alone.'

'You're leaving, Freddie?' She hadn't realised how much she had been hoping a miracle would happen to save her until she heard that. 'When?'

'Tonight.' His voice was clipped. His eyes stormy. There was anger in them, pain and a great deal of disappointment in her. 'Good luck with the marriage, Dot.'

He inclined his head politely, excusing himself to march towards the bookshop, but turned at the last minute to stare deep into her soul. 'I hope your new slippers fit as well as your new gown. I hear there's nothing worse than ill-fitting shoes.'

CHAPTER 6

*Lady Dorothea Claremont and Lord Peter Crawley's Betrothal Ball...*

Freddie hauled himself onto his phaeton and manoeuvred it out of the Albany's narrow mews onto Piccadilly, intending to spend the night at a coaching inn fifteen miles away rather than waste another second in Mayfair. The more distance he put between himself and Dot's travesty of an engagement celebration and subsequent wedding, the better.

If she wanted to shackle herself for all eternity to a man she did not love, there was nothing he could do about it. He had said his piece, bared his heart and plighted his troth, and if she was still determined to go through with the marriage out of a misplaced sense of duty to her family, there was nothing more he could do to change her mind.

Let her live with the consequences of her actions! If she was content to settle for less than everything and didn't think that Freddie was worth the risk, he would get over it. Hearts mended, or so he hoped. And he would start the healing process by leaving her to it, convinced that if he didn't have the opportunity to see her, he might eventually stop craving her with every fibre of his being.

Even so, he slowed his carriage at the turning for Berkeley Square to watch the line of carriages already queuing to get to the Claremont residence despite the early hour. Soon, for such an eagerly anticipated event, they would be snaking all the way to Hyde Park Corner, so it was good he was getting a head start out of the way. In another hour, after their illustrious parents toasted their union, the first waltz would play and everyone would watch Dot and the man she had chosen over him twirl around the floor. All remarking on how perfect a match it was, when both he and she knew different. If it was so damned perfect, she wouldn't have confessed to him that she wasn't in love with her fiancé, nor would she have kissed Freddie with such fervour. And she certainly wouldn't have been so upset when she had lamented that she had 'had to say yes' to the proposal because she 'had no choice', when of course she had a choice!

She could have said no there and then if she harboured doubts. Should have said no if she experienced the same magnetic pull to him as he did to her. She should have said no if she felt one-tenth of the emotion he felt for her. She should have given Freddie a chance to woo her and convince her that he might be the one whose ring she should be wearing.

But no.

She had behaved like a typical staid Claremont and put duty over love.

Peter over him.

Lord how that broke his heart!

With a decisive snap of the reins, his phaeton lurched forward, and because the road ahead was still empty, he sped down it at reckless speed to where the city melted into greenery and the sanctuary of home beckoned.

‘Peter has just arrived.’ Her mother bustled through her bedchamber door and waved the maid away to finish her daughter’s hair herself. Dorothea forced a smile even though she wanted to weep. ‘I must say he looks very sun-kissed and handsome after his jaunt away. Those few weeks at Lord Sedgewick’s estate have done him a power of good. And the best news is his waistcoat is blue to match your dress, exactly as I requested.’

‘That is the best news.’ Because at least their clothing was compatible if nothing else was. But what if it never was? ‘Mama...how long did it take for you and papa to...er—’ how to phrase all her niggling doubts without putting the cat amongst the pigeons? ‘—feel completely comfortable together?’

Misinterpreting her question entirely, her mother blushed crimson. ‘Well, such things take a bit of time to get used to...but by the end of our honeymoon, we found...um...comfort together.’ She poked a pin into Dorothea’s hair to avoid her gaze in the mirror. ‘But then, we were virtual strangers, whereas you and Peter have known each other forever, so I dare say you will find things in your bedchamber less awkward.’

‘It wasn’t so much that side of things I was referring to.’ Peter in her bedchamber was not something she was ready to contemplate just yet, especially after their uninspiring kiss. Which was ironic when she had contemplated Freddie in it near constantly since *theirs*. ‘More the normal day-to-day relationship...as that has been rather strained of late.’ Or more specifically since the start of the Season and their families’ insistence that the time was right to turn their lifelong friendship into a lifelong commitment.

Relieved that the topic wasn’t about the carnal manifestation of love, her mother smiled. ‘Oh, that is to be expected, dear, when a couple start courting. It adds a new dimension to proceedings. A *frisson* as it were...’ She gave her one of those knowing looks mothers gave their daughters when they were sharing a confidence. ‘Which is all part of the fun.’

‘But what if there isn’t so much a frisson as over-politeness? How long does that side of things take to develop?’

‘Ahh—I see.’ Her mother sat on the mattress, awkward again. ‘I had assumed that you and Peter had already dabbled in some of the physical aspects of a courtship, but I can see now that you haven’t. Hardly a surprise when you are both such dutiful and respectful children with an admirable sense of propriety, but...’ She reached for Dorothea’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Now that you are engaged, we will all turn a blind eye to a little chaste...um...experimentation before you take your vows. And I am quite certain that once you do, the frisson will materialise immediately.’

Her mother wiggled her eyebrows and chuckled, oblivious to the fact that there hadn't been the slightest glimmer of the frisson when her daughter and Peter had locked lips. Considerably less of one when she had tried to deepen it into the sort of frisson-filled passion she had enjoyed with Freddie. 'In the meantime, some pre-wedding nerves and cold feet are entirely natural. I had assumed yours would kick in sooner, like Peter's did so spectacularly at the Bulphans', but I am sure yours will pass as quickly as his did now that you have confided in your mother.'

'Peter had cold feet?' Before or after he proposed? The heavy sense of dread in Dorothea's tummy suddenly doubled in weight along with all her doubts. 'Spectacularly?' That did not bode well.

That did not bode well at all!

Sensing her panic, her mother patted her hand as she stood. 'All water under the bridge, dear, and all perfectly natural. Men in particular are most reticent about giving up their wild bachelor ways, but his father talked him round and, exactly as his mother and I predicted, he proposed to you that same afternoon, so all is well that ends well. Now, hurry along, the love of your life is awaiting you downstairs.'

No, he wasn't.

He was hightailing it back to Avondale while she was miserably stuck with Peter. And worse, by all accounts, it seemed Peter was also miserably stuck with her!

CHAPTER 7

‘Have you seen Peter?’ After frantically hunting for her fiancé for ten minutes, Dorothea relented and approached the acerbic Lord Toby, who had been positively glaring at her since she had made her grand entrance on her father’s arm.

‘He hasn’t jilted you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Peter isn’t the jilting ladies type.’ Toby took a long swig of the champagne in his glass, scowling. ‘He’s all about honour and duty and doing the right thing.’

‘I asked if you had seen him.’ She was in no mood for his usual rudeness. ‘And I take it you haven’t.’ She turned to march away and Lord Toby caught her arm.

‘Do you love him, Dorothea? Because if you don’t...’

‘There you are!’ Peter strode towards them, looking every bit as sun-kissed and handsome as her mother had said, yet she was apparently immune to all those charms. He retrieved her arm from his friend’s grasp while shooting him an odd look and kissed the back of her hand. ‘You look lovely—and see.’ He pointed to his waistcoat. ‘We are the perfect match.’

‘About that...’ She winced, not wanting to have this conversation but knowing that it was imperative when both of their future happiness was at stake. ‘Can we talk outside?’

‘Of course you are *the perfect match!*’ Lord Toby practically snarled this despite slurring as the last drops of his champagne sloshed out of his glass. ‘Your parents have decreed it, promised you to each other since birth, so how could it possibly be otherwise!’

‘You are drunk, Toby.’ Peter’s voice was clipped. ‘You should *go. Home.*’

‘And miss the engagement of the century?’ He was shooting daggers at Peter now, which made a change when they were normally aimed at her. ‘The love match of the century! Oh, I wouldn’t miss this mockery of an engagement for the world!’

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ The master of ceremonies called for quiet. ‘Kindly charge your glasses, for in ten minutes we shall be toasting the happy couple.’

Ten minutes! ‘Peter—please!’ Dorothea tried to drag him towards the terrace. ‘We really do need to talk!’

‘Yes, of course...’ He followed for a moment, then stopped dead, his gaze fixed on Toby, who was recharging his glass. ‘Let me pour him into a carriage first and I shall meet you on the terrace.’

He left her stranded to see to his friend, and as well-wishers surged towards her to congratulate her on making probably the biggest mistake of her life, Dorothea rushed out onto the terrace alone. Hugging herself tight despite the temperature being perfectly pleasant.

What a mess!

What a hideous mess!

Why on earth had she allowed things to go this far without having an honest conversation with Peter? A conversation which might have fixed things—one way or another—weeks ago.

‘Dot!’ She practically jumped out of her skin at the sound of Freddie’s voice coming from the darkened lawn. ‘We need to talk!’

He emerged from behind a shrub several yards away, all windswept and interesting, still dressed for travelling rather than dancing. ‘I thought you had gone!’ But oh, how relieved she was that he hadn’t! The urge to throw herself into his arms and cling on for dear life overwhelming.

‘I had... I got all the way to Chelsea before I had to turn around.’ He was striding towards her, his expression frantic. Urgent. Angry. Desperate.

Determined.

‘I knew I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t give it one last try. I have things to say. Things I *have* to say. And I promise you that I am going to cause the scene to end all scenes and thoroughly ruin your party unless you do me the courtesy of listening!’ He took her hand, and her heart and soul rejoiced at the contact. ‘So, follow me!’

He marched them towards the back of the garden into the darkness, his long legs eating up the ground so fast she had to run to keep up. When they reached her mother’s favourite little bench amongst the rose bushes, he sat her on it and began to pace before her. He stopped briefly to jab his finger in the air.

‘Marrying Peter is a mistake!’ That said, he paced some more, his hands gesticulating wildly as he spoke. ‘You do not love him, Dot! You are only marrying him because your parents want you to, and frankly that is the most ridiculous reason for marrying as any I can think of! Because marriage is for life, Dot!’

He stopped pacing again, his fists clenched. ‘For life!’

Then he was off again. ‘And you deserve to spend eternity with a man who adores you, not one who tolerates you and who you tolerate back. One who cannot stop thinking about you! One who loves you with a burning passion that makes absolutely no sense beyond the fact that it makes perfect sense! One who you love and desire back with every fibre of your soul!’

When he stopped this time, the intense emotion in his unwavering gaze staggered her. ‘If that man is Peter—genuinely Peter—then I shall stand aside, and we will never speak of this again. You can

marry him with my blessing because I want you to be happy.’ He swallowed. Hard. Then edged towards her to take her hand, staring at it in wonder as if his body experienced the same sublime jolt of contact that hers did. ‘But if he isn’t, then as God is my witness, I am going to do whatever it takes to try to win you for myself.’

His stormy blue eyes stared deep into hers, begging for the truth. ‘Do you love him, Dorothea?’

‘There are two hundred people inside about to toast our engagement.’ She was thoroughly trapped. By timing. By circumstances. By duty. ‘The banns are being read in the morning...’ The ramifications of it all, the futility of it all, brought tears to her eyes. ‘Peter and our parents are expecting...’

He placed a finger on her lips, then used it to tenderly trace them before he pressed his mouth to hers softly.

Briefly.

But still her heart sang.

Soared.

‘Do you love him, Dorothea?’

She shook her head, her voice cracking. ‘No.’

Freddie sagged in relief, his fingers gently brushing her cheek, more vulnerable than she had ever thought possible. ‘And do you love me?’

‘I...’ The distant voice of reason in her head warned her this was madness. Utter, reckless, potentially scandalous madness, but the hypnotic pull of his gaze and his presence overwhelmed her. Drew her like a moth to a flame. Overruled the voice, all common sense and all reason. Without thinking, her mouth edged towards his. Her arm snaked around his neck. Her fingers wove their way into his hair as she spoke the undeniable truth. ‘I do.’

‘Dorothea!’ She jumped at Peter’s bellow. ‘What the blazes is going on here?’

CHAPTER 8

Her fiancé stood rigid by the ornamental fountain where she had dragged him, arms folded and dark brows so knitted in anger they merged into one. 'Our parents are about to toast our engagement! That ballroom is full to the rafters!' He jerked his thumb backwards. 'And you thought tonight was the best night to engage in a tryst?'

'I appreciate that you are angry, Peter. You have every right to be.' Because Dorothea was certain what he had witnessed could not be construed by him in any other way. 'But before we talk about that—' she gazed helplessly to the other side of the lawn where both Freddie and Toby glared at her '—I need to ask you a question. A question I should have asked you a long time ago. Back when everything between us wasn't so stilted and awkward.'

His frown deepened at that, his mouth opening as if about to argue, until he huffed in resignation. 'What do you need to ask?'

'Is this what you want, Peter?' She threw up her hands. 'If, for one moment, we forget that we have been promised to one another since birth, that our parents are over the moon at our union and that there are two hundred people in the ballroom behind us all clasp champagne glasses and waiting eagerly to toast our engagement, am I what you want?' She took both his hands and stared deep into his eyes. 'Am I what your heart desires?'

'I...' He pulled a hand away and raked it through his hair. 'I...want you to be.'

'And what does that mean?' It wasn't a heartfelt declaration of love, that was for certain.

'It means that I am going to try my best to ensure that you are—and that I assumed you were going to do the same.'

'And is that enough for your heart? Or fair to either of us? Ever since this Season started, we seem to have even stopped being friends when we always used to be, and while we are both clearly trying to make us work...' She was so sick and tired of trying. 'I wonder who we are trying for. Is it best for us, or best for our parents? When I think we both realise that you cannot force love if your heart isn't in it.'

Peter sat heavily on the wall of the fountain and gestured across the lawn with a flick of his head. 'I take it your heart is engaged elsewhere?'

'It wasn't intentional.' Which was the absolute truth. 'It just happened. With absolutely no effort on my part at all. In fact, I made a concerted effort *not* to fall in love with him, but...'

Peter smiled wistfully as he stared intently across the lawn. 'The heart wants what the heart wants, no matter how hard you try to fight it.' At first, she assumed it was Freddie he was studying, but as Freddie began to pace, Peter's eyes remained fixed on his friend.

'Toby! You and Toby?' Dorothea was both shocked and then, as the bombshell he'd dropped settled, oddly not—because suddenly their complete lack of frisson all made sense. 'Oh, Peter... I don't know what to say.' Because she didn't. 'Beyond that I am sorry.' He would never have what she had now. His true love was doomed to always be a secret and one that the law dictated he had to hide.

'And yet I am not sorry. How could I be when Toby is everything that I need. I've tried to fight it. Honestly I have. I've said my goodbyes and promised myself that what we had had to be in the past because you were my future, but...'

'The heart wants what the heart wants.' She took his hand and squeezed it. 'I wish you had told me all this before we found ourselves here.'

'It's not the sort of thing...' She stayed him with her hand.

'It is exactly the sort of thing that one lifelong friend confides in another. All I want is for you to be happy, Peter, and if it is Toby who makes you happy and he is who your heart wants, then I think we should both listen to our hearts for a change and not our parents.'

'Sadly, that is easier for you than it is for me.' His resignation was tragic when she now had so much. 'I know I *have* to marry. One day.' He pulled a comic face of disgust which made her smile. 'And I must produce the customary heir the dukedom expects, but it will be easier to do that in a dispassionate and loveless union. One where my future wife wants my title more than she wants me, and one where once the perfunctory chore of procreation is done, we can blissfully go our separate ways as so many do in society. I am long used to living a lie—but it would break my heart to perpetuate that lie with you.' He wrapped his arm around her in a reassuringly brotherly fashion. 'I love you, Dorothea. I always have—just not like that.'

'A feeling that is gloriously mutual, Peter.' She rested her head on his shoulder in time to hear the first bars of the long-delayed waltz waft from the house, imagining their mothers frantic as they searched for them. 'Now what do we do?'

Peter and Toby helped sneak Dot out of the garden and across Berkeley Square to where Freddie had parked his phaeton.

'Are you sure you do not want me with you to deliver the bad news?' She clutched her former fiancé's hand, concerned. 'It doesn't sit right with me to leave it all to you when I am as much, if not more, to blame for this debacle tonight.'

'I am happy to shoulder the consequences. After all, I did abandon you to the Season and our meddling mothers as soon as the engagement was announced, so this is the least I can do.' Peter lifted

her into the seat beside Freddie, then reached over to shake his hand. 'Take care of her—and be warned that if you ever treat her as shoddily as I have, you'll have me to answer to.'

'Duly noted.' He wasn't entirely sure why Peter was taking this all so well, but knew this was no time to question why either. Dot wasn't marrying him, so Freddie's reckless mission here hadn't been in vain. That was all that mattered now.

'DOROTHEA!' Her mother's shout from the steps of Claremont House was filled with outrage. 'Come here this instant!' Behind her, half the ballroom seemed to tumble out to witness the scandal unfold.

'Go!' Peter shooed them away as Dot gripped Freddie's thigh. 'Fly like the wind!'

So Freddie did, snapping the reins and ushering his pair of horses to a gallop before they had even left Berkeley Square. The rest of Mayfair passed in a blur, and for good measure Freddie took his phaeton well beyond the city's edge at a lick before he dared slow down.

'Where to?' Because he had no clue.

'What difference does it make when I'm now thoroughly ruined anyway?' She was smiling as she said this, her lovely eyes sparkling, as if being thoroughly ruined in front of everyone was considerably more preferable than the alternative. 'Wherever you take me, I shall still be a scandal.'

'But at least we shall be a scandal together.'

'So we have run away, with nowhere to go and no plan when we get there.' Yet her arm slipped through his, suggesting she was completely content with that state of affairs.

'When something is right, Dot, it's right. You are my thunderbolt.'

'And you *aren't* an ill-fitting pair of shoes.' She snuggled against him and kissed his cheek. 'This is madness, Freddie! Utter madness!'

'But love *is* utter madness, isn't it? So this *feels* right.'

'It does.' She beamed at him and he beamed back.

'So what say you we embrace it and do something completely mad and properly scandalous?'

She shrugged, unperturbed, love shining in her gaze. 'I say in for a penny, in for a pound.'

'Good.' He kissed her then. Long and deep and hopelessly perfect before he snapped the reins again. 'Gretna Green it is, then.'

*A Kiss to Spark a Scandal*

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SECOND CHANCE WITH  
THE ISLAND DOC

TINA BECKETT

PROLOGUE

*Fifteen years earlier*

Patricia Cohen lay almost completely submerged in her bathtub. The water had long since cooled; the knees that stuck above the liquid surface were icy and had already dried. Still, she didn't move, her eyes going to the edge of the tub. Getting out meant she would have to do something about...that.

And right now, she didn't think she could bear it.

The guy she'd had a crush on all through school had finally noticed her. On graduation night. Neither of them was interested in attending a slew of parties. Instead, she and Dax had sat behind the school and talked about future dreams until after midnight. And when he'd leaned over and kissed her, she was lost. Even knowing he was soon leaving for college in Antigua didn't change how that kiss made her feel. They were inseparable the rest of the summer. Had made love as often as they could during the tropical nights.

Eight weeks ago, he'd left, taking her heart with him.

And today...she glanced at the stick that could change both of their futures. And the phone that sat beside it, Dax's number on speed dial.

She gritted her teeth in agony. He wanted to be a doctor. Had talked about it incessantly. Said he could catch babies and she could work beside him as a nurse. Or a midwife, since Patty hadn't decided which she wanted to be yet. She herself was taking a year off to work and earn money. Then she would join him at school.

At least, that had been the plan.

How ironic that a baby—their baby—could stop that dream in its tracks.

No, it wouldn't stop her dream...but it could stop his. She could choose to terminate. And no one would be the wiser. They could go on with school. Get married in a few years. Become the husband and wife team that they'd talked about.

But she couldn't do it. This was Dax's baby nestled inside her. A man she loved more than life. A man she'd give up anything for. She knew him well enough to know he would come back to St. Lucia the second he heard about the pregnancy. Be a father to this child. How could she ask him to do that, though? The openings at the school he was attending were few and far between. To drop out now, when he'd barely started... Who knew if they'd let him back in when the time came?

No. Her aunt Grace lived on one of the neighboring islands—St. Victoria. She could go there for a little while and try to figure things out.

And not tell Dax about the pregnancy?

If she told him and then lost the baby after he rushed home...what then? It would have all been for nothing.

She would wait. Wait and see what happened. Wait and examine her options.

There was time.

She stood, water sloshing everywhere. Shivers took hold of her, making her a little unsteady. As she stepped over the rim of the tub, her toes hit the edge where her phone was, sending it and the pregnancy test into the cold water. The phone sank while the test floated, its pink stripes reminding her of decisions and their consequences.

So much for calling him. Or her aunt.

All she could do was take a few deep breaths, retrieve her phone...and wait.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Present day*

Daxon Morrow took one last bite of his apple before tossing the core into a nearby trash receptacle. He was meeting with the chief of staff of The Island Clinic this morning about doing a one- to two-day-a-week rotation at the exclusive medical center. The rest of his week would be spent at Victoria Hospital in Williamtown.

He'd never set his sights on working on any island other than St. Lucia, but going back there now... Well, there were only ghosts. And a remembered anger that had burned down to embers years ago.

Shaking his head to erase those thoughts, he continued up the sidewalk, glancing to his right at the pristine beach that lay a short distance away. This would be a good place to get in some endurance swimming, something that had seen him through some pretty tough times. It was hard to think of anything else when you were plowing through currents that tried to sweep you off course.

And really, his swimming had kept him on track through his studies. Through his exams. Through the process of letting go.

But right now he needed to concentrate on what he was here to do. See if this was a good fit. And if it wasn't? Well, he could certainly work at Victoria Hospital full-time—they'd already offered him a position—but he really wanted to hone his skills as a thoracic surgeon, something he'd never pictured himself doing when he started med school.

He passed a bronze statue of a child that stood on the clinic's front lawn, just in front of a flower bed that boasted tropical blooms of every color imaginable. Funny about the sculpture. This wasn't a children's hospital, per se, but he guessed they couldn't put a representative of every specialty out front.

The door opened even before he reached it, and when he went to smile a thank-you, he recognized the chief of staff before he even opened his mouth.

Dax had heard the man, an imposing figure with dark hair and piercing blue eyes, had opened this facility using his own money. That was part of what had drawn him to the place. It was one of the top medical centers on this chain of islands, coming into existence after Hurricane Regan had decimated the island's infrastructure. Even with the gorgeous buildings and beautiful views, the Island Clinic hadn't lost its heart. Its reputation for philanthropy had quickly made itself known.

"Dr. Morrow?"

He smiled. "Yes. But please call me Dax. And you must be Nate Edwards?"

"I am." The man's answering smile was immediate and genuine. "Nice to meet you, and call me Nate. You'll find we're a pretty informal bunch here at the Island Clinic."

Dax liked the place already.

"Let's go up to my office and talk particulars about which days Victoria clinic is willing to share you."

"Are you saying I have the job?"

One of Nate's brows went up. "Do you want the job?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"You'll find I trust my intuition." A frown played across his face, and he glanced outside. "About most things, anyway."

He sensed something behind those words, but that was okay. Dax had some areas that didn't bear digging into, either. "Great. I'm due over at Victoria clinic after our meeting here."

"It's a great place. And they have a good surgical nurse over there who specializes in cardiac cases, so make sure you look her up—she can give you some tips on how things work over there. I've worked with her a time or two. Her name is Patty. Patty Cohen."

## CHAPTER 2

Patty was here? On St. Victoria?

Hell, he'd wondered where she ended up. He'd come home for Christmas that first year in college to find she was gone. Her mom said she'd decided to start med school a couple of months after he left and had chosen to go to Barbados rather than Antigua. Without telling him. He'd texted her repeatedly that first semester he was in school. She'd sent him happy messages of missing him terribly for the first three weeks. The next week he'd gotten a six-word text that said, "Change of plans. Will text later." Only she hadn't.

He'd had visions of her finding someone else. Of realizing they were not meant to be together. Her mother's pitying look when he asked about her seemed to confirm his darkest thoughts. But she was happily in college, according to her mom.

So he'd thrown all of his energy into his own school career from that point forward, not letting his mind play cruel tricks on him. He wasn't the first person to have been ghosted. Left behind. But he was damned if he was going to keep reaching out when it was obvious she no longer wanted him. Had she been playing him all along?

Maybe the Patty Cohen from Victoria Hospital was a different Patty. After all, both of those names were common enough.

So with that thought in mind, he finished his meeting with Nate and rode the clinic's shuttle back to Williamtown. Nate had been nice enough to say he could stay at one of the staff accommodations at the Island Clinic for as long as he wanted. That would at least give him time to find a place of his own, if he decided he liked Victoria Hospital as well as the Island Clinic.

He ran back to the bed-and-breakfast he was staying at and threw the paperwork he'd gotten from Nate into a file folder on his bed. Then he headed over to the other hospital.

He went in through the front doors and stopped at the information desk. "I'm looking for the human resources department."

"Yes, of course." The young woman at the desk gave him a smile that made him blink before she added, "Just go straight down the hallway on your left. It'll be the last door you see. Are you coming to work here?"

He smiled back, trying to keep his face neutral. He wasn't here for anything other than the job, and he'd do well to remember that. "I am. And thanks."

Human resources proved to be as friendly here as they'd been at the Island Clinic. He could see the private medical center's influence in the posters on the wall announcing that some kind of fund-raising gala was going to be held in a couple of months. Everyone was invited.

He was given a lanyard, and HR said that there were already a few cases that had been put on his schedule and hoped he didn't mind.

Good thing he'd decided he was going to stay.

"I'll get someone in your department to show you around." The man picked up the phone and spoke in hushed tones with someone. Then he glanced up. "She'll be right down, if you want to have a seat. And welcome to Victoria clinic."

"Thank you. I'm happy to be here."

He'd just taken his seat when the door opened and a woman stood there. Her eyes met his, and every ounce of color drained out of her face. A face as beautiful as it had been fifteen years ago.

This wasn't someone with the same name. This was Patty Cohen from St. Lucia. His Patty.

No not his. Not anymore.

The lanyard around his neck seemed to brand itself into the skin below his shirt.

Damn. He'd committed himself to both the Island Clinic and Victoria hospital. And suddenly, he wanted nothing to do with either of them. What he wanted was to take the first boat out of here.

CHAPTER 3

Patty waited until they left the room before saying anything. Partly because of the shock of seeing him and partly because she wasn't even sure he would recognize her after all of these years. Her hair was styled differently now, and she'd put on about ten pounds since high school.

And what she'd gone through afterward... She closed her eyes for a second or two, waiting for a wave of pain to subside.

Dax, on the other hand, had the same handsome face as the one she'd known, and yet he was different. Harder somehow. More self-assured and independent.

And he was a thoracic surgeon? Not an obstetrician?

Yes. He was different.

About fifteen yards down the hallway, she stopped to face him. Whether or not he recognized her didn't erase the fact that she knew who he was. And she wasn't going to hide it. "How are you, Dax?"

He peered down at her, a muscle working in his cheek. "I'm good. A little surprised to see you here, though."

"The feeling's mutual."

"So you're a surgical nurse."

Her insides tightened in surprise. How did he know that? Had he somehow discovered where she was and come after her? After fifteen years? Not likely. Her mom said he'd made one visit to the house and then never come back. It had been a year or two before she even told her mom about the pregnancy. Or about what had happened afterward.

"Did you ask for me to come down here to show you around?"

"Excuse me?"

God, the accusation in her voice had come through loud and clear. "I'm sorry. It's just such a coincidence. And HR asked for me personally."

"Ah, I see. No, it wasn't me. It must have been Nate Edwards over at the Island Clinic." He frowned. "Although, when he told me there was a surgical nurse named Patty Cohen, I was hoping it wasn't..."

Her stomach clenched, her mind filling in the words he hadn't said. He'd been hoping it wasn't her. Well, who could blame him?

"I had no idea you were coming to St. Victoria. I always assumed you'd go back to St. Lucia. That's where you originally wanted to practice." She didn't elaborate or ask him why he'd changed specialties. Her throat tightened. She didn't want to know. Maybe it was for the same reason she'd decided against midwifery. It would hurt too much, always wondering where he was. And to see baby after baby born, knowing...

Besides, if she wasn't a midwife, even if he did someday show up, she wouldn't have to work with him.

Ha! She should have known fate would never be that kind.

"I'd decided a long time ago I didn't want to go back to St. Lucia."

"Why?" The question came out before she could stop it, and instinctively her eyes went to the ring finger on his left hand. It was empty. And there was no indentation that said there'd ever been a ring there.

His eyes found hers, something simmering in their depths. "Because of you. You're part of the past, and I had no desire to run into you again."

CHAPTER 4

He knew the second he said the words, he'd hurt her. And he hadn't meant to. At least he didn't think he did. "I should clarify. I thought it would be awkward for both of us to have to make small talk and act like that summer never happened."

Her shoulders seemed to relax. "You mean like we're doing now?"

"Yes, exactly like this."

Her chest rose as she took a deep breath. "Maybe we both placed too much stock in what happened over the course of three short months. It was the wrong time to start any kind of relationship. You were leaving."

One brow went up. "And yet I'm not the one who actually left, was I?"

He might have left St. Lucia, but he wasn't the one who left the relationship. That had been all Patty. Thank God he hadn't given her the ring he'd bought a week before he left for college. He'd meant to pop the question before he caught his flight out. But the timing had never seemed right, and there was a niggling fear that she might turn him down. That it had all been too quick.

Evidently he'd been right.

Patty must have understood the meaning behind his words, because she touched his hand. "We were both so young back then. There were too many...variables." She took a step back and smiled. "And look at you now. A thoracic surgeon. We both bounced back pretty well, I'd say."

"Yes, we did." The words slid from his lips slowly. She might have bounced back right away, but he had spent the six months after she dumped him struggling in school. He'd almost washed out, actually. But then he'd buckled down and decided he was going to make something of himself, if for no other reason than to get back at her.

Not that she ever would have known. But Dax and his self-esteem knew. And he did not want to wind up like his dad, a drunk who barely made ends meet. Who barely knew who the members of his own family were. His dad was long gone, now, dead from cirrhosis before Dax graduated from medical school, but his legacy was still there. It was one of the reasons that Dax didn't drink.

Patty seemed to realize what she was supposed to be doing. "Well, let's take that tour that HR wanted me to give you. What would you like to see first?"

*Tina Beckett*

Before they went anywhere, he needed to make sure of one thing. But he wasn't quite sure how to say what was swirling through his head. Especially since the curve of her hips...the long length of her neck were reminding him of things he probably should forget. Probably needed to forget. So maybe the question in the back of his throat was as much for him as it was for her.

"Is my being on St. Victoria going to be too hard, Patty?"

CHAPTER 5

Would it be too hard? Yes, it would. In so many ways. But to admit that would be to let him know why she'd let him go all those years ago.

"We're both grown-ups. We're both a lot older and a whole lot wiser than we once were."

Was that true? Damn, she wasn't sure. But it wasn't like she had a choice.

She had to know something, though. "So no catching babies?"

"I decided that I was better suited to defective hearts than to children."

A spear went through her. And if she'd told him that he'd very nearly fathered a child? If she shared the heartbreak of losing that child? She swallowed back an unexpected rush of tears—needing to repeat the act several times.

A hand circled her arm, and she realized she'd closed her eyes, hoping to block him out, for some reason. Or maybe she was afraid those choked-back tears were about to escape.

"Hey, are you okay?"

She pulled in a ragged breath before looking at him, seeing his dark hair and steel-gray eyes. His hair was shorter than it had been in school, the bad-boy curls tamed to a more conservative length. But it made him no less attractive than he'd been when they were in school. She somehow found a smile and forced it to the surface. "I'm fine. It's just been a long day already."

"Because of me?"

There was no way she was going to admit that. She couldn't, not and hold it together. "No, of course not. I've already assisted in three surgeries, and it's not even ten o'clock. And I still have a full slate of cases left."

"Do you need to go?"

"I have about an hour before I need to scrub in again, so let's finish the tour."

Somehow she managed to show him the cardiac unit and the surgical area before he stopped her. "I think I can figure the rest out, and you look like you could use a cup of coffee. Or at least to get off your feet for a few minutes before you head back in to surgery. Let me buy you a cup."

What she wanted more than coffee was to be able to go somewhere and compose herself. Or to try to wake herself up from what was rapidly becoming a nightmare. But she was afraid this was very, very real. So she'd just prove she was the grown-up she'd claimed to be and sit down at a table with him for a few minutes.

"Coffee sounds good, thanks."

Realizing he didn't know where the café was, she walked ahead, feeling his eyes on her. Were her hips swishing back and forth on purpose? Or was it just nerves that made it seem that way?

Fortunately, the cafeteria was right ahead. She slipped through the door and went to stand in line. How long before this would just seem...normal? Before seeing him was a mundane, everyday experience that no longer made her heart race, no longer put her senses on high alert?

How long before her belly no longer ached with an emptiness that wouldn't be filled?

*Never.*

The word whispered through her mind before she caught hold of it and pushed it to the farthest reaches of her brain, hoping it would stay put for as long as Dax was on the island.

## CHAPTER 6

Dax was scheduled to do his first surgery at Victoria Hospital, and he wasn't sure he was ready. He credited it to nerves, but he knew the truth of the matter was that Patty would more than likely be scrubbing in on it. He'd seen her name on the whiteboard at the nurses' desk the last time he was here.

After their run-in two days ago, he'd hoped he wouldn't need to see her again quite so soon. He'd spent yesterday at the Island Clinic, and his first case had been an elderly senator from the United States. The man was running for office again and preferred no one know about his heart problems. Dax didn't necessarily agree with his decision, but he didn't choose his patients. They were chosen for him, for the most part.

The way his surgical team would be?

Damn. Why was he dwelling on this? He hadn't seen Patty for years. So why had the sudden shock of meeting her again thrown him for such a loop? Maybe because she didn't look any worse for wear after what she'd put him through. He was long over her, but he was pretty sure he still bore some scars on his heart. Which was why he shied away from dating, for the most part.

But Patty... If anything, she was more beautiful now than she'd been in high school. Her high cheeks didn't look quite as gaunt as they once did. They were softer somehow. Her eyes had laugh lines beside them that he'd had no part in making.

And damn if that didn't hit him right in the gut.

It didn't matter. This was where he'd chosen to work, and he wasn't going to let Patty or anyone else run him off. He took the elevator up to the cardiac unit and glanced at the board to make sure he had the time of surgery right. He also wanted to meet the patient.

According to the schedule, the bypass was in three hours. His eyes scanned the other people on the team, then he frowned and skipped through them again. One name was notably absent now. Or had he just imagined it earlier?

No. Patty had definitely been on there day before yesterday. But today it had been replaced by...Clare Story. What the hell?

He glanced at the day's other surgeries. And Patty was there. In four of the cases. In fact, the only surgery she wasn't participating in was his.

So maybe he wasn't the only one who'd been thrown out of whack. But this wasn't acceptable. It was better just to get in there and get their differences hammered out.

She was in surgical suite one right now. So he was going to stand outside and confront her when she came out.

Seriously? Was that the smartest thing to do? He had no idea, but he couldn't work in an atmosphere where she was actively avoiding him.

So he smiled at the nurses behind the desk and introduced himself to the ones he hadn't yet met and then walked to operating room one and leaned against the far wall and waited.

Ten minutes later, she came through the door and took one look at him, her eyes widening in...guilt?

He said what he came to say in one succinct word. "Why?"

CHAPTER 7

Oh God. He knew. Somehow he'd found out. Her mother? No. She would never say anything.

She swallowed. "I didn't know how to tell you."

"A phone call would have sufficed. Or better, a face-to-face conversation."

There was no way she could have gone to Antigua and given him that kind of news. And after she'd miscarried, there'd been no point. "I didn't want to affect what you were trying to do."

"How in the hell would it do that?"

She stared at him. "Are you kidding? It would have affected everything. You had just started school, and to hear that I was—"

"Just started school..." He stared at her, brows coming together, his face looking fiercer than she'd ever seen it. "Maybe you'd better explain what you're talking about."

Her breath seized in her lungs. Oh God, had he not meant what she thought he did? "I'm sorry, what were you asking about?"

"I wanted to know why you'd erased your name from my surgical team today."

"I...I..." Suddenly working with him seemed like the least of her worries. All she could do was come clean about her reasons for erasing her name and hope he forgot about anything else she'd said. "I was trying to help you by not being a distraction."

Saying that out loud made her sound conceited, so she tried to clarify. "As in our past being a distraction. Not me personally."

"So you're saying I wouldn't be a distraction for you?"

She was messing this up beyond repair. "No. I just think until we figure this thing out, maybe it's better if we work together as little as possible. Just for a while."

"And you think the administration isn't going to catch on? Or did you already tell them about us?"

He was right. That could prove to be tricky, since eventually she would have to explain why she didn't want to work with him. And he was right about something else—he would prove to be a terrible distraction. Had she really thought she could work with him without standing there and remembering

everything they'd done together? If so, she was more naive than she'd thought. Because even now, there was an awareness that shimmered in the air around them. That caught at her chest and yearned to be held by him again. That wanted to feel his hands gliding over her skin.

She shuddered. No. No one knew. Not yet. But if she didn't pull herself together, they would soon guess.

"I haven't told anyone." She gulped. "If it helps, I won't ask to be pulled from any more of your cases."

He nodded. "Thanks. And yes. It helps."

"Good." She breathed a sigh of relief. It looked like her tactic worked, and the secret of her pregnancy was still intact.

More people filtered out of the operating room, making conversation impossible for several seconds. Once they were gone, he fixed her with a gaze that told her she hadn't gotten by with anything.

"Let's go to my office, and you can tell me exactly what you meant earlier."

"Meant?"

"Don't play games with me, Patty. You know what I'm referring to." He paused. "And you can either explain yourself in private, or we can have this out right here. In front of whoever happens to be walking by."

CHAPTER 8

He hadn't decorated his office.

God, of all the things for her brain to latch onto as she entered the space.

The long walk and elevator ride had seemed to take an excruciating amount of time. And instead of rehearsing her words, she'd felt completely numb. Drained. Not only was she going to have to tell him the truth, after all these years, she was going to have to relive the pain she'd endured during those terrible months. The pain she still periodically felt when she wondered what their baby would have looked like. How her hand sometimes wandered to her belly, as if she still carried that child.

Dax didn't bother sitting down, nor did he offer her a seat. Instead he leaned against the top of his desk and folded his arms across his chest. "Okay, spill."

"I...um, I don't know where to start."

"I don't care where you start. I just want to know what the hell you meant about me just starting school and that it would have changed everything."

If she was going to do this, there was no way it was going to be standing up, so she moved sideways and dropped into one of the chairs flanking his desk. "I was pregnant. I found out a few weeks after you left for school."

"Excuse me?"

He'd heard her. She could see it in his face. He just hadn't fully processed the words. "You'd just started school, Dax. If I'd said anything, you would have come home. And...and I didn't want to be the reason you delayed—maybe even gave up on—medical school."

"So you kept it from me?" His face hardened, becoming a stone that made her want to weep. "Where's my child now?"

She swallowed. She could imagine the thoughts reeling through his head. "I miscarried a month after I found out. So you see, it wouldn't have mattered, because—"

"You're wrong. It does matter. I can't believe..." His words stopped, a muscle working in his jaw. "You should have told me. Instead you ran away. Did you leave St. Lucia before the miscarriage? Or after?"

Why did the anger in his voice have to hurt so much? The urge to wrap her arms around her midsection came, and she had to grip the arms of the chair to stop herself. Had she been wrong not to tell him?

It didn't really matter at this point, because the decision had been made, and she'd never thought the day would come when she would have to tell him. And seeing him standing there trying to decipher her motives...the timing of everything. She'd stolen something precious from him by her actions. He hadn't had the chance to grieve the what-might-have-beens. Tears welled, one slipping down the side of her cheek as she realized the enormity of what she'd done. "I'm so sorry, Dax. I was going to tell you, if the pregnancy continued, but when it didn't... It just seemed easier."

"Easier. For whom?"

"You might not believe me, but back then, I thought it was the only way." She scrubbed the moisture from her cheek with a hand that wasn't quite steady. "I was doing it for you."

CHAPTER 9

Doing it for him? Was she serious?

“Did your mom know?” The pitying look she’d given him had crushed him when he’d come home to visit and found that Patty had left the island.

“Not until much later.”

“So I wasn’t the only one you kept in the dark.” After all these years of not knowing why she dumped him. Of thinking that she’d realized how many men would be interested in her at college and beyond...that she didn’t want to settle for him. It had torn him up inside. But this...this seemed so much worse than all of that.

“I told my mom I’d decided to go to school in Barbados and that I wanted to visit my aunt before I went. She lives here on St. Victoria. She was the only one who knew, and I swore her to secrecy.”

“Why not tell me after you lost the baby?” Hell. Was he really standing here discussing a baby he’d never known about?

“I... I’d never answered your texts. By the time I stopped grieving, it just seemed...too late.”

She’d grieved.

The image of her crying on her bed made something twist inside of him. She’d been completely alone, dealing with something no one should ever have to deal with. She’d paid heavily for keeping her secret. He moved to stand in front of her. “I’m sorry, Patty.”

She glanced up, the track of one of her tears still wet. She shook her head, not saying anything, but her chin wiggled as if she was trying to hold back her emotions. He reached down and drew her to her feet, pulling her against his chest. He’d been standing there nurturing an anger he wasn’t sure he was justified in feeling. What would he have done if she’d told him?

He’d have come home. Would have walked through it with her. And that’s probably exactly why she’d kept it a secret. He tipped her chin back. “You should have told me.”

“Maybe. Probably.” She shrugged. “I was just a kid myself. And so were you. We were just starting to plan out our futures.”

Her nose still had that little uptilt that she'd hated so much. The one that he loved. Before he could stop himself, he kissed the tip of it, then reached to smooth her hair back. "I can't imagine how hard that time must have been for you."

"It was pretty awful. I was horrified when I found out I was pregnant, but then when I lost it..."

Hadn't he just experienced something similar? Only instead of horror and grief, he'd felt anger, then loss, followed by...something else.

Her eyes glittered as a whole host of emotions tracked across her face. "It was your baby, Dax. He or she was there one moment, and then the next it was gone, and there was nothing I could do to stop it."

"I know."

They stared at one another for what seemed like an eternity. Her arms had gone around him at some point. Grief and something more insidious twined together as her soft curves pressed against him. As the heat of her body met his. Memories that should have been laid to rest ages ago swamped him, and despite his best efforts, he tightened his grip.

"Dax?"

His name on her lips did him in, and without saying a word, he lowered his head and kissed her.

CHAPTER 10

The second his mouth touched hers, her world went up in flames. She was whisked back to the stand of trees where they'd made love for the very first time.

Those remembered emotions were wild and heady. He'd been her first. And God, she'd been so sure he would be her last.

For all she knew, maybe he would be.

So why not let him kiss her? Why not let him take her back down forgotten paths and help her remember just how good they'd been together?

As if she could ever forget.

Her arms slid up his back, her hands hooking over his shoulders as if afraid he might pull away.

He didn't. Instead he deepened the kiss, one of his legs edging between hers in a way that made her mouth go dry. His tongue touched her lips, and she opened to him immediately, giving him access to everything that was inside of her. And then he was right there, sliding, touching, moving.

Oh God. Her hips instinctively sought him out, pressing into him in a way that left no doubt what she was feeling. What she wanted.

He knew. She could tell by the way his arm curled around her waist, trapping her against him. If anyone saw them, they would swear they were frozen in place. But Patty was anything but frozen. What was happening between them was for them alone. And she was aware of every millimeter of movement happening inside her mouth. Against the heart of her, where the muscles of his thigh were rippling against her, making her gasp for breath.

He whispered against her lips, "Hell, I've missed this. Missed you."

He wasn't the only one. A roar of remembered emotions poured over her. Except these weren't memories. They were here. Now. Rematerializing from somewhere inside of her.

When he bent her back against his arm, her knees buckled, and he followed her down to the carpeting on his office floor.

Hands grappled with clothing as they struggled to get closer to each other, Patty's hips lifting as he pushed her skirt up. A zipper snicked, and then her hand slid around his warm, familiar flesh.

Her eyes closed as she savored this moment, capturing his groan with her mouth. This was what she wanted. What she needed.

She felt him suddenly shift, and her lids flew open, eyes finding his.

“Shh...just needed something.”

So did she, so she wasn't sure what he was...

Oh. His hand covered hers as he sheathed himself. A quick stab of disappointment went through her at not having that skin-to-skin contact.

But maybe she could still drive him crazy the way she once had by...

She tightened her hand around him and pumped.

“Hell, Patty, I need you to stop.” He gripped her hand, carrying it up beside her head. When she gave what she hoped was a seductive smile, he leaned down and nipped her lip. “You think you're so smart, do you?”

His body covered hers, and she suddenly didn't think she was smart at all. Because he'd trapped both her hands and held them there, while his body slid against hers, his flesh somehow able to touch just the right place, teasing it. Applying pressure. Movement. Until she was arching against him, desperately trying to find him.

And then he was there, filling her beyond belief, thrusting until she couldn't hold back any longer, and with a sharp cry, she let herself tumble down a familiar mountain, where there was no pain. Or fear. Just a clenching of muscles that gripped her senses as he pumped his way to completion. Then he slowly eased her to the bottom, softening her landing with kisses and wordless murmurs that touched her in ways she didn't understand.

And then it was done.

CHAPTER 11

Hell, what had just happened here?

Dax stood, zipping himself back up as he tried to collect his thoughts. If he was having second thoughts, then so was Patty, judging from the way she jerked upright, tugging her clothing back in place.

"I'm sorry." They both said the words in unison, and she gave a nervous laugh.

His legs were still not quite right, and he had to force them beneath him to avoid having to lean against his desk. "That shouldn't have happened."

"No." Her agreement was expected, but it still struck a nerve. "And I—I'm not sure we should be working together. Not sure we can work together."

Was she saying he should quit?

Maybe he should. But it was Patty who had kept things secret, not him. If she had just responded to any of his texts asking to meet or asking her to call him, maybe they wouldn't be at this point. Maybe they would have tied up all their loose ends and gone their separate ways. Or maybe they'd still be together.

But neither of those things had happened. And by leaving him with a boatload of unresolved emotions, she'd stolen the trust that came with being with someone. Much like his father had stolen his trust during his formative years. It had taken him too long to get over her. And to have had sex with her within days of seeing her again?

He wasn't the only one who'd gone through hell, though. He'd heard the tremor in Patty's voice as she shared what had happened. The loss. The grief. The unbelievable pain.

What he couldn't do, however, was go down this road again, although it didn't sound like she wanted to, either.

"So what do you suggest we do? I think if you continue to erase your name from my cases, one of us is eventually going to have to answer some questions."

"I know." She clasped her hands in front of her. "My aunt needs me right now, so I can't just go back to St. Lucia."

She would leave the island? Because the prospect of working with him was too hard to face?

"What if I promise that whatever happened here will never happen again?"

“How can you be so sure?”

“The same way it never happened the whole time we were in high school.”

Patty flinched. At least he thought that’s what she did. It could have just been the way she was fiddling with her skirt. “You make it sound so easy.”

It wasn’t going to be easy. It was going to be damned hard. So he was just going to have to focus on those months after she stopped texting, those months when he thought his world was ending. He’d promised himself he would never mourn another woman the way he’d mourned her. And so far, he’d kept that promise. All involvement with women was superficial, and they’d seemed just as happy to keep it that way. It wasn’t the most satisfying thing in the world, but surely he could get any fulfillment he needed from his work.

“It can be. Maybe this—” he motioned between them “—was about unresolved issues. Now that we’ve set the record straight, it should be easier.”

“If you say so.” She didn’t sound any surer than he was.

“We’ll just avoid being alone. Or talking about anything that can bring up emotions from the past.” He gave a tight smile. “The only conversation between us will be about our jobs.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “From now on, no talking about anything...except work.”

CHAPTER 12

They succeeded in not talking about work for the next week. Then one of the nurses came up to her while she was discussing a case with Dax.

“Patty, I’m sorry to interrupt, but your aunt is here.”

“Here?”

She nodded. “She evidently took a taxi. But she fell getting out of it and has a pretty nasty gash on her head. She’s in one of the exam rooms, but...”

But she wasn’t letting anyone near her.

Dax glanced at nurse. “Is she okay?”

So much for not talking about anything other than work. She could hide her aunt’s condition, but doing so felt wrong. And she’d gone that route once before and lived to regret it.

“My aunt has Alzheimer’s.” She swallowed. “She must have gotten away from her caretaker.”

“Ah, this is what you meant—”

“Meant?”

“Nothing. Do you want some help?”

Patty hesitated. Her aunt could be combative at times, if not handled carefully. And it sounded like that was what was going on down in the ER. “Do you mind? Some people are able to get through to her and others can’t.”

Dax had never met her aunt. They’d been together such a short time, they’d just never had a chance. Although her aunt evidently knew she’d hidden her pregnancy.

“Of course not.”

The other nurse glanced between them. “They recognized her when she came through the doors, thank goodness.”

Her aunt had ventured to the hospital a couple of other times, and once she'd wound up in the room of another patient, convinced that it was her long-dead husband and that he'd been hiding from her. It had created a sticky situation for the hospital and for Patty.

Ha! Imagine the sticky situation if someone found out Patty had slept with the hospital's newest doctor. Ugh. If she could leave St. Victoria, she would, but with her aunt like she was, she was going nowhere. Grace had no children, and there was no way Patty was going to drag her to St. Lucia with her, removing her from the things she still remembered. Like her home. Besides, Patty's mom was getting up in years, too, and it wouldn't be fair to ask her to take on her sister at this point in her life.

"Thanks, Holly, I'll go help with her and then take her home, if you can cover for me for about an hour."

"Of course."

Dax's voice broke into her thoughts. "I don't have any other cases scheduled for today, so if she's released, I can go sit with her."

"No need. She has a nurse. I'm actually surprised that..." She took her phone out of her pocket and saw seven missed calls. All from the nurse. "Damn. My phone was still on silent from the surgery."

They'd had a tough case. A male who'd had a one hundred percent blockage of his aorta. Fortunately they'd been able to get in there in time to bypass the section. But it had been touch and go for a while.

She glanced at Dax. "If they release her, though, and you can help me get her into the car, I would appreciate it."

"Absolutely. Let's go."

CHAPTER 13

Patty's aunt was sitting on the table. And a gash was right. She had a line of blood that had run down her left temple and gotten all over the shoulder of her white blouse. There was more on the white paper on the exam table.

"Glad you're here." A man who was evidently one of the ER docs was standing nearby with small table containing suture material. "She's not letting us clean her up."

Patty moved closer. "Aunt Grace, you've hurt yourself. You need to let these people help you."

"I'm not hurt, Patricia." The woman's eyes were still sharp and observant, despite her memory issues. And she had to be semi-lucid if she'd gotten in a taxi and arrived here.

That sharp gaze swiveled to him, and she frowned. "Who are you?"

"I'm Daxon Morrow. A friend of Patty's." The words slipped out before he could stop them. But how else could he introduce himself?

Her head tilted, and she studied him before her attention shifted to Patty. "Let me see your locket."

Patty's face turned bloodred. "I haven't worn that locket in years, Aunt Grace. How did you even remember that?"

"I only remember the important stuff. And I think I know him." The woman blinked. "Or I think I do. I don't...where's your locket?"

The confusion was a sign of dementia. As was repeating the same information. And from what Patty said, the locket wasn't even something she currently wore. So what had brought that on?

"Is it a special locket?" he asked. Maybe if he distracted her, it would make it easier to get the sutures in.

Grace nodded. "It has a picture of her boy in it."

A boy? But Patty had said she'd miscarried. Had she lied?

No. There'd be no reason to. And from the way she'd revealed it, he was certain she hadn't made it up. So who was the boy? Someone imagined? Or was one of Patty's boyfriends?

His jaw tightened at the thought.

“Aunt Grace. I don’t know where the locket is. I think I lost it.”

“No, it’s in your special drawer. The one you think I don’t know about.”

“Oh Lord...” If anything, Patty’s face had turned an even darker red.

Why was she so embarrassed? It wasn’t as if it was a picture of him in there.

His eyes found hers, and her glance flitted away as soon as they did. Surely not.

He stepped closer to Grace. He’d offered to help, so he needed to do that, not fixate on a thought that had arrived unbidden. But now that it was there, he was going to have a hell of a time trying to push it back out. “Grace. You need to let us look at your head.”

Unexpectedly, she nodded with all the pomp and circumstance of royalty. “Okay. But not him. You.”

She shot a glare at the ER doc that could have pierced steel.

The man’s brows went up, but he smiled. “Okay by me. We’ve been busy today.”

“I can do it,” Dax said. He would gladly sit here and stitch the area over her brow. Anything that would keep him from wondering if that boy in Patty’s locket...might be him.

CHAPTER 14

"I am so sorry, Dax. I shouldn't have asked you to come downstairs with me."

"Yes, you should have. And she did fine in the end."

Patty made a sound. "Only because she got her way." She couldn't believe how close her aunt had been to bellowing out to everyone that Dax had been "Patty's honey," as she'd liked to call him. Her aunt had tried to convince her to call Dax and tell him the truth in those early days of her miscarriage. Especially after she saw the locket around Patty's neck and asked if the boy in the tiny photo was the baby's father. It was. And she'd worn that locket through her first year of medical school, taking it off when she was doing lab work and fastening it back around her neck afterward. And then as time went on, and it became more and more evident she was never going to try to get back in contact with Dax, it became too painful to feel its weight around her neck. So she'd stuffed it in her underwear drawer, way in the back. It was still there. And truthfully, she'd forgotten about it. So how, then, had her aunt remembered it?

Dax helped her aunt get into the passenger seat and shut the door. When he opened one of the doors to the back seat, she said, "What are you doing?"

"I'll help you get her inside the house. She might be a little woozy still from the sedative."

Although she'd been more cooperative, they'd still had to give her a little something to calm her nerves and keep her from reaching for the needle.

"Well, thank you. I'm sure her nurse and I could have gotten her inside."

"Like I said, I don't have any other cases." He gave her a smile that looked genuine. "And I want to help."

"Okay. If you're sure."

He got in the car, and they started down the road. Aunt Grace was woozy, but she was still stuck on that stupid locket. Every once in a while a jumble of words came out that were iffy, but the one constant was, "Where is the locket?" By now, Patty was ignoring the question and praying that Dax didn't pick up on it. The last thing she wanted was for him to know she still had something of his.

She fumbled around for a question. "So you work over at the Island Clinic tomorrow?"

"I do."

"How's it going so far?"

“I like it. Nate, the chief of staff, seems to be a good guy.”

“He is. And he’s done a heck of a lot for Victoria Hospital.”

“I can see that.” He leaned so that he could catch her eye in the rearview mirror. “So what’s the story with this locket?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a gift my mom gave me for graduation.”

His brows went up. “Graduation.” He drew the word out as if deep in thought.

Oh no. Here it came. He was obviously putting two and two together and was about to ask, so she decided to beat him to the punch. “My aunt hasn’t seen that locket in a long, long time, and before you ask, yes...the picture inside...is you.”

CHAPTER 15

Patty's face turned red-hot as silence met her declaration. She had no idea why she'd kept his picture. No idea why she hadn't replaced it with one of her parents or anything else. Anything but Dax.

*Because you don't wear it to work.*

And the fact that her aunt Grace had by chance found it in the back of her drawer years ago—when she was putting away laundry—was sheer dumb luck. She'd asked about the man in the picture, and Patty had told her the whole story. She'd lost the baby by then and needed someone to talk to. It wasn't long before the fog had started winding through her aunt's brain, and Patty could weep at the odd things she remembered. Somewhere hidden in a forgotten compartment, Grace had probably recognized Dax, but she couldn't quite figure out the connection or remember how to express it. So she kept repeating the question about the locket.

She glanced in the rearview mirror and found Dax staring out of the window beside him. Oh God. He was probably as embarrassed as she was. Especially after what had happened in his office.

It looked like her crush had lasted far beyond high school. And for him to see it...

"I—I just haven't worn it in a long time because of med school and work, and honestly I'd forgotten about it." She had, but not quite in the way she made it sound. In recent years she'd forgotten about the memento tucked away out of sight. But that didn't mean she hadn't stared at the picture trying to will herself to take his picture out of the holder. Each time she'd put it away, telling herself she'd tackle it at some other time. That time had never come.

He didn't say anything, and her eyes followed the road as she neared her street, swallowing back a sudden realization. She hadn't pulled that picture out because she'd never quite closed the book on Daxon Morrow. In fact...oh Lord. How had this happened?

She still loved him. After all this time.

And working with him? No. She couldn't do it. Couldn't stand beside him as a surgical nurse knowing how uncomfortable he would feel knowing she'd kept his picture after all these years.

So what was she going to do?

She was going to drop her aunt off at home and make sure she was okay, then she was going to go back to work and go to the HR department and ask a huge favor. One she wasn't sure they would grant. It wasn't like they had a surplus of nurses to cover surgeries, especially on days when the trauma caseload exploded.

If they wouldn't grant her favor, then she might have to do something that tore at her heart. That made a warning pressure gather behind her eyes.

She might have to leave Victoria Hospital and work at one of the smaller clinics on the island. She was trained as a nurse first and foremost, so she could work in any number of departments. She just wasn't sure she wanted to.

But she was also sure she couldn't go on seeing Dax every day he was at the hospital. And if his reaction to her news was anything to go by, the feeling was mutual. So it was better to sever contact now. While her pride was still intact.

CHAPTER 16

Dax struggled to keep his mind on his patient. This wasn't like him. But when he'd come in to work today and noticed that Patty's name was nowhere to be seen on the whiteboard, he'd frowned. She'd been quiet on the ride back to the hospital two days ago, but then again, so had he.

Knowing she'd kept his picture all these years had been a shock. And a jolt of some weird emotion he later identified as hope had rocketed through him before she brushed it all away by saying she'd simply forgotten about it.

Why the hope? After all, hadn't he kept the engagement ring he'd bought all those years ago? He'd told himself he was too embarrassed to take it back to the store. Then he'd justified it by saying if he ever got engaged, he could still use it. Except that was a lie as well. He would never put Patty's ring on someone else's finger. Not that he'd ever come close to that point.

Hell, he'd never actually asked Patty to marry him. Had never gotten the chance. But he'd loved her. Had been devastated when she walked away from him.

Drawing his mind back to his patient, he finished placing tiny stitches in the last of the grafted veins that made up the triple bypasses, checking everything over carefully. It looked good. But the real test would be when they took the patient off the cardio bypass machine. "Okay, let's switch him over."

The perfusionist began adjusting dials on his board and restored blood flow to the heart. This was the part of the surgery that always made him tense. Usually the blood would stimulate the heart to start doing its job again, but if for some reason it didn't, they would use the defibrillator to shock it back into rhythm.

Five long seconds went by as the patient's heart remained static and still. He drew a breath, and then a ripple of movement happened, followed by a strong beat. The another. Soon the patient was in sinus rhythm.

Hell, he'd second-guessed himself almost this entire surgery, and if it continued, he was going to have to do something about it. Things at the Island Clinic were going well, and Nate had offered to increase his workload if Victoria Hospital could spare him.

Was that what he wanted?

Right now, he didn't know what the hell he wanted. Seeing Patty's name scrubbed from that board had done a number on him. Because it reminded him of another time—a time when she'd scrubbed herself from his life just as suddenly. He'd let her get away with it back then. And now?

Dammit! No, he wasn't. If she'd left the hospital, he was going to find her and demand an explanation.

Why?

That was a question he wasn't ready to answer. Not quite yet.

Once he was sure the patient's vitals were stable and that there were no leaks in any of the vessels, he quickly closed up the chest and made sure the man was stable.

"Good job, people. Thank you for your help."

He started to strip off his gloves to leave the room, then turned to the nurse who'd handed him his instruments during surgery. The young man had been sure and competent and had anticipated many of his requests.

"Thanks for your work." He hesitated before asking the question that was on his lips. "Is Patty Cohen on vacation?"

"No. You haven't heard? Patty transferred to maternity, starting today." The nurse shook his head. "It was kind of a shock. As far as I knew, she loved it here."

So she had walked away. Again. Except this time, he knew what he had to do.

CHAPTER 17

Catching babies.

Her mind wouldn't stop rewinding one of her and Dax's last conversations about working side by side. So far, there had been three births. And seeing each of those new little humans had sent a pain searing through her chest. Working maternity was just as hard as she'd feared it might be. But she'd been desperate not to work with Dax anymore.

What if she hadn't lost her and Dax's baby? He or she would be fifteen years old now.

She swallowed. She wasn't sure which was worse: having this question pelt her with each new baby that she helped deliver or having to see Dax each and every day. This had been the only opening for a nurse the hospital had had, but they'd promised to consider her if something else opened up.

And if it didn't?

Well, she might have to take the more drastic step of leaving the hospital.

A new thought whispered through her head—*or she could go try to talk it out with Dax.*

And if he discovered she still loved him after all these years? Well, right now, she didn't see how that could be any worse than what she was currently facing.

And didn't she owe it to him to be honest? She'd kept something from him once before, and it had changed her life in ways that she'd never imagined.

Maybe telling him the truth could change it again. In ways that could at least bring closure, if nothing else.

She didn't expect him to still have feelings for her after all this time. But he'd never married. Never had children. And neither had she.

So getting things out in the open could at least answer the one nagging question that had been swirling through her chest for the last two days. By now, he knew that she was no longer working in the surgical wing.

Did he care? Was he relieved?

The only way she would know for sure was to ask him. Or she was going to drive herself crazy.

She smiled at a fellow nurse, who smiled back. “Nothing like a busy first day, huh? It looks like things are letting up at the moment. Want to take a break?”

“Do you mind?”

“No, go. I’ll text you if something unexpected comes in. You’ll learn to do what new moms do—take your breaks when and where you can.”

Patty laughed. “Thanks for the advice. I’ll be back in about twenty minutes, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

She headed down the hallway. What if Dax was in surgery?

Well, then she’d just have to do it later. But she could at least leave a note at the desk asking him to call her when he got a chance.

She rounded the corner to the elevator and pushed the call button. A minute later, the doors opened and she stepped back to let any passengers off.

There was only one passenger. And when her eyes found his face, her breath caught and her heart skipped a couple of beats. Dax? What was he doing here? On her floor?

“Just the person I was looking for.” He stepped off and faced her. “We need to talk.”

CHAPTER 18

“Yes, we do,” Patty said. “I was actually just coming to find you.”

“You were?” Maybe she was going to explain why she’d left. Except there was a wariness in her face that didn’t bode well for open communication.

“I was. I honestly didn’t want to face you after what happened with my aunt, but then I realized I was keeping something from you. I did that once before, and it turned out to be a disaster. So here goes.” She bit her lip for a second before straightening her spine and looking him in the eye. “I love you. I don’t think I ever stopped loving you.”

Patty’s blurted words couldn’t have shocked him more. Because he’d come to the same conclusion just minutes after stepping out of the operating room this morning. It had taken him exactly three seconds to screw up the courage to come and tell her.

Her eyes shut and then reopened. “I know the feeling isn’t mutual, but I wanted you to know. And that I now realize how wrong it was for me to have kept the pregnancy from you. It was just that—”

He grabbed her up in his arms before she had a chance to finish her sentence. “Thank God.”

“What?” She went completely still, the whispered word barely audible.

The elevator doors opened, and two nurses came out. They stared at them for a few seconds and then smiled at each other as they walked past them. He grinned back, his heart suddenly lighter than it had been in years.

“Let’s go outside. Where we’ll have some privacy.”

They found themselves on a bench flanked by two huge bougainvilleas, their pink flowers littering the ground at their feet. It was the perfect place to tell her how he felt. “I love you, too. Believe it or not, I came down here to ask you if you’d left the surgical floor because of me.”

She shifted on the bench to face him. “I did. After you found out about my locket, it just seemed too awful to have to face you, especially when I realized the reason I could never bring myself to remove your picture from it. I’d shoved it to the back of a drawer back then, hoping I could just forget it was there.”

“But your aunt remembered.”

“Yes. She remembers the funniest things sometimes.”

His fingers tipped her face toward him, his thumb sliding over the tiny groove in her chin. "I'm glad she did."

"You are?"

"Yes. Because I kept something, too." He chuckled. "I actually bought an engagement ring before I left for Antigua."

Her smile faded. "Oh Dax, I had no idea."

"I know. It was an impulse buy. But I knew then that I wanted to marry you someday. I still do."

"You do?"

He nodded. "The ring is in a safe-deposit box back on St. Lucia. But as soon as I can get over there to get it..." He paused. "Is there a chance I can put it on your finger?"

"Yes. Oh yes." Her eyes glistened as she cupped his face and stared at him. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it." He bent down to kiss her. "I do love you."

"Same." She sighed against his mouth. "Unfortunately I have to be back on the floor in a few minutes."

"And I have another surgery in a half hour. But tonight?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

He twined his fingers through hers and pulled her to her feet. Together they walked back toward the entrance to the hospital.

"I hope to see your name back on the surgical board."

She nudged him with her shoulder. "There's nowhere I'd rather be."

EPILOGUE

Sun streamed through the palm fronds outside their bedroom window, sending fingers of light dancing across Dax's skin. It was her new favorite sight in the mornings. Patty fingered the locket around her neck. She'd thought about replacing the pictures of them with more recent ones, but in the end she couldn't do it. This was where it had all started.

And if their relationship hadn't been derailed by the pregnancy? Maybe even that had worked in their favor. They'd both grown and matured, and as fate would have it, they'd ended up working in the same specialty after all.

Leaning over, she touched her lips to his bare shoulder then laid her cheek against the sun-warmed skin, smiling when he murmured in his sleep. Someone else was going to have to catch their baby. And any other ones they might have in the future. She hadn't told him yet about the tiny being tucked beneath her heart. She'd just taken the test a few minutes ago.

Her lips traced the line of his neck. So very strong. So very forgiving. She couldn't believe her luck. She'd not only gotten to love him once, when he was young. She was getting to love him again, with a love she was even more sure would endure.

He rolled onto his back with a suddenness that made her squeak. "Wanting something, Mrs. Morrow?"

"Mmm...yes. I have something for you. Something I think you'll like."

"That sounds promising."

This time they hadn't waited to get married, had done it quickly, while her aunt could still mostly understand what was happening. Their mothers were both there as well, thrilled to see their children finally get the happiness they deserved. Patty hadn't been so sure she did deserve it, until she saw the look in Dax's eyes as she walked into the room where the justice of the peace was waiting. And then she knew. Dax loved her. Had said he realized it the moment he saw her again, although he'd refused to admit it to himself.

He hauled her on top of him until she straddled him, but when he went to pull her down for a kiss, she stopped him. She placed her news—housed in its plastic strip—on his chest, watching him puzzle through what it was.

Then his eyes came up and speared hers. "Is this what I think...?"

"Yes. And this time I wanted to let you know the minute I found out. I don't want to waste another second of our lives together."

“Hell...I—I don’t know what to say.”

There was an intensity to his gaze that sent a shiver through her. “Are you upset?”

“No.” He set it down and gripped her shoulders. “Not upset. I’m happy. Just so damned happy.”

She leaned down and rested her elbows beside his head. “I’m happy, too. Truly.”

Threading his fingers through her hair, he pulled her closer and kissed her on the mouth. Softly. Too softly.

“Hey,” she murmured. “I won’t break.”

“I know. I just want to enjoy you.” The locket dangled between them, and he caught it in his hand. “I’m glad you kept my picture.”

She smiled. “And I’m glad you kept my ring.”

This time when they kissed, rings and lockets were forgotten as they once again pledged their lives and hearts to each other. Patty treasured the second chance she’d been given, and she was going to make sure that Dax knew how much she loved him. Each and every day of their lives.

~

If you loved *Second Chance with the Island Doc*, be sure to catch Tina Beckett’s other title:

*How to Win the Surgeon’s Heart*

*Dani Collins*

SCANDAL BEFITTING  
A PRINCESS

DANI COLLINS

CHAPTER ONE

Laszlo Fabin rose from Sofia Albizzi's bed before her skin had cooled.

She left her arm across her eyes, still breathless and trembling, still euphoric even as she pressed back the sting that rose behind her eyelids.

He was right to leave. They had agreed they wouldn't do this anymore, not after they'd almost been caught when they'd hooked up at a royal wedding in Monaco two weeks ago.

They'd managed to resist each other for three days here in Geneva, barely making eye contact as they saw each other in passing at high-level trade-development meetings, but she'd made the mistake of sitting in on his presentation on foreign investment.

She loved to hear him talk almost as much as she loved the way he made her feel. He was passionate and stimulating, intelligent and insightful. He took the lead in every interaction, assertive and powerful. Privately, he was capable of charm and finesse and compassion. He fascinated her.

So it set fire to her chest that he didn't linger after their intense lovemaking, but this was just a convenience for both of them. That's all it could be.

Laszlo was the president of Presovia. When he'd been elected two years ago, he'd ousted a corrupt dictator who'd been causing unrest throughout the Balkan Peninsula.

Sofia was the daughter of the Kinky King of Vallia. Despite how scrupulously she conducted herself to make up for that, she couldn't afford this arrangement being discovered and neither could Laszlo. Her father was an immoral. She was supposed to have better control of herself.

She was supposed to become the queen of Vallia, and a tiny part of her was holding out for that, doing what had to be done so it could happen.

Deep down, however, she knew she and Laszlo were using the protection of their reputations as an excuse to avoid the deeper, harder questions. She was.

Did he care for her at all? Even if he did, what sort of future could they make for themselves? What were they prepared to give up for a relationship?

Laszlo sat on the bed to put on his shoes. Sofia was instantly drawn to come up on an elbow and smooth the back of his shirt.

He seemed to swell, spine straightening as though her lightest caress filled him in some way. It was exhilarating to be this powerful, but the way he stood and turned and wore such a forbidding expression told her he resented her effect on him.

*Mio Dio* he was beautiful, though, with sharp, angular features, dark hair and stern brows. His eyes were such a startling blue, she wanted to wear it as her signature color.

“Are you going to the climate change forum next month?” He tied his tie.

“Yes.” She spoke with too much eagerness. She saw his dismay in the way he flicked his gaze to the side.

“Then I’ll send someone else.”

Crushed, she quickly turned her back on him, sliding to the far side of the bed so he wouldn’t see how he’d knocked the breath out of her.

“Sofia.” His voice rang with frustration.

“No, you’re right,” she insisted, forcing words past the tightness in her throat, her stomach in knots. “I’d rather not see you, either.”

She dragged the sheet with her as she stood and adopted a regal demeanor as she faced him. She had learned this cool, unbothered smile from her mother, not that she’d been old enough to understand that the former queen had used it to hide her pain.

Her mother had gone to great lengths to protect Sofia and her twin, Luca, from learning what an irredeemable man their father was. In the twenty years since her mother’s death, Sofia had seen all his dissolute ways, though. Her country was a laughing stock.

Sofia wanted more for Vallia, and her indulging in little trysts was not the way to go about it.

“Goodbye, Laszlo. This time we mean it, *sì?*”

He didn’t nod, didn’t speak, didn’t move. Only his cheek ticked.

She was the one who turned away. It took every ounce of her strength to walk into the bathroom. An ache bloomed in her chest. *Come with me*, she willed him as she started the shower. Her eyes were clenched against a sting of longing, every breath burning her lungs.

He didn’t follow, and she went through the motions of washing his scent from her skin.

*This is for the best. Even if it feels like I’m dying.*

CHAPTER TWO

Laszlo pulled the door closed, locking himself out of Sofia's life once and for all. None of the people hovering in the hall looked at him. Every single one was paid well enough to call that a breakout meeting on world affairs—under oath, if it came to it.

Igor was paid so well, he had ensured the president of Presovia had been given a room on the same floor as the princess of Vallia. He followed Laszlo into his suite.

“Will there be anything more, sir?”

“We'll return home tonight.”

“I'll make the arrangements.”

It felt like a retreat, but Laszlo had sworn he wouldn't go to her again and yet here he was, imagining washing himself in that shower with her, soaping her smooth skin, drinking her sighs as he brought her to orgasm with the rhythm of his touch.

She had bewitched him from the first moment he'd seen her two years ago when she'd mediated trade talks with Presovia and their contentious eastern European neighbors.

Laszlo had just won a brutal campaign and was determined to rescue his country from high taxes, poor infrastructure and regressive policies. He'd been receiving death threats every other day and initially tried to dismiss Sofia as an elitist pushing sweetheart deals for corporate interests.

She had been impossible to ignore. She was knowledgeable and determined, painstakingly neutral and committed to the betterment of all. In short, magnificent.

He had fought his infatuation for months and, the day the agreement was signed, managed a private conversation to thank her. He couldn't say how they'd wound up locking lips, but their discussion had dissolved into torrid and frantic lovemaking.

With regret on both sides.

Princess Sofia was even more diligent about protecting her reputation than he was his. The only dirt anyone could dig up on her was her flawed pedigree. She was the daughter of the most debauched leader in modern Europe. The king of Vallia had slept with Presovia's First Lady while Laszlo's predecessor had watched—if rumors were to be believed.

Such rumors were *always* believed.

Laszlo was still cleaning house within Presovia's government. He was under constant scrutiny and should have been courting a potential wife, subtly conveying his confidence in Presovia's stability and prosperity, not having midnight hookups with anyone, let alone *her*. His countrymen might have seen past a bachelor having an affair. Maybe they would even accept his involvement with a princess if she renounced her title, since Presovia's recovering democracy needed distance from supreme rulers like royalty and oligarchs.

But the daughter of the Kinky King? Absolutely not.

Why take the risk to see her at all? he kept asking himself.

Because he couldn't stay away was the ignominious answer.

As a man trying to prove himself ruled by only Presovia's best interests, he couldn't allow himself to be ruled by his insatiable desire for Sofia.

So Laszlo made his staff travel home at this ungodly hour. He made himself leave so he wouldn't give in to his basest urges. He made himself pretend—made himself *believe*—nothing would ever happen between them again.

It made him impossible and the staff avoided him for several days afterward.

On a quiet afternoon, Igor approached. "Sir," he said with a note of concern. "There's a headline in the news—the king of Vallia has died."

*Solntse* was Laszlo's first thought. *Sunshine*. It was the name he'd used for her private number. As he drew out his own phone, he saw no message from her. Why would she reach out, though? They were little better than one-night stands to one another.

Weren't they?

"Where is she?" His chest hurt. The loss for her would be complicated, but she would be suffering.

"The princess was still in Geneva when he passed."

"Why?" The conference was long over.

A rasping lick of jealousy briefly swept over him along with a kick of self-recrimination. If he wanted her to be faithful, he had to give her a reason to be, didn't he?

"She's on her way home." Igor proved himself worth every lek Laszlo paid him as he said, "I'll learn what I can about the funeral arrangements and organize your attendance."

CHAPTER THREE

Sofia only saw Laszlo briefly in the receiving line. Her heart nearly exploded and she had to fight to maintain her composure when he gave her gloved hand a firm, lingering squeeze.

His presence here wasn't personal, she reminded herself. He was doing what was expected by all world leaders and, like many others, had come for the chance to rub shoulders with their peers. No one truly mourned her father.

She couldn't say she was particularly sorry for the loss herself. Her father's endless scandals were over, but his death upended her world.

She didn't make it to the climate change forum the following month, too busy supporting her twin as Luca took up the mantle of ruling Vallia. After they'd endured decades of their father's neglect, the task was enormous, but that wasn't Luca's reason for trying to refuse the crown.

"Sofia is the rightful heir," Luca insisted heatedly to Vallia's Privy Council. "She was born first. Our father's choice in naming me was pure sexism. If Vallia wants to redeem our world standing, our first point of order is to recognize the true monarch." He pointed at Sofia.

The council refused to accept his abdication. Sofia felt robbed but couldn't bring herself to throw Vallia into further chaos by making a constitutional challenge. Her country was in good hands with Luca—far better than with their father. She recognized Luca as her king and was once again relegated to delegate roles. Between royal duties at home, she attended a forum on NGOs, an assembly on urban economics and now—was she the only one who saw the irony?—she was at a meeting in Madrid on the international status of women.

It had been six months since Geneva. She'd thought of Laszlo every day, sometimes squeezing her own hand and pretending it was his grip around her fingers, but she'd refused to look him up or ask her assistant for his whereabouts. They had agreed not to see one another again, and aside from his appearance at the service, she hadn't heard from him.

They were nothing to one another. *Forget about him, Sofia.*

She tried, but how could she when she left her presentation with her entourage and came face-to-face with him in the wide hall of the conference center?

Her heart lurched and her whole body stung with a self-conscious blush.

He halted, equally taken aback. After an awkward thump of time, he gave her a deferential nod. "Princess."

Absolutely nothing had changed. His wonderfully deep timbre was a velvety caress down her spine, but that standoffish air radiated around him.

*I can't do this.* Of all the things she'd withstood in her life, seeing him and knowing she couldn't have him was the most agonizing.

"Mr. President." She didn't offer her hand, even though she normally would with any other dignitary.

It was taking every ounce of control she possessed to disguise how thoroughly this meeting was shredding her composure. To be near him was to be alive, heart racing, skin hot. She longed to step into his wide-shouldered frame and let him envelope her. She wanted his mouth on hers, wanted to breathe the scent in his throat, wanted his rough voice against her ear while his weight pinned her to the mattress.

She said, "I didn't see your name on the attendance list." *Or I wouldn't have come.* "It's nice to see you again."

"I'm at Economy and the Environment." He pointed down the hall. If she was having any effect on him, he was even better at hiding it. His expression remained stiffly polite, nothing more.

Which was an even sharper kick in the stomach than their last goodbye.

"I won't keep you," she said with her own well-practiced and very bland smile.

There was an incendiary flash in his sharp blue eyes. It could have been a reflection from something outside; nonetheless, it made her feel as though the ground shifted beneath her feet. Her step faltered as they both continued on their way.

She was still trying to make sense of that moment when she left another session, having heard exactly none of it. Her assistant handed her an envelope.

It contained one of the hotel's folders with a key card and a room number written inside. Her stomach sank, but her heart soared.

CHAPTER FOUR

It had been six months since Laszlo had shaken her gloved hand at her father's funeral. Six months of telling himself to forget about her.

He had no appetite for other women, however. Sofia dominated his thoughts. When he gave in to temptation and looked at headlines and photos of her, he thought she appeared to have lost weight. She wasn't his to be concerned about, but he was—despite having hundreds of concerns of his own.

He was on legitimate business to restructure his country's economy, yet when he'd bumped into her, nothing had mattered beyond watching her mouth form words. The world held color again. He could taste and smell and feel his blood moving in his veins.

While she had been her most aloof, contained self.

That air of remoteness itched at him. He was definitely a man who was stimulated by challenge, but this was more than a desire to break through her walls and get a reaction. He was infatuated. Bordering on obsessed. He didn't like it. It made him feel as though he had a flank open.

All the more reason to ignore her. Knowing she was so close had a fire bursting forth inside him.

When Igor asked tentatively, "Sir, should I—" he cut in with a firm *yes*.

He hated himself for the weakness, but passing her a key would put the decision in her hands. At least he would know if this grinding ache inside him was reciprocated.

He had his answer two hours later when he returned to his room and it was empty.

*Good*. He ordered food and poured himself a scotch, telling himself he was glad she had more sense than he did.

When the door lock hummed a few minutes later, he turned with his breath held.

*Solntse*. She still wore her crisp pencil skirt and matching jacket, still had her light brown hair up in its smooth twist. Her eyes were cool blue behind her glasses, but she brought light and warmth no matter where she went.

*That* was what he had felt when he'd run into her downstairs, the sensation of emerging from a cave into spring sunshine. A bright day suddenly filled with possibility.

She shut the door and leaned on it. The way her teeth tortured her bottom lip said, *I'm weak. I hate myself for being here.*

That was a shard of glass straight into his heart.

Perhaps they were the instrument of each other's destruction. He set his drink aside and strode across the room to press her into that door.

She was the only thing that could have stopped him from making her his, and she didn't. Aside from a small gasp of surprise, there was only welcome in the part of her lips and her soft moan of capitulation.

He thanked his lucky stars because he was starved for her. He devoured her mouth, drinking in the faint taste of coffee and the way her skin smelled of vanilla, like always. The most intoxicating thing about her, however, was the way she pressed her pelvis into his.

Whatever she was wearing was too much. He swept his hands over her, trying to find her curves, searching out those places he could pull away fabric and find skin.

Her clever hands were just as determined, her mouth equally greedy. When she sucked against the side of his neck, he grew more inflamed at being marked by her. She was the only woman he'd ever known who was so sexually aggressive, and it turned him on intensely.

It made him equally fierce in his determination to gather her up and glorify and gorge himself on her. He wanted to overwhelm her completely, take her to the floor and let the world listen to him making her his.

But he had one last shred of civility in him and brought her to the bedroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

This was what Sofia needed more than anything. Torrid passion that stole her thoughts and overwhelmed her senses. To feel wanted. Needed. To feel completely in sync with this man, who seemed to know exactly where her body yearned to be touched.

He stalled them at the foot of the bed, where he cupped the back of her neck and used his other hand to lock her hips to his. She was tall, only a few inches shorter than him, so they were perfectly matched as he tenderly ravaged her mouth until she was combing frantic fingers through his hair.

Then his mouth went to her throat and they began to sweep clothing away.

There were things she ought to be saying. All the reasons were still there for why this shouldn't happen, but it had been too long since she'd felt sensual and excited and *alive*. She had missed him so much and poured that emotion over him, streaking her hands across the fine hairs on his chest, running her touch to the tense muscles in his abdomen, peeling open his trousers to caress him in a way that had his breath rasping in his throat.

She went to her knees, dragging his pants and briefs to his ankles, then clasped his erection in her fist and began to pleasure him with her lips and tongue.

His guttural groan was everything, making her smile around the salty heat that filled her mouth. His hand cupped her cheek, knocking her glasses askew. He took them off, and she didn't know where they went but didn't care. She was determined to give him this.

"Stop," he growled. "I won't last."

"I don't want you to."

He swore and pulled her to her feet as he kicked out of his pants. He sat on the edge of the bed in only his socks and open shirt and dragged her to him. He hitched her skirt up to her waist so she could straddle his thighs.

She had one moment of recalling that they were backsliding into a place they'd sworn to avoid, but his hands were palming her bottom through the lace of her panties.

"Give me your nipple," he said in that primitive voice, and she obeyed, pulling down the cup of her bra then bracing her arms on his shoulders.

She abandoned herself to him then. No one else had ever made her feel consumed by fire. Lightning shot from where he rolled his tongue against her nipple to detonate in wet heat between her thighs.

She bucked in his lap, seeking pressure against the ache that was becoming unbearable.

He obligingly slipped two fingers under the lace, moaning his gratification as he found her slippery and welcoming. She hugged his head, rocking against his touch, whispering a plea.

Because she was weak. So weak.

He drew the fabric aside and the blunt velvety tip of him probed.

With a shaken sigh, she let her weight settle her onto his thick intrusion.

For these few minutes, they were one. This ferocious, consuming hunger wasn't just in her. They both suffered it.

She looked into his glazed eyes as she began to rise and sink, taking him in a luxurious rhythm while he stroked her thighs beneath her skirt, guiding her. Encouraging her to take her fill of him.

Her flesh was so greedy, she was peaking in moments, breath shattering while she sobbed in loss because she didn't want it to be over yet.

"Laszlo," she gasped with anguish, caught in the crosshairs of joy and sorrow.

"Let it happen, *Solntse*."

She had no choice. She was falling apart while he held her in his strong arms and watched her, giving small thrusts of his hips to increase her pleasure as she rode the powerful waves of her orgasm.

After long moments, when she was still trying to catch her breath, he carefully withdrew, still hard. He set her on her back on the mattress and leaned over her with a feral smile as he drew her underwear down and off, then tossed it away.

"Let's do it properly now, shall we?" He went to his knees beside the bed, draped her thighs over his shoulders and bent to the business of arousing her all over again.

CHAPTER SIX

“Harder,” Sofia gasped, bracing her hands against the headboard.

This was what made her spectacular. She knew what she wanted. What she needed. She wasn’t afraid to demand it and *take* it.

And she was so beautiful like this, flushed and naked, back arched so her breasts stood high and proud, legs over his straining arms.

Laszlo was a very headstrong, autonomous man, but in this moment, he thought he could live the rest of his life in service to making this woman mindless with pleasure. Nothing else existed when they were like this except the friction of their bodies, the tear of their panting breaths, the sweet clasp of her as he drove himself into her and the exquisite chills of approaching climax that raced across his skin.

“Tell me when,” he said, not sure which language she used. It was taking everything in him to wait for her. He fought the culmination that teased in the base of his spine, holding back while he watched her lashes flutter and her lips part, holding back until—

She cried out.

He let go, vision turning white as he slammed into her in an uneven, primal rhythm. Acute pleasure exploded within him, and he was nearly wrenched apart by the intensity of his orgasm. Sensation sharpened and softened and convulsed his muscles as her flesh quivered thrillingly around his.

They held like that for eternity, as though trapped in golden amber.

He wished that’s exactly what happened, that they were frozen in ecstasy forever, but the waves of euphoria slowly faded and his arms weakened and he melted onto her.

He tried not to crush her as he sank down, but there really was no more delightful place to settle than upon her damp and quivering body while still shaking with their shared pleasure. He wanted to set his teeth against her neck like a damned animal, keeping his mate exactly where he wanted her.

He had to dispose of the condom, however. He gathered his strength and touched a kiss to her closed eye as he withdrew.

When he came back, she had gathered her clothes and stood with them clutched to her naked breasts.

*Not this time* was the emphatic, barbaric imperative that rocketed around in his brain. That might have been how they did things in the past. Tonight he yanked the rumpled covers back and said in quiet, implacable command, "Get into this bed."

She lifted her brows and snorted her affront, arms firming across the drape of her clothes, pinning them to her stomach. Her mouth tightened and a small wrinkle appeared on her brow.

"I really can't linger, but there's something I should tell you." She turned to drop her clothing into the chair and began to dress, back bowing as she stepped into her underpants and drew the jewel-green lace to cup her pretty round ass. "I had a pregnancy scare last time."

Laszlo was so taken aback, his foot bumped into the night table with a sharp jab he barely felt.

The world was a harsh, terrible place where harrowing, life-altering things happened all the time. This news shouldn't be such a surprise.

Maybe the fact it *didn't* feel terrible surprised him most.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I don't remember a condom breaking," Laszlo said behind her, voice difficult to read. "What happened?"

"After you left Geneva, I realized I was late. I'd seen you in Monaco and I'm usually like clockwork." Sofia hurried to dress, far too defenseless and raw after giving herself up to him so quickly and thoroughly. "I've since gone on the pill. It's totally fine."

Then why tell him at all?

Because it had been her excuse for coming here.

Of course, she had fallen into his arms and his bed. Of course, she had shattered into a million pieces again and again. That's why seeing him was such an irresistible compulsion. He brought her a pleasure that was so intense it was almost pain.

The pain was there, though. Blanketed by kisses and caresses and the joyous joining of flesh. The reckoning afterward was always inevitable. And excruciating.

If she told him about the scare, she reasoned, maybe he would make it easier for her to resist him in the future. Maybe the next time they met in a hallway, he would only nod and pass her by as if they were the acquaintances they pretended to be. Maybe he would find another woman to offer his room key to.

*Mio Dio*, that was a sickening thought.

"You should have texted me. I would have come back."

"There was nothing you could do. I told my team I had food poisoning and they had a private doctor brought in. He gave me a pregnancy test. It was negative and he said it might be a low body fat issue since I've been running more this year."

"Have you had follow-up tests?" he asked gruffly. "Are you sure it's not something more serious?" He stepped into his briefs.

"I'm fine." The royal physician had given her a physical and offered to freeze her eggs since she was thirty-one and not planning to have children yet. "I'm perfectly healthy, but it was stressful to realize I had worked so hard all my life to walk the straight and narrow, then come this close—" she pinched her finger and thumb together "—to landing up in that age-old position of being unwed and pregnant, unable to tell anyone who the father is. You can bet the press would have equated it to all of

my father's antics. Never mind how humiliating that would have been for me and Luca. I can't do that to him."

More reason to never see Laszlo again, but she couldn't say it out loud.

She tucked in her blouse, then zipped up her skirt and smoothed it down her hips.

Laszlo stood there in his briefs, hands on his hips, watching her. He was like a bronze god with his honed muscles, flat hips and thick thighs.

She swallowed, still high on sex endorphins, trying to talk herself into leaving.

"I would have married you," he said bluntly.

Sofia dropped the jacket she hadn't realized she was holding. She picked it up and gave it a shake, trying to knock his words from her head.

"Don't you mean you would have proposed and breathlessly awaited my response?"

"Sure." His tone was more amusement than agreement. Laszlo was not quite as civilized as men were supposed to be these days. "And when you said yes, I would have married you."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“So chivalrous.”

“No.” He came around the bed and took the jacket she was trying to put on. He threw it onto the chair and set his hands on her waist, gently tugging her hips into his own.

He was both fascinated and infuriated by the way she could lift her chin, aloof and self-possessed, as if she hadn't been begging him for everything he had twenty minutes ago.

If he hadn't felt the faint tremble in her fingers where they rested on his naked chest, he would have been annoyed and let her go, but she wasn't nearly as unaffected as she was pretending.

“I lost my father when I was twelve. I wouldn't leave my child fatherless.”

Her expression softened, making his heart unsteady. “You never talk about your father. You never talk about yourself,” she added with a wry twist of her mouth.

“Too busy with other things,” he said, caressing beneath her ear. “Always short on time.”

Her gaze shifted to the clock on the night table and his chest tightened.

“My father was killed in a professional hit.” He dropped his hands and moved to look for his shirt. He jabbed his arms into the sleeves, chilled by his own words but refusing to cling to her as he relayed them. “The man who ordered his death lives comfortably in exile. I continue trying to have him extradited, so I can bring him to justice, but may never succeed. That's not a legacy I want to put on a child. My mother was left to raise me alone. I would never force such a challenge on the mother of my own child if I could avoid it.”

Her expression was difficult to read, soft yet conflicted and distressed.

“I'm not as vulnerable as most women,” she pointed out. “And I loathe the idea of a man marrying me because he 'had' to. If you wanted to marry me, you would have asked by now.”

He supposed he deserved that, but after their first time, she'd been even more concerned about keeping them a secret than he had, so he was compelled to ask, “Is that what you want?”

“What?”

“Marriage. A future. Family? We've never talked about this being anything more than...” He tried to find a word that wouldn't make it sound cheap because it wasn't.

“Too busy with other things,” she repeated facetiously, though he heard a pang of hurt in her tone.

“So talk. Tell me what you want.”

“And you’ll make it happen?” she scoffed.

“Maybe.” He pulled on his pants. “Tell me and we’ll see.” He zipped.

She snorted and turned away from him, arms crossed, profile working with deep inner struggling. She looked to the floor, hair falling forward to curtain her face, then she warily lifted her lashes.

“What do *you* want?”

He had the sense of a childish struggle between them. *You let go first. No, you.*

He pushed his hands in his pockets.

“The sex is fantastic. I want that,” he drawled.

“Tsk.” Her cheek went pink and she looked to the floor again. “So you want to keep doing *this*. You can have that with anyone.”

“Like hell,” he said with affront and crossed the room to open her arms and softly crash her into him. “Are you saying you feel this way with other men?”

He cupped his hands possessively over her ass, pinning her hips to his while she wedged her arms between them and scowled.

“No,” she admitted. “But nothing has changed. We’re still who we are. Anything more than this is impossible.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Things *have* changed. For both of us,” Laszlo insisted. “When this started, you had just mediated our trade agreement. You were afraid your neutrality would be called into question if we went public with our involvement. We’re past that. Our dating wouldn’t reflect badly on you now. On my side, I was new enough in my position I couldn’t afford to be linked to the daughter of a man with an image problem. Now I have a stronger record, and I’d be dating the sister of the Golden Prince—a king who has never made a mistake in his life.”

Sofia gently extricated herself and sank onto the foot of his bed, considering his words.

“*Has* he made a mistake?” Laszlo asked. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

She sent an ironic glance upward. There were many things they didn’t tell each other. This was the longest, most personal conversation they’d ever had. Did he realize that?

“Luca is every bit as scrupled as I am—probably more.” Like her, he had been hemmed in his entire life by nannies and mentors and advisers, all hired by their mother to ensure they upheld the morals their father had abandoned. Luca was still trying to convince the Privy Council to let her take the crown, trying to right their father’s wrong.

Sofia couldn’t tell Laszlo that, however. It bordered on treason that she was still chafed at being passed over, but was there a silver lining to that injustice? Rather than living her life in careful preparation for the slim possibility she would ascend, could she embrace a less exalted and more humble role, one that allowed her to become involved with the president of Presovia?

“I still have to live a very faultless life. If something happens, I’m first in line for the throne. Think about what that would mean to you if it came to pass.”

“That’s not likely,” he dismissed—too easily. “Your brother is healthy and, if he’s as duty-conscious as you are, will marry quickly. You won’t be next in line for long.”

“There would still be a lot of pressures and expectations on both of us. Are you willing to put up with that for an affair? It would be different if we were in love, but...” She lifted her questioning gaze.

His face became a blank slate and he stepped away.

“I don’t expect that,” she lied. “We barely know one another.”

“I know you,” he asserted, pivoting to confront her. “I know you’re taking that tone right now because I’ve hurt you by not stating unequivocally that I’m in love and willing to do whatever it takes to

be together. I know how to touch you to make you wild. I know when you walk into a crowded auditorium without hearing or seeing you. I know that your brother is probably the only person you genuinely trust, and that hurts *me*.”

“Is that it, then?” She looked at her hands in her lap, stunned by all he had said. At length she asked, “You can’t open your heart to me because I don’t share state secrets?”

“I didn’t say I don’t care for you.” His stare was hard enough it nearly knocked her flat onto the mattress. “I’d closed myself off to strong feelings when my mother died, and what I feel for you is nothing like what I remember of the love I had for her. This is a greedy ache in the pit of my stomach, a hunger to have you beside me all the time. I want our lives so intertwined there are no secrets, state or otherwise, that I can’t share with you.”

“Laszlo,” she breathed, so moved her eyes stung. “I want that, too.”

CHAPTER TEN

Sofia wanted to tell her brother before they made any moves in public.

“Have we not done away with those antiquities?” Laszlo asked with genuine irritation. He’d be damned if he’d ask anyone’s permission to court her except *hers*.

“Things are still very delicate at home,” she insisted, but she stayed the night.

Waking beside her, stretching out his arm to drag her sleepy, sighing body into the spoon of his, was the best way to wake. Even better was their lovemaking—lazy and without the usual cloud of “shouldn’t” and “hurry” hanging over them.

“My brother owns a castle,” Sofia said as she put on a hotel robe after they showered the next morning. “We could use it this summer, if we can find a shared week?”

“I’ll tell Igor—” There was a firm knock on the suite’s front door.

They locked gazes.

“One minute,” Laszlo called and pulled on the other robe, then left the bedroom to answer the door.

Igor stood in the hallway with Sofia’s assistant. The young woman wore a shoulder bag and an expression of extreme agitation.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast meeting, sir,” she said. “I wonder if the princess has checked her messages?”

“Are we in the news?” Laszlo asked Igor, waving for the assistants to come inside.

“The king of Vallia has been caught in a compromising photo.” Igor clicked his phone to show King Luca caught backlit by the sunset on a palace balcony, naked as the day he was born. Judging by the blurred section of the image, he was intensely aroused by the very beautiful and curvaceous blonde he was embracing.

“This might be a good time for you to be seen downstairs?” Igor suggested. “Alone?”

Laszlo mentally dug in his heels. Igor’s advice was sound. It was one thing for Laszlo to appear at galas with a woman whose family scandals were behind her. It was another thing to be caught with her while a fresh one made headlines.

Still, it felt disloyal to even think of abandoning Sofia in her moment of vulnerability.

She came out of the bedroom and faltered, probably because he wore such a thunderous expression. What was wrong with the men in her family that they couldn't keep it in their pants? Or at least keep their affairs private like he and Sofia managed to do.

Her clothes were different from last night's. Her damp hair was twisted up, and she wore enough makeup that if she was spotted leaving his room, this could be passed off as the breakfast meeting her assistant had labeled it.

Even so, Laszlo could tell she was shaken beneath her veneer. His heart lurched.

"I need a moment with the president." Gone was the smoky-voiced languorous lover he'd awoken to. She was Princess Sofia, collected and regal.

Their assistants stepped outside and Sofia nervously licked her lips.

"This changes things," she began.

Her hands were clasped so tightly he wanted to pry them apart and hold them. Soothe her and tell her no, it didn't. But he had to be honest.

"A little," he agreed. "It would be better to wait for this to blow over before we—"

"It won't," she cut in. "I think..." Her mouth trembled and she pressed her lips flat, searching his eyes. "Laszlo, I don't think this photo was an accident. I think Luca meant for it to happen."

"What? *Why?*"

"I was born first," she said with a shrug of simplicity. "When our father learned my mother was pregnant with twins, he named the boy his successor and never allowed anyone to question it. When he died, Luca tried to refuse the crown so I could have it, but the Privy Council wouldn't permit it. I didn't have a legitimate reason to challenge him. He was trained for the role, of sound mind and, well, without blemish."

"You think he's giving you a reason?"

"I can hardly believe it, either. I knew he hadn't given up, but this..."

"You *knew* your taking the crown was likely and didn't tell me?" he asked, astounded.

"I didn't *know*. But I...alluded to it yesterday when I said anything could happen." Her chin came up. There were flags of red standing on her cheekbones. "I told you to think about how you would feel if it did."

He snorted, feeling lied to. "I said I wanted there to be no secrets between us, and you withheld the most important one you have."

“This isn’t something I can talk about with just anyone!”

He wasn’t as angry about that as he was about the fact that she immediately felt far beyond his reach. What had he imagined? That after they dated for a time, she would renounce her title, put on an apron and stand in his shadow?

“You’re going to do it? Challenge him?” he demanded.

“Luca has sacrificed himself to give me this chance. I have to.” Tears stood on her lashes.

She wouldn’t want their on-and-off affair muddying the waters while she did.

Why did this feel like such a rejection? They weren’t even properly dating. They had talked about seeing where this relationship would go. Like middle graders asking to go steady.

Even so, he felt as though his heart was being carved out as he said “good luck” and nodded stiffly.

Her head went back and she gusted out, “Thank you.” She might have sniffed as she turned away.

He opened his mouth to call her back, but the door was already closed.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

She did it. In the most civilized coup in history, Sofia took the crown from her twin and became the queen of Vallia overnight. Her dethroned brother made statements of support and regret for his scandal and disappeared.

Sofia made her first proclamation as queen, setting a tone of calm and order and a new, bright future for Vallia.

Laszlo was so filled with pride for her, he was sick with it. He was also anguished by the way they'd parted, tortured by the things he had said and the things he hadn't. Did she think he blamed her for choosing her destiny over what he offered? Because it belatedly struck him that he hadn't offered her anything.

He was in such a foul mood, Igor only came to him with the most pressing of matters. As he presented a handful of reports one afternoon, Igor quietly asked, "The Queen's Foundation gala in Vallia, sir? You'd asked me to make room in your schedule and prepare for your attendance. It's this weekend."

Laszlo had texted Igor about the event while he'd been abed with Sofia that night in Madrid. In their sex-drunk midnight naivety, they had thought it would be the perfect venue to step out as a romantic couple. Her brother's exposure had ruined that. Aside from signing a letter on presidential letterhead that pledged his country's recognition of her new standing, Laszlo hadn't been in touch with her.

There was nothing to be gained by seeing her, he reminded himself, except to appease this monster of a craving that was eating him alive.

"I'll go."

He tried to think of someone he could take as a date and was immediately repulsed by the idea. Eventually he settled on a woman who worked with a mental health organization here in Presovia, since the foundation, which had been started by Sofia's mother, benefited mental health causes.

Laszlo made it clear this would be a networking opportunity for her and a cause he wished to support. His mother had had depression after his father's death and had never quite recovered.

Aside from his security detail, he paid for the trip out of pocket so he couldn't be accused of misusing government funds, not that he had unlimited disposable cash. What money he'd earned and invested during his previous life as a lawyer was held in trust until his political career was over.

*Scandal Befitting a Princess*

That difference of wealth between him and Sofia was another reason they had no future and why he knew this trip was a mistake. But he hadn't appreciated how painful it would be to see her. Or how agonizing it would be to see her see him with another woman.

"Mr. President." Sofia was magnificent in a gown her mother had made famous shortly after becoming queen. Its color was a rich wine red with silver embroidery. A tiara sparkled in the complex arrangement of her hair. Matching diamonds dangled from her ears and encircled her throat.

There Laszlo saw the shock and pain he caused her. The tendons in her neck flexed as though she had taken a mortal blow.

"Please introduce me to your date."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“How kind of you to come,” Sofia said past the dagger lodged in her chest. “It’s lovely to meet you,” she lied to the woman Laszlo had brought.

“I wanted to show support for something close to my heart,” Laszlo said, meeting her gaze.

*Don’t be cruel,* Sofia wanted to say.

In Madrid, as she’d been absorbing her brother’s scandal and its implications, she had known immediately that she would have to choose between the crown that was her destiny and the man who, in another life, might have been her soul mate.

She had made her choice and had to live with it, but the backs of her eyes were hot. It was the greatest test of her control that she held her welcoming smile and didn’t let her cry of anguish break from her throat.

She turned her attention to the next person in the VIP line, the ones given the privilege of being greeted by the queen of Vallia in her first public appearance.

Her brother was beside her, proving his loyalty to her despite his ouster. They were deeply attuned to each other’s moods, and he glanced at her, transmitting his concern at whatever tension he sensed.

Sofia gave the barest hint of a dismissive head shake and they went on with the night.

Laszlo was determined to torture her, however. He danced with his date while Sofia was on the dance floor with the husband of one of the organizers. Laszlo had the temerity to cut in, saying something about his date’s desire to meet the man’s wife. “Would you be so kind as to introduce her?”

When Laszlo then held out his hand to Sofia, she had no choice but to let him draw her into the waltz.

“I’m pleased to see you’re moving on,” she said stiffly, trying to ignore the way her body came alive from the mere pressure of his legs against the fall of her gown.

“I haven’t,” he said grimly.

“I wish you would,” she insisted, only to have her hand squeezed in warning. “What other choice is there?” she asked in a faint hiss. “You are needed in your country as badly as I’m needed in mine.” They had made no promises. No declarations.

A wide canyon sat empty inside her, where those words of intimacy might have echoed and resided, if they'd ever managed to say them.

"Put that aside a moment," he ordered. His voice lowered with concern. "How *are* you?"

Still winded by overturning power and catching it in her own hands. Determined, but overwhelmed by the profound responsibility she'd taken on. Frightened she wouldn't live up to her own expectations, let alone anyone else's. Deeply grateful to her brother, and a tiny bit resentful that he'd done this to her. That he'd cost her Laszlo.

"Fine."

"Liar," he accused under his breath.

The music was reaching its conclusion. Sofia could feel the tension rising in her that always presaged their goodbyes. This would be their last one. It had to be. She couldn't bear another.

"I really do want you to move on," she said sincerely. While it was an agonizing thought that another woman could give him what she hadn't, she said, "I want you to be happy."

The music stopped and he continued to hold her in the stance while her skirts settled.

"Igor has my room number if—" he began against her cheek.

"I'll send a car."

They stepped apart. Their gazes remained tangled for one more second before they were forced to walk away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Weak*, Sofia berated herself as she changed and removed her makeup.

She immediately regretted her lack of a shield when Laszlo was shown into her apartment. Her entire being felt peeled to its rawest state, throbbing with sensitivity.

Her brother had purged the king's chambers during his brief reign, and she was awaiting some minor redecorating before she took them over. Part of her wished she could stay here in the rooms she'd had since she and Luca had left the nursery. She longed for one small thing to remain the same, but nothing ever did.

Laszlo flickered his gaze around the silvery greens and soothing yellows, the sumptuous furniture and the ceiling-high drapes that covered the windows. No balcony of shame here. Only a glowering palace secretary, who noted the queen had dressed down in wide-legged pants and a comfortable pullover.

"Shall I have the car and driver wait?" Guillermo asked.

"I'll text you when we've finished our discussions."

Guillermo left with a snap of a closed door, and Laszlo ran his tongue over his teeth behind his lips.

"Your butler disapproves of your hosting late-night summits, Prin— I beg your pardon. Your Majesty."

"Call me Sofia or I'll have you beheaded." She poured drinks, trying to keep from throwing herself into his arms. Her hand was unsteady and the neck of the crystal decanter sang a musical note as it tapped the crystal glass. "He's the palace secretary and has reason to be concerned."

"Because of your brother's recent troubles?"

"And my father's long history of them." She crossed the room to offer one of the glasses.

Being near him was like standing near a blaze. She craved the heat and light that filled her but had to remind herself to be careful not to get too close or she'd be consumed.

"Whatever you've heard or read is nothing compared to the things our staff has covered up over the years." She sipped the strong scotch. "Things even I didn't know until I came into this position and insisted on learning."

It wasn't wise to be so loose-lipped, but in many ways she had always felt safe with Laszlo. She saw now that had always been his appeal for her. She could be herself in ways no one else allowed.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"My father? No." She took another sip of the searing alcohol. "Only to say that his appetite for sex—" *and drugs and other things* "—was more than a monarch's eccentric and questionable tastes. It was self-destructive and shattered his wife. It scarred his children, impacted the staff and left our entire country in dire straits. Every time I give in to this need to see you, I fear that I'm doing the same thing. That's why it has to stop." *Has to.*

He sucked in a sharp breath.

"You feel the same. I know you do," she said with an anguished, humorless laugh. "Why are we even here now? This is the behavior of one with an addiction"

"Untrue. I'm cautious politically," he said crisply. "But I'm not ashamed of what you and I do when we're alone. I'm offended that you are." He set aside his glass without tasting it and cupped her chin. "You are a passionate, sensual, *perfect* person. I *celebrate* that. That's why I'm here. That's what brings me to you every damned time."

She blinked at the poignant tears that rushed up to dampen her lashes.

He dragged her close and smothered her mouth with his own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Laszlo cupped her cheeks and kissed her with sweet reverence, Sofia clenched her eyes, squeezing the dampness from her lashes onto her cheeks. She had known bringing him here was a mistake, but she had thought her old guilt would be her punishment.

It wasn't. As Laszlo rocked his mouth across hers and her heart thudded in a slow, heavy rhythm that made her sway on her feet, she knew she wouldn't regret this.

But she also realized that all of their stolen moments had stolen her heart. She loved him.

As she slid her arms inside his jacket and up his back, he sighed and molded her closer, reinforcing to her how well they fit, how perfectly they complimented one another.

She quit thinking *This can't happen, this shouldn't happen* and reveled in gratitude that it had. That she had one more night with this tough yet caring man. That she could touch him and drink in the scent at his neck and shiver at the skim of his fingertips down her spine.

When they began to remove each other's clothes, they did it without hurry, the way one opened the most rare and precious of gifts. She folded his jacket as she set it aside and he did the same with his bow tie and cummerbund. After drawing off her pullover, he let his fingers play across her collarbone and the points of her shoulders, like a pianist lovingly finding favorite notes.

Drawing him into her bedroom was an act of drawing him into her most intimate self, not that she'd ever had many defenses against him. As their naked bodies brushed beneath the sheet, she had a flash of realization.

"We're perfect." Perfection was impossible. *That's why they were impossible.*

"We are." He sounded shaken. When he entered her, they barely moved except to kiss and caress. "I will never want anyone else the way I want you," he vowed.

It hurt her to think of him being alone and hurt her to think of him with someone else. She put both out of mind. For this short while, they belonged only to each other. They held onto each minute, held onto each other, as long as they could.

Need and greed got the better of them, though. He began to move with more power. She clung and bit his earlobe and arched to take more of him.

They reached their culmination in exquisite synchronicity that came back in rolling waves, redoubling their pleasure again and again until it finally faded away.

They recovered and parted and lay facing one another, not speaking, using eyes and touch to memorize the other.

When he rose to leave this time, she knew it really was their last goodbye. She refused to make it a bitter one. Not when he'd chased away ghostly fears that she was too much like her father. Laszlo had left her feeling pure and loved.

"Thank you." She set her hand against the sandpaper of stubble coming in on his cheek. "I really do want you to be happy, you know."

"I want that for you, too." He searched her gaze. "If this is all we can have—"

She pressed her thumb over his lips. "Don't tempt me. I'm grateful you helped me see that what we've had doesn't make me like him, but I still need to guard against being selfish. I won't use you."

"I'm inviting you to," he pointed out dryly.

But she wouldn't. She wanted more for him. And putting his well-being above her heart's desire proved once and for all she was better than her father.

When Laszlo finished dressing, he kissed her tenderly and said, "Good night, Sofia."

"Not goodbye?" Her heart wrenched with crooked hope.

"I have to believe I'll see you again. Otherwise, what's the point in living?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Laszlo returned home to an early wildfire season that flared unexpectedly. Thankfully, no one was injured, but homes were lost and people displaced. His detractors went wild. #wherewasFabin. #Galavanting. #ValliaVacation.

His supposed affair with the woman who had accompanied him began making headlines, which infuriated him for the hurt it would cause Sofia.

God, he missed her. He had put out his invitation for her to come to his hotel after the gala without thinking it through, compelled to see her privately in the same way he'd been unable to stop himself from going to the gala in the first place. When she'd sent the car, he had only wanted to get past the platitudes and learn how she was really coping in her new role.

Her confession of fearing she carried some of her father's worst characteristics had shocked him. It explained the way she'd always left his room as though dropping an ax on their time together. He'd adopted it himself after a while and, until Madrid, had allowed himself to believe there was nothing emotional between them—only intense desire.

It all made more sense now, especially why she had pushed him away the morning she had learned about her brother's scandal. She *had* to choose the crown. Yes, it was hers by birthright, but it was a matter of principle. She couldn't let her own needs take precedence over those of her nation, otherwise she really would be no better than her father.

She was as frustratingly noble as her twin.

And it only made Laszlo love her more.

He loved her. He absorbed the realization with shock and a snort of laughter at his own blindness. Of course he loved her. She was independent, dedicated and willing to do the work to make the changes the world needed. She was beautiful enough to start wars but brought people together rather than dividing them.

He had left his heart with her that night and was walking around with an empty chest, so hopelessly in love he could hardly eat.

*I really do want you to be happy.*

How? He would never be happy with anyone else, not if it meant scorning his *solntse*. There was no woman like her. The entire weight of Vallia sat on her determined but slender shoulders, and all

Laszlo could think was how nice it must be for her brother to abdicate his responsibilities and do whatever he liked. *If only.*

Wait a damned minute.

Laszlo's heart lurched and his mind scrambled to catch up. He almost reached for his phone to text Sofia.

He knew what she would say, though. She would tell him not to give up his aspirations on her account, but that's what he had presumed she would do. He had seen her new title as an obstacle that blocked any chance that she could be his. Did that make him any less hers?

Laszlo still had goals and ambitions for Presovia, of course he did, but he had already accomplished the most important one. He had removed the corrupt party from power.

More importantly, what he had learned about politics was that it had the same slow-turning wheels of process that had frustrated him as a lawyer. He had thought he would get his degree and bring his father's killer to justice. That hadn't happened. Then he had thought he would become president and have the power to extradite the killer. He didn't.

Being a queen's consort wouldn't give him any more power to make such things happen, but he wouldn't have any less. He would still have the ability to influence politics behind the scenes, where the real work happened anyway.

The truth was, along with his occasional rendezvous with Sofia, the most interesting and satisfying work he'd done in the last few years had been at the UN conferences.

He started making calls.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Why do you look like hell?” Luca asked Sofia, throwing himself into a chair in her boudoir. “Guillermo is going to think I’m poisoning you to get my old job back.”

“I’ve missed you, too. When are you leaving?”

He snorted, but his voice softened with concern. “Seriously. Why the dark circles and hollow cheeks?” He remained sprawled in a relaxed pose, but his keen gaze missed nothing. “That’s not just one sleepless night. Is it the coronation? I can take over the last-minute barking of orders.”

Initially, the ceremony had been planned for Luca. It was strange to think back on all that had happened in a year. At this time last year, she had been holed up in a hotel room, waiting out a pregnancy test. Soon after, she’d lost her father and pledged allegiance to her brother only to then steal his crown. She had moved in to the monarch’s chambers and, in a few days, would have a ceremony and a parade in her honor.

Amid all of that, she had fallen deeply in love.

She briefly closed her eyes, using a slow breath to withstand the bittersweet angst of joy and yearning.

Laszlo had become a fixture in her mind, one she carried against her heart with a glad, burning pain, stinging even more so lately because he seemed to have found someone. Not the woman he’d brought to the gala, but a human rights lawyer.

Sofia wanted to hate that other woman, but she seemed bright and determined. She had better make him happy

She wanted Laszlo to be happy, but she was dying of loneliness.

“Sofia. Hi. Still here. Still worried.”

“I’m fine.” She went back to putting on her makeup, using a heavy touch with the concealer. “Yes, take over the coronation. One less thing for me to worry about.”

“Good, because there was a question from your assistant that I said I would run by you.” He paused, waiting for her to glance over her shoulder in query. “The president of Presovia has offered to come in a day or two early. He wants a private meeting. Would that be a trade agreement or...?”

Sofia's ears buzzed and her heart took a stumble in her chest. She realized she had stopped breathing and forced herself to gather her composure and pivot on the stool to meet her brother's flat gaze.

"Do you think you're clever?"

He cocked a brow. "Do you think you could tell me you had a pregnancy scare and I wouldn't obsess over who the father could have been? Laszlo Fabin, hmm?"

"Please don't tease me," she said with quiet dignity, despite the fact her heart was pinched in a vise.

"Tease you? I want to know if I should have a private chat with him or welcome him to the family."

She choked on a wistful laugh. "Neither. We're not...possible." She turned back to the mirror, steeped in despair.

"A year ago, I was told it wasn't possible to give the crown to my sister."

"Yes, and thanks to your bullheadedness, I have a country to run. So does Laszlo. What am I supposed to do? Commute from Presovia with my morning coffee? Don't put dreams into my head that can't happen."

"Are you still letting the nanny panel tell you what you can and cannot do?" Luca asked impatiently. "You're the *queen*, Sofia. I didn't give you that power so you could squander it. What the hell is the Privy Council going to do if you break a few rules? Ask *me* back?"

"Oof. Can you imagine?" she asked with pithy horror.

They held straight faces as long as they could before breaking into laughter.

It was her first moment of levity, her first glimpse of something besides loneliness, she'd had in weeks.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Between seeing Sofia in the ballroom and visiting her private apartment, this was Laszlo's third visit to the palace since he had gone back to his hotel.

Today, he was shown into a formal reception parlor.

The second he saw her, he felt as though he was breathing fully for the first time in months, even though she wore her most aloof persona, the one that told him she was very much on the defensive. She wore a navy blue skirt with an angled line of buttons from her waist to her knee. Her blue-and-white-checked jacket was tailored perfectly to her figure.

Everything in him wanted to rush to her and crush her close, smell her, feel her, but she wasn't alone. Prince Luca was with her, dressed in bone-colored trousers and a dark jacket over a striped shirt and tie. The cranky butler was hovering, as well.

Had she felt a need for reinforcements? A chaperone?

"President Fabin," Sofia greeted with a cool smile and a brief handshake. "It's nice to see you again. I don't know if you've had a chance to meet my brother?"

They shook hands and the sharp glint in Luca's eye held a warning. What had she told him?

They briefly exchanged diplomatic niceties before Luca excused himself, saying, "Guillermo, I need you in my meeting."

"Sir—"

"Come along," Luca said with a pleasant smile, opening the door for the palace secretary and waving him through.

As the door closed behind the men, Laszlo said, "You told him about us?"

"He knows we were involved, yes."

The way she framed it as past tense made his blood prickle.

"My assistant wasn't given any preparatory materials." Her voice was strained. "Is this a courtesy call? If so, it's not necessary. I told you before you left last time—"

"I'm not involved with her."

Her gaze crashed into his. She must have seen the animal rising in him. Her eyes widened and her breasts hitched with an uneven breath. She swallowed.

"The woman in the news?" she asked stiffly.

"Natasha, yes. I think she has a good chance at being my successor. We're in talks as to how we would rally the support she needs before campaigning starts in January."

Sofia's jaw went slack. "You're not running?"

"Not if I have a better offer, no." He lifted his brows at her expectantly.

"Laszlo." His name was a breath of shock. She took a few staggering steps, one forward, one back.

He opened his hands to catch her, but she stayed where she was.

He looked at his empty arms. This had been a gamble. He had known that, but he pressed on.

"It will take time. You should know that I'm asking you to wait. I know that's not fair, but I actually *loathe* the idea of you moving on with someone else even though I realize you might have to." He choked on a lump of gall. "It seems absurd in this day and age that you would marry purely to make the next king or queen, but I suppose that's how this works?"

"It does. You don't have any real idea how restrictive this life is. How much pressure I'm under." Her eyes grew shiny with distress. "I won't cage you into it. I *can't*, Laszlo. Don't give up what you have for me."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I would do it for *us*," Laszlo said.

"Don't." Sofia was shaking with temptation.

He was here, so sharply handsome she could weep at his sheer beauty. And he was offering himself. Her brother's words about breaking rules were ringing in her head. She wanted to break the worst one—the one where she put self-interest above duty and grasped at what she wanted in the moment, exactly as her father had done thousands of times.

But she couldn't do that to Laszlo. She couldn't do it to Vallia.

She shook her head, voice thinning. "I don't want you to lose yourself in my life. You're not a man to stand in anyone's shadow."

"I would be standing in your light, *Solntse*." The tenderness in his gaze was sweet, and it made an ache rise in her throat.

He closed in on her and she folded her arms between them, pressing her forehead to his jaw while the rest of her trembled.

"Please don't do this. I don't think I'm strong enough to send you away."

"You are strong, Sofia." His hands rubbed her upper arms and shoulders. "You're so strong you scare the hell out of me. You walk around with a broken heart and withstand it because you must, but I won't break it again. I can't. I love you too much to do that to you."

She gasped and closed her fist into the fabric of his jacket, pressing closer, letting his declaration sink into her skin and blood and bones.

His hands ran soothingly up and down her back. "The first thing I admired about you was that you understood how hard it is to keep wading into the fight when everything seems stacked to defeat you. When we were in Madrid, I formed this little dream that you could be my haven, my confidant. The person who made taking on such fights worth the blows and disappointments. Then we retreated to our separate rings and I ached for you until it struck me. Why shouldn't I be that person for you?"

He was tearing her apart in the gentlest, most profound way.

"I don't know what to say." She lifted her head, tears leaking down her cheeks.

“Say you’ll wait for me. Say you’ll marry me when the time is right. Say yes.”

Queens did not marry commoners. Sofia had always known she would face a metric ton of pushback if their affair came out. Gaining approval to marry him would take more time than he needed to free himself from his own obligations.

But all she could hear was him saying, *I have to believe I’ll see you again. Otherwise, what’s the point in living?*

“I’ll wait as long as I have to. I’ll marry you when you ask. I love you, Laszlo. Yes.”

He smiled and the greatest joy exploded in her heart. When he crushed her close, she thought she would burst from sheer happiness.

Their mouths met, sealing in all the promises they were making to one another. Vows to support and share secrets and love with their whole hearts. Oaths to celebrate their love with the passion and hunger that never seemed to abate between them.

“Slow down or I’ll ravish you on that desk,” he warned.

Sofia had a feeling that desk had seen action in the past but managed to collect herself enough to ask, “If I send a car later—”

“Yes.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The palace staff gathered to see Sofia walk outside in her coronation gown and climb into the carriage pulled by eight chestnut geldings. Thousands had collected on the streets of Vallia for the spectacle, cheering in an unending roar as Sofia was driven to the cathedral where she was anointed before an assemblage of dignitaries from around the world.

Given her tireless ambassadorial work over the years, she enjoyed international popularity. Still, it was noted by the press as remarkable that the president of a small country like Presovia would have such a prominent seat during the ceremony. And what was the provenance of the startling aquamarine ring she wore? What was its significance?

When the heavy crown was placed on her head, Sofia looked to Laszlo, and his solemn nod of deference and pride filled her with strength.

The reception and ball took hours and would have worn her to the bone if not for Laszlo claiming a dance. He made her smile so happily, the press picked up on their chemistry. Their photo went viral before the party was over.

They didn't see one another again until Christmas, when they reunited after months of duty to their respective roles. They anchored in a yacht near Crete and were bothered by nothing but a few seagulls and one choppy day of whitecaps.

As their idyllic time dwindled into its final hours, however, Sofia grew anxious. When they made love, her hold on him held shades of their old frantic desperation.

"My love, shhh. I'm here." He pressed deep inside her, pinning her with his weight while he touched soft kisses to her cheekbone and brow and lips. "What's wrong?"

"Are you sure, Laszlo?" She cradled the side of his face and held him with the clasp of her thighs. "There's still time to change your mind."

When he went back in January, he would make the announcement that he was leaving politics. The dominoes would begin to fall. After his term finished, he would move to Vallia. They would confirm their relationship and, in a year or so, they would announce their engagement. A wedding was two years away at least.

"This is where I want to be, Sofia." He withdrew then pressed into her, setting her alight with pleasure. "I want to be with you like this, every night. Wake with you every morning." He thrust again, and she curled her nails into his shoulder with sharp ecstasy.

*Scandal Befitting a Princess*

Culmination swept over them in minutes and they held one another tight as the throes of joy gripped them.

Afterward, as he stroked his hands over her, he said, "I don't want to put off our life together any longer than I have to."

"I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"You didn't have to do anything. You're you. That's all you need to be."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Four years later...*

The queen of Vallia had been warned her “advanced maternal age” meant she might have trouble conceiving. Since she was expected to produce an heir and a spare, she’d been urged to begin trying on her wedding night.

As with everything else in the course of their relationship, she and Laszlo had seemed fated to wait. They tried for nearly a year and never once saw happy news on the pregnancy stick.

It was demoralizing, but Laszlo insisted there was no pressure on her. Laszlo was Sofia’s delegate in many halls of power, developing a reputation for pushing boundaries and taking risks, but above all he was her most stalwart supporter, known best for his fearsome devotion to his wife. He assured her that they lived very full lives and her brother could secure the throne if needed.

As they closed in on a year of trying, they saw a fertility specialist. Laszlo took his test and was pronounced fertile. Sofia wanted to discuss whether it was time to see if any of her eggs she’d had frozen a few years ago were viable.

The specialist ran a standard screen before beginning treatment and came back with the news that she was already pregnant.

“I can’t be,” she said with disbelief while Laszlo reached for her and crushed her hand. His eyes were damp with joy.

She was pregnant. So pregnant that, when they went for her first scan, they learned she was carrying twins.

“You’re a twin. How can you be this shocked?” Laszlo asked through his astonished laughter.

“Because it’s a miracle. It makes me too happy.”

“No such thing,” he chided.

It seemed to be true. Aside from the usual discomforts of pregnancy, she carried to term and delivered naturally. As she held her son and Laszlo held their daughter, they were both smiling through tears.

“I never imagined I could be this happy,” she told him. “You did this, you know.”

*Scandal Befitting a Princess*

“Oh, *Solntse*,” he choked. “You just birthed two babies. I held a pair of scissors and tried not to faint. Let’s leave credit where it’s due.”

“You know what I mean. You didn’t have to choose this life, but you did. You made this possible for me. Thank you.”

“I would do it again. It’s worth everything we’ve been through to see that beautiful light in your face.” He glanced down. “And in these ones. How will we tell them apart, do you think?”

She laughed but wanted to cry, too, she was so overcome with love for him.

“Colored caps. It worked for Luca and me.”

He chuckled and came to sit on the bed, being careful of the babies they held between them as he leaned in to kiss her. “I love you, my beautiful queen.”

The End

~

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