

Kathryn Freeman



A Little Christmas Charm



A LITTLE CHRISTMAS CHARM

A heart-warming festive love story about second chances

KATHRYN FREEMAN

Christmas Wishes Book 2



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Chapter One

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Six weeks before Christmas

This was the third year in a row that Owen had been included on the work Christmas party planning team. He was becoming a seasonal (come on, the joke wasn't that bad) professional, though he suspected his inclusion had more to do with his enthusiasm for all things party and Christmas, than for his organisational skills. According to the agenda he'd glanced at thirty seconds ago, today they were down to discuss the post-dinner entertainment. Finally, an agenda item he could get excited over. Previous items discussed over the last few months, such as where to hold the party, what colour the theme should be and whether to go for balloons or mini Christmas trees for the table decorations . . . not so much.

Frankly, as long as there was turkey and booze, he'd be happy.

When he pushed open the door to the meeting room his pulse kicked up a gear at the sound of a distinctive laugh; feminine, soft, sexy. Gabby was already there, chatting to her PA, Cindy. Gabby, the tall, dark-haired beauty with deep brown eyes who'd joined Sweet Art as marketing director six months ago.

Gabby, who made this year's Christmas planning meetings the highlight of his week.

He'd tried like blazes to ignore his attraction — he wasn't a fan of

relationships at work –but far from going away, it had intensified to such an extent that he was going to have to do something about it. Either that, or get a new job, or slowly lose his mind.

Gabby's chocolate-brown eyes glanced up at him. 'Well, well, Owen Cooper is actually on time.'

It was the only meeting he'd been prompt for today — because it was the only meeting she'd been attending — but as he couldn't admit that, he settled for flashing her a smile.

If he'd hoped it would make her as off balanced as he felt, he was doomed for disappointment, as she casually continued her conversation with Cindy. With an inward sigh, he pulled out a chair and sat down opposite, observing the pair of them. It was clear from their animated expressions, the flow of easy laughter, that Gabby had a better relationship with her PA than he had with his.

And with uncanny timing, Hilda chose that moment to bustle into the room and park herself on the chair beside him. Short and stocky, her mousy brown hair streaked with grey, Hilda was exceptionally efficient and . . . terrifying. Thank God she was only a temporary fill-in while he looked for a replacement. One that might actually crack a smile at his jokes. He accepted he wasn't McIntyre funny, or Clooney charming, but making women smile was one thing he prided himself on being reasonably good at.

'I expected to find your expenses in my in tray this morning, Mr Cooper.' She wore the same air of displeasure his teachers had worn when he'd failed to deliver homework on time.

'Yes, sorry.' He tried his never-fail smile. 'It's been one of those days. You know, phones going crazy, back-to-back meetings.'

'I told you to put all your calls through to me.'

How to tell her he was afraid she'd scare off the key accounts he was trying to woo? 'I know, but I figure you already have enough on your plate, trying to kick me into shape.' He threw her another smile, wondering if he was losing his touch. He was a salesman, for heaven's sake. Winning people over was part of his job description. 'And what's with the Mr Cooper, again? I thought we agreed you were going to call me Owen?'

She stared stonily back at him. 'I'm old school, Mr Cooper. I like to conduct my business my way.'

Was there any point telling her that as she was working for him, it should

actually be his way? Her unsmiling face suggested it would be a waste of breath. ‘Relax, the expenses are next on my list.’ Right after he’d phoned HR and found out when they were setting up the interviews for the permanent position. A task he couldn’t entrust to Hilda in case, God forbid, she decided to apply. With any luck, he’d have a replacement before Christmas. The thought of having to sit next to Hilda at the Christmas party made him feel queasy.

Finally Sandy, office manager and chair of the planning team, rushed in, full of apology, and the meeting got underway.

‘If we hire a karaoke machine, is anyone actually going to sing?’ Gabby asked fifteen minutes later.

‘You wouldn’t be asking that if you’d been here last year. After a couple of drinks this lot will sing with or without a machine.’ He glanced at Cindy. ‘The lady sitting next to you managed to belt out ‘Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree’ without knowing half the words.’

Cindy snorted. ‘At least I didn’t think I was Frank Sinatra.’

Owen winced as Gabby’s big brown eyes searched out his in a silent question. ‘I may have found myself singing in the bar,’ he conceded.

‘Singing?’ Cindy let out a bark of big, rolling laughter. ‘You serenaded the pretty young barmaid. She probably still has nightmares about it.’

Gabby’s eyebrows rose and Owen shifted uncomfortably. ‘It’s possible,’ he murmured. ‘I don’t have a crystal clear memory of the evening.’ He remembered the hangover the next morning well enough, and the singing, though he had no recollection of who he’d sung to. Only that he’d been dared to sing ‘White Christmas’ by his sales team. Dare him when he was sober, and he’d struggle to turn it down. Dare him when he was drunk, and it seemed he’d do anything.

He risked a glance at Gabby, and winced again at the expression of disappointment on her face. ‘I’m not usually found singing in bars,’ he felt it necessary to clarify. ‘I prefer drinking in them.’ And damn, if he was trying to impress this woman — and he was, no doubt about it — that didn’t sound good. ‘Responsible drinking,’ he added, belatedly realising he sounded like a government health warning. ‘Anyway, moving on. Is anyone, aside from myself and Cindy, in favour of Christmas karaoke?’

Beside him, Hilda shuddered. Owen couldn’t imagine her enjoying any sort of party, never mind one featuring embarrassingly loud singing. Still, at

least he didn't have to feel bad about asking her to help organise a party she wouldn't be attending.

'Is post-dinner entertainment compulsory?' This from Gabby again, who looked almost as horrified as Hilda at the thought of singing in public. 'Couldn't people just talk? Or dance?' She looked at Owen. 'Or drink and chat up the bar staff?'

* * *

Gabby had meant her comment as a joke, but it was clear from the way Owen's cobalt-blue eyes, usually so bold, darted away from hers, that he'd taken it as a dig. But heck, what was she supposed to think about a man who flirted with her as if he liked her, yet who also seemed to flirt with every other female he met, too? Apparently even going as far as serenading a barmaid at the last Christmas party. According to office gossip though, flirting was where it stopped. He didn't have a girlfriend, so her sources . . . okay, so Cindy had taken great delight in telling her. He'd also, again according to Cindy, never actually dated anyone from the office. So you could be the first, Cindy had gleefully informed her. Gabby had politely, and firmly, though rather dishonestly, told her she had no interest in Owen Cooper.

Sandy stood abruptly, shaking Gabby out of her musings. 'Sorry, I need to take this call. I'll be back in five minutes.'

'I think you've upset Ol' Blue Eyes,' Cindy whispered, leaning towards Gabby.

Gabby had to stifle a laugh. Cindy was a stunning Jamaican who had a warm smile, an infectious laugh and took no crap from anyone. They'd grown close in the six months since Gabby had started at Sweet Art, a confectionary company that specialised in putting new twists on the old classics. 'A rather apt nickname.'

'What is?' Owen peered at them from across the table.

'Cindy called you Ol' Blue Eyes. You know, Frank Sinatra's nickname.'

Owen flashed her his killer smile. The one she wished didn't send her stomach dipping, waking up all the dormant butterflies. 'Apt because of my singing prowess, or my eyes?'

Gabby found herself staring into the very eyes she was usually so careful to avoid. Owen was a treat to look at, there was no doubt about it — think

tanned, sexy surfer dude — but it was gazing into those dazzling blue orbs that made her wish for things she wouldn't otherwise dream of wishing for. 'If you're a fan of blue eyes, then I suppose yours are a good example.'

His lips twitched — not that she noticed them, or the fullness of his bottom lip. 'I'm a fan of brown eyes.' His gaze narrowed in on hers. 'The darker the brown, the better.'

He's a compulsive flirt. Do not blush.

Cindy saved her from any potential embarrassment by letting loose another of her hearty laughs. 'You must love my Jamaican peepers then.'

Owen treated Cindy to one of his big, eye crinkling smiles. 'Ah, Cindy, you know I adore everything about you.'

Gabby shook her head, but Cindy laughed again. Married, with two incredibly cute kids, Cindy treated Owen just as Gabby wished she could, with good-humoured mockery.

Hilda, who'd clearly had enough of the frivolous conversation, rose to her feet. 'Would anyone care for a drink?'

When they all asked for a coffee, Cindy slid off her chair. 'I'll help you carry them.'

What? Was Cindy really leaving her alone with Owen? Gabby threw a few mental daggers at her PA's back as she walked out.

The moment the door closed behind them, a humming awareness pinged around the room.

Owen cleared his throat. 'So, it would appear you're not keen on the singing suggestion.' His eyes met hers. 'What type of post-dinner entertainment would bring a smile to your face?'

At the clear innuendo, Gabby raised her eyebrows. 'Seriously?'

Owen sighed and gave her a wry glance. 'Sorry, that was an awful line, wasn't it?'

'It was quite high on the cheesy scale.'

'Yeah, that's a polite way of putting it.' He fidgeted on his seat. 'I'm not usually this terrible at flirting. I don't know what it is about you.' His gaze, when it found hers, was astonishingly unguarded. 'I think I'm trying too hard.'

Her heart faltered. 'Why?'

'Why am I flirting?'

'No.' She swallowed to relieve the sudden dryness in her mouth. 'I

understand that for some men flirting is hard-wired into their DNA. Why are you trying so hard?’

‘I’d have thought that was obvious. I like you.’

Oh boy. Pleasure flooded through her, but along with it, a ripple of panic. Thankfully before the latter could take hold, Cindy and Hilda came back carrying drinks. A minute later Sandy returned and the meeting resumed.

* * *

As if fate was determined to scare the pants off her today, the next meeting in Gabby’s diary, organised by the sales force training team, also involved Owen.

She found him waiting for her outside the room they’d just vacated, one hand casually slipped into his trouser pocket. The dress code in the office was smart casual but Owen always wore a suit. When she’d asked him why, he’d told her he never knew when he might have to meet a client. She’d argued wasn’t that what diaries were for and he’d laughed. Diaries are only useful if you look at them.

‘Which room is the next meeting in?’ she asked him.

He gave her an amused look. ‘Why are you asking me? That’s why I’m waiting for you.’

Typical. Muttering under her breath she dragged out her phone and checked her calendar.

‘It’s not the only reason,’ he added quietly.

Her heart seemed to miss a beat. ‘Oh?’

He shook his head ‘Nope. As I said before, I like you, Gabby Sanderson.’

An hour later, as the sales training meeting rumbled on around her, Gabby realised she’d noticed every movement he’d made, every word he’d said. And the fact that he’d caught her staring at him seventeen times.

Chapter Two

During the meeting, Owen decided two things. One, that the sales force training materials looked too similar to the last lot, despite asking the agency to come up with something fresh and different.

Two, that Gabby was by far the most beautiful, sharp, fascinating woman he'd met in a long time. So much so that he was going to break his self-imposed rule of not dating work colleagues and ask her out for a drink.

'Owen?'

He blinked, finding Josh, the training manager, eyeing him expectantly. Damn, what had the man been waffling on about? 'I'll give you my thoughts in a moment, Josh. How about we get those from around the room first?' Owen eased smoothly into his bullshitter mode, designed to convince others he knew exactly what he was talking about. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Gabby's lips twitch. Okay, so it didn't work on everyone.

The meeting wore on for another twenty minutes until even those who liked the sound of their own voice had heard it enough. As they filed out, he bumped Gabby's arm with his own. 'Catch you later.'

She gave him a distracted nod, clearly totally unaware that he meant the phrase literally. When he got to his desk he fired off a quick email to Cindy.

Let me know when your boss is heading home. He added a please for good measure.

A tortuous hour later, a message from Cindy landed in his inbox.

I'm heading off. She's yawning. Come and rescue her.

Okay then. Inhaling a deep breath, ignoring the twisting in his stomach, he grabbed his briefcase — it looked the part, though actually only held a bag of assorted mints, a stack of business cards and an array of pens — and strode purposefully towards Gabby's office.

She had her head down, glossy dark hair hiding her face. When he gave the door a soft knock, she looked up with a start.

'I've got a better idea for how you can spend your evening.'

She glanced down at the file she'd been reading. 'Better than reading brand strategy?'

'I hope so.' If he couldn't compete with a brand strategy document, his dating days were over. 'You, me, a quiet pub and two glasses of something

alcoholic.'

Long dark lashes blinked slowly over her dark eyes. 'Is this so you can try to convince me about the Christmas karaoke again?'

'No.' He swallowed down the nervous lump in his throat. 'This is me, Owen Cooper, asking you, Gabriela Sanderson, out for a drink.'

'Oh.'

Not the reaction he'd been hoping for. Then again, she hadn't said . . .

'Look, Owen.' She pushed away the file and turned so she was fully facing him.

His heart sank. 'If you're going to follow that up with I like you, please stop now.'

'What's wrong with saying I like you?'

'It's not that, it's the words that will follow. Starting with BUT.'

'Oh, I see.' Her expression softened, and he steeled himself for the gentle letdown. 'I like you but not enough to want to go out for a drink with you.'

And there it was. 'Ouch. Excuse me while I slink out quietly with my tail between my legs.' He paused, wondering how to dig himself out of this hole. 'Any chance we can forget this conversation ever took place?'

'What conversation?'

He slapped on the expected smile, though inside he felt gutted. Not at being turned down, he could handle that. It was the bursting of his happiness bubble he found hard to stomach. He'd made plans. Only rough ones, his crush hadn't led to a personality transplant. Still, he'd figured today a drink, at the weekend a meal, next week the cinema. Next month, maybe he'd slip the idea of a weekend break into the conversation.

A shame he hadn't factored in her not actually fancying him.

As disappointment rolled through him, he tightened his grip on his briefcase. 'Right then, sorry to interrupt. I hope you and the brand strategy document have a good evening. He's a lucky bastard.'

* * *

Gabby saw defeat flash across Owen's face. Defeat and something more; disappointment, hurt? 'Owen.' He halted by the door and glanced over at her, blue eyes cooler now, more guarded. 'I hadn't actually been about to say I liked you.'

'Oh.' If anything, his expression tightened.

‘I’d been about to say, do you think us going out for a drink is a good idea?’

He laughed softly; more disbelief than amusement. ‘Are you doubting my ability to come up with one, or the idea itself?’

‘I like the thought of having a drink with you.’ A hard thing to admit, but worth it to see the surprise on his face. ‘I just wonder if it’s a sensible move. We work together. We can’t afford for . . . emotions to upset that balance, further down the road.’

His responding smile was utterly disarming. ‘It’s just a drink, Gabby.’

The assertion was enough to make her hesitate. When was the last time she’d enjoyed some social time in male company? Heck, in any company. Since she’d moved to take this job, her life had been nothing but work. Even at weekends, she worked, either catching up on emails or sorting out the house. She could tell herself it was because she liked being busy, liked being organised, but the reality was, she was lonely.

Making a rare snap decision, she ripped off a Post-it note, stuck it on the page she’d reached (she wasn’t ready to abandon all her careful principles) and shut the file. ‘Okay, let’s go before I change my mind.’

They walked together to the car park, and it was only as she neared her car that she realised she didn’t have a clue where they were going. ‘Which pub? The one near here? Or somewhere on the way home? Though I don’t even know where you live.’

Another laugh, this one more amused. ‘Are you asking?’

She felt a flush creep across her face. Damn, she hated getting flustered. ‘I just wanted to clarify if there are any details to this plan of yours.’

‘You, me and a drinking venue.’ His smile was indulgent, his voice soft and seductive. ‘How detailed does it need to be?’

Desire sizzled in the pit of her stomach. ‘Where would be useful.’ And she needed to set herself a time limit. His smile was too addictive, his voice too sexy. The promise in his eyes way too tempting.

They reached her car; an Audi TT Roadster she’d blown a small fortune on last year. Practically, she knew it was a poor investment; the outlay, the insurance, the maintenance. But then she’d gone on a test drive, and practicality had been gleefully abandoned in favour of fun and sexy. It had disturbing parallels with her decision to take Owen up on his offer tonight.

‘We could leave the cars here,’ he suggested, glancing at the Audi. ‘Take

a cab to the pub. Have a real drink.’

Laughter caught in her throat. ‘Let me guess, then you come back to mine, or I to yours, so we can save money on the taxi back to work the following morning.’

He grinned. ‘Damn, that’s a great idea. Wish I could take the credit, but I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.’

‘I guess that’s the difference between marketing and sales.’ Keep it light, she told herself, keep it work-related. ‘We drive to the pub, have one drink. Then we go home. Separately.’

He held her door open as she slipped inside, then leant in. ‘I’ll compromise. You follow me to the pub, we’ll have a drink and then see how the mood takes us.’ Then, in typical Owen fashion, he grinned, and closed the car door before she had a chance to reply.

Smiling to herself she scanned the car park, wondering which was his car. The flashy Mercedes fitted his looks, but was perhaps a bit old. The BMW was a typical reps’ car, but she didn’t think he’d be that obvious. The Porsche? No, he’d walked past that. The Mini? Somehow she couldn’t see Owen, several inches over six foot, cramming himself into something so small.

She almost laughed out loud when she saw the car he finally climbed into. A deep blue Maserati — of course. Nothing said single man on the pull like a Maserati. The thought made her pause. Had she really allowed him to charm her into having a drink? It might sound innocuous, but a drink could so easily lead to dinner. Which could lead to . . . She inhaled sharply.

One step at a time.

* * *

The pub was exactly what she’d have chosen. Warm and inviting with red walls, a highly-polished dark wood bar, big open fire and a pleasant hum of conversation.

He turned to her as they walked in, placing a hand at the small of her back to guide her through a small throng of people. ‘What are you having?’

‘A small red wine. Thanks.’ Automatically she dipped into her handbag to find her purse, but the action was halted when his hand clasped her wrist.

‘I get that you’re into equality, that you don’t expect the man to pay, that chivalry is probably a swear word to you but please, don’t shrivel my balls.’

Not on our first date. And not over a measly glass of wine.’ With a huff of acceptance, she put the purse back and he flashed her a grin. ‘You can buy them next time.’

That he was already planning a second date — because let’s face it, that’s what this was — caused a dip in her belly, yet right alongside it came pinpricks of unease. She’d uprooted herself for this job. She couldn’t afford for things to get messy with one of the key people she needed to get along with.

They settled in a quiet corner and he sat back on his chair, legs crossed at his ankles, a lazy smile on his face. He looked content. At ease with himself and the situation, while she was left feeling all . . . fluttery. Her pulse reacting to every movement he made, every glance from those incredible blue eyes.

‘So, Gabriela Sanderson.’ He ran a casual hand through his wavy blond hair. ‘You’re thirty years old, formerly a business graduate from Lancaster, now marketing director at Sweet Art. You like detail, order and hard work. You hate arrogance, aggression and sloppiness. You’re incredibly attractive but you don’t want people to judge you on that so at work you play it down; no make-up, no towering high heels, trousers not skirts. You’re frighteningly organised, careful, hence your worries about us, and though you put on a tough front, making new commercial trainees quake in their boots, they soon realise as long as they put the effort in, you’re actually a real softie.’ He took a swig of his beer. ‘How am I doing so far?’

His observations, uncannily accurate, unnerved her. ‘I’m not soft,’ she muttered.

He arched a blond brow. ‘Did you, or did you not, cover for young James when you found a mistake in the final proof for the sherbet lemon ad?’

‘He’d been working all through the night to make sure those ads got to the agency on time, thanks to the damn power stoppage . . .’ She trailed off when she saw him laughing. ‘Okay, so I appreciate hard work. Shoot me.’

‘Gabby, Gabby.’ He shook his head, eyes alive with amusement and something else. Something darker. ‘There are many things I’d like to do to you, but shooting isn’t up there with them.’ The husky tone sent a shiver down her spine. ‘On the personal front you like the colour red — why else would you buy a red Audi when it looks much better in blue? But it suits your dark Hispanic looks so I’m a huge fan of the red jacket, the red cashmere jumper.’ His eyes flickered downwards, skimming over her red

shirt. ‘Anything red you wear.’ Before she could get too flustered, he changed tack. ‘You don’t talk about your parents, so I sense if they are still around you’re not close. Likewise, I’ve never heard you mention a sibling though you are good pals with the friends you made at Lancaster uni; the Lancaster Ladettes.’

Her mouth hung open. ‘How do you know that?’

‘During a break in the marketing strategy meeting I saw you grinning down at your phone. I asked what was up and you told me you were planning a reunion in Lancaster.’

‘That meeting was five months ago.’

He shrugged. ‘I can appreciate detail, too, when I’m interested enough.’ His eyes caught and held hers. ‘In case there’s any doubt, I’m interested.’

Oh, he was smooth. And she shouldn’t be so affected by smooth. She hadn’t been in the past. When she didn’t reply — couldn’t, because she didn’t know quite what to say to that — he shifted in his chair. ‘So that’s what I know about you. How about you tell me something I don’t know.’

Chapter Three

Owen tried to read the emotions flitting across Gabby's beautiful dark features. And failed miserably. There was a slight colour to her olive-skinned cheeks, which could be anything from anger to pleasure, or simply alcohol and the warmth of the room. He felt out on a limb. He'd told her he was interested, as if that hadn't been clear enough already. He'd also admitted that his interest had been sparked months ago, not long after she'd joined the company. Yet he had no clue what she was thinking.

'That's a clever spin on the whole tell-me-a-bit-about-yourself line.' She angled her head, appearing to study him. 'Is it a tried and tested formula or am I the first recipient?'

He blinked. Then blinked again as he attempted to get his head round what she was implying. 'Sorry?'

She laughed. 'Come on, I'm not cross. In fact I think it's rather clever. I was just wondering if it was part of your standard getting-to-know-you patter.'

It was often said about him that it took a hell of a lot to make him angry, but if you ever did, stand well back. Well, he had a good mind to warn Gabby to move away right now. 'What are you implying?' he asked, attempting to keep the calm he was famed for.

She frowned. 'Hey, I'm not having a go.'

'That's not how it feels from where I'm sitting.'

'Well, wow, I didn't think you'd be that sensitive. It's not like you don't know you're a serial flirt.'

He knew he liked to flirt, but serial flirt? 'You say that as if it's a bad thing.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Look, forget I said anything. I'm not making any judgements.'

Again, that wasn't how it felt. 'What office gossip have you been listening to?'

'Gossip implies it isn't true.' He was pinned in place by a pair of deep brown eyes. 'Are you going to tell me you don't have all the women in the office lusting after you?'

He felt a flush creep up his neck. 'It's hardly all of them.' There was only

one he wanted lusting after him, and so far she seemed . . . ambivalent. ‘Besides, I’ve made it a rule never to date anyone from work.’ Which begged the question, what was he doing here with Gabby?

‘I know.’ She sipped at her drink, her eyes not leaving his. ‘Just as I know you went out with two account managers in the first month I joined.’

He squirmed on his chair. Truth was, both women, from two different agencies, had come on to him. Sure, he’d had a couple of enjoyable evenings, but that’s as far as he’d taken either of them. His interest had already been snared by Gabby.

‘I’m only saying this,’ she continued, eyes searching his, ‘because I’m wondering what, exactly, we’re doing? I admit to an attraction, but as neither of us appears to be relationship material, I’m worried about what will happen when we’ve scratched the itch.’

He winced. ‘Jeez, is that all you think this is, an itch?’

‘I don’t know.’

Owen chose his next words carefully. ‘As you said, I’ve not dated anyone from work before. I’ve also admitted to taking an interest in you practically from the day you joined. I’d planned on the attraction fading but it hasn’t. It’s grown, which probably explains why I haven’t dated anyone in the last five months.’ It had been a non-stop fun-fest of work, sorting out his morose dad, and doing up his dump of a house. ‘As for my apparent inability to have a proper relationship. That’s simply untrue.’

‘Oh?’

‘I lived with a woman for four years.’ He’d only been twenty-three, but by God he’d fallen for Stella, hard. Older, and light years more sophisticated than he’d been, she’d invited him into her life, her home, her family — she had a young daughter — and, so he’d thought, her heart.

Gabby’s eyes were wide with surprise. ‘What happened?’

‘Stella was eight years older than me. It worked at the beginning, but when she turned thirty-five, alarm bells went off in her biological clock. Having another child — she already had a daughter, Zoe — was all she could think of. I was twenty-seven and not ready for nappies yet.’ He’d been having too much fun with Zoe. Two when he’d first met her, six when he’d last tucked her into bed and said goodnight to her. Nearly nine when he’d last seen her, seven months ago, before Stella had started getting twitchy about wanting Zoe to bond with her new boyfriend, Simon.

Suddenly Owen had to avert his eyes, embarrassed, as sorrow washed through him. It had taken years to ease the pain of losing Stella.

He still hadn't got over the loss of Zoe.

'I'm sorry.'

'Yeah. For a long time, so was I.' He'd have given Stella what she wanted, if she'd been prepared to wait another year or two. The fact that she hadn't, had told him everything he'd needed to know about how much she'd really loved him. Owen drained the rest of his beer. 'But it happened nearly four years ago, and this conversation isn't helping me find out more about you.' He angled his head and studied the gorgeous woman sitting opposite. 'You said neither of us were capable of a relationship. What's the longest you've been out with a guy?'

* * *

Gabby was still reeling from the knowledge that the laid-back flirt, who didn't seem to take anything seriously, had actually been in a long-term relationship. And been hurt by it, judging by the haunted look in his eyes when he'd spoken.

'Gabby?'

'I'm not getting into a competition with you about relationships,' she answered, hating that she sounded so defensive.

He frowned. 'It was only a question. You can tell me to butt out.'

Drawing in a breath, she tried to relax her shoulders. 'I've not been out with anyone I've wanted to stay with long-term.'

'Present company accepted?'

His grin was so unashamedly brash, laughter shot out of her. 'You're seriously asking me that on the first date?'

He shrugged, though his eyes continued to smile. 'I notice you didn't deny it.'

'I'm so flabbergasted at your audacity I can't find the breath to tell you to stop being so stupid.'

Far from being upset, he laughed softly. 'Note to self, don't push Gabby on her relationship history.' He flicked a hand through his hair again, leaving it to fall back into the same casual, sexy, just got out of bed style. 'What can I ask you about then, I wonder? How about siblings? Is that safe enough?'

It was safer being annoyed with him, but how to keep to that when he

grinned like he was now? ‘You were right about me not having a brother or sister.’

‘And your parents?’

Her eyes dipped to her glass. ‘I never knew my father. My mother and I . . . aren’t close. She’s worked abroad for most of my life. I was a boarding school kid.’ Why had she said it like that? It made her sound fragile, sad even. And she wasn’t. It no longer bothered her that her mother had been too interested in saving other people’s children to look after her own.

She jumped when a warm hand briefly clasped hers. ‘That sucks. I’m sorry.’

‘No need to be. I’ve managed perfectly fine without a father and I stopped needing my mother a long time ago. It’s better this way. She’s happy doing what she loves.’ Dropping in to see her daughter when the mood suited her. ‘And I’m happy not having to be a dutiful daughter.’ His eyes were watching her carefully so she made sure to look straight into them. ‘I mean that. I’m not some damaged soul in need of sympathy.’

‘I can see that.’ He nodded to her nearly empty glass. ‘Want another?’

‘It will need to be water.’

He gave her a wry smile. ‘Told you we should have gone for the cab option. Guess that’s two waters coming up.’ A few minutes later he was back, pushing a bottle of water and an empty glass over to her. ‘Am I allowed to ask what your mum does that she loves so much?’

‘She works for Save the Children. I’m the product of a fling she had when she was helping out in Mexico following an earthquake.’ She made sure to keep her voice neutral. Everything she’d told him was true; she was happy on her own. It was just that occasionally she wondered if the fault lay with her, rather than her mother. Was she simply unlovable? ‘What about you? Do you have siblings, parents?’

Pain flashed across his face and he reached for his water, not bothering to pour it into the glass. ‘I have a sister, Alice, who lives in France. Mum died three years ago. Dad’s never been the same since.’

It was her turn to touch his hand in sympathy. ‘That sucks, too.’

‘Yeah. It wasn’t a good time. I was still reeling from the break up with Stella, and suddenly shit gets a whole lot worse when Mum’s diagnosed with terminal cancer. Put my pathetic broken heart into perspective.’ His eyes looked bleak. ‘It’s a bastard disease. Everyone tells you to fight, so she did,

but by God there were times I wish she hadn't. Times I wished she'd not gone for the chemo option but just drifted quietly away.'

She'd expected light and frothy, she realised, yet here they were, discussing relationships, death. Real emotions. 'She wanted more time with you all.'

He nodded. 'She did. But it only bought her a few more months, and during that time she was sick as a dog.'

'I guess, if the alternative is death . . .' She trailed off, feeling useless. Truth was, she wasn't sure she understood his pain, not fully. She'd not experienced the death of a loved one. Couldn't even say she'd experienced love; not of a daughter to a parent, or a woman for a man. And she'd thought he was the shallow one. What did that make her?

Suddenly he stretched out his long body and gave her an apologetic smile. 'I promised you an evening better than reading brand strategy, yet here I am talking about death. I must be losing my touch.'

And there it was. The reminder that he might not be shallow, but he was entirely comfortable with charming women, dating them for a short while, and moving on. That in itself didn't worry her — she was hardly looking to be swept off her feet and settle down — but working with someone she'd been intimate with. Wasn't that kind of yuk?

'How about we talk about Christmas?' He pointed to the flyer on the wall next to them, promoting live music during December. 'Any plans, aside from singing at the Christmas party?'

She narrowed her eyes. 'We agreed on a quiz.'

He gave her another of those easy smiles. 'So we did. Anything planned to top that, or will the party be your Christmas highlight?'

'Christmas has never been a highlight for me.'

A flicker of surprise crossed his face, soon followed by understanding. 'No siblings, and an errant mother. I guess it can be a lonely time.'

'Only if you let it be.' And for a while she had, accepting the pity invite from friends who were lovely, but who really hadn't needed her dropping in on their family Christmas. 'Now I go abroad for Christmas, usually somewhere sunny. Cocktails by the pool beats mulled wine in the cold any day.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

'You're not going to tell me all the things I'm missing out on? Snowball

fighters, sprouts, whisky and mince pies by a roaring fire? The Queen's speech?'

He chuckled softly. 'It hardly ever snows, sprouts were only conceived to put kids off vegetables, I usually nod off in the Queen's speech and I can manage a whisky by the fire any time of the year. I don't need the mince pie, though I am rather partial to them.' His eyes rested on hers. 'Have you booked the trip yet?'

'No. I usually go for a last-minute offer.' Oh God, he couldn't be going to ask her—

'Want some company?'

Though she'd half been expecting it, her jaw still hung open. 'You're asking to go on holiday with me when we've not even managed to get through a first date?'

'It's not like we don't know each other.' He shrugged. 'It could be fun.'

'And it could be a total disaster.' Feeling suddenly agitated, she reached for her handbag. 'Look, I've enjoyed tonight, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.'

His eyes dipped to where her fingers gripped the strap on her bag. 'Going somewhere?'

'It's getting late. Time to go home.'

Disappointment flickered across his face before he hid it with a smile and helped her on with her jacket. 'I hope I haven't scared you off. I was thinking out loud. You won't find me stowing away in your suitcase.'

The humour helped to settle her. 'I know, because my packing is legendary for taking up every square inch of space.'

'I might have guessed you'd pack efficiently.' As they headed towards the cars, he again placed a hand against the small of her back. An old-fashioned gesture, much like opening the car door, yet she felt the press of it ripple through her. 'Do you live far?'

She glanced sideways at him. 'Is this where you angle for me to invite you back for a drink?'

His responding laugh was low and seductive. 'When I'm inviting myself back to yours, you'll know it.' They came to a halt by her car and before she had time to worry about whether he was going to kiss her, his mouth lowered to hers. Soft, exquisitely gentle, the kiss was achingly brief. 'I heard what you said tonight,' he said quietly as he broke away. 'And what you didn't say.'

We'll take things slow. But we are moving forward.'

Her lips tingled where his had touched. 'Are we?'

'We are.' He smiled down at her, eyes glittering against the dark night sky. 'Kind of ironic that I'm the one with the reputation, yet you're the one who's commitment shy.'

It was more the other way around. Nobody had ever committed to her. But telling him that would send the wrong message. 'I'm still not convinced us going out is a good idea,' she said instead. 'This job is important to me.' An understatement. Right now, it was all she had.

'Mine is important to me, too, which is why I bided my time for six months.' He traced a finger across her cheek, sending shivers of awareness through her. 'But this attraction isn't going away.'

'We can ignore it,' she breathed, though there was no way she could unfeel the press of his lips on hers.

'We both know that's impossible.' Bold blue eyes tugged at hers. 'Come on, don't be a coward.'

The insinuation stung. 'I'm not.'

'No?' His lips pressed hers in another exquisitely chaste kiss. 'Take a look at the definition sometime. Sweet dreams, Gabby. Until the next time.'

Her head was full of him as she drove the twenty-minute journey home. Still full of him when she hit the play button on her answering machine and listened to the stilted message from her mother, checking in, as she did from time to time. Out of duty, perhaps out of guilt. Certainly not because she actually wanted to talk to her daughter.

When at last Gabby climbed into bed, Owen still invaded her thoughts. So much so that she ended up grabbing her phone and tapping coward, meaning, into the search engine.

A person who is too eager to avoid danger, difficulty or pain.

Was he right? Were her misgivings because she was too scared to take a risk?

Or was she just being sensible?

Sensible, meaning:

Sensible actions or decisions are good because they are based on reasons rather than emotions.

Exactly.

Letting out a deep sigh, she lay back against the pillows, reliving the

gentle touch of his mouth. The pull of his sexy blue eyes. Sensible actions were all very good, but they wouldn't stop the ache between her legs. Or the race of her heart as she wondered how it would feel if he kissed her for real.

Chapter Four

Three weeks before Christmas

It had been three weeks since Owen had persuaded Gabby to have a drink with him. Since then he'd persuaded her into two more after work drinks, and a quick after work meal. He'd tried to keep his promise to take things slowly, but when it came to kissing her goodbye he was having a hard time holding back. In fact after the meal on Monday — which she had insisted on paying for — he'd been seconds away from abandoning his good intentions and begging her to let him follow her home.

Then he'd remembered how wary she was about dating him, and how easy it would be to scare her off. She was a woman who wouldn't be pushed. A woman who, from the snippets she'd let slip, had been made to feel like an inconvenience to the one person who'd really mattered to her growing up, her mother. It wasn't hard to see why she was scared of getting close to anyone. Why take the risk when she had no clue of the benefit?

It was up to him to show her how good it could be. How good they could be.

So tonight, Friday, he was going to take her out for a proper meal, which he would damn well pay for. With no work tomorrow, they had all evening, and he was determined to make the most of it.

Sadly first he had an afternoon of interviews to get through.

Two hours, two coffees and two mince pies later — why couldn't they be available all year round? — he'd interviewed three very pleasant candidates. All had impressive CVs, smiles that seemed genuine and were a vast improvement on his current personal assistant. One more to get through. One more before he could head off home and get ready for his hot date.

Resolutely he picked up the final CV. And blanched when he read the name.

'Hilda, I didn't think you'd be applying,' he said to the lady now entering his office. She looked too old for a woman he guessed was in her mid-fifties, though God knew where the wrinkles had come from because they sure weren't laughter lines.

'I was told I could.'

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ He motioned for her to sit on the chair opposite. ‘I just assumed you preferred the life of a temp.’ For assumed, read hoped.

‘I prefer a job with a steady income.’ She raised her chin, her back ramrod straight. ‘I was made redundant last year.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ Firm probably couldn’t wait to get rid of her. He picked up her CV and glanced through it, aware he probably should have done that before he’d started the flaming interviews. Looked like she’d worked for the same company for over thirty years, and the same person for most of that time, following him through the ranks to MD. Interesting. Maybe that’s why she was so set in her ways.

‘Tell me, Hilda, why should I take you on instead of the other three candidates I’ve just seen?’ Every one of whom he felt he could have a bit of a laugh with. Hilda was like the teacher he’d always hated at school. The one who told him off for running and having his top button undone.

‘I’m efficient, loyal and discrete.’

He could attest to all three qualities, and certainly the last two were vital, but call him nuts, he’d trade some efficiency for someone who actually looked like they enjoyed their job. ‘I’ve witnessed the first. Can you provide any examples of the other two?’

‘Mr Cox, my previous manager, trusted me to manage the redundancy letters, even though I knew I would be receiving one of them. Before that I was with Mr Weatherby for twenty years. He trusted me to manage his inbox, buy presents for his wife.’ She twisted her hands. ‘And cover for him when he was seeing his mistress.’

Owen’s eyes widened. ‘Sounds like a real charmer. Don’t tell me, he also expected you to sort his dry cleaning and bring him his coffee at ten o’clock sharp every morning. With two biscuits.’

‘It wasn’t always ten o’clock.’ Her face remained impeccably expressionless. ‘And he preferred a Danish from the bakery across the road.’

Owen sat back and studied Hilda. ‘I believe you’re loyal and discrete, but I’d say the other candidates are, too. Why should I choose you?’

She blinked, then glanced down at her hands. ‘I can’t think of a reason beyond what you know. If you’re not happy with the work I’ve been doing then clearly I should withdraw my application.’

Part of him wanted to leave it at that. He’d achieved his objective, hadn’t he? Convinced her not to apply, but it didn’t feel right. There was something

he was missing. 'I take it this isn't the first job you've applied for since you were made redundant?'

'No.'

She stared defiantly back at him. A proud woman, yet one he suspected was desperate for a permanent position. He also suspected she was unlikely to get one because she came across as po-faced; an old-fashioned, inflexible PA who was a stickler for rules. The total opposite of what he was looking for. So why on earth was he still going through the motions of this interview?

Because for twenty years she's worked for a man who treated her like a lackey.

'If I were to employ you, I wouldn't expect you to do my dry cleaning, buy presents for the wife I don't have or fetch my coffee. I would expect you to smile at my sometimes really bad jokes, say good morning and call me Owen. Could you do that?'

A mixture of confusion and surprise crossed her face, but neither of those emotions sealed the deal. It was the hope in her eyes that did it for him.

By four o'clock, Gabby found it almost impossible to focus. Instead of reviewing the sales forecasts, her mind had begun reviewing her wardrobe. What to wear tonight? At work it was always trousers, but she had a hankering to wear a skirt. Show Owen she had a pair of legs that were actually fairly presentable.

Oh God, was she really doing this? Getting all fired up about going out with a guy? She usually had more focus than that, more discipline. She wasn't even convinced she was doing the right thing, yet here she was, giddily excited about her Friday night out.

At the light tap on her door, she almost jumped out of her skin.

'That's the third time in the last ten minutes I've seen you gaze off into space.' Cindy flashed her a knowing grin. 'You wouldn't have your mind on other things. Like tonight?'

'Keep your voice down.' Her eyes skimmed anxiously behind Cindy. 'I don't need the whole company knowing.' Bad enough her PA knew, and that was only because on Monday, when Cindy had asked if she planned to work late, Gabby had turned a mortifying shade of tomato. Then confessed she was waiting for Owen.

'It's not frowned on, you know.' Cindy stepped inside the office, one arm resting behind her back. 'Though I understand why you'd want to be

circumspect. This being only your . . . second date?’

‘Fourth.’ Amusement shone in Cindy’s dark eyes and Gabby knew she’d fallen into her trap.

‘Things must be moving on nicely then. Perhaps that’s why he asked me to give you this.’ Cindy drew a small artificial tree from behind her back, complete with tiny red baubles and flashing red lights. ‘He said it was a disgrace for someone on the Christmas party planning team not to have decorations in their office.’

Gabby rolled her eyes as she reached for it, though inside, her heart did a slow cartwheel. ‘I guess he bought one for you, too.’

Cindy let rip one of her big laughs. ‘It’s not me he’s trying to woo.’

‘He’s not trying to . . . we’re just . . .’ She trailed off, flustered. ‘Enough, I’m not talking about this.’ She flapped a hand at Cindy. ‘For goodness sake, go home.’

‘I will, thank you. And you have yourself a fabulous evening.’ A wide grin split her face. ‘Don’t do anything I—’

‘Bye, Cindy.’ Gabby cut her off, smiling to show there were no hard feelings. She couldn’t talk about this thing with Owen yet. Not until she’d sorted it out in her own head.

As she carefully placed the tree by the side of the monitor, her phone buzzed with a text.

*I’m leaving to spruce myself up for my hot date. Pick you up at 7.30.
Owen.*

In the quiet of her office, Gabby looked at the tree, then back down at her phone. And smiled to herself.

Ten minutes later, she headed home.

Her good mood was broken moments after stepping into the house when she received a surprise call from her mother. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

Gabby closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. ‘I don’t usually receive two calls within a few weeks of each other.’

The connection was poor and it took a moment for Gabby to work out her mother’s reply above the crackle. ‘You didn’t phone me back.’

‘You always told me not to.’ It had been one of the hardest things she’d had to cope with as a child. Hurtful comments from supposed friends, being dumped by her first boyfriend, being overlooked as Head Girl. Just a few of

the times she'd reached for the phone, wanting to talk to her mum. Then put it down again. Don't phone me, I'll phone you. Gabby knew her mother's rule came from practicality — she never knew what time zone she'd be in, or what she'd be doing — rather than a deliberate desire to hurt, but it didn't change the fact that when she'd needed her most, her mother had never been there.

They talked for another few minutes before hanging up. Gabby had the sense her mother was holding something back, but when she pushed, she received a huffy response. I just called to catch up with my daughter. I didn't realise it was a crime. As there had always been a huge part of her mother's life she'd never been part of, Gabby left it there. Right now, she had enough in her own life to focus on.

After showering she opened her underwear drawer, and instantly felt the thump of her heart.

Would Owen see it tonight?

She couldn't deny she'd missed sex. It had been . . . over two years, she realised with a start. David. Pleasant guy, good body. He'd known what to do with it, too. He hadn't known how to talk to her before or afterwards, but that hadn't bothered her because she hadn't wanted that either. They'd both been happy to scratch the itch. A phrase that had offended Owen.

If this wasn't about sex though, what was it about? Fun, she decided firmly. A single, thirty-year-old woman was allowed to have fun with an equally single, incredibly attractive, man of a similar age.

Flicking through the drawer, she skipped over the practical underwear — she had a lot of practical — and picked out the sexiest set she owned. A lacy red number, because she was going to wear a red dress. There, see, practical. And she was wearing the dress because she liked it. Not because it suited her colouring and showed off her legs.

When the bell rang at 7.40 — predictably he was late — she was ready and waiting. She was also, to her intense annoyance, a tiny bit nervous. Popping out after work was one thing. Getting dolled up for a man who was picking her up, was an altogether more serious proposition.

Running a hand down her dress to smooth out the non-existent creases, she went to open the door. And had the satisfaction of seeing his jaw drop.

'Bloody hell, Gabby.' His eyes feasted on her, skimming up and down her body before settling on her face. 'You scrub up well.'

A bubble of laughter caught in her throat. ‘That’s . . . good, I think?’

Giving himself a little shake, he reached for her hand and raised it to his lips. ‘Sorry. You look so gorgeous you’ve screwed with my sangfroid. Outside I might look calm, but inside my tongue’s hanging out.’

The laughter eased past her throat and flowed out, reminding her she didn’t need to be nervous. She knew this man. Not all the details, perhaps, but the essence of him. He wasn’t complex, or guarded. He was open and easy. And by God he made her laugh.

As she slid into the coat he gallantly held open for her, Gabby took a good long look of her own. He’d opted for dark blue jeans, teamed with a navy patterned shirt and a snazzy brown wool jacket. ‘You scrub up pretty well, too.’

‘Hey, stop pinching my lines. Are you ready to go?’

‘Yes, but first this.’ She kissed his freshly shaved cheek. ‘Thank you for my tree.’

‘Ah, you liked it?’ His eyes rested on hers. ‘I know you aren’t a fan of Christmas, but it didn’t seem right for you to sit in an office that looked so joyless compared to everyone else’s.’

He touched her, she thought. More than she wanted to admit. ‘I’m starving.’ Desperately she changed the subject. ‘I hope you’ve chosen well.’

‘Are you doubting my ability to wine and dine you, Ms Sanderson?’

Smiling, she threaded an arm through his. ‘Not at all, Mr Cooper. Bring it on.’

Perfect, she thought as she eased back in her chair. The restaurant, the meal and the company. He’d chosen atmosphere over elegance — probably because the place had more Christmas decorations than Santa’s grotto — and good food over fancy. She had, she was forced to admit, enjoyed every minute of it.

Would the evening end here, though?

The thought was enough to have her reaching for her wine. The next step felt like a huge one. Because they worked together? Or because she sensed this could be something more? Something she wasn’t ready for.

Stop thinking. Enjoy the moment.

Setting the wine glass back, she allowed herself a few moments to simply gaze at him. ‘I forgot to ask. How did your interviews go? Have you got yourself a new PA?’

‘Ah.’ He placed the dessert menu he’d been scrutinising back on the table. ‘I might just have hired Hilda on a permanent basis.’

‘Hilda?’ she croaked. ‘The battleaxe who makes trying to get a meeting with you harder than one with the Queen, George Clooney and the Pope? All in the same room.’

Owen hooted with laughter. ‘Does she really? Maybe I’ve just hired the perfect PA.’

Gabby was still in shock. ‘You’re seriously going to hire the woman you’ve done nothing but gripe about since she arrived?’

He gave her a charmingly sheepish smile. ‘Okay, I may have been a little hasty in my judgement. I believe she can mellow though, with the right encouragement.’

‘Were the other three that bad?’

‘Not at all. Any of them would have been great. But Hilda . . .’ He sighed, his expression one of bemusement as if he too couldn’t believe what he’d just done. ‘I think she needed the job more than any of them.’

There it was, another unwanted tug on her heart. ‘And you called me soft. You’re the biggest softie of them all.’

‘Oh no, no way. Absolutely not.’ He gave his head a vehement shake. ‘Better the devil you know and all that. The others could turn out to be right nutters. At least with Hilda I’m aware of her nut quotient.’

She fought not to laugh. ‘Then all I can say is good luck.’ Her gaze flicked down to the menu he’d abandoned, and then up to his. ‘Do you want dessert?’

‘That depends.’ His eyes met and held hers. ‘Is there an alternative plan?’

‘You could come back to my place for a coffee.’

Chapter Five

Owen tried to keep his expression to one of dignified pleasure, rather than the abso-bloody-lutely, try and stop me, he felt inside. But he couldn't stop the grin that spread across his face.

'Is that an abstract, you could come back, or an invitation?'

She rolled her eyes. He thought he could get lost in those deep brown pools, if she ever allowed him close enough. 'I believe it's an invitation. For coffee.'

She emphasised the last two words, clearly able to read his X-rated thoughts. Owen was used to having doors slammed in his face though, he was a salesman, after all. He also had a track record of easing them open again. 'Then let's get out of here.' He settled the bill quickly, reminding her it was his turn when she reached for her purse. Her independence both impressed and irritated him in equal measures.

In the car she chatted away about this and that; the office Christmas party, the crazy cost of Christmas trees. How she wanted to see the latest Thor film because she loved Chris Hemsworth. Beyond the occasional ummm, he wasn't required to contribute, which was just as well because his mind was fully occupied wondering what she was wearing beneath the sexy red dress. If it was red underwear, he was toast.

'Do you agree?'

Damn. He shot her a sideways glance and didn't need to be a mind reader to guess what she was thinking. Well, he'd soon prove her wrong. She'd last been talking about that Hemsworth guy, hadn't she? 'Absolutely. Height, muscles, blond hair. What's not to like about him? I'd totally fancy him if I didn't prefer curves. And dark hair.'

She bit into her lip, clearing trying not to laugh. 'Actually, I'd moved on from Thor. I was talking about the new guy on the reception desk. And how hot he was.' She gave him a sly smile. 'Which you clearly agree with.'

She might have rumbled him but Owen had never been one to back down. 'As I said, I'd totally fancy him if I didn't already have this thing for an incredibly sexy brunette who looks amazing in red.'

Her laughter filled the car. 'You're slick, I'll give you that. Have you ever been left speechless?'

‘Not so far.’ He smirked over at her. ‘But the night is young.’

After pulling up outside her Victorian terrace he leapt round to the passenger side to help her out, biting back a smile as she frowned at his outstretched hand. ‘I am capable of getting out of a car by myself.’

‘And I’m capable of making my own coffee. Doesn’t mean I won’t appreciate you making one for me.’

She rolled her eyes again, though she didn’t tug her hand away as they walked up the path to her postbox red front door. The woodwork was freshly painted, the flowerbeds beneath the bay window neat and the path remarkably weed free. Two bay trees stood in smart red pots, adding a festive touch he knew was unintended. All were reflections of the woman he was coming to know and like more and more each day; organised, careful, tidy. God knows what she’d think of the rambling old place he’d bought on a whim two years ago, and still hadn’t finished renovating.

‘No Christmas lights?’ he asked as she opened the door.

‘Didn’t seem much point, not with me planning on going away.’

Ah yes. Last time she’d laughed at him, but to his way of thinking this was just another closed door he had to find a way to open. ‘What is this now, our sixth date? Seventh?’ He really had no idea. He could hardly remember a time when he hadn’t been dating her, or wanting to date her.

‘Fifth,’ she murmured as she tugged off her coat and hung it in a neat cupboard under the stairs.

Owen flung his jacket over the banister. ‘What’s the cut off before we’re allowed to go on holiday together?’

‘Pardon?’

‘When I first suggested tagging along with you on your Christmas jaunt, you used the it’s only our first date argument.’ Because he could see she was backing away from him, he took hold of her hands — wow they were cold — and pressed them to his chest. ‘I was just wondering the number we have to get to when that argument will no longer be valid.’

Her hands fidgeted beneath his. ‘I don’t know. It’s too early. I mean we don’t know if we’re compatible yet. We’re not even dating, not really. Going away together . . . God, that’s a huge step.’

He could feel her tension; see the panic she was trying to hide. ‘You think we wouldn’t have fun?’

‘I know we’d have fun.’

‘Then what’s stopping you?’

She sighed, jerking her hands away. ‘It’s a crazy idea. We’ve not even slept together yet.’

He laughed softly. ‘I have no problem with remedying that. No problem at all.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘Not everything is a joke.’

Ouch. ‘I know. Equally not every decision you make has to be meticulously thought through. Sometimes you can go with your gut.’ Though from the look on her face, her gut was also telling her holidaying with him was a bad idea. A bloody shame, because he couldn’t imagine anything better than spending ten days, and nights, in her company.

‘That’s not how I work.’

Her back was stiff, her voice tight. If he carried on like this, the evening that had promised so much was in danger of disintegrating. He was too used to getting his own way, he realised. Too used to women who bowed to his wishes.

Exhaling roughly, he cupped her face with his hands. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push.’ He dropped a light kiss on her lips. ‘Is the coffee still on, or have you had enough of me for tonight?’

How simple it would be to tell him she’d had enough, Gabby thought, and not just for tonight. Her work life would remain uncomplicated, her personal life remain ordered. Her emotions under control.

But he’d awakened something in her, something she wasn’t sure she could neatly package up and put back in the box. These last few weeks she’d felt different; less lonely, less of a marketing machine. Far more of a woman. So if she couldn’t stop it, perhaps she needed to embrace it. This thing between them was hardly going to end up becoming serious; he wasn’t, after all. Perhaps they really could enjoy each other for a while, and remain friends at the end.

‘I can make you a coffee.’ Screwing up her courage, Gabby pressed her body closer to his, feeling the hard muscles of his thighs press against hers. ‘Or we can find something else to do to pass the next few hours.’

She felt his groin pulse. Saw heat flash in his eyes. ‘Hours? You have a healthy opinion of my stamina.’ He dipped his head and ran a trail of hot kisses down her face. ‘For the record, I prefer option two.’

‘Thought you might.’

His arms circled her, one hand skimming down her back before drawing her tighter against him, eliciting a moan of pleasure from her.

‘Shall we continue this somewhere more . . .’ his eyes drifted over the pokey hallway they were still standing in ‘. . . more conducive to seduction?’

Laughing, she eased away. ‘Well, if you’re not able to seduce me in a hallway—’

The words died on her lips as his mouth captured hers. No longer flirtatious and gentle, this was a full-blown onslaught to the senses. He devoured her, slipping past her defences, torturing then caressing, teasing then plundering. Before she could take a breath, she was pressed against the wall, her legs lifted to encircle his hips.

‘What were you saying?’

Good God, he had her head spinning. ‘Let’s go upstairs.’ He gave her a smug, purely male, smile. Then lifted her into his arms. ‘Wait, no.’ She wriggled against his hold. ‘Please don’t tell me you’re going to try and carry me up the stairs.’

‘What sort of seduction would this be if I didn’t?’ Manfully he took the first step.

‘There won’t be any seduction if you do your back in.’

She felt, as well as heard, the rumble of his laughter. ‘Such little faith.’

She held her breath as he strode up the stairs, wondering at his strength, because at five foot eight, she was no lightweight. Wondering also why a fiercely independent woman could get such pleasure out of being carried. She could open her own doors, make her own way up the stairs. And yet . . . she sighed into his neck, resting her head for a moment before breathing him in.

She was so immersed in him she wasn’t aware of him pushing his way into the spare room. ‘Good God, I hope this isn’t your bedroom.’

Her eyes skimmed over the neutral colours, the elegant cream carpet, the carefully chosen oak furniture. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Where’s the mess? You know, the lotions and potions, hairbrushes, yesterday’s clothes. Lacy underwear on the floor.’ He gazed down at her. ‘Please tell me you have lacy underwear lying around somewhere else.’

How could this man make her laugh and want at the same time? ‘My room is the next one. But the underwear is neatly tidied away in a drawer,’ she added as he pushed the door open. ‘My lotions and potions are in a box in the bathroom and yesterday’s clothes are in the laundry basket.’

‘God, I love a woman who can talk dirty,’ he murmured as he laid her on the bed. ‘Guess I’ll have to find the underwear myself.’ His hand swooped behind her back, drawing down her zip. As he eased the dress off her shoulders, the heat of his gaze sent an answering rush of desire to parts of her body long forgotten.

‘Red lace.’ His voice sounded hoarse. ‘You’re killing me here, Gabby. I feel like the kid with his hand in the candy jar, and every sweet he touches is one of his favourites.’ He cupped her breasts. ‘Sugar dusted pear drops.’ He shook his head. ‘No, strawberry bon bons.’

His touch, the appreciation in his eyes, sent a sharp thrill through her. ‘I’ve never been compared to confectionary before.’

‘No?’ His eyes were focused on her breasts and with a groan he bent to kiss them, his mouth hot against the lace. ‘Nobody’s ever told you how delicious you are?’ He unclasped the bra, his tongue now lapping against her nipple. ‘How sweet you taste?’

She wanted to tell him he was being corny, but his touch was too exquisite, the sensations building too powerful for speech. Instead she clasped his head and pulled it closer, losing herself in the moment, giving in to the desire that throbbed and pulsed through every part of her. When his hands trailed between her thighs, she detonated.

As she slowly came to, she found him standing at the end of the bed, lifting his half-unbuttoned shirt over his head, the muscles of his chest sliding over each other, rippling across his body.

Catching her ogling him he grinned and began to slowly undo his belt before lowering the zip on his jeans, his movements sure and cocky. Then he turned around and tugged the jeans down his hips, wriggling his impeccable backside at her.

She couldn’t help it, she started to giggle. ‘Do I have to pay for this show?’

He turned back, unashamedly naked. ‘Only if you like what you see.’

Her heart let out a giant thump, and lust shot through her. The body of a male stripper, the looks of a male model, the confidence of a Hollywood star. And yet, despite all that, he wasn’t arrogant, because arrogant men didn’t pose like Owen was now, waggling his eyebrows up and down in a comic gesture while puffing out his impressive chest and pumping his biceps.

‘I like what I see,’ she told him honestly, surprising herself as much as

him.

The laughter in his eyes died, replaced by a fierce hunger. 'I like what I see, too,' he said quietly, easing onto the bed, his body sliding over hers. 'And what I touch,' he added, tracing his fingers along the curve of her breast. 'What I smell.' He inhaled, kissing her neck. 'And what I taste.' His mouth came down on hers, his tongue diving between her lips.

She was mush. Putty in his hands. A puddle on the bed. He played with her body, teasing, delighting, before slipping on a condom and easing inside her. As his thrusts became more forceful, the pace faster, she was swept away on a tidal wave of passion.

Chapter Six

As he rolled, exhausted, onto his back for the second time in the space of an hour, Owen wondered if making love to Gabby hadn't been a monumental mistake. It was too overpowering, too intense. Too addictive. He couldn't envisage a time when he wouldn't want to reach for her, as he'd just done again. When he wouldn't want to kiss her, to hold her in his arms.

For a man who'd run away from anything serious for the last few years, unwilling to put himself through all the angst and hurt he knew relationships could bring, the thought was terrifying.

Shifting onto his side, he studied her naked body, running his hand along her arm, her breasts, her stomach. The amazing legs, currently entangled with his.

Not because he could, but because he couldn't not.

'You're incredible,' he told her, loving how flushed her skin looked, how soft her deep brown eyes. Too soon to be serious, he realised, for both of them. 'The most incredible strawberry bon bon I've ever been to bed with.'

She smiled and damn it, something in his chest shifted. 'And that's the most . . . interesting compliment I've ever had.'

'I aim to please.' Ignoring the fear that hovered, fear he was getting in too fast, too soon, he kissed the tip of her nose. 'Any chance I can cadge a night's sleep in this comfy bed of yours, or are you kicking me out now you've had your evil way with me?' Staying was trouble, but by God he wasn't ready to leave just yet.

She scrunched up her face. 'That depends. Do you snore?'

He gaped in mock horror. 'You think a body like this snores?'

'Point taken.' Her eyes, often dark and mysterious, glittered with amusement. 'Do you hog the duvet?'

'No need. You and me are all the heat I need.'

She groaned, raising her eyes to the ceiling. 'Cute or corny, I can't decide. Probably corny. Last question. Will you be waking me up at some ridiculous hour of the morning, because I'm telling you now, I get grumpy if I have to get up early at the weekend?'

He snuggled closer to her, winding his arm around her waist. 'If I wake you up, I guarantee I won't leave you grumpy.' To stop the smart retort he

knew was coming, he kissed her.

When they finally came up for air, she smiled softly at him. 'You passed. You can stay.'

Ridiculously pleased, he shifted them both so her back was against his chest, her warm and tempting buttocks hugging his crotch. Spooning had never felt so good. 'Goodnight, gorgeous Gabby.'

Her body rose and fell as she let out a long, sleepy breath. 'Goodnight . . .' She angled her head round. 'I can't think of anything beginning with "o".'

'Orgasmic Owen?' When she groaned he tried again. 'Oh-my-God-you're awesome, Owen?'

'That works.' She settled back against him. 'Goodnight Oh-my-God-I'm-in-bed-with Owen Cooper.'

For the first time he could remember, Owen fell asleep mid-laugh.

* * *

He woke before Gabby, his body clock seemingly stuck on six a.m. Before Stella, he'd slept in till mid-afternoon, no problem, but after moving in with a toddler his body had adjusted to early mornings. And stuck there.

Desire pulsed through him as he stared down at the woman lying next to him; dark locks spread across the pillow, long eyelashes fanning over her closed lids. Her skin a healthy glow against the white cotton duvet. Instead of reaching for her, he swung his legs out of bed and removed himself from temptation. Last night had been beyond his expectations. He didn't want to ruin things between them now by waking her for what would be his own selfish end.

It left him wondering how to occupy himself though. He could take a shower and hope she was awake when he came out. Make them both some breakfast, though hers might go cold and he didn't fancy eating alone in someone else's house. He could just go home, but sneaking out of a woman's bedroom even after leaving a note had never felt right, though he'd done it once or twice. Wracked with indecision, he reached for the jeans he'd discarded on the floor.

'I seem to have a naked man standing in my bedroom.'

He jerked upright. 'God, woman, you scared me. I thought you were fast asleep.'

'Are you heading home?'

His imagination, or did she sound a lot cooler than she had last night?
'Not unless you want me to.'

'Then what are you doing?'

Something about Gabby's tone made him feel uncomfortable having this conversation with his private parts on display. Feeling like a shy teenager, he moved the jeans he was clutching to cover his modesty. 'I was trying not to wake you.' As he didn't like the way she was looking at him, he went to perch on the bed next to her. 'I wasn't about to leave.' He brushed his hand along her face. 'You have to know this meant way more than a one-night stand to me.'

* * *

Gabby didn't know. Last night had been incredible; the meal, the conversation and the sex. It was why it had been so easy to let him stay over, something she didn't usually encourage. She enjoyed living on her own, enjoyed her own space, doing her own thing. If men stayed over, it was usually because they'd fallen asleep. Owen had stayed because he'd asked, and she'd . . . heck, she'd wanted him to. Helped by the way he'd made it all feel so easy, so natural. But then she'd woken to see him sneaking out, or so she'd thought, and she'd been shocked to find she was hurt.

'Gabby?' His expression radiated sincerity.

'If you're going to stay, you need to get back into bed.' She glanced at the bedside clock. 'Nobody in their right mind gets up and dressed at six-thirty a.m. on a Saturday unless they have to.'

Wordlessly he dropped the jeans he'd been rather amusingly using to cover himself — it's not like he was shy, nor, she could confirm, did he have anything to be shy about — and climbed back into bed. The moment his warm body wrapped around her, she drifted back off to sleep.

Two hours later she woke to the feel of his hand stroking her breast. The hard, hot press of his arousal against her backside.

'Is this you not waking me up again?'

His breath fanned against her back as he laughed. 'Oops.'

Why did it feel so right to wake in this man's arms, when other men had made her feel boxed in? His hand drifted lower and as his mouth left a hot trail of kisses along her spine, she arched her back in pleasure. Perhaps the whys didn't matter. If it was just sexual chemistry, it would soon fizzle out. If

it was more . . . well, then she'd be entering uncharted waters. And she'd approach it as she did everything in life; cautiously, pragmatically.

His big body shifted, covering hers, and a moan of arousal escaped her as she tugged him closer, abandoning herself to the desire flooding through her.

* * *

'So, this holiday you're planning.' Owen sat at her breakfast bar, a pile of scrambled eggs on toast in front of him. She must be losing her mind, she thought as she settled down opposite him. She'd never made a man breakfast before.

'What about it?'

His blue eyes twinkled, his smile oozing charm. 'When are you going to realise it would be much more fun with a companion?'

She forced herself to keep chewing the mouthful of eggs. To swallow. It was still far too early, but heaven help her, now she could imagine a long sandy beach. Him lying next to her, tanned skin over rippling muscles. Tiny trunks — it was her fantasy, after all.

Sex. Lots of holiday sex.

Feeling the beginnings of a blush, she stared determinedly down at her plate, focusing on the eggs, on her breathing. 'Who do you suggest I take?' she asked when she'd regained her composure.

'How about someone you've just spent an amazing night with?'

She tried to keep her lips from twitching. 'Umm, I'll have to think. There are so many to choose from.' His arm shot out and grasped her hand. When she looked up, she was surprised to see the smile had vanished from his face.

'Gabby.' He heaved out a sigh. 'That's a joke, right? Not that I care how many men there have been. As long as they aren't in the picture now.'

The glimpse of vulnerability floored her. 'Of course it was a joke. The only man to have shared my bed in the last . . .' Her mind skipped backwards. 'You're the only man to have been in my bed in two years.' The only man I've woken up next to in even longer.

'Good.' The easy smile slipped back onto his face. 'Should I pack a case then?'

'Whoa.' It was crazy to be considering this. Utterly and completely. 'We probably don't even want the same type of holiday.'

She didn't miss the flash of triumph. The salesman who knew he'd had a

nibble, and now just needed to reel it in. ‘My ideal holiday is with a hot brunette, preferably somewhere she can wear a bikini.’

‘I fancy Iceland.’

He shuddered briefly before snapping back into charm mode. ‘A hot brunette in a hot spring works for me.’

‘Seriously? You’d go to Iceland?’

His expression looked slightly pained but she had to give him credit for the ring of sincerity in his voice. ‘As long as it’s with you, I’d go anywhere.’

Please don’t melt, please don’t melt, please don’t . . . too late. She felt some of the strong defences she’d built up around her heart start to crack. ‘What do you have planned this morning?’

A wicked gleam entered his eyes. ‘I’m up to going back to bed if you are.’

Utterly amused by him, she started to laugh. ‘I was thinking more of whether you fancied a trip to the travel agent.’

In the process of forking up some more eggs, his hand stilled and his eyes searched hers. ‘Is that to watch you book yourself a holiday?’

‘Yes.’ The disappointment that flooded his face would have been comical, if it hadn’t touched her so much. ‘But also so you can book to come with me. If you want to.’

And now his expression was one of obvious, unfiltered pleasure. He shovelled a final, mighty mouthful of eggs into his mouth, drained the last of his orange juice, and stood up. ‘What are we waiting for?’

Chapter Seven

Thirteen days before Christmas

Owen shrugged on his jacket and straightened his tie. A final glance in the mirror and he called himself ready. The sight of Father Christmas's backside sticking out of a chimney wasn't particularly attractive. Then again, Christmas ties weren't supposed to look good, just ridiculous. This certainly fitted that description. The dress code for the work Christmas party was smart, so he wasn't sure how many other garish ties there'd be, but Owen had never been the type to bow to peer pressure. He'd say what he wanted (though he didn't cause offence unless it was deserved), do what he wanted (as long as it was legal), and wear what he wanted.

He'd also go after what he wanted, and he was pretty certain what he wanted was a five foot eight marketing dynamo with legs like a supermodel. And a mind far sharper than his own.

Inside his jacket pocket, his phone buzzed.

Running a bit late. Shall I meet you there? Gabby xx

An innocuous text, but he knew her well enough now to be able to read behind the lines, and what she was actually saying was: I'm not sure I'm ready to let everyone know we're together yet.

Determinedly he typed out his reply.

I'm on my way to yours. I can help you dress. O x

Quick as a flash he received a reply.

Was that a typo?

Grinning, he replied.

No typo. I'll help you dress, after I've helped you undress. O x

He was in the car before his phone buzzed again.

I'm not going to a work party looking like I've just had sex. No touching until afterwards.

He'd see about that.

Presume looking is acceptable? O x

He was just about to put his phone back in his jacket when she texted again.

Only if it's not obvious. See you soon.

And that, he thought ruefully, was where they had reached an impasse. He wanted everyone in the office to know Gabby was his. Yeah, that sounded possessive, but where she was concerned, it seemed he was that guy. The one who wanted to mark his territory, who looked daggers at any other male who glanced in her direction. The man who told everyone, ad nauseam, that Gabby Sanderson was his girlfriend.

So far she'd balked at telling anyone other than Cindy. He wasn't going to lie, it was starting to piss him off.

Within half an hour he was knocking on her door. Ten seconds later, his eyes were bugging out of their sockets. He must have looked a picture, because she laughed. 'I take it you approve?'

He wanted those long, long legs, revealed by the red sequin dress, wrapped around his waist. 'Give me ten minutes and I'll show you how much I approve.'

'Ten minutes?'

'I can be quicker. Can't promise to be longer.' Because he didn't want her to think this was all about sex, he took a step closer, tilted her head a fraction — her sexy silver stilettos made her nearly as tall as him — and kissed her softly on the mouth. 'You look stunning.'

'Thank you.'

Though she smiled, her eyes were guarded and frustration bubbled inside him. Funny how she backed away the moment he even hinted at anything heavier between them. 'Thought you were running late? You look ready to me.'

Another flash of wariness. 'Seems I caught up quicker than I thought.'

'Or perhaps you wanted to turn up alone?'

To her credit, she looked apologetic. 'That obvious, huh?'

'What's less obvious is why you don't want anyone knowing about us.'

She huffed out a breath, turning away from him. 'We've been through this. It makes things awkward when we work together.'

'It's more awkward people not knowing that I'm sleeping with the woman they're telling me they admire/find annoying/fantasise about having sex with.'

Her head snapped round to stare at him, those damn brown eyes so wide they almost took over her face. 'Please tell me that hasn't happened.'

'What, the first, second or third point? It's a mute question anyway,

because I've had all three.' True the last one had been before he'd started dating her. If it had happened after, he couldn't honestly say he wouldn't have punched the guy who'd said it. And then waved goodbye to his career.

Her expression turned quickly from horror to one of regret. 'I'm sorry. I didn't think about the other side to it.'

He smiled ruefully. 'Not been plagued by women telling you they want to shag the sales director?'

She slipped her arms around his neck. 'I keep being told you're hot.'

'You do, huh?' His ego enjoyed the stroke, though his heart knew it was only what she thought that mattered. 'What do you say?'

Her mouth nipped at his bottom lip. 'I agree with them.'

'Good answer.'

For a few minutes they kissed. Nothing heavy; soft kisses, gentle strokes. His hand up and down her back. Her hands in his hair. When he felt the shift inside from want to need, from light to dark, he reluctantly pulled away. 'If you don't want to go to the party with sex hair, we'd better get going.'

As Owen drove to the country hotel where the party was being held, Gabby was aware that things weren't settled between them. He was upset with her. And maybe now she could see his point. Not telling people at work was deceptive. Telling them though . . . unease swished around in her stomach. That was a big step. It made this thing between them real. Gave it both a sense of importance, and of permanence.

Gabby had never had permanence with anyone in her life.

But was it fair on him, on either of them, to let her fears strangle what was blossoming between them? And it was blossoming. Not just growing, but blooming. When she wasn't with him, she thought about him. When she was with him, she found herself smiling just for the hell of it.

He made her happy. He made her think of future possibilities she'd never considered before.

When he opened the car door for her — she hadn't just accepted his manners, she was fast becoming charmed by them — she took his hand. And held onto it all the way to the entrance.

He gave her a questioning look when they stepped inside and she buried her nerves, ignored the dark thoughts — don't get too settled, this won't last, nothing ever does — and gripped his hand tighter.

Her reward? A smile from him that seemed to light up everything inside her. Followed by a kiss that had her seconds away from dissolving on the front step. But then he was tugging her inside, and the butterflies of joy gave way to a slithering nest of nervous snakes.

They strode into the foyer and predictably drew stares from the crowd gathered by the giant Christmas tree. Gabby tried not to freeze, tried to smile as the comments came thick and fast.

You're a pair of dark horses.

That mulled wine must be stronger than I thought, I'm seeing things.

And her particular favourite:

Who's going to tell Owen he's punching way above his weight?

But as she joined in the chat, drinking the mulled wine and listening to Paul McCartney wishing her a 'Wonderful Christmas Time' through the speakers, the world didn't come to an end. Not even when a photographer snapped a photo of her smiling into Owen's eyes by the tree.

Slowly, Gabby began to relax. So, her work colleagues knew she was dating Owen. By the end of the evening, it would be old news.

'I want to ask if he's as good as he looks,' Eve from finance whispered as she gave Owen, who was clearly receiving his own interrogation, a covetous glance. 'But it seems a bit unprofessional.'

'It is.' Smugness rose up inside, and happiness curled around her. 'The answer is yes.'

Just as Eve let out a dreamy sigh, Owen, jacket now off, his beauty undimmed despite the garish Christmas tie, turned back to them. 'What was the question?'

Eve inhaled sharply, then began to cough. 'I'm . . . umm . . . going to find a drink.'

Gabby watched her flee, and tried not to laugh.

'What did I say?' Owen looked bemused. 'Women used to come towards me, not run off in the other direction.'

Gabby placed a proprietorial hand on his arm. 'I'm still here.'

His expression softened, his eyes drifting from hers, to her mouth. 'So you are.'

'Oh no.' She curled her fingers around his jaw and tilted his eyes back up to hers. 'We're not kissing in the middle of a work party.'

His resulting laugh was low and sexy. 'I'm sure a lot worse has

happened, and probably will happen again.’ He nodded over to the seating plan. ‘But as I’d rather kiss you later, in private, let’s go and see who we have to sit and make polite conversation with for the next hour.’

Ten seconds later, he groaned. ‘Dear God, what have I done to piss Cindy off?’

Cindy had been given the job of organising the red and silver themed decorations, the live band, and the seating plan. Gabby glanced to where Owen was looking, and burst out laughing. ‘Well, you did recruit her.’ Because he looked so crestfallen, she slipped a hand into his, and squeezed. ‘Hilda with a drink down her and wearing a party hat might be a very different woman.’

‘That worries me even more.’ His eyes landed on hers, and he gave her a flash of his devastating smile. ‘I don’t suppose you’d consider swapping places?’

‘Do I look like a pushover for a pretty face?’

‘Okay, okay.’ He pushed back his shoulders. ‘I’m ready to receive my fate. Oh, no, wait.’ He reached into his trouser pocket, pulling out his buzzing phone. ‘I might still be saved by the bell.’ But his handsome features formed a frown as he stared down at the caller I.D.

‘Who is it?’

‘Dad.’ Owen shook his head. ‘The man never calls me. I always have to phone him.’ She could tell the moment worry gripped him; the tightening of his fingers around the phone, the deepening of his frown lines. ‘I guess Hilda will have to wait.’ His eyes were full of apology when they looked at her. ‘Sorry, I’d better take this.’

And then he was striding away, his tall, athletic figure cutting a dash through the partygoers and heading for the exit.

‘Dad, hang on a sec.’

Owen darted through the crowded foyer, past the towering Christmas tree, and into the dark outdoors. ‘I’m back. What’s up?’

‘Does there have to be something up for me to phone?’

At the curt reply, Owen thumped his hand on one of the pillars framing the entrance. It’s how things were between them now. It was time he got used to it. ‘You can phone me whenever you want, but you don’t.’ Damn, he shouldn’t have added those last three words.

‘I’m phoning now, aren’t I?’

And yes, the layer of annoyance, wrapped over the grumpiness, was entirely Owen's fault. Time to smooth over. To deflate. 'You are, and it's good to hear from you.' Because he knew his father, he added, 'Any particular reason why you're calling now?'

'Thought my son might be interested to know I'm in hospital.'

Owen's heart almost stopped. 'You're what?'

'You heard. Damn staff won't let me go home. Say I need to have an operation.'

'An operation?' His mind jumped through a whole range of awful scenarios. 'What the hell happened?'

'I fell. Told you that stair carpet needed tacking down.'

'You tripped down the stairs?'

'I tripped on the loose carpet I'd asked my son to fix because my arthritic fingers can't hold a bloody hammer any more. And then fell down the stairs.'

Owen swallowed back his irritation. 'Are you okay?'

'Fractured my damn hip. They need to put a screw in it.'

Owen drew a hand down his face and took a deep, steadying breath. His dad was okay. He needed an op, would need looking after for a bit, but he was okay. 'I'm at a work do, but I'm not drinking. When do visiting hours end?'

'No need to drag yourself away. I'm fine.'

Frustration finally got the better of him. 'You're in hospital, Dad. You're not bloody fine and I want to come and see you. Okay?'

There was a short silence, followed by a grunt. 'Visiting time ends at nine p.m.'

Owen looked at his watch and did a quick mental calculation. 'Right. See you in about forty minutes then.'

'No need to rush. I'm not going anywhere.'

Owen stabbed the call end button and let out a huff of sheer exasperation. How had their relationship degenerated to this level? Alice, his older sister by three years, didn't have any of the problems Owen seemed to have. Then again, the lucky cow had snuck off to live in France. Even their dad could be civil in an occasional phone call.

Feeling pissed off and out of sorts, and guilty because the pissed off feeling had drowned out the worry, he headed back inside in search of Gabby.

He found her talking to the marketing team in the main function room,

which was an explosion of red and silver. Cindy had gone crazy. Silver balloons on every table, big red bows on the back of each chair. A silver Christmas tree by the bar, dripping with red baubles. Strands of red fairy lights were wrapped around the pillars and ran along the raised stage where the live band were currently rocking out 'All I Want for Christmas Is You'.

Walking up behind Gabby, he slid his arm around her waist. 'Mariah Carey must have read my mind,' he whispered.

She jumped, then smiled and melted into him. But when her eyes met his, her smile slipped. 'Is your dad okay?'

He discretely eased her away from the group, taking her hand as he led her back out into the lobby. 'Dad's had a fall and he's in hospital.'

'Oh no, I'm so sorry.' She touched a hand to his cheek, face full of concern. 'How is he?'

'Fractured his hip but other than that, he's fine.'

She winced, her eyes flickering away from his. 'Umm, is there anything you need me to do? I mean, should I offer to go with you?'

An odd question. 'You don't need to do anything, thank you. I'm driving over there now.' He gave her a wry smile. 'Guess it means I'll miss sitting next to Hilda. And the quiz you were so insistent on.'

'Better than you missing karaoke, and leaving only Cindy up for singing.'

Again, she avoided his eyes. Owen tucked a finger under her chin. 'Hey, what's up?'

'Nothing.' Her shoulders rose up and down as she let out an agitated sounding sigh. 'Crap, I'm sorry. I'm not sure what's expected of me in this situation.'

'Expected? What on earth is going on inside that beautiful head of yours?'

'I just want to . . . do the right thing,' she said quietly.

Owen frowned. Gabby wasn't like this. She was strong and confident. What the hell was going on? 'Dad's only fractured his hip. He's not at death's door. There is no right thing. You stay here and enjoy the party. I'll come and find you when I've been to see him.'

Her gaze flew to his. 'You're planning on coming back? I hope it's not just to look after me, because I'm perfectly capable of making my own way home.'

Now he thought he understood. Cupping her face, he planted a soft kiss on her lips. 'You think I don't know that? Or that I don't realise you're finding this role as my girlfriend a bit of a weird, uncomfortable fit?' He smiled, tracing a finger down her cheek. 'I'm coming back because I'm not missing a chance to smooch with you to 'White Christmas'. As for the girlfriend part, it's a bit like putting on a new pair of shoes. Feels a bit stiff, a bit odd at first, but soon you don't notice they're on your feet.' He grinned. 'Plus they look bloody awesome on you.'

'First I'm confectionary. Now I'm a pair of shoes. You say the most romantic things, Mr Cooper.'

He didn't mind the sarcasm because her eyes smiled. 'You wait till tonight. I'll give you romance.'

Chapter Eight

Gabby watched Owen stride off, and sank into the nearest chair. Thankfully the lobby was deserted, so nobody was there to witness her mini meltdown.

Well, except for a gigantic tree, but she figured it was too busy dispensing Christmas cheer to tell on her.

God, she was a twit. I just want to do the right thing. She slammed her eyes shut as the embarrassing words floated through her head. Owen had been right, she was feeling weird and out of her depth. Flirting with an attractive man, allowing it sometimes to lead to sex, was nicely within her comfort zone. No attachments, no being dependent on someone else. It was all she'd ever looked for. But several weeks after their first date and she still wasn't thinking I've had enough. Instead she was thinking When can I see him again? Worse, I want to see more of him.

It was unsettling. She no longer felt like the strong, level-headed woman she'd spent most of her life trying to be. Instead she felt emotionally vulnerable, and more than a bit scared.

'Hey, what are you doing out here by yourself?'

Gabby's eyes sprung open and she cringed as she saw Cindy hovering over her. The woman looked amazing, her generous curves and glorious dark skin highlighted by the cerise-pink dress. Finished off perfectly with a crooked silver party hat.

'I'm just taking in a bit of air.' A response unlikely to satisfy the woman who seemed determined to take Gabby under her wing.

'Everything okay between you and Mr Dreamboat?'

'Mr . . . oh my God, you mean Owen?' Gabby didn't know whether to be insulted or flattered for him.

'Of course. It's what all the admin staff call him. I'm surprised you haven't heard it before. Then again, maybe they all saw what I did. That you were a serious threat to his single status.'

Gabby slumped further down the chair. What was she doing, dating the office crush? It wasn't her. She went for the edgy, emotionally unavailable, closed off type. Not the charming flirt every single woman wanted to marry and have kids with.

'Gabby.' Cindy squeezed her shoulder. 'What's wrong?'

‘Please reassure everyone that Mr Dreamboat is not about to be taken off the market. At least not permanently,’ she added quickly, the thought of him being with someone else making her queasy. ‘He’s a flirt and I’m enjoying a change of pace. We’re just having fun.’

Cindy’s expression softened, sympathy flooding her eyes. ‘It doesn’t look like fun at the moment, honey.’

‘What, no.’ Gabby straightened and slapped on a smile. ‘Owen’s dad had a fall and he’s in hospital. Owen’s just left to go and see him. That’s why I’m out here.’

‘Ouch, poor Owen.’ Cindy cocked her head. ‘You didn’t feel like going with him?’

Oh God, she should have done that. Of course she should. ‘I didn’t want to get in the way,’ she mumbled.

‘Are you coming in to eat then? Or are you going to wait out here all evening, hoping Mr Dreamboat makes a return?’

‘He is coming back. Not specifically for me,’ she added, aware as soon as she said it she was lying. I’m not missing a chance to smooch with you.

‘Of course not for you. Just as my table decorations aren’t that amazing.’

‘Oh they are.’ Gabby saw Cindy’s triumphant look and shot to her feet. ‘Right, I believe there’s turkey to be eaten, crackers to pull and a fiendishly clever Christmas quiz to run.’

‘Fiendishly clever?’ Cindy asked as they strode back into the function room.

‘Well, I did compile it.’

‘I thought Owen was doing it with you?’

Unconsciously Gabby smiled. ‘He was. One of his better suggestions was; what happens to Elves when they’re naughty?’

Cindy looked at her as if she was crazy. ‘Err, they sit on the naughty step?’

‘According to Owen, Santa gives them the sack. And that,’ Gabby continued, as Cindy groaned, ‘is why I put the quiz together.’

* * *

Two hours later, having just navigated the room through the after-dinner quiz, Gabby headed for the bar. Cindy greeted her with a wave, and patted the bar stool next to her.

‘Have they stopped giving you gip over question seventeen yet?’

‘No.’ Gabby eased carefully onto the stool. Not easy in a tight dress. ‘That’s why I’m hiding over here.’ The question had been simple; which two reindeer are named after weather phenomenon? Answer, Donner and Blitzen — thunder and lightning in German. Apparently expecting them to know German had been unfair. Gabby reckoned anyone forced to learn the language like she’d been, deserved a few measly points in a quiz. ‘What are we drinking?’

‘I know just the thing to make the last half an hour disappear.’

A few minutes later a lethal looking cocktail was placed in front of her.

‘Don’t just look at it,’ Cindy encouraged. ‘Drink it.’

Gabby took a sip, and immediately spluttered. ‘Bloody hell, what’s in it? Pure alcohol?’

Cindy roared with laughter. ‘It’s Planter’s Punch, honey. Grenadine, lemon juice, angostura bitters and a good measure of fine Jamaican dark rum.’

Gabby glanced at Cindy’s glass of water. ‘I see you’re too cowardly to try it.’

Another booming laugh. ‘Do I look stupid? But I’ve had plenty in my time, when I was young and single like you. Now I have kids who get up in the middle of the night. I can’t be drinking cocktails any more.’ She indicated to Gabby to take another sip. ‘What are your plans for Christmas then, Gabby? You and Mr Dreamboat spending some quality time together?’

Gabby spluttered for the second time. ‘Why would you ask that? Christmas is a time for families.’

Cindy’s dark eyes studied her. ‘When I told you I had three brothers, you said you’d have liked siblings, but didn’t have any. You never talk of a father, and when I heard you on the phone to your mother, it didn’t sound too friendly.’ She smiled and nudged Gabby in the ribs. ‘See, you can’t hide anything from your admin.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Gabby took another sip of the cocktail, which, after the first burning mouthful, was slipping down nicely. ‘You’re right, about everything.’

A slow grin spread across Cindy’s face. ‘Including the quality time with Dreamboat?’

‘Would you please stop calling him that?’ Boy, the cocktail must be

getting to her. She could feel herself grin as she said the next words. 'We're going on holiday together.'

Cindy whooped. 'And this from the girl who tells me she's not serious about her man.'

'He's not my man.' She went to take another drink, realising she'd nearly finished it. How on earth? 'And it isn't serious. Going on holiday together is just . . . fun.'

'Sure it is.' Cindy waved over to the bartender. 'Another cocktail needed over here when you're ready.'

Unable to find the strength to protest, Gabby sat back on the bar stool feeling all warm and fuzzy, her mind skipping forward to when she'd be jetting off to Florida. With Owen. 'Oh God.' She jerked upright. 'What if he can't come now? I remember him saying his father is on his own. He's going to need help if he's fractured his hip.'

Cindy put a hand on her arm. 'Slow down, honey. When do you lovebirds jet off?'

The term should have annoyed her. Instead it sent a warm tingle through her. She must be tipsy. 'Christmas Eve.'

'Well, hell, that's nearly two weeks away yet. Plenty of time for Mr Cooper senior to recover from his op. Here, this will help you relax.' She pushed another tall glass filled with brownish liquid and a snazzy green umbrella towards her. 'Drink up.'

And like a crazy woman, Gabby giggled and did exactly that.

* * *

Owen managed to catch the frazzled looking doctor just as she was leaving the ward.

'Sorry to bother you, I'm Sidney Cooper's son.' The doctor frowned, obviously trying to click through the myriad of patient names she'd checked up on. 'Cantankerous sixty-nine-year-old with a fractured hip.'

The frown disappeared and she smiled. 'Ah yes. You must be the culprit who didn't nail down the loose stair carpet.'

'That's me.' He ran a hand across his face, trying to collect himself, guilt and frustration winding through him in equal measures. 'I understand he's to have a screw inserted tomorrow, and will be discharged in a few days. How long before he's likely to be able to travel? And by travel, I mean fly to

France.'

'There's no health reason why he can't get on a plane a week after surgery, but he will be suffering discomfort and have to use a walker, so he may not feel like travelling much.'

Relief surged through him. 'That's great, thanks, Doctor.' The old bugger might not feel like travelling, but he was getting on that plane. It was time his sister had a turn at looking after him. Alice had sloped off to live in France with her husband not long after their mum had died, so Owen had spent the last two Christmases with the old man and his squawking birds. He reckoned he'd earned this Christmas in the sun. With Gabby.

Feeling like a weight had been lifted, Owen stepped back into the ward. His heart squeezed as he neared the bed. The man in it drove him nuts, but he was still his dad. And it was painful to see him looking so . . . old. When his mum had been alive, his dad had always seemed ageless. The last few years had knocked not just the fun, and the compassion out of the man, but the essence of him, too. Now he was just a frail frame, lurching from one day to the next. The only thing to get a smile out of him these days was his beloved budgie, and the damn hens his mother had insisted on buying when she'd been alive, because who doesn't want a freshly laid egg?

Owen didn't, for one. Shift through a poop filled hen house for an egg, versus take it out of a clean, cardboard box? No contest.

'Did you get some painkillers from the nurse?' Owen asked as he sat down on the uncomfortable plastic chair. Clearly hospitals didn't want visitors outstaying their welcome.

'Yes, yes. Stop fussing. I can manage you know. I'm not senile.'

'Just accident prone.'

Owen smiled to show he was joking. Five years ago, his dad would have taken the jibe on the chin and rolled with it. Now he gave his son a sharp look. 'If you'd fixed the ruddy thing like I'd asked you to—'

'Fine.' Owen held up his hand. 'Let's not go over old ground. The doctor says you should still be okay to fly out to see Alice, so that's good, isn't it?'

His father grunted. 'Don't know why she wanted to live with a bunch of frogs.'

'Jeeze, Dad, will you stop with the poor taste. She's living in a country that makes fabulous wine and cheese. You'll love it.'

'Maybe.' He shifted, a flash of pain crossing his face. 'Haven't you got

some fancy party to go back to?’

‘When they kick me out of here, yes.’

‘No need for you to stay. You’ve satisfied yourself I’m not at death’s door.’

Owen loosened his tie. ‘Thought I’d keep you company for a while longer.’

His comment was met with silence and Owen sighed and jammed his back further into the chair, trying to get comfortable.

‘Who’s looking after the birds?’ his father asked after a few uncomfortable minutes.

‘Guess that’ll be me.’

‘The hen house needs cleaning out in the next couple of days, and the hopper, too. And make sure you collect their eggs—’

‘I know the routine, Dad. It’s not my first chicken duty. I used to look after them when you and Mum went on holiday, remember?’

A haunted look entered his father’s eyes, and Owen felt his heart twist. Yeah, he could bitch all he liked about his dad, but the fact was the guy had loved his mum, and life without her was still beyond painful for him.

‘Anything special I need to do for Clarissa, other than feed her?’ he asked more gently. Clarissa was the budgie his dad had bought for company two years ago.

‘She needs fresh water every day, and the empty husks removing from her food dish.’ A glimmer of a smile crossed his face. ‘She likes those seed bars. And dandelions. She’s partial to them.’

‘Okay, I’ll see to it.’ Owen’s liking of birds started and ended with the non-feathered variety. Still, it would only be for a few days. One of the neighbours had offered to take care of things when his dad went to France, but Owen didn’t want to take the piss. He could stomach a bit of aviculture short-term (yeah, he’d had to look that up when his father had first used the word). As long as he was on that plane with Gabby on the 24th December, he could put up with anything.

The lids over his father’s eyes began to close, and Owen took that as his cue. ‘I’ll leave you to sleep. I’ll check in on you tomorrow after your op.’ A ball of emotion lodged in his throat as he bent to kiss him on the forehead. ‘Night, Dad.’

When he received no response Owen figured he was already asleep, but

as he took a few steps away from the bed, he heard a gruff. 'Night, son.'

It was after ten by the time Owen made it back to the party.

Head down, no longer in the mood for raucous music and drunken conversation, he strode towards the function room and almost bumped into Hilda walking the other way.

'Mr Cooper.' She nodded, giving him a small smile.

'Owen,' he said firmly. 'That was part of the deal, remember?'

'Owen.' She clutched at the beaded bag she was holding. It was the one sign of frivolity in an otherwise plain outfit.

'Heading home already?'

'Yes. Parties aren't for me.' Her eyes, usually so guarded, filled with compassion. 'I was sorry to hear about your father.'

'Thanks. He's had a fall but he'll be fine. Did I miss anything? Was the meal we agonised over any good?'

'It was turkey, Mr . . . sorry, Owen. In my experience turkey is rarely good.'

God, the woman cracked him up. 'I trust the entertainment was better than the turkey?'

The severe lines of her face relaxed, just a little. 'It was. Gabby's quiz was . . . very agreeable.' With a dip of her head she looked past him and towards the door. 'Thank you for the invitation. I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

'Goodnight, Hilda.' He watched her go, her back stiff, her stride more of a march. Only she could think a daft Christmas quiz was agreeable.

He was accosted a few more times as he walked round the packed room, his gaze drifting over the sea of bodies dancing energetically to the live Christmas music. He really didn't want to be here right now.

But then he clocked Gabby sitting at the bar with Cindy. Suddenly this was exactly where he wanted to be.

Marching straight over, uncaring of who was watching, he put his arm round Gabby's shoulders and kissed her cheek. 'Hey, there.'

The eyes that stared back at him were amusingly unfocused. 'Ah, the wanderer returns.' She hiccupped. Then giggled.

Owen slid his eyes over to Cindy, who stared back at him in silent laughter. 'Who is this, and what have you done with Gabby Sanderson?'

'Meet tipsy Gabby. She's taken a liking to Jamaican punch.'

‘You should try some.’ Gabby hiccupped again and pushed the nearly finished glass towards him. ‘Might put hairs on your chest. Not that you need hairs. I’m a big fan of the smooth, ripped look you’ve got going on.’ Her fingers trailed down the front of his shirt, and though he knew sober Gabby would be mortified, an involuntary bolt of lust shot through him. ‘Ooh, feel that, Cindy.’ She smiled in that goofy way of drunk people. ‘Feel what Mr Dreamboat is hiding under those shirts he wears.’

Owen winced, looking daggers at Cindy. ‘Seriously, you told her about that stupid nickname?’

As Gabby’s hand began to work its way between the buttons on Owen’s shirt, sending goosebumps racing across his skin, Cindy snorted with laughter.

Aware they were now attracting attention, Owen grabbed Gabby’s hand before it could do any further damage. ‘Time to go home, Gabby.’

She pouted, dark eyes blinking adorably up at him. ‘Jush one more drink. I want another umb . . . umb . . . you know, another green one.’ She nodded down to the three green cocktail umbrellas already on the table.

Owen frowned over at Cindy. ‘Please tell me one of those is yours.’

‘Nope.’ Cindy’s grin was full of mischief and flashing white teeth. ‘She managed them all by herself.’

‘With your encouragement,’ he countered, helping Gabby off the stool.

‘Hey, the woman needed cheering up.’

Owen stilled, his arm wrapped protectively round Gabby. ‘Why?’

‘That’s for her to say.’ Cindy must have seen his worry because she relented, whispering. ‘I think our Gabby is finding dating you tougher than she thought.’

What the hell did that mean? ‘Right, thanks. I think.’ Damn, Gabby’s eyes were fluttering closed. ‘I need to get her out of here before she falls asleep and I have to carry her.’ He squeezed Gabby’s waist, causing her eyes to pop open. ‘Can you manage to walk?’

Gabby giggled. ‘Of course. I’m not drunk, you know.’

‘Could have fooled me,’ Owen muttered under his breath as he kept his arm tightly wrapped around her.

Occasionally she’d lurch, or trip, finding the whole thing hilariously funny in that way only drunk people can understand. Together they managed it out of the hotel and into his car.

By the time he'd reached her house, she was fast asleep. With a resigned sigh, Owen shifted through her handbag for her keys — neatly attached to a clip in the scarily organised interior — and went to open her door. Sliding an arm around her shoulders, his other under her legs, he lifted her and carried her up to her bedroom.

There he carefully undressed her and tucked her under the duvet. She murmured something unintelligible when he kissed her forehead before settling back onto the pillow.

After stripping off, he climbed in behind her, tucking her against him. Here's your romance, he thought with a wry smile. And promptly fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Twelve days before Christmas

Gabby woke to the screech of an alarm, a pneumatic drill pounding through her head, and a furnace against her back. Groaning, she whacked the snooze button. No, the drill was still there. And so was the heat. She started to shift away, only to find a muscled arm pinning her in place.

‘Morning, sunshine.’ She was eased onto her back and blinked up to find a blond God gazing down at her, all dazzling blue eyes and far too bright smile. ‘How’s the head?’

Slamming her eyes shut, she groaned again. ‘Don’t smile at me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t move me.’

The sound of soft laughter echoed round her room. ‘You’re really not a morning person, are you? We’re going to have to remedy that when we go on holiday.’

Gabby jerked her head towards Owen, only to feel her brain bang the side of her skull. ‘Damn it. Find me some painkillers before I die.’

As she struggled to sit up, Owen slipped out of bed. ‘Kitchen, bathroom?’

Gingerly she moved her head to look at him. Then hissed in a breath at the sight of his naked, rippling torso. His naked everything. It was too much, when she felt like she’d been thrown down a flight of stairs. ‘Bathroom. And cover up. The sight of all that wholesome flesh is making me sick.’

‘That’s not what you said last night. In fact last night, you were so enamoured with running your hands down my abs, you asked Cindy to cop a feel, too.’

Oh God, she really was going to be sick. ‘Painkillers. Now.’

What the hell had she been doing, drinking all those cocktails? She was going to murder Cindy when she saw her. After she fired her.

Half an hour, some painkillers and a hot shower later, she felt strong enough to tackle the toast and mug of tea Owen put in front of her. They were sitting at her breakfast bar, him looking sinfully healthy, his eyes clear, his expression relaxed.

‘I’m never drinking again.’

He grinned, taking a big mouthful of the toast she hadn't got further than eyeing up. 'I'll remind you of that when we're at the beach bar, looking at the cocktail menu.'

The fuzz was starting to clear from her head. 'Won't your dad need looking after when he comes out of hospital?' She slapped a hand over her mouth, horrified at her lapse. 'Shit, I didn't even ask you last night. How was he?'

'Fine.' His amused eyes caught and held hers. 'Probably in a better state than you this morning.'

'Not hard.' Damn, how had she cocked this up so badly? Some support she'd turned out to be. 'Looking after a drunk woman was probably the last thing you needed last night. I'm sorry.'

'Hey.' He reached across and grasped her hand. 'Don't apologise. You were exactly what I needed. Though I'd have preferred it if you hadn't been comatose when I slid into bed next to you.'

Embarrassed, Gabby pushed at the toast on her plate.

'Out of interest, why did you start downing the cocktails?' He tucked a finger under her chin, making her eyes meet his. 'Cindy said something about you needing cheering up?'

She really was going to murder her PA. 'She's wrong. I wasn't unhappy. Just . . .' feeling horribly vulnerable. How could she admit to that? 'This is all new to me. Dating someone from work. Being in a relationship. Being somebody's girlfriend.' She sighed, putting her head in her hands. 'And if last night is any indicator, I think I'm going to be crap at it. I hate being crap at anything.'

'Whoa, stop there.' Owen jumped neatly off his stool and wrapped her up in a pair of big strong arms. 'Where on earth has all this come from? So, you had a bit to drink. I can guarantee you'll have to put me to bed one of these days.'

'Maybe, but tell me this, if the situation had been reversed, and my mum had been taken ill, what would you have done? Stayed at the party and got drunk, or come to the hospital with me?'

'Gabby, will you stop being daft. You offered to come, I told you stay at the party and enjoy yourself.' He kissed the top of her head. 'Seems to me, you did exactly that.'

'I didn't offer.' She could remember bits and pieces, before she'd started

hitting the cocktails. 'I asked you if I should offer, which is different. And you didn't answer my question. Would you have gone to the hospital, even if I'd asked you not to?'

She felt his chest expand and contract as he sighed. 'Yes, I'd have gone with you. But mainly to make sure you got there okay.'

'That's so stupid.' Annoyed with herself, with him, she squirmed away from him. 'I don't need you to protect me. I can look after myself.' She'd had nearly a lifetime of practice, after all.

'I know, it's a man thing.' He took hold of her shoulders, clearly considering his next words. 'I'm no expert at this relationship stuff either, remember. If I was, I wouldn't have been dumped.'

The pinch of jealousy scared her. 'Do you still think about Stella? Wish you were with her?'

'No, God no.' A gentle squeeze of her shoulders. 'But at the time it bloody hurt. Made me never want to get involved so seriously ever again.'

And now his reputation started to make sense. 'Hence the serial flirting?'

'Yeah, I guess. It wasn't conscious on my part, but probably, yes, that's why I've played it casual ever since.' The hands that had been on her shoulders moved to cup her face. 'Until I met you.'

The sincerity in his eyes was too much, she had to look away. How ironic that if he'd been the serial womaniser she'd first thought, this would be so much easier.

Owen felt Gabby pull away from him, both physically and emotionally. One minute they'd been in an intimate embrace, the next she was walking to the other side of the kitchen.

'We're late for work. Better get a move on.' She clattered her plate and cup into the dishwasher.

As he watched her, Owen wondered if this was how it had felt for some of the women he'd been with. They'd pushed him for more, he'd retreated. Then ended it.

Was he, too, about to be dumped? Again? He could believe it as she busied herself around the kitchen, avoiding his eyes as she wiped down surfaces that were already spotless.

Yet this same woman had been so worried she wasn't girlfriend material, she'd got hammered on cocktails.

Walking over to her, he placed a hand over hers, stopping her frantic

cleaning. 'Relax. Nobody gets into work on time the morning after the Christmas party.'

'I have a meeting at ten.' Her eyes swept past his and onto the clock on the wall behind him. 'I need to go.'

As a salesman, he knew when to push, and when to back away. 'Okay then. Will I see you tonight?'

'Don't you have to check on your dad?'

He felt a kick of guilt that he'd forgotten. 'After I've been to the hospital.'

She sighed. 'I think it's better if we don't. I feel lousy. All I want to do tonight is have a bath and go to bed.'

'Sounds good to me.' He smiled and she rolled her eyes.

'I won't be much fun.'

He didn't want her to entertain him, he thought with a burst of irritation. He actually wanted to take care of her, though clearly she wasn't about to let him. 'How about tomorrow?'

Finally a small smile. 'Tomorrow sounds good.'

He bent and kissed her, deepening it when she began to respond. 'I'll see you at work,' he told her roughly as he pulled away. Tomorrow sounded a long way off.

The day dragged, not helped by the fact that Gabby had been locked in meetings for most of it and Owen hadn't seen her. Now he was on his way to the hospital for a fun evening in the company of a grumpy man recovering from a hip op.

The sound of his phone ringing was a welcome intrusion.

'Owen Cooper,' he said into the hands-free.

'It's me.'

At the sound of the young voice he felt a rush of sheer, unbridled affection. 'Zoe, this is a nice surprise.' Stella had made seeing Zoe difficult since she'd started dating Simon, but he made sure they spoke every couple of weeks. It was rare for Zoe to call him though.

'Mum's out with Simon and I'm stuck in with a babysitter. I told her I'm too old for one but she said I'm not.'

Owen could picture the pout on Zoe's face. 'Tell your mum to call the person who's looking after you a nearly-a-teenager minder instead.' She giggled at his terrible joke, and Owen wondered if there was any better sound

in the world. ‘So, how are you getting on with Simon?’ Stella had worked her way through three men since dumping him and, ironically, not had a child with any of them.

‘Mum says he’s a keeper.’ Her voice turned into a whisper. ‘She reckons he’s going to marry her.’

Three years ago the words would have devastated him. Now, thanks to distance and time, he understood the two of them weren’t meant to be. Their incompatibility went beyond their ages. Stella had never been career orientated. She’d hated his long working days. Not understood that sometimes he had to work at the weekends to secure a deal. ‘Is that good if they get married?’

‘I guess. He’ll be my dad then.’

Owen tensed, hand clenching the steering wheel. ‘Do you want him to be your dad?’ For her sake, he hoped the answer was yes, even though he knew it would slice him in two. He’d always be Owen to Zoe, her mum’s friend, he knew that. But damn it, she felt like his daughter.

And now she was going to be another man’s daughter.

‘I don’t mind. He doesn’t shout and he helps me when I get stuck with my homework.’

‘That’s good.’ Owen forced the words out through a throat that had become ridiculously tight.

‘Yeah. He’s not as funny as you though.’

‘He’s not, huh?’ Slowly he unclenched his hands. ‘That means he probably doesn’t know why the octopus beat a shark in a fight.’

Zoe started to giggle. ‘Tell me, so I can tell him.’

‘He was well armed.’

As Zoe’s giggles turned into laughter, emotion clawed at his chest. Damn, he missed this girl. Her childish enthusiasm, her spark. The way she used to look at him as if he was her hero.

‘More, more.’

‘Oh no, I’m not falling for that. You know I have to limit you to one a call. Don’t want you laughing so much you pop.’

‘Not fair.’ He imagined her sticking her tongue out at him.

‘Always leave the audience wanting more. Have you written your letter to Father Christmas yet?’

‘Duh, I’m nearly ten. I’m not a baby any more.’

‘So you don’t want any presents?’

He heard her little girl huff. ‘Didn’t say that, did I? But Father Christmas doesn’t bring them, Mum does. And I won’t be getting many this year ’cos we’re going away.’

Her disappointment was clear in her voice. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Mum says somewhere nice. It will be hot and have a beach. But that’s not Christmas, is it?’

Owen thought of his own plans. Of the sexy brunette lying on that beach in the hot sun. ‘Might be fun though.’

‘It’ll be boring. No Christmas tree, no turkey, no crackers. Boring.’

‘I bet the resort you stay in will have all of those.’

‘No snow.’

He chuckled. ‘Okay, you’ve got me there. Doesn’t always snow here at Christmas either, though.’

‘But it might.’

They lived in the North of England. Anything was possible. ‘True, it might.’ He was nearing the hospital now, but Owen was loath to say goodbye just yet. ‘Most girls your age would love to go on holiday at Christmas.’

‘Yeah, to Lapland.’

‘You just said you didn’t believe in Father Christmas.’

‘Duh, I don’t. But Christmas isn’t Christmas unless it’s cold.’

Owen smiled to himself as he slotted into a parking spot. Give him heat and Gabby over Christmas any day.

Chapter Ten

Eleven days before Christmas

Gabby glowered at Cindy when she walked into work on Friday, two days after the Christmas party.

‘I’m still not talking to you.’

Cindy rolled her big brown eyes. ‘You can’t still be hung-over?’

‘No, but now I’ve got twice as much work to do today because I was so useless yesterday.’

‘Can I help it if you can’t hold your alcohol? We Jamaicans drink punch for breakfast.’

‘And then you lie on the beach all day, which is exactly what I plan on doing in eleven days’ time.’ But would she be doing it alone? Owen never had answered her question about whether he’d need to take care of his dad following his hip operation. Not that it should matter; the last few Christmases she’d holidayed alone and they’d been fine.

It’s just that now she’d had a glimpse of what a holiday could be, with a man who made her laugh. And made her want.

‘You and Mr Dreamboat. Sea, sand and—’

‘Thank you, Cindy.’

Gabby stepped into her office to the sound of Cindy’s untamed laughter. Shoving her briefcase on the floor she went to boot up her computer and froze. As her eyes took in the single red rose on her desk, her heart let out a loud thump. A Post-it note lay next to it, and scrawled in barely legible writing was:

Missed you yesterday. Mr Dreamboat xx

Unconsciously she placed her hand over her racing heart. No one had ever bought her flowers before. Flowers were for romantics, and she wasn’t one. The men she’d had flings with had known that. Sighing, she carefully picked it up, trailing her fingers across the soft red petals. She wasn’t going to get sentimental over a rose.

Cindy poked her head round the door. ‘I see you found it. Do you want me to get a cup of water for you?’

‘Yes, thanks.’ She held it to her nose, inhaling the scent. ‘Maybe you

could try and persuade the catering team to lend me a glass.’ Cindy started to smirk. ‘What? It would look better in a glass, that’s all.’

‘Sure, honey. I’ll see if I can hunt down a glass for you.’ Cindy turned and walked out, whistling.

Gabby shook her head when she made out the tune: ‘Love is in the Air’. Seems her PA was a romantic. Luckily Gabby had both feet on the ground. The rose was a sweet gesture, one she was touched by. But if life had taught her anything about relationships so far, it was that gestures, like promises, were easily made. It was actions that counted.

Still, it deserved a thank you, at least, so she drew out her phone.

‘Owen Cooper.’

She was used to hearing his voice, so why did it send a sharp thrill through her now? ‘Thank you for the rose.’ Subconsciously her fingers caressed the petals. ‘You don’t have to romance me, Cooper, though I do appreciate the thought.’

‘That wasn’t me romancing you, Sanderson. It was me giving you a rose.’ It sounded daft, but she could hear his smile. ‘Was it still okay? I meant to put it in water, but I didn’t have time.’

‘It’s perfect. Cindy’s getting some water for it now.’ The background noise told her he was in his car. ‘Where are you on your way to?’

‘Got a meeting in Birmingham.’

‘Ouch. Haven’t you trained Hilda not to schedule meetings that take you down the M6 on a Friday?’

‘Train Hilda? I’d have more luck training a grizzly bear.’

Gabby’s lips twitched at the image. Owen with a whip in his hand. Maybe wearing some leather trousers. No shirt, just beads of sweat sliding down those beautiful pecs. Picking up a folder from her desk, she started to fan herself. ‘Are you going to be okay for tonight? You can cancel if you don’t think—’

‘We have a date, Gabby. I’m not cancelling.’

‘Right.’ A smile burst across her face. She hadn’t realised how much she’d wanted to see him, until she’d thought she might not.

‘Got to go now. My meeting is at eight thirty.’

‘Eight thirty?’ Gabby frowned. ‘Wow, what time did you have to leave home this morning?’

‘Six. A small price to pay to make sure I’m back for our date. See you

later, Gabby. And if you're wondering how to make a tired salesman happy, wear something red. And make sure it can be easily peeled off.'

As he ended the call her eyes skimmed over the rose, and then to the little Christmas tree he'd given her. What to make of a man who was sweet and sentimental one minute, hot and sexy the next? What time must he have dropped the rose off this morning? And the office wasn't even on his way to the motorway.

'Will this do?' Cindy reached over her shoulder to place a tall glass of water onto the desk. Whatever she saw on Gabby's face made her eyes narrow. 'Well, well, that's an expression I never thought I'd see. You've gone all dreamy eyed.'

Immediately Gabby schooled her features. 'You're imagining things.' Carefully she placed the red rose into the glass. 'That's perfect, thank you.'

Perfect wasn't her though, she worried as she stared at it. She needed flawed, like she was. A man who got out of bed twenty minutes earlier than he had to, just to deliver a flower to a woman, was a man secure in his own skin. A man who found relationships easy, despite his protest to the contrary. How could he understand a woman riddled with insecurities? Understand why she found this so hard?

He rang on her bell five minutes after he'd said he would. Of course she'd been ready for the last fifteen minutes.

'Hey.' His eyes ran up and down the black jeans and fitted red top she'd chosen to wear. 'That's a sight to lift the soul of a man who's spent two hours stuck in roadworks.'

He looked carelessly gorgeous in faded jeans, pink shirt and an expensive grey jacket, but he also looked tired.

'Tough day?'

He smiled and bent to kiss her. 'It's about to get a whole lot better. What do you fancy? Italian, Indian, something starting with a letter other than I?'

'Actually, I thought we could keep to the I theme, and I'd cook.'

His eyebrows shot up. 'You're going to cook for me?'

'I figured you'd have had enough driving for today.'

He swooped down and hugged her, lifting her off her feet. 'Jeeze woman, you sure know the way to a man's heart.' Don't panic, don't panic, don't . . . too late, she stiffened in his arms. With a sigh he let her slip back to the floor. 'It's just a saying, Gabby.'

‘I know.’ And now she felt stupid. Why couldn’t she be as chilled about all this as he was?

He tilted her chin, drawing her eyes to his. ‘Relax. We’re enjoying ourselves. Don’t overthink this.’

Damn him for being able to read her so well. And damn her mother for making her such a basket case. ‘Do you want me to cook for you, or not?’

He didn’t take offence at her snotty reply. Of course he didn’t. ‘There’s the Gabriela Sanderson I know and . . . like.’ He grinned down at her. ‘Yes, I want you to cook for me. While you’re at it, you can take off my shoes, furnish me with slippers and sit me by the fire with a whisky.’

She shoved at him. ‘You can sit at the breakfast bar and chop.’

A few minutes later they were working harmoniously in her kitchen. It didn’t usually feel this small, she thought as she glanced over at the hulking male sitting on one of her shiny red stools, a look of charming concentration on his face as he diligently chopped some peppers.

Oh God. Had she just used the word charming in connection with him? It was all this domesticity. It was making her soft. ‘How’s your dad?’

‘Good, thanks. If he behaves himself he can go home tomorrow.’

‘Surely he shouldn’t be on his own? Not after hip surgery.’

Owen grunted. ‘If you talk to him, he’ll tell you he can manage perfectly well. But no, I’m dragging him kicking and screaming back to mine for a few days until he’s strong enough on his crutches.’

She paused, drawing in a breath. ‘A few days sounds optimistic. If you need to duck out of the holiday, just say. I’d rather know.’ She could handle being let down. She’d had enough practice at it. What she hated was being dangled on a string, left foolishly hoping when the person who’d made the promise had no intention of keeping it.

Of course I’m coming home for your birthday, Gabby, I wouldn’t miss it. You watch, I’ll be home in time for Christmas.

As the childhood memories swirled through her, choppy and turbulent, she reached for her knife and began to chop the chicken.

* * *

Owen glanced up to find Gabby hacking at the chicken breast, her face like thunder.

‘Gabby?’

She snapped her head up, then seemed to shake herself. ‘Sorry. I was miles away.’

‘In a place where chickens are evil monsters and need taking down?’ He nodded towards the pulverised pieces on the chopping board.

She gave him a ghost of a smile, though her eyes appeared still locked in the past.

‘Where did you go?’ he asked softly.

‘Just bad memories.’

‘I admire frugality with words, but you could spare a few more on this occasion.’

She heaved out a sigh. ‘I was remembering all the times my mother made a promise, and didn’t keep it.’

‘And you think I’ll do the same?’

‘Perhaps not intentionally.’ She turned her back on him, sliding the massacred chicken into a frying pan, before facing him once more. ‘I’m done with getting my hopes up and then finding them crushed. If you think you won’t be able to go on holiday, please just say.’

He couldn’t resist. ‘You’ve just admitted you’re hoping I’ll go.’

She rolled her big brown eyes at him. ‘I wouldn’t have invited you otherwise.’

He rose from the stool and slipped his arms around her waist. ‘I was under the impression I’d invited myself, but now I know you’ve officially invited me, there’s no way I’m not going.’

‘You can’t say that.’ Emotions he couldn’t put a finger on — worry, fear, compassion? — flickered across her face. ‘Not with how your dad is at the moment.’

‘Okay, you’re right. But believe me when I tell you I’ll do everything humanly possible to make sure I’m on that plane with you on Christmas Eve. Dad’s spending Christmas with my sister this year.’

‘Alice? The one who lives in France?’

He smiled, stupidly pleased she’d remembered. ‘Yes. The doctor says as long as we arrange for help either end, there’s no reason he won’t be able to fly out as planned.’ Hell, if he needed to, he’d put his dad on the plane himself. Travel over with him. Anything to have a Christmas he could look forward to again. ‘Now, about this meal you’re supposed to be cooking me.’ He glanced over to the collection of haphazardly sliced onions and peppers

he'd been slaving over. 'Seems to me I've done most of the hard work.'

She snorted. 'Typical man. Contributes one tiny thing and thinks he's some sort of God.'

'Hey, there's nothing tiny about me.'

'Give me strength,' she muttered, though her eyes were laughing. 'Go and pour yourself a drink. And while you're at it, get me one, too. I'm going to need it if I have to put up with you all evening.'

He smirked as he uncorked the wine bottle and started to pour. 'All evening? Does that mean you won't kick me out after midnight?'

Her back was to him as she shuffled the chicken around in the pan but when she glanced over her shoulder her eyes smouldered. 'You're not getting kicked out, but you will have to work for your supper.'

He stilled as desire blazed through him. Then swore as he realised he'd managed to miss the glass and pour most of the wine over the worktop.

* * *

They ate at the breakfast bar. Gabby hit the dimmer switch and, to his surprise, fished out a few tea lights.

'Are you romancing me now, Ms Sanderson?'

She focused on lighting the candles. 'I'm helping to reduce my electricity bill.'

He grinned, knowing he'd caught her out. 'You're not as hard-nosed as you want me to think. You like dating me. You like being in a relationship. Being my girlfriend.'

Her eyes darted to his and her lips twitched briefly. 'I like eating in my own home, and without the glare of bright light.'

As he knew pushing her was counterproductive he took his time assembling a fajita before trying a different tack. 'Tell me a bit about your life growing up. I want to understand what makes a gorgeous woman so afraid of romance. Of falling in love.'

She frowned over at him. 'I'm not afraid. It just isn't something I yearn for.'

Okay then. Carefully he placed the fajita he'd been about to bite into back on his plate. 'You don't want to fall in love?'

'I don't want to become dependent on someone else for my happiness.' Her eyes dropped to her glass, and she twirled the stem round and round with

her fingers. 'You asked about my life growing up. There were good times, times when Mum was around and she took me to all the places kids want to go; the zoo, the beach. And some of the places I wasn't particularly bothered about. Like the charity shop I worked in with her one summer when I was about twelve. Shifting through bags of smelly donated clothes wasn't exactly fun, but even then I was content because Mum was with me. If she wanted to spend the summer volunteering at a local charity shop, or a kids centre, then I wanted to do that, too.'

His summers had been filled with holidays, he reflected, and going out with his mates. Knowing his mum would be there when he got home, because that's what she'd been, a homemaker, fitting occasional work around him and Alice. God, he'd been blessed. 'And when your mum wasn't around?'

'I went to boarding school. She'd send me postcards from wherever she was in the world.' A fierce expression entered her eyes as she glanced over at him. 'Don't look at me like that, Owen.'

'Like what?'

'With all that cloying sympathy. I was happy at boarding school. I had a great bunch of friends there and life was simple. We had routines. I knew what time tea was, when it was time to go to bed. There were no nasty surprises.'

He started to understand her obsession with things being tidy and organised. 'I'm guessing life during your holidays was harder to manage. You had to rely on your mum.' At her look of surprise, he laughed. 'You're not that complicated to work out.' Before she could take offence, he grabbed her hand. 'Hey, I mean that in a positive way. There's nothing twisted or devious about you. You're honest and straightforward.'

Her eyes softened. 'Neat save.'

'I thought so.' Because he could, and because he knew it would unbalance her, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Her eyes widened and she tried to draw her hand away, but he clung onto it. He needed her to feel how much he wanted her, cared for her, while she answered his next question. 'You mentioned the good times. Now tell me the bad times. The stuff that made you sad as a child.'

Chapter Eleven

Gabby couldn't believe Owen had kissed her hand. What century were they in? And why were her insides fluttering? It was true, she didn't need romance, yet it appeared that she liked it.

But now he wanted her to tell him all the crap parts of her childhood. The bits she carefully, and meticulously, kept locked away. He wanted her to bring back memories that hurt, made her angry. All while he stared at her with compassion, her hand clasped in his strong grip.

'I don't like talking about it.' She tugged at her hand, but he held firm. 'I don't see what good it serves.'

'Humour me. I want to understand the woman I'm dating.'

'You just told me I'm not complicated.'

He groaned. 'Why did I have to fall for a smart woman?' Fall for? Oh God, surely he'd said that glibly. Hadn't he? While she became all tangled and panicked, he blithely carried on. 'If I had to make a guess, I'd say you spent most of your childhood being let down by your mum.'

His perception shouldn't surprise her. For all his laid-back, casual nature, Owen was sales director for a reason. He listened, asking the right questions, and the difficult questions. All to help him understand who he was dealing with.

Feeling unsteady, she sipped at her wine with her free hand, trying to find her control, her calm. At his nod of encouragement, she put down the glass. 'It wasn't that she did it deliberately. That she didn't want to come home when she said she would. More that last-minute issues always dragged her away.'

'Give me some examples.'

'Seriously?'

'Yes.'

She huffed, making her resentment quite clear. 'For future reference, the way to thank me for making you a meal isn't to grill me on subjects I don't want to discuss.'

His eyes flared. 'You'll know when I'm thanking you, trust me. But for now, stick to answering the question.' His hand tightened over hers. 'Please.'

There he went again, unsettling her. Leaving her hot and bothered,

aroused, yet also so annoyed she wanted to shove at him. 'Fine. My mother missed several Christmases. I always knew when she wasn't going to make it back in time because the welfare officer would seek me out the day before we broke up. Sometimes I had to stay behind for a few days until she turned up, but usually I went to my grandparents, or my aunts to wait for her.' She forced down the ball of emotion threatening to choke her. She'd done getting upset over this crap. 'I remember at least three Christmases when she didn't make it home at all.'

'Christ, Gabby.' Owen looked as if he'd taken a hit to the stomach. 'What could possibly be more important than seeing her only child at Christmas?'

'Helping children who'd lost their home, their parents.' She looked Owen straight in the eye. 'How was I supposed to be angry when there were kids out there who needed her more than I did? I was warm, clean. I had a house to live in, relatives to take care of me. Thanks to earthquakes and hurricanes, the kids my mother was helping had lost everything.'

'Charity begins at home,' he said softly. 'I admire the hell out of her career choice, but that's what it was. A job. You were her daughter. Family should always come first. Always.'

She smiled sadly. 'I could have done with some of that reassurance back then. I'd get so cross, so hurt that she wasn't there as she'd promised, and then feel so guilty for being selfish. Wanting her with me when she was helping kids a lot worse off than I was.'

His fingers wrapped around hers, giving them a gentle squeeze. 'It wasn't selfish to want to see your mum. It was selfish of her not to put you first. She must have known how upset you'd be, yet she chose to let you down.'

He'd said it to console her, yet the truth of it stung. What did it say about her, that her mother had chosen the happiness of other kids over her own?

Pulling her hand away, she stood up sharply. 'Have you finished?'

Disappointment etched across his face and he sighed. 'With the food, yes. Best fajita I've had in ages.'

'Do you eat them a lot?'

'Haven't had one in ages.'

She rolled her eyes and reached for his plate, but his hand reached out to stop her, raising it once again to his lips. 'I'm sorry your mum let you down,

Gabby.’

Her throat locked up. ‘So am I.’

‘But not everyone will.’ Earnest blue eyes pressed into hers. ‘You need to learn to trust again.’

Easy to say, yet when you’d lived a childhood bouncing from promise to promise, hope to hope, only to be left crushingly disappointed, trust was hard to give. ‘That’s one way of seeing it. The other is not to entrust my happiness to someone else.’

He exhaled a curse, dropping her hand and sliding off the stool before coming to stand in front of her. ‘That road leads to a sad, lonely existence, Gabby.’

‘Does it? Because I’ve been perfectly happy these last few years.’

His thumb smoothed across her cheek. ‘Happier than you are now?’

And bam, there it was again. The difficult question. ‘I’m very happy in my new job, in my new house,’ she evaded.

‘And with me?’ The confidence, so much a part of him, was stripped away. She found herself staring into blue eyes that brimmed with both hope and vulnerability.

‘I’m happier now than I’ve ever been,’ she admitted honestly.

His eyes lit up and he bent to kiss her. ‘So am I,’ he whispered. ‘I don’t know how it must have felt for you growing up, but I do know what it feels like to be kicked in the teeth. Emotionally,’ he added with a small smile. ‘My teeth are still my own.’

‘And what fine teeth they are.’

He grinned, giving her a flash of the perfect white teeth. ‘Thank you. What I was saying, before I got sidetracked by my dental perfection, is that for many years I felt like you do. I wasn’t prepared to risk putting myself out there, leaving myself open to being hurt again.’ He drew a hand down her hair, tucking it behind her ear. ‘But then I met you. And now I want to take that risk.’

Her heart faltered, then began to thump wildly inside her chest. She wanted so much to be like him; boldly opening his heart, but how many times had she opened it to her mum? And how many times had she been left reeling? ‘I don’t know if I can. If I’m ready.’

* * *

Owen's heart fisted and he inhaled sharply. Would it always be like this? He felt like a horse whisperer, trying to calm a skittish mare, harshly treated by her previous owner. When he thought of what Gabby had put up with as a child, it made his blood boil.

It also explained one hell of a lot, too. So he needed to be patient. 'All I'm asking is you don't push me away. Let's see where this takes us.'

She nodded, dropping her eyes to his chest, and he slid his hands down her arms before settling them around her waist. Feeling they could both do with a break from the heavy emotion of the last hour, he pressed his hips against hers. 'And if it takes us up to your bedroom, I'll rate this as the best evening in I've ever had.'

The tension left her body and she let out a huff of laughter. 'We can get to my bedroom, once you've helped me clear up.' Desire buzzing through him, he strode purposefully to the dishwasher. 'And once you've told me more about what it was like to be Owen Cooper growing up.'

He spun round to face her. 'If you're putting hearing a potted history of my childhood before going to bed with me, I must be seriously losing my touch.' Taking her hand he placed it on his chest, letting her feel his racing heart. 'I was thinking more along the lines of, stuff the clearing up. We'll do it in the morning.'

She bit into her lip as her fingers undid a button and crept beneath his shirt. 'Persuade me.'

With a groan of satisfaction, of lust, of sheer delight, he scooped her into his arms. 'I'll do more than that, Gabriela Sanderson. I'll sweep you off your feet.'

Her breath tickled his neck as she giggled. 'Mr Dreamboat. Deliverer of the most corny lines known to man.'

'Hey, I can deliver on more than corny lines. Just you wait and see.'

* * *

He'd definitely delivered, Owen thought smugly as he gazed down at Gabby. She looked flushed and content. Very, very content. Her big brown eyes blinked open.

'I've got a man in my bed again.'

He quirked an eyebrow. 'Not just any man.'

'No. A man who's going to clean my kitchen tomorrow.'

He looked at her in mock disgust. ‘Would you ask that of Chris Hemsworth?’

‘No. I’d get him to remove the bricks that have been dumped in the garden.’ She reached to squeeze his bicep. ‘Make use of his superior strength.’

That taught him to bring a Hollywood hunk into bed with them. Feeling a teeny bit slighted, he rolled onto his back. Immediately she feathered his face with kisses. ‘I like the man I have in bed with me now.’

‘You do, huh?’

‘I do.’

Mollified, he pulled her into his arms so her head rested on his chest.

‘Why do we always end up in my bed, and not yours?’

‘Good question.’ It had happened unconsciously. He liked to pick her up — it was another man thing — so obviously he dropped her back. And if he was lucky, wangled the night in her bed. ‘You’re welcome in my bed anytime, though. In fact . . .’ He rolled the idea around in his head, and decided to go with it. ‘How do you fancy coming over tomorrow? I’ve got a bit of sorting out to do before Dad comes out of hospital.’

She rose up, resting on her elbow. ‘Are you inviting me over for dinner, for sex, or to help you clean?’

‘You forgot the romance.’

‘So there won’t be any cleaning?’

‘Ah, I didn’t say that, exactly.’

She pursed her lips. ‘So how much cleaning is required, exactly? I need to work out if the dinner and the sex is worth the investment.’

‘You forgot the romance again.’

She grinned. ‘You’re putting a lot of store on that.’

God, he loved her sharp tongue. ‘Trust me, the sex alone is worth the investment. The dinner and romance will be a bonus.’ He paused, knowing a good salesman was an honest one. ‘I should probably point out that my house is . . . an ongoing project is a polite way to describe it. A dump would be another way.’

Her laughter fanned across his chest. ‘Was that how you found it, or what it’s turned into now you’re living there?’

‘Hey, I’m not messy.’ He thought of the tidiness of her cupboard under the stairs, and the clutter of his. ‘Not that messy,’ he corrected. ‘I bought it

that way. I've done up a few rooms, but it's a long way from being finished.'

'Please tell me one of the rooms you've done up is one your dad can stay in?'

He tried not to squirm, but her eyes had him pinned. 'Not exactly? I mean he could have the spare box room,' decorated with Zoe in mind, ever hopeful. 'Or my room, both of which are finished, but they're on the first floor. And he needs to be downstairs.'

'So this cleaning I'm doing tomorrow—'

'Includes decorating,' he interrupted. 'But remember the dinner. And the sex.'

'And the romance?'

'Of course.' Though now he thought about it, he wasn't sure how he was going to manage that in a dump of a house, after they'd been painting all day.

'That's one heck of a romantic meal you're going to cook me.' He smirked, because her statement implied she knew the sex was going to be worth it. 'How long will your dad stay with you?'

'A couple of days. Just while he gets into the swing of moving around with a walker. After that I'll arrange for help to come to his house. And then I put him on a plane so he can spend Christmas with Alice in France.' He rolled them over so he was above her. 'And we start packing, so we can spend Christmas together, in the Florida sunshine.'

'Umm, hello. I'll have started my packing the week before.'

'Seriously?' He peered into her deep brown eyes. 'Bloody hell, you are. In which case you can help me with mine.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'So now I have to clean your house, decorate and help you pack.'

He planted a kiss on her cheeks, her nose, and finally her mouth. 'Ah, but think of the rewards.'

Chapter Twelve

Ten days before Christmas

Gabby jolted as Owen swerved the Maserati around yet another pothole.

‘You need to get yourself a four-wheel drive,’ she said distractedly, her eyes fixed on the detached house looming ahead of them, half of it hidden by a huge weeping willow.

He uttered an exclamation of disgust. ‘What am I, a farmer? No thank you. I’m getting the holes filled in next month.’ He navigated a final pothole before pulling up and turning off the engine. ‘Well, what do you think?’

If she’d been a woman who spoke without thinking, she’d have said, ‘It’s big, old and looks like it needs a hell of a lot of work.’ The paint on the sash window frames was peeling, ivy had run amok over most of the brickwork. One of the windows on the upper floor was cracked. The front garden was wild, so God only knew what state the back was in.

But she took a moment to look closer. The tiles on the roof looked new. The green front door had been freshly painted and boasted a shiny brass knocker and beautiful Christmas wreath. And it was pretty. She loved old houses; it was why she’d fallen for hers.

‘That bad, huh?’

She turned to find him looking at her with a half-smile on his face. ‘I like it.’

‘You do?’ He stared back at the house. ‘Some days I like it, too. Others, when I discover a fresh patch of damp, or another busted pipe, I wonder why I didn’t buy one of the new developments down the road.’

‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘You tell me. After we’ve turned what was the downstairs study into a room fit to house a grumpy pensioner with a dodgy hip.’

Not so predictable after all, she thought as he led her inside. The flash car fitted the flash salesman, but that man would be living it up in a swanky new apartment. Not trying to renovate an old Victorian house. ‘Why did you buy it?’

‘Bloody good question.’ He dumped his keys on the wooden drawers in the hallway and carelessly threw their coats over the banister. ‘I probably

should say it was a clever investment, or that I was keen to work with my hands. Truth is, it was a spur of the moment thing.'

'You bought a house on the spur of the moment?'

He laughed at her obvious astonishment. 'Sure, why not? Not every decision has to be meticulously worked through. Sometimes you can just drive past a house, like the look of it, and decide to buy it.'

'We're so different,' she muttered, shaking her head.

He pulled her into his arms. 'And that's exactly why we work. Remember your physics. Opposites attract.'

'Then drive each other crazy.'

Holding her gaze, he gave her a heart-melting smile. 'Life is dull without a little crazy.'

As his lips brushed hers in a gentle kiss, she felt a flutter inside her chest. Unnerved, she carefully manoeuvred out of his arms. Kissing to arouse, she understood, but this was different. It indicated affection, caring. Other heavy emotions that scared her, yet it seemed her heart responded to. 'Show me this room you've tricked me into helping you with.'

Frustration flickered across his face before he masked it with an exaggerated frown. 'Tricked you? You walked into this with your eyes wide open. What some women will do for a night in my bed.' Wrapping his hand around hers he led her through the hallway. 'First the quick tour. Then we'll set to work.'

He started with the sitting room and she admired its wooden floorboards, original fireplace and rich wine coloured walls. No decorations, she noted, but Christmas cards were plonked haphazardly on most available surfaces. Next came the big bright kitchen that opened onto a casual sitting area with French windows overlooking the garden. 'It'll look better when you can see a lawn and flowers, instead of a jungle.'

'It looks like it's trying to be an orchard.'

'Yeah. I've a feeling I'm going to be sick of apples and pears.'

Quickly he showed her the downstairs toilet and walk-in shower room — smartly done in black and white tiles, before leading her past a closed door and up the stairs.

'This is where you'll be sleeping tonight.'

He pushed open the original wooden door, revealing the master bedroom. Grey was the theme; light grey walls, darker grey curtains, white and grey

duvet that, typically, was in a crumpled heap, as if he'd jumped out of bed in a hurry. The bed itself was huge, with a wooden headboard and next to it, matching dark wood cabinets. Opposite was a fireplace with a white surround and dark slate inset.

By the window was an armchair that looked like it could be comfortable, though it was hard to say because much of it was hidden under a pile of randomly thrown clothes.

'Don't you have a wardrobe?'

'Of course.' He pointed to the other side of the room. 'I had these fitted.' He must have seen the way she was looking at the chair because he let out a quiet curse. 'Very funny. I haven't got round to putting those away yet. It's my Sunday job.'

'If we're going to make it through this holiday without me killing you, you're going to have to learn to put your clothes away every day. Not once a week.'

'Noted.' He leant against the door frame, one long jean-clad leg crossed over the other, a sexy smile on his face. 'Though you could learn to relax a little.'

'I'm tidy. It doesn't mean I'm not relaxed.' Before she could start to obsess again about how different they were, and how potentially disastrous this holiday was going to be, Owen straightened and tugged his jumper over his head, followed by his T-shirt. Immediately her eyes zeroed in on the rippling muscles of his chest. She'd seen him naked a lot since they'd started dating, but it wasn't getting tired yet.

'If you can drag your eyes away from my chest, you might want to do the same.'

She watched, spellbound, as he unbuckled his belt and pulled down the zip on his jeans. 'Strip?'

His laugh was as dirty as her thoughts. 'I like the way you're thinking.' He stepped out of his jeans, and she had a delicious view of tight cotton boxers and finely honed muscles before he turned and walked towards his wardrobe. 'But if we're going to get this damn room finished for tomorrow, we need to get cracking.'

The muscles of his back slid sensuously over each other as he shifted through clothes in his wardrobe. Then he turned and threw a paint-spattered shirt at her. 'Here. You might want to put this on.' He waggled his eyebrows

up and down. 'I recommend stripping off first. For the sake of your clothes, you understand.'

* * *

Owen grinned as he watched Gabby shake herself. God, the things it did to him to know he could put that heat in her eyes. He had half a mind to say sod the decorating. But then his dad would have to sleep in his bed, which wasn't going to happen. And not just because he doubted the man could make it up the stairs.

As he grabbed another old shirt, and a pair of tatty jeans, he turned to find Gabby standing there in a sexy yellow bra and pants.

'Christ, Dad's not even here yet and already he's getting in the way,' he mumbled to himself.

She slipped on the paint-ruined shirt. 'Do you have another pair of jeans I can put on? Sweats?'

He eyed up her long slim legs, looking downright incredible beneath his shirt. 'Afraid not,' he said cheerfully.

He struggled not to laugh as she put her hand on her hips and glared at him. 'You're kidding me.'

'You're lucky I found you the shirt.' The thought of her decorating dressed only in her underwear sent arousal humming through him. 'Besides, a man has to have some incentive when he's working.'

She arched a perfect dark brow. 'And what about my incentive?'

'Just say the word. I'll strip for you any time you like.'

She muttered all the way back downstairs, until he opened the door to the room he'd omitted showing her earlier — the one he'd earmarked to house his dad. 'Here we go.'

Her sharp eyes scanned the room. Flaking wallpaper on the walls. A fireplace that needed at the very least a good clean. Shelves either side of the chimney breast that were lined with dusty old books the previous occupants hadn't bothered to take away. A carpet that looked like someone had thrown up all over it. 'When did you say your dad was coming out of hospital?'

'Tomorrow.'

She started muttering again under her breath. Words like conned, smooth-talking bastard, and finally, no sex is worth this.

'I'll strip. The wallpaper,' he added with a smirk. 'You sand. We'll both

paint.'

Feeling pleased with himself, he went in search of the wallpaper stripping machine he'd hired when he'd thought he was going to have a shitty day, decorating by himself. Instead he was spending it with a sexy, half-naked, smart-mouthed firecracker.

No wonder they called him the man with the silver tongue.

* * *

'The least you can do is entertain me while I'm doing this.' Gabby put down the paintbrush she'd been using to good effect on the skirting boards and looked over at him. 'You were going to tell me about your childhood.'

He wondered whether he should tell her she had paint on her nose. Then decided he'd enjoy the sight a little longer. 'My life is an open book. What do you want to know?'

'Tell me about your mum, your sister. What your dad was like before he turned into the grumpy man you keep mentioning.'

Owen winced, feeling disloyal. His dad was a good bloke. He didn't want to taint Gabby's view of him before she met him.

And he wanted her to meet him.

The thought made him pause. The only other woman he'd introduced to his parents had been Stella. Gabby was becoming important. Perhaps too important, because he had a horrid feeling that this time the shoe was on the other foot. Stella had been ready for children and marriage. He'd not. Now? Marriage and children might be a way off, but commitment? It was frightening to realise how appealing the idea sounded, now that he'd met Gabby. Yet she'd made it quite clear she wasn't ready for anything serious.

'To get the paint on the wall, you do have to actually move your arms a bit.' Gabby's amused voice broke him out of his trance. 'And for a man who usually can't stop talking, you're taking a long time to answer my question.'

Pushing thoughts of his potentially squished heart to one side, Owen dipped his roller into the paint. 'I'll ignore the barbed comment, but only because you look so cute covered in French Grey.' At least that's what the tin called the off-white paint she was using on the woodwork. As she rubbed at her face, presumably to remove the paint but actually only smudging what was already there, he grinned to himself. 'My family, okay, you asked for it. Alice is older than me by three years. She thinks she's smarter, too, but it's

never been confirmed. She's married to a French guy, hence her move over there. She has one kid, and another on the way.'

'Do you get on?'

'Better now she's moved to another country.' The glib reply came out by habit, but then he realised Gabby didn't have siblings. 'Truthfully, we're pretty close. She tends to boss me around, which I resent, obviously, but now I get my own back by buying my nephew annoying toys. We don't see each other as much since she's moved, and the timing of it all sucked, but she's still my big sister and I love her.'

Gabby had a thoughtful expression on her face. 'The timing of it?'

'Yes. Mum had just died, Dad was reeling from it, and Alice moved to another country.' He sighed, shaking his head. 'I'm not being fair. Ever since she met Pierre, my brother-in-law, a move to France had been on the cards. And then he got a job over there. They did offer to postpone the move for a bit, but I told them to go for it. A few months was hardly going to make much of a difference to Dad, and they needed to get on with their new life.'

'So you were left helping your dad with his grief.'

He felt a kick of emotion at the sympathy swimming in her eyes. 'I'm not sure I was much help. I don't think anything can help, when you lose the love of your life. I was there for the practical stuff; sorting out her clothes, the paperwork. Making sure he ate, taking him out of the house.' It was the emotional side he'd failed at. How to support a man who'd lost the will to live?

'It sounds like you're a better son than I am a daughter.'

Shocked, he stared at her. 'How on earth did you figure that?'

'You were there for your dad when he needed you.' An intense sadness settled across her face. 'I've grown so far apart from my mother I wouldn't even know if she needed me or not.'

Dropping the roller, he hunched down next to her. 'The distance isn't your fault, Gabby. She's the one who created it. She's the only one who can fix it.' Not as indifferent to her mum as she makes out, he realised as he planted a soft kiss on her forehead. As badly as the woman had let her down, Gabby still wanted a relationship with her.

And if she was still open to that, maybe, just maybe, she'd also be open to other relationships. He just had to show her that he wasn't like her mother. She could rely on him.

‘Tell me about your mum,’ she asked when they started work again.

Automatically he smiled, which proved time was a healer, because even a year ago he’d have teared up instead. ‘She was the best,’ he said truthfully. ‘I honestly can’t imagine a better mum. She was warm, friendly, up for anything. Nothing ruffled her.’ He huffed in annoyance. ‘That sounds so bland, when she was anything but that. There was no side to her, you know? She was straight as a die. She wasn’t afraid to tell me when I’d let her down, but mostly she spent her time doing the opposite. Telling me how proud I made her.’ He stopped as the grief he’d thought had dulled, began to bite again.

‘Sounds like you take after her,’ Gabby said softly.

Another wave of emotion flooded through him, constricting his throat. ‘I’d like to think so.’

‘And your dad? Tell me what he was like when your mum was alive.’

Owen sucked in a breath, allowing the emotion to subside. ‘He smiled a lot more. My mum was the giggler, but Dad was the one who made her laugh. Made us all laugh, really. Not in a slapstick way, but in a dry, clever way.’

‘You get your sense of humour from him?’

He grinned. ‘Are you saying you find me funny?’

‘Sometimes.’ She gave him a sly smile. ‘When you’re not pissing me off. Anything else you get from your dad?’

‘My drive, I guess. If he wanted something, he went after it until he got it. Dad always told us that’s how he convinced Mum to be his. He wore her down.’ Deliberately Owen caught her eye and held it. ‘So be warned.’

Before she could get all flustered, he put down the roller. ‘Time for a break. I’ll raid the fridge and find us some lunch while you sit back and admire the work we’ve done so far.’

She carefully wiped the brush with a rag and put it into the jar of white spirit. Then she crouched down and inspected what she’d done. ‘It would look better if you’d had some masking tape. Who paints without it?’

‘People who actually want to get on with the painting? People who don’t have swathes of time on their hands? Sensible people who know that once the furniture is in place, nobody is going to notice a wonky paint line?’

At her huff of frustration, he bolted from the room. And chuckled all the way to the kitchen.

Chapter Thirteen

Nine days before Christmas

Gabby woke to the smell of paint in her nostrils, a warm body surrounding her, and cramp in her fingers from holding a brush all day yesterday. Gently she eased them out, before relaxing back against the pillow.

The sex had definitely been worth it.

Smiling, she turned to face Owen, who grumbled in his sleep as she wriggled in his arms.

‘I thought you were the early riser.’

He blinked open a sexy blue eye. ‘You tired me out.’

‘You mean decorating a room in a day tired you out.’

His smile could only be called smug. ‘No. You tired me out. After the decorating.’

She touched a hand to his face, feeling the bump of her heart again. This was so easy. Painting with him. Eating in his kitchen to the glow of a dozen candles he’d somehow managed to find and light while she’d had a shower. Going to bed with him, waking up with him. Sharing banter, but also the harder conversations, as they had yesterday. If she didn’t let her mind go too far beyond this, she was fine. More than fine. She was happy.

Dad always told us that’s how he convinced Mum to be his. He wore her down.

Her pulse turned skittish as she remembered Owen’s warning.

A warm hand clasped hers. ‘Where have you gone?’

She gave herself a mental shake. She wasn’t going to ruin what she had by worrying about hypotheticals. ‘I’ve gone to a place where I get breakfast in bed. Delivered by a man wearing nothing but a smile.’

His chest shook with laughter. ‘Subtlety isn’t one of your attributes, is it?’ Before she could say anything more, he leapt out of bed and dragged on one of the many pair of jeans dumped over the armchair. ‘As it’s December and frigging freezing in this house, despite the expensive new boiler, I’m covering up my important parts. I don’t want to ruin the image you have of me by appearing in front of you naked. And cold.’

With that he wrenched the door open and bounded down the stairs.

Laughing at his retreating figure, Gabby sat up and glanced round his room, noting the small personal details that helped build a picture of the man she was becoming alarmingly attached to. A screwdriver and assorted screws had been abandoned on top of a large antique chest of drawers, along with receipts, a few pens, and a roll of mints. The drawers were partly opened, with various socks and T-shirts trying to escape. A bottle of cologne sat on the bedside table and she reached over to sniff, appreciating the deeply male scent yet knowing it was a hundred times more potent when he wore it. Spying the framed photographs on the fireplace she slid out of bed, slipping on one of his abandoned shirts before walking over to the pictures.

‘No need to wear that on my account, though I am digging the whole naked-except-for-one-of-my shirts look.’ She turned to find him carrying two mugs, a mountain of toast and wearing an appreciative smile.

‘Is this your mum?’

‘Yes.’ Sadness filled his eyes and his smile turned nostalgic. ‘The curly-haired girl standing beside her is Alice, though she doesn’t look anything like that now. Not as cute, not as unwrinkled, and she irons her hair. In case you wondered, the handsome devil Mum’s got in her arms is me.’

Gabby studied his mother’s wide smile, the thick wavy blonde hair. The direct blue eyes. ‘You look a lot like her.’

‘I have her colouring, yes.’ He nodded over to the photograph next to it, featuring the same lady many years older, laughing into the eyes of handsome man with greying hair and a more reserved smile. ‘That’s her with Dad, a year before she fell ill.’

‘They look happy.’

‘They were.’

Gabby felt a dart of envy. What must it have been like to grow up with parents who loved each other? And knowing they loved you, too? It made her ache for something she’d spent years telling herself she didn’t want. A relationship with her own mother. Enough to keep a photograph of her on the mantelpiece.

She heard a clatter and then he was standing behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. ‘Hey, what’s wrong?’

She swallowed, carefully placing the photograph back on the mantelpiece. ‘Nothing a dose of caffeine can’t fix.’

His expression told her he wanted to push, but then he sighed and

stepped back. 'Then you're in luck. Get back into bed.' He took one look at her face and laughed. 'Please.'

She scrambled under the duvet, watching as he picked up the tray again. 'You do realise this is the first time I've ever had breakfast brought to me in bed.'

Surprise flashed across his face and he glanced down at the toast-laden tray. 'Damn, if I'd known that, I'd have brought you something more elegant.'

She made a grab for the coffee. 'I'll hold you to that next time.' And how easy it was to say that. To know, without doubt, that she'd find herself in bed again with him soon. She looked up to find him grinning at her. 'What?'

'Nothing.' He settled into the space next to her, putting the tray between them. 'Just pleased to see you've accepted the inevitability of sleeping in my bed again. And again.'

'I've accepted that if you're offering to provide breakfast in bed, I'm inclined to accept.' Taking a piece of toast, she moaned in pleasure as she bit into it. 'When are you picking your dad up?'

'I said around lunchtime. The doctor needs to take a final look at him this morning.'

Should she volunteer to go with him? No, she wasn't going to get herself in a state over what was the right thing to do. Not this time. If he wanted her to meet his dad, he'd ask. Otherwise, it wasn't any of her business. Anyway, she hardly wanted to spend her Sunday afternoon helping Owen look after his dad.

Funny then that the thought of spending it alone in her quiet, organised, tidy home had suddenly lost its appeal.

He didn't want to say goodbye to her, Owen realised as they finally made it downstairs after a lazy morning of making love, talking, and making love again. But he could hardly subject her to an afternoon with an invalid pensioner. Plus, he didn't want the pair of them to meet for the first time with his dad all cranky from hospital.

'Do you want a look at your handiwork? See if it passes muster in the daylight?'

He opened the door to what would be his dad's room. The dark wood floorboards and green walls were unusual for a bedroom, but would make a great study once his dad was back at home. Gabby had helped him carry the

spare bed downstairs last night — in bits — and he'd assembled it, with a lot of cursing.

'It looks good, Owen, really good.' She smirked up at him. 'Even the parts you did.'

He had no comeback, he thought as he gazed into her smiling eyes. His heart felt too full. 'Did I ever really thank you for everything you did yesterday?'

'You thanked me this morning. Twice, if I recall.'

For once he didn't want to banter. 'I'm serious, Gabby. When I invited you over I didn't intend for it to be that much hard work.' He shook his head, feeling a twinge of shame. 'I want to date you. To treat you. To make you feel special.' To make you fall in love with me, he almost added. 'Yesterday I ended up using you for slave labour.'

She frowned, placing a hand on his chest. 'I enjoyed it. I don't need the fancy stuff. I'm a modern, independent woman.'

'You might not need it, but I want to give it to you.' He bent to kiss her, finding a primitive pleasure in smelling his shower gel on her. 'I'd better get you home before I decide to stuff my dad and take you back upstairs for the rest of the day.'

They were both quiet on the journey back to her house. Owen's mind was taken up with wondering how much he'd get to see her over the next few days, with his dad staying. As for her mind, he had no clue what she was thinking, other than whatever it was, her brain was working overtime on it.

After pulling up outside her house he put the car into park before cupping her face and giving her a long, drugging kiss. 'Thank you again.'

Her lips were swollen, her cheeks flushed. 'Enjoy the rest of your day with your dad.'

'I'd rather be with you.'

'Even if I got you working?' She smiled. 'Payback's a bitch.'

'I'll do anything.' Unable to resist, he kissed her again. 'As long as I'm with you, I'll do anything.' Knowing she was about to freak out, he quickly kissed the tip of her nose. 'Except getting rid of mice. I can't stand the things. Twitchy nose, big feet and long creepy tail.'

His deflection tactic worked and she laughed as she waved him goodbye.

* * *

When Owen entered the ward he found his dad sitting on the chair next to his bed, coat on, bag packed, waiting for him.

‘Looks like you’re ready to leave.’

His dad heaved himself onto his walker. ‘I was ready an hour ago.’

Okay then. Owen held his tongue and picked up his father’s bag. ‘Wouldn’t it be easier with a wheelchair?’

Wrong thing to say.

‘I’m not a damn cripple.’

‘You’re a man recovering from a hip operation. Wheelchairs are allowed.’

His dad began to make his way across the ward with the speed of a geriatric tortoise. ‘Physio says I should walk.’

Owen wanted to point out that he could walk all he wanted, when he got home, but at this rate home wasn’t going to happen this side of Christmas. Once again, he held his tongue.

An hour later and Owen had his dad settled in an armchair by the fire. For all his irritation with the man, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret at how diminished he looked. Pale from being stuck in hospital, thinner too, it was heartbreaking to see this man wither away in front of his eyes. It wasn’t that long ago his dad’s grey eyes had twinkled. Not that long ago that the man’s face had lit up when his mother had walked into a room. Now he was a shell. A man who seemed to have given up on life even though he still had kids who loved him, and a grandchild he could fuss over. If he could be bothered.

‘Where’s Clarissa?’

Damn. He’d decorated a bedroom, made a bed — none of which his dad had shown any enthusiasm over — but he’d forgotten to fetch the damn budgie. ‘I’ll go and get her now. Do you need anything before I go?’

‘Have you been looking after the hens?’

‘Of course.’ His dad had wanted them brought over, too, but Owen had managed to persuade him they were fine where they were.

He was halfway out of the room when his dad spoke again. ‘Smells of paint.’

‘Yes. We decorated your room yesterday.’

It slipped off the tongue so easily Owen wasn’t aware he’d said it, until his dad gave him a searching look. ‘We?’

‘I did it with Gabby. My girlfriend.’ It sounded a bit juvenile. Surely there was a better term for a thirty-two-year-old man to use? Partner. Fiancé. Wife, he tried out. Unlike five years ago when Stella had mentioned the word, his heart failed to detonate in panic. Interesting.

‘Why haven’t I heard about her?’

Owen sighed. Because you haven’t asked. Because we only talk about practical things. Never about anything important. ‘We’ve not been dating long.’ As he didn’t want his dad to think Gabby was a brief fling, he added. ‘She’s special though.’

‘If she’s special, why did you have her doing hard labour in your house?’

This time Owen failed to hold his tongue. ‘You might have forgotten the concept, but I work, Dad. When else was I going to get the room ready for you but at the weekend? And how was I supposed to make that happen, if I’m enjoying a fancy day out with my girlfriend?’

Immediately his dad stiffened. ‘I told you I’d be fine in my own house.’

‘And I told you I wanted to have you where I could keep an eye on you for a few days until I’m certain you can get about by yourself.’

‘If you’re working and seeing your woman, I might as well be at home.’

Anger fizzed through him — dangerous when mixed with the heavy dose of guilt. It’s your dad, he reminded himself. He might not show it, but he’s in pain. Likely a bit depressed, too. He’d brought him home to take care of him, not yell at him. ‘I’ve cleared my schedule for next week. I’ve got a few meetings I have to be at but outside them, I’m working from home.’ He didn’t mention Gabby. He wasn’t sure how he was going to work that, but he would, somehow. Even if it meant inviting her to spend the evening with a father and son who’d lost the ability to talk to each other. ‘Right, I’ll go and get Clarissa.’

Maybe the budgie would do what the son clearly couldn’t, and manage to cheer the old man up.

Chapter Fourteen

Seven days before Christmas

It was three days since she'd waved goodbye to Owen outside her house. Not that three days was long to go without seeing him. Oh hell, who was she kidding? It felt like an age. She was so used to chatting to him most days — even if it was just at work. It was only now she realised that even before they'd started dating, encounters with Owen Cooper; meetings, chats round the coffee machine, had been a high spot in her day.

Cindy had given her a knowing look when they'd walked past his empty office. 'Pining for your man, honey?'

'I'm not pining. He's not my man.'

Cindy had let out one of her big, bawdy laughs. 'You ready to give him up then?'

The stab of jealousy had been so fierce she couldn't ignore it. 'No,' she'd mumbled.

Cindy had given her a wide, satisfied grin. 'Thought not.'

Well now she was back at home, and still feeling out of sorts. When her phone bleeped, and she saw who was messaging her, she smiled for the first time that day.

Please cheer me up and tell me what colour underwear you're wearing.

It was quickly followed by another text.

This is Owen by the way.

And another.

I shouldn't need to tell you that. I hope no other men are asking you similar questions.

Her chest tightened painfully and instead of texting back, she pressed the call button, needing the connection.

'It's black. And lace,' she added for good measure.

She heard a long, deep sigh. 'I don't suppose you'd send me a picture.'

'No way. I've heard of men like you. Before I know it, you'll have it plastered all over the noticeboard at work.'

'You think I'd share you with anyone else?'

He sounded so disgusted, she had to smile. 'And there was me thinking

you'd take offence at my lack of trust.'

'Yeah, there's that as well.' She heard a voice in the background, and then a ripe oath from Owen. 'Hang on a sec. I've just got to rescue Dad. He's got his walker jammed against the table leg.' A few minutes later he was back. 'Sorry. I didn't realise looking after a post-op pensioner would be like having a toddler.'

He sounded so frustrated, in a selfish way it made Gabby feel better. 'Is he doing okay though?'

There was a pause before he answered. 'Yeah. He's getting there.' Before she had a chance to question him further, he turned the tables. 'How are you doing? You know I miss you, right?'

'I do now.' As a wave of pleasure spread through her, she sank back against the sofa. Be brave. 'I miss you, too.'

She could feel his smile down the phone. 'Bet that was hard to admit, huh?'

'Don't rub it in or I'll take it back.' It was her turn to hesitate. So far he'd been the one to chase, to set up their next date. 'Would you like to come over for a meal? You can bring your dad. Or I can come to you?'

During the unnerving beat of silence that followed her offer, Gabby began to feel sick. He didn't want to see her. But hadn't he just told her he missed her?

Oh God, he didn't want her to meet his dad.

'Thanks, but I don't think Dad's up to going out for the evening just yet. Or to visitors.'

'Of course.' Damn it, why had she been so stupid? Meeting the parents was a big step, one they clearly weren't ready for, which was fine. Absolutely fine. She felt an absurd prick of tears and squeezed her eyes shut. 'Well, I'll leave you to it.'

'Hey, don't put the phone down on me just yet.' His voice held an almost desperate edge. 'Give it a few more days. I'll work something out.' She heard him inhale a sharp breath. 'I really, really want to see you.'

Then why not invite me over? Wasn't she more than an unwanted visitor? Wasn't she supposed to be his girlfriend? 'Are you going to be in work?'

'I've cleared my schedule so I can work from home. But it's the sales team Christmas lunch on Friday so I might catch you before we go if you'll

be around?’

He could drag himself away from his dad for a lunch, but not to see her? Anger burned through her. Anger and a heavy dose of hurt. This was why she didn’t do relationships. She no longer felt in control of her emotions and she bloody hated that feeling; the insecurity, the irrational thoughts. The swings in mood between joy and misery. It was exactly how she’d felt as a teenage girl, waiting for her mother to phone, to come home.

How much simpler life had been once she’d cut the emotional ties and admitted her mother didn’t care.

‘Gabby?’

The concern in his voice took some of the heat from her anger. Owen and her mother weren’t the same. She needed to cut him some slack. He was looking after his father. And her mother had been looking after kids far less fortunate than she’d been.

Following a silent curse, she spoke into the phone. ‘Yes. I’m in the office on Friday. I’ll see you then.’

* * *

Owen sighed long and hard when he heard the line disconnect. She’d put herself out there, offering to cook for them, to come round. In turning her down, he knew he’d hurt her. Just as she’d been tentatively starting to trust him, too.

Damn it.

He winced as he heard a crash, looking up to see the mug his dad had been holding, presumably filled with tea, now in bits on the floor.

‘I told you I’d make it.’

His father looked over at him, red stains on his cheeks. ‘I can make my own blasted cup of tea.’

‘Clearly not.’ Owen regretted the words the moment they were out. His dad was having a tough enough time as it was. He didn’t need his son making him feel like a burden. His heart ached as he watched him struggle to make his way back to the armchair. When they’d left the hospital, Owen had blithely believed that after a few days convalescing his dad would be fine going back to his home. And then to France.

Three days on, and he was starting to wonder if his dad would ever be fine. It was like he’d totally given up. How the hell was he going to get him

fit enough, both physically and mentally, to go to France in five days?

It was why he'd turned down Gabby's offer. She'd have taken one look at him and known the holiday was off, but Owen wasn't ready to admit that yet. She'd been let down by her mother her whole life. He desperately didn't want to let her down, too.

'Here, let me give you a hand.' He reached to help his dad navigate the sofa, but received an angry glare in return.

'I can manage.'

'Sure you can. Just as I can manage to cook tonight's tea. Doesn't mean I won't appreciate some help.'

His father grunted as he fell into the armchair. In a cage next to the chair, Clarissa bowed her head and started to chirp. His dad opened the door and scratched the back of her head. 'There you go, lass.'

'She likes that.'

For a moment he thought his dad wasn't going to say anything. But then he accepted the verbal olive branch. 'Aye, she does. We've come to an understanding, over the last few years. She wriggles her tail, means she's happy. She bows her head, she wants a scratch. She ruffles her feathers and moves side to side, she's upset about something.'

'If only human females were that easy to read.'

His dad carefully closed the cage door. 'The signs are usually there. You just have to look carefully.' He gave Owen a searching look. 'Trouble in paradise?'

'No.' It was instinctive, yet shutting his dad out wasn't going to help rebuild a relationship that seemed to be rolling downhill faster than a medicine ball. 'It's been tough, not seeing her these last few days.'

Immediately his father's back turned rigid. 'You don't have to stay in on my account. I can—'

'Manage. I know.' Owen sighed and went to sit down on the sofa opposite him. 'But while you're finding your sea legs again, I'd worry about you.'

'Then invite her here. I'll make myself scarce.'

'I don't want you to do that. In fact, I want you to meet her.' Yep, that had definitely shocked the old guy. 'If Mum was around she'd have been grilling me for weeks. And putting a date in the diary.'

Sadness crept into his dad's eyes. 'She would that.' There was a beat of

silence, broken only by the sound of Clarissa ruffling her wings. ‘Your mum always worried about that Stella woman. Felt she looked at you as a father for her kid, and a source of income, rather than the love of her life.’

Surprised, Owen leant forward. ‘She never said.’

‘She would have done, if it had gone any further.’ He gave Owen the ghost of a smile. ‘You know your mum. Spoke her mind.’

‘She’d have liked Gabby.’ He knew it instinctively. ‘She speaks her mind, too. And she’s a marketing director, so she’s no need for my money.’

‘If she’s prepared to spend her weekend helping you decorate, she’s not afraid of hard work, either.’

Taking it as a sign that his dad was interested, Owen continued. ‘Gabby’s got dark hair and deep brown eyes. Exotic. Bloody gorgeous, actually.’ The answering glimmer of a smile was enough to encourage Owen further. ‘She’s opposite to me in so many ways; she’s organised, tidy, thinks before she talks. Actually enjoys sifting through the details. And she’s got a fiercely sharp mind. But she’s also a real softie, beneath the bluster.’ He dragged a hand through his hair, realising he was no longer doing this for his father’s benefit. He wanted to talk about Gabby to someone. ‘She’s never known her dad, and her mum’s been . . . absent a lot in her life, so she’s got a few trust issues.’

‘Doesn’t explain why you haven’t invited her over.’

It was time to put his cards on the table. He used to have a good relationship with his dad. They’d always been honest with each other. He wanted that back. ‘I’m booked to go on holiday with her on Christmas Eve. If she sees you now, she’s going to assume you won’t be well enough to go to France.’

Grey eyes pierced his. ‘And?’

Owen swallowed, guilt swimming through him. ‘She’s been let down by her mum so many times in her life. I don’t want to be another person who lets her down.’

Understanding spread across his dad’s face. ‘You think I’m going to stop you going with her?’

‘No. I think you’ll insist you’re fine and either go to see Alice as planned, even though you feel like crap, or spend Christmas Day alone.’ He pinned his dad with a glare of his own. ‘Neither of which I’m going to let happen.’

His father let out a bark of unamused laughter. 'I'll do what I bloody well want. I'm not a geriatric. You'll go on holiday with your woman.'

Owen hung his head, running his hands up and down his face, realising he'd used the wrong tone. Again. Shit, this was hard. 'I hope so.'

Immediately another dose of guilt snaked through him. What was he doing, trying to palm his sick dad off on his sister, so he could selfishly bugger off with his girlfriend?

Chapter Fifteen

Six days before Christmas

Gabby was eating lunch at her desk — the glamorous life of a marketing director — when her phone lit up with a call.

‘This is a surprise.’

‘Am I not allowed to phone my daughter?’

For a second Gabby wished she’d let the call go to voicemail. She was feeling grumpy enough as it was, missing a man she wasn’t supposed to be growing attached to. Wondering if the holiday she was supposed to be going on with him would still happen. What she needed was cheering up; cocktails for lunch, a spa session. Not a fight with her mother. ‘Of course you are. I just wasn’t expecting another call from you.’ Because it isn’t my birthday, it isn’t Christmas Day and you’ve never phoned three times in the space of a few weeks.

Silence stretched down the phone, until finally her mother sighed. ‘Sorry. I’m not at my best today.’

‘Is anything wrong?’

‘No, no.’

Gabby wasn’t convinced. Her voice sounded odd. She’d have said lonely, if it wasn’t her mother. ‘Where are you calling from?’

‘Haiti. The last hurricane did a huge amount of damage. I’ve been here for several months.’

Gabby cursed silently and leant back in her chair, feeling like a proper bitch. Why couldn’t she admire her mother for what she did, instead of always playing the poor-little-me card? Here she was in her cosy life, with her well-paid job, centrally heated house and well-stocked fridge. Her mum was working in areas devastated by disasters. Helping people. ‘It’s a good thing you do.’

Another pause, and Gabby wished she could see her mother’s face. Something wasn’t right, she could sense it. ‘Perhaps, but it isn’t enough. It’s never enough.’

‘Are you sure you’re okay? You sound a bit down.’ And for all her faults, her mother was usually upbeat.

‘I’m right as rain.’ She wasn’t. Gabby didn’t need to hear the tremor in her voice to know it. ‘Just . . . feeling a bit homesick, I think.’

The heart she thought was hardened against her mum gave a small, telltale squeeze. ‘Then go home.’ She still owned a house in Oxford. One that was empty most weeks of the year.

‘I might do.’

‘I’m going away for Christmas again.’ Immediately Gabby winced, realising how that sounded. Go home, Mum, but don’t think you’ll be seeing me.

‘That’s getting to be quite the habit.’

‘There’s little point spending it sitting here alone.’ And there they went again. Dig for dig.

Instead of the usual sharp retort though, her mother sighed. ‘I can understand that. Where are you heading off to?’

‘Florida, on Christmas Eve. With a . . . friend.’ Crap, why had she added that? Gabby wasn’t even convinced Owen was going to come, despite his reassurances. And she was nowhere near ready to discuss him with her mother yet. Not when she still hadn’t worked out how she felt.

‘I take it from the way you hesitated that the friend is male.’

‘He is.’

‘That’s all you’re going to say?’

‘For the moment, yes.’

Another pause, and Gabby could hear what sounded like waves rolling onto the beach in the background. ‘Then I won’t pry. But perhaps you’ll tell me a little more about him if I decide to come and visit you.’

‘Perhaps I will.’

‘I might even meet him?’

She felt the inevitable bubble of panic, but this time it wasn’t so acute. She even began to wonder what her mother would make of Owen.

Good God, did she want her mother’s blessing? Just as the crazy idea began to take hold, it fizzled away as she remembered who she was talking to. ‘You might,’ she replied, secure in the knowledge that there would be no meeting. History suggested her mother wouldn’t be visiting any time soon.

* * *

An hour after the surprise call from her mother, Gabby had another

surprise.

‘What on earth have you got there?’

Cindy popped her head out from behind a huge bouquet of assorted red flowers; roses, chrysanthemums, carnations, red berries and Gerber daisies. ‘Flowers?’

‘I can see that. Are they from Joel?’

Cindy shrieked with laughter. ‘Now why would my husband be sending me flowers when it’s not my birthday?’

‘I don’t know. It’s a mystery to me why any man sends flowers. They cost a fortune and die within a few days.’ Though the memory of the rose Owen had left on her desk sent a pulse of pleasure through her. Did it make her soft that she’d pressed it between the pages of her favourite book?

‘Maybe Owen can tell you.’

With that she placed the bouquet on the desk in front of her, smirked, and walked out.

Gingerly Gabby reached for the envelope nestled within the flowers. On the front was written:

This is me, romancing you. xx

Heart in her mouth, she ripped it open only to find a handmade advent card inside, counting down the next few days. And because it was hastily made, there were no actual doors to the windows, so she could see inside every one.

Window 21 was the picture of a bikini: three days before I see you in this.

Window 22 had two cocktails: two days before we drink these . . . I’ll ration you to two.

Window 23 was a beach: one day before we walk together on the sand.

Window 24 was a plane: flying off into the sunset together (too corny?).

Tears pricked at the back of her eyes. Alarmed, Gabby reached into her drawer for her box of tissues. How was she supposed to protect herself from him, when he did things like this?

Clutching at her phone she typed out a quick text.

I told you before, I don’t need romancing. But thank you, the flowers are lovely. Yes, the card was corny, and yes, it made me smile. Gabby x

Within seconds her phone buzzed with an incoming call.

‘If I want to romance my girlfriend, I will.’

At the word girlfriend, she unconsciously smiled. ‘Then if you want to waste your money on flowers, and your time on corny but sweet cards, I’ll happily accept both.’

‘If they make you think of me, the time and money isn’t wasted.’

She wanted to tell him she’d been thinking of him anyway, but self-preservation kicked in. Their relationship felt more unsure than it had a week ago. She needed to see him, she realised. Needed him to look her in the eye and tell her he’d missed her. ‘How’s your dad?’

‘Driving me mad.’

It didn’t tell her anything, but again she had no chance to quiz him further because he cursed, saying, ‘Got to go, I’m afraid. That’s Hilda at the door.’

‘Hilda?’

‘Yeah, she’s come to help me with some admin. I’ll see you tomorrow just before the lunch?’

‘I’ll be here.’

She punched the call end, feeling ridiculously jealous that his middle-aged admin was allowed to meet his father, yet she wasn’t.

Owen shoved his phone on the sideboard with a hiss of frustration and went to let Hilda in. Why the hell had he phoned Gabby when he’d known Hilda was arriving any minute? A hurried call was worse than no call. It sent all the wrong messages.

But damn it, he’d just wanted to hear her voice.

And that’s what he should have said, he realised, rather than making her feel like an item he’d just ticked off his to-do list.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Cooper . . . Owen,’ Hilda corrected.

‘Thanks for coming over.’ He ushered her into the hallway. ‘I hope you’re not allergic to birds? Or mess come to that, because I’ve not got round to tidying up yet.’

‘I can cope with either in short bursts.’

‘Then come and meet my dad and Clarissa. His budgie.’

Owen hadn’t just invited Hilda over to help with his admin — she could quite easily have done that at the end of the phone. His reasons were more personal. When she’d reminded him about the sales team Christmas lunch tomorrow — an event he’d embarrassingly forgotten about — he’d had to admit he might have to cancel because he couldn’t leave his dad alone all

afternoon.

He'd been flabbergasted when she'd offered to check in on him. Not wanting to take liberties, he'd declined, insisting she'd have a better time eating lunch with him and a bunch of charming salesmen than being stuck with a surly pensioner. She'd looked him straight in the eye and replied. 'I rather think your father is more my speed.'

So here they were, pretending to meet for work reasons when really he was giving Hilda the chance to meet his dad. Of course, he'd not told his dad he was getting a babysitter tomorrow. He'd save that argument for later.

After making the introductions he watched carefully as Hilda went to sit on the sofa opposite his dad. Was it his imagination or had his dad just straightened in his chair?

'What can I get you to drink, Hilda?' he asked.

'Tea, please. Earl Grey if you have it, if not English Breakfast. Not too weak. A splash of milk. No sugar.'

Earl Grey? He had to smother a smile. 'Dad?'

He caught his father's eye, and didn't miss the rare glimmer of amusement. 'The same.'

Stepping back into the room five minutes later with two mugs of tea — Tetley, if it was good enough for men in flat caps, it was good enough for him — he halted abruptly, some of the tea slopping onto the floor.

His dad was laughing.

And bloody hell, so was Hilda.

He must have made a noise, hopefully not a gasp, though it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility, because they both looked up.

'Two teas, as requested.' He smiled, trying to act like everything was normal. That he often found his dad and his PA laughing. At the same time. Together.

'Sidney was telling me what a time he had of it, training Clarissa to step onto his hand.'

'Oh?' Owen kept his face neutral, but his mind was working overtime. She was calling his dad Sidney already. Two months of asking and she still called him Mr Cooper.

'Damn girl kept biting me,' his father answered gruffly.

'I didn't realise.' Because he'd never asked, Owen thought guiltily. He'd only ever treated the budgie and the hens as a nuisance. Not recognised how

important they were to a man who'd suddenly found himself living alone.

'Do you have any pets?' he asked Hilda, wondering if she, too, counteracted loneliness that way.

'A cat. Mr Tickle.'

Good God. The surprises kept on rolling. Just as he was getting over the shock of his straight-laced PA calling her cat something daft, he was blindsided by the sound of his dad talking. Again. This time to offer that he'd considered a cat but opted for the budgie instead as he'd always know where it was.

The pair of them then started to converse as if he wasn't in the room and Owen slowly took a step back. Then another. When they didn't so much as glance his way, he grabbed his phone from the sideboard and bolted up the stairs.

'Owen?'

By the time he heard Gabby's surprised answer he'd made it to his bedroom and slammed the door shut.

'Hilda and my dad are talking,' he blurted. 'I mean really talking. And smiling at each other. It's like I'm in a parallel universe.' His words were met with a resounding silence. A painful, and lamentably late reminder that their relationship had taken a backwards step since his dad's fall. 'Sorry. Are you in the middle of something? Because I can phone back later.' Damn, he was cocking this up. Slumping onto the bed, Owen stared up at the ceiling. 'What I really phoned for was to hear your voice. Our last call was too rushed.'

'You've done all the talking.'

'A good point.' He rubbed at his forehead, trying to find his smooth. 'Force of habit. I'm going to shut up now and I really, really hope you'll say something. Even if it's piss off, Owen, I've got better things to do than listen to you waffle on about your dad.'

'I do have a KPI document to review.'

Okay, he was used to her sharp humour. It didn't necessarily mean she was pissed off with him. 'It won't buy you flowers.'

'Which I don't need.'

'But you enjoy looking at?' he tried hopefully.

'Which I enjoy looking at.' She sighed and the optimist in him thought it sounded wistful, though it could equally have been boredom or frustration. 'I find it hard on the phone, Owen.'

He knew what she meant. Without seeing her expression, or looking into her eyes, he had no idea how irritated she was with him. 'I'll see you tomorrow. And hopefully in a few days, I'll see a lot, lot more of you.'

'Hopefully?'

Damn, he hadn't meant to add an element of doubt. 'A figure of speech. I'll leave you to get back to your apparently fascinating KPI review. Just know I wish I was there with you. Leaning over your desk. Sweeping back the hair from your neck and kissing you right there, on the soft skin above your collarbone.' His voice roughened as desire flooded through him. It had been too long since he'd touched this woman. 'Goodbye, Gabby.'

Chapter Sixteen

Five days before Christmas

Owen felt more positive as he made his dad his usual lunch of a cheese and pickle sandwich. They'd had a talk after Hilda had left yesterday and he'd sounded okay about flying to France in three days' time to stay with Alice. Well, what he'd actually said was I'll go where you want me to go. It was enough for Owen.

As he carried the sandwich through, he wasn't aware he'd been whistling until his dad frowned. 'What's put you in a good mood?'

'It's nearly Christmas?'

'You're not six.'

Owen refused to stop smiling. 'True. At six I wanted to meet a man with a white beard and a big fat belly. At thirty my tastes are more refined. Female, dark eyed, dark haired. Curves in all the right places.' He glanced back over to his dad. Should he ask again? The devil in him didn't want to jinx anything. His conscience shoved the naughty horned creature aside. 'Are you still up to getting on a plane on Monday?'

Eyes fixed on the sandwich, and not on him, his father said quietly, 'Stop fussing. I'll go.'

Shouldn't have asked. Some of his good mood evaporated, but Owen reminded himself his father hadn't been thrilled about going to France even before the fall. 'Alice is going to buy a wheelchair, just in case you want a rest from the crutches.' The physio had suggested moving from the walker to the crutches yesterday, which Owen had taken as another good sign.

'I'm not going anywhere in a bloody wheelchair.'

'Fine. Tell Alice when you see her.' He didn't feel guilty about handing his dad over to his sister for a while. The visit was long overdue. Pushing him to visit now though, when he was recovering from a major op . . . yeah, that guilt lay heavy in his stomach. 'I'm off to the Christmas lunch now. Hilda's going to pop in later to check you're okay.' Before his dad could register the comment, Owen continued smoothly. 'You need me for anything, you've got my number.'

'I'll be fine.' He gave Owen a look loaded with accusation. 'You didn't

need to get me a damn babysitter.'

Owen tried not to flinch. 'I thought you liked Hilda. You certainly didn't find it hard chatting to her yesterday.'

His dad focused back on his sandwich. 'She's a good woman.'

'It's not going to be a hardship having her come to see you then, is it?' Owen sighed, going with honesty. 'And knowing she's going to pop in means I can relax and enjoy the lunch.'

Not that he was particularly looking forward to it. His sales team were a good crowd, but he'd far rather be spending the afternoon with a certain marketing director. At least he'd see her though. His heart lifted as he hunted down his car keys and headed for the door.

'Don't forget to feed the hens!'

Damn. 'Will do,' he yelled back as he flung open the front door. Blasted things. A twenty-five minute round trip to sort them out would mean twenty-five minutes less time with the bird — Gabby would thump him for that description — he really wanted to spend time with.

* * *

Gabby looked up from her desk for the third time in five minutes. Damn Owen Cooper. He'd turned her into a jittery mess. With a huff of determination, she focused back on the document she'd been reviewing.

A few moments later, her nostrils twitched. As Owen's unique brand of aftershave hit her senses, her gaze flew to the doorway, crashing into a pair of stunning ocean-blue eyes.

He gave her a slow, sexy smile. 'Hi.'

God, how was it possible for a heart to somersault? 'Hi, yourself.'

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him, causing her heart to jump even higher. Then he walked up behind her, carefully pushed back her hair. And planted a gentle kiss on her neck, exactly as he'd promised in his phone call yesterday.

He groaned, low and deep. 'Christ, I've missed this.' His lips moved along her neck, kissing her again. 'Missed you.'

Closing her eyes she leant back against him, savouring his smell, his touch. Her head tried to remember why she was annoyed with him, and came up blank.

With a reluctant sigh, he drew back. 'A glass office isn't the right place

for what I want to do with you right now.'

Heat flashed through her and a retort, witty or otherwise, seemed beyond her capability.

With a practiced movement he perched on her desk, one foot on the floor, the other swinging. His muscular thighs straining against the black denim of his trousers. 'How are you?' he asked softly.

Why did she feel such a hit of emotion? It wasn't the first time this man had wandered into her office and asked how she was. But now he kisses you first. Now your hands are trembling, your heart racing, just because he's sitting so close to you.

She dragged in a breath. 'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Fine?' His eyes searched hers, a little hurt, a little concerned. 'Is that all I get?'

'My mother phoned me yesterday,' she blurted.

A pair of blond eyebrows shot up to his hairline. 'That's good, isn't it?'

Gabby forced a nonchalant shrug. 'I guess.'

His hand reached down to squeeze hers. 'Hey, talk to me.'

She hadn't realised how much she needed to, until now. Keeping hold of his hand, she took a breath. 'She sounded . . . lonely. I've never heard her like that. She actually said she was homesick.'

'Do you think she'll come back?'

Her instinct was to dismiss this notion — this was her mother, after all — but Gabby couldn't get it out of her head how despondent she'd sounded. 'I don't know.'

'When was the last time you saw her?'

How awful that she had to think about it. 'About two years ago, I guess. She was happy. She'd found a guy.'

Owen smiled. 'We can have that effect.'

Relieved at the break from tension, Gabby rolled her eyes. 'She finished with him a while back though.'

'You think she's still pining for him?'

Gabby shook her head. 'I doubt it. I've never known her become attached to anyone.'

'Like mother, like daughter, huh?'

'I'm not like my mother,' she told him quietly.

'Of course not. You've become attached to me.' Though he smiled, there

was a tension to it that suggested he wasn't convinced he believed what he was saying.

'I have,' she admitted, holding his gaze. The joy that leapt into his eyes made her glad she'd had the guts to say it.

'Good to hear.' Briefly he touched his hand to her cheek. 'Tell me why the conversation with your mum upset you so much.'

'I didn't say I was upset.' When he cocked an eyebrow, she huffed. 'Okay. I'm worried about her.' She swallowed down the emotion that squeezed its way into her throat. 'Stupid, I know. She lives her own life, does her own thing. Phones when she's a bit down and then ignores me for months on end. I shouldn't waste my energy on her.'

'Of course you should. She's your mum.'

Gabby heaved out a sigh. 'Yeah, there is that.' He got her, she realised. This man who was her opposite in so many ways, actually understood her. She looked up at him, almost afraid to ask the next question. 'While we're on the subject of parents, how is your dad?'

'Good, thank you. Moved from a walking frame onto crutches yesterday. And ready to fly to France on Monday.'

'Seriously?' She studied his face for evidence of the signs she was sure she'd picked up on over the last few days. When she couldn't find any, she pushed anyway. 'You can tell me the truth, Owen. I'd rather know now if there's a chance you can't make it.'

He glanced quickly through the glass walls, and seemingly reassured nobody was walking by, laid a gentle kiss on her forehead. 'From Monday onwards,' he said softly, his breath dancing across her skin. 'I'm all yours.'

Her stomach went all squirmy, both at the words I'm all yours and the tenderness in his voice.

All too soon though he was glancing at his watch, sighing as he slipped off the desk. 'Got to go, duty calls.' His blue eyes filled with heat. 'Tell me how many bikinis you're packing.'

A welcome burst of laughter shot from her. 'I've not thought about it yet.' When he smirked, she threw up her hands. 'Okay, maybe I've put a few things aside.'

'And made a list.'

'Most sensible people would do that.'

'Lists are for wusses. So, about those bikinis?'

She grinned, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from her chest. The last few days of uncertainty about the holiday, about Owen, felt like a silly waste of emotion. ‘There are several. One in black, one with polka dots.’ She gave him a flirty smile. ‘A skimpy red one.’

He groaned. ‘Enough.’ His hand slipped to her arm and he squeezed gently. ‘I’ll phone you tonight, when I’m in the privacy of my bedroom.’ His voice dropped an octave. ‘We can finish the bikini talk, before moving onto your underwear.’

The smile he flashed her over his shoulder before heading out was as sexy as sin.

A few beats later Cindy popped her head round the corner. ‘Well, well.’ Her eyes skimmed Gabby’s face. ‘Either you’re coming down with something, or that was a very interesting meeting you just had with Owen.’

‘My office is a little hot. That’s all.’

Cindy let out a booming laugh. ‘I bet it is, honey. I bet it is.’

* * *

Owen arrived home after the sales team Christmas lunch — Hilda called it the ‘boozy sales lunch’ — at six in the evening, stone cold sober. In previous years he’d partied on till the wee hours and fallen into a cab. This year he’d wanted to get back for his dad. That’s the reason he’d given the team, anyway, and it was the truth, if not the whole truth. The desire to get drunk and hit the nightclubs just wasn’t there any more.

He was ready to settle down.

More accurately, he was ready to settle down with Gabby.

The realisation hit him quietly. Not a thunderbolt, more an enforcement of a belief he’d held for weeks now. The idea of permanency with Stella had left him unbalanced, leading to their break-up. With Gabby it felt like the natural next step.

By God, he missed her. Five days since he’d woken up next to her was far too long.

He was about to climb out of the car and into the house when his phone rang. Thinking it might be Gabby he rushed to answer it. Instead it was the other female in his life.

‘Zoe?’ Something was up. This was the second time she’d phoned in the space of a week.

‘I told Mum, I’m not going.’

It took Owen a moment to remember the last conversation they'd had. 'You don't want to go on holiday?'

'No. She can't force me.'

The wobble in her voice made his heart squeeze. Poor kid. He'd like to bet it wasn't the thought of spending Christmas on the beach that upset her, but going on holiday with a guy she was only starting to know. At home she had her friends, her room to disappear off to. It was a safe place. Going abroad probably felt intimidating. 'She won't force you, Zoe, you know that. But she won't want to be without you, either. Especially not at Christmas.'

'Then she shouldn't have booked a holiday.'

He wasn't going to get anywhere. 'Is your mum there? Maybe I can have a talk to her?'

Zoe huffed in the way kids did when they thought grown-ups were being dumb. 'She won't change her mind. I've tried.'

He considered telling her he could be persuasive, but it had been a long while since he'd had anything but a coolly polite conversation with Stella.

Suddenly there was a clatter, and the sound of muffled voices. A second later, Stella came on. 'What have you been saying to my daughter?'

Jeeze. He wasn't sure whether it was the frosty tone, or the fact that he was sitting in his car with the engine turned off in the middle of December, but he shivered. To hell with this, to negotiate though this conversation, he needed to be inside. 'Hang on a sec, Stella. Let me get in my house before you start lobbing grenades.'

Juggling keys and the phone, he opened the front door, taking a moment to pop his head into the sitting room to check his dad was okay. Satisfied to see him watching television, he strode into the kitchen and sat down at the table. 'Okay then. First things first, how are you?' He didn't see why they couldn't be civil. They'd once shared a life together.

There was a beat of silence before he heard her exhale. 'Fine, thank you. You always were good at deflating an argument.'

'I'm not here to argue. Zoe phoned me sounding upset. It's the second time she's told me she doesn't want to go away for Christmas.'

'She's spoilt. What kid wouldn't jump with joy at the thought of going to the Caribbean?'

'Who is this break for, you and Simon, or Zoe?' he asked quietly.

Another pause, followed by another sigh. 'Okay, okay. It's mainly for me

and Simon. We were planning on getting married there. No fuss, just us and Zoe.'

Now he understood. 'Have you told Zoe this?'

'No. I thought it would be a nice surprise.'

It was his turn to hesitate. He didn't have any rights here. He wasn't the father, just a man who cared deeply for Zoe. 'You know you need to talk to her, don't you? Christmas is a time for family, nostalgia, tradition. And if you're a kid, it's a time for being at home. You're taking all that away from her. Plus, she's not daft. She knows she's going to get shoved in a kids' club while you and Simon have some time to yourselves.'

'It's not a prison,' she replied sharply. 'She'll meet other children her age and have fun.'

'I know, but maybe she doesn't want to do that. Not at this time of year, at least. Just think about it,' he added quickly, before she could shoot him down with another objection. 'Would you please put Zoe back on now. I'd like to say goodbye.'

'You won't say anything, you know, about us getting married.'

'Of course not. But I hope you will. And Stella, congratulations. I hope you'll be very happy.' He prayed to God Simon was the right man, not just for Stella, but for Zoe.

'Did you get her to change her mind?'

The hope in Zoe's voice twisted his heart. 'Sorry, no. But it sounds like you'll have a fabulous holiday,' he added with what he hoped was the right degree of enthusiasm. When there was no answer, he felt like the biggest bastard for letting her down. 'Hey, Zoe, how does a penguin build its house?'

'I don't know.' Her voice was flat, but at least she was talking to him again.

'Igloos it together.'

A few seconds of silence, during which he held his breath. Then the beautiful sound of innocent laughter. 'OMG, that was a good one. More. Give me one more.'

'I told you, only one per call. Now I've got to go and take care of my dad.'

'Is he sick?'

'He had an operation and he's a bit unsteady on his feet, but he'll be fine. You be good for your mum. Bye, Zoe.'

Mixed emotions weaved through him as he ended the call. Sadness that he wasn't part of Zoe's life any more, except for the occasional phone call. Nostalgia for Stella and what they'd had, though he didn't feel any jealousy at the thought of her getting married. More a longing for what she had to look forward to.

He might be ready for marriage, but the woman he wanted to marry was so far from it, he wasn't sure they'd ever get there.

You won't with that crappy attitude.

With a determined shake, he scrolled through his phone for Gabby's number. His dad was feeling better. It was time for her to meet him.

Chapter Seventeen

Four days before Christmas

Gabby hummed as she surveyed the items she'd laid out on the spare bed. Bikinis, check. Wispy cover-ups to take her from the hotel to the beach, check. Strappy sundresses for lazy late afternoon strolls along the beach holding hands, check. Posh frock in case they went somewhere fancy, check. Shorts and T-shirts for all other eventualities. Sunglasses, sun cream, Kindle, sun hat, flip-flops. Check, check, check.

She was so ready for this holiday. And not just in terms of preparation.

Some sun, after two months of cold and ugh.

Time away from work, from the computer, from everything.

Then there was the best part. Some alone time with a man who didn't just make her pulse race and her heart ache, he made her laugh. Made her happy. Made her imagine scenarios she would previously have scoffed at. Like fast-forwarding a year and still being with him.

Of course first, they had to negotiate ten days away together. Ten days in which his untidiness, his inability to plan and his lack of attention to detail would seriously stretch her tolerance.

She knew she was in trouble when even that made her smile.

The sound of the phone interrupted her daydreams and she answered without even looking to see who it was.

'You sound happy, Gabriela.'

And no, not even the shock of speaking to her mother again was going to wipe the smile from her face. 'I am. I'm packing.'

'Oh yes. You leave on Christmas Eve, if I remember correctly.'

'I do.' Pushing aside a few T-shirts, she made room to sit on the bed. 'How are you? Last time you phoned you sounded a bit low.'

'I was. So I decided to come back.'

Gabby froze. 'You're home?'

'Yes. I thought, if you were free, I could come and see you before you go away.'

'Well, yes.' She willed herself to sound more thrilled. Only yesterday she'd told Owen how worried she was about her mother. This way she could

check her out with her own eyes. ‘When were you thinking?’

‘I can drive up later today. Stay until Monday.’

‘I have plans for tonight.’

‘Oh.’

Guilt twisted at her gut but Gabby pushed it away. Was she really expected to drop everything for a woman who’d never given up anything for her? ‘Owen, the man I told you about, he’s asked me over for dinner.’ With his father, she almost added, but bit her tongue. Her mother might see it as an offer for her to come, too. Meeting Owen’s dad was going to be a big enough step. No way was she ready to introduce her mother to the mix.

For a second she relived the conversation with Owen last night, when he’d invited her over. It had felt . . . big. Important. Scary, perhaps, but still, a milestone in their relationship. Especially after the rejection she’d felt earlier in the week, when her offer to go round had been slapped down.

Now she was back on an even keel, sure that her feelings and Owen’s were running in parallel.

It gave her the strength to extend an olive branch to her mother. ‘You’re welcome to come up tomorrow. Stay till Christmas Eve morning. I fly later in the afternoon.’

‘Thank you.’

Gabby frowned at the meek tone. She’d never heard her mother so subdued. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow then. Give me a call when you set off so I know when to expect you. Drive safely.’

‘Who’s the mother in this relationship?’

Interesting question, Gabby thought as she ended the call. Her mother had hardly been a textbook mother, and for years Gabby had been certain all she wanted from her own life was a fulfilling career, good friends and the occasional company of a man she liked but didn’t have to be emotionally invested in. Not marriage. Not children.

Dating Owen was starting to make her rethink everything.

* * *

Gabby spent the afternoon cleaning her house. Though she was naturally tidy, in honour of her mother she bleached the toilet, hoovered already spotless carpets and mopped the already clean kitchen floor. Finally she neatly folded all the holiday clothes she’d laid out in the spare room and

packed them into her suitcase.

She was about to head up the stairs to squeeze in a quick shower before driving to Owen's, when the phone rang again.

This time she checked the number, and broke into an automatic smile. 'Hey.'

'Hey, yourself.'

His voice sounded oddly flat. 'Is everything okay?'

'Yes. Sort of.' He let out an agitated sounding noise. 'I'm really sorry, but I'm going to have to cancel tonight.'

'Oh.' The bottom fell out of her stomach. 'Can I ask why?'

'I'm letting you down at the last minute. By any standards you want to look at, that's a bastard move. Of course you're entitled to ask why.' More agitated breathing, followed by a scratching sound. Possibly him rubbing a hand across his unshaven chin. 'Just, can I save the explanation for tomorrow? I've kind of got a . . . thing going on here and I need to get back to it.'

'A thing?'

His laughter carried an edge of hysteria. 'Yes. I'm sorry, I know I sound vague, but trust me, I'll explain it all tomorrow.' He heaved out a sigh. 'Christ, I'm so sorry, Gabby. Really, truly, sorry. I want to see you tonight like you wouldn't believe.' Now there was a tremor to his voice, as if he was on the verge of tears. 'I'm so fucking pissed off right now.'

She'd never heard him use the F-word. Never heard him sound so upset. It made her want to reassure him that it didn't matter, she wasn't upset, but the words stuck in her throat, because it did matter. The 'big step' they'd been about to take had been cancelled. And she didn't even know why. 'Well, I hope whatever it is, sorts itself out.'

'So do I,' he replied heavily. 'Can I pop round tomorrow?'

'If it's in the morning, yes. My mother's coming at some point in the afternoon.'

There was a moment of silence. 'She's back?' Then he laughed humourlessly. 'Stupid question. Is she okay? Are you okay with her visiting?' A choked breath. 'God, so many things I want to talk to you about, but I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow morning?'

'Yes.'

'You will let me in? I wouldn't blame you if you didn't, but I'd like to

know whether to bring my big coat or not.'

'Your coat?' What on earth?

'If I've got to wait on your doorstep to see you, I want to be vaguely warm.'

She shook her head, her emotions muddled and messy. She was upset with him, with the situation, but a big part of her also wanted to hold him in her arms and ease whatever it was that was troubling him. 'Of course I'll let you in.'

'I'll ditch the coat then. Bring some humble pie instead.'

'Just bring me an explanation I can understand.'

Owen cursed as he ended the call to Gabby. She'd asked for the one thing he wasn't sure he could deliver on.

An explanation, he could manage. Whether she'd understand it, was another thing entirely. He wasn't even sure he understood it himself.

'Owen?' Zoe popped her head round the door, her cute pigtails bouncing either side of her head. 'I've been looking for you.'

He stared at the miniature woman in front of him. The one that might just mean the end of his relationship with Gabby. Pain ripped through him. No, damn it, whatever she had to say tomorrow he wasn't going to let this be the end.

'Come on.' Putting an arm round Zoe's slim shoulders, he smiled down at her. 'Me and your mum have got some talking to do. Can you sit quietly and watch television with my dad?'

'I suppose.' She grinned, dimples peeping out either side of her mouth. 'As long as what you say to each other means I get to stay with you for Christmas.'

Christ, how was he supposed to let all that cuteness, that childish innocence, down?

Then again, how was he supposed to let down the woman he'd fallen in love with?

Life sure had a funny way of kicking you in the balls when you least expected it. He'd felt the kick four years ago when his mum had been told she had cancer, months after Stella had dumped him. When his dad had fractured his hip, he'd felt it again. Not in the same league as his mum's shocking diagnosis, sure, but overarching his worry for his dad had been the niggling thought that if he let Gabby down over the holiday, she'd never

forgive him. And that would have crushed him. His dad had started to recover though, and moved on to crutches. He'd agreed to travel to France.

This morning, Owen had almost smelt the sea air. He'd almost felt the suntan lotion slipping through his fingers as he'd rubbed it into the beautiful olive skin on Gabby's back.

Then Stella had turned up and he'd felt that kick to the balls all over again.

Damn it to hell.

Stella and his father were sat opposite each other when he and Zoe walked back into the sitting room, neither of them talking. He guessed his dad was silent out of solidarity — he'd witnessed first-hand how cut up he'd been when Stella had broken things off. As for Stella, she was probably too scared to say anything, as she was the one who'd arrived on his doorstep ten minutes ago asking the whopping big favour.

She looked up when he walked in. 'Is your girlfriend okay with it?'

Owen gaped at her. 'How would you feel if Simon turned round to you and said sorry, we can't go on holiday now because my ex wants me to babysit so she can have her holiday?'

Stella fidgeted. 'That's not entirely fair. This isn't just a holiday, it's a honeymoon and I didn't realise you were going away when I asked you. Zoe told me your dad wasn't well so I naturally assumed you'd be at home. And anyway, I'm not asking you to look after Zoe. It's Zoe who wants to stay with you.'

Zoe turned her big blue eyes on him and Owen felt his anger crumple. He shouldn't be talking like this in front of her. Bad enough that she felt her mum was pushing her out of Christmas by going off on holiday. She didn't need to feel he didn't want her, either. 'I know, I'm sorry.'

He couldn't do it, he thought miserably. Couldn't let Zoe down. Which meant there was no decision to be made. Slapping a smile on his face he tugged at the pigtails of the girl who'd wormed her way into his heart nearly eight years ago. 'I'd be delighted to have Christmas with this monster.' He tucked a finger under her chin. 'Can't promise any snow, mind. But presents . . .' shit, now he wasn't posting them, he'd have to buy some more ' . . . a tree . . .' damn, he'd have to sort that, too. He hadn't bothered as he'd thought he and his dad were going away. 'And all the other stuff associated with Christmas we can manage.'

Her gorgeous blue eyes lit up. 'Can we do stockings? I know Father Christmas isn't real, but I want to put my stocking up and you have a proper fire.' Her eyes scanned the room and Owen could almost feel the excitement radiating off her. 'We can put the tree in the corner. A proper tree, one that we have to choose. Mum doesn't like the real trees 'cos they drop needles but you won't mind, will you?' Before he had a chance to tell he'd put up with pine needles stabbing his feet if it made her happy, she began to skip round the room. 'Have you got decorations? You know, baubles and tinsel. Oh and fairy lights. We need loads of lights 'cos they make it look so pretty.'

This time when he smiled at her it felt less forced. In fact if he didn't imagine Gabby's face when he told her he couldn't go on holiday with her tomorrow . . . if he didn't think about what he was going to miss out on, or about whether she'd ever forgive him. Yeah, if he forgot about all that, he was thrilled at the thought of spending Christmas with Zoe.

His glanced over at his father, who had a rare twinkle in his eye as he watched Zoe skipping. Maybe he'd ask his dad if he wanted to stay, too. Visit Alice when he was fully recovered.

Actually, the more he thought about it, nearly everyone benefited from this arrangement. Stella got her honeymoon — apparently she and Simon had married this morning in a registry office so Zoe could be there — Zoe got her Christmas, he got to spend some precious time with the girl he thought of as his daughter. And his dad didn't have to cram his recently fractured hip onto a plane.

The only person who was going to really lose out, he thought miserably, was Gabby.

* * *

Stella and Zoe stayed for tea. Stella seemed keen to let Zoe get used to the house; keen enough to put up with his hastily cobbled together pasta dish. As they sat at the table, Owen noticed his dad's fascination with Zoe hadn't waned. He listened to her like she was giving him the answer to world peace and though he didn't say much, his eyes told Owen he'd forgotten his own sadness. At least for a while.

'We'll reimburse you for the holiday,' Stella said quietly as they cleaned up after the meal.

'You won't. I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for Zoe.'

Stella nodded. 'Okay. What do you want us to do about presents?'

It took him a moment to realise what she was really asking. If you were a kid, Christmas wasn't Christmas without a mountain of presents. 'I've already got a couple I'd been planning to post, but I'll buy her some more. Write me a list of ideas you've not got covered. We can save yours for when you can watch her open them.'

'Or we could Skype?'

'Whatever you want to do.' Damn, his head was beginning to hurt with everything he now had to sort out. At least he didn't need to pack, he thought grimly.

'We'll drop Zoe off tomorrow on the way to the airport?'

Numbly Owen nodded. 'I'm seeing Gabby in the morning, so not too early.' Though she'd probably kick him out as soon as she heard what he had to say.

'The flight's not till the evening so it will be after three.'

'Fine.' He wondered if it gave him enough time to convince Gabby not to give up on him. That what they had going was too strong to let a cancelled holiday get between them.

She's had a lifetime of being let down. It will feel like a betrayal.

Another shot of guilt sliced through him. It was going to take all his powers of persuasion, all his skills at smooth talking to dig himself out of this one.

He felt Stella touch his arm and looked into a pair of big blue eyes he'd once lost himself in. Now he only wanted dark brown. 'I really appreciate this, Owen. Especially after, well, you know.'

Anger coiled. 'After you stopped me seeing her? And now it's convenient — for you, I might add — I'm allowed again?'

Her face flushed. 'I did it for the right reasons. I wanted her to bond with Simon.'

'And you think the two were mutually exclusive? You didn't think she'd feel more secure if she knew she still had me in her life, no matter what?'

Tears filled her eyes. 'I didn't think,' she replied quietly. 'You were my past, Simon my future. I didn't realise how attached Zoe had become to you.'

Owen took a step back, dragging a hand through his hair. 'I've been her dad in everything but DNA for six years of her life, Stella. For four of them we even lived in the same house. I put her to bed, read her stories, played with her, laughed with her. Picked her up when she fell. Dried her tears when

she cried.’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘How could you think we wouldn’t form an attachment? That I didn’t love her?’

‘You didn’t want children.’

He exhaled sharply. ‘I was enjoying life with Zoe. I didn’t feel we needed anything more.’

‘But I did.’

‘I know. That’s why we broke up.’ He looked her straight in the eye. ‘It didn’t change my relationship with Zoe, though. She was still my girl.’ He almost choked over the last words.

Stella scanned his face before giving him a sad smile. ‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise. Maybe when I get back from honeymoon we can sort something out. A regular time for you to see her.’ She seemed to finally understand how much her daughter meant to him, because she gave his arm a sympathetic squeeze. ‘I know she’d like that. She still talks about you a lot.’

The emotion clogging his throat threatened to strangle him. ‘She does?’

Stella nodded. ‘When we have fish and chips she always says “Owen would be cross he missed this.” And when she comes off the phone to you she always runs over to us to tell us the joke.’ She hesitated, drawing her hand away. ‘It was hard for Simon at first. That’s why I stopped you seeing her. I wasn’t trying to be mean. They get on much better now though. The bond isn’t as strong as the one she has with you, but I don’t think he’ll mind you seeing her again.’

He swallowed. When that didn’t work, he swallowed again. ‘Thank you. I don’t want to cause problems. Just to support Zoe in any way I can. If it means stepping away again, I will, if it’s in her best interests. But if she wants me in her life, then I’m there for her. Always.’

Yet another issue he needed to discuss with the fiercely independent Gabby. A woman who hadn’t planned to have a relationship, never mind have kids.

Though if tomorrow didn’t go well, it would be a mute issue.

Chapter Eighteen

Three days before Christmas

The moment she opened the door to Owen, Gabby knew something was wrong. His eyes, usually so full of life, so vivid, were aching sad.

‘Is everything all right? Oh God, it’s not your father, is it?’

He shook his head, stepping inside, looking as if he had the worry of the world on his shoulders. There was no attempt to kiss her, not even on the cheek. And no smile. ‘Can we sit somewhere?’

He was starting to scare her. ‘Yes, come through.’ She nodded to the big coat he was wearing; clearly he hadn’t believed her when she’d told him she’d let him in. ‘You can hang that up.’

With frustrating slowness, he shrugged it off and placed it on the hook by the stairs. When they reached the sitting room he carefully held her face, his eyes drowning in sorrow. ‘I can’t go on holiday with you.’

She reared back, her heart thumping. ‘What? Why?’

He tried to take her hands but Gabby snatched them away, not in the mood to be mollycoddled. Yesterday he’d ditched their evening, now he was ditching their holiday. All she wanted from him was answers.

‘Stella has asked me to look after Zoe over Christmas.’ Before she had a chance to speak, he held up his hand, his eyes pleading with her. ‘Please, just hear me out. Stella has booked for her, Simon — her newly acquired husband — and Zoe to go away to the Caribbean. Zoe doesn’t want to go, which has put Stella in a bind.’

Gabby couldn’t believe she was hearing this. ‘Your ex clicks her fingers and you drop everything? Drop our holiday, so she can have hers?’

Owen paled. ‘Please, Gabby, it’s not like that. Zoe didn’t want to go. She wanted Christmas in England.’

Gabby took a step back, and then another. ‘Then surely your ex should have cancelled her holiday.’ Owen flinched, his eyes filled with agony, but Gabby found it hard to sympathise. It was his weakness, the affection he must still carry for his ex, that had brought this on them. ‘One minute you’re hounding me, persuading me to go away with you like it’s the most important thing in the world. The next I’m dumped.’

He hissed in frustration. 'I'm not dumping you. You're overreacting.'

She glared back at him. 'Two words every woman wants to hear. Next you'll be asking if it's my time of the month.' Simmering with anger, she started to pace. 'I always had a sense you weren't committed to this holiday.'

His eyes flashed. 'That's not fair.'

'Isn't it? You were wobbling about it when your dad was hurt. I knew you were, I understood, but instead of treating me like an adult and warning me there was a chance you wouldn't make it, you kept reassuring me you would.' Her chest shuddered as she tried to keep her emotions in check. 'You let me hope, Owen. Damn you, you let me hope again.'

He rounded on her, all his usual smooth in tatters. 'You think I didn't need that hope, too? I love my dad, but God, I needed a break. Then Stella and Zoe came round yesterday and . . . I can't say no to her.'

'You've made that perfectly clear.' Anguish poured from him but Gabby was in too much of her own pain to empathise with his. Her mother had never been able to say no either. It felt like life was repeating itself. The moment she'd let someone in, allowed herself to believe she was important to them, she'd been kicked into touch again. 'I'm fed up with being the afterthought, Owen. The one who can be picked up and dropped at whim. That's why I didn't want to start this. It's easier on my own.'

He rocked back on his heels. 'What are you saying?' Shaking his head, he took a step towards her, reaching out his hand. 'Come on, let's have a drink. Cool off. Sit and talk about this like adults?'

She ignored his outstretched hand. Right now she didn't feel like an adult. She felt like her twelve-year-old self. The one who'd been told her mother wasn't going to make it home for the start of the Christmas holidays. Again. So she'd be going to stay with her aunt. Again. 'I can't sit down and talk to you,' she whispered. 'I'm too upset, too hurt.'

He dropped his hand, his eyes, the dejected droop of his shoulders, the tight expression on his face all betraying his pain. 'Later?'

'My mother's coming round.' What a day this was turning out to be. Of course, considering her mother's track record, it was entirely possible she wouldn't show up.

'Will you still go on holiday?'

Oh God. She thought of the suitcase upstairs, packed with such joy, such optimism. Could she still go? Then again, what was the alternative? 'I don't

see why I wouldn't. It was my original plan, after all.' Though now, damn him, she'd feel lonely. 'I guess I should have stuck to my guns. Not allowed myself to be sweet-talked by a professional salesman. Then I wouldn't be feeling so let down.'

Owen blanched. 'I'm sorry you feel that way.'

'Yeah, well I'm just sorry, full stop.'

'Gabby, please—'

'No.' This hurt too much. She felt too miserable. Nothing good would come of any further conversation. 'I think we've said enough for today.' She couldn't stop the bitter laugh. 'I need to prepare myself for the next emotional onslaught.'

He looked like he wanted to say something more but she turned away, walking back down the hallway and holding the door open for him. 'I hope you have a good Christmas.'

He halted in the doorway, looking wretched. 'I won't. Not if you're not with me.'

Biting into her cheek to stem the building tears, she reminded herself he'd pushed her happiness aside in favour of that of his ex. 'Perhaps you should have thought of that before you said yes to Stella. Goodbye, Owen.'

His jaw tightened. 'This isn't over. I'll be back.'

'Then you might need to bring a cushion. The doorstep can be a hard place to sit.'

While she still had the strength to do it, she shut the door firmly behind him. Then she leant back against it, shut her eyes, and slid to the floor.

It was only when she'd run out of tears that she noticed Owen's coat still hanging on the hook.

* * *

Owen jumped into his car and slammed the door shut. Something you should never do to a Maserati. But by God, he was angry. Furious even. How could she be so stubborn? Upset, he'd expected, but she wouldn't even listen to what he had to say. She'd thrown it all back in his face, accusing him of wheedling his way into her holiday, and then blithely dumping her just because Stella had asked him to.

With quick, jerky movements he sped off down the road, frustration fizzing from every pore. If she'd only given him a chance to explain, damn it,

he could have told her he wasn't doing this for Stella. He was doing it for Zoe.

Then again, would it have made a difference? Gabby badly needed someone to put her first for a change and what had he just done? Shoved her aside, letting her down exactly as her mum had.

As the car churned up the miles, his anger gave way to guilt, and his frustration to misery. Gabby was right, he should have been more open with her after his dad had come home from hospital. Sure, it wasn't his dad who'd been the final straw, but she might not have felt so blindsided now. And while he was on this guilt trip, he should never, in a million years, have even considered forcing his still-recuperating dad on that plane tomorrow. He'd not just ruined Gabby's Christmas, he'd almost ruined his dad's, too.

Now he had to make sure he didn't ruin Zoe's. While also persuading both Gabby and his father to forgive him.

When he let himself back into the house twenty minutes later, his dad was in his usual position; armchair by the fire, in front of the television. Before his mum had died, his dad would have been tearing his hair out with all this inactivity. In fact he'd probably have come in to find him abandoning his crutch and trying to walk unaided.

These last few days, it had taken all Owen's patience just to get the man to do the exercises the physio had recommended. 'What are you watching?'

'Tripe.'

Owen came to stand next to him and glanced at the television. 'That's not tripe. It's a Christmas classic. Elf.'

'It's a man wearing a green suit and yellow tights.'

'I can't deny that.' Owen perched on the coffee table. 'Dad, tell me honestly, do you want to go to France tomorrow to spend Christmas with Alice? Or do you want to stay here and spend it with me and Zoe?'

His father turned to look at him. 'You're definitely not going away with your lady friend then?'

'No.'

'How did she take it?'

Owen dropped his gaze to the floor, his mind reliving the painful conversation. 'Not well. It didn't help that I got frustrated, when I should have stayed calm and made sure I put my point across.' At work, he was a genius at that. It seems when it really mattered, he was useless.

‘You’ll be able to talk her round. She just needs time to get over the disappointment.’

‘I hope so.’ Owen stared into his dad’s eyes. They might not twinkle any more, but they did brim with sympathy. ‘I told you she never knew her father and her mum was absent a lot when she was growing up? What I didn’t mention was that her mum would make promises, like the fact that she’d be home for Christmas, and then let her down at the last minute. I’ve just done exactly the same thing.’

‘You can’t blame yourself, lad.’ His father patted his hand. It was a quick gesture, perhaps an embarrassed one, but Owen’s throat tightened with emotion. ‘Stella shouldn’t have asked, at least not in front of young Zoe. How were you supposed to say no to that wee girl?’

Owen gave his dad a sidelong look, and almost smiled. ‘She got to you, too, didn’t she?’

His father scoffed. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Yes, you do. Now, what’s your answer? France with Alice, or here with me and Zoe?’

His father’s eyes drifted towards the television, and then over to Clarissa, who angled her head, as if to say, *Come on, there’s no contest*. ‘If I stay here, will you bring the hens over?’

Jesus. Owen swallowed the curse. Less than two weeks since leaving hospital, this man had been prepared to get on a plane for him. The least he could do was fetch the damn hens. ‘Sure. As long as you’re in charge of feeding them.’ That would get him out of the chair.

‘Deal.’ Though his eyes remained fixed on the television, Owen saw the start of a smile on his dad’s face. ‘Didn’t want to spend Christmas with a bunch of frogs.’

‘Dad.’ Owen shook his head, trying hard not to smile. ‘If Alice heard you she’d give you an earful. She loves it out there. And she loves her French husband.’

‘No accounting for taste.’

His eyes darted towards Owen and something rare happened. They shared a smile. ‘Right then. I’d better go and get these hens of yours. Actually, on second thoughts.’ He picked up the crutch that was by the side of the chair and handed it to his dad. ‘We’ll go and get them.’

His dad glanced at the crutch, then up at him. ‘I won’t be able to help.’

‘You can provide the direction. I’ll do the manual labour.’

With a grunt, his father levered himself, shakily, to his feet. ‘I suppose this means I have to cram myself in that daft car of yours.’

‘Considering my daft car is about to get covered in hen poop, I think it’s the least you can do.’ Owen slid his dad a look, and they shared another small smile.

‘When’s the wee lass coming over?’ his father asked after they’d wedged him into the passenger seat.

‘Later this afternoon.’

‘Good. She can help me feed the hens. I reckon she’ll like that.’

Despite the crappiness of the morning, Owen felt a trickle of optimism, a rush of warmth. At least there was a chance this Christmas might work out for two of the people he loved.

Chapter Nineteen

Two days before Christmas

The coat haunted her. Every time Gabby walked past the black, down filled puffer jacket, her stomach knotted and her heart tightened. She had to do something about it. Stuff it in the post to him. Give it to charity. At least shove it in a cupboard so she didn't have to look at the damn thing.

'Whose jacket is it?'

Gabby jumped at the sound of the voice. For a moment she'd forgotten she wasn't alone in the house. 'Nobody important.'

Her mother walked down the stairs, swaddled in Gabby's spare dressing gown. Ten o'clock in the morning and she'd only just woken up. It was unheard of.

'If it was nobody important, you wouldn't be looking at it like you wanted to rip it to shreds. Then bury yourself in what was left.' Wow. Gabby hadn't realised she had her totally transparent look on today. Either that or her mother knew her better than she thought. 'Does it belong to the friend you're going on holiday with?'

Ouch. Gabby turned away, not wanting her mother to see how upset she was. 'The man I was going on holiday with, yes.'

'Was?'

Ignoring the question, Gabby strode into the kitchen. 'What do you want for breakfast? I have healthy stuff I try to keep to during the week, or naughty stuff that I eat at weekends.'

'How about we share some of the naughty, and you tell me about the man who owns the jacket.'

She glanced sharply at her mother. 'Not before you tell me why you've come home. I didn't press you last night because you seemed shattered, but this morning I want to know what's wrong. And don't tell me nothing, because I'm not stupid.'

'I know you're not. And neither am I,' she added pointedly, giving Gabby's face an uncomfortable scrutiny. 'So let's sit down and talk to each other.'

A few minutes later they were in the sitting room, her mother on the sofa,

Gabby opposite on the armchair. A plate of assorted Danish pastries on the coffee table between them.

‘What’s up, Mum?’

The woman on the sofa slowly raised her eyes to look at her. She must be fifty-six now, Gabby thought. Her brown hair, currently in a tidy bob, had flecks of grey, her face more lined than it should for a woman her age. Perhaps it was the sun; as far as Gabby could remember, her mother had always looked tanned, thanks to her travels with the charity. Lines aside, it was still a very attractive face.

‘You don’t call me Mum very often.’

You haven’t been much of one. Gabby swallowed down the words. ‘That’s not an answer.’

‘No.’ She pushed the half-eaten Danish back onto her plate on the coffee table and grabbed the mug of coffee in both hands. ‘These last few months I’ve not felt settled.’

‘Perhaps it’s time to come home for good.’

Her mother gave her a sad smile. ‘You say the word home like it’s a real place, instead of just a house I’ve hardly lived in.’

Gabby couldn’t let that one slide. ‘That was your decision.’

‘Yes, yes it was.’ Her mother’s eyes drifted down towards her mug and her hands clasped it tighter. ‘One I’m starting to regret.’

Gabby’s heart bumped. ‘You are?’

Her mother nodded, not meeting her eyes. Gabby had never seen her look so uncomfortable. Or so vulnerable. ‘I’ve put my whole life into the charity. It’s been my home, my family, my everything. But now my time is coming to an end and I realise I have nothing outside it.’ She swallowed, adding in a quiet, strained voice. ‘The one person I have, I’ve distanced myself so much from I doubt she wants much to do with me any more.’

Gabby stilled. ‘What’s brought this on?’

Her mother twisted her hands together in an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. ‘A while back we managed to reunite a mother and the daughter she thought had died. The look on that mother’s face. The love, the unbridled joy.’ She put down the mug before finally looking Gabby in the eye. ‘It made me realise all I’d missed out on with you. I’m so sorry, Gabriela. So very, very sorry.’

‘Gabby. I call myself Gabby,’ she repeated woodenly, her mind reeling

with shock.

‘You’ll always be Gabriela to me. I chose a beautiful name for a beautiful girl.’

Tears rushed, stinging her eyes, and Gabby rubbed furiously at them. She wasn’t going to cry. She was too angry to cry. ‘Do you know how much I’ve longed for you to tell me something like that? To give me any hint at all that you cared?’

‘Of course I cared.’ Anguish filled her mother’s face. ‘You were my child. My precious daughter.’

‘I didn’t feel very precious when you failed to come home to see me. Especially at this time of year.’

‘Oh, Gabriela.’ Her mother shook her head. ‘Of all the things I regret, and there are many when it comes to my relationship with you, not making it home those times is at the top of the list.’ She drew in a shuddery breath. ‘I don’t have an excuse. I just got sucked into life in the refugee camps. Christmas, with all its over the top eating and drinking, seemed so far removed from what I was seeing.’

‘I didn’t need someone to celebrate Christmas with. I needed my mum home with me.’

‘I know.’ She blinked and stared up at the ceiling, seeming to gather herself before looking back at Gabby. ‘I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.’

‘Why, Mum? Why did you spend so much time away from me?’

Her mother’s expression hardened. ‘We’ve never spoken much about your father, have we? There’s a reason for that. He broke my heart.’ She reached to sip at her drink before setting it back on the table. ‘I was twenty-six, working in Mexico to help in the aftermath of a hurricane, when I met a local doctor there.’ Her expression became distant. ‘He was the cliché; tall, dark and handsome, and I fell for him quickly, and completely. For many months we lived together and worked together. Until I fell pregnant.’ Her mouth tightened. ‘He wanted me to get rid of you, but I refused. You were made in love, at least I thought so. I hadn’t planned it, but when I knew I was pregnant I wanted his child.’

‘He didn’t.’

‘No.’ She let out a shaky breath. ‘And when I decided to keep you, he didn’t want me either.’

Gabby felt a pinch on her heart. It was impossible to look at the agony on her mother's face — thirty years on, yet still so vivid — and not feel sympathy for the young woman who'd fallen pregnant and been rejected. 'What happened?'

'I stayed in Mexico, thinking if he saw me growing in size with his baby, he'd change his mind. He didn't. Not while I was heavily pregnant and waddling round the refugee camp. Not when I had you. In fact, he refused to even look at you. Refused anything to do with either of us. In the end his ignoring me hurt so much that I left and came home.' Her eyes, when they met Gabby's, were filled with regret. 'Every time I looked at you, your olive skin, your deep brown hair, your dark eyes, I was reminded of him. In the end, I couldn't stand it.'

'So you hired a nanny and went back to work.'

She nodded, a tear slipping down her weathered cheek. 'To my shame, yes. And the more I was away, the easier it became to stay away. By the time I realised how selfish I'd been, it was too late. We'd become so distant, and you were so independent. I felt you didn't need me any more, so I stayed with the charity. The place I felt wanted.'

'I had to protect myself.'

'I know. And it haunts me to know that.'

Silence filled the room. Gabby wanted to feel strong enough, forgiving enough, to put her arms around her mother and tell her she understood. Maybe one day she'd be able to, but for now the hurt, built up over thirty years, was too deep.

Her mother cleared her throat. 'Well, I seem to have done a lot of the talking. I think it's your turn now. Perhaps you can tell me why you're so upset with the man who owns the jacket.'

* * *

Owen felt the tug on his heart as he looked at Zoe. She'd got dressed without him asking her to; green tights twisted beneath a pink skirt, topped with a yellow jumper. And now she was putting on her coat.

'I'm ready.'

'I can see that. Ready for what, exactly?' Though he had a pretty good idea.

'To get the tree!' She bounced up and down. 'You promised last night

and there are only two more days to go. We have to get a tree. And decorate it.'

His eyes swivelled to the room his dad was using. The room with the closed door. 'Zoe, sweetheart, I'm not sure we can.' As he watched all the joy flood from her face, he cursed his bad luck this Christmas. Looks like he was destined to let both the women in his life down.

'Why?' Her eloquent blue eyes looked utterly dejected.

'After you'd gone to bed last night, my dad had a fall. He's not up to coming with us and we can't leave him on his own.'

Slowly the door in front of them creaked open and his dad appeared in his dressing gown, clutching the once abandoned walker. He glared at Owen, his face unshaven, his grey hair uncombed. 'Don't let this little girl down. Go and buy her a damn tree.'

As Zoe squealed with excitement, Owen returned his father's look, glare for glare. 'Be a big help and go and feed the chickens, will you, Zoe? Just like my dad taught you yesterday.'

'Sure. Cluck, cluck.'

As she ran off giggling, Owen turned back to his dad. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like I told you last night. Fine.'

Owen huffed. 'So fine you're back to using the walker?'

His dad's eyes darted away from him. 'A precaution. I'm never steady on my feet first thing in the morning.'

Owen wanted to call him on it — the last two days he'd walked into the kitchen with his crutch to get breakfast — but what was the point. The guy was more stubborn than a mule digging its hooves in. 'I'm not taking Zoe out until I'm convinced you're okay to be left on your own.'

'Bloody ridiculous.' His father turned round and pushed the door shut.

'Not as ridiculous as you insisting you're fine when you're not,' Owen shouted through the door.

Cursing again under his breath, Owen walked into the kitchen, watching through the window as Zoe talked to the chickens. Christmas without a tree was unthinkable to Zoe. Somehow he'd have to find a way to get one, even if it meant phoning up and getting one delivered, which admittedly sucked most of the fun out of it. Thankfully online shopping had at least taken care of her extra presents.

While he was debating what to do, his phone rang.

‘Hilda. Everything okay?’

‘Yes, Mr Cooper.’ Owen sighed, but kept quiet. Getting his PA to call him by his first name wasn’t high on today’s priority list. ‘I wanted to know if there was anything in particular you needed me to do before I finish tomorrow.’

Owen winced guiltily. He’d forgotten that today he was meant to be working. Tomorrow he’d taken off . . . to go on holiday with Gabby.

His heart weighed down with misery, he slumped onto one of the kitchen chairs. ‘Actually, I’m going to take today as annual leave, so if you could amend the system, that would be great. And if you’ve nothing to do, you’ve my permission to take yourself off home and get ready for Christmas.’

‘Thank you, but I’ll catch up on the items waiting in my in tray. I like to keep busy.’ The way she said it, the slight catch in her voice, made him wonder if work was actually what kept her going. ‘I hope you have a pleasant holiday.’

‘Ah.’ He felt the usual stab of regret, followed by the ache of longing. ‘My plans had to change.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

Just then he heard the door to his father’s room open, and his father shuffle out, holding his crutch not his walker. Stupid damn fool. Slowly the cogs in his brain started to turn. ‘Actually, Hilda, before you go home, would you mind doing me a huge favour and popping here for a bit?’

‘Certainly. I can be there in half an hour.’

‘You’re a superstar. Thank you.’

After ending the call, he allowed himself a small smile.

* * *

Owen parked up outside his house, climbed out of the car and surveyed the damage. Maserati’s weren’t designed to carry Christmas trees. Fact. It looked bloody ridiculous, the top half sticking out of the passenger window, the rest of it jammed inside, scraping against the soft leather seats.

Zoe flung open the rear door and jumped out. ‘Come on, we have to get it inside and put it in water, like the man said.’

Owen didn’t want to disillusion her by telling her the tree had probably been out of water for the best part of four weeks. ‘You go in and open the

back door. I'll bring it round.' As she ran off he surveyed the problem, wondering how best to get it out without damaging his precious car. He'd given up worrying about pine needles. The gung-ho way the man at the garden centre had 'helped' him put the tree in, had ensured he'd be finding the damn things all year.

With a lot of internal swearing — he'd had the occasional slip in front of Zoe, and she'd taken him to task over it — he manoeuvred the tree through the back door and into the kitchen. 'Where do you want it, Zoe?'

'Here.' She pointed to the end of the hallway. Not a bad place, but they'd only see it when they walked through. Still, it was her Christmas, her choice. He'd just manhandled it into the right spot when she shook her head. 'Oh no. We can't have it here. It's too far away from where we'll sit.' She clapped her hands. 'Pick it up again. I remember now. I want it in the other room where the telly is.'

'Please?'

She gave him a heart-melting smile. 'Pleeeeeeease, Owen.'

Heaving it onto his back, again, Owen trudged through to the sitting room. And came up short. There was his dad, smiling again. And Hilda. Smiling too.

It was a Christmas miracle.

Zoe ruined the sentimental moment by squealing and pointing her finger to where Clarissa was sitting on the curtain rail. 'The budgie got out.'

His dad looked up with a start. 'I let her out, lass. She likes to flap her wings a bit.'

'But she's going to escape.' Zoe was beside herself, and the panic in her voice must have upset Clarissa because she flew off her perch, and out of the room.

Owen froze. 'Did you shut the back door, Zoe?'

She hadn't. Of course she hadn't. Heart in his mouth, Owen ran through the hallway and into the kitchen. Arriving just in time to see Clarissa fly out of the door.

Bollocks.

To add to the chaos, with almost immaculate timing, his phone decided to ring. 'Dad, Clarissa's flown outside,' he yelled. 'Go and see if you can talk her back.'

Snatching his phone out of his pocket, he saw Gabby's name flash up and

immediately pressed answer.

‘Gabby.’ His mind whirled with all the things he wanted to say to her. So many he couldn’t seem to pick one.

‘You left your coat.’

Owen backed up as his dad hobbled through, clutching at his walker with Hilda by his side. Zoe was right behind them, looking horribly upset.

‘Yes,’ he answered distractedly.

Zoe was starting to cry. ‘It’s my fault. I should have shut the door.’

Owen tapped her on the shoulder, shaking his head vigorously, but he could see Zoe didn’t understand. ‘Look, Gabby, now’s not a good time.’

‘It never is.’ He cringed, remembering how he’d had to dismiss her the last time she’d phoned; when Stella and Zoe had turned up unannounced. ‘Please come and pick your coat up. I’d rather not have it in my house.’

He couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. Loud, humourless laughter, bordering on hysteria. ‘The coat is the least of my problems right now. Bin it, give it to charity. Whatever you need to do.’ He watched in despair as Hilda, his dad and Zoe stood outside, staring up at the pear tree. Zoe with tears running down her face. All day he’d wanted to talk to Gabby but damn it, why had the universe decided it was time for her to phone now? ‘Sorry, Gabby, I’ve got to go.’

Chapter Twenty

Gabby was still seething as she drove her Audi carefully down Owen's pothole riddled drive. He was the one who'd left his coat, yet here she was, bringing it back to him like a prize mug.

You want to see him.

She dismissed the voice. What she wanted was to get rid of the bloody coat, so she wouldn't have to think about him every time she saw it.

As if that's going to stop you.

Parking her Audi next to Owen's Maserati, she frowned as she noticed an old Golf on the drive. Visitors? Was that why he didn't have time to be civil to her on the phone? He had another woman with him?

Bristling with anger she hauled his coat out of the small boot and rang on the doorbell. And rang again. 'Come on, come on. I know you're in there,' she hissed. 'The car's a bit of a giveaway.'

Still no answer. But hang on, were there voices coming from the back garden? Deciding she'd not come all the way here to take the coat back with her again, she stomped round to the back garden. And came to an abrupt halt.

A pair of stepladders was perched against a pear tree. At the bottom of the ladders was a grey-haired man clutching a walking frame. And . . . wow, was that Hilda? Owen was standing on the top rung of the ladders, talking softly to . . . something in the tree?

'There.' A young girl with blonde hair tied in two odd-looking plaits pointed at the top of the tree. Zoe, Gabby guessed. 'I can see her.'

'That's a pigeon, sweetheart.' Owen shook his head. 'There are two of them. They're looking at me as if I've lost my marbles.'

'I'm not surprised.' As the words tumbled out of Gabby's mouth, everyone spun round to stare at her. Owen looked shocked. Zoe, and what must be Owen's father, looked curious. Hilda looked like she usually looked. Unruffled. Guarded. 'Why are you talking to a tree?'

'Clarissa's in there.' Zoe's pretty little face looked miserable. 'I left the back door open and she escaped.'

'No.' Owen's voice was firm. 'I told you before, Zoe. I was the one who left the door open. You did nothing wrong.'

Gabby was almost afraid to ask. 'Who's Clarissa?'

The man with the grey hair turned to her. 'She's my budgerigar. By the look of you, you must be Gabby.' He shuffled towards her, using a walker to support him. 'I'm Sidney, Owen's dad.' He glanced down at the frame and then back to her, giving her a wry smile. 'I'd shake your hand, but I might keel over and the boy would shout at me again.'

Gabby felt a smile tug her lips. 'Does he often shout?'

'Like you wouldn't believe.'

The words were said with such feeling, Gabby couldn't help it. She laughed. 'Isn't it supposed to be the other way round?'

Sidney gave her another wry smile. 'I've done my fair share of shouting, believe me. He was a pain in the backside growing up.'

From his perch on the ladder, Owen cleared his throat. 'Hello. We're supposed to be catching a budgie here. Not going on a trip down memory lane.' But his eyes, when they caught Gabby's, held such warmth, such hope, she felt the pull on her heart.

'We need to keep quiet.' Hilda glanced at them all with what Gabby knew Owen called her schoolmistress expression. 'I suggest you put Clarissa's cage on the top of the ladders and leave it open with her favourite treat inside. We should all retreat out of the way, except for Sidney because she knows his voice. She'll come down when she's not so frightened.'

Everyone did as they were told. Gabby watched as Owen took Zoe's hand, squeezing it in reassurance as they put the birdcage on the ladders and moved to the patio.

Damn him. It was hard to stay mad with a man who looked at you with such longing. And who showed such care, such affection, for his ex-girlfriend's sweet-looking daughter.

'A budgie in a pear tree,' she mused, watching Sidney trying to coax Clarissa down. 'I'm sure there's a song in there somewhere.'

Owen's gaze darted towards her, sexy blue eyes brimming with amusement. 'Two pigeons on the branch above. As close to turtle doves as we're going to get.'

Zoe looked between them, then pointed to the chicken coop and started to giggle. 'Hens.'

Owen laughed. 'At least three of them. I bet they speak French, if pushed.'

Zoe whipped round, pulling at his arm. 'What else do we need? I can't

remember the song.'

'Now you're testing me. Lots more birds; calling birds, geese, swans, but we've got enough trouble with the ones we've already got. And while I'm happy to have five gold rings and watch ladies dance, I don't want leaping Lords, drumming drummers or piping pipers wandering through my house, thanks very much.' He gave Zoe a little shove. 'You're trouble enough.'

As Zoe started to giggle again, Gabby stared at the pair of them. Zoe's not just the daughter of his ex, she realised with a start. The connection went deeper.

Hilda clapped her hands. 'Well done, Sidney.'

Guiltily Gabby turned her attention towards the tree. Thankfully Clarissa was settled back in her cage, and Hilda was now smiling, yes actually smiling, at Owen senior. 'Is it my imagination, or is something going on between Hilda and your dad?' she whispered as Hilda helped Sidney close up the cage.

Owen gave her a look so intense, it made her toes curl. 'It's my own love life I'm more worried about.'

Before she could think of a reply, he strode off towards Hilda and took the cage from her hands, carrying it back into the house.

* * *

Owen couldn't believe Gabby was in his house, yet he couldn't do a damn thing to try and keep her here. He desperately wanted to take her hand and rush her upstairs to the privacy of his bedroom. To talk to her, kiss her if the talking went well, then talk to her some more to make sure she absolutely understood how much she meant to him.

But he had Zoe wanting to decorate the tree, Hilda with him still, talking to his dad, both of them keeping an eye on Clarissa to check she wasn't suffering any ill effects from her flight to the pear tree.

'How about you fetch the decorations we bought from the car, Zoe? I just need a quick word with Gabby.'

Zoe gave him one of her looks that said she understood more than she should for a girl of her age. 'Can Gabby help us decorate the tree?'

He raised his eyebrows, giving Zoe a mental fist bump when she grinned cheekily back at him. The little matchmaker knew exactly what she was doing. Trying to school his expression into something a little less gleeful, and

a little more contrite, he swivelled to face Gabby. 'How about it? We'd love you to help us.' When she narrowed her eyes, he added. 'You look like an expert tree decorator.'

'I do?'

'Umm.' Crap, where was he going with this now? 'You're very neat, organised. Just what we need to counter our over exuberance.'

'Are you saying I'm boring?'

He could feel the blood drain from his face. God, this woman tied him up in knots. He was supposed to be the one skilled with words, with the art of persuasion, but when it came to Gabby he became whatever the verbal equivalent of fingers and thumbs was. 'Hell, no. I'm saying . . .' He paused, drew in a breath. 'I'm saying—'

'Please help us,' Zoe interrupted, bouncing up and down. 'I want a pretty tree. Owen's rubbish at stuff like that.' She pointed to her wonky pigtails. 'He can't even put my hair in plaits properly.'

As a big smile spread across Gabby's gorgeous face, Owen had to fight the urge to lift Zoe into his arms and hug her for putting it there. 'If you want a pretty tree, I'm your woman.'

Zoe beamed. 'Don't go away. I'll get the things from the car.'

When she'd disappeared, Owen's mind raced with which of the gazillion words he'd rehearsed, he should say first.

'Did you put her up to this?'

Gabby's question rocked him back. 'No. Of course not.' What did she think he was, a manipulator of young girls? But then he remembered the chat he'd had with Zoe when she'd wanted to know why her mum had asked if looking after her was okay with his girlfriend. 'I might have told her I'd promised to go on holiday with my girlfriend and now she wasn't talking to me.'

Gabby's eyes flashed. 'You made me out to be the bad guy?'

The hope that had bloomed so eagerly when he'd first noticed her in his back garden, shrivelled a little. 'Of course I didn't.' His eyes sought hers. 'I'd like to think there was no bad guy in this scenario. Just an unfortunate set of circumstances.'

Her expression told him the jury was very much still out on that. Thankfully Zoe chose that moment to dart back into the room, bringing with her a rush of cold air and a buzz of boundless enthusiasm.

‘I’ve got everything.’ She dumped the bags she’d been carrying onto the floor in front of them. ‘Can we start now? What goes on first? Mum says you should always do the lights first, so you don’t knock the decorations off when you twist the lights round the tree. Shall we do that? Put on the lights?’

Owen saw a small smile cross Gabby’s face and his heart lifted. ‘First we need to saw a bit off the bottom of the tree and put it in the stand.’ He might be rubbish at making a tree look pretty, but at least he knew how to make it stable. ‘Otherwise you’ll have a wobbly tree and everything will fall off.’

As he grasped the tree, Owen glanced over Zoe’s shoulder, noticing Hilda and his dad still talking away, Hilda looking twenty years younger. He had a sudden flashback to his parents’ thirtieth wedding anniversary. To where he’d watched from the back of the hall, a gangling, awkward twenty-year-old, as his dad had effortlessly twirled his mum around the dance floor.

He shouldn’t be surprised to see Hilda looking so enthralled, he realised. The old man had charm. He’d just forgotten how to use it since his mum had died. He looked again at Hilda. Though she was nothing like his mum, she’d had a tough life, and for the last few years, so had his dad. If they could make each other happy, he wasn’t going to stand in anybody’s way.

‘Owen,’ Zoe huffed, hands on her hips. ‘We haven’t got all day. It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow.’

Shaking himself, he touched his forehead. ‘Sorry, ma’am. I’ll get to it right away.’ It earned him a giggle out of Zoe. And a smile from the gorgeous dark-haired woman he needed to persuade to give him another chance.

She was the one, he acknowledged as he sawed off the stump before wrestling the tree into the stand. It had taken him thirty-two years, and a reasonable amount of sampling, but he’d finally found a woman he wanted to build a future with. To dance with at their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

He simply needed to convince her that’s what she wanted too. It didn’t have to be next week. Or next year, he reassured himself as he wriggled under the tree to tighten the screws on the tree holder. But he had to do it.

Happy with his plan, he went to straighten up, forgetting he was beneath thick branches covered in spikey needles.

‘Ouch.’

Rubbing his head, he shuffled inelegantly backwards before scrambling to his feet.

‘Did you have fun down there?’

Gabby looked amused, though he wondered quite how amused she'd be if she knew what he'd been thinking. 'Great, thanks.' He held her gaze. 'Nothing I like better than a fumble under the tree.'

She raised her eyes to the ceiling, though the flush on her neck reassured him she might not like him right now, but she wasn't immune, either.

Zoe dived into the carrier bags. 'Lights now. We have to put all of them on, 'cos then it will look all twinkly at night time.'

As they weaved the lights around the tree, and loaded it with baubles, Owen caught Gabby watching him and Zoe but her expression gave him no clue what she was thinking.

'No, no not there.' Zoe tugged off the red bauble he'd just hung. 'You can't put red next to pink. Duh. It needs to go over here.'

'What's wrong with red and pink together? I like both colours.' He flashed a smile at Gabby. 'Especially red. I have a real fondness for red.' She shook her head at him, but her lips twitched. Feeling he was on a roll, he nudged Zoe. 'I forgot to give you today's joke. Why can't Christmas trees sew?'

'I don't know,' she said slowly, angling her head.

'They always drop their needles.'

Zoe put her hands to her face in dramatic fashion. 'OMG, that's bad.'

'I agree.' Gabby reached for a silver bauble, placing it next to the red one and receiving no rebuke from Zoe. 'If you're going to tell Christmas jokes, they have to be better than that. Where do you—'

'Oh no.' Owen put a hand over Gabby's mouth, feeling a jolt of desire as his palm brushed her soft lips. 'Zoe is restricted to one joke a day. Otherwise she risks laughing so much she pops.'

Zoe pouted. 'That's not fair. I want to hear Gabby's joke. It has to be betterer than yours.'

'Better than mine,' he corrected. 'And that is highly unlikely.' Reluctantly he took his hand away from Gabby's mouth. 'But if you want to risk popping, go ahead.'

Zoe nodded rigorously, looking wide-eyed at Gabby.

Owen whispered to Gabby. 'Go on then, hotshot. No pressure.'

She gave him a cool look. 'Zoe, where do you find reindeer?'

Zoe frowned, pursing her lips. 'I don't know.'

'It depends where you left them.'

Zoe doubled over with laughter. ‘That’s way better than Owen’s.’

‘It’s not even clever,’ he retorted, pretending to be miffed. ‘But as Gabby’s clearly better at decorating trees and telling jokes, I’ll leave you both to it.’

He walked away to the sound of more laughter, the noise curling around his heart and tugging hard.

Chapter Twenty-One

Owen walked slowly towards Hilda and his dad, keen to observe them from a distance before Hilda changed into his PA.

And bam, there it was. The moment she caught sight of him, she straightened and looked at her watch.

‘Hilda, thanks so much for helping out today. I hope Dad hasn’t bored you too much.’

‘Not at all.’ She shot to her feet, all starchy and professional again. ‘But heavens, I should go. I didn’t intend to stay this long. I’ve got so much still to do.’

‘Hey, relax.’ He took in a breath, and tried to do the same. ‘It’s nearly Christmas. Nobody is expected to work. Besides, you’ve been doing your boss a huge favour.’ The smile he gave her almost cracked her face. Almost. Yet when she was talking to his dad, she seemed to smile most of the time.

‘What are your plans for Christmas?’ he asked as he walked with her towards the front door. ‘Taking it easy, I hope.’

‘I’m afraid I see Christmas as all a bit of a fuss about nothing. I shall be at home.’

‘By yourself?’

The gaze that had been holding his, shifted towards the door. ‘I’m often by myself at home. That’s what comes of living alone. I can assure you I’m quite used to it, and quite happy.’

She didn’t look happy. Aside from the few times he’d witnessed her with his dad. A thought struck him. ‘How did you know to put Clarissa’s cage outside earlier? You looked like a real pro at catching budgies.’

‘I used to keep them. But then the man I . . . was seeing didn’t like them, so that was the end of that.’

‘You don’t strike me as a woman who’d allow a man to dictate how she lived her life.’

‘I wouldn’t now, but back then . . .’ Her expression turned sombre. ‘I was young and impressionable. He was older and, to my naïve mind, rather impressive.’

He studied her for a moment before deciding to go with his gut. ‘You can tell me it’s none of my business, but this man . . . was he your old boss?’ The

shock that flew across her face gave him his answer. 'I'm not judging,' he added quietly.

She stared down at her hands, swallowing a few times before finally meeting his eyes. 'I didn't realise he was married in the beginning.'

'How old were you?'

'Twenty. It was my second job. By the time I realised I wasn't his girlfriend but his mistress, it was too late. I was in love, with all the foolishness that brings. Of course I should have left. Moved away. Instead I stayed with him until he retired.' She paused, drawing in a breath. 'After which he moved with his wife to Spain.'

'Christ, Hilda, I'm sorry.'

'No need to be. It was entirely my fault.'

He opened his mouth to argue — the man in a position of power, seducing his secretary half his age, was the one at fault — but then he saw how uncomfortable she looked. 'Well, your budgie keeping skills certainly came in useful today. Dad would have been lost without Clarissa.'

Her face relaxed a little. 'I was glad to help.'

'She's the only female he's really spoken to since Mum died.' He smiled into Hilda's eyes. 'Until recently.'

Her eyes darted away but it was the tinge of pink in her cheeks that confirmed it. She really did have a thing for his dad. 'You know, if you fancy some company on Christmas Day, you'd be very welcome here. Dad's staying and though he's great with Zoe, I'm sure he'd welcome some conversation from someone nearer his own age.' Because she looked both flustered and agitated, he added. 'No need to answer now. Just pop round if you feel like it. We'll eat around one o'clock and I've bought a turkey big enough to feed the entire sales division.' When she glanced up in horror, he laughed. 'Don't worry, you're the only one with an invite.'

She had one foot out of the door when she glanced back at him. 'I hope you'll also extend an invitation to marketing.'

Stunned, he watched her march towards her car. And found he was now the one blushing.

* * *

It had been a long time since Gabby had decorated a tree. As a child she'd decorated a few with the nanny, in the days before boarding school, and

later one or two with her mother, when she'd been home in time.

She'd never displayed the same innocent enthusiasm that Zoe was showing.

'You seem to be an expert at this,' she remarked as Zoe moved yet another pair of clashing baubles.

'Mum taught me. We have this tree that lives in the loft and Mum brings it down every Christmas. She used to only let me put silver and purple baubles on 'cos then it matched the room, but now it's been painted — the room, not the tree.' She grinned, flashing a pair of cute dimples. 'I guess next year we'll have to buy green baubles.' With a nod of satisfaction, she took a step back. 'Will Mum and Simon have a tree where they're staying?'

Gabby had zero experience of children, other than once being one. Was this Zoe admitting she missed her mum? Or just her chatting? 'You'll be able to ask her when she phones you, I suspect.'

Guilt niggled as she thought of her own mum. She'd told her she'd be popping out to deliver the jacket. That had been two hours ago. Then again, maybe it was about time her mother was left waiting for her to turn up. Wondering if she ever would.

Zoe flipped back her wonky pigtails. 'I bet it won't look nearly as good as this one.' Her smile was full of pride, and joy. Nope, she wasn't missing her mum. At least not yet.

'I bet you're right. You chose a good tree.'

'Owen chose the tree. I picked out a small one but he said as it was our first Christmas together for ages, we should have a big tree. And a big turkey.' She giggled. 'He said big everything except the sprouts.'

Gabby wondered at the bond she'd seen between them. If she remembered correctly, Owen had said he'd ended his relationship with Stella four years ago, and he'd lived with her for four years before that. It meant Zoe probably couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known Owen. God, so many questions she wanted to ask, but they would have to wait. She could hardly quiz Zoe.

Dimly Gabby heard the front door close. A few seconds later Owen appeared, hands casually in his pockets, a pensive expression on his handsome face.

No, she scolded herself. Don't think how gorgeous he looks in his faded jeans and casual hoodie — how perfect he'd be to model an Abercrombie

range targeted at the over thirties.

Think of the holiday he promised you and failed to deliver on.

‘That looks great, ladies.’ His gave Zoe’s pigtails an affectionate tug before his eyes landed on hers.

Don’t think how adorable he is with Zoe.

‘I’d thank you, but it was mainly Zoe’s doing.’ She kept her expression neutral, her eyes steady on his. ‘As my work here is done, I need to get going. My mother will wonder where I am.’

‘She’s staying with you?’

‘Yes.’ The conversation with her mother still whirled round her head. Did she believe what she’d said? And if she did, was she really going to allow her back into her life?

She watched as Owen pointed Zoe towards his father. ‘Take what’s left of the decorations over to my dad and get him to help you decide where to put them.’

As she trooped off, Owen’s gaze found hers again. ‘How is your mum?’

‘Fine.’

He heaved out a sigh, jamming his hands in his jeans pocket. ‘Is that all I’m going to get now? This is me you’re talking to, Gabby. Not a work colleague. Not a distant relative.’

Hurt lurked deep in his eyes, hurt and an edge of frustration. Suddenly she felt ashamed of her recent behaviour. All he’d done was try to help a lovely young girl, one he was clearly very attached to, have a great Christmas. Sure, it had meant letting her down, but wasn’t that better than disappointing sweet little Zoe?

‘Gabby?’

‘Sorry, I just don’t want to talk about my mother right now.’ She sucked in a breath, let it out slowly. ‘But she is fine. There are no problems between us.’

Restlessly he tugged a hand through his hair, clearly still upset. ‘Yet there are problems between us, and I don’t like it.’ He clasped her shoulders, eyes blazing down into hers. ‘I’ll repeat it as many times as you want to hear it. I’m sorry I had to cancel on you. More sorry than you can ever imagine. It was absolutely the last thing I wanted to do.’

God, the sincerity in his voice. Those earnest blue eyes. ‘I believe you.’

His chest rose and fell, the grip of his hands loosening. ‘That’s a good

start.’

She took a deliberate step back and he flinched but she needed distance to say the next words. ‘It’s me who should be apologising. When you said you couldn’t go, I was upset and I said some things that were unfair. I realise now when you told me you couldn’t let her down, you didn’t mean your ex, you meant Zoe.’ She nodded over to where Zoe was skipping round the room, shoving tinsel on every surface she could find. ‘I can see how much she means to you.’

His eyes followed hers, and his expression turned soft. No, she realised, besotted. ‘Yeah.’ He gave an uncharacteristically awkward shrug. ‘I know it sounds daft, but she’s like my daughter. She wasn’t even two when I started living with Stella. I was the one who read her bedtime stories. Who taught her how to catch, and to kick a ball. I helped her with homework, picked her up from school when Stella couldn’t make it.’ His jaw clenched. ‘For four years I did everything a father would do.’

His voice sounded raw and instinctively she reached to squeeze his arm, even as a ripple of unease ran through her. Heaven help her, this man was ready to have a family. How could she possibly be the right woman for him?

‘How often do you see her now?’

His eyes fell to where her hand still rested on his arm, and he covered it with his. ‘Not nearly enough. Stella had this mad idea that if Zoe saw me she wouldn’t bond with her new man, Simon. But we spoke before she went on holiday and I think she’s realised she was wrong.’ He stared directly into her eyes. ‘I plan on seeing Zoe a lot more next year.’

Was it a warning? The unease sharpened, and Gabby snatched her arm away. How could she be ready for this, when she couldn’t handle something as simple as a change in holiday plans without blowing it out of all proportion? ‘I need to go home.’

Ignoring the leave-me-alone vibes that must have been pulsing off her, he rested a palm against her cheek. ‘I want us to get back to where we were.’

She nodded rigorously, too rigorously, knowing she needed to get away before she started to panic and say something stupid. Something that might turn him away completely. ‘Me too.’ It was the one thing she knew for certain. ‘I just need time to think. To . . . reassess.’

His thumb gently stroked her skin. ‘Are you still going on holiday tomorrow?’

‘I’m packed.’ It wasn’t an answer. They both knew it.

‘Well, if you change your mind and decide to stay, we’d love you to spend Christmas Day here, with us.’ A family Christmas. Could she even do that? Slowly her chest began to constrict, leaving her feeling suffocated. ‘And if your mother is still with you, obviously she’d be welcome, too.’

Gabby bit into her cheek as hysteria threatened to take over. Oh God, Christmas with the parents. And with his almost stepdaughter. ‘Thank you,’ she managed, rushing towards the door, almost tripping over her own feet in her desperation to leave. ‘I’ll, umm, I’ll let you know.’

‘Gabby!’ She turned to find Zoe rushing towards her. ‘Thank you for doing the tree with me.’

Her heart skipped a beat and Gabby forced the panic down sufficiently to smile at Zoe. ‘Thank you for letting me.’

Before emotion could take hold, she flung the door open and almost ran to her car. As she reversed she spotted Owen in her rear-view mirror, watching her from the doorway. His face a mixture of confusion and frustration.

She understood the feeling. Trouble was, she was the one causing the confusion. And she was the one frustrating them both.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Christmas Eve

When Owen thought back to Christmas as a kid, board games always featured highly — usually ending in him and Alice fighting over who'd cheated most. Figuring it was his duty to teach the art to the next generation, he dragged out his old Monopoly board and started playing with his dad and Zoe. His mind was only half on the game though. The other half was at Gabby's house. Wondering if she was zipping up her case.

'That'll be a hundred quid.'

He frowned over at his dad. 'You don't even own Oxford Street. Even if you did, that's a rip off price.'

His dad winked at Zoe and then chuckled — actually bloody chuckled. 'Just checking you were paying attention. Your mind looks like it's elsewhere.' He gave him a shrewd look. 'Maybe with a pretty brown-haired lass.'

Zoe's head snapped up. 'That's Gabby. Owen's in love with Gabby,' she said in a sing-song voice, giggling.

'I didn't say that.' But he could feel his heart pumping and a flush creeping up his neck. What was he, ten?

His dad gave him a knowing smile that bordered on a smirk. 'You didn't have to. Is she still planning on going on holiday today?'

'She's packed, so probably, yes.' He sighed, eyes on the board so his father wouldn't be able to read his pathetic hope. 'But her mum's visiting. And . . . well, I invited her over tomorrow, both of them actually, if she decides to stay.'

Owen caught Zoe's interested eyes on him and he plastered on a big smile. 'I mean, who wouldn't rather come here for Christmas than go somewhere warm and sunny, eh, Zoe? You don't regret your decision yet, do you?'

She gave him a slow, sweet smile. 'I miss Mum, but I'd rather be here. You and Gramps are pretty cool.'

'Gramps?' Owen tried to school his expression into mildly interested, and not WTF.

‘Well, he’s your dad, and you’re kind of like my dad, so we decided on Gramps.’ She grinned up at the man in question. ‘Didn’t we?’

Owen’s eyes started to sting and his chest felt like someone had put a band around it and was squeezing really, really tight. A glance towards his dad wasn’t much help. His face was the mirror of his own drowning emotions. ‘That’s great, Zoe,’ he squeezed out, rising to his feet. ‘I just need to . . . to get a drink. Either of you want one?’

He staggered out of the room to the kitchen where he filled the kettle on autopilot, clicking it on before collapsing onto the nearest chair. You’re kind of like my dad.

It was the first time she’d ever said something like that and it felt so, so precious. A gift he’d earned and would never give her cause to retract.

At the sound of shuffling, he looked round to find his dad wincing as he knocked the walker on the door frame. ‘Have you taken your painkillers today?’

‘Yes, Doc.’ His dad took a few more steps before giving him a careful study. ‘Are you okay?’

Owen managed a weak smile. ‘It’s usually me asking you that.’

‘Then my question is long overdue.’ He shifted, his movements slow and awkward, before plonking himself onto the chair next to Owen. ‘She’s quite the girl.’

Owen laughed. ‘She is that. Gramps.’

His dad smiled. ‘I actually meant Gabby, but yes, Zoe is quite a girl, too.’

‘Ah.’ The sound of the kettle boiling gave Owen an excuse to fiddle around with mugs and teabags. If his mum had been around, he’d have blurted everything he was feeling. Hell, he’d have been on the phone to her yesterday, asking her advice on how to win Gabby back. They’d had that kind of closeness. But now he only had his dad. A man who’d shown enough concern, enough interest, to drag his aching body away from the armchair to come and find him.

After topping the mugs up with milk, Owen pushed one towards him. ‘Gabby would quell you with one of her looks if you called her a girl but yes, she’s quite a woman.’

‘She’s only, what, twenty something?’

‘Thirty.’

His dad huffed. ‘She’s still a girl to me.’ He took a sip of the tea. ‘Is

young Zoe right? Do you love Gabby?’

Owen looked his dad straight in the eye. ‘Yes.’

Eyes brimming with understanding, his dad smiled. ‘Then you’ll win her back.’

‘As simple as that?’

He chuckled. ‘I didn’t say it would be simple. Nothing to do with the opposite sex ever is.’ Pain flickered across his face before he seemed to gather himself. ‘But I have every confidence that my son will win over the woman he loves, if she’s important enough to him.’ With those surprisingly touching words, his dad put his hands on the walker and heaved himself to his feet. ‘Now I’m going to go and finish that Monopoly game with Zoe. I suggest, rather than wondering what your Gabby’s doing, you give her a bloody call and find out.’

* * *

It had been a funny morning. When she’d woken, Gabby hadn’t been sure whether she was going to Florida, or staying at home.

She also knew that if she dithered long enough, the decision would be made for her.

She’d paid for the damn holiday, she thought crossly, staring at the suitcase. And though she could swop her flights to a later date, the hotel should have been cancelled yesterday. And she hadn’t. Why? Because it wasn’t really a choice, was it? Ten days in the sun by herself, doing exactly what she wanted, versus one day eating turkey with a man she’d been dating but had fallen out with, that man’s father, and the daughter of that man’s ex. Oh and maybe her mother, too, who didn’t know either of them. Who hadn’t even met the man who’d offered the invitation.

Gabby sagged back onto her bed. Why was life so complicated?

You’ve made it complicated, a voice niggled at her. She’d accepted Owen’s apology, knew he hadn’t even been in the wrong. So why was she still wobbling, when in her heart she knew exactly what she wanted to do.

‘Have you made a decision yet?’ Her mother hovered in the doorway, nodding towards the suitcase.

Glumly Gabby shook her head. ‘How stupid is that? I’ve paid for a perfectly good holiday, one I’d originally planned to go on by myself anyway. I don’t know why I’m not just booking a taxi to the airport.’

‘Because you have feelings for Owen.’

‘Yes.’ Whatever feelings meant.

‘And he returns these feelings?’

Numbly Gabby nodded. ‘I know he cares for me. He wants us to get back on track. I don’t understand why I can’t do exactly that. Why I’m sitting here feeling so confused.’

Her mother came and sat next to her. ‘Because you’re afraid to rely on someone else for your happiness.’ She gave her a sad smile. ‘Believe me, I know the feeling. After your father left me, I didn’t have the guts to fall in love again. There were men, quite a few over the years, but none I allowed to get too close. I suspect you’re the same.’

Gabby wanted to dispute it — please God she wasn’t anything like the woman who’d continually let her down. But in this respect, she knew they were alike. ‘You made me this way.’

Her mother’s face contorted in anguish. ‘I know, and I’m sorry. I disappointed you so many times and I made you scared to trust. But this man hasn’t let you down. From what I understand, he’s taking care of his father and looking after a girl he’s not even a father to. Does he sound like the sort of man who can’t be relied on?’

‘No.’ Her heart squeezed as she recalled how caring he was with his dad, despite the bluster. The clear affection he held for Zoe. He even seemed to have taken Hilda under his wing. But wasn’t that all part of the problem?

‘Gabby.’ Her mother went to hold her hand, then seemed to think better of it and patted it instead. ‘I know I’ve not been much of a mother to you, that it’s probably too late for me to be reaching out now, but I am here if you need me. I want to help.’

She was trying, Gabby realised. First yesterday’s confession, and now her tentative offer. If she wanted to release herself from the past, to move forward, she needed to try, too. ‘Everything you said about Owen is true, but it also isn’t the man I thought I was dating. He’s supposed to be a flirt, only out for a good time. It was meant to be fun. But he’s actually a whole lot deeper than I gave him credit for.’ She inhaled a deep breath and looked her mother in the eye. ‘And I’m in danger of drowning.’

Her mother gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘You’re a good swimmer, Gabby. I may not have been a great mother, but I remember making sure of that. Good swimmers don’t panic when they get out of their depth. They

relax, confident in their capability. And their judgement.'

'It didn't work out too well for you.'

'No.' Sadness came and went in her eyes. 'But I was younger. I dived in head first without thinking, without seeing the danger signs. And they were there, I realised afterwards, if only I'd bothered to look. My worry for you is the opposite. That in your determination to be cautious, to hold back and wait for signs you're convinced you'll find if you search hard enough, you might not take the dive at all.'

Why risk taking it though, when it was easier to remain on dry land? Yet Gabby knew if she carried on skirting close to the edge, there was a chance of her falling in anyway.

From the bedside table where she'd left it, her phone began to ring. Gabby reached for it, raising her eyebrows when she saw who it was.

'Is it him?'

'Yes.'

Her mother rose and walked to the door. 'Then I'll go and pack my things and leave you to it.'

Drawing in a slow breath, Gabby sat back against the headboard and pressed answer. 'Hello.'

'Hey.' The sound of his voice immediately sent her pulse racing, making a mockery of her assertion that she preferred to stay out of the water. 'Are you at the airport yet?'

'No.'

'Are you planning to go to the airport?'

His voice gave nothing away, leaving her only to guess at how he felt. He'd said he wanted them to resume their relationship, but at what level? Giving up her holiday to spend Christmas with him would be a huge step. A massive indication to them both of how she felt. 'I don't know.'

She was sure she heard his breath catch. 'Is there anything I can say to persuade you to give up ten days in the sun and spend those days with me here instead?'

Maybe she wouldn't have to take the step alone. 'You could try.'

'I am a salesman, remember.' His voice was warmer now, and she could tell he was smiling. 'Are you sure you want to risk it?'

'Fire away.'

There was a small pause, and she presumed he was deciding his tactic. 'I

could point out the obvious. That if you stay, you get me in your bed, or more precisely me in my bed, because I can't leave dad looking after Zoe.'

'I understand that.'

'Yet you don't seem swayed, which is a pretty big dent to my ego.'

'I'm waiting to hear the full proposal until I make a decision.'

'Ah yes, of course. Miss Cautious needs all the details before she can make up her mind.'

A smile tugged at her mouth. 'Keep going, Cooper. So far all I've had is a dubious offer to sleep in your bed.'

'I take offence at the term dubious, but I see you're angling for another sweetener to seal the deal.' He went silent and she sat forward, straining to hear, her heart thumping. 'What if I told you I want you here with me? That I'll cook for you, wait on you. Give you back massages, foot massages. That I can't imagine a better way to spend Christmas than with you. That I'm falling for you, Gabriela Sanderson.'

Her throat closed up. Tears that had pricked at the words I want you here, now began to slide freely down her face.

He cleared his throat. 'Is that enough?' Another small cough, and this time she heard the vulnerability in his voice. 'Too much?'

Grabbing at a tissue, she wiped her eyes. 'You had me at foot massage.'

'I did?' She heard his soft, rueful laughter. 'Wish I'd known. I might have saved the last part until I thought you were ready to hear it.'

Oh God, the tightness was back again, in her throat, across her chest, around her heart. 'I liked hearing it.'

A beat of silence, and then she heard him swallow. 'Then I'm glad I said it.' Another few seconds of silence. 'It's a date, then. I'll see you tomorrow. Bring an overnight bag. On second thoughts, bring a suitcase. And pack those bikinis you promised me.'

Laughter rippled from her and suddenly she felt light again. Happy. 'I've got my mother staying with me, so overnight might be difficult.'

'I told you, your mum is welcome. I'd invite her to stay over too, but the only other spare room is more suited to guests of the rodent variety.' His voice dipped. 'And only you get to stay in my bed.'

She flushed, feeling like an infatuated teenager. 'I'll see what I can do.'

After ending the call she walked towards the spare room, finding her mother zipping up her suitcase.

‘I’m not going on holiday.’

A smile spread across her mother’s face. ‘I thought that might be the case.’

‘You’re welcome to stay, if you want. Owen has invited you tomorrow.’

There was a flare of something, surprise, pleasure, hope? But she quickly masked it, so Gabby wasn’t sure. ‘That’s very kind of him but I won’t cramp your style.’

‘Mum.’ She swallowed down her frustration. Her mum . . . and yes, she was actually thinking of her as a mum, and not a mother. Her mum was trying to do the right thing. What had she once said to Owen, that they’d grown so far apart she wouldn’t know if her mum needed her or not? Well now, she did know. ‘I’d like you to come with me to Owen’s. To spend Christmas Day with me.’

She watched as her mum fidgeted with the strap on the case before raising her eyes to Gabby’s. ‘I’d like that,’ she said softly. ‘Thank you. But I don’t want to get in your way, so I’ll leave after the meal and head home.’

‘You don’t have to.’ The thought of her mother spending Christmas evening alone on the motorway sent a lump to her throat.

Her mother smiled. ‘I’ve not done much to help my daughter over the years. Let me do this. Let me make it easy for you and Owen to explore what it is you have between you.’

The lump grew, making the next words hard to say. ‘We can do that later. Stay. Please.’

Her mother reached out to touch Gabby’s hand. ‘Then thank you. I’ll spend Christmas Day with you and go home on Boxing Day. And perhaps you’ll come and visit me early next year. Or invite me back.’

‘You’re not rushing back to work?’

‘No.’ Her mother dipped her head, removing non-existent fluff from her trousers. ‘I think it’s time I had a change.’ She glanced back up at Gabby. ‘Time to start a new chapter of my life. One I hope will make it easier for my daughter to feature in.’

A little while later, as Gabby unpacked her case, wistfully putting away the sarongs, the T-shirts, the flip-flops, she received a text.

*Hope I’m not too late to wish you and Mr Dreamboat a happy holiday.
Cindy x*

A day ago, perhaps a few hours ago, her reaction would have been a

mixture of frustration and despair. Now she smiled as she replied.

Holiday in the sun ditched. Am going to spend Christmas in Mr Dreamboat's draughty, half-renovated house with a girl I don't know, Dreamboat's father. And my mother! Love Gabby x

A reply pinged straight back. ????????????

Gabby laughed. *Long story x*

Another reply. *But you and Mr Dreamboat are good?*

Gabby hesitated. They'd taken a hit, but they were going to come through it. Weren't they? She settled for: *I think so. Will tell you all about it next year. Happy Christmas x.*

Cindy's reply brought another smile to her face. *Happy Christmas to you, too. And tell Dreamboat if he doesn't make sure it's a happy one for you, I'll box his ears x*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Christmas Day

It wasn't what he'd planned for Christmas Day, Owen thought ruefully as he sat on his bed and watched Zoe chat away with her mother on Skype. He should have been the one on holiday. Not his ex-girlfriend. Stella was sitting on what had to be her balcony, the white sandy beach behind her taunting him. At least it was the crack of dawn for her, he thought peevishly.

He'd been woken by a small blonde tornado, who'd ripped into his room and bounced on his bed. Then insisted he come and watch her open her presents. No, she hadn't wanted breakfast first. No, he couldn't make himself a coffee. It was Christmas morning and she needed to open her presents. Now.

The following few hours had been spent admiring the pictures she'd coloured with her new pen set, helping her set up the camera he'd bought her (waterproof, drop-proof, idiot-proof) and holding her hand as she'd gingerly skated down the hall in her new roller blades. While trying not to wince as she'd knocked into the skirting boards he'd laboriously painted a few months ago (he'd have to remember to thank Stella for that gift idea).

'When's Gabby coming?' Zoe asked as she closed down his computer. Her head was bent, her hair, not tied back yet, covering her face.

Owen eyed her carefully. 'In an hour or so. Are you okay?'

She looked up and a tear splashed down her cheek. 'Sure.'

'Come here.' He patted the space on the bed next to him. When she slid in beside him, he wrapped her in his arms. 'You're allowed to miss your mum, Zoe. Allowed to feel a bit sad.'

Zoe sniffed. 'I'm not sad. I'm happy. I just wish she was here, too.'

'She'll be back soon.' He kept it deliberately vague, figuring saying five days would seem like an eternity right now.

'I know.' Zoe rubbed vigorously at her cheeks. 'Do you think I'll be good at skating by then?'

He chuckled. 'We'll make sure of it.'

'You need to buy some, too. Then we can learn together.'

'How do you know I can't do it already?'

Her eyes grew wide. ‘Can you?’

It had been a while, but Owen was pretty certain roller blading was like riding a bike. ‘You’ll have to wait and see.’

‘What about Gabby? We can buy her some, too. Then we can all go together.’

Owen felt his arms tighten around the special little girl he was holding. ‘Way ahead of you, Zoe.’

She gasped. ‘OMG, you bought her some, too?’ When he nodded, she peeled with laughter. ‘This Christmas is going to be awesome.’

Owen’s heart faltered. Would Gabby, independent, never-had-a-relationship Gabby, feel the same way? Would she even spend the next few days with him and Zoe, or would the thought of playing happy families with them be too much for her? He’d told her he was falling for her — hell, he’d already fallen — and she hadn’t run for the hills. She’d even admitted she liked hearing it. Maybe if he kept things easy, light, in time she’d be prepared to hear more. Perhaps even say something back.

‘Can we give Gramps his presents now?’

Owen grinned, lifting Zoe off the bed and dumping her on the floor. ‘Yes, we should do that. He’s going to love what you chose for him.’ When they’d been buying the tree at the garden centre, Zoe had spotted some bird feeders. He had a strong feeling his dad was going to love them far more than the jumper, socks, book and bottle of whisky he’d bought him. In his defence, the socks had budgies on them. And the book was entitled: How to train your budgie to talk in ten days.

* * *

It was a measure of how her relationship with her mother had moved forward that Gabby was embarrassed by the presents she’d just given her. The scarf, the scented candle. They seemed so impersonal. Gifts to give the person she didn’t really know. Then again, if she’d gone looking for something now, would she have chosen any differently?

There was still an awful lot of catching up for them to do, if both of them were willing.

‘Thank you. It’s beautiful.’ Gabby draped the red cashmere scarf she’d just unwrapped around her neck.

‘Great minds.’ Her mother smiled sadly. ‘Or perhaps two people who

aren't sure what to buy each other.'

'At least you knew my favourite colour,' Gabby admitted, feeling a flash of guilt.

'Green.' Her mother briefly pressed her hand against Gabby's. 'My favourite colour is green.' She fingered the green and blue patterned silk scarf Gabby had just given her. 'On some level you know me better than you think.'

'Perhaps.' Truth was, Gabby was rubbish at buying personal presents. She'd had so little practice at it. She hoped Owen was a typical male and had gone for the standard chocolates or bath salts, because otherwise when he opened his she was going to be embarrassed all over again. A quick glance at her watch and Gabby's heart gave a little jump. 'Shall we head over to Owen's in five minutes?'

Half an hour later they were standing on Owen's doorstep. Her mother had offered to drive, giving Gabby the choice of staying over if she'd wanted to, but Gabby had instinctively picked up the keys to the Audi. She wanted to be the one in control of when she left. Not her mother, not Owen. There you go again, Miss Independence. She shrugged off the niggle and rang the bell.

When he opened the door a moment later, her heart somersaulted in her chest.

It had only been a day, yet she'd forgotten how beautiful his smile was, how stunning the blue eyes currently eating her up as they skimmed up and down her body before landing on her face.

'Happy Christmas.'

'And to you.' His eyes remained on hers, unguarded, radiating happiness, desire, longing. Then he bent and brushed her lips, the kiss both tender and intimate. 'It is happy now you're here,' he whispered before straightening and holding his hand out to her mother. 'Mrs Sanderson, lovely to meet you. I'm glad you could come.'

'Please, call me Helena.' When her mother went to shake his hand, Owen tugged her forward and kissed her cheek.

'Welcome to the mad house.'

'Mad house?' her mother repeated as he led them inside.

He gave her a disarming smile. 'I hope Gabby warned you we have an over-excited nine-year-old, an invalid and occasionally cantankerous nearly seventy-year-old—'

‘I might be cantankerous but I’m not bloody deaf,’ a voice shouted out from the sitting room.

Owen grinned. ‘I rest my case. Come on in and meet them.’

The sitting room looked like an explosion in a gift wrap factory. The stuff was everywhere. Automatically Gabby went to pick up some by her feet, only to feel Owen’s eyes on her. ‘It’s Christmas Day, Gabby,’ he said softly. ‘It’s supposed to be chaotic.’ He reached for her hand and pulled her further into the room, introducing her mother to his father and Zoe. ‘You and your mum take a seat on the sofa. Zoe and I are in charge of drinks. What would you like? Champagne, orange juice, a combination?’

‘That’s Bucks Fizz,’ Zoe cut in proudly. ‘I know how to make it. Owen showed me.’

‘But don’t let that put you off,’ Owen added dryly.

Gabby and her mum chose a Bucks Fizz, much to Zoe’s delight. As she watched the pair of them walk off, her mother gave her a nudge. ‘Why don’t you go and help.’ She smiled over at Owen’s father. ‘Leave Sidney and me to get acquainted.’

Sidney, bless him, paled a little but gave her a game smile. ‘Go and stop young Zoe wasting all the expensive champagne.’

As she neared the kitchen, Gabby heard Zoe chatting away to Owen.

‘Remember this morning, when I said can you cook a Christmas dinner and you said no, but you had it sorted?’

‘Yes,’ Owen answered slowly.

‘Is Gabby going to be doing it?’

Owen started to laugh, but then the floorboard squeaked beneath Gabby’s feet and both of them turned to stare at her, halting whatever he’d been about to say.

‘Your father sent me in to check Zoe wasn’t wasting the champagne.’

Her voice must have sounded cool because Owen frowned, but he couldn’t ask the obvious question because Zoe was talking again.

‘Watch, Gabby. When I pour the fizzy wine in it all froths up.’ Zoe’s hand shook with the weight of the bottle and Owen quickly came to the rescue, keeping it steady for her as she poured. ‘I have to put a bit in, let the bubbles go down and then put a bit more in.’

‘You’re doing a great job.’ Gabby kept her eyes on Zoe, refusing to glance at Owen even though she could tell he wanted her to. Had he really

asked her here today to cook the bloody turkey?

‘Why don’t you take that one out to Helena, Gabby’s mum,’ he added when Zoe looked confused. ‘We’ll bring the others through.’

He handed her the glass and with aching slowness, eyes on the contents to make sure she didn’t spill it, Zoe walked out of the kitchen. The moment she was out of earshot, Owen put his hand on Gabby’s shoulders and turned her to look at him. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing.’

He exhaled sharply. ‘That’s clearly a lie. And if you tell me next that you seriously think I only invited you here to cook the dinner, I’ll go apeshit.’

Gabby jumped at the fury in his tone. ‘Zoe said—’

‘I know what Zoe said. Did you hear me agree?’ Numbly she shook her head. ‘Of course you didn’t hear me agree. Only someone certifiably insane would believe I’d invite the woman I’m falling in love with over for Christmas dinner with the express purpose of putting an apron on her and shoving her in the kitchen.’

Gabby hiccupped out a half laugh, half sob. That’s the second time he’s told you he’s falling for you. Because she still didn’t know how to deal with it, she focused on the first part of the sentence. ‘Are you saying I’m insane?’

He took in a deep breath, the hold on her shoulders relaxing into more of a caress. ‘Possibly. You’re certainly driving me insane.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Inhaling slowly, she wrapped her arms around his waist and sagged against him. ‘I seem to turn my common sense off when I’m around you.’

His hands moved to smooth down her back. ‘Good.’

‘Good?’

‘Yeah. It means you’re not unaffected by me.’

She laughed, the sound muffled against his chest. ‘God, Owen, I’m far from unaffected by you. I’m terrified of you.’ When he tensed she reached up to kiss him. ‘Not of you, that’s wrong. I’m terrified of how you make me feel. Of how much I missed you. Missed this.’

‘Even better.’ His lips met hers, kissing, nibbling, teasing. ‘If it helps, I missed you far more.’ Letting out a wistful sigh she rested her head against his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart. ‘Did you pack the bikinis?’ he murmured after a while.

She shook her head. ‘Mum’s staying with me tonight.’

His lips moved teasingly down her neck. 'Will you come tomorrow? Stay tomorrow night?'

Her mind was fogging with lust. 'I can't say no to a man doing that.'

His mouth returned to hers, giving her a final long, deep kiss. 'That was the general idea,' he said softly, drawing back and cradling the back of her head with his hands.

She smiled into his hot blue eyes. 'So who is making the dinner?'

His chest heaved with silent laughter. 'Dad. He's a chef.'

'Really?'

'Really. But as he's not steady on his feet, yours truly is doing all the grunt work.' He slid her a lazy, sexy smile. 'Unless you feel like peeling a few spuds?'

Her fingers found his waist and she squeezed, hard, causing him to yelp. 'You might be able to charm my mother, and Zoe, but it takes a lot more than a sexy smile to butter me up.'

He sighed dramatically, looking at his watch. 'Maybe the next visitor will be more useful.'

'The next visitor?'

His eyes danced with amusement. 'Yes.' As if on cue, the doorbell rang. 'Ah, that will be her now.'

'Her?' She felt like a parrot, repeating everything he said back to him.

'Jealous?'

'Should I be?'

Instead of answering, he gave her a cocky smile and sauntered out of the kitchen. She wanted to feign indifference and simply breeze into the sitting room but she didn't have that confidence. Not in herself, or in his feelings for her, despite what he'd just told her. Instead she snuck into the hall, hanging at the back, her heart thumping.

But when he pulled open the door and she saw who it was, she started to laugh.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The dining room table, enthusiastically decorated by Zoe, held an eclectic group of people, Owen thought, smothering a smile. To his right was Hilda, the last to arrive. She'd stood on his doorstep clutching at a homemade Christmas cake and wearing a tight, awkward smile. If he'd kept Gabby guessing at the visitor just a minute longer, he reckoned Hilda would have jumped back in her car. But since then, she'd started to relax thanks, he had no doubt, to the smile his father had greeted her with. Now the pair of them were reciting their cracker jokes to Zoe, which of course was right up Zoe's street.

'This is delicious.' Helena, Gabby's well-spoken, polite, rather reserved mother was sitting on his left. Owen wanted to dislike her for all the pain she'd put Gabby through, but it was hard when all he saw when he looked into her eyes was a sad, lonely middle-aged woman.

'Entirely Dad's doing,' he told her. 'I was just the skivvy.'

'Even that you had help with,' Gabby interjected from her seat on the other side of Helena. 'I can't believe I let you coerce me into peeling potatoes.'

'Coerce is a little strong. No force was used.'

'Only blackmail.' Her eyes glittered back at him and he knew they were both remembering his threat to tie her to his bed if she didn't lend a hand.

'You'd have enjoyed it,' he murmured, feeling an embarrassing blush creep up his neck as he realised her mother was watching them both, very attentively.

Gabby must have been aware too, as she quickly changed the subject.

When the meal was eaten and the table cleared, Owen retreated to the kitchen to make some coffees. He was surprised when Helena came to join him.

'Thank you for inviting me today.'

'Thank you for coming. It meant a lot to Gabby, I think, to have you with her.'

Her eyes fell to the floor and she seemed to be having difficulty articulating what she'd clearly come into the kitchen to say. Figuring he'd give her a moment to collect her thoughts, Owen busied himself making the

drinks.

‘I suspect Gabby’s told you I haven’t always been there for her,’ she said finally, as he transferred the cups to a tray.

‘I know you worked overseas a lot,’ he replied diplomatically. He was more than happy to fight Gabby’s corner, but he suspected a) she wouldn’t thank him for it and b) the relationship with her mother had improved a little over the last few days, evident from the way Gabby had called her Mum, or my mum several times today. Previously she’d only ever referred to her as my mother.

Helena gave him a half-smile. ‘Your tact is appreciated, but we both know I wasn’t the mother Gabby deserved. As a result she’s grown up with . . . trust issues.’ She sighed, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation. ‘I’m only saying this to help you understand her.’

Owen swallowed down his immediate reaction — laughter. He’d like to bet he understood Gabby far more than her mother did. ‘Thank you.’

He was about to pick up the tray when she spoke again. ‘You’re the first man she’s ever told me about, never mind introduced me to. I hope you’ll be kind to her. And not hurt her.’

Owen felt a rush of pride at knowing he was the first man to matter to Gabby. ‘My intention is to love her,’ he replied, looking her straight in the eyes. ‘If she’ll let me.’

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a ghost of sadness come and go across her face. But then she gave him a proper smile. One that reached her eyes. ‘In which case, I wish you the best of luck.’

Owen had asked Zoe to put together a wish list for Christmas Day. So far he’d managed to tick off; opening presents, eating turkey, pulling crackers, watching a film. Building a snowman wasn’t going to happen, but he could grit his teeth and get this final one done.

‘Time for charades.’ He watched expressions ranging from shock (Helena), unease (Hilda), horror (his dad) and disbelief (Gabby) cross the faces of the adults before adding, ‘Zoe has requested this.’

Immediately they all schooled their features, and slipped into two teams (he put Zoe with Hilda and his dad) with barely a murmur.

Fifteen minutes into the game and Owen was desperately trying not to burst into laughter. It turns out that Hilda, straight-laced, uptight Hilda, was really competitive.

‘Come on, come on.’ She strutted round the room with her chin sticking out. ‘Sidney, you have to get this.’

His dad stared at her, his eyes doing something Owen hadn’t seen in a long time. Brimming with laughter.

As Hilda continued to stalk the room, bobbing her head, Zoe jumped to her feet. ‘You’re a chicken. Chicken Little!’

Hilda let out a huge sigh of relief. ‘Thank you, Zoe dear. I was beginning to think my chicken miming days were over.’

Owen, whose motto was usually there’s no point playing if you don’t play to win, found himself sitting back after that and simply enjoying the show. There was Zoe, giggling her way through her mimes. His dad, pretending not to enjoy himself — and pretending not to keep sneaking glances at Hilda. And then there was Gabby, radiantly beautiful in her fitted red jumper dress. Her presence was the ultimate gift, and he’d drink it in for as long as he could.

All too soon though she stood up, and signalled to her mum it was time to go. As he followed them into the hallway, he half considered falling to his knees and begging her to stay. It seemed a lifetime since he’d held her in his arms as they’d slept, and he felt it like a physical ache.

Her mother bid him goodbye and discreetly went to sit in the car, leaving him and Gabby alone. ‘I still have presents for you under the tree.’

She smiled, though it looked a little forced. ‘Is that plural?’

‘It is.’

‘Then I’ll look forward to opening them tomorrow.’

There was something about the formal way she said it, the tightness of her expression, that worried him. ‘Hey, if you haven’t got anything for me, it doesn’t matter.’ He slid his hands down her back, drawing her closer to him. ‘You’re all the present I need.’ When she sniggered, he smiled. ‘Too corny?’

‘A bit, but I’m starting to like your corny lines.’ She bit into her lip, then huffed out a sigh. ‘I have got you a present, but it’s very boring. I’m great at choosing impersonal gifts. Crap at anything more intimate.’

He kissed her forehead. ‘Gorgeous Gabby, I will love your present, because it came from you. As for the intimate.’ He lowered his voice. ‘I’m sure between us we can manage something.’

She left on a strangled laugh, her cheeks the colour of her dress.

* * *

It had been a good day. As Gabby walked into her house, her mother right behind her, she couldn't remember enjoying a Christmas Day more. The food had been excellent, the atmosphere relaxed. There had been laughter and foolishness — she'd never look at Hilda in the same way again.

And at every turn, there had been Owen, she recalled longingly. Owen with his burning blue gaze, making her feel desired, wanted. Like she was the most important person in the room.

The woman I'm falling in love with.

He'd been open with his feelings, telling her even though he knew she wasn't ready to say the words back. It was time for her to show him how important he was becoming to her, too.

Turning to her mum, she indicated to the drinks cabinet in the sitting room. 'If you want to get us both a nightcap, I'll be down in a minute. There's something I need to do.'

She returned five minutes later to find her mother sitting on the sofa, a glass of brandy in her hand.

'Where's mine?'

Her mother shook her head. 'I don't want you drinking and driving.'

'But I'm not going anywhere.'

Her mother gave her a knowing smile. 'Are you sure? Because I think I know where I'd be if I were you. And it wouldn't be here.'

Gabby's heart jumped. 'What are you saying?'

'My dear Gabriela, you know exactly what I'm saying. Go back to your man. Don't end up like me, all alone.'

Gabby's heart, closed to her mother for so long she'd begun to believe it was stuck like that, began to creak open. 'You're not alone, Mum. You have me.'

Two tears trailed down her mother's weathered cheeks, and Gabby's heart shifted open even further. Without thinking, she sat down next to her, wrapped her arms around her, and hugged her.

She didn't know how long they stayed like that. Only that at some point the hug shifted and it became her mother's arms around Gabby's shoulders. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

Gabby drew back, wiping at the tears she hadn't realised had collected in

her eyes. 'I believe you.' She hesitated, aware there were three more words that were needed to be said, I forgive you. They bounced restlessly around her head before slinking back to where they came from. Too early. Maybe in time, if this shared moment proved to be the start of a real relationship, and not just another crushing disappointment.

Seemingly satisfied with Gabby's response, her mum smiled. 'Thank you. Now go and spend the rest of the Christmas holiday with that charming man of yours. I will head off home tomorrow.'

Gabby could feel her lips twitch. 'Charming, huh?'

'You know he is. He knows he is, too, but that doesn't lessen the charm.' She patted Gabby's cheek. 'Go.'

It took her a while to get out of the house. First she had to re-pack her case. Her eyes flew to the drawer where she kept her bikinis and she shook her head, laughing at herself even as she pulled out the red one. Ridiculous. He was turning her into a crazy woman.

A giggling, happy, crazy woman.

Next she needed to check the house was okay to be left for a few days. She was eyeing up the fridge when her mum came up behind her. 'I'll throw out anything that won't keep. I'll check the windows, turn off the switches, lock the front door. Go.'

'Thank you.' Breathlessly she dashed into the hall and picked up her coat. 'Right, I'm off. Drive safely. I'll see you next year.'

Her mum smiled, flicking her hands towards the door in a shooing away gesture. Laughing, Gabby fled the house and jumped into her car.

As she was driving she heard her phone ping with a text message. Oh God, please don't be anything important. Taking the next turn, she pulled into a side street and dragged out her phone. A message from Owen.

Miss you already x

A huge smile bloomed across her face as Gabby turned back onto the road.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It had been a poignant end to Christmas Day. Hilda had risen to her feet the moment Owen had come back into the room after saying goodbye to Gabby. Back to her old straight-laced self, she'd thanked him formally for a very pleasant day — yes, she'd used that word — and darted off before he could ask her what was wrong.

His father had been quiet after that, leaving Owen to entertain Zoe before she lost the fight to stay awake and fell asleep with her head burrowed against his chest while they watched *It's a Very Merry Muppet Christmas Movie*.

As he'd tucked her into bed, she'd smiled sleepily up at him. 'Christmas Day was sick.'

'Even though it didn't snow?'

'Yeah.' Then her voice had trembled, just a little. 'I hope Mum had a good day, too.'

He'd felt his heart squeeze. 'I'm sure she did.'

He made a silent promise to make sure Stella knew how much her daughter had missed her. The last thing he wanted was for Zoe to grow up like Gabby, believing her mother didn't care.

The thought of Gabby sent another band of tightness around his chest, and he fired off a quick text, telling her he was missing her.

Then he walked back downstairs, only to find his dad staring bleakly into the fire.

'What's wrong?' His father grunted and the dismissal, the return to the grumpy git who'd been blissfully absent these last few days, sent anger fizzing down Owen's spine. He decided to poke the bear.

'Are you going to tell me why Hilda couldn't get out of the house fast enough?'

His father glowered. 'None of your business.'

'She was a guest in my house. It's very much my business.'

His father let out a long, slow breath, his shoulders sagging. 'I told her how much I missed my wife.'

Owen frowned, confused. 'Why on earth would you say that to a woman you know is interested in you?'

‘To put her off.’

‘Same damn question.’

His father gave him another glare. ‘Because I’ve no business looking at another woman.’

Instantly the anger vanished. ‘Dad.’ Christ, what to say? He moved to sit on the sofa, reaching across to put his hand on his dad’s knee. ‘Mum would want you to look at Hilda. She’d want you to be happy.’

‘I don’t deserve to be.’

Owen gaped at him. ‘Why on earth do you say that?’

His father lifted his eyes to Owen’s, his face lined with agony. ‘I put your mum through hell in those last few months. I don’t bloody deserve to be happy.’

Owen searched his father’s face. ‘I don’t understand. You loved Mum. You were there for her every step of the way. I know because I was there, too.’

His dad shook his head, his body slumped in the chair. ‘I shouldn’t have made her have that chemo. She didn’t want it, but I begged her. Bloody begged her.’ He inhaled a shaky breath. ‘I should have let her go the way she wanted. Peacefully. Instead I pushed her into fighting a battle she was never going to win.’ He hung his head, putting his hand over his eyes. ‘She didn’t deserve to die like she did.’

Owen’s heart crumpled. For three years his dad had been carrying this terrible burden of guilt. No wonder he’d turned into a recluse. Moving from the sofa, Owen perched on the arm of his dad’s chair and wrapped his arms around him, hugging him fiercely. ‘You loved her, Dad.’ He felt tears sting his eyes. ‘Who can blame you for wanting her to stay with you as long as possible? Certainly not me. And certainly not Mum.’

His dad’s shoulders shuddered. ‘I miss her, lad. I bloody miss her.’

‘I know.’ Owen rested his head on top of his dad’s, heart aching with their shared loss.

When he felt his father’s body stop shuddering, he eased back. ‘If she was here now, she’d tell you to stop being so daft.’

His dad’s eyes glistened with emotion. ‘You’re probably right.’

‘And then she’d tell you to get Hilda’s phone number from me, so you have it when you’re ready to call her.’

He let out a strangled laugh. ‘I’m too old for that game.’

‘You’re never too old.’ He studied his father. He was probably around twelve years older than Hilda, but in terms of attitude, they were very similar. ‘She’s had a tough life, Hilda. Carried a torch for a man who never really felt the same way. I reckon she deserves a bit of happiness. You both do.’ Before the emotion got the better of him again, Owen stood. ‘Right, I’m off to bed. Do you need anything before I go?’

His dad shook his head, pulling the walker frame towards him and rising stiffly to his feet. Just as Owen was about to move though, he spoke again. ‘On second thoughts, there is one thing.’ He gave Owen a small smile. ‘Hilda’s number.’

Later, as he climbed the stairs, Owen prayed that today would be a turning point for his dad. Though the loss would always be there, hopefully some of the guilt had been expunged.

And maybe a new chapter to look forward to.

The thought inevitably turned his mind back to Gabby. Was there a new chapter waiting for him, too? Or was he going to get his heart crushed again?

After getting undressed and dragging on his pj bottoms, he snatched up his phone. No message from her. Either she was still chatting to her mum, or already asleep. Or maybe she’d seen his message and chosen not to reply.

With a deep sigh, he settled into bed.

* * *

Gabby hauled her case out of the Audi’s tiny boot and strode up to the front door, heart thumping. She’d never gone to a man’s house late at night, unannounced, before now. Would he be happy to see her? Everything he’d said up to now suggested he would, but still, another knot formed in her stomach.

He’d been the one doing all the running so far though. Putting himself out there, unsure whether or not he’d be slapped down.

It was her turn to take a risk.

Heart in her mouth, she rang on the bell.

When the door opened, she almost dissolved on the spot in a puddle of hormones. Sleepy blue eyes. Messy hair. Bare feet. Pyjama bottoms riding low over his hips. No top, just a broad expanse of perfectly muscled chest.

As he took her in, the eyes went from sleepy to wide awake in a flash. From confused, to delighted. From cool blue, to blazing.

‘Gabby, hell of a surprise.’ He cleared his throat, a huge smile enveloping his face. ‘Father Christmas does exist, after all.’

Her heart jumped between her ribs. ‘Good surprise, or bad surprise?’

He chuckled, the low sound resonating through her. ‘Bloody marvellous surprise.’ Grabbing her suitcase, he tugged her inside. ‘No backing out now. Get up those stairs.’ He glanced down at the case. ‘Please tell me you packed a bikini.’

God, this man. He could make her swoon and giggle in the same breath. ‘Come upstairs with me and find out.’

She should be embarrassed, she thought a short while later as she lay on his bed in her red string bikini. But the naked desire in his eyes, the wonder on his face, only made her feel wanted.

Then he was kissing her, his lips chasing up and down her stomach, over her breasts, the heat of his mouth burning through the material. Now she didn’t just feel wanted, she felt cherished.

‘Thank you for coming back,’ he whispered hoarsely as he caught her gaze.

It was as if he knew it hadn’t been easy for her. ‘My pleasure.’

His eyes smiled back at her. ‘I plan to make it exactly that.’

And he did. With every touch of hands, every kiss, every caress, he sent her further and further into a spiral of arousal so that when he finally entered her, she was utterly lost in him.

She must have dozed off, she realised, because when she opened her eyes Owen wasn’t beside her. Just as she was starting to wonder where he’d gone, he appeared in the doorway, carrying a large tartan gift bag stuffed full with presents.

‘I know we said we’d do them tomorrow, but, well . . .’ He gave her a sheepish smile. ‘It is Christmas.’

She tried to smile back. Tried to ignore the return of the tension that had knotted her stomach earlier. Presents weren’t her thing, both giving and receiving. It was hard to make the right noises, to pull the right faces, when you opened things you hadn’t asked for, didn’t want and had no intention of keeping.

His face fell, his eyes locked onto hers. ‘You don’t look excited.’

‘Sorry. I get nervous about opening presents when I don’t know what they are.’

He nodded, walking into the room and dropping the gift bag in front of her on the bed. 'You're worried you'll have to pretend to like what I've bought?'

'Something like that.'

He climbed into the bed next to her, shaking his head. 'You won't have to pretend with these presents, trust me.'

She couldn't help it. She smirked. 'Kind of cocky, aren't you?'

'I prefer confident. Now open the damn things and tell me I'm wrong.'

As she stuck her hand inside the bag, the nerves settled. If she didn't like it, she was just going to say. Serve him right for being so smug. But she found she didn't have to pretend to like the Audi TT leather key ring, or the photo frame with a picture of her and Owen by the tree from the Christmas party.

'I noticed your house has no photos,' he remarked quietly. 'You might want to replace it with one from today. Zoe captured a good one with you and your mum. I was going to print it out tomorrow morning.'

She knew he'd buy thoughtful presents. Just knew it. 'This is perfect. But I'll take the one of my mum, too.'

A moment later she laughed as she opened a pair of roller blades.

'I bought Zoe a pair, too. She's expecting you to try them out with her tomorrow.'

'What about you?'

He flashed her a grin. 'Don't you worry. I'll be coming as well. Someone has to teach the pair of you.'

There were two small presents left. He handed her one, watching her carefully as she ripped off the paper. And gasped. A stunning ruby bracelet, set in silver. 'It's beautiful. Truly beautiful, but it's too much.'

Her hands shook as she lifted it out of the box. Nobody had ever bought her anything so precious. All the jewellery she possessed, and it wasn't much, she'd bought herself.

'It's not enough,' he said softly, taking it from her and clipping it onto her wrist. Before she had a chance to wonder what he meant, he handed her the final present.

Now she was really nervous, her heart a wild, beating animal in her chest. 'I don't need another present, Owen. You've given me too many already.'

‘Just open it.’

Tentatively she slipped off the wrapping, very much aware of his eyes on her. When she caught a glimpse of the contents, she burst into relieved laughter. A tube of Love Hearts sweets. Now that she could handle. ‘Is this because you don’t think I’m sweet enough?’

He smiled, but it wasn’t the usual easy curve of his lips. In fact he looked a little . . . tense? ‘Open them up and let’s have one.’

She ripped open the pack and read the first one. I love you. Okay then. Laughing nervously, she offered it to him but he shook his head. ‘You have it.’

After popping it into her mouth she looked down at the next. I love you. Swallowing, she glanced back up at him. ‘Are they all going to say that?’

‘Yes.’ As panic shot through her he cupped her face, looking straight into her eyes. ‘I know you’re not ready to hear it, but it’s a fact and it’s important to me that you know it.’

‘I . . . don’t know what to say.’ Her eyes were a messy fog of tears and she felt she was drowning in emotion. How could he love her? She was closed off, emotionally stunted. People didn’t love her. They liked her, sure, but nobody had ever loved her.

His thumb brushed her cheek, his eloquent eyes betraying his disappointment before he masked it with a smile. ‘You say thank you for all my presents, Owen. And then you give me mine.’

Her laugh sounded weird, possibly because she was moments away from crying. ‘Thank you for my presents, Owen,’ she repeated back before bringing his hand to her lips so she could kiss it. ‘And I really mean that.’ After blinking to clear the welling tears she hopped off the bed and dug into her case. Crazy butterflies buzzed in her stomach as she handed him a present and an envelope. ‘Here you go.’

He rubbed his hands together, which made the nervous fluttering worse. ‘Please don’t get excited. If there’s one thing worse than pretending to like a present you receive, it’s watching someone else pretend to like something you’ve given them.’

Owen started to laugh. ‘Gabby Sanderson, will you stop sucking all the fun out of present giving?’ He must have seen something cross her face because amusement left his eyes and understanding took its place. ‘You’ve not bought Christmas presents very often, have you?’

Embarrassed, she looked away. ‘Not for people who mean something to me, no.’ And how sad was that? She used to buy the Lancaster Ladettes gifts, but then they’d moved away. She’d bought her mother gifts, but sometimes she’d not come home to open them. She’d not been with a man long enough to buy him anything other than a drink.

His face softened. ‘Then I feel very honoured. Now, what have we here.’ With rigorous movements he tore into the wrapping, balling it up and flinging it across the room. ‘A jumper. Very snazzy.’

‘I thought the colour would match your eyes.’ Oh God, Gabby, shut up.

He smirked. ‘Is that your way of saying you’ve become a fan of blue eyes?’

‘They’re not bad.’ Butterflies swarming, she nodded to the envelope. ‘That’s your other present.’

He ripped it open. ‘Two nights in the Old Mill Hotel.’ His gaze flicked to her, and back again to the booking confirmation. ‘You’ve booked us a New Year stay in a hotel in the Lake District?’

‘You told me Stella was picking Zoe up on the thirty-first, but I’m not sure whether your dad will be well enough to go home by then. We don’t have to go,’ she added, knowing she was waffling but too scared to stop talking because when she did, she’d know his reaction. ‘It’s my friend Faith who owns it and I’m sure she won’t charge me a cancellation fee—’

‘Gabby.’ He shook his head, carefully placing the booking sheet on his bedside table. ‘Are you going to shut up for a minute?’

She drew in a breath, let it out slowly. ‘Sorry.’

He smiled into her eyes. ‘This is the best Christmas present I’ve ever had.’

‘Seriously?’

His mouth dipped towards hers, and he kissed her gently. ‘How could you possibly doubt that two nights away with you would be anything other than the perfect gift?’ He kissed her again. ‘Though two weeks would have been better.’

He proceeded to effectively — and rather fabulously — silence any protest she’d been about to make.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Boxing Day

Owen thought he might die laughing. The sight of Gabby and Zoe holding hands and wobbling around on their roller blades was too much for him.

His girls, he thought, as love rushed into his heart, leaving him ridiculously, blissfully happy. The only flaw to this otherwise perfect feeling was that neither of them were really his. Zoe was borrowed, and who knew whether her mother would keep to her word and allow him to see her regularly again?

As for Gabby, he was hers, no question. He'd taken the ultimate plunge, fallen so deeply in love he knew there was no way back. But she wasn't his, not yet at least. Ever cautious, she was playing her cards very close to her chest and seemed to be in no hurry to reveal her hand. It hurt, he couldn't pretend otherwise, but it wasn't like he had a choice in the matter. Who you fell in love with was one of life's great mysteries; at times its greatest curse, at others its most magnificent achievement. At least now he knew the difference between love, and 'Love'. His twenty-four-year-old self had loved Stella. His thirty-two-year-old self had finally fallen in 'Love'.

'Aren't you supposed to be teaching us?' Gabby's voice cut through his thoughts. 'Or was your boast about being brilliant at roller blading all puff and no substance?'

'Puff?' He forced himself out of his head. 'I'll give you puff.' In a manoeuvre that could only be called showboating, he speed skated away before gliding effortlessly back to them, adding a few step-overs for good measure.

'Show off,' Gabby muttered, causing Zoe to giggle. 'And that's hardly helping us learn.'

'No,' he conceded, bending to kiss her nose. 'But it is impressing the hell out of you.' Before she had a chance to give him the put down his comment deserved, he took both her and Zoe's hands. 'Now, lesson one. How to find your balance.'

An hour later and they'd both started to get the hang of it, Zoe declaring the roller blades her best present, ever.

‘How about you,’ he whispered to Gabby as they strolled back to the car. Zoe was ahead of them, still skating. ‘Best present ever?’

‘They were good, but not that good.’

‘Hey, give them a chance. When you’re as awesome as me, you’ll love them.’

She shook her head at him. ‘I don’t know how your neck supports that huge head of yours.’

‘That’s one of the reasons you and me work. You bring me down to earth.’ She gave him a quick sidelong glance but didn’t say anything. Frustration bubbled but he resisted the urge to grab her by the shoulders and tell her to stop being so scared. Instead he forced a smile on his face and returned to the previous conversation. ‘What is your best present ever, then?’ When she hesitated, he took hold of her hand. ‘I don’t want the careful reply, Gabby. This isn’t the winning question on Who Wants to be a Millionaire? You don’t need to think when you’re talking to me.’

Her eyes met and held his. ‘My sweets,’ she answered quietly. ‘They’re the best present I’ve ever had.’

Emotion balled, jamming into the back of his throat. First the hotel gift, now this admission. She was scared but she was trying. Which meant he could keep hoping. ‘Good to know.’ He dropped a soft kiss on her forehead. ‘I think I already told you mine.’

‘Do you think your dad will be well enough to go home by then?’

He wanted to say yes, of course, but the memory of the disaster of their last planned holiday made him hesitate. No more making promises he might not be able to keep. ‘I believe so. I hope so.’ A massive understatement. ‘Tell me about this hotel we’re staying in. You said you know the owner?’

‘I do, Faith Watkins.’ A soft expression entered her eyes and Owen knew immediately that Faith was important to Gabby. ‘I should say Faith Hunter now, because she got married two years ago. We went to university together.’

‘She’s a Ladette?’

Gabby nodded. ‘She bought the hotel a few years ago and Adam, her husband, was her first guest.’ Gabby sighed. ‘So romantic.’

For some bizarre reason, Owen felt a dart of jealousy. ‘More romantic than meeting at a coffee machine in the office of a large sweet manufacturer?’

Her eyes scanned his face. ‘You remember our first meeting?’

‘Of course I do. I knew who you were — my spies had told me the new marketing director was a knock-out brunette.’ He paused, drinking in her soulful brown eyes, her warm olive skin. ‘For once the build-up wasn’t as good as the reality. You didn’t have a clue who I was.’

‘Wrong.’ She gave his chest a playful prod. ‘I knew you had to be in sales. You asked me if I’d tried the new sherbet range before you even asked my name.’

He couldn’t help but grin back at her. ‘Sounds like you remember our first meeting, too. We must have made quite the impression on each other.’

‘Umm, one way or another.’ But she smiled as she said it, and when he bent to kiss her, she moved towards him, closing the gap.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Four days after Christmas

Gabby woke up in Owen's bed. It was starting to become a habit. Automatically she pressed a hand to her stomach, feeling for the knot of tension. Sure enough, there it was. Smaller than she'd expected though, and largely overshadowed by the feeling of belonging, of happiness, as she stared at Owen's sleeping form. When he slept, blond hair a mess around his face, he had the look of an angel. A sexy, handsome angel.

An angel who'd told her he loved her.

An angel, God help her, she thought she was falling for.

The last few days, all of them spent with Owen, had been the happiest of her life. Even sharing him with Zoe hadn't dimmed the enjoyment — irrepressible, sweet, it was easy for Gabby to see how Owen had become so attached to her. Yesterday she'd even caught herself wondering what it would be like to have a child of her own one day.

And then there was Sidney, Owen's dad. A few weeks ago she'd gone into full-blown panic over the thought of meeting him. Now she'd shared a pub lunch with him, cooked with him, spent the last four evenings with him. And it had all felt so natural.

But this wasn't her life, she had to remind herself. It was a holiday. They might not have been in the sun, but that's what it was. And it was easy, and dangerous, to get carried away with a holiday romance.

'Hey.' She felt the gentle press of his hand on her face. 'What are you cooking up in that head of yours?'

It was time to retreat. To collect her thoughts for two days before they became muddled again when they went away for New Year. 'I was just thinking I should head home today.'

His face fell. 'Why?'

'I have a house that's been abandoned, things to sort out. Washing to do. Plus we're going away in two days. I need to pack again.'

'I can do all that with you.'

'No.' It was too sharp. She took a breath, and pushed down the jitters. 'These last few days have been wonderful, truly, but . . .' How to say it

without hurting him? ‘I need some breathing space,’ she added softly. ‘And you need some time alone with Zoe, and your dad, before they go home.’

He stretched out onto his back, his naked chest rising and falling as he sighed. ‘Okay.’

She felt the tug on her heart. This man, this funny, kind, gorgeous man, had stuck his neck out by telling her how he felt. All she’d given him in return was a few days of her time. And even that she was taking away.

But if she was ever going to say his words back to him, and dear God, she wanted to, she needed to be sure. And she couldn’t be sure if she felt trapped.

‘Perhaps it was just as well we didn’t go on holiday together,’ he remarked as he threw the covers back and climbed out of bed.

‘What do you mean?’

His abdominal muscles rippled as he shrugged a T-shirt over his head. ‘Seems four days with me is your limit.’ As his eyes met hers, he didn’t try to disguise how hurt he was feeling.

‘That’s not fair,’ she countered. It was the reverse; being with him felt too good. She needed to get away and find some perspective. ‘I told you, I have a house I’ve abandoned. And Zoe must be dying for time alone with you.’

He laughed humourlessly as he pulled on his jeans. ‘Using Zoe as your excuse is a low blow, Gabby. I’ll go and get the breakfast started. Unless you’re planning on disappearing right away?’

He’s disappointed, she reminded herself, as her temper started to flare. ‘I’m not disappearing. I’m going home to get my life in order.’

‘You’re going home to hide from what you’re starting to feel,’ he snapped back, then cursed, slamming his hand against the wall. ‘Sorry. That was out of line.’ Silence crackled between them and Owen ran a hand through his hair, staring down at his feet before finally looking back at her. ‘Will you have a bacon sandwich with us before you go?’

‘That sounds good.’ She couldn’t shake the stiffness from her voice. ‘Thank you.’

He nodded and disappeared out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Well, that went well. With a sigh, she flopped back onto the bed. Definitely time to retreat. It was scary enough knowing she held her own

happiness in her hands. Absolutely terrifying to realise she was responsible for his, too.

* * *

When it was time for her to go, Gabby felt uncharacteristically emotional. It was only when she'd given both Zoe and Sidney a hug, and been hugged back even tighter, that she realised why. These last few days, she'd felt like part of a family.

'Don't be a stranger now,' Sidney said gruffly, squeezing her hand. 'And you don't have to wait for this man to bring you to see me. You can come by yourself. Clarissa and I will be happy to welcome you.'

Why was she so tearful? She barely knew Owen's dad, yet there was something in the way he looked at her, with fondness, with affection, that drew long buried feelings out of her. What would it have been like to have a father? To be part of a traditional family, like Owen's, where the parents loved each other? And showered love on their children?

'Thank you,' she whispered, placing her hand over his. 'I might just do that.'

'And you have to see me.' Zoe pulled at her other arm. 'We need to go roller blading again.'

Gabby laughed through the tightness in her throat. 'We will. I promise to practice if you do.' She glanced over at Owen, who was watching intensely. 'Soon we'll be better than Owen.'

Zoe giggled and gave her a final hug. Then it was left to Owen to see her out.

'So.' She moved towards him, but a sudden bolt of nerves had her stepping back. Stupid; she'd made love to this man every morning and every evening for the last few days, and now she was too scared to kiss him? 'I'll see you in two days.'

Owen had no such hesitation. In a flash he had her pinned to the wall, his mouth plundering hers as he pushed his hips against her. 'Don't miss me too much,' he said roughly as he let her go.

With her lips tingling and her body humming, she staggered to her car. He'd made his point, she acknowledged as she fell into the driver's seat.

She was missing him already and she hadn't even left.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

New Year's Eve

It was, admittedly, the third time he'd asked his dad if he was okay, but still, Owen didn't think he deserved the rolling eyes treatment.

'For Pete's sake, stop fussing, lad. I told you yesterday, and I'll tell you again today, for the third time. I'm perfectly capable of managing on my own.'

'You're sure?'

The words were out before he could stop them, and the look on his dad's face was so comical, Zoe started to giggle.

'Did you drop me home yesterday?'

Owen frowned, not quite sure where this was going, so Zoe answered for him. 'Yes we did, Gramps.'

His dad's eyes lit up at the term, as they always did. 'Thank you, young Zoe. Now then, was I still in one piece when you called on me this morning?'

She giggled again. 'Yes.'

'Was I out of bed, dressed, looked like I've had a shower?'

'Okay, okay,' Owen cut in. 'You've made your point.'

His father relented then, his expression softening. 'I know you're only looking out for me, lad, and trust me, I appreciate it.' He clasped Owen by the shoulder. 'Even when I'm being a grumpy git.'

'Gramps, git isn't a nice word.'

His dad smiled and ruffled Zoe's hair. 'No, it isn't. I should have said grumpy old man.'

'But you're not old. Not really. Not like the Queen is old.'

Owen watched his father chuckle and felt a rush of nostalgia. This is the dad he knew. The one he'd grown up with, until fate had cruelly intervened.

Zoe ran off to feed the hens one last time, and his father gave him a keen study. 'Out with it, lad. What's on your mind?'

'I was just thinking how much better you've seemed this last week. Maybe a dose of the women; Zoe, Hilda, Gabby, has done you good.'

'Aye, maybe it has.' His eyes drifted outside, to where Zoe was talking to the hens. 'I've missed the company of women.'

‘You’ll need to get yourself to France and see Alice when you’re feeling up to it.’

‘I will.’ In a gesture that shocked Owen, his father grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a quick, tight hug. ‘Don’t think I don’t know how much you’ve done for me, son. I wouldn’t be standing here considering a trip to France, planning a lunch date with Hilda, if it wasn’t for you.’

Bam, Owen felt tears prick his eyes. ‘Lunch, eh?’ he managed to squeeze out.

‘Thought I’d start slow.’ He darted Owen a look. ‘You all right with that?’

‘I’m more than all right with it. I’m proud of you. And Mum would be, too. She’d have hated to think of you moping around.’ He smiled. ‘Being a grumpy git.’

‘Aye, she would that.’ There was a moment of companionable silence while they both watched Zoe giggling as the hens darted towards the feed she was throwing. ‘How about you and Gabby? Any closer to winning her over?’

Unbidden, his body let out a long, deep sigh. ‘That’s the million dollar question.’

‘You say she booked this hotel stay for your Christmas present?’

‘Yep. Apparently she can only take a few days of me at a time.’ It was an unfair comment — she had needed to go home to sort things out, and he’d needed time alone with Zoe. But the hurt that she’d left him still felt raw. When he’d invited her to stay for Christmas, he’d meant the entire time. He’d not just felt short-changed when she’d darted back, he’d felt, yet again, that their relationship was uneven. He was all in, and she was still playing a slow, cautious game, the outcome a big unknown.

‘Maybe she needed time to think.’ His dad gave him a nudge. ‘Some people use their head, not their gut.’

Owen smiled sadly. ‘I was hoping she’d go with her heart.’

He was saved any further soul searching when Zoe flew into the kitchen; a dose of fresh air literally and metaphorically. ‘Right, we’d better get going. Stella and Simon are due in an hour.’

His dad bent down and kissed the top of Zoe’s head. ‘You take care now. Come back and visit us again soon.’

‘I will, Gramps.’ She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

Owen knew his father was fighting back tears. Hell, he felt them himself, too. Saying goodbye to her was going to be a huge wrench. Thank God he was going away with Gabby and not staring at his empty four walls. Him, Gabby, a hotel room and a bottle of champagne.

Yeah, there was a lot to look forward to.

An hour later, he and Zoe were killing time playing cards. In the hallway were two packed bags; his and Zoe's. As soon as Stella arrived to pick up Zoe, Owen would jump in his car and race round to Gabby's.

Zoe heard the car before Owen did. She leapt to her feet and rushed to the door, flinging it open.

'Mum!'

Owen slowly picked up the cards, giving them the moment they both needed. When he looked up, he stared at Stella and his heart sunk. Tears were rolling down her tanned cheeks.

'What's wrong?'

Stella wiped at her face. 'Simon and I had a fight on the last day.' A sob escaped her. 'He stayed on. Said he needed a few days away from me.' Tears were now streaming down her cheeks. 'It was supposed to be our honeymoon.' She lifted her red, puffy eyes to his. 'I'm sorry but I'm going to need a lift home. We used Simon's car to get to the airport. I paid for a taxi to come here but I can't afford to get one all the way home.'

He glanced from Stella's miserable face, to that of poor Zoe. She'd been so excited to see her mum. And now this. As his heart sank into his boots, he also thought of Gabby, waiting by the phone for him to tell her he was on his way.

For God's sake, would nothing ever go right for them.

* * *

Gabby looked at her phone for the third time. Yes, it was on. No, it wasn't on silent. Huffing out a breath she rose to her feet and walked to the kitchen to slap on the kettle. She knew Owen had to wait for Stella to pick up Zoe before he could leave. Flights were often delayed and besides, it was only two o'clock — only half an hour later than she'd expected him to phone her.

It didn't stop the insecurities raising their ugly heads.

He's forgotten. Unlikely, considering he'd phoned her only yesterday.

He's decided he doesn't want to go. Again, unlikely. His last words to her yesterday had been I can't wait to get you to myself for two days.

Something more important has come up. And ouch, that one was a killer. So many times she'd felt the sting of it with her mother. It was why it had hurt so much when Owen had cancelled their holiday. Was he about to cancel this break now, too?

She nearly jumped out of her skin when her phone rang. Rushing back to the sitting room where she'd left it, she snatched it up.

'Gabby, I'm really sorry. I'm going to be late.'

She bit into her cheek. 'How late?'

'I don't know.'

He sounded as frustrated as she did, but it all felt like *déjà vu*. 'What's happened?' She was about to add this time, but stopped herself. She was bigger than that. 'It's not your dad, is it?'

He blew out a breath. 'No, he's fine. It's Stella. She's had a row with Simon and come back alone. I'm taking her and Zoe home.'

Gabby clutched at the phone, inhaling slowly. Count to ten. Don't say anything until you've counted to ten. 'She seems to have a knack for ruining our plans.' Damn, she'd only made it to four.

On the other end of the phone she heard Owen exhale sharply. 'I'm sorry. I'll be with you as quick as I can.'

Thirty years of resentment churned inside her. Thirty years of being let down. Of never being important enough. Never being the one people changed their plans for. Always being the one who got dumped on. 'I'll save you the bother of all that dashing around. You make sure Stella's okay. I'll make my own New Year plans.'

Before he could say anything else, she pressed disconnect, turned off her phone. And wept.

* * *

A couple of hours later, Gabby pulled into the car park of the Old Mill Hotel. After inspecting her face in the mirror — yep, still a disaster area — she sighed and climbed out of the car. Faith was hardly going to mind what she looked like, and Adam, her hunk on legs husband, only had eyes for his wife. Dragging her case out of the boot, she made for the entrance. Pushing the huge wooden door open, she stepped inside.

‘Gabby!’ Faith darted from behind the reception desk and ran towards her, curly hair a riot around her face. ‘I’m so glad to see you.’ After giving her a warm hug she pulled back, her eyes skimming the entrance. ‘Where’s this man of yours? Left him behind?’

Gabby bit into her lip. She wasn’t going to cry in public. She wasn’t that type of girl. ‘He’s not coming.’

Faith’s pretty hazel eyes zeroed in on Gabby’s face. ‘What happened?’ she asked softly.

‘Something more important came up.’ And with that, Gabby disgusted herself by letting out a noisy, inelegant sob.

Quickly, quietly, Faith propelled her up the stairs and into the private quarters she shared with Adam and their two crazy Cavachons, Nip and Tuck. ‘We’re safe here for a bit. Adam’s taken the dogs for a walk.’

Gabby took the offered tissue and wiped furiously at her eyes. ‘I bet that’s a sight.’ She’d not been able to stop laughing the first time she’d visited Faith and seen her big hulk of a husband holding the cute dogs under each arm.

‘Village is used to it now, but the guests love it.’ She sat down opposite Gabby and gave her a firm look. ‘Now tell me what happened, before our peace is shattered.’

It only took a minute for her to recite the phone call. It took several more for her to recount her jumbled feelings.

‘Are you jealous of Stella? Do you think there’s something going on there, some residual feelings?’

‘Yes. No.’ Gabby put her head in her hands. ‘Oh God, what’s happening to me? I’m such a mess. I don’t do drama and here I am, sobbing on you like a total drama queen.’

‘I think you know what’s happening to you, sweetie.’

Gabby sat back up with a start and stared into Faith’s calm, understanding eyes. ‘You think I’m in love with him?’

‘Yes. Now answer the question about Stella.’

She was in love with Owen. Her heart bounced around her chest like a pinball. Oh God. She’d fallen in love. Taking in a deep breath she tried to rein in her wild, seesawing emotions and focus on what Faith was asking. ‘I’m upset he chose Stella over me, yes, but I don’t think he’s still in love with her.’ She swallowed down the emotion lodged in her throat. ‘He said he

loves me.'

'He did? Wow.' Faith smiled, reaching for her hand. 'Do you believe him?'

Gabby thought of all the times he'd not only told her how he felt, but shown her, too. The Love Hearts sweets, the advent calendar, his obvious hurt when she'd gone back home instead of staying with him the entire Christmas holiday. 'Yes, I believe him.'

Faith's hand tightened over hers. 'Then why do you say he chose Stella over you? Isn't he just trying to help out a friend? A friend who happens to be the mother of the girl he thinks of as his daughter?'

Tears welled again. This time at her own stupidity. 'When you put it like that, it sounds so simple.'

'That's because I can see it from a viewpoint not tainted by a childhood full of crushing disappointments. A lifetime of being made to feel unimportant.' She nudged Gabby's arm. 'Why don't you give him a call? I'll go and make us a drink.'

She disappeared into the kitchen and Gabby dragged out her phone. Her heart pounded as she dialled Owen's home number. It rang. And rang. And rang. Then went into voicemail. Shit. 'Umm, Owen, it's me. Gabby.' She cringed. As if he wouldn't already know that. 'When you get this can you give me a call?'

He had to be home by now, didn't he? Should she try his mobile? But what if he was still with Stella? Or worse, he'd seen it was her calling and chosen to ignore it?

What if he'd had enough of her blowing hot and cold on him? Of her keeping her feelings tucked safely to her chest, not daring to reveal them.

Not having the decency, the courtesy, to give him what he'd so unselfishly given her.

By the time Faith came back in, holding two mugs, Gabby was feeling wretched. 'I've got an awful feeling I've blown it. I've been blaming him for letting me down when actually it's me who's let him down. Again. I should have been understanding. I should have told him not to worry, I'd wait for him. Instead I had a hissy fit.' Shame washed through her. 'What sort of woman does that make me?'

Faith gave her a soft, understanding smile. 'It makes you a woman in love, because we often do and say daft things when our emotions are

involved. And if he loves you like I think he does, he'll forgive you.'

'God, I hope so, because if I've ruined this, the best thing to ever happen to me.' Suddenly Gabby jumped to her feet. 'I have to go back. I need to talk to him.'

Faith pulled her back down. 'Oh no you don't. Wait for him to return your call. Drink your tea.'

A series of barks echoed from the kitchen and Faith heard a deep, firm voice echo round the apartment. 'Stay.'

Gabby darted a look towards Faith, then started to smile as she heard the scampering of feet. A second later, Nip and Tuck hurled themselves onto Faith's lap.

'Bloody fluffballs on legs. Wait till I get hold of you . . .' Adam stopped abruptly when he came into the room, his rugged, at times serious face breaking into a huge grin. 'Hey, Gabby, great to see you.' His eyes swivelled to Faith, and Gabby felt a spurt of pure jealousy at the adoration she saw there. 'Where's Owen? That's his name, yes?'

Faith reached out and tweaked his hugely impressive bicep. 'Be a sweetie and go and man the reception desk for me for a few minutes. Chloe's due soon.' Chloe was Faith's niece, who helped out in the holidays and was hoping to go to university to study hotel management.

Adam nodded, giving them both another look. 'Is that code for butt out, we girls need to talk?'

Faith gave him a bright smile. 'Two years of marriage and I finally have you trained.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

She hadn't waited for him. Owen had known Gabby was angry, but he'd figured by the time he'd dropped Stella and Zoe home — and checked Stella had calmed down enough to leave them — her temper would have cooled. The lack of response when he'd rung on the bell, together with the lack of a red Audi outside, suggested otherwise.

Seems her threat to go it alone this New Year hadn't been an idle one.

To say he was gutted, was an understatement. He knew her issues, understood and sympathised with them, but to realise she still didn't trust him, didn't trust his feelings for her . . . crushed was how he felt. Add in hurt and bitterly disappointed, too.

Sitting in his car outside her house, he felt battered. Seems he was destined not to go away with Gabby. Destined to bring the New Year in alone, and no doubt spend the next year alone, too, because how the hell could he be with someone who had so little faith in him?

But then he remembered his dad's words. I have every confidence that my son will win over the woman he loves, if she's important enough to him.

Damn it, she wasn't just important to him. She was everything.

So he needed to track her down. Grabbing his mobile he tried her mum's, but Gabby wasn't there, though her mum wished him luck. 'She's stubborn and headstrong but when she's calmed down she'll realise she's overreacted.'

He took some comfort from that. His next thought was the hotel in the Lake District. He wished he could remember the damn name of it. Something with a Mill in it, and owned by a lady called Faith.

Several calls later, he had success. A deep yet surprisingly quiet male voice answered the phone, confirming the Old Mill Hotel was indeed owned by Faith Hunter, formerly Watkins.

'Do you have a Gabby Sanderson staying with you this evening?'

'Sorry, we're not allowed to give out guest details.' The voice paused. 'You're not Owen, are you?'

His heart leapt. 'Yes. And I'm heading your way right now. Please don't tell her I'm coming. I don't want her bolting.' Worried he sounded like a crazed stalker, he added. 'I just need to talk to her. After that, if she doesn't want me there, you can kick me out. Hell, you don't need to kick me out, I'll

leave.’ He didn’t have much pride left where she was concerned, but he wasn’t about to stay where he wasn’t wanted. Or where he wasn’t trusted. ‘Who am I talking to?’ he added as he started the engine and the phone clicked into hands-free mode.

‘Adam Hunter.’

‘Hunter you said? Any relation to Faith?’

‘Husband.’

‘Oh, right.’ Owen jammed his foot on the accelerator and sped off down the road. ‘Well I’m not sure what Gabby’s told you about what happened.’

‘Nothing. And I’m not confirming there is a Gabby staying here.’

The dry tone convinced Owen that Adam Hunter knew far more than he was letting on. ‘Got you.’ He hesitated, then went for bust. ‘You’re a married man, Adam. Have you any advice for me? Because if there is a Gabby staying with you, I desperately need her to stop running scared. It’s killing me.’

Adam laughed softly down the phone. ‘No advice — I’m far from an expert. But I can tell you this. They’re worth it.’

Owen sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out. ‘Yeah. I figured that.’ He glanced at his GPS. ‘Should be with you in just over an hour.’

‘I would expect the hotel bar to be a good place to find a guest at seven o’clock on New Year’s Eve.’

Owen smiled, liking the guy’s style. ‘Thank you. The bar it is.’

It was spot on seven o’clock when Owen walked through the hotel reception. He expected to find Adam on the reception desk but instead there was a pretty young girl sporting a neat trouser suit, a professional smile. And bright green nail varnish.

‘I’ve just come for a drink in your bar.’

‘Owen Cooper, right?’

He blinked. ‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t worry. Gabby doesn’t know you’re coming. She’s with Faith and Adam in the bar.’ She pointed down the hallway before giving him a conspiratorial smile. ‘Good luck.’

‘Thanks.’

Shit, what was he walking into? Did everyone in the hotel know he’d come to beg Gabby’s forgiveness? Because beg he would, if he had to. Even if it was in front of the whole damn lot of them. Squaring his shoulders,

Owen walked in the direction he'd been told, feeling like the accused in a courtroom, awaiting the verdict of the jury.

* * *

Gabby looked at her phone again. No calls, no messages. And it was now seven o'clock.

'Look, Faith, it's been great to see you but I really need to go. Owen must be back home by now and he's clearly not going to phone me, though I can't say I blame him. I need to go back.' Anguish engulfed her, leaving her heart weighing heavy in her chest. 'I need to tell him I'm sorry.'

Faith gave her a distracted smile, her eyes locked on something happening behind Gabby's back. 'Wow.'

Gabby frowned. 'Wow? Are you seriously checking a guy out when I'm pouring my heart out to you? And your hunk of a husband is standing right next to you?'

Adam grinned. 'You, Gabby Sanderson, are welcome back any time.'

Faith cleared her throat. 'I do believe someone's come looking for you, Gabby.' She bent to whisper in her ear. 'And if you don't grab hold of him and never let him go, you're not as smart as I thought you were.' Straightening, she took hold of Adam's hand. 'Me and my hunky husband will be in our private quarters if you need us. Though I rather suspect you won't.'

Gabby's heart was in her mouth as she slowly turned round. It couldn't be, could it? But her gaze immediately locked into Owen's dazzling blue one, and the bottom fell out of her stomach.

'Owen.' She could barely say his name, her mouth had gone so dry. He looked gorgeous, as always, but also tired, wrung out. And highly annoyed.

'Can we go somewhere private to talk?' His voice sounded sharp, the words clipped. 'I assume you're staying the night here.'

'I . . . think so,' she stammered, her cool deserting her now she was faced with this beautiful, tense, angry male.

'You think we can talk, or you think you're staying the night?'

'Both.' The pleasure at seeing him was being fast eclipsed by a sense of dread. Please God, don't say she'd blown it. 'We can go to my room.' Heart pounding, she gazed up at him, shocked by the emotion swirling in his eyes. 'You have no idea how happy I am to see you.'

The tension in his face eased a fraction. 'You are?'

The fact that he doubted it brought a fresh wave of shame. 'I am,' she confirmed softly before leading him down the corridor to the suite Faith had reserved for her. For them, she thought with a sharp pang.

The moment the door closed behind them, Owen brought his hands to her shoulders, holding her as if he wanted to shake her. Then he cursed roughly and dropped them, taking a step back. 'Don't ever run away on me again,' he said tightly. 'If you're angry with me, at least do me the courtesy of saying it to my face. As a man who loves you, I deserve that. I also deserve the chance to talk to you before you slam the phone down on me.'

He wasn't just angry, she realised in alarm. He was livid. And by God, he was hurting, too. She could see it in the rawness of his expression. Feel it in the rigid way he held himself, maintaining a few feet of distance between them.

'I'm sorry.' She thought of all the things she wanted to say to him; things she'd told Faith but not had the guts to say to the man who deserved to hear them. But her mind was too full of emotion, her throat too tight. Her heart too full.

His eyes searched hers and she felt their burn, and their pain. 'I don't know what you think is going on here Gabby, but let me repeat. I love you. You need to start to trust that. To trust me.'

'I know.' It seemed she was only capable of two word sentences.

'Sometimes things might come up that become a priority, things I have to deal with even though I'd rather be with you. It doesn't mean they're more important than you. Nobody in my life is more important to me, than you.'

Oh God, the heart that had felt too full was now so stretched it was painful. 'I thought I'd ruined things,' she blurted. 'When you didn't phone me back, I thought that was it. That you'd got fed up with me. And I would have understood,' she added on a sob. 'I was really fed up with myself, too. It's just I realised a few hours too late.'

'I didn't know you'd phoned.' His gaze softened as he moved towards her, hands that had previously gripped her shoulders now gently cupping her face. 'I will always be here, Gabby. We're going to argue. Hell, if the last month is anything to go by we're going to argue a lot, but you need to know this. I'm not going anywhere. I repeat again. I love you. You are it for me. I want to marry you, have kids with you, grow old with you. The only way

you're getting rid of me is if you tell me to go, and even then, I'm going to have a bloody good shot at persuading you to change your mind.'

For a woman who didn't cry much, she was now clearly going for the crying world record because once again tears gushed down her face. 'Is that a proposal?' She was half afraid it was, half afraid it wasn't.

He laughed softly. 'Good God, no. I can do far better than that and besides, I'm not proposing until I'm certain you'll give me the right answer.' His face turned serious, a hint of vulnerability beneath the cocky front. 'But if you can't imagine a future with me in it, now's the time to tell me. Please.'

His voice cracked on the last word and Gabby's heart went into free fall. Now, she told herself, screwing up her courage. Now was the time to tell him what she needed him to hear. But one glance into his beautiful eyes, shining with love, and suddenly courage wasn't needed. Telling him was easy. 'I see you in my future, Owen Cooper. And I love you, too.' Joy burst across his face and another flood of tears streamed down hers. 'I'm sorry I didn't wait for you today. Sorry I acted like a total bitch.' She slapped a hand over her mouth in horror. 'I didn't ask. How's Stella? Is she okay? And Zoe?'

Owen smiled, mopping up some of the tears with his thumb. 'Zoe's fine. And Stella and Simon will be, too, I'm sure. But I don't want to talk about them right now.'

'Oh?' Her pulse skittered. 'What do you want to do?'

'I want to grab a drink from the bar and meet your friends.' Her face must have looked a picture because he grinned. The wide, easy, sexy grin she'd never see enough of. 'Bloody hell, Gabby, if you think having a drink with your friends is at the top of my mind right now, you still have a lot to learn about me.'

Laughing with relief, with happiness, Gabby reached for his belt. 'Actually, I think I know you quite well.'

His eyes burned into hers. 'You do, huh?'

She smirked as his breathing quickened when her hands slid under his shirt. 'Your bag is in the car because you were sure you'd end up staying the night with me.'

'Not sure. Hoped.' His body shuddered as her fingers trailed over his rock-hard abs. 'I'm an optimist.'

'I know that. Just as I know that even without actually meeting my friends, you've already managed to convince them you're a good catch.'

‘I’m persuasive.’ He drew in a sharp breath as her fingers dipped below the waistband of his jeans. ‘And charming,’ he added huskily. ‘Don’t forget charming.’

‘How can I forget, when you constantly remind me.’ Desire pulsed through her as she slipped open the button on his fly. ‘Want to know what else I know about you?’

‘Yes.’

It came out as more of a groan and Gabby let out a satisfied smile. ‘I know that any minute now your control will slip and you’ll pick me up, throw me on the bed and—’

She didn’t have a chance to say anything more. The next moment she was flat on her back on the bed, his body covering hers, his eyes blazing down at her. ‘You, Gabriela Sanderson, are going to drive me crazy.’

She smiled up at him. ‘And you, Owen Cooper, are going to enjoy every minute of it.’

Slowly his mouth moved towards hers, stopping a whisker away. ‘Amen to that. Now shut up and let me kiss you.’

Gabby placed a hand on either side of his beautiful face. ‘No. Let me, kiss you.’

The breath from his laughter floated across her face. ‘I tell you what, let’s kiss each other.’

Epilogue

His dad was driving him mad. How many times had Owen told him to put his damn suit on? But when he popped his head round the door to his dad's hotel room there he was, still in his dressing gown, playing cards with Zoe.

'Dad, I'm getting married in forty minutes. Did you hear that? You're giving Gabby away to me in forty bloody minutes.'

Zoe's eyes popped out of her head. 'You said bloody.'

'Did I?' Feeling frazzled, Owen jammed his hand through his hair, belatedly realising he'd tried to smooth it down with wax only five minutes ago. 'Sorry, Zoe. But I suggest if you don't want to hear any more bad words, you go and find your mum and get your bridesmaid dress on. Or am I the only one who's going to be ready for this wedding on time?'

Zoe glanced at his dad, who shrugged, though his eyes twinkled. 'What do you reckon, Zoe. Is our Owen getting a teeny bit nervous?'

Zoe started to giggle and Owen glared at his dad. 'I'm not bl— I'm not nervous. What is there to be nervous about? I'm marrying the woman I love. In front of our family and closest friends. And two dogs, apparently, but hey, that's fine. I'm sure they'll be perfectly well behaved. I'm sure nothing will go wrong. Nothing at all.'

Shit, he didn't need his dad's highly amused look to tell him he was rambling. Owen tugged on the collar of his shirt, which suddenly felt too tight. But at least he was damn well dressed.

Obviously taking pity on him, his father nudged Zoe. 'Probably about time you put your dress on, before Owen here has a wobbly.'

'Okay, Gramps.' She rose to her feet and rushed over to Owen, flinging her arms around his waist. 'Don't be nervous, Owen. Gabby isn't.'

Owen's heart bounced. 'You've seen her? This morning?'

Zoe rolled her eyes. 'Duh, of course. I'm her bridesmaid.'

'And she looks like she wants to do this?' Immediately he let out a strangled noise. 'What I meant to say is, does she look happy?'

Zoe grinned. 'She looks well pretty. Just you wait and see.'

As she skipped out, Owen felt his father's eyes on him. 'Don't say anything,' he muttered. 'Just get dressed. I'll be in the next room.'

His father stood and walked over to him, clasping his shoulder. 'I take it

the nervous groom act isn't because you're not sure you want to get married?'

'Me not sure?' That strange noise came out of him again, like laughter only with an edge of hysteria, and without the amusement. 'I've never been more sure of anything.'

'You think Gabby isn't?'

Restlessly he shoved at his hair again, wincing as he felt the wax. Damn, if he kept this up he was going to look like he'd been wrestling a bear in his wedding photos. Slowly he inhaled. Yeah, that was better. He was thinking more positively. For there to be wedding photos, there had to have been a wedding.

'Owen? Has anything happened between you and Gabby arriving at this fine hotel last night, cooing over each other like a pair of loved-up doves, and now?'

If his father put it like that. 'No.'

'But you're worried she's going to get cold feet?'

His dad's tone had gentled, obviously seeing the state Owen had got himself into. 'You don't know how hard it was for me to get her to even come on a date with me. How skittish she's been.'

His father squeezed his shoulder. 'That was last year. Did she or did she not happily agree to your proposal at Easter?'

'She did, but we were in the Maldives. And she'd had a lot of champagne.' Which was why he'd dared to risk asking her.

'Did she or did she not phone Faith and organise your wedding in this fine Old Mill Hotel two months later?'

Owen swallowed. 'She did.' She'd wanted intimate. A place she felt a connection to, and a handful of friends and family.

'And did you have to cajole her to come here yesterday, in preparation for your wedding today, or did she come of her own free will?'

'She wasn't happy about coming in my car.' He'd not been about to drive off on his honeymoon in a daft TT when he had a far superior car. 'But she did seem happy, yes.'

His dad grinned, punching him on the arm. 'Then pull yourself together, lad. You're getting married in half an hour.'

Owen's eyes widened in horror. 'Shit, Dad, half an hour and you're still in your ruddy dressing gown.'

Sidney chuckled. 'I don't know about you young uns but it doesn't take us oldies long to get ready.' He started to walk towards the bathroom, then stopped and turned. 'Your mum would have loved today. She'd be so proud of you, lad.'

A lump flew into Owen's throat. 'Thank you.' Then, because he'd had enough moping on his wedding day, he clapped his hands. 'Now get in the bloody shower or I'll send Hilda in.'

He'd never seen his dad move so quick. It always made Owen smile to watch the pair of them together. They'd started having the occasional lunch out in February. Then it had moved to dinners, too. And the theatre. Gradually his dad was getting his mojo back. And Hilda was mellowing.

Didn't mean she couldn't still turn stern and officious when she wanted something done.

Feeling a lot calmer, Owen went to tap on Stella's door.

'Hey. Just checking you're on schedule.'

Stella raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'You mean you got ready too soon and now you're pacing around, wondering what to do.'

He smiled. 'Something like that.'

'Well, come on in. Simon's in the bar and Zoe's in the bathroom, putting her dress on.' He was aware of her eyes studying him as he went to sit in the only available chair. 'You look good, Owen Cooper.'

His eyes skimmed across her turquoise silk dress and up to her carefully styled, highlighted blonde hair. 'You too.'

She bit into her lip. 'It's funny to think that in an hour, you'll be married.' As Owen didn't know what to say to that, he kept quiet. 'Do you think if instead of getting all impatient, I'd waited for you, we'd have worked out?'

'We weren't right for each other, Stella, not for the long haul, and you know it. Simon is a much better fit for you.'

'True. And you never once looked at me the way you do at Gabby. She's a lucky girl.'

'I'm the lucky one.' He leant forward, hands on his knees, and spoke the next words carefully. 'You are too, you know. Zoe is amazing. You've done such a good job of bringing her up. And she's happier now than I've ever seen her, so I know you and Simon are working out.'

Stella smiled, and whatever else she was going to say was halted by the

appearance of Zoe. The soft pink dress was perfect for her, Owen thought with a rush of love. Not too flouncy, or too prissy. It was simple, yet pretty. And that, together with the wide grin splitting her face, made his heart miss a beat.

‘She’s your daughter in everything but DNA,’ Stella whispered as Zoe did a twirl for them.

Christ, now tears were in his eyes. If he was reacting like this to Zoe, heaven help him when he saw Gabby.

* * *

‘You look stunning.’

Gabby turned to see her mother smiling at her. There was admiration in her expression. Admiration and something that looked a lot like she’d imagined a mother’s love might look. They’d grown close over the last six months, helped by her mum’s move up North. Now she only lived five minutes away from Gabby — or more correctly, from Owen and Gabby, as she’d moved in with him after he’d proposed. Her mum still worked for the charity, but she did her work locally. And came round to dinner every Sunday, along with Sidney.

‘Thank you.’ She glanced down at the long, cream lace dress she was wearing. ‘You look pretty amazing yourself.’ Her mum’s elegant sheath dress emphasised her trim figure. ‘I’m glad you went for red, considering I was banned from it.’ Owen had balked at the idea of his bride to be in a red dress. Who knew he’d be such a traditionalist when it came to weddings? She had a feeling he’d have gone for the whole big white wedding if she’d let him, but the Old Mill Hotel suited Gabby just fine. She didn’t want a load of people she hardly knew watching her marry the man she’d defied her own expectations and fallen in love with. She wanted only those who’d been part of their incredible journey.

And amazingly, one of those was her mother. Realising it was time, Gabby drew in a breath. ‘I need to say this quickly, because I don’t want to cry.’

Her mother looked surprised. ‘What?’

‘I love you, Mum.’ As the shock raced across her mother’s face, Gabby added. ‘Everything in the past, it’s forgotten and forgiven. I’m just happy you’ll be part of my future.’

‘Oh, Gabby.’ Her mum swallowed, eyes brimming with unshed tears. ‘You have no idea how much that means to me.’

She did now, Gabby thought, but just as emotion threatened to overwhelm them both, they were disturbed by a tap on the door. Knowing who it would be, Gabby opened the door in a rush. ‘Sidney. Right on time.’

Her soon to be father-in-law grinned. ‘Of course. Didn’t need Owen getting his knickers in a twist about it.’

‘Oh dear, is he getting stage fright?’

‘Only about whether you’ll turn up, lass. Only about that.’

Her heart twisted. Confident, bordering on cocky, except when it came to matters of the heart, she’d discovered. Her backing away from him, twice, last Christmas had done more damage than she’d thought. Now she couldn’t wait to get married to him, to prove once and for all how much she loved him. And how far she’d come from the prickly, independent woman he’d first charmed into dating all those months ago.

‘Then we’d better get a move on before he worries himself into a frazzle.’

Zoe popped her pretty blonde head from behind Sidney. ‘He was so nervous he said bloody in front of me.’ She grinned. ‘He’s funny when he’s nervous.’

She patted Zoe’s cheek. ‘I bet he is. But if you’re ready, I think it’s time we put him out of his misery.’

Sidney held out his arm, and Gabby threaded her hand through. From having no family, except for a distant mother, she’d gone to having a surrogate daughter and father . . . and her own mother back.

Now it was time to complete the picture, and bag herself the husband she thought she’d never want.

* * *

The wedding ceremony took place in the hall of the Old Mill. Something of a tradition now, as it was where Faith and Adam had got married two years ago.

Keeping with the tradition, Nip and Tuck were honorary page dogs. It apparently meant they got to scamper around, creating havoc, yet also look very dashing in their blue bow ties.

Gabby couldn’t stop smiling as she and Sidney, with Zoe and her mother

behind them, walked towards the small group of special friends. There was Faith and Adam, of course, sitting next to the other two Lancaster lasses. Cindy was there with her husband, too, beaming at her, and sitting next to them was Hilda, her face looking happier than Gabby had ever seen it. Whether that was for her, or for Sidney, she didn't know. Standing at the front was Owen's sister and her young family. Then came the registrar and to the side of her, Pierre, Owen's brother-in-law and best man. Finally, there was Owen.

Suddenly the heart that had been beating wildly in her chest, leapt into her throat, and she stumbled. Sidney clenched her arm, keeping her upright. His eyes asked the question. Everything okay?

She tried to smile back, but felt too full of emotion, of love, of bloody-hell-this-is-really-happening. This man is mine.

Her gaze locked on Owen's, and she was dazzled by the love that blazed back at her. Resplendent in his expensively tailored charcoal suit, white shirt and red tie, he looked like the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

And then he smiled and held out his hand. In an undignified haste she marched towards him, leaving Sidney, Zoe and her mother behind, and making everyone laugh.

'I have no words.' He grasped her hand, moving it towards his mouth to kiss the palm, just as he had the night she'd first cooked for him. 'You're breathtaking.' Reaching into his pocket he drew out a stunning necklace, twinkling with deep red rubies.

'Oh God, Owen.' No, she wasn't going to cry on her flaming wedding day.

'To match.' His eyes flickered down to her wrist, and the beautiful bracelet he'd bought her for Christmas. 'I was going to get Dad to give it to you this morning, but he was late getting ready.' He gave her a wonderfully sheepish smile. 'And I forgot.'

She couldn't resist. 'Because you'd worked yourself into a state, worrying whether I'd get cold feet.'

If anything, his expression grew even more sheepish. 'Maybe.'

'You daft, crazy man. Have you no idea how much I love you?'

His eyes turned bluer, a sheen of unshed tears making them glisten. 'I do now.'

THE END

Thank You

Dear Reader,

I get so much pleasure out of writing a book — spending months in a fantasy world with my perfect hero, what's not to love?! The greatest pleasure though, comes from hearing that others have enjoyed the fantasy I've created. I'm not alone in that. Authors love feedback — it can inspire, motivate, help us improve. It can also help spread the word. So if you feel inclined to leave a review, I would be really grateful. And if you'd like to contact me (details are under my author profile) I'd be delighted to hear from you.

Kathryn

x

Acknowledgements

Writing a book — especially a Christmas book — is an utter joy. Mainly. But it can also be hard work, frustrating and feel like it will never be the book you intended it to be. So my first thank you is to my family and friends. Without their shouts of encouragement (and sometimes just shouting), this book might never have been completed.

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Having a book published is exciting, but the real thrill is in seeing it read — if you're lucky, by readers and bloggers who enjoy what you've created. So, to the marvellous book-loving community out there, a massive thank you for supporting *A Little Christmas Charm*. I hope you enjoy Owen and Gabby's story. And I wish you all a very Happy Christmas ☺

About the Author



Kathryn was born in Wallingford, England but has spent most of her life living in a village near Windsor. After studying pharmacy in Brighton she began her working life as a retail pharmacist. She quickly realised that trying to decipher doctors' handwriting wasn't for her and left to join the pharmaceutical industry where she spent twenty happy years working in medical communications. In 2011, backed by her family, she left the world of pharmaceutical science to begin life as a self-employed writer, juggling the two disciplines of medical writing and romance. Some days a racing heart is a medical condition, others it's the reaction to a hunky hero. . .

With two teenage boys and a husband who asks every Valentine's Day whether he has to bother buying a card again this year (yes, he does) the romance in her life is all in her head. Then again, her husband's unstinting support of her career change goes to prove that love isn't always about hearts and flowers — and heroes can come in many disguises.

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UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C6R32M6L

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Anything could happen when you spend summer in San Remo . . .

Running her busy concierge service usually keeps Cassie Travers fully occupied. But when a new client offers her the strangest commission she's ever handled she suddenly finds herself on the cusp of an Italian adventure, with a man she thought she would never see again.

Jake McQuire has returned from the States to his family-run detective agency. When old flame Cassie appears in need of help with her mysterious client, who better than Jake to step in?

Events take the pair across Europe to a luxurious villa on the Italian Riviera.

There, Cassie finds that the mystery she pursues pales into insignificance, when compared to another discovery made along the way . . .

SPRING ON RENDEZVOUS LANE
BY ANGELA BRITNELL



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C4YTG7B4

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C4YTG7B4

Recently widowed mom Sandy Warner and her young son Chip are ready for a fresh start.

It's just what they need after the death of Chip's dad. Somewhere new where there are no painful questions about the past.

They're soon taken under the wing of lovely Beth, the elderly Grandma living next door.

When Beth suddenly gets sick, her grandson Taran arrives to look after her. He just happens to be gorgeous — and has an irresistible British accent. Sparks fly, but Sandy and Taran both have their baggage.

Taran's a food blogger with a taste for adventure, not suburbia. And Sandy's

priority is being a good mom to Chip. The last thing she's looking for is romance . . . isn't it?

This heart-warming story is perfect for fans of Meghann Quinn, Portia Macintosh, C.J. Connolly and Beth Moran.

SUMMER AT SERENITY BAY
BY HELEN BRIDGETT



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C5RQYVNS

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RQYVNS

What happens when you send a city girl to a tiny seaside village?

Career girl Chloe Walsh is in need of some TLC. Her boyfriend was unfaithful and her job was at a dead end.

She's leaving London to get away from it all and visiting her best friend Roisin in Serenity Bay.

But little does she know that her kooky friend has a master plan to breathe some life into the sleepy seaside village through a new wellness retreat. And she needs Chloe's expertise.

Sparks fly with hunky Andy from the Surf Shack when he offers a helping hand. But Chloe swears not to be distracted by his sparkling eyes and perfect

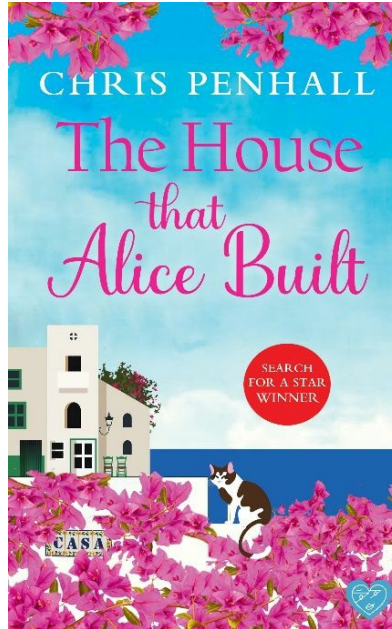
abs . . .

Then she attracts the attention of a major TV company, and before she knows it a clique of celebrities descend on Serenity Bay to film a new reality TV show.

Will the scandalous flings be left to the celebs, or could Chloe find some romance of her own?

This fun and flirty rom-com is perfect for fans of Emily Henry, Phoebe MacLeod, Jo Thomas, Emma Bennet and Shari Low.

THE HOUSE THAT ALICE BUILT
BY CHRIS PENHALL



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C6FJWLQR
US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6FJWLQR

She was renovating her house, but maybe now she can renovate her whole life . . .

Alice Dorothy Matthews is nothing if not sensible. She leaves the adventures to other people, in particular, her best friend Kathy, who's living it up in Portugal. Alice is renovating her house in London while her insufferable ex, Adam, travels the world.

Alice tells herself she's fine just the way things are. But then a postcard from Buenos Aires turns her life upside down . . . Her ex wants to sell the house that they bought together.

So Alice does something spontaneous for the first time in many, many years. She joins Kathy in sunny Portugal.

Alice feels alive for the first time in forever. She remembers how she used to be carefree and adventurous. Can she find her way back to the person she used to be?

Then her newfound sense of self begins to attract the attention of gorgeous — and arrogant — Luis . . .

Will Alice realize that you don't always need a house to find a home?