

Kathryn Freeman

REACH FOR A STAR



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An absolutely irresistible grumpy/sunshine will-they-won't-
they escapist romance

KATHRYN FREEMAN



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Chapter One

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Jessie stared into the hypnotic blue eyes of Michael Tennant as his rich, smooth voice flowed over her like molten chocolate. Words of love slipped from his tongue and into her heart where they nestled, warm and satisfying. His voice was like a gift, a place she could go where her world was filled with flowers and sunshine. With candles and soft velvet cushions.

‘Mum, time to turn this crap off. You’re burning holes in our shirts and *Football Focus* is about to start on the other side.’ Jack, her twelve-year-old son, grabbed the television remote control and switched channels, promptly shattering her fantasy.

With a deep sigh, she stared down at the scorch-marked school shirt. In her daydreams she was Mrs Michael Tennant, wife to the sexy modern tenor. A woman who paid someone else to do her ironing. Outside those dreams, she’d somehow become a divorced mother of two boys and seemed to do nothing but iron. Unless she was cooking, or cleaning. Or working.

‘What is it with that Tennant guy anyway?’ Luke, her younger son by two years, ambled in and flopped down on the sofa next to Jack. ‘His songs are like sooooo boring.’

‘You just don’t understand music.’ She gave the next unwitting shirt a good thump with the iron. ‘You think anything with a loud drum beat, fronted by a crazy man shouting, is music.’ Oh God, when had she turned into her

mother? ‘Well, it’s not. Michael Tennant is music. I’m not the only one who thinks he’s got the most beautiful voice in the world, either. Take a look at his album sales. And while you’re doing that, listen to one of them, instead of the racket you usually put on.’

‘Hey, keep your curly hair on!’ Luke rolled big blue eyes uncannily like his father’s. ‘You’re so easy to wind up. Anyone would think you’re in love with the guy, the way you go on about him all the time.’

Jessie shook her head and focussed back on the ironing, knowing there was no way her sons would ever understand her little crush. They thought she was nuts. Embarrassing, too, but mainly nuts. Even, Annabel, her best friend, struggled to grasp why Jessie needed her trips into fantasyland. According to Annabel, Jessie was a lonely romantic, and idolising Michael Tennant was her way of making up for the lack of a real man in her life. The theory held an element of truth, sure, but there was so much more to her dreams than an escape from being single. Marriage to Phil — thankfully put out of its misery several years ago — had been like putting on a comfy pair of slippers. Maybe she’d read too many romance novels, but damn it she was thirty-six, not sixty-three. She didn’t want slippers. What she wanted was knock ’em dead Louboutins with red soles and eye-watering heels. And maybe they’d hurt her feet, maybe she wouldn’t be able to walk in them, but that didn’t stop her longing to *try*.

She wanted to live, not just exist. She wanted excitement. Passion. To rip the shirt off a man. Not iron the damn thing.

‘The dude’s probably got bad breath.’ Jack had finally dragged his eyes off the television long enough to add his considered opinion to the discussion.

‘Yeah and if you met him he’d be like blah, blah, blah.’ Luke yawned dramatically. ‘Snoozefest.’

Jessie opened her mouth to protest — she’d seen Michael Tennant interviewed and hadn’t felt like snoozing once — but then caught the wicked gleam in her sons’ eyes. ‘You’re probably right,’ she agreed, smiling at their look of

disappointment as she refused to take the bait. ‘It’s perhaps just as well I’ll never find out.’

The boys exchanged a look before turning their focus back to the TV. When Jessie glanced up a moment later, she swore their shoulders were twitching up and down, as if in silent laughter. ‘What’s so funny?’

Another non-verbal exchange took place between them before Jack replied, ‘You’re the one that’s funny, Mum. You so want to meet him.’

‘Not if he has bad breath.’ Even as she muttered the words, Jessie knew it was a lie. She’d breathe through her mouth. And offer him a mint.

* * *

A little while later

‘It’s the postie!’ Luke exclaimed. ‘I’ll get it.’

Quite why the route he took had to entail him scrambling over the back of the sofa, Jessie didn’t know. Especially as there was never anything in the post worth rushing for.

But it was the fourth day on the trot her sons had shown an interest in the post. ‘Are you expecting something?’ she asked when he came back in.

‘Nah.’ Why were his eyes not meeting hers? ‘Here you go. Four for you, one for the previous owners, and none for me. *Again,*’ he added heavily, as if getting post was something a ten-year-old should expect on a regular basis.

‘Well, if you ever feel the need to read glossy brochures trying to sell things we don’t need, or to pay the bills, you’re welcome to my post.’ Relieved to have an excuse to stop ironing, she thumbed through the envelopes. ‘Umm, this one doesn’t look like a bill.’ With practiced ease she tore it open, scanning the contents. ‘I’m invited to ... what? An interview at some studios with a view to me taking part in a pilot TV show, *The Week of Your Life*. What show? How on earth did they get my name?’ She checked the address — correct. Checked her name — also correct. ‘This must be some sort of scam.’

She glanced over to Jack and Luke, expecting to find them gawping at the TV. Instead they were grinning at each other like a pair of demented Cheshire cats. The first ripple of concern eased through her. ‘Do you two want to let me in on the joke?’

Luke pointed to Jack, who gave her a sheepish look. ‘We saw the TV show advertised on the telly. They said they were looking for people who wanted to learn to sing with a professional, so we gave them your name.’

‘You *what?*’ She knew her sons. This had to be one big wind up.

‘It’s about time you learnt how to sing,’ Luke added, backing up his brother. ‘Your singing makes our ears hurt.’

‘Plus Michael Tennant’s one of the singers taking part,’ continued Jack. ‘So you can find out if he has bad breath.’

Jessie shook her head, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. It felt like ... what was the right analogy? Wading through cold porridge? She’d only ever eaten it, but walking through it sounded freakishly difficult.

Then again, so was getting her sons to write thank you letters at Christmas, which could explain why she was having a hard time grasping the idea that they’d spontaneously sent a letter off to a TV company. A letter apparently persuasive enough for the producer to want to see her.

And if she added into that mix the prospect of maybe, possibly, meeting Michael Tennant. Well hell, no wonder her brain hurt.

‘Are you going to give them a call?’

The question came from Jack. Dark like her; the more thoughtful of the two, more serious.

‘Yeah, go on, Mum.’ Luke was fair-haired and the spitting image of his father. Laid-back like him too, though he got his chatty — some would say gobby — nature from his mum.

Both were watching her as if they, too, understood the enormity of what she might be about to commit to. The time

for joking was over. If she picked up the phone, she could be facing the prospect of singing on national television. She, who couldn't find the right note if it was dressed in fluorescent yellow and winking at her. Her stomach plummeted just thinking about it.

Then again, they'd gone to so much trouble.

And there was the little matter of Michael Tennant.

Taking a deep breath, she gave them the answer they wanted. 'Of course I'll call them. I can't believe they took a letter from a couple of young boys so seriously. What on earth did you put in it?'

Jack shrugged. 'Just stuff about how badly you sing. And how we want them to make you sound better.'

'And we told them you fancied Tennant.' Luke grinned. Cheeky, irrepressible, he was destined to break hearts in another ten years.

'You've really set me up, haven't you?' Because it all seemed so utterly bonkers, she started to laugh. 'At least I won't have anything to live up to.'

It's just an interview, she told herself as she picked up the phone. Not much chance of making the final programme.

But as she dialled the number, a hum of long-forgotten excitement ran through her.

* * *

One week later

Michael looked again at the itinerary Georgina, his PA, had put together for him, and sighed. Why in God's name had he agreed to take part in a reality TV show? It was so far out of his comfort zone he might as well enter *The X Factor* and totally blow his career.

Making a snap decision he shoved on his jacket and called the studio. He might just get there in time to see the shortlisted contestants being put through their final auditions. As pulling out of the blasted thing wasn't an option — not without blackening his reputation — he might as well show an interest.

At least this way he could have a say in who he was partnered with.

Unaware of the way female heads turned as he strode into the studio lobby a short cab ride later, Michael shook the hand of the show director, Stuart Kennedy, who was waiting to greet him.

‘Remind me again, Stuart. What’s the set up?’ he asked as he was shown into the main studio where the auditions were being held, and the live show was scheduled to be filmed. He noticed a couple of the other celebrities sitting at the front — pop singer Tegan, with all that blonde hair, and Jerome, the dreadlocked rapper, were hard to miss — but he turned and headed for the back. He’d make his assessment in private.

‘We’re going to watch a shortlist of contestants to see how they come across in front of the camera. From them we need to select a partner for each of you. A girl with a boy.’ He gave Michael a small smile. ‘As you’ll be spending the week with whoever it is, it’s only fair you have an input. But I have the final say.’

Michael raised an eyebrow. Bad enough he’d be spending a week with a woman he didn’t know. He wasn’t going to be railroaded into spending it with one he’d taken an instant dislike to. Unconsciously a quiet groan escaped him. Christ. Meeting new people wasn’t his forte. He could stand on stage and act the part of the tenor, Michael Tennant, no problem. It was being himself he was diabolical at.

‘The show will feature six contestants, three men, three women, each paired with a professional.’ Stuart was now staring at him in earnest, no doubt worried by Michael’s obvious lack of enthusiasm. ‘We’ll film you during the week as you learn to sing a duet together. On the night of the show we’ll play back the highlights and then you’ll each sing your duet, live. The studio audience and the people watching at home will vote on who’s made the greatest improvement.’

Michael smiled politely, though his heart had now settled somewhere round his feet. If they were filming them all week, it was going to be hard to take shortcuts. It meant he was

pretty much going to be stuck with his partner 24/7. Especially if he was going to win the damn thing. Because there was only one thing worse than entering a competition like this; entering and losing.

Thanking Stuart, he settled into his seat, crossed his legs, squared his shoulders, and prepared to find his partner.

* * *

An hour later, Michael had listened to eight warbling, self-obsessed women clearly in it for the limelight and not to learn to sing. With a despairing sigh, he glanced down at the running order he'd been given. If this last one, Jessica Simmons, wasn't any better, he was going to have to develop a mystery illness.

He watched as a short, curly-haired woman came onto the stage. Involuntarily he found he was sitting up, taking a better look. She was pretty. Really, sweetly pretty. A pretty that came from dimples and a ready smile. She wasn't deathly skinny either, but had curves that filled out her dark jeans and black jumper rather spectacularly. He could appreciate them even from this distance.

Finally he had something to smile about. If she sang as well as she looked, he was going to bagsy her for his partner.

Hell, maybe the week wouldn't be that bad, after all.

'Which song would you like to sing for us?' the studio technician asked her, handing over a sheet of paper.

She glanced down, biting on her bottom lip. 'How about "Simply the Best"?' she suggested finally. 'At least I know the words, though Tina Turner probably won't recognise it by the time I'm finished.'

Sitting in the dark on the back row, Michael smiled. The woman had a nice line in self-deprecating humour.

'When you're ready, give the cameraman a nod and sing the words as they come up on the screen,' the technician clarified. 'Sorry there's no music, but I'm sure you know how it goes.'

She laughed. Not a self-conscious titter, or a polite chuckle but a real laugh that seemed to dance its way over to Michael. ‘I don’t have a problem with knowing the tune,’ she reassured. ‘As Eric Morecambe would say, it’s singing the right notes, in the right order, that’s the challenge.’

Fascinated, Michael sat forward and watched as she took a moment to collect herself, drawing in a deep breath.

‘I call you when I need you, my heart’s on fire ...’

He lurched back, almost giving himself whiplash.

Christ, she was murdering the song.

While he winced and cringed, she continued to murder it all the way to the end.

His eardrums ringing with tuneless screeching his cat — if he’d had one — would have been appalled by, Michael wondered what he was supposed to do now. This Jessica person was by far the most appealing. And she seemed ... genuine. Down to earth, at least compared to the women who’d come before her. But that *voice*?

What would it do to his career if he sang a duet with someone like Jessica Simmons? Sure, he had a shot at improving her, but her voice needed more than a week of coaching. It needed the wave of a ruddy magic wand.

Yet spending a week with any of the previous candidates was a definite no. Jessica might kill off his eardrums and his career, but a week with the others and he’d want to kill himself.

As Jessica made her way off the stage, Stuart glanced over in Michael’s direction.

Taking a deep breath, Michael nodded.

Chapter Two

Two weeks later

Finally ... *finally*, Jessie was on her way to London.

In the two weeks since she'd had the call from Stuart telling her she'd been selected for the show, time had passed in slow motion. Like a child waiting for Christmas, she'd resorted to crossing the days off in her diary.

But now the day was here. And sitting on the train on her way to the studio, she couldn't for the life of her remember why she'd been so damn excited. She'd left her boys, and to do what? Make an utter twit of herself on national television.

The knots in her stomach tightened and, for a horrible moment, she thought she was going to be sick. Snatching at the bottle of water stashed in her handbag, she took a big swig, swallowed, and tried to calm herself.

The sound of her ringing phone jolted her out of her misery.

'Excited?' Her friend's voice came out in a rush, but that was Annabel all over. Always on the move.

'Try upset and bloody terrified.'

Jessie heard a door slam in the background, followed by a rustle of clothing. A minute later, Annabel's voice returned. 'Sorry, just had to shoo the kids out of the way. Did I hear you right? You're not sitting there buzzing with adrenaline and saturated with hormones at the thought of meeting your idol?'

Jessie sighed, accidentally catching sight of herself in the train reflection. Not the glowing face of a happy woman. More like the haggard face of a tense, worried one. 'Sorry, I can't quite manage that at the moment. I'm still picturing Jack and Luke's faces as I said goodbye to them this morning. How had I not anticipated what a huge wrench that would be?'

'Five nights, Jessie. That's all it is. Five nights in London, staying in a swanky hotel. Meeting new people, some of them

famous. One of them the man you've crushed on for the last five years,' she added dryly.

'I know.' Jessie rested her head back against the seat, relieved to have the carriage almost to herself. 'I'm being stupid and sentimental.'

'You're being a mum,' Annabel corrected quietly. 'But their dad will take good care of them, and I'll go round every day to make sure they're not wilting under junk food and gaming overload.'

Jessie couldn't help but smile at the uncannily accurate image. She'd known Phil practically all her life — from best friends in the playground to first boyfriend, to husband — so it was with some authority she could say he was kind, sweet and warm-hearted. BUT. He had no drive, no ambition, no discipline. In the end, it had pushed them apart. He hadn't fought for their marriage, just as he hadn't fought for anything in his life. At least it had made divorce relatively pain free. Phil had simply eased out of her life as calmly and good naturedly as he'd entered it all those years ago. He saw the boys whenever he wanted to, remaining a special friend to her, and a great, if rather lax, dad to them.

'The Jessie I knew fifteen years ago.' Annabel's voice brought her back to the present. 'The Jessie who dragged me out of the house and into the clubs of Oxford on a Tuesday night just because she fancied a wild night out and Phil was watching the football. That Jessie would be bouncing up and down with excitement right now.'

'I know. But I'm not that girl any more.'

'You are. Divorce and motherhood haven't changed you, they've just dimmed your light a little.'

'A kind way of saying I'm old and knackered.'

Annabel hissed in exasperation. 'I'm saying the exact opposite of that. You're in your mid-thirties. The prime of your life. It has to be, because you're the same age as me and I'm certainly not ready to succumb to middle age. You, Jessie Simmons, are still young enough to find that wild again. This

is your moment. A week away from being a mum. A week away from being a pharmacist. John's going to miss the heck out of you, mind.'

Jessie rolled her eyes at her friend's unsubtle dig. 'Only because the pharmacist covering for me is sixty-two and can't cope with the computer system.'

'If you want to keep telling yourself your boss doesn't fancy the pants off you, go right ahead. But don't try and kid me. I've seen the way his spaniel eyes follow you round.'

And truthfully, so had Jessie. John didn't make her pulse race though, and after years of pleasant, and nice, the last thing she needed was another helping of the same.

Instead of beige, she wanted vibrant, bold. Exhilarating. She longed for that lightning bolt of desire that made sensible people go crazy, just for the sheer thrill of it.

Oh God, the train was slowing. 'Help, I think I'm here.'

Annabel snorted. 'Stop panicking. You're going to have a ball. And if you don't bloody well enjoy it I'll ... I'll ...' She huffed down the phone line. 'I'll be really cross with you.'

Jessie burst out laughing. 'Oh well, in that case, I'll be sure to have a ball.'

The train screeched noisily into the station and Jessie's heart let out a loud thump, her hands trembling as she reached for her suitcase — her flipping heavy suitcase. Why had she let Annabel persuade her into spending a month's salary on a tonne of new clothes?

You can't spend a week with a millionaire singer looking like a mum on the school run.

Maybe not, but Jessie was that mum, and no amount of snazzy new clothes were going to change it.

* * *

As Jessie struggled with carrying her case along the platform, Michael's chauffeur-driven Bentley glided to a halt outside the hotel he'd been booked into — all *The Week of Your Life* team had been booked into the same hotel,

apparently. He'd have preferred to stay in his apartment, but the place was having a thorough overhaul, thanks to an untimely leak from the apartment above that had totally ruined his kitchen and part of the living area. If it had happened a week later, he'd have been on tour. As it was, not only did he have to get through a tortuous singing competition, he had to do it living out of a hotel room.

To say he wasn't looking forward to the week was a blinding understatement. Given the option of spending it singing on a cruise ship instead, he'd currently be heading to Southampton Docks. And that was knowing the last time he'd been on a boat he'd been so seasick, he'd spent the entire crossing sitting on deck in the pissing rain, staring out at the horizon.

'Cheer up. You're not on your way to the gallows. Just a few days singing with a pretty lady.' Robert, his manager and best friend — not a combination Michael would recommend to anyone, as it was far too hard to say no — grinned over at him as they walked into the hotel reception.

'I didn't say she was pretty.'

Robert raised an eyebrow. 'You didn't say much at all, which was why I decided to ask Stuart to give me the rundown on your partner for the week. Jessica — goes by Jessie — Simmons, thirty-six. Single. Pharmacist and mum to two boys. Very pretty, according to her photograph.'

Michael kept quiet, refusing to be drawn into Robert's trap. The guy was always matchmaking for him. Just because Robert was happily married, he thought everyone else should be. Michael had lost count of the number of times he'd reiterated to his blissed-up friend that he had zero desire to take the same path. He'd tried love once and it hadn't worked for him. He didn't feel the need to repeat the experience.

They checked in, the woman on the reception desk giving him the same insincere smile she gave Robert. Clearly not a fan, which was exactly how he liked it. It was the women who blushed and stammered, or worse, batted their eyelids and

pushed up their cleavage, he had a hard time dealing with. Formal and distant, he was an expert at.

The pair of them made their way to Michael's suite. Michael, because he wanted to settle in before he had to meet his partner for the week and Robert ...

'Remind me again what you're doing here, apart from bugging me?' Michael asked his friend as he pushed open the door to his suite, his eyes casually flicking over the decor.

A sofa and modern fireplace in the sitting area, with fancy curtains framing French windows that opened to a balcony overlooking the Thames. As it was the end of January, he had no intention of going out on it. To the right was a door leading to a large bedroom complete with super king-sized bed. Standard five-star suite accommodation. He'd stayed in so many hotels over the years it no longer had the ability to stir him.

'I'm here to talk about your tour, Mikey boy.' Michael winced at the nickname Robert insisted on using, thankfully only in private. 'We've got a teleconference with the publicist scheduled in fifteen minutes and I thought we might as well do it together.'

'Right.'

'Plus, I wanted to keep a check on you regarding the week ahead,' Robert added with a smirk. 'You were so against doing this show, I had to make sure you didn't duck out at the last minute.'

'Thanks.' Michael dropped his case onto the bed and began to pull out his clothes, hanging them in the wardrobe not because he was meticulously tidy, but for something to do. Anything to take his mind away from the ordeal waiting for him.

Robert sighed, slumping onto the sofa. 'Come on. I know this isn't really your thing—'

'Not my *thing*?' Michael jammed the hanger onto the rail with tight, jerky movements. 'It's about as far as it's possible to get from being my thing.'

‘I know.’ The understanding in Robert’s voice helped deflate some of Michael’s anger. ‘But we’ve spoken about this and I think it will be good for you. An opportunity to show your fans a little more of the real you.’

‘That’s not who they want to see.’

Robert stared back at him. ‘How can you be so sure? You’re more of an introvert than they might believe. So what? Is that so terrible?’

Once again Michael kept quiet. Even Robert, who’d been to school with him, didn’t fully understand Michael’s unease around people. He wasn’t just shy, he was painfully shy. *Who wants to be friends with a boy who sings?* That had been his childhood. Isolated, apart from Robert. It meant that even now, he hated talking to people he didn’t know. Sure, he could smile and sign an autograph, but anything more and he became ridiculously uptight.

Which meant he was in for a week of torture. And his popularity was likely to plummet. How Robert could look him in the eye and tell him the show would be *good* for him, he had no bloody idea.

‘Anyway, it’s all great publicity for the tour,’ Robert continued, correctly sensing Michael wasn’t in the mood to discuss the blasted show any further. ‘We’re lining up a series of interviews on the back of it, which I’m sure you’ll look forward to with your usual unbridled enthusiasm.’

Michael shot his friend a dark look. ‘I can sack you, you know,’ he pointed out mildly.

‘But you won’t, because nobody else would put up with you. Is Georgina going to be around?’ Robert added, before Michael could come up with a snappy retort. ‘You’re going to be busy over the next week and I want to make sure you don’t drop too many balls.’

Georgina was Michael’s new PA. When he said new, she’d been with him for a couple of months now, replacing Mary who’d presumably retired so she could drive her husband mad instead of Michael. The man had Michael’s heartfelt

sympathy. Georgina was different to Mary in every respect; efficiency, age, manner, looks. Mary's efficiency had been ... haphazard was a polite word for it. Georgina's was like a Swiss clock. Mary had worn cardigans, sensible shoes and wool skirts that covered her varicose veins. Georgina was a fan of skirts that barely covered her bottom, lethal looking stilettos and low-cut tops.

Some days Michael didn't know where to look.

'Georgie will be flitting in and out. She's already scheduled an interview and photo shoot for this week. Something I may have encouraged,' Michael admitted a touch shamefaced.

Robert gaped, obviously trying not to laugh. And failing. 'You've what?'

And yes, his life was pretty much screwed when the thought of a photo shoot interrupting his day was something to be cheered. 'You heard. I'm not spending all day, every day, with this Jessica woman.' He glanced at his watch. 'Shouldn't we be dialling into this conference call?'

'Not so fast.' Robert took out his phone, giving his messages a brief scan before smirking over at Michael. 'What's with the *Georgie*?'

Michael winced, wishing he had a friend who wasn't quite so switched on. 'She's asked me to call her that.' Did he sound too defensive?

One look at Robert's glinting dark eyes told him he had. 'Next, she'll be asking you to call her babe, or sweetheart. Probably while she's undoing your trousers.'

Michael abandoned searching for a witty reply, settling instead for a crude, but very satisfying, middle finger.

The call took longer than either of them anticipated. Michael kept glancing at his watch, knowing he was running late. As he couldn't abide lateness in others, he motioned to Robert that he needed to pop out, and ducked into the bedroom to phone Georgina. And yes, he found it much easier to think of her as that, than the overly familiar *Georgie*.

‘Would you do me a favour and head over to the studio to meet Jessica? Explain that I’m stuck in a meeting but I’ll be there as quick as I can.’

‘Your wish is my every command, sir,’ Georgina replied, and Michael could visualise her giving him a mock salute. It hadn’t taken him long to realise she wasn’t the type of girl who hung on his every word. She had a very definite mind of her own and wasn’t afraid to show it. It was why he was scared to death of what her short hemlines — and Robert’s playful dig — might suggest. He’d slept with enough women over the years to know there were only two reasons they were attracted to him. His fame ... and his fortune.

He was so damn tired of it all. And if that made him sound old and jaded, well maybe he was.

Chapter Three

Jessie was overawed by her hotel room. Admittedly her previous experience was limited to Holiday Inn Express and a dodgy three-star concrete jungle in Spain. Still, at least now she knew what five stars gave you. A bed so big it would take days for couples to find each other and a view that didn't overlook a car park. Cotton sheets so unwrinkled they must have been ironed. Oh and a bathroom boasting expensive tumbled marble tiles, miniature smellies she actually wanted to use, a sunken bathtub *and* a walk-in shower.

The shower even had a pulsing spray, and not the weak trickle her ex-husband plumber still hadn't sorted, despite a year of nagging. *I'll get round to it* was Phil's stock reply to any job she asked him to do.

Following her invigorating shower, she changed into a vibrant pink shirt, a pair of simple but well fitting black jeans — part of her 'new' collection — and scrunch dried her hair.

It was time to meet Michael Tennant.

Her heart was beating like a drum as she walked over to the mirror to give herself a final study.

He's just a man, she reminded herself.

A boring one with bad breath, if her sons were to be believed.

Squaring her shoulders, she gave herself a critical appraisal. Not bad, considering what she had to work with. Hopes of morphing into Angelina Jolie had vanished a long time ago. A pair of hazel eyes not too tired looking, curly brown hair not too frizzy. A wide mouth painted in lipstick that matched her shirt, and also claimed to plump her lips. Wrinkles ... well, okay, those were there to stay, but didn't they add character? Or was that something only men were allowed?

All in all, she didn't look bad for a mid-thirties mother of two.

Time to take a few teetering steps on the wild side.

A short taxi ride later she walked purposefully into the studio. Head held high, hips trying to remember the sway they'd once had, curls bouncing. Yes, she'd caught sight of her reflection in the huge glass windows and there was definitely some bounce.

Her steps faltered at the sight of Tegan — twenty-two-year-old pop-star mentor to one of the male contestants.

Tegan wore thigh high, black patent boots and a thin strip of material around her waist that was possibly a skirt. Immediately Jessie's jeans felt too dull, the pink blouse as if she was trying too hard.

But you're not the celebrity, she reminded herself. She was here to represent the ordinary woman. One who couldn't sing, and who didn't look like she'd just walked off a slick pop video.

Taking several deep breaths, which did little to calm her nerves, she went in search of her rehearsal room where Michael, so she'd been informed, would be waiting for her.

Her hand shook like crazy as she knocked on the door. Why hadn't she gone via the ladies to check her eyeliner wasn't halfway down her cheek? And her lipstick wasn't all over her teeth.

Too late now, because a voice from inside told her to come in. A female voice.

'Oh, err, I think I've got the wrong room,' Jessie stammered as she pushed the door open.

'No, this is the right room, Jessica.' A sleek-looking blonde gave her a cool smile. 'I'm Georgina, Michael's personal assistant.'

Jessie didn't miss the way Georgina's eyes skimmed over her, weighing her up. 'Michael is running a bit late,' Georgina continued in her crisp, cultured voice. 'He asked me to meet up with you first.'

Deciding to give as good as she got, Jessie returned Georgina's stare, her eyes sweeping across the classically beautiful face, framed by silky, straight blonde hair. She hated people who judged by appearances, yet here she was, feeling an instant dislike. Was it anything to do with Georgina having hair Jessie would have sold her soul for twenty years ago? Or was it the younger woman's firm, trim — and no doubt stretch mark free — figure?

'While we're waiting, Jessica, let me go through a few things you need to be aware of. Michael is an extremely busy man, as I'm sure you'll understand. His priority right now isn't this little competition, but the promotion of his upcoming world tour. Your sessions will need to fit around that.'

And now Jessie had her answer. Georgina might be younger, with glorious hair and a body to die for, but the reason she wasn't going to like her was because she was a stuck-up little madam.

'Actually, I go by Jessie, not Jessica. As for Michael's tour, I understand that's a priority, but he agreed to take part in this show, so he'll need to find a way to manage his time with me alongside his other commitments.'

'*Actually*, Jessie,' Georgina countered, with heavy emphasis, 'I'm in charge of Michael's diary, so I'll be the one managing his time. Currently he has an interview for a magazine tomorrow morning, and a photo shoot scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. You can use the free time to practice. You need it more than he does.'

Jessie was saved the trouble of finding a clever retort by the entrance of the singer himself.

'Sorry I'm late. You must be Jessica. I'm Michael,' he said needlessly, extending his hand in a formal introduction.

Jessie had an instant impression of height, breadth and a pair of cool blue eyes. She'd heard it mentioned that celebrities who seemed larger than life on the television were often reduced to mere ordinariness in real life. Not Michael Tennant. His presence dominated the room, making everything else, even Georgina, fade into the background. He was, quite

simply, stunning. Wearing a steel-grey shirt and dark trousers, he was every inch as beautiful as she remembered from hours spent watching him on the television.

Yet while his appearance lived up to her hopes, his impersonal greeting fell a long way short. If he was as cold and aloof as his PA, she was in for a bumpy week.

‘Pleased to meet you.’ She tried to reply with equal formality. ‘And I go by Jessie. The last person to call me Jessica before this week was my old headmaster, which was quite a while ago now ...’ She trailed off as it was obvious Michael wasn’t listening to her.

‘Thanks for holding the fort, Georgie.’ He gave his PA a smile. It was brief, and not particularly warm, yet a million times better than the guarded look he’d given Jessie. ‘I got tied up in a conference call with the tour publicist. Did you hear from Duncan about tomorrow?’

‘Yes, the journalist will come to the hotel at nine a.m. It should be over in a couple of hours, but you never know with these magazine people.’ Georgina rolled her big blue eyes. ‘Is there anything else you need me to do?’

Jessie watched as the two of them continued to discuss his schedule, totally oblivious of her. Feeling like an eavesdropper, the confidence she’d arrived at the studio with leaking faster than the overflow pipe Phil was supposed to fix this week, she cleared her throat. Two pairs of eyes turned to look at her.

‘As I’m superfluous to requirements here, shall I go and get a coffee? Let you both discuss this in private?’

Michael blinked. ‘Sorry, we won’t be long.’ It’s possible he felt bad. It was also just as possible he was annoyed at her for interrupting. ‘Why don’t you get us both a drink while I clear up a few things with Georgie? We can start when the film crew arrive. White coffee please, no sugar.’ With a curt nod of his head, he turned his attention back to Georgina. Or should she say *Georgie*? Though she suspected as she wasn’t rich, handsome or male, she wouldn’t be allowed to call her that.

Jessie's legs felt wooden as she walked out of the room. She tried to summon her anger, because wasn't she the one out of her comfort zone here? The one they should be making feel welcome? Much as she tried though, the anger wouldn't come; it was too swamped by her misery. Like a fool, she'd elevated Michael to an almost God-like status in her mind. Yet beneath the gorgeous exterior, it seemed he was more ill-mannered than average. In fact she'd go as far as saying his manner was pretty shitty.

And this was all before he'd heard her sing.

* * *

As Jessica left to get the coffee, Michael's shoulders slumped. Why was it that when he was feeling uncomfortable or awkward, he turned into this cold, arrogant twit? Georgina waffled away in his ear, but Michael wasn't listening. He was the star here. The one supposed to be at ease with the situation. It was his role to make his singing partner feel comfortable. Not treat her like a flaming gopher.

When she came back, he'd be better. More charming. He winced — hard to be *more* charming, when he'd failed to be even a bit charming. She'd probably settle for him simply being polite. Even he could manage that. He just needed to think of this as another performance. One that went on for six, long days.

Georgina finally stopped talking and as she headed out of the door, the film crew headed in. 'Don't mind us,' the one holding the camera said cheerfully. 'We'll be wandering in and out from time to time over the week, charting your progress. Pretend we're not here.'

Michael smiled grimly. How the hell was he supposed to pretend two hulking men with microphones and cameras weren't lurking in the corner, recording his shambolic attempts to both charm and train the woman he'd just sent off to fetch his coffee?

Finally the door edged open again and Jessica pushed her way in, clutching two cups and saucers. Before he had a

chance to catch it, the door fell back, bumping her elbow and sending coffee slopping into the saucers.

‘Thanks,’ he murmured, taking a cup from her. ‘I guess half a cup is better than nothing.’ He smiled awkwardly. And almost groaned out loud when he saw her eyes flash before she jerked her head away.

Shit, he couldn’t even make a joke without upsetting her. Feeling more uncomfortable than ever, he decided to rope in the help of the film crew he’d been told to ignore. ‘Jessica, meet Ken and Mark. They’re going to be filming us now and again.’ As if the equipment they were holding didn’t make that bloody obvious.

She threw the men a sweet smile. ‘I’m Jessie actually, not Jessica, though try getting these guys to remember that.’

Michael stifled another groan at the dig, then watched as Ken, the big, bearded cameraman, chatted to her with all the warmth and ease Michael knew he should have shown. ‘I wouldn’t take offence, love. You should hear some of the names we’ve been called. Nice as it is to meet you though, from now on you need to ignore us.’

Jessica — damn it, was it Jessie? — looked pointedly at the huge camera. ‘Kind of hard to.’

‘Yeah, I know it seems impossible at the moment, but I guarantee by the end of the week you won’t bat an eyelid when we walk through that door.’

‘I hope you’re right.’ She perched on one of the nearby chairs. ‘I’ve got enough to worry about with the actual singing element of the whole thing.’

Ken and Mark laughed and for a few seconds, the atmosphere in the room rose above painfully strained to almost natural. Until Michael became aware of all eyes on him.

He took a swig of what was left of his coffee. It was cold and had far too much milk in it for his taste but even he wasn’t crass enough to mention it. Placing it back on the table he tried for a smile. ‘While we finish our coffee, why don’t you tell me

about your singing? Let me know what you think we'll need to work on.'

She nodded, and Michael took her responding smile as a sign she was as keen to move on from their painful start as he was. 'I do all my singing at home or in the car. I've never been in a choir or anything.' Now her smile held an apology. 'And in answer to the second part of your question, there's plenty that needs work. I'm afraid I'm really not very good.'

Tell him something he didn't know. Still, he lived in hope that he'd imagined her singing worse than it was; that nerves had got the better of her. 'Why don't you stand and sing me a few lines of a song you enjoy? Then I can see for myself what we need to focus on.' He settled back into his chair and gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

She swallowed, twisting the cup around the saucer, glancing nervously at the camera crew. 'Now? I mean you want me to sing to you right, umm, now?'

'Sure. You're going to have to sing sooner or later. This is a singing competition.'

'I know.'

Her sharp reply told him he'd upset her again. Bloody hell, was he being obtuse or was she far too sensitive? 'Okay then, give it a go. I promise not to run away screaming.'

Once again, his joke — if he could call the lame attempt that — failed to raise a smile. Instead she stood and carried her cup over to the table, clattering it down with hands he was shocked to see were trembling.

Then she swallowed, took in a breath and started to sing.

'At first I was afraid, I was petrified.'

The more she sang, the more his eardrums complained bitterly at the onslaught. With every cell in his body wincing, Michael's fears came crashing back to the surface. They were going to be a ruddy laughing stock.

Midway through the chorus, just as she was starting to screech out *'I will survive'*, he motioned for her to stop. 'You

might survive, though I'm not sure how long the audience will.'

She clearly didn't appreciate his brand of humour at all, because now two splashes of red blotted her cheeks.

'It's my understanding the purpose of the competition is to see how much I improve, rather than how well I can sing right now. By rights you should be rubbing your hands with glee. There's clearly lots for you to work on.'

Was she challenging him? Because he might know how to sing, but he had no bloody clue how to teach it. 'You're not wrong there,' he murmured, feeling the beginnings of a cold sweat. The conversation was unravelling again. And this time in front of the sodding film crew.

'We're supposed to be on the same side, working together.' She looked straight at him, her anger, her bitter disappointment, vividly clear in the glare of her hazel eyes. 'For some crazy reason, I thought this would be exciting and fun. But if all you want to do is mock, I'm afraid you need to find yourself another partner.'

Michael looked on in horror as she reached for her bag and walked towards the door, head high, shoulders straight, her body rigid with anger. Ken following her all the way with his blasted camera.

Shit.

The conversation he'd had with Robert earlier came crashing back. Damn it, the man had been wrong. He *wasn't* the right person to do this show. He didn't do warm, natural or easy. He did gruff, blundering. Defensive. And that was on a good day. 'Jessie.' Thank Christ he'd finally got her name right. 'Please, wait.'

He swung his eyes towards Mark and Ken, silently pleading with them to leave. They already had some dynamite material. If he had any chance of salvaging something with Jessie, it had to happen in private.

To his utter relief, Ken put down his camera. 'I reckon we're done here. You've given us some cracking footage. The

viewers go wild for all that love-hate stuff.’ As he and Mark walked past them, Ken leant towards Michael and whispered. ‘Good luck, mate. From the look of things, you’re going to need it.’

Chapter Four

Jessie stood by the door, heart pounding, as she watched the film crew troop out. She'd imagined this day a hundred times, yet even her bleakest imaginings hadn't gone like this. Worse case, she'd thought Michael would be reserved and her so in awe, she wouldn't be able to talk to him. Best case ... how naive it seemed now that she'd harboured hopes of building a rapport with him. Laughing together over her singing.

Instead he'd laughed at her, and she'd never felt so horribly inadequate.

She was a pharmacist, not a flaming singer. She shouldn't be judged on her voice like that. *But you've entered a singing competition.* In hindsight, an unbelievably insane decision.

She jumped as Michael placed a hand on her arm. It was a light touch, not enough to stop her from opening the door, just enough to show her he was there. Not that the citrus tang of his expensive aftershave, and the sheer imposing size of him, weren't already a dead giveaway.

'I'm sorry, I've been a shit.' Shocked, she stared up at him, past his prominent Adam's apple, over the tense mouth and up into his earnest blue eyes. 'I'm not good with people. Ask anyone who knows me well.'

Sighing, he moved away, taking his hand off her arm to thrust it through his short dark hair. 'Michael Tennant the singer's not a bad bloke. It's the man behind him who has trouble. I should probably stick to the stage,' he added ruefully, hanging his head, his shoulders slumping. One deep inhale later he stared back at her, his expression full of apology. 'I really am very sorry.'

Jessie found herself caught in his eyes. Mesmerising shades of blue — sapphire and cobalt with flecks of bright azure — they looked surprisingly vulnerable. Glancing down at his tanned hand, now hanging loosely by his side, she made a snap decision.

‘Pleased to meet you, Michael. I’m Jessie.’ She held out her hand. Surprise flickered in those blue orbs before he took the hint and shook it, his fingers feeling warm and strong as they clasped around hers. ‘I should warn you, I’m a really terrible singer.’

There was a beat of silence and Jessie steeled herself against another comment. One that would send them hurtling back to square one again. But then Michael did something unexpected. He smiled. Not the small, awkward thing he’d done earlier, but a proper one that touched his eyes, transforming his face from coolly attractive to vibrantly compelling.

‘Hi, Jessie, I’m Michael,’ he replied, keeping their hands tightly clasped. ‘I’m a decent singer, but I should warn you I’m probably a terrible teacher.’

So a sense of humour *did* lurk behind the formal façade. Relieved, she smiled back. ‘I guess if I’m still as bad at the end of the week, we’ll know your prediction was right.’

With a nod of amused agreement he let go of her hand and motioned for her to sit down. ‘It might help us feel more at ease if we get to know each other a little. Would you mind telling me a bit about yourself?’

Though his body language was still stiff, and his words tortuously formal, at least now she knew it wasn’t arrogance, but a surprising unease. ‘You wouldn’t be putting off the moment when I have to sing again, would you?’

‘Why would you think that?’

His face was impeccably straight, yet there was enough amusement in his eyes for her shoulders to relax. ‘I’m a pharmacist, divorced, with two beautiful boys, Jack who is twelve and Luke who is ten. In fact, it’s their fault you have to put up with me this week.’

‘Oh?’

‘The devils applied for me to go on the show behind my back. Said they hoped it would improve my singing.’ She decided to keep quiet about the other reason they wrote to the

show. Their start was rocky enough, without her turning all fan girl on him.

Michael brushed at what she was sure was a non-existent fleck on his elegant dark trousers. 'That sounds very enterprising. I don't think I could have done the same at their age.' The small smile he directed at her looked like it was a conscious effort. 'Do you sing a lot at home?'

'I suppose so. I've always got music on in the house.'

'Who do you admire as a singer? Who are your favourites?'

Jessie felt the hot blush start from her neck and spread with alarming speed across her face. Swallowing hard she gazed at the wall behind him. 'I like most music. Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, Queen, Adele, Robbie Williams, James Blunt.' She paused. Now he'd asked her directly, would it be lying to keep quiet? Looking him straight in the eye, she added, 'You.'

Surprise raced across his face. It was quickly followed by embarrassment and something that looked a lot like *what the hell do I say to that*. Coughing, he shifted in his seat. 'Thank you, I'm honoured to be in that list.' His eyes darted round the room before settling back on hers. 'I was going to ask what you liked about them.' Another small, uneasy smile. 'But perhaps we'll skip that question.'

'And what about you, Michael,' Jessie asked, desperate to move the conversation on so her face could stop clashing with her fuchsia blouse. 'Can I ask about you?'

'Sure. I'm a singer, single, with no children,' he replied, copying her original response.

She waited for him to elaborate, but instead he sat there looking woefully uncomfortable. It was like watching a beautiful koi carp floundering on the side of a pond. When the silence became painful, she tried a different angle. 'As you obviously weren't set up by your children, do you mind me asking why you agreed to take part in this show?'

'Ah.' He hesitated, rubbing at his chin. 'My manager, Robert, thought it would be good publicity for the tour which

starts next week in the US.'

'And you?'

He blinked. 'Sorry?'

'What do *you* think?'

'I think singers should stick to singing.' She thought he was going to keep it to that, but then he sighed and the next words seemed to be dragged out of him. 'These days it seems fashionable to dig around in people's private lives. Find out about the person behind the voice. But it's the voice, maybe also the image, that captures the interest, isn't it? What if finding out more is a let down? Do you go off the music, even though they still look and sound just as they did before?'

What the heck? Was he trying to tell her he was worried his fans would go off him after seeing him on the show?

* * *

With a sudden, jerky movement, Michael rose to his feet. What was he doing, telling her all that? Here he was, a Grammy winner, for God's sake, and he was acting like a sappy, insecure prick. 'I think we've put off the singing for long enough.' Read into that, he'd made enough of a fool of himself. Time to move on to what he was good at. 'Let's try your song again, only this time I'll accompany you. It's always easier to sing to music.'

He strode over to the piano, sat on the stool and ran his fingers along the keyboard. As he picked out Gloria Gaynor's iconic tune, he felt some of the tension leave him. Music always did that. Soothed him, calmed him. He'd go as far as to say completed him, if it didn't sound too sappy.

Even as he started to relax though, he was aware the woman standing next to him was doing the opposite. From the corner of his eye he saw her wringing her hands. Hell, he could almost feel the tremors coming from her. Funny how the tables had turned. During the conversation, when he'd been a wreck, she'd been all breezy and collected. Now he was in his element, and she was trembling. Though he definitely didn't

like to see her so nervous — he knew how it felt, and it sucked — he was relieved to finally be the one in control.

Turning his face towards her, he gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, inviting her to join in with a nod of his head.

He heard her inhale a shaky breath.

‘First I was afraid, I was petrified ...’ and on she went.

Desperately Michael tried to school his features. It seemed that getting back to his comfort zone had given him a rather unfortunate high. And listening to her had suddenly become the funniest thing he’d heard in a long time.

As she fumbled the next line, he became aware of her eyes on him. ‘Sorry. It’s just I thought I saw you ... Were you smirking?’

‘No, of course not. No,’ he added again, as if the emphasis would make up for any hint of laughter she might have seen in his expression.

‘Was I bad again?’

How the blazes did he answer that? He stared down at the keyboard, praying for inspiration. ‘I’m not sure how to reply without upsetting you,’ he said finally, forcing himself to look up at her. ‘Can we just say I think I’ve found your level?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘And it’s one you’ve never sunk to before?’

He made a non-committal noise. ‘Why don’t we focus not on the level, but on how we’re going to move you up from it?’

He gave her a tentative smile and was shocked to hear a peel of laughter burst out of her. ‘It’s okay, you don’t have to look so worried. I’m not the sensitive flower you seem to have me pegged as. I know I’m rubbish at singing, but earlier it felt as if you were laughing at me. Now I feel we’re laughing together.’

He let some of the amusement he’d been holding back come out in a short bark of laughter. ‘By the end of this week

we'll be singing together,' he promised, in a crazy burst of confidence.

* * *

Over the next few hours Michael explained about the basics of music, getting her to sing the right notes in (approximately) the right key. With the ice finally broken, hallelujah, Jessie became less self-conscious about singing in front of him.

Which unfortunately only made her more aware of who she was singing to.

'Let's finish with a few exercises to help your posture and breathing. That way, when you do hit the right note, you can sing it loud and clear.' He added one of his careful smiles, as if anxious not to upset their new-found harmony.

He moved to stand in front of her and she had another waft of delicious, tangy aftershave. She was still breathing it in when he placed his hands gently on her shoulders, drawing them back. When he told her to relax, tilting her head so she was forced to stare directly at the tanned flesh exposed by his shirt, his words began to blur. Soon they were only a rich, deep sound that meandered through her, caressing everything they touched.

'Jessie?' he prompted.

Mentally she shook herself. Focus, Jessie, focus. 'Sorry, what did you say?'

'Well, you were certainly relaxing,' he replied dryly. 'But this time please listen and relax at the same time. I'm given to understand women are good at multitasking.'

There it was again. That dry wit. Earlier she'd thought he'd been having a dig at her. Now she knew him a little better she realised it was simply his slightly formal, incredibly deadpan, brand of humour. 'Give me laundry, homework and cooking to juggle and I'm masterful. Listening, not so much.'

His lips, so yummy she found herself focussing on them a little too long, twitched. 'I was trying to tell you that for singing, you need to breathe low into the bottom of your lungs.'

Done correctly, it will lead your rib cage and back to expand but your shoulders and chest to remain still. Let's try, shall we? Breathe in deeply.'

She sucked in a breath but to her horror, her chest didn't keep still. No, the damn thing rose and seemed to inflate, causing her breasts to jut out prominently.

Oh God, she felt like a poor man's Dolly Parton.

A quick glance at Michael and her fears were confirmed. He'd noticed. Yet the longer his gaze remained on her chest, the more her embarrassment receded, replaced by a flutter, a tingle.

Michael cleared his throat. 'I'm sure you'll get the hang of it, with a bit more practice,' he said, after a lengthy pause. 'Let's finish now.'

Jessie moved away quickly, grateful to escape. She'd fantasised about being this close to him, but the reality was far more vivid. Television didn't capture his raw sex appeal, or the power of his build. Heck, the sheer *virility* of him.

And she could categorically confirm he didn't have bad breath.

Unconsciously she put a hand to her chest, feeling the way her heart danced beneath her fingers. She needed to be a bit careful here; make sure the crush she had for the singer didn't become a crush for the man himself, or the rest of the week was going to be terribly awkward.

'Are you seeing your children tonight?' Michael's question rocked her out of her thoughts.

'No, I live in the Chilterns, so they've put me up in a hotel this week.' Needing something to do to avoid looking at him, she went to pick up her handbag. 'I'll have to make do with a phone call home and room service.'

'Would you care to join me for dinner?'

As the shock of his invitation sunk in, she stared over at him. 'Dinner?' she repeated, as if the concept was entirely alien to her.

He shifted uncomfortably and gave her a tight smile. 'Robert and Georgina will be there too. I thought, perhaps, it would be an opportunity to get to know each other more.'

Okay then. An offer to dine with Michael Tennant — she'd forget the part about his manager and cow of a PA being there, too. Jessie felt a sudden, crazy desire to giggle. Part because it was so surreal, and part because his invitation was so formal, his expression so painfully serious. She wanted to tell him to relax, that he didn't need to try so hard, her earlier hissy fit was over. But she didn't know him well enough, nor did she think her advice would be welcome. So instead she smiled. 'I'd love to, thank you. Just tell me when and where and I'll be there.'

As they discussed the logistics, Jessie felt another jolt of surprise at finding they were both staying in the same hotel.

Wait till she told Annabel that she was going out to dinner with Michael Tennant. And had every intention of going back to his hotel afterwards.

Chapter Five

Back in his hotel room, Michael threw his jacket on the bed and rubbed a weary hand over his face. Bloody hell, what a day.

He'd nearly touched her breasts.

God, when he'd looked down and seen those wonderful globes jut right under his nose ... his body tightened just thinking about it. Jessie Simmons might be a terrible singer, but there was something about her — the curves, the warm brown eyes? Maybe just the fact that she seemed so normal, where his life was full of artificial, of surface gloss with little substance. Whatever it was, it made him look. And then want to touch.

And he'd invited her to dinner.

Even now he couldn't remember why he'd done it. It was so out of character. He'd arranged for a couple of meetings this week just so he could have a break from her, for crying out loud. Yet in a moment of madness, he'd invited Jessie to spend the evening with him.

Hell, he even thought of her as Jessie, because the more familiar name seemed to fit her. Yet *Georgie* still felt clumsy on his tongue, even after two months.

Robert was going to tease him mercilessly.

Undressing quickly, Michael stepped into the shower. It hadn't been her breasts that had driven him to invite her, he decided. He'd not wanted her to be alone in the city. It was an act of kindness, pure and simple.

Yes, that sounded better.

Robert knocked on his door just before seven thirty, raising his eyebrows when he saw what Michael was wearing. 'I see you've decided to go wild tonight. Is that a white shirt you're wearing with your suit instead of the grey one you had on earlier?'

'Piss off.'

Ignoring him, Robert strolled into the room looking annoyingly casual in jeans and a bright red polo shirt. It wasn't that Michael couldn't appreciate the relaxed look. Just that he wasn't sure he could pull it off. Smart clothes gave him confidence. It was like putting on armour.

'You survived the day at least.' Robert made himself at home on the sofa in Michael's suite. 'How did it go?'

'Fine.'

'As uncommunicative as ever, I see. Are you going to give me more than that or do I have to bring the thumbscrews out?'

'Jessie is ... nice,' Michael settled with, though the image flashing through his mind of her breasts jutting beneath her pink blouse made him think of different adjectives.

'Nice as in nice, or as in *nice*?'

'We're not in the school playground now.' Michael let out an exasperated breath. 'She's easy to get along with, okay? Can't sing to save her bloody life, but at least she can laugh about it.'

'Is she a looker?'

'I'm sure Alice will be delighted to hear you ask that.'

Robert laughed, stretching out on the sofa. 'My wife wouldn't mind, because she'd know I was asking for you, not myself.'

'How many times do I have to tell you I'm not interested in dating anybody at the moment?' Slightly irritated, Michael reached for his jacket. 'I've got enough to focus on with this tour you've set me up with. Now, shall we go downstairs and meet the ladies?'

'Ladies?'

'Yes.' And why did he feel he was on the verge of going an embarrassing shade of red? It had been an act of kindness, he reminded himself again. 'Jessie's meeting us down in the lobby, too. And before you say anything sarky, I invited her because her alternative was to spend the evening alone in her hotel room.'

Robert didn't say a damn thing. Just rose to his feet and gave Michael a smile that was half smug, half smirk before heading to the door.

Michael walked behind him, wishing he'd not invited Jessie. Wishing he'd never agreed to the damn competition in the first place.

And while he was on this roll, wishing his friend didn't know him so well.

* * *

Georgina was already waiting for them in the lobby, wearing a short pink dress, endless tanned legs and an eye-popping cleavage.

'That's all for your benefit,' Robert whispered as they walked over to her. 'I wonder if she's wearing a bra? If not, they'll fall into her soup when she sneezes.'

Michael struggled not to laugh. 'Shut up,' he said mildly. 'And put your tongue back in your mouth.'

'Gentlemen.' Georgina gave them both a kiss on the cheek and Michael reassured himself she hadn't pressed her body into his deliberately. 'Shall we go?'

'Ah, I forgot to tell you, I invited Jessie to come with us.'

Irritation flashed briefly across her face before she caught it and smiled back, slipping her phone out of the slim pink handbag she was carrying. 'No problem. I'll just warn the restaurant.'

When she was out of earshot, Robert groaned. 'Don't tell me she's booked us into some pretentious place again.'

'I haven't a clue.' Michael patted Robert's not-quite-as-flat-as-it-used-to-be stomach. 'If she has, the artfully arranged, though pitifully small portions, will do you good.'

Robert glanced down at his stomach, then back up to Michael, a broad smile across his face. 'That's what being married does for a man. Home-cooked meals every night. Not to mention sex on tap.'

‘Alice would crucify you for that description of marriage.’

‘Hey, I didn’t say it was all there was to the great institution.’ He gave Michael a meaningful shove. ‘Perhaps you’ll find out one day. Thirty-seven is a bit long in the tooth for the bachelor life.’

Michael considered which of his stock replies to go with. *Piss off*, which he usually reserved for when he was feeling tetchy, or the truth, which went along the lines of *give it a rest, you smug bastard, not all of us are lucky enough to meet a woman like Alice*. Robert’s wife wasn’t just attractive, she was easy company. Warm and down to earth. A real woman, unimpressed by money and celebrity. He might have too much on his plate to consider dating at the moment, but Michael wasn’t averse to having a woman in his life. He was single not out of choice, but out of lack of choice.

Before he had a chance to verbalise either reply, Jessie came into view. Jessie, who’d already admitted she was a fan of his singing, yet rather than coming on to him, had almost walked out on him.

She wore a simple black dress, her curly hair an untamed riot around her pretty face. ‘Hi.’

Her smile was hesitant and he could see from the way her hands clutched at her handbag that she was nervous.

‘Thanks for joining us.’ He gave her what he hoped was a friendly smile. ‘Can I introduce you to my manager and sometime friend, Robert?’ As Robert ignored her outreached hand and kissed Jessie on the cheek instead, Michael added. ‘A word of warning, don’t ask him about his recent wedding. Not if you want a quiet evening. Georgina is around too. She’s just phoning the restaurant to change the booking to four.’

‘It’s done.’ Georgina slid up to them, tucking her phone back in her bag. ‘Jessie, good to see you again.’ Michael had a moment to wonder at the cursory glance his PA sent Jessie’s way before Georgina was urging them towards the exit. ‘The car’s waiting for us outside. Shall we?’

* * *

Jessie's stomach churned as they walked out to the car. Nerves, not a stomach upset, though either way she wasn't sure how much she was going to be able to eat. Her phone call home hadn't helped. Here she was, about to have dinner with Michael Tennant, for heaven's sake, and yet her heart was back home with her boys.

She missed them.

But they weren't exactly balling their eyes out at not having her home. So if they were happy to be without her for a few days, she owed it to herself to put on a smile and be happy, too.

Even if it meant spending the evening with Georgina. She was grateful she'd settled for wearing the boring black dress and not gone for the red. She and Georgina would have clashed horribly. As it was they appeared to be rubbing each other up the wrong way. Jessie wasn't sure what she was supposed to have done, other than perhaps spending time with the man Georgina clearly had the hots for.

Damn, she wished she didn't look so drab next to her. And so *old*.

'It's good to meet you, Jessie.' Robert fell in beside her. Around the same age as Michael, he was shorter and stockier, and though his face had none of the high watt glamour of his friend, it was pleasant, and his eyes kind. 'I'm looking forward to hearing how today went. Michael took a lot of persuading to take part in this programme; I hope he's behaving himself.'

At the friendly tone, Jessie felt her churning stomach slow a little. 'Well, I nearly walked out after the first ten minutes,' she admitted, smothering a laugh at Robert's look of horror. 'But we made it through to the end of the day and we're still talking.'

Just then a group of women squealed and rushed up to Michael. Robert raised his eyebrows, shaking his head as they waited for Michael to sign everything shoved under his nose. Dressed in a dark suit with a white shirt and no tie, he looked elegantly handsome, yet while he smiled smoothly at the ladies Jessie couldn't help but remember how different he'd

been with her back in the rehearsal room. Where was the stiff formality now?

When Michael had dashed off his last autograph, they settled into the waiting limousine. Robert shuffled in next to her, leaving Georgina and Michael sitting on the seats facing them.

Robert eyed her speculatively. ‘Tell me more about this first ten minutes when you nearly walked out.’

Immediately Jessie cursed her big mouth. What she’d intended as banter between her and Robert, now felt like a betrayal with Georgina watching her intently, and Michael looking uncomfortable. ‘Looking back, I realise I was too sensitive,’ she murmured. ‘Michael was just being honest.’

Robert started to laugh. ‘I admire your diplomacy.’

‘It was a small misunderstanding.’ Michael’s expression was tight, and the dark look he sent his friend wasn’t hard to interpret. ‘One we resolved when we started to get to know each other.’

Robert leaned closer to Jessie. ‘By the end of this week, you might know him better than you want to,’ he said in a mock whisper.

A joke, certainly, yet Jessie’s heart fluttered at the words and involuntarily her eyes drifted over to Michael. A flicker of unease crossed his face before he carefully masked it.

‘We’re nearly at the restaurant,’ Georgina cut in, clearly determined to transfer the focus back to herself. ‘I hear it’s really good. Rumours are it’s going to be awarded a third Michelin star.’

Robert groaned. ‘Georgina does love her posh restaurants. Personally I prefer less style and more substance.’

Georgina’s glance skimmed over Robert. ‘I can see that.’

Just as Jessie began to feel bad for Robert, he laughed. ‘Touché.’

Moments later they came to a smooth halt. A quick glance at the restaurant’s simple façade and Jessie wondered if the

driver had got the right place. But Georgina climbed out of the limo — managing to do so with an enviable elegance, and without showing her knickers — and strode straight in.

Michael motioned for Jessie to follow, and the moment she stepped inside, she let out a long, slow breath. Rows and rows of candles provided a romantic, flickering light, with exposed brick walls and rustic oak beams adding to the atmosphere. Dining was on white tablecloths in secluded, private bays. It shrieked of taste, of wealth and exclusivity. A world away from Nando's.

When they were shown to their bay, Jessie went to pull out her chair but Michael covered her hand with his.

'Allow me.' He eased the chair out, his body so close she felt his warmth through the thin fabric of her dress.

Flustered, she almost fell onto it. 'Sorry, I'm not used to dining with grown-ups.' Or gentlemen, she could have added as she watched Robert pull a chair out for Georgina.

'I think you'll find the food here is slightly better than McDonald's.' Georgina smiled coolly over at her.

Jessie glanced down at the menu she was handed and returned Georgina's cool smile with one of her own. 'At least in McDonald's I can understand the menu.'

Robert burst out laughing, though Michael's responding smile was far more restrained. Perhaps like Georgina he preferred the fancy restaurant. Or perhaps he simply preferred Georgina.

'Oh, by the way, Jessie, the low calorie options are on the third page.' Georgina gave her a sickly sweet smile. 'You might want to consider them, as the television always adds a few pounds, especially to the female figure.'

'Thank you, but I'll take the risk.' Jessie gave the blonde an equally false smile. 'You've gone to the trouble of finding such an excellent restaurant. I'd hate to waste the chance of eating one of their specialities.'

Feeling she'd evened the score, at least if Robert's wide grin was anything to go by, Jessie made a point of ordering the

most calorific dish she could find on the menu. If the TV added pounds, she was already doomed anyway.

After the waiter had left, Georgina turned to Michael and started discussing an upcoming appointment that was clearly so important she couldn't discuss it tomorrow. Jessie smiled at the man sitting across from her. 'How's married life?'

Immediately Robert's face lit up. 'Thank you for ignoring Michael's dig and asking me that. Convincing Alice to marry me is the smartest thing I've ever done.' As he continued to describe how he'd met and wooed Alice, his expression becoming more and more besotted, Jessie felt her heart sigh. Had Phil ever looked like that when he'd talked of her? 'I keep telling Michael he should try it some time,' Robert added finally. 'He's not getting any younger.'

'It can't be through lack of opportunity,' Jessie murmured. 'How long did you say you've known him?'

'We went to school together so I knew him when he was a gawky teenager. Braces on his teeth, spots on his face and knobby knees.' He glanced over at his friend, who was still deep in conversation with Georgina. 'Now look at the bastard. Hard to believe, isn't it?'

Though she couldn't vouch for his knees, Michael's teeth and face were hard to fault. 'How did you become his manager? — if that isn't too nose-y a question.'

'Not nose-y at all, it's no secret. Michael was ribbed about his singing a fair bit at school, from me included,' Robert added with a wink. 'I had no clue why he wanted to sing all that fancy stuff. But at school concerts, all the parents gaped when they heard him, so I figured either he was diabolically bad, or he must have something. When we ended up at the same university, the chance of making some beer money out of him seemed too good to miss, so I took it on myself to phone round all the local pubs and clubs, offering his services. Michael had a hissy fit, of course, but once I'd made the booking he had to turn up. The rest is history, as they say.'

'You kind of pushed him into it then?'

‘I prefer to say I paved the way for him. He was a different person on the stage.’ Robert glanced over at Michael and his next words were uttered so quietly, she felt sure he’d meant to say them only in his head. ‘Still is.’

Jessie had already begun to see that for herself. The magnetically handsome tenor she’d crushed on was quite different to the man she’d met today. ‘Michael mentioned he wasn’t very keen on taking part in this show,’ she ventured.

‘Ah, he did, did he?’ Robert chuckled. ‘He felt it was too intrusive. He’s a private man, and this was putting too much of the real Michael Tennant on show. We argued about it, but I won. Convinced him it would be a good move. I only hope I’m right, or I’ll never hear the end of it.’

In that moment Jessie understood why the two men were friends. Robert had a natural ease, a warmth that Michael didn’t possess. But Michael had the exceptional natural talent. They rubbed well together, feeding off each other.

‘You two look locked in conversation.’ Michael turned to her as their starters were placed in front of them, his expression questioning.

‘We were talking about your school days.’

‘I deny everything.’

‘Even the knobbly knees?’

‘Especially the knobbly knees.’ Michael frowned over at his friend. ‘I should have known better than to leave you talking to Robert. There’s no telling what he’ll come out with.’ Michael’s clear blue eyes focussed back on her and suddenly everyone else, even Georgina, faded away. ‘Tell me about being a pharmacist and a mum.’

With a small sigh, Jessie stared down at her plate. She knew he was only asking to change the subject, but how on earth could she entertain this man? Days when she wasn’t being a mum were spent counting out tablets and talking to old ladies about compression stockings for varicose veins. ‘It’s very different to life as a famous singer.’

‘Jessie.’ His eyes caught hers, serious and unblinking. ‘Don’t fall into the trap of thinking people in the limelight are a different species. We breathe and shit like everyone else.’ At his unexpected use of the word *shit*, her jaw gaped open and he groaned. ‘Why do I get the feeling you’re imagining me on a toilet right now.’

Laughter tumbled out of her, and when she caught Georgina looking sharply at her, she laughed even harder. She bet Michael had never traded toilet jokes with his hoity toity PA. Chalk another point up to the pharmacist.

Michael gave her a rare smile; one that reached into his eyes. ‘Where were we? In the pharmacy, I think.’

And just like that, Jessie forgot she was scoring points against Georgina. Forgot even that she was talking to Michael Tennant. As their empty plates were taken away and their main courses served, she started to chat to the guy sitting next to her. Called Michael, he was wildly handsome, if a little too serious, but he nodded in the right places. He even asked the occasional relevant question, making her think he might actually be listening to some of the things she said. Then again, Jack and Luke often nodded when she talked, yet actually didn’t listen to a word.

‘And life as a mum?’

Jeeze, asking a mum to talk about her kids, especially one who was missing them terribly — did the man not realise what he was letting himself in for? Did he not want to talk about himself at all? But those serious blue eyes were looking at her expectantly, and Jessie was only too happy to oblige.

She’d just begun the story of how, against the odds, Jack and Luke’s football team was top of their local league when Georgina’s voice butted in.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt.’ Her expression made a lie of her words. ‘Michael has an interview for *Esquire* tomorrow morning at nine and I’m sure he’d appreciate not getting to bed too late. Shall I get the bill?’

Jessie longed for him to tell Georgina he was busy talking, he'd leave when he was ready. Instead he sighed and leant back on his chair, the bright beam of his attention now directed at the sharply beautiful young woman opposite him. Not the thirty-six-year-old mother of two by his side. 'You're probably right.'

The bill was swiftly brought to them, and as Jessie reached into her handbag for her purse she wondered numbly if Michael and Georgina had some sort of pact, where he gave a discreet signal to her when he was bored, and she leapt in and rescued him.

A warm hand settled over hers. 'Put that away. I invited you.' Ready to protest — she'd never sponged off anyone and she wasn't about to start now, even if the guy was worth millions — she stared up into Michael's handsome face. He smiled gently. 'Please?'

Immediately the reasons she'd crushed on this man for so many years came hurtling back to her. With her heart giving a long, slow flip, she shoved the purse clumsily back into her bag.

Chapter Six

Michael thanked the sharp young journalist he'd just spent an uncomfortable hour and a half with, and headed straight for his hotel room. There he yanked off his tie, undid his collar and took a few deep breaths. It didn't matter that it was probably his hundredth such interview, each felt like the first. Like he was being picked apart by a cool-eyed surgeon, his entrails studied and carefully dissected.

Every question he answered felt like he was giving away a piece of himself to be examined; perhaps found wanting. It's why he was so careful to reply with the same information each time, tweaked so it sounded fresh. The media loved the tale of how he was discovered, in student pubs and smoke-filled clubs rather than snooty music schools or the stage, so that's what he gave them. Facts, rather than feelings.

After splashing cold water on his face, he stripped off his dress shirt and changed into a sharply ironed grey one. Feeling better he glanced at his watch, grimaced, and headed back out again into a waiting cab.

Ten minutes later he arrived at the studio. On the way to their rehearsal room he paused by the drinks station to grab a coffee. Remembering his blunder from yesterday, he poured a second for Jessie.

Outside the door he hesitated for a moment, listening. She was practicing, just as he'd asked. It wasn't good but ... perhaps it wasn't as bad as yesterday?

'That's sounding better.' Jessie spun round to face him, her startled gasp changing to a smile when she saw who it was. She was wearing trousers again today and he found he was slightly disappointed. He'd enjoyed seeing her legs last night.

'Really? Or are you just saying that to keep my spirits up?'

'I'm not a fan of dressing things in fancy words, as you might have noticed,' he added dryly, remembering how blunt

he'd been yesterday. 'I'll tell you straight. You weren't singing those notes to the right pitch yesterday.'

She smiled again and it was so infectious he nearly found himself smiling back. 'Is one of those for me?' She nodded at the cups he was carrying.

'No, I brought two for myself.' It took her three awkward seconds before she realised he was joking. Clearly his humour still needed work.

Smiling more cautiously now, she reached for the cup and he found himself watching her hands, noticing how small they were. How her nails were painted a soft pink. 'Thank you. How did the interview go?'

'So, so.' Silence followed as they both took a sip of their drinks. Jessie's eyes swept briefly over him before flitting back to her cup and Michael groaned inwardly. Monosyllabic answers weren't going to help ease their time together. 'I hate being interviewed,' he offered into the uncomfortable silence. 'I understand why it's needed but it's very hard to give witty and exciting answers to questions you've heard many times before.'

'I suppose it's like anything in life. Once you've done it a couple of times, it becomes routine.' Her mouth curved in a teasing smile. 'A bit like counting out tablets.'

He returned her smile, though he doubted dispensing rattled her nerves so much she had to resort to splashing cold water on her face afterwards.

Determined to be a better partner than yesterday, he forced himself to make small talk while they drunk their coffee, asking her how she'd slept (apparently a lot better than he had) and whether she'd spoken to her boys before they'd left for school (yes, but far too briefly).

'Thank you,' she said finally, putting down her cup.

'For?'

'Easing me into the session this time.'

'Ah. I'd hoped to be less obvious.'

‘It wasn’t that it was obvious. More that I sense you’re a man who prefers to be *doing* rather than chatting.’

An image of him *doing* her burst into his head and he shifted uneasily on his chair, wondering where the hell that had come from. ‘Why don’t we start with some vocal exercises?’

The morning session — cut short thanks to his interview — went remarkably quickly and soon they were queuing in the studio canteen. She reached for the ploughman’s; a calorific hunk of bread, several chunks of cheese and a huge dollop of pickle. His mouth watered and he discreetly shoved the dull-looking salad he’d chosen back into the chiller. Sod his waistline. He’d go for a run tomorrow.

When they found a table, he made sure to sit on the opposite side to her. He’d enjoyed sitting next to her last night, enjoyed talking to her — a little too much. It was time to distance himself before either of them got the wrong idea.

‘The big decision we need to make now,’ he said, keeping his eyes on her arresting face rather than her equally arresting, though far less safe, curves, ‘is which song to sing on Saturday.’

Her eyes rounded and he could read the panic in them. ‘Seriously? Already?’

The panic was entirely justified — he felt it too. ‘I think we’re best focussing all our efforts on the end game. The more we practice, the more you’ll pick up, so we might as well practice what you’ll have to sing. Have you had any thoughts on what you want that to be?’

The blood drained from her face. ‘Shit.’ Then her eyes flew back up to him. ‘Sorry, that was rude.’

‘I might have heard the word before. Perhaps even used it myself.’

Her laughter was more a flustered expelling of breath than the sexy, uninhibited sound he’d heard last night. ‘Yesterday seemed like a dream. The fancy hotel, the studios. Meeting you.’ Cheeks that were already pink turned scarlet. ‘I guess

now I'm realising why I'm here. I really am going to have to sing on live television.'

He felt her fear but was at a loss how to reassure her when he was having his own nightmares about the whole thing. 'That is the plan, yes.'

'Is "Baa Baa Black Sheep" out of the question?'

Another time he could have laughed, but right now his own worries were too close to the surface. 'I'm not sure I want to risk my reputation by singing about sheep on prime-time television.'

Hurt rushed into her eyes. 'I meant it as a joke,' she replied stiffly.

'I know. Sorry.' His half-assed apology sounded shamefully stilted. 'My reply was meant to be humorous too, but clearly it missed its mark. It's why I failed as a comedian.' Slowly she raised her head to look at him and he tried a smile. 'That was also meant to be a joke.'

She nodded. 'That one I understood. Perhaps because you smiled when you said it.'

'Fair point.' He sighed, sitting back against his chair. 'I'm not sure if this will help or hinder your own anxiety levels, but you aren't the only one worried about this show.'

* * *

Jessie stared into Michael's deep blue eyes and tried to work out whether he was telling the truth. It was impossible. He seemed to be an expert at hiding his real thoughts. At hiding the real him too, because she still wasn't sure who that was. The cold man she'd first met, and who'd just killed her sheep joke with a sharp barb? The shy one who'd admitted he wasn't good with people? Or the confident one who signed autographs and stood on a stage like he owned it?

'Think of a song you like.'

She dragged her eyes away from his and down to her plate. Damn, she'd meant to leave some of the cheese. How many calories had she just stuffed down her neck? 'There are

lots of songs I like, but none I'm capable of singing.' Her voice sounded as flat as she felt, her bubble burst the moment it all began to feel too real.

'For example?'

At his prompt, she looked back up at him. 'Okay, you asked for it. My favourite song is "All I Ask of You" from *The Phantom of the Opera*. A song I've got as much chance of mastering as I have of winning the *Great British Bake Off*.' She held up her hand. 'And before you ask, it's quite possible that I'm worse at baking than I am at singing.'

He didn't reply straight away. Didn't even smile. Just stared at her for a few humming moments before murmuring. 'Maybe you should do it.'

Jessie blinked. 'Please no. I'll kill it.'

'You won't.'

His voice was softer than she'd ever heard it and Jessie found she couldn't hold his gaze. Dipping her head, she stared down at her hands, the table, the remaining bread on her plate. She knew he was trying to make up for his earlier sharpness, but this was more serious than her hurt feelings.

'I don't want either of us to end up looking foolish,' she whispered.

'Jessie, trust me, neither do I. We have to sing something though, and I believe that together we can pull that song off.' Oh God, he sounded so earnest. She risked another look at him and found herself trapped by the bright blue of his gaze. 'It won't be perfect, but that's not what we're being judged on. Isn't the real aim of the show to encourage people to sing? To prove it isn't something to be afraid of. Anyone can do it, with a bit of practice.' Her body tingled as his eyes took on a teasing light. 'I hope it isn't too rude if I add, even you?'

He had no idea how much she wanted to smile back. Hell, to laugh, because she really needed a good belly laugh right now. But. 'I don't care about embarrassing myself in front of the millions I don't know who might watch the show. It's

embarrassing the few I do know, in particular my sons, that worries me. I don't want to be a laughing stock, for their sake.'

Understanding dawned across his handsome face. 'I won't make you do anything you aren't comfortable with.' His voice had turned smooth and seductive. Far closer to his singing voice than the cool, clipped tone he'd used yesterday. 'But maybe I have more faith in you, and in me, than you do.'

As he smiled, Jessie placed a hand on her stomach, feeling it quiver. Suddenly she felt flushed and very aware not of the celebrity sitting opposite her, but the man. 'Thank you.'

Silence descended as he finished his lunch. Jessie, her stomach too knotted to eat, stared at the small portion of crusty bread she'd left on her plate.

'Why don't we spend the rest of the day going through the words of "All I Ask of You" and trying out the first verse?' he suggested after a while. 'If, at the end of today, you don't want to do it, we'll think of something else. Perhaps revert to "Baa Baa Black Sheep".'

He added the last words with a smile so cautious, she wanted to scream. She appreciated his effort to be careful with her, but by God she wished he'd relax. It might help them both. 'Okay, yes. Let's give it a go. The Phantom piece, I mean. Not the one about the sheep.'

He smiled again, and this time it was warm enough to cause her heart to flutter. If he ever relaxed enough to laugh, she thought, she'd be in big trouble.

* * *

The music and lyrics for their duet were waiting for them on the table when they returned to their rehearsal room, thanks to the ever-efficient Georgina.

Michael walked over to the piano and carefully placed the sheets on the rack. Then sat down and began to sing.

'No more talk of darkness, forget these wide-eyed fears ...'

At the opening words she inhaled sharply, frozen to the spot, unable to do anything other than gape at him in awe. The

rich timbre of his voice slipped over her, through her, filling her with its warmth, sensitising her to his presence. She'd seen him sing live on stage, listened to him countless times on the television and her stereo, but being this close to his voice, to him ... she almost couldn't breathe. It was incredible.

He was incredible.

When the song ended, he turned to her. 'Now it's your go.'

She took a gulp of the air she'd forgotten to inhale while listening to him. How on God's earth could anyone, least of all her, follow that? 'It sounded amazing. I mean, wow.'

He smiled faintly. 'Thank you. Though if you agree to do this song, you're going to find yourself bored to death of hearing it by the end of the week.' He glanced down at his watch. 'In fact, I predict by eight o'clock you'll never want to hear me sing it again.'

Clearly the man had no clue how much of a crush she had on him. 'I predict in two minutes you'll never want to hear *me* sing it again,' she countered.

Those beautiful lips curved upwards. 'For now, I'll settle for hearing you once.'

His elbow nudged hers and she gingerly took the song sheet from him.

'Forget the words to start,' he told her. 'Just try and sing a one syllable word, something like nay, nay, nay, to the right notes.'

'Is this the Black Beauty version?'

She really needed to stop trying to make him laugh and focus on what he was saying. But then his mouth curved again, the amusement reaching his eyes, and she knew she wouldn't. Not if that was her reward.

'Very funny.' He angled his head to one side, studying her. 'At the start, we need to KISS.'

The comment took her by surprise and as his bright gaze captured hers she was bombarded with erotic images of them

embracing. Of his lips sliding over hers, his hands reaching ... she swallowed hard. 'Sorry?'

'Keep It Simple, Stupid.'

His eyes continued to watch her and yet again she wished she knew what he was thinking. Had he said it deliberately to see her reaction? 'What a disappointment,' she murmured.

'Was it?'

Heat raced up her neck and into her cheeks and she immediately felt stupid. What the hell was she doing, trying to flirt with a man who must hear chat-up lines far more elegant than hers, every day. 'I ... umm, sorry. Bad joke.'

'Yes, of course it was. A joke, I mean. Not that it was particularly bad.' He raked a hand through his short, dark hair and for a second she wondered if he was as rattled as she was. 'So, if I remember correctly, you were about to nay your way through "All I Ask of You".'

Grateful for the dial down in intensity, Jessie smiled and prepared to sing.

* * *

At Michael's suggestion, they worked into the evening to make up for the time lost in the morning. Georgina ordered a pizza for them. Of course she did. The woman seemed to know what Michael needed before he even asked for it.

By the time it arrived, Jessie wasn't sick of hearing his voice but she was mightily sick of her own.

'Come on, you've earned this.' He took hold of the huge pizza box and placed it on the table, smiling at the bottle of wine and two glasses he found in the bag delivered with it. 'Georgina thinks of everything.'

Jessie was so grateful for the wine, she didn't react to his words as she took a big swig. Hell, if the woman had walked in just then, there was a high chance she'd have hugged her, even though the pizza did look as if it had a million calories. She could almost see Georgina smirking, *that'll add another two pounds.*

Michael took a more considered sip from his own glass. 'If you continue to improve like this, you might surprise your children on Saturday. In a good way,' he added hastily, giving her a wry smile.

'Thank you. Perhaps the KISS worked.'

His eyes flew to her face. 'It often does.'

As she felt the heat rise once again in her cheeks, she cursed her big mouth. Taking another gulp of wine, she groped around for a conversation opener. 'Did you always want to be a singer?'

'I always loved singing. I never imagined as a child I could make any money from it.'

'What do you enjoy most about it all?'

'Throwing my voice across large concert halls, working with the best orchestras. Hearing the applause of the crowd when I've finished.'

His answer was careful and succinct. One she guessed he'd given a million times before. 'And what do you enjoy least?'

'The fame.' He finally met her eyes and gave her a self-mocking smile. 'Actually, what I really don't enjoy is people wanting my friendship, inviting me to their house, party, yacht, just because I'm famous.'

His reply gave her a glimpse into why he was so aloof with her at times. And why he retained his best friend as his manager. 'If it helps, I promise I won't invite you to my house.'

'Now that's a shame.'

Flummoxed and flustered, Jessie couldn't think of a suitable reply. *That's what happens when you try to flirt with someone out of your league.*

They finished their pizza in silence, his words hanging between them. She'd have dismissed them as a joke but there was no amusement in his eyes. Instead he'd seemed wistful,

pensive. Or was she clutching at sentiments that simply weren't there?

Chapter Seven

Michael had to be going out of his mind. He'd spent most of yesterday with Jessie and yet here he was at nine the following morning walking back into the studio with, if not a spring, then certainly a slight bounce to his step.

He was actually looking forward to seeing her again.

All that talk of kissing yesterday must have screwed with his brain.

There had been a moment though — if he was honest more than one — when he'd thought not of talking about it, but actually doing it. Claspng the back of her head, his hand nestling in those mass of curls, drawing her gorgeous mouth to his and covering it with his own.

The image caused a throb of desire to pulse through him. How long had it been since he'd last felt like this? Needy, wanting. The shallow, stick-thin celebrity crazed women he came across had invariably left him feeling flat. Jessie, with her ample curves, lilting laugh and absolute normality, hadn't just woken his libido. She'd jump-started it.

But what the hell was he meant to do about it? He'd received mixed vibes from his attempt to flirt yesterday. Admittedly his technique was rusty, but her response — an embarrassed silence — had been less than encouraging. Even if she'd leapt into his arms though, what then? He was about to embark on a worldwide tour, for God's sake. It wasn't the time to start fooling around.

'Hey, Mickey. How's it hanging?'

At the sound of that awful nickname, he snapped his head round to find Jerome Stevens, aka the rapper Playit Kool, smiling cockily over at him. Jerome was one of the five celebrities competing against him on Saturday night. 'Good, thank you.' Though what the hell the *hanging* was supposed to refer to, he wasn't sure. 'How are things with you?'

'Everything's sweet, man. My lady's got a real kick-ass voice. Gonna take you down on Saturday.' He shook his head

with laughter, dreadlocks whipping round his face.

‘I’ll enjoy watching you try.’

Michael’s reply caused more laughter from the rap star. ‘Oh, man, you classical dudes crack me up. Do you drink from a cup and saucer, posh boy?’

Though his roots were buried deep in working-class soil, Michael knew Jerome wouldn’t want to hear that. Nor did the rapper actually want a reply. All he wanted was the excuse to hurl the jibe.

So he kept quiet as Jerome swaggered away, lean hips rolling with a loose ease that made Michael feel like a geriatric needing a hip replacement. Merely saving face on Saturday was now no longer an option. He needed to win. For Jessie, for himself.

And to show the cocksure bastard what a classical singer, born and bred on a rundown estate, who’d had abuse hurled at him on a daily basis, was capable of.

The buzz of his phone drew his attention and he checked the screen before accepting the call. ‘Good morning, Georgina. Sorry, Georgie.’ He winced. ‘Everything okay?’

‘I’m just reminding you about the photo shoot later today.’

‘Oh, blast.’ How had that slipped his mind?

‘You did ask me to schedule it this week,’ she reminded him with a slight edge.

He had, though that had been before he’d met Jessie. Before he’d known how much he enjoyed being with her. And how much he wanted to win the damn competition. ‘Yes, no problem. I’ll be there.’

‘How are the rehearsals going? Do you need any more excuses to escape?’

He frowned, wishing he hadn’t let slip how much he’d been dreading this week. ‘I’m good, thank you.’

‘Okay then, I’ll leave you to it. The cab to take you to the photo shoot is booked for two p.m. Shout if you need anything

else. Anything at all.’

He cringed, hoping to God he’d got it wrong and she hadn’t deliberately lowered her voice for the last three words.

When he opened the door to the rehearsal room he experienced a pang of disappointment at not finding Jessie. The film crew were there setting up though, so he made small talk with them while he waited.

And waited.

It wasn’t long before his disappointment mushroomed into frustration. Where the hell was she? He wasn’t the one who needed the damn practice.

When she finally turned up half an hour later, the camera crew had given up — though not before getting a few candid shots of him pacing — and Michael was within a whisker of doing the same. ‘Good morning, or should I say afternoon?’

She looked flushed and out of breath. ‘I’m so sorry. I was on the phone and it took longer than I expected.’

‘You need all the rehearsal time you can get, Jessie.’ The meeting with the rapper, the frustration of the last half an hour, simmered inside him. ‘I’m not here this afternoon, so we’ve only got this morning.’ Admittedly that was his fault, not hers, but still. ‘It’s time to take this competition more seriously. I hope I don’t have to remind you my reputation is on the line here, too.’ Temper fizzing inside him he stalked over to the piano and sat down, waiting for her to follow.

She didn’t. Instead she remained in the middle of the room, clutching at her hands. ‘The reason I’m late is because my son wanted to go through the words for his assembly with me. The assembly I’m missing because I’m here.’ Though her voice shook, her eyes stared unflinchingly into his. ‘I realise it won’t seem important to you, but to him it’s a very big deal. Which means it’s a very big deal for me, too.’

His heart plummeted as he began to see how much he’d blundered. ‘Jessie—’

‘And one more thing,’ she interrupted. ‘I’m giving up five precious days of my children’s lives to be here and do this. I

want to make them proud of me. So if you think for one minute I'm not taking this seriously, you can damned well think again.'

Brown eyes flashing, she turned and strode out of the room, leaving Michael staring first at her rigid back, and then the door as it rattled back into the doorframe.

Bollocks.

Why hadn't he thought to *ask* her why she was late, before launching into her? His singing might be world-class, but his interpersonal skills totally sucked.

* * *

Jessie finished drying her eyes and was inspecting their appearance — puffy and bloodshot, perfect, just perfect — when she heard a knock on the door.

'Jessie, it's Michael. Are you in there?'

'No.'

She wasn't in the mood to talk to him just yet. Already feeling wobbly after talking to Jack and Luke, Michael's snide comments had tipped her over the edge.

To her astonishment the door opened and Michael's tall figure stood in the doorway.

'This is the ladies, Michael. Men aren't welcome.'

'Any men, or just me?' he countered, looking distinctly uneasy. 'I wanted to check up on you. You've been gone a long time.'

'I'm perfectly okay, thank you. Though my face has probably seen better days.'

'You look fine to me.'

Clearly on his best behaviour again, he gave her a cautious smile. She willed herself not to smile back just yet. He'd been bloody rude. Just because he was gorgeous didn't mean he could trample over her.

‘I also came to apologise.’ His eyes drifted from her and over to the cubicles. ‘If it’s all the same with you though, could I do the grovelling back in the rehearsal room? The ladies’ toilet isn’t a natural environment for me.’

Nope, she still wasn’t going to smile. She wasn’t. Nodding briskly, she walked with him in silence back to the rehearsal room. As he closed the door she moved to the other side of the room. Distance was good when dealing with someone you had an unhealthy crush on.

He glanced over, gave her a wry smile and sighed. Then he did something unexpected. He walked towards her, coming to a stop right in front of her. As he put a hand on her shoulder her pulse began to hammer and she didn’t know where to look. His broad chest, clearly defined beneath his freshly ironed blue shirt. Or higher, to his throat with its sexy Adam’s apple. Or to his mouth. Oh God, she couldn’t look at those lips and not want to feel them on hers. But then the hand moved from her shoulder to her chin, and as he angled her face upwards she had no option but to look straight into his eyes.

It was the first time she’d been this close to him. When amused, his eyes could look like the brightest of sapphires, but she’d also seen them as cold and uninviting as the North Sea. Right now, they were calm, quiet waters.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said softly. ‘I should have realised you were phoning home, of course you have to do that. I can be a thoughtless sod sometimes. Can you forgive me?’

The contrition in his eyes, the deep lull of his voice. Jessie replied with a nod, swallowing to try and lubricate her throat.

Relief darted across his face and she tried not to be touched by it.

Breaking their eye contact he moved over to the piano. Taking her cue, Jessie went to join him. ‘I am taking this seriously, you know.’

His handsome face looked pained. ‘I know you are. I should never have said that.’ He paused, clearly choosing his next words carefully. ‘I’ve never done anything like this

before, and I don't want to let you down. I don't want either of us to regret this.'

'I've got no regrets so far,' she said quietly.

'Not even the missed assembly?'

'Nope.'

'The cold pizza?'

She smiled. 'Not even that.' Especially not that, she thought, recalling the way he'd almost flirted with her.

'I hope it remains that way.' His eyes lingered on hers and yet again she wondered what was going on behind the handsome mask. All too quickly he looked away, and started to play.

* * *

Two hours later and Jessie was still getting the words jumbled.

'You're doing fine, really. We've got another two full days to get this right.'

'Wow, two whole days?' The sigh that escaped her was tinged with resignation. 'Two weeks wouldn't be long enough.'

'Two days is plenty of time to show an improvement.'

Why did he still look and sound so chipper, when she felt knackered? 'I hadn't realised how tiring singing was. How on earth do you manage when you're on stage?'

'I've been doing it a little longer than you.' Another small smile, the fifth this afternoon. 'It helps to keep fit though. I swim when I can, and run most days. What about you? You look like you keep in shape.'

She did? The moment the compliment started to register she felt the hot stain creep across her cheeks. 'I run when I get the chance.' No point mentioning that the chances didn't come along very often.

'How about tomorrow?'

‘Well, I suppose I could.’ She had brought her trainers. Then again—

‘I’ll meet you in the lobby at seven thirty a.m.’

‘What?’ Oh no, that wasn’t happening. No way was she running with him. ‘I wouldn’t want to slow you down, so—’

‘It doesn’t matter how fast we go.’

She huffed. ‘Are you doing this so I won’t be late again?’

He grimaced, looking offended. ‘I probably deserved that but no, I have no ulterior motive.’ With a deep sigh, he glanced at his watch. ‘Sorry, I’ve got to go now. I have a meeting with a woman and a camera.’ At her questioning glance, he added. ‘She’s going to take some photos of me for the magazine piece I did yesterday.’

‘Sounds glamorous.’

If anything, his sigh was even heavier. ‘It isn’t. Staring into a camera lens while wearing clothes chosen by somebody else isn’t my idea of fun.’ He hesitated. ‘I’m aware this is cutting into our rehearsal time, so if you want to carry on when I get back ...’

Pleasure shot through her at the thought of spending the evening with him again. Even if she’d have to sing for her supper. But then she remembered this morning and shook her head. ‘I need to catch up with the boys. I’ve only managed hurried phone calls so far and I’d like to have a proper conversation with them. Find out how the assembly went this morning. Besides, I suspect you won’t feel like meeting up after your afternoon gazing into a camera.’

He nodded briefly, not meeting her eyes. Was he disappointed? Relieved? Cross?

‘Well, then.’ He angled his head, stunning her by planting a very gentle kiss on her cheek. ‘Enjoy the rest of your day.’

‘I ... thank you,’ she stammered, the cheek tingling from the press of his lips. God, she’d never be able to wash her face again.

He flicked a small smile before turning and walking away, leaving her staring after him like a lovesick fan.

* * *

Did it make her a bad mother that for a beat, just a tiny sliver of a second while Luke was recounting his day, her mind had drifted wistfully to Michael, and the evening she could have spent?

‘Mum?’

Guiltily she focussed back on her youngest son. ‘It sounds like you totally nailed the assembly. I can’t wait to watch the video when I come home.’ If Phil had remembered to take the camera. And to use it. ‘Do you want to put Dad on the phone now?’

A loud clatter followed, which Jessie assumed was Luke dropping the phone. ‘How is singing with the great tenor going then?’ Phil asked when he finally came on.

‘He’s great, I’m struggling.’

‘Great?’ There was a question in his voice and, because he knew her so well, she knew what the question was.

‘Yes.’ She shut her eyes and lay back on the bed, wondering how much Phil could read into that single answer.

‘Jessie, you will be careful, won’t you?’

Looks like he read too much. ‘Of course I will.’

There was a beat of silence and she knew he was wondering how much he could say without pissing her off. ‘It’s just I know you’ve always liked this guy, and you have a vivid imagination.’

She squeezed her eyes even further shut. ‘I’m not stupid enough to imagine he might fall for me.’

She heard the relief in his long, slow exhale. ‘Good. Well, enjoy the last few days.’

‘Thank you. And thank you for looking after the boys.’

‘You’ve already said that. Three times now.’

‘Sorry. I’d better go before I say it again. Don’t want you thinking I’m indebted to you.’

Emotion welled inside her as she ended the call and suddenly all she wanted to do was cry, though she wasn’t even sure why. Because she missed her family? Because she was so grateful to Phil for stepping up and giving her this time?

Or because she was scared she wasn’t being careful? She might not be stupid enough to imagine Michael would fall for her, but she had an awful feeling she was stupid enough to fall for him.

Chapter Eight

Michael glanced over at the bedside clock. He was running late. Damn. After the bollocking he'd given Jessie yesterday for turning up late, he needed to get his arse downstairs pronto.

But he felt sluggish this morning. A night spent tossing and turning.

First on his mind had been Jessie. He wasn't even sure what drew him to her. She was pretty, with her lively brown eyes and dancing curls, but he met and mingled with beautiful. She was funny, too, but he'd dated women just as sharp. Then again, the women he knew used humour to be cutting, where Jessie often directed it against herself. Not that she'd care what he thought of her though, judging by the speed she'd turned down an evening with him last night. The need to talk to her boys had felt like an excuse. As if she'd decided he'd made too many blunders to consider seeing him any more than she had to.

But damn it, she'd have to put up with him a lot more over the next few days, because the other reason he felt so sluggish was he'd woken up in a cold sweat thinking about the final on Saturday.

Hastily he tied his trainers and bolted from the room, miraculously making it into the lobby just in time to see Jessie dashing down the opposite staircase.

'Morning,' she said breathlessly.

'You didn't chicken out then?'

Laughter tumbled from her in the relaxed, easy way he envied. 'I nearly did. Confession time, it's been a while since I went for a run. But I figured I've already sung in front of you. I doubt my running is any more embarrassing.'

He wanted to tell her it didn't matter how well she ran, she looked amazing in Lycra that hugged every curve, but he was terrified of coming off as a celebrity leech. Instead he gave her a smile he knew was stilted and awkward, and led the way outside.

They started off slow, Michael happy to leave it to Jessie to set the pace. Happy simply to be out in the fresh air and jogging next to a woman who didn't seem to want anything from him, other than to be treated with consideration.

'I thought we'd run round the park.' He nodded in the direction of the gates. 'It's about three miles. Does that work for you?'

Her eyes, previously focussed on his legs, flew up to his face. 'Yes, sure.'

He felt a trickle of pleasure. The jury was clearly still out on whether she liked him, but it appeared she liked his legs.

They ran in silence for a while and every now and then he hung back and allowed his own eyes to dip to her legs, the round curve of her buttocks. Did he have the guts to act on this attraction? To risk a rebuff, and subject them both to an awkward few days until the competition was over? And if he did, was it sensible considering he was about to embark on a long tour, and she had two kids in a life a world away from his?

'I'm sorry.' She stopped abruptly, crouching with her hands on her knees, her breath coming out in ragged pants. 'I was stupid to try and run with you. I don't know what I was thinking.'

'It's okay. Rest and get your breath back.'

Slowly she straightened, her cheeks so red they were almost glowing. 'I guess it was possible to embarrass myself further.'

'No.' He scratched at his head. 'I mean no you haven't embarrassed yourself. Not no, your singing is so bad you couldn't embarrass yourself further.'

Her laughter seemed to get stuck in her throat. 'Oh God. Shoot me now.'

'Not before Saturday evening.'

She rolled her gorgeous hazel eyes at him and he was so tempted to say to hell with what was sensible and kiss her.

Right there in the park.

His face must have reflected his thoughts because she stilled, the amusement leaving her eyes, and for a long, pulsing moment their gaze clashed. Was it desire darkening her eyes, or fear? Were her cheeks flushed with exercise, excitement? Or embarrassment because he was now staring at her?

He dragged his eyes away, wishing not for the first time that the man who could sing so effortlessly on stage, wasn't such an introverted mess off it.

That's when he noticed they'd attracted a small crowd.

'Oi, I know you. You're that geezer that does the fancy singing.' A middle-aged man with a pot belly stared back at him. 'You're in that show they keep advertising, the one that's on Saturday.' He shifted his focus to Jessie. 'And she's your singing partner. I saw her picture in the paper, too. Didn't recognise her with her running kit.'

Michael could almost feel Jessie trying to make herself invisible. He gave the man a practiced smile. 'I hope you'll be rooting for us. Now if you'll excuse us, we need to get back and rehearse.'

Jessie was off like a hare out of a trap. 'Oh my God,' she panted when they were out of earshot. 'That was horrible.'

He didn't like to tell her that after she'd been on the television, encounters like that were likely to be more frequent for a while. And possibly worse. 'Which part was horrible?'

'Them knowing who I was. Seeing me with you, and when I'm all sweaty in my leggings.' She groaned. 'How much further till we're at the hotel?'

'Not far.' He gave her an encouraging smile. 'Especially not at this pace.'

An hour later they were showered, changed and back in the studio. 'Did you manage to speak to your sons yesterday?' he asked before they started, remembering his previous blunders.

Her surprise at his question told him more than he wanted to about how brusque he'd been these last few days. 'Yes, thank you.'

'Are they looking forward to Saturday?'

The smile that had burst onto her face at the mention of her sons, dimmed. 'I think they're more worried than anything. Word has got around now and it seems everyone in the school *and* the village know their mum will be singing on the telly.'

Because she looked so nervous, and damn it, because he wanted to, Michael reached for her hand and held it. 'Then soon everyone in the village will know how amazing their mum is.'

* * *

Jessie stared at the way Michael's long tanned fingers wrapped firmly round hers, as if he was trying to force his belief into her through the power of touch. And damn, now her eyes were starting to well.

He released her hand, but only to wipe at a tear that had traitorously crept down her cheek.

'It's okay to be nervous. I am before a performance.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. You just have to learn to use the nerves in a positive way, and not let them overwhelm you. I promise you won't embarrass yourself.' His eyes softened, brimming with kindness. 'Don't forget, you won't be alone, I'll be on stage with you.'

Her breath caught and she had to look away before the emotions trapped in her chest erupted in an embarrassing way. But it was okay, she could do this. She'd have to do this, because there was no way she was letting her family down. And no way she was letting Michael down either.

He motioned for her to sit next to him at the piano and she perched on the end of the stool, very conscious of the warmth of the body next to her.

Don't think about him. Focus on your words.

There were a few missed starts, a few stumbles, but eventually she made it through the entire piece.

'I did it!'

'Not quite.' Michael shook his head. 'This is meant to be a love duet. You sang the whole song looking just past my left ear.'

Unconsciously she twisted her hands in her lap. 'Did I?'

'You know you did. Please, this time look at me now and again. We have to make the audience believe we at least like each other.'

Her heart began to race. She knew very well she'd avoided his eyes. Singing emotional words of love while looking into the eyes of the man she had an embarrassing crush on was way, way too intimate.

But now he'd asked, how could she not? Clearing her throat, she nodded at him to start again. Each time their eyes caught she flushed, heat prickling her skin. By the time they'd reached the end of the song, she'd fumbled over more words than she'd sung.

'You knew the words yesterday.' She could sense his frustration, though he was clearly trying to hide it. 'Why can't you remember them today?'

Her eyes strayed to the door, willing someone to come in. The director, the camera crew, heck even Georgina would be preferable to facing Michael right now.

'Jessie.' There was a warning edge to his voice.

With a huff she moved away from him, walking to the relative safety of the other side of the room. 'I can't sing while I'm looking at you.'

'Then we've got a problem, don't you think?' He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

The weary gesture caused a jolt of guilt to slam into her. A sharp reminder that she wasn't the only one worried about

Saturday. If she mucked up she'd embarrass her sons for a few days; herself too. Singing was Michael's career though. His life.

'I'm sorry.' She closed her eyes, wondering how on earth she could explain what she was feeling without it being obvious she had a massive crush on him. And each day she was with him it was getting bigger. 'When I look at you, I forget what I'm meant to be singing next. Possibly because you're quite attractive.'

When she dared to raise her eyes, she found a small smile on his face. 'Quite attractive, huh?'

'Yep, that about covers it.'

Silence echoed through the room for a few beats until he suddenly stood up and marched out of the room.

Her heart sunk. Oh God, she'd totally embarrassed him. Way to go, Jessie. Just as she was weighing up whether to go and find him, stay put, or go back to the hotel, he appeared again, clutching a paper bag.

Which he proceeded to place over his head.

'Does this work better?' he asked, his voice muffled by the bag.

He looked so ridiculous, and so totally at odds with the formal, at times austere man she'd come to know. Laughter exploded out of her, becoming even more uncontrollable when the camera crew chose that moment to wander in.

With the intimate mood broken, especially now there was a camera lens pointing at them and two hulking men behind it, Jessie was able to focus back on the singing. She grew more confident at looking at Michael, though she kept it to fleeting glances, just in case. After each verse Michael would stop her, refining parts here and there, as if he were tuning a musical instrument.

* * *

'I think you've had enough for today,' Michael announced finally, looking over at her as she tried to stifle a yawn.

Blimey, if she was yawning in front of Michael Tennant, she must be bushed. 'I think you may be right. I'm not sure if I'm shattered from the gruelling marathon you forced on me this morning, the scare of being recognised, or the singing.'

He inclined his head in acceptance. 'You can tell your boys tonight that I'm a cruel teacher.'

An awkward pause followed. The last two evenings he'd asked her to work late. Would he ask her again? She was painfully aware of how the days were slipping away, not just for the final, but for her time with him.

'Well, enjoy your evening and try to rest your voice. If that's possible for you.' He smiled, just a small curve of his mouth, but together with the tease in his eyes it felt ... big, important. Like maybe he was warming to her. 'I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

As he bent to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek, she chided herself for being so naive. Michael Tennant had better things to do in his evening than sit through another few hours of her murdering the song they'd been practicing all day.

Not murdering, she reminded herself. Not now. More like a gentle euthanasia.

Back in her hotel room, Jessie flopped onto the bed. Phoning home would ground her. Remind her who she was and what was important.

Phil answered on the first ring. 'Well, if it isn't the singing superstar again.'

'Leave it,' she replied, a little too testily.

'Touchy, huh? Is someone getting nervous?'

She let out a long, deep sigh. 'Sorry. It's been a long day and I really don't want to talk about it. How are you and Annabel managing?'

'We're getting on great. I've had a cooked meal on the table every night.'

She could actually hear the grin in his voice. 'That wasn't part of the deal. She's only meant to be looking after Jack and

Luke until you get in.’

‘Hey, I can’t help it if the woman wants to feed me. Jack, me and Luke sit at the table with Annabel and her boys each evening to eat. Who’d have thought it?’

‘Certainly not me, as you rarely managed it when you were living with us.’ A bite of jealousy rippled through her at the thought of them all enjoying themselves without her. *But you wanted this.*

‘I don’t think Annabel wants to be at home at the moment. Things with her clot of a husband seem to be getting worse. I’m being a gentleman and helping her out.’

At times he could be one, she remembered. He could also be lazy and unthinking. ‘Don’t go breaking her heart, Phil. She’s vulnerable right now.’ Annabel hadn’t been happy in her marriage for a long while now, not helped by her estranged husband’s infidelity. Divorce was probably only a matter of time.

‘I know, Jess. I’m not a total idiot.’ He sighed. ‘I’ll go and get the boys. Maybe you can give them a sermon rather than me.’

Jessie stared up at the ceiling, blinking back tears. Jack and Luke were having fun miles away from her, yet instead of feeling happy for them, she felt left out. And horribly lonely.

‘Mum, Jack’s being a dick and says he won’t help me with my maths homework. Plus, Miss Mathews told me off for talking but I was only asking Simon what we were meant to be doing.’

Luke’s words came flying out in a familiar rush, and her heart ached a little, even as she started to smile. ‘Am I allowed to ask why you needed Simon to tell you what you were doing?’

‘I didn’t hear what Miss said.’

‘Because?’

‘I was talking to Josh.’

Laughter bubbled and love flooded into her heart, banishing her tears. A poignant reminder that this was her real life, and it contained everything she needed. ‘Well maybe you did deserve the telling off after all. And don’t call your brother a dick ...’

Chapter Nine

Michael paced his room, torn. The steady, sensible part of him, the one usually in control, told him to take a shower and go to bed. It was exactly what he should do.

So why the hell was he considering knocking on Jessie's door at nine o'clock at night?

He'd lost his mind.

Or maybe, just maybe, he was fed up with being sensible. And fed up with being lonely. He was thirty-seven, yet he spent most of his evenings either working, or on his own. A few years ago he could have counted on Robert to relieve his boredom, but now his friend was loved up with his new wife and Michael had no desire to spend his evenings as a gooseberry. He'd tried it a few times and ended up feeling even lonelier than before.

Sure he *knew* a lot of people. His phone was jammed full with telephone numbers — names that would probably make Jessie's eyes water. A few calls and he could be at a party. Or out to dinner with a glamorous singer/actress.

But he rarely ever made the call. Going out, being sociable, involved an effort he simply didn't have the energy for.

Yet despite the long day he'd spent with Jessie, and the terminally dull teleconference with Robert and the tour organisers he'd just escaped from, he wasn't ready to call it a night.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Michael stalked to the telephone by the bed and called reception. 'Jessie Simmons' room. Please.'

He could feel the thump of his heart as he waited for the call to be put through.

Christ, what if she was asleep? Was it too late to be calling a woman he hardly knew? Just because they were working together, it didn't mean they were friends. And because he was

the celebrity she'd probably feel obliged to see him if he asked her ...

'Hello?'

He gripped the receiver. 'Jessie, it's Michael. I hope I haven't woken you?'

'No, no. It's only nine o'clock. I might be a small-town girl but I can usually make it to ten before I fall asleep.'

Oh crap, had he offended her? Why couldn't he manage basic small talk? And what the blazes was he going to say now?

Jessie, of course, had none of his crippling ineptitude when it came to conversation. 'Is everything okay? Anything I can help you with?'

'Everything's fine.' He paused, taking a deep breath. 'I wondered, do you fancy a drink?'

'Oh ... well, that's ... umm.'

His heart sank like a brick at her flustered reply. He should have gone for the blasted shower. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot. My meeting finished early, so now I'm sat in my hotel room not quite tired enough to sleep.'

'You had a meeting after we finished?'

'Only on the phone, but it went on. And then on some more.'

'Poor you. A day of listening to me, followed by an evening of listening to other people. No wonder you need a drink.'

'Like you wouldn't believe.'

The tension from a few moments ago began to slowly ease away as her soft laughter echoed down the line. 'Maybe it's a good job we only have two more days.'

At the start of the week he'd have been overjoyed to hear that. Now it left him feeling as if someone had sucked all the stuffing out of him. 'I think it's a shame we only have two more days.'

There, he'd done it. Tested the water before it was too late to try. As he waited for her to say something he shut his eyes. If she laughed it off, she wasn't interested. He could accept that. It would even be a good thing, because he knew this was all bad timing—

'I think it's a shame, too.'

Her softly spoken reply caused his throat to tighten uncomfortably. 'So, about that drink?'

'I'd love one.'

'Are you sure?' Instantly he slammed his hand against his forehead and fell back on the bed. Did he *want* her to rethink?

'Well I was, until you asked me again. Are you having second thoughts?'

'God no.' He sat up again and rubbed at his face. 'Sorry, it's just you didn't seem keen when I first asked. I don't want you to feel like you have to pander to the celebrity singer.' He cringed. This is why he should have left well alone.

'I don't. I'm not.' She let out a huff of laughter. 'Truth is, you caught me off guard. I wasn't asleep but I am in my pjs.'

She might have said pyjamas but immediately his mind conjured a slinky black nightdress, her curves spilling out of them. 'You don't have to change. I'm very happy to come to you.'

Silence. The worse kind, too, because he couldn't see her face to pick up clues to what she was thinking. Other men made flirting look easy, yet he managed to make it look like wading through a bog, on crutches. Did he sound like a perv now? 'Look, scratch that. I've put you in an awkward position —'

'I'm in room three seventeen.'

'Okay then.' He released the breath that had become stuck in his lungs. 'I'll be there in five minutes.'

Good idea, or bad idea, it was too late now.

* * *

Jessie scrambled off the bed. Bloody hell, what to wear for a drink with your celebrity crush in a hotel room? And you've only got five minutes to change.

For two of those precious minutes she stood paralysed in front of her wardrobe. Numbly she grabbed at a pink shirt, only to shove it back because it needed ironing. She fingered the black silk top, but decided it looked like she was trying too hard. She could put on the stretch beige trousers she'd had on all day, but weren't they a bit formal for a quick drink? Then again, other than his running gear, she'd never seen Michael in anything less than formal.

Her heart jumped at the sound of a light tap on the door. Damn it, pyjamas it was then. The bottoms she could get away with — they looked like stretchy yoga pants — but the top was way too skimpy. Hurriedly she shoved on her zip up hoodie, wondering why on earth she hadn't asked him to give her more time.

Even if you'd had half an hour it wouldn't have been long enough.

Yet this wildly attractive man had phoned her, hadn't he?

A quick look in the mirror and she winced, quickly dabbing on some blusher to give her face some life.

'Jessie?' Michael's smooth voice sounded through the door.

With a final pat of her hair, she went to open it.

'Hi.' He gave her the small, awkward smile she was becoming used to, though the eyes that rested on hers were warm.

'Hi, yourself.' She stepped back to allow him in, wondering how it was possible he looked even better now, tired from a long day, a dark shadow of stubble across his jaw. He still wore the dark dress trousers and pale blue shirt he'd been wearing all day. A glance down at her own cobbled together slouch look made her feel gauche and inadequate. 'I'm sorry about my outfit. If I'd had more notice I would have put on something more appropriate.'

Embarrassment gave her voice an edge she hadn't intended, and he immediately looked contrite. 'I'm sorry. I didn't think I would be finished so early, or I would have mentioned it at the studio. You look lovely.'

And now she'd shamed him into complimenting her. To hide her confusion, Jessie went over to the minibar. 'What is it to be? Whisky, brandy, beer? As the production team are picking up the tab, I can push the boat out and offer hugely expensive peanuts.'

'Whisky sounds good. I'll pass on the nuts.'

She found she couldn't look at him. 'Straight? I've got no ice ...'

'Straight works for me.'

She fiddled with the miniatures, pouring his whisky and a brandy for herself, all the while aware of his eyes on her. God knows what he must be thinking, especially now she'd turned this into a pyjama party.

'Here you go.' She motioned for him to sit on the armchair while she perched awkwardly on the end of the bed, trying not to think that Michael Tennant was effectively in her bedroom.

He let out a long, deep sigh. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I've made you feel uncomfortable and that's the last thing I wanted.'

Her heart thudded as she watched him knock back his whisky and place it carefully on the table.

Slowly he rose to his feet, towering over her.

'No, I ... it's okay,' she stammered, straining her neck to look up at him. She might feel self-conscious and slightly nervous, but no way did she want him to leave. *Two days to drink her fill of him. Two days before she was sucked back into real life.*

To her shock he crouched before her and clasped one of her hands. 'No, it's not okay,' he said softly. 'Truth is, I missed

you this evening, but it was selfish of me to come over so late.'

His dazzling blue eyes blazed into hers and she could no more look away than she could physically move. Her body cried out to be touched, her mouth to be kissed by lips that were now only inches from her own.

He'd missed her?

In an effort to calm herself she dragged her gaze away, down to his throat, but even the sight of that was tortuously sexy.

Then she felt a warm hand cup her face and his breath stir against her skin. 'Is this okay?'

In reply, she closed the gap between them, pressing her lips firmly onto his, letting her actions say what she couldn't. A groan left him before he crushed her to him, easing her back onto the bed. Her breasts swelled, straining against the confines of her vest top and she almost gasped with relief as he unzipped the shapeless hoodie and smoothed his hands over her.

'Christ.' He gazed down at her, his breath hot and heavy. 'I've got to find out if these are as stunning as I think they'll be.' A moan of satisfaction escaped her as his hands slid under her top, pulling it up and over her breasts before caressing their fullness. 'More.' He shook his head, his eyes devouring her. 'More stunning than I imagined, and I've imagined them a lot.'

'You have?'

Suddenly the man she'd crushed on for years, the same one who'd just started expertly teasing her nipples with his tongue, halted and looked up. 'Is that okay?'

Oh God, that someone as beautiful, as talented as him, should doubt enough to ask, was beyond her comprehension. In answer she tugged at his shirt, pulling it out of his trousers, running her hands over the warm, taut skin beneath. She felt his powerful body shudder and he groaned again, the sound full of need, of want.

On a fresh burst of confidence, she reached for his belt.

Then her phone rang.

Uttering a strong oath under his breath, Michael slowly pulled away, his handsome face flushed.

‘I err, I’d better answer it,’ she mumbled apologetically. ‘It might be the boys.’

Disappointment weighed into her as he nodded and stood up. She felt like crying as she reached for the damn phone with its shrill, insistent ringtone.

Even more so when she saw it was only flaming Annabel. She barely choked out a greeting. ‘Hello.’

‘Well, hello there, my friend. Hope I haven’t called at an inappropriate time, you sound all weird.’

Jessie hastily jammed her breasts back into her vest top and tried to contain the hysterical laughter that threatened to escape. ‘No, no, you’re not interrupting anything. I just had to run for the phone.’ She cast a furtive glance at Michael, who raised an eyebrow.

‘You do know never to lie to a best friend, don’t you?’ Jessie shut her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek. Never before had she wanted to laugh and cry so much at the same time. ‘Oh my God, I’ve caught you having a snog with the great man, haven’t I?’ Annabel’s highly amused voice continued in her ear. ‘No need to reply, I can see that would be a tad awkward. But if you want to see your kids alive again, you’d better call me back with *all the details* when he finally takes his hands off you.’

Jessie’s cheeks burnt under Michael’s watchful gaze. ‘Well, yes, thanks, Annabel. I’ll call you back later.’ She stabbed the call end button and flopped back on the bed.

‘Not the boys then.’

Jessie sat up and tried to gather her wits, which seemed to be stuck in the moments before the call. The moments when she’d had her hands all over Michael Tennant’s hard body. ‘My friend, Annabel. She likes to check up on me.’

‘She certainly knows how to time her calls.’ His voice was dry, his expression one of ... resignation, disappointment. Relief? She couldn’t tell.

‘That’s Annabel, always there to keep me on the straight and narrow.’ The image of her unbuckling Michael’s trousers blazed across her eyes, and she felt a flush of shame. What had she been doing?

Michael took her hand and pulled her gently to her feet before wrapping his arms around her stiff, mortified body. There was nothing sexual about the way he held her now. It was kind, caring, yet it did nothing to appease her feeling of acute embarrassment. Rather it emphasised how differently they must be feeling. Him, obviously relieved the phone call had put a halt to an experience he would have later regretted. Her, gutted the phone call had put a halt to an experience she’d have remembered for the rest of her life.

‘I’d better go.’ His blue eyes seared through her. ‘You’re a special lady, Jessie, really special.’

Sure, she thought miserably. Just not special enough.

‘I’ll see you at the studio tomorrow.’ He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. Then left, closing the door carefully behind him.

Immediately she crumpled onto the bed and reached for her phone, her hands still trembling. ‘Annabel, it’s me. I’ve got myself into a right mess.’

Chapter Ten

Michael slept like shit. His brain had finally turned off around five in the morning, only for the alarm to kick in at six thirty. He almost reached for the off button, but instead dragged on his running kit and pounded the pavements. It didn't look like he was going to get the release he craved, so he'd have to exhaust himself through exercise.

Bloody Annabel.

Whoever the woman was, she sure picked her moments. Another five minutes and he'd like to think Jessie wouldn't have heard her damn phone, never mind answered it.

But she had answered it, and the moment had been lost. Hell, lost was an understatement. Lost implied it could be found. Judging by the feel of Jess's rigid body when he'd tried to embrace her afterwards, the moment had detonated into a thousand un-put-back-able pieces.

Five miles later he dragged his sweaty body into the shower, ready for his 8.00 a.m. meeting with Georgina. *Georgie.*

She knocked on his door right on time, breezing inside on a cloud of expensive perfume. Immediately it made him think of Jessie. Not because the two were alike, but because they were polar opposites. One brash, confident, clothed in figure hugging designer labels, smelling of Dior or Chanel. The other warm, hesitant, her style simple. Her fragrance of choice the hotel shampoo and shower gel.

Georgina walked up to him and gave the collar of his shirt a tweak, though he could have sworn it was already straight. He felt the slight press of her breasts against his chest. Accident or design?

She smiled up at him. 'I've arranged for a few of the studio staff to come to the rehearsal room at three o'clock as you asked.'

'Thank you.' As she was still standing close enough for him to feel uncomfortable, he stepped away and went to pick

up his wallet from the bedside table.

‘I’ve also requested some evening gowns to be sent up to Jessie’s room as you suggested. I’ll help her pick one out.’

‘You’ve checked with her first though?’ He thought he’d detected an undercurrent between them and wasn’t convinced Jessie would welcome his PA’s help. ‘She might already have one lined up and I don’t want her thinking I’m interfering. I just want her to feel as confident as possible.’

Georgina tutted. ‘Don’t worry. It’s all in hand. I’ve also sorted the chauffeur to take you to the airport on Sunday morning and checked you in for your flight. Seat 1A, of course.’

As if he gave a toss where he sat on the plane, but that was Georgina — stuff it, he was never going to call her Georgie — that was her all over. Status crazy. ‘Thank you.’

‘There will be a chauffeur waiting for you at LAX to take you to the hotel. You’re in the same suite as last time.’

She stared back at him expectantly, as if waiting for some kind of reward. ‘Again, thank you.’ How many times did he need to say the words?

‘Is there anything else I can help with?’

Was her tone, her smile, suggestive or was he getting paranoid? It’s not like he was catch of the century. Apart from the money, of course. ‘That’s all from me. Might be worth checking in with Robert, in case there’s been any last-minute changes to the tour details.’

She wrinkled her nose in clear displeasure. Michael knew the pair of them didn’t hit it off. Robert thought Georgina stuck up and she thought Robert crass, but he needed them both in his life, so they had to suck it up. Whatever Georgina’s faults, lack of efficiency wasn’t one of them.

With a nod of her head she swivelled and strode out of the room, her hips swaying suggestively, crammed into a tight red pencil skirt.

He gave her a few moments — call him a coward but he didn't want to travel down in the lift with her — before shrugging on his suit jacket and heading off out. A glimpse of his reflection in the mirror confirmed his suspicions — he looked like he was heading to a business meeting rather than a singing rehearsal. Robert would have a hissy fit.

With a sigh Michael called for the lift. The truth of it was, the relaxed look only worked if you *were* relaxed. Sure, he could manage a pair of jeans at home, because he could be himself. Here, today, he was Michael Tennant. And considering he was about to spend the day with a woman he fancied, but had tried, and failed, to tumble into bed, he needed the armour of a damn suit.

* * *

Jessie was already there when he opened the door to the rehearsal room. Her head was bent as she scrolled through her phone, brown curly hair hiding her face. She was so engrossed she hadn't heard him, so he allowed his eyes a brief journey over her black satin blouse, and down to her dark navy jeans. There was a simplicity to everything she wore that made Georgina's clothes seem totally over the top. He guessed the old saying *less is more* was true. Certainly, the less flesh Jessie showed him, the more he wanted to see.

Suddenly the thought of Georgina helping choose a dress for Jessie seemed like the stupidest idea he'd ever had.

He cleared his throat. 'Good morning.'

Her head came up with a start. 'Oh, sorry, I didn't see you there. Good morning.'

Her smile was horribly strained and it immediately triggered his own unease. He had to do something, he realised with alarm, before they drowned in a well of their own embarrassment. As he'd been the one to make the first move last night, and as he was the damn celebrity, it was up to him to smooth it out.

'Did you sleep well?' And no, that wasn't the most sensible question he could have asked. Now he had visions of

her sprawled across her bed as she had been last night, her top raised, those luscious breasts taunting him.

‘Yes, thank you. Did you?’

He watched the rise and fall of her chest, gazed into her warm brown eyes, and thought sod it. ‘Honestly? No, I didn’t.’

Her eyes widened and she inhaled a sharp breath, a flush spreading across her cheeks. ‘I’m sorry.’

Michael exhaled in frustration at his own blinding incompetence. ‘No, please don’t be sorry. That’s not why I said it. I—’ He dragged a hand through his hair, wondering whether he should sing the damn words instead, because he was pretty damn competent at singing. ‘Will you have dinner with me tonight?’

When she didn’t immediately reply, just continued to stare at him with huge brown eyes, he added the word he should have said at the start. ‘Please?’

‘Are we talking pizza in the rehearsal room again, because I know I need the practice. I can’t believe we’ll be doing this live tomorrow—’

‘Dinner,’ he interrupted. He might be incompetent when it came to dating, and women in general, but he could manage a civilised night out in a restaurant. ‘I want to take you out to dinner.’

* * *

Jessie looked into Michael’s earnest blue eyes and felt the breath leave her lungs. She opened her mouth to reply, but the only noise to escape was a stunned, ‘Oh.’

Disappointment flashed briefly across his face before it was replaced with his usual careful expression. ‘Sorry, it looks like I’ve put you on the spot again.’ He smiled stiffly, his beautiful voice sounding painfully stilted. ‘No doubt you already have plans for tonight. I expect your family are coming down.’

Heart pounding, she shook her head. ‘No, no, they’re not coming down until Saturday lunchtime. They don’t want to

put me off. Said I needed all the practice time I could get, which is probably true. Who am I kidding? It's definitely true.' Oh boy, she was rambling like a crazy woman. She made herself pause. Take a breath. 'I don't know why I said *oh* like that, most likely shock. What I absolutely meant to say was yes, please. I'd love to have dinner with you.'

Slowly the muscles around his mouth began to relax. 'You would?'

'Of course I would.'

He frowned. 'Of course?'

'Well, you are Michael Tennant, aren't you?'

His expression froze, and there was a harshness to it she'd not seen before. Clearly she'd upset him again, though why this time ... slowly his words from a few days ago came back to her. *What I really don't enjoy is people wanting my friendship just because I'm famous.*

Panic ripped through her and she strode hurriedly over to him, placing a hand on his arm. 'Whatever you're thinking I meant by that inane statement, you're wrong.' His muscles felt stiff beneath her touch and she squeezed gently, hoping to convey her sincerity. 'It was a flip remark, meant to sound casual and light-hearted. I only made it to hide the fact that I'm stunned you want to take me out to dinner. After last night, I thought you'd had second thoughts—'

'I haven't.'

Pleasure shot through her, warm and sweet. 'Then I can only say I'm sorry I came across so badly. Truth is, I didn't know how to handle your invitation. I've never had anyone as attractive as you, interested in me.'

A myriad of emotions flitted across his face; a sort of stunned confusion, closely followed by surprise. And was there a smidgen of pleasure, too? For a long, pulsing moment he didn't say anything, just kept staring at her. Then he placed a hand on either side of her face, dipped his head, and kissed her.

The moment his mouth touched hers, her knees gave way. As if he could feel her capitulation, he moved his hands to her hips, supporting her, drawing her against his powerful frame. A guttural groan escaped him, resonating through her in wave after tingling wave.

Slowly he pulled back, but his hands remained warm and steady on her hips. 'Though kissing you is infinitely preferable to listening to you sing, I fear for the sake of both our reputations tomorrow, we'd better stop.'

Her laugh got caught up in her breathing and came out sounding hoarse. 'That's a shame.'

'Isn't it?' His eyes skimmed across her face, settling on her mouth. 'Don't tempt me.'

She smiled, feeling giddy and sexy as she deliberately licked her lips.

He groaned and planted one last, soft, kiss on her lips before releasing her. Dragging a hand down his face he gave her a wry smile. 'Where were we?'

* * *

The day went by in a blur of singing, chords, singing, fine-tuning, singing, vocal exercises, singing, remembering to look into his eyes.

And flirting. It was gentle, but it was there in the way his eyes sought and held hers, and in the smiles he gave her. Smiles infinitely warmer than those she was used to.

By late afternoon she was shattered. And wound up tighter than a drum.

Standing up from the piano, he smoothed his hand down her arm. 'Good work. Take fifteen minutes to stretch your legs and get some fresh air. Then I've asked a couple of the studio staff to come and listen to us.'

She felt the blood drain from her face. 'You're going to make me sing in front of strangers?'

A smile tugged at his mouth and his eyes regarded her kindly. 'Tomorrow you'll be singing in front of thousands of

strangers, with millions more watching you from their television sets. You've got to start getting used to it.'

Of course she did. But somewhere in the joy of being with Michael, she'd forgotten why she was here. Forgotten what she had to do. Fear crashed into her and she shivered as a cold, heavy dread settled like lead in her stomach.

'Jessie?'

His eyes studied her face, but she wasn't in the mood for one of his pep talks. 'I'm good. I'll be back in fifteen.'

She fled to the toilets, hands clutching the sink as she stared at her pale face in the mirror. If Jack and Luke were here right now, she'd box their ears. It was their fault she was in this mess.

Yet without their intervention, she wouldn't have nearly slept with Michael Tennant.

She wouldn't be going out to dinner with him tonight.

Okay then. She inhaled a few deep breaths. No pain, no gain.

Her stomach was still churning as she walked back to the room. And when she saw Michael talking to a small crowd of people, it fell to the floor.

He took one look at her and nodded to the makeshift audience. 'Excuse us a moment.'

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pulled her out of earshot. 'First rule. Never think of the audience.' He tapped lightly on her cheek, forcing her eyes to meet his. 'Imagine yourself singing to one person. In this case, as it's a duet, that person is me.' He continued to hold her gaze with his steady blue one. 'Forget the surroundings, the cameras, the audience. Just sing to me.' He smiled. 'And trust me.'

When he looked at her like that, with such belief, it was hard to do anything other than nod in agreement. 'I do. I will.'

Together they walked to the piano, him sitting, her standing. Immediately Michael began to sing, as if he knew if he waited, he ran the risk of her bolting.

Taking a breath, she let the beauty of his voice wash over her. Then she began.

'Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime; say the word and I will follow you,' she sang, staring deeply into his eyes.

They seemed to smile back at her as they sang together. *'Share each day with me, each night, each morning.'*

'Say you l- you love me.' She'd sung it a thousand times, so why did she stumble over it this time?

His eyes narrowed, as if he was asking himself the same question. *'You know I do.'*

They ended together, *'Love me, that's all I ask of you.'*

Michael's hand stilled on the keys and the small crowd clapped vigorously. Jessie tore her eyes away from him and onto those who were applauding. Even as she smiled in relief, the words she'd been singing bounced wildly though her brain. And her heart felt like it was about to somersault right out of her chest.

Because she'd sung in public for the first time — or because of the words she'd sung?

To cover up her confusion she gave a mock curtsy, dipping her head. Thankfully everyone started to laugh and, for a moment at least, the wobbly moment vanished.

When everyone had disappeared, Michael traced a finger down her cheek, his eyes studying her face. *'Are you okay?'*

A tremor shot through her and this time she knew the pounding of her heart wasn't nerves. *'I'm fine.'*

He cocked his head to one side, his expression one of disbelief, but thankfully he didn't call her up on her lie. Instead he stepped away and for once she welcomed the distance. Welcomed the dip in the intensity of his presence.

'That's enough for today. Tomorrow morning we'll have a warm-up and a quick practice together before your family arrive.' He smiled across at her. *'I think you're ready, Jessie.'*

She swallowed, hard. ‘I wish I could agree with you.’

He frowned. ‘Do you want to practice some more?’

The only sensible answer to that was yes. But ... ‘I thought we were going out to dinner?’

‘Yes, if you want to. If you think you should stay and go through it a few more times though, we can do that.’

Maybe it was nerves making her hypersensitive, but it sounded like he was trying to wriggle out of dinner. ‘Do *you* think I should?’

His frown deepened. ‘I just told you, I think you’re ready.’

She bit into her bottom lip, feeling stupid and clumsy. ‘Yes you did, sorry.’

A few strides and he was in front of her again, the strong fingers of his hand clasping hers. ‘What is it?’

She couldn’t tell him, because she didn’t know. Oh, she had a suspicion she knew what was causing her emotional meltdown, but it might just be nerves. ‘Ignore me. I’m turning into a nervous wreck at the thought of tomorrow.’

His expression softened. ‘It won’t be any different to what you’ve just done. A few more people listening, that’s all.’ He bent and planted a sweet kiss on her lips. ‘I’ll see you in two hours.’

There was a promise in his eyes that heated her blood. ‘Aren’t you coming now?’

‘I’m going to stay for a while. I’ve been neglecting my practice for the tour.’

‘Oh yes, I’d forgotten you’ve got that coming soon.’ Of course he had. This week must have been a real inconvenience for him, getting in the way of his preparations. ‘When does it start?’

‘I’m off to LA on Sunday morning. Rehearsals begin Monday. No rest for the wicked.’ His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

‘Aren’t you looking forward to it?’

‘Sure.’ But then he sighed. ‘Touring is tough. I love performing, but for most of the next eight months I’ll be travelling from one place to the next, with nowhere to call home. I expect I’ll get into the swing of it soon enough.’

* * *

As Jessie showered in preparation for their ‘date’ his words continued to haunt her. Michael would be disappearing on Sunday morning; getting on with his real life. And she with hers.

This fantasy she was living would be over.

A knock on the door pulled her out of her mawkish thoughts. Dragging on a robe she went to answer it, though when she had, she almost wished she could go back to them.

‘Georgina. This is a surprise.’

The slick blonde was carrying an armful of dresses. She gave Jessie a false smile and strutted in. ‘Michael requested I pick out something for you to wear tomorrow night.’

‘He did?’ She tried to picture the Michael she was getting to know, the shy, awkward one beneath the thin veneer of confidence, discussing ladies clothing. ‘That doesn’t sound like him.’

‘Maybe he’s worried you’ll embarrass him.’ Georgina laid the dresses out on the bed. ‘I wasn’t quite sure of your size. I’ve gone for a sixteen.’

Bitch. Jessie swallowed the comment. ‘That’s kind of you, but I already have a dress I brought with me.’ She cast her eyes over the dull looking black dresses laid out on the bed. ‘One that fits.’ She carefully picked them up again. ‘So you can thank Michael for his thoughtful gesture, but I’m good.’ And if the man trusted his PA’s dress sense more than he did hers, then stuff him. He wasn’t worth her getting upset about.

Georgina huffed as Jessie handed the dresses back. ‘Suit yourself.’ She paused, giving Jessie a thorough inspection. ‘Michael asked me to book a restaurant for you both tonight. I presume you understand him well enough to know by now he’s just being kind. You’re hardly his type.’

Jessie forced a smile onto her face. 'He's hardly mine, either.' She should have left it there, but the thought niggled and before she knew it she was blurting it out into a question. 'Out of interest, what is his type?'

Georgina, one foot out of the door, turned and smirked. 'Me.'

As the door shut behind her, Jessie let out a deep, wobbly breath and wandered to the wardrobe. She felt overwhelmed. Nerves and fear about tomorrow colliding with her growing feelings for a man she would soon be saying goodbye to. A man she was stupid to be getting attached to, because while she didn't believe everything Georgina told her, she did believe the last part. The blonde with the killer figure was far more his type than she was.

Still, she was the one he was taking out tonight. Even if he was only being kind.

Pushing everything away but the here and now, she eyed up her most daring dress. Bright red, cut low enough at the front to show a cleavage, and with a scooped out back. If ever there was a time to dress boldly, this was it. Slipping it on, she added her strappy silver sandals, chunky silver necklace and a flash of red lipstick.

She eyed herself in the mirror. Not bad. Not bad at all.

She patted at the riot of curls.

Shame about the hair.

Chapter Eleven

Michael stared at his reflection and picked up a tie. Then put it down again.

Then picked it up again.

The trouble with not doing casual was that when it came to doing smart, he'd already worn his entire wardrobe. And was sick to death of it.

Hence the tie dilemma. He hadn't worn one all week, so maybe if he wore one now, it would look like he'd made the effort.

Was that important though? He didn't want Jessie reading too much into this date. He hadn't wanted to spend the evening alone, that's all.

Liar, his image screamed back at him.

Stuff it, he was wearing the bloody tie. He wouldn't see her again after tomorrow, so she should know how much he liked her. Certainly enough to put a tie on for her.

He threaded the pink tie round his neck, donned the charcoal grey jacket that matched his trousers, splashed aftershave on his freshly-shaven face, and considered himself ready.

Within moments he was knocking at her door — the second time in two days.

He wondered what Robert would make of that.

As she opened the door, the air rushed out of his lungs, leaving him utterly tongue-tied.

'Hi.' Her delicious lips curved up in that glorious smile of hers. The one that looked so natural, so real. It shot straight to her eyes, warming them.

He had to cough before he could force any words out. 'Hi, yourself. You look lovely.'

Lovely. Seriously? He couldn't manage anything more than a word he would also use to describe a meal his mother

made for him.

Jessie didn't seem to mind though, because her smile widened and a hint of red coloured her cheeks. 'Thank you. So do you. I love the pink.' Her eyes landed on his tie and he'd never been so pleased to be wearing one. 'Though we do clash.'

His eyes swept from neat ankles, up shapely calves and to hips that flared from her waist. Unconsciously he licked his lips as his gaze climbed higher, to the plunge of her neckline and the twin globes of her breasts.

Desire blazed through him, firing his blood. 'I know a way we can remedy that,' he found himself murmuring.

'You could take your tie off?'

'I could,' he agreed. 'But there is another solution.'

Please God she was on his wavelength.

She glanced down at her dress. 'I could change, I suppose. I have the black dress I wore a few days ago.'

'That's not quite what I had in mind.'

Her eyes flew to his and soon her face was matching the red of her dress. 'Oh.'

Shame washed through him. Shit, what was he doing? He'd come to take her out to dinner and a minute after she'd opened the door he was suggesting she get naked. 'Sorry, that was rude. I was trying to be clever, but clearly it didn't work.' He shuffled awkwardly. 'Could we just go back to the part where I said you look lovely? Actually, scratch that. Can I start the whole thing again please, because lovely doesn't do you justice? You look amazing. Gorgeous. Ravishing.'

Her slender neck moved as she swallowed. 'I was happy with lovely.'

She would be, he thought. She wasn't a girl who fished for compliments, and he liked her all the more for it. 'Well you deserved more. Shall we go to dinner?'

For a moment she said nothing, just gazed at him, as if weighing something up. He began to worry she was rethinking her decision to spend the evening with him following his crass suggestion.

But then she shocked the hell out of him by taking a step forward and pulling at his tie. Then she kissed him.

Her lips moved teasingly over his and just as he was starting to enjoy it, just as he was about to start deepening the kiss, she pulled back, a wicked gleam in her eyes. ‘Sorry, but I needed to do that.’

‘No need to apologise,’ he replied hoarsely, his heart racing from the adrenaline spike.

She continued to stare at him, eyes sparking, a seductive smile on her face. Her glorious breasts rising and falling with every breath she took.

With a groan he crushed her to him, running his hands down her back, groaning even deeper when they met warm flesh. Restless, he dropped his hands to her hips, pressing them against his arousal. But hadn’t he already made that mistake?

Exhaling a ragged breath, he forced himself to draw back, resting his forehead against hers. ‘We’d better go,’ he whispered. ‘Before I end up dragging you onto the bed and making love to you.’

‘Then stay.’

Her voice was so soft, he wondered if he was just hearing what he wanted to hear. ‘Sorry?’

‘Stay and take me to bed.’

It was all the encouragement he needed. With one swift movement, he lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed.

She landed with a bounce, making them both smile. As he gazed down at her, he shrugged out of his jacket and yanked off his tie. When she started to reach for her zip, he placed a hand over hers.

‘Please, I’ve wanted to undress you for days. Let me.’

His hands trembled slightly as he carefully dragged the zip down and peeled off her dress. Another bolt of desire shot through him as he revealed her white lace underwear. It was Jessie all over. Pretty, wholesome. So flaming sexy.

‘You’re beautiful.’

She smiled self-consciously up at him. ‘And that is ridiculously flattering, but you won’t hear me complaining.’

He tore off the rest of his clothes, conscious all the while of her eyes on him, studying him. His body wasn’t bad, he knew that. He worked hard to keep fit, part vanity, part necessity. Right now he was glad of every mile he’d run, every minute he’d spent in a hotel gym rather than the bar. All had been worth it for that look in her eyes.

* * *

Michael’s mouth zeroed in on Jessie’s breasts, his breath fluttering hot and heavy over her skin. Automatically she arched towards his touch, moaning when his tongue flickered over her sensitive nipples.

His eyes darkened and she thought she saw the beginnings of a smile play round his mouth before he focussed back on her breasts.

She had a second to think — God, this is really happening — before his hand settled between her legs.

And she was lost.

Between the flickering of his tongue and the clever movement of his fingers she was carried away on a spiral of pleasure.

When she finally returned to earth, he was definitely smiling at her — a slightly smug one, at that.

Realising she was never going to get this opportunity again, she gently pushed him onto his back and gazed at him. Those expensively tailored suits of his clearly weren’t disguising an out of condition body, as they did in so many cases. Oh no. Michael Tennant was all lightly tanned skin

sliding over taut, hard muscle. Turned on didn't begin to describe the heat, the ache she felt as she drank him in.

Gently she trailed her fingers over the hard angles of his chest, following them with her lips, dipping lower, towards the proud junction between his legs.

'I can't take much more of that,' he warned, shifting them so she was on her back again, him nestled between her legs.

Suddenly he cursed. 'Shit. Condom.'

He glanced down at her and she bit into her bottom lip, shaking her head, feeling the prick of tears behind her eyes. 'Sorry, no.' Hell, why hadn't she thought of that? She wasn't even on the pill, because since Phil the closest she'd got to sex was reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Disappointment flashed across his face and he exhaled a long, deep breath. 'I guess neither of us was expecting this.'

'Hoping,' she whispered and he laughed softly.

'Yeah. Me, too.' He planted a gentle kiss on her lips. 'I have a pack in my room. I thought maybe, once I'd plied you with wine and a fancy meal, I could tempt you back there.'

The long length of his body felt hot, hard and deliciously heavy against her. 'I don't need the wine. Or the meal.'

His eyes smiled at her. 'Good to know. If I go to my room, will you still be here when I get back?'

A strangled laugh escaped her. 'You seriously imagine I might think of something better to do than have sex with you?'

There was no answering smile. Just a simple, 'I hope not.'

As Michael dressed and rushed out of the door, Jessie was left to wonder about the glimpses of insecurity she'd witnessed in him. His fear of allowing people to see the man behind the voice. His hesitancy with her, including an absurd concern that she'd have second thoughts about sleeping with him.

She knew about hang-ups — she hated her hair; was very conscious her body wasn't stick thin. Michael's insecurities ran deeper though. On the surface, he seemed to have it all;

looks, talent, wealth. So why was he so unsure of himself? It didn't make sense.

Slipping off the bed she went to put on the hotel robe, rolling her eyes at the sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. Wild hair, smudged make-up, bundled in a shapeless towelling dressing gown. And Michael envisioned *she'd* be the one to have second thoughts?

As she wiped at the smudges of mascara there was a light tap on the door and her heart jumped.

He'd come back.

The moment she opened the door he lifted her into his arms and sank with her onto the bed. 'Sorry about that,' he mumbled in between opening her robe and taking off his clothes. 'Starting to make love to a lady without protection on me. Not my finest moment.'

She stilled his movements by claspings his face between her hands. 'It was an honest moment.' She could have added that it made him real. That him not being prepared made him far more genuine. Far more attractive.

And far easier to fall for.

But instead she kissed him.

It didn't take her long to feel the build-up of pleasure once again. His mouth, his hands. The seductive strength of his body. All combined to have her aching for him. When at last he entered her she gasped, pleasure searing through her.

He moved powerfully, building up the rhythm as sensation after sensation flooded through her, ending in an explosive climax.

'Wow,' she finally managed. What had she and Phil been doing all those years, because it had never felt like that.

Michael gazed down at her, a fine sheen of sweat across his forehead. A small smile on his lips. 'Worth the wait?'

'Absolutely.'

'Good. Think you can go again?'

Slowly she became aware that Michael was still hard inside. 'I don't know. But I'll enjoy finding out.'

She caught the glimpse of another smile just before his head dipped and his mouth landed hot and greedy on hers.

* * *

Bloody hell. Feeling utterly boneless after two shattering orgasms, Jessie lay back against the pillow. Beside her Michael too was lying on his back, his chest heaving up and down.

He turned to her, catching her hand with his and entwining their fingers. 'Much as I'd love to stay here and make love to you again, I'm starving.'

A laugh burst out of her. 'We did get sidetracked, didn't we?'

He eased onto his side and traced a finger gently across her lips. 'Can't say I regret it.'

Emotion caught at her throat. 'Me neither.'

Another of his small smiles. 'Good.'

Chapter Twelve

An hour and a half later than planned, they finally walked into the restaurant. It had Georgina's stamp all over it. Starched white linen tablecloths, dark wood floor, flickering candles. An exotic sounding menu. Classy and elegant, certainly, but Jessie was finding it hard to relax in such formal surroundings. And with the spectre of Georgina hovering around them. *He's just being kind. You're hardly his type.*

Stop it, she urged herself. He wasn't thinking that an hour ago.

'How long have you been divorced?' Michael asked as he poured them both a large glass of crisp white wine.

Jessie latched gratefully onto the question. Anything to drag herself out of her own head. 'About three years, though the marriage had ended a while before that.'

'But you remained friends?'

'Yes. Phil is a good man, a good father. Better now we're not married. When I was around he could get away without doing anything. Now when the boys go to see him, he makes an effort to do things with them.'

'Why did you split up?' He immediately shook his head. 'Sorry, you don't have to answer that.'

She smiled. 'It's okay, there's no great drama to it. We met too young. He was my first and only boyfriend. As we grew older, we wanted different things in life. Phil followed his dad into the plumbing trade and was content to work when it suited him. Do nothing when it suited him. I wanted more for us. For our sons. We started to argue and I could see myself turning into this horrible nagging wife. We both realised we'd be better off apart. What about you?' she asked, deciding it was only fair he share his romantic history, too. She'd seen him linked with various women but never mention of anything serious. 'Have you ever been close to marriage?'

He darted her a look of surprise and was clearly relieved when the waiter appeared with their first course; crab terrine,

artfully displayed on a bone china white plate.

The waiter slipped away and as Michael began to tuck into his crab, showing no sign of replying to her question, annoyance rippled through her. 'Forgive my ignorance, I'm not used to having dinner with a famous person so I don't know the rules. Do I take it you're allowed to ask me about my private life, but not the other way around?' Wow, she was more than just annoyed she realised. She was steaming. 'Maybe you could give me a list of questions I'm allowed to ask you?'

His eyes flashed with anger. 'Don't be absurd.'

'Don't treat me like I'm less than you.'

Horror filled his expression. 'Christ, I didn't ... I wasn't.' He cursed under his breath. 'I'm sorry. I've become pretty adept at keeping my private life private over the years. When I'm asked a question I don't want to answer, I ignore it or change the subject.'

His reply reminded her again of the gulf between them. She could count on one hand the number of people interested in her private life.

He was probably worried she'd sell her story to the press the moment the show ended. 'You're the first man I've slept with since my divorce,' she blurted.

Shock flashed across his face and yes, maybe it was an odd thing to admit to, especially when he was being so tight-lipped. But damn it, she wanted him to understand she hadn't gone into this ... this *thing* with him, lightly.

His eyes searched hers. 'What are you trying to tell me?'

Her stomach dropped and she clasped at the starched napkin in her lap. 'I didn't say that to make you think I expected more from you than today. I just wanted you to know I'm not some groupie who'll go talking to the press.'

'You think that's why I clammed up just now?' When she nodded, he let out a deep sigh. 'I know you're not that type of woman, Jessie. It's not why I didn't answer your question.' He reached for his glass and she watched as he swallowed. Was it

wrong that even now, cross as she was, she still thought his Adam's apple was sexy? 'I didn't answer you because it's a painful part of my life that I don't like talking about.'

A hot red flush of shame crept up her neck. 'Oh, I'm sorry.'

* * *

Michael cursed inwardly. He doubted he could make a bigger balls-up of this date if he tried. First he'd pounced on her in her room, though to be fair she seemed to have enjoyed that as much as he had. Then he'd forgotten the damn condom. Now he was making her feel like a kiss and tell groupie who couldn't ask him anything without being made to feel awful.

He reached across the table and clasped her hand. 'It's me who's sorry. I find general conversation hard enough, but talking about anything personal is way out of my comfort zone.'

'It's okay. I'm probably too open.' He hated that she wasn't looking at him now. 'I shouldn't have said anything.'

Regret flooded through him. 'No, please. I enjoy how talkative you are.'

She gave him a small smile but he could tell she wasn't convinced. Nor was she relaxed. This restaurant wasn't helping, either. He should have picked the flaming thing himself, not asked Georgina to do it for him.

'I was nearly married, many years ago. It was while I was still playing small gigs, before I hit the big time.' Her eyes flew up to his face and he ignored the way his stomach still churned at the memory. He had to give Jessie something. Prove to her he did trust her. 'Paula was a fellow singer. Sometimes we'd do duets together. The day before we were due to walk down the aisle she told me she'd met someone else. A richer, more famous, someone.'

The expression of disgust on Jessie's face would have been comical, had she not been feeling all that anger on his behalf. 'How terrible.'

‘Perhaps not. Better to have found out what she was like before I married her.’ And what she was like, it turned out, was a money-grabbing bitch. ‘There have been women since, but I guess I’m more wary now. Plus it’s hard to have a relationship when you spend a lot of your life on tour.’

‘She was a fool.’

Her softly spoken words did funny things to his heart. ‘I like to think she regrets her decision.’ In fact he knew she did, because the moment he’d become more famous than the guy she’d swapped him for, she’d come running back to him.

Slamming the door in her face had finally healed his ego, but his heart was another story.

He shook himself out of the past and gazed at the woman opposite. The one with big brown eyes that were almost drowning him in sympathy. ‘I didn’t tell you so you’d feel sorry for me.’

‘I don’t. I feel angry for you.’

He smiled, liking the sound of that. Liking *her*, even more. He’d learnt the hard way how to sniff out a fake, thanks to Paula. Jessie, with her refreshing honesty, was as genuine as they came. Whether he was doing the right thing by either of them, asking her out two days before he was about to start a gruelling tour, he wasn’t sure. Right now though, he was incredibly glad he had.

As his eyes rested on hers, she smiled back. God, she was gorgeous. Not beautiful, but really, really pretty. Not sweetly, cloying pretty either, but pretty with a heavy dose of sex. It was the spark in her eyes. The hourglass figure. His eyes dipped to the curve of her breasts and a bolt of lust shot through him, causing him to shift on his chair.

‘Did I mention how amazing you look in red?’

Her smile widened. ‘That’s good, because I’m wearing the same colour tomorrow.’ Her hand flew to her mouth. ‘Oh boy, I never thanked you for sending Georgina up with some dresses, though I have already got one.’

He winced. ‘She was supposed to ask you first. I don’t want you thinking I was trying to ... I don’t know ... change your style or something stupid. I have no idea about fashion, but I know the importance of wearing something that makes you feel confident.’

The brown of her eyes softened, and she reached across to squeeze his hand. ‘Then I appreciate the gesture even more.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be a knockout.’

Instinctively his eyes fell again to her cleavage, and the way her nipples were now pebbled beneath the red silk of her dress.

When he forced his gaze back up to her face he realised she’d seen exactly where his attention had been focussed, and was mortified.

‘Please, don’t be embarrassed. I’m having a hard time sitting here too. Pun intended.’

Her cheeks flushed. ‘Is it mean of me to say I’m glad?’

‘Don’t tease. You have no idea how close I am to saying forget the main course. Let’s get a cab back to my room.’

‘But I thought you were hungry?’ Her voice had turned throaty which turned him on even more.

‘I am.’ He let all the desire he was feeling show in his eyes. *But not for food.*

She stared right back at him. ‘I’m hungry, too.’

And that was it. His control was done for. With her tacit agreement, he dropped a wad of notes on the table, stood up and reached for her hand.

The taxi ride back to the hotel was only five minutes, but it felt like an eternity as he sat next to her, his hand on her thigh. He wanted to kiss her, but was terribly afraid if he started, he wouldn’t be able to stop.

Luck wasn’t to be on his side though. The moment the cab pulled up outside the hotel, they were blinded by the flashes from what seemed to be half a dozen cameras. ‘Damn it.’

Jessie froze by his side. ‘How did they know?’

‘I guess someone from the restaurant tipped them off.’ He reached for her hand. ‘Come on, there’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s no big deal.’

‘To you, maybe.’

He’d been dealing with this crap for half of his life. She’d never experienced it before. Michael took a moment to run his thumb gently over the knuckles of her hand. To remind her this was just a temporary hurdle to overcome before they could lose themselves back in his room. ‘The longer we stay here, the more of a story they’re likely to make up. We went out for a meal. Now we’re heading back. Smile at them, look confident. That’s all they want. A photo for tomorrow’s paper ahead of the final.’

He watched her gulp in a breath and then nod.

* * *

Jessie wondered when she’d wake up from the dream, because surely tonight had been one?

Well, if she forgot the paparazzi moment, because that had scared the living daylights out of her. So much so that she’d nearly gone straight back to her room.

Nearly missed out on another round of the most phenomenal sex of her life.

Next to her, his head propped up on his arm, Michael smoothed his hand over her breasts and down to her stomach. ‘That’s the second time your sexy body has got between me and my dinner.’

She followed the trail of his hand, glad she was lying on her back. Sitting upright she wasn’t sure he’d have used the term sexy. ‘I think we’re destined to eat pizza or room service.’

With a soft chuckle he stretched out and grabbed the room service menu by the bed. ‘How does a bowl of chips and a bottle of champagne sound?’

‘Heaven.’

While he dialled she slipped on a robe from the bathroom and went to stand on the balcony. It didn't matter that the wind whipped through her, giving her goosebumps. She was captivated by the incredible view across London.

'Breathtaking, isn't it?' Michael came up behind her and wound his arms around her waist. 'If a tad cold.'

With a dreamy sigh she leant back into his warmth. Oh, she could get so used to this.

But you'll never have the chance.

Instinctively she pulled back, as if her body thought creating a physical distance between them — even though they'd already been as close as a man and woman could possibly get — would protect her heart.

Sure, nice try. Just several days too late.

Michael tapped her on the shoulder, forcing her to face him. 'Are you getting cold?'

Gratefully she latched onto the excuse. 'A bit, yes.'

They stepped back into the suite where they were immediately interrupted by a knock on the door. Michael disappeared off to answer it, returning with a huge bowl of chips, bottle of expensive looking champagne and two glasses. Skilfully he removed the cork and filled their glasses, handing one to her and raising the other in a toast.

'Here's to you, Jessie. No matter what happens tomorrow, I want to thank you for this week. I had reservations about doing this show, but I've defied my own grim prediction and enjoyed it.' He gave her a sheepish smile. 'And if that gets back to Robert, I'll never hear the end of it.'

Jessie tried to return his smile, but she could feel her lips wobbling. The week — *their* week — was nearly over.

'Hey, I didn't mean to upset you.' He frowned, wiping an errant tear with his thumb. The gentleness of his gesture made her want to cry more. 'I wanted us to celebrate the week.'

‘Sorry.’ She drew in a deep breath, determined to bring herself under control. ‘What with nerves about tomorrow and joy at seeing the boys, I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry.’ Knowing she’d only ever see him again on the television weighed the scales heavily onto the crying side, but that was her own stupid fault. He hadn’t promised her anything beyond tonight, so she just had to suck it up and accept this for what it had been. A beautiful fling. Exotic, once in a lifetime, but over in a flash.

‘I’d rather you chose laughter.’ His thumb had dropped to her mouth, rubbing gently across her lips. ‘When I think of you, I picture you laughing.’

A lump settled in her throat and she wanted to beg him to stop being nice. How she could do with a dose of the cold, hard Michael she’d first met.

His eyes searched her face and he looked like he was going to say something, but then shook his head. Finally he took a step back and picked up the bowl. ‘Chip?’

Grateful for the reduction in intensity, she smiled and took one.

While they ate they talked a little about what would happen tomorrow. When the bowl was empty, the bottle drunk, Jessie stood. ‘I’d better get going. Big day tomorrow.’

Michael nodded and followed her into the room, watching while she gathered her discarded dress and the white lace underwear she was so glad Annabel had made her buy. ‘I’ll just, umm ...’ She gestured awkwardly at the crumpled clothes in her hands. ‘Get dressed.’

Feeling self-conscious, she dived into the bathroom. It was hard to believe that only an hour ago she’d lain naked next to this man.

Yet tomorrow it would be over.

Fighting back her tears she stepped back into the room. Michael had dressed too and was staring out of the window, hands in his pockets, his back to her. The way he seemed to have withdrawn again added to her misery.

But you'll be going home to Jack and Luke.

The knowledge made her feel even more terrible. What sort of mother was she that she couldn't just be excited to see her sons? That instead she was already pining for something that could never be?

She cleared her throat and he turned round. Immediately her heart lurched at the sight of his naked chest, framed by the unbuttoned shirt. With his messy hair, bare feet and brooding eyes he looked so sexy, so much the heartthrob singer. He stole her breath away.

'Right then.' The catch in her voice echoed back at her across the silent room. Why wasn't he saying anything? 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

For a moment she thought that was it. He was just going to stand there and watch her walk out. But then he seemed to gather himself and stride over. Cupping her face, his lips touched hers in the softest of kisses. 'Sweet dreams.'

As she dashed back to her room Jessie knew her dreams wouldn't be sweet. But they would be filled with him.

Chapter Thirteen

At five to eight, Michael heard a knock on his door and opened it to find Robert. His friend gave him one long, searching look.

‘Jesus, you look like shit. Must have been one heck of a night, Mikey boy.’

Michael didn’t reply. The last thing he needed right now was Robert’s particular brand of humour. Or a barrage of searching questions.

Robert walked to the coffee table and eyed up the Danish pastries that room service had just delivered. ‘So?’

‘So what?’

Robert dumped two calorie laden pastries on his plate. ‘If you’re being evasive, there’s definitely a tale to tell.’

‘I’m not being evasive.’ He couldn’t keep the annoyance out of his voice, which of course Robert picked up on.

‘Bloody hell, you and the pretty pharmacist got it together, didn’t you?’

Michael bristled. ‘Not that it’s anybody’s business, but why the surprise if we did?’

Robert started to chuckle as he plonked himself down on the sofa, stretching out his jean clad legs and looking perfectly at home. ‘Well, well. I could sense something there, but I didn’t think you’d have the balls to act on it.’

‘I have dated women,’ Michael felt compelled to point out. ‘I’m not a total recluse.’

‘True, but you’ve never asked a real woman out.’ He stuck up his hand before Michael could interrupt. ‘You’ve dated easy targets. Women who’ve chased you, looking for a brief affair.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Jessie doesn’t strike me as the type who sleeps with a man easily.’

Michael felt a sting of shame. Robert had just confirmed what he already knew, because Jessie herself had told him

when she'd admitted he was the first person she'd slept with since her divorce. She wasn't a woman who had a one-night stand, yet last night he'd treated her exactly like that. He'd had sex with her twice, yet hadn't even had the decency to wine and dine her properly. Worse, despite seeing how awkward she'd felt, he'd just stood there and watched her slink out of his room, like some groupie. And all because he'd been too much of a coward to ask her to stay.

Not since Paula had he wanted a woman to sleep in his bed with him. Yet in that moment, seeing Jessie standing there in her crumpled red dress, hair askew and make-up smudged by his kisses, he'd wanted her to stay so much, he'd frozen. Paralysed by fear for what he'd been feeling.

After that, he'd not been able to sleep. All he could think was how he'd taken a gorgeous, bubbly, warm-hearted woman to bed — and ended up treating her like a tart.

'Can't help but wonder what you're planning to do with Jessie now.' Robert was studying him, his expression unusually pensive. 'It's not like you to play with a woman's feelings like this.'

Michael's hand tightened round his coffee cup. 'I'm not playing with her. She knows I'm going on tour. Besides, she has a family and a life back at home. It was just a bit of fun.'

Robert's eyebrows shot up. 'Now I know you're lying to me. You don't do anything for fun.'

'Damn it.' Michael shoved his empty cup onto the table and lurched forward, dropping his head in his hands. What the hell had he been thinking? After their explosive kiss the night before last, he'd known exactly where dinner would lead and yet he'd asked her anyway. Clearly his thinking hadn't been done with his brain.

'You like her, don't you?'

Michael looked up and straight into Robert's unusually serious eyes. 'Yes,' he admitted. 'But as my life isn't going to be my own for the next eight months, thanks to this damn tour you're sending me on, it hardly matters, does it?' He rubbed at

his forehead, trying to ease out the tension of a crap night's sleep and this painful conversation.

Robert finished off the last mouthful of his second pastry and wiped his hands on his jeans. 'Eight months isn't an eternity,' he said finally. 'And technology has advanced so much these days you can actually communicate with someone in another country.'

Michael threw a napkin at him. 'Shut up. And use that instead of your trousers, you lazy bastard.'

Robert grinned. 'If you ever wore jeans you'd understand part of their purpose is to get them dirty.' He took one look at Michael's expression and held up his hand. 'Okay, okay, I guess you've had enough of my badgering for one day. One last question though, before your delightful PA arrives. Now you've almost made it through the week, was appearing on this show a good idea, or a bad idea?'

Michael sighed, slamming his eyes shut as he allowed his head to fall back against the sofa. Snapshots from the week flashed through his mind, all of them featuring Jessie. That first day, when she'd nearly walked out. Sharing the pizza. Watching as she resolutely looked everywhere but at him when she sang.

Watching her as she sang into his eyes.

His heart shifted and unconsciously he rubbed at his chest. 'I don't know,' he replied honestly. But he did know he had to tread carefully today, for both their sakes.

He was saved any further interrogation from Robert by a further knock on the door. And the arrival of Georgina.

The smile she gave him was far too bright for the time of day. For that matter so was her vivid pink top, unbuttoned to show the hint of a cleavage. He felt Robert's eyes on him as he averted his gaze. For the life of him he still couldn't work out whether this was just Georgina, or whether Robert was right and she was dressing to impress him.

Her smile faltered a little as she noticed Robert. 'Oh, sorry. Am I late?'

‘No. Robert was early.’

From his seat on the sofa, Robert flashed her a grin. ‘I wanted first dibs on the pastries, before you came in and polished the lot off.’

Georgina frowned, and Michael had to bite his cheek to stop from laughing. He shouldn’t enjoy watching his friend take the piss out of his PA, but it felt so good to see Robert pushing someone else’s buttons for a change.

* * *

Jessie was at the studio half an hour earlier than Michael had suggested for their final warm-up before the full rehearsals that afternoon.

She sat in their room — oh God. She squeezed her eyes shut, knowing she couldn’t think like that. She sat in the room they’d used all week, casting her eyes over the music sheet even though it was just a blur to her right now. With a huff of frustration she thrust it down and looked at her phone instead.

Her lips curved as she saw the texts from Luke and Jack.

Luke: *Dad says we have to look smart. Tell him he’s wrong. I don’t want to wear a dumb shirt with a collar.*

Jake: *All my mates are going to be watching tonight. Please don’t be rubbish.*

Drawing in a breath, she held the phone close to her chest. This was her reality, and it was worth more than a hundred flings with a handsome singing star.

The final text was less grounding. In fact, it was a terrifying reminder that she wasn’t just putting her singing voice into the limelight tonight. She was, ever so briefly, thrusting herself into it.

Annabel: *The gossip rags have a picture of you and Michael coming back from a meal, and lots of speculation. This is a good luck text but also a what on earth is happening?!?*

She was so immersed in typing her replies that she didn’t hear Michael enter.

It was his cologne she smelt first, the expensive fragrance hitting her smack in the middle of her chest. As her heart lurched painfully, she turned to find him standing in the doorway, his stunning eyes watching her with an intensity she'd not seen before.

'Hi.' His eyes drifted to her phone. 'Good luck texts?'

'Something like that.'

He nodded, moving inside and taking off his dark navy suit jacket. Always so smart. So exactly like his stage image, from the outside.

Inside though, far less confident. One of many things she'd learnt this week.

'I hope you managed to get some sleep?'

She lied, nodding her head. The dark circles under his eyes suggested he hadn't fared much better. Was he that worried she'd embarrass him today?

He rolled up the cuffs of his neatly-ironed white shirt and her gaze automatically dropped to his tanned forearms. *Stop gawping at him.*

'What do you want to do this morning?' He glanced at his watch. 'We have perhaps two hours before we need to go to the rehearsal.'

I want you to kiss me. She bit into her lip, tearing her eyes away from him. She sensed he was being deliberately distant to remind her last night had been — in his words — a way to celebrate the week. Nothing more.

She had to show him she was perfectly fine with that.

Slipping her phone back into her bag she rose to her feet. 'Let's warm-up for a bit and go through the song a couple more times to make sure I haven't forgotten it. Phil and the boys are arriving this afternoon which probably kills any further chance to practice.'

Perhaps her smile looked too bright because he gave her an odd look before stalking over to the piano.

* * *

Their on-stage rehearsal was terrifying. Not just the hot lights, the intrusive cameras or the stares of the studio staff. It was also the first chance she'd had to hear the other contestants sing.

'They're miles better than me.'

Michael, who was standing tall and straight to her right, squeezed her arm — the first affectionate gesture he'd made all morning. 'You're being pessimistic.'

'Realistic.'

As the director finally announced it was their turn, her stomach lurched. And this was only the rehearsal.

Michael surprised her by taking her hand as he led her onto the stage. It didn't matter how many times he told her to relax though. How many times he smiled kindly into her eyes before they were told to begin.

She felt terrible, and predictably she performed terribly, too.

'I'm so sorry.' Tears welled at the back of her eyes but she was determined not to cry. Her performance alone was embarrassment enough.

'Don't be.' His hand, warm and comforting, continued to hold hers even after they'd stepped off the stage. 'Now the others have mentally crossed you off their list of competition.' He gently squeezed her fingers. 'Stupid mistake. Always beware the underdog.'

Over the next ten minutes the director summoned the contestants into a huddle and went through the sequence of events for the following few hours. Although she tried to listen her brain had switched into panic mode and all she really heard was they'd have to be ready to start, with their make-up done, at six o'clock.

As the briefing wound up, Michael bent to whisper in her ear. 'I've had a text from Georgina and I need to disappear for

a bit. Try not to think yourself into a panic attack by the time I get back.’

And just like that her anchor, the man she was relying on to get her through the next few hours, disappeared.

She went to sit on one of the seats in the audience, casting her eyes around the studio. It wasn’t huge, not like the places someone like Michael must be used to appearing in. There would be hundreds, rather than thousands watching. But she’d never done anything like this before; wasn’t used to performing, never mind singing. And if she then thought about how many people might be watching her make a total twit of herself on the television — her stomach clenched and she broke out in a cold sweat. The thought of going back on that stage in a few hours was frigging terrifying.

The sound of her phone bleeping shot her out of her panic. Phil and the boys had arrived.

Gratefully she made her way to the reception area.

* * *

Ten minutes, lots of chatter and two very special hugs later — Jack and Luke must have missed her because hugs were a rare commodity, usually only dispensed in private — she was sitting with Phil and the boys in the studio canteen.

‘How are you feeling?’

Dressed in scruffy jeans and a T-shirt that had been white once but washed too many times, his sandy hair flopping onto his forehead and nearly obscuring his kind blue eyes, Phil looked so familiar she felt a rush of affection. ‘Bloody terrified,’ she answered on a half laugh, half sob.

‘You’re not meant to swear,’ said Luke with a glint in his eye.

‘If you’re about to make a fool of yourself on live TV, you’re probably allowed to swear at least once.’

Jake slurped at his drink. ‘Do we get to meet that Tennant guy?’

Her heart gave a little jump. ‘I think so. He’s disappeared for a bit, but he should be back.’

‘You’d better hope he’ll be back, or you’ll be singing up there by yourself.’ Phil grinned. ‘I’m not sure the world is ready for that.’

She jabbed him sharply in the ribs, making him squeal and the boys laugh.

Just as she was beginning to relax a little, she caught sight of a tall, smartly-dressed man coming towards them. Her heart gave a giant thump as she waved Michael over.

Feeling ridiculously nervous, she made the introductions. Michael shook hands stiffly with Phil, giving him the same detached smile he’d first given her. Had it only been six days ago? Then he held out his hand to the boys, who didn’t know how to react. Why would they, when they’d never had anyone make such a formal gesture to them before?

Did Michael know nothing about kids?

Jack and Luke gawped at Michael’s hand for several painful moments before copying what their father had done. In the awkward silence that followed, Jessie found she was too wound up, too fretful over the whole evening, to think of a way to fill it.

Michael cleared his throat. ‘Are you looking forward to hearing your mum sing?’

Jack shook his head but remained silent and Jessie squirmed on her seat. Oh God, this was awful.

At last Luke, the chatterbox, found his voice. ‘I’m not. We’ve heard her enough already.’

Well, at least he’d spoken. And really, it was quite funny, only Phil and Jack seemed frozen to the spot and Michael wasn’t laughing.

Another painful silence followed before Michael spoke again, his voice as strained as the expression on his face. ‘You haven’t heard the improved version.’

She waited for her family to come up with a sarky reply but now even Luke wasn't saying anything.

'Your mum's worked really hard.' Michael looked like he'd rather be anywhere but with them right now. 'I'm sure you'll be proud of her when it's all over.'

Jessie knew Michael was trying to help, but building her up like that was the last thing she needed. What she actually needed was for him to loosen up. Be the man she'd come to know.

'I hope so, 'cos the whole school is going to be watching,' Luke mumbled.

Finally Phil spoke. 'Well you can't blame your mum for that. You're one of the bright sparks who put her in for it.'

'Yeah but only 'cos she had a mega crush on him.'

The moment the words tumbled out of Luke's mouth, Michael's shocked eyes slammed into hers. Jessie felt a violent blush sting her cheeks and wanted to crawl into a dark hole and not come out for the rest of the day. Longer. At least enough time for Michael to be on the other side of the Atlantic.

Michael shuffled his feet. 'Well, I'll leave you to it.' He nodded stiffly over to her. 'I'll see you in make-up.'

As his long legs took him away, Jessie slid down on the chair. Beside her, Phil started to laugh. 'I hope his performance on stage is better than it is off.'

She shot him a fierce look. 'What do you mean?'

'He's kind of a stuffed shirt, isn't he?'

Images of Michael leaning over her, naked, his hair ruffled by her hands, his eyes blazing with desire, crowded into her mind. 'Actually, he isn't.' She rubbed at her face, feeling sick. 'And anyway you guys didn't help. What happened? The cat didn't just get your tongue, it seemed to have chewed it right off.'

Phil shrugged. 'Don't know. He seemed a bit intimidating, to be honest.'

‘Well I suppose I should be grateful you didn’t say any more. I’ve been so careful not to let him know I had a crush on him. Now I feel like a silly fan girl.’ Next to her, Luke’s face crumpled and she gave herself a mental kick. ‘Hey, don’t worry, sweetie, it’s not your fault. It’s mine for not saying anything. And at least you talked to him. Anyway, none of it matters because I won’t see him again after tonight.’

Her voice caught on the last few words and Phil gave her a searching look. As understanding dawned he reached across and touched her hand.

Chapter Fourteen

Michael stood in the gents, staring at his face in the mirror. He didn't know what to flip about first. The fact that he'd managed to put such a distance between himself and Jessie that she now felt like a stranger. The fact that he'd been so inept at talking to her family she probably *wanted* him to be a stranger.

Or the fact that she might only have slept with him because she'd fancied his image.

Not because she'd liked *him*.

He thrust a shaky hand through his hair, then swore and tried to smooth it down again. The make-up girl would have a fit at him.

He had to put all those crappy thoughts aside right now. He was the professional. Whatever Jessie thought of him, she was relying on him to get her through the evening. He'd let her down over last night, let her down just now, but he was damned if he was going to let her down where it mattered to her. In front of the cameras.

Straightening his shoulders, adjusting his bow tie, he walked out to find her.

She was standing by the monitors with the other contestants, looking absolutely stunning in a floor length deep red dress that had clearly been designed with her figure in mind.

When she saw him she gave him a weak smile. Her face was unusually pale, even with the artfully applied make-up, and her eyes were filled with something beyond anxiety, and dipping its toes into terror.

Jerome Stevens, aka Mr Playit Kool, stood to her right, his arm draped casually round his singing partner's shoulders. 'Hey, sugar, looks like your man decided to turn up after all. Shame. I totally fancied grooving with you.'

Michael felt every muscle in his body tense. He disliked Stevens; his arrogance, his confidence. The way he was pressed against Jessie's side. 'Sorry to disappoint.'

Stevens smirked, clearly aware he was rubbing Michael up the wrong way. 'No worries, dude. May the best man win, eh?'

'I rather think it's the contestants who are competing, not the professionals.'

His tortuously pompous retort had Stevens cracking up. 'I rather think you're right, old boy. Toodle pip.'

Cackling away to himself, Stevens and his partner walked away.

Thankfully Jessie hadn't seemed to notice the interaction. Her eyes were fixed rigidly on the monitor, which was now showing footage of them all rehearsing during the week. 'Oh God.'

Michael drew in a deep breath, wishing not for the first time in his life that his people skills weren't so horrifyingly inept. Robert, even Mr flaming Kool, would know exactly what to say to help Jessie relax. He didn't seem to have been given that skill set.

Winding an arm around her waist, he drew her against him, hoping his body heat would help her unfreeze. Magically he felt her melt, and he cursed himself for not doing it earlier. He'd been so focussed on the thought he was leaving, so intent on keeping a distance, he'd forgotten how utterly nerve-racking she must be finding this.

Keeping his arm around her, he eased them away from the others. 'If it's any consolation, this is the worst part. Once you walk on stage, and the music starts to play, you'll forget everything else but singing to me.'

She gave him a look of terrified disbelief but he just smiled.

And kept holding her.

A few minutes went by before Jessie coughed to clear her throat. 'About what Luke said.'

Michael kept his face deliberately neutral. 'That you had a crush on me.'

She let out a shaky laugh. 'Yes. I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable, though it probably wasn't a huge surprise.'

He let his arm drop from her waist and immediately regretted it when disappointment flashed across her face. But he wasn't sure he could have this conversation with her while she was so close. 'I'm flattered you found me attractive.'

She screwed up her nose. 'Found? I think you mean find.'

If he hadn't felt so confused, so fearful that his interpretation of what had happened over the last few days and hers were very different, he might have enjoyed her comment. He exhaled sharply. 'What I'm trying to say is I wish you hadn't heard of me before this week. I wish your impression had come from our time together and not from the media.'

He saw the bewilderment in her eyes. 'But it wouldn't have mattered.'

'How do you know?' He jammed a hand in his pocket. 'How do you know whether you wanted to sleep with me, or the image of me?'

She just shook her head at him. 'I know,' she said softly.

Maybe, he thought. But he didn't.

When he glanced back at her he saw her shoulders hunch. Time to push his damn insecurities aside and be the man she needed him to be. Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he drew her back against him and she clung to him as if he was the one thing stopping her from drowning. They remained that way until they were called on stage.

'By the way,' he whispered as they made their way to their markers. 'You were right to stick with that dress. You look utterly gorgeous.'

He felt the tug on his arm as Jessie almost tripped up. When she looked up at him, her lovely brown eyes swam with

gratitude. And he felt an even bigger prick.

He shouldn't have waited until now to help her. No matter how damn awkward he'd felt with her family, with her ex-husband sitting protectively next to her, he should have stayed.

As they found their place on stage, he tucked a finger under her chin and smiled into her eyes. 'Remember, there's nobody else here. It's just you and me.'

The music started, and she began to start her inhales, filling her lungs just as he'd taught her. He hoped she could see the pride he felt, and the confidence he had in her ability to surprise everyone.

* * *

Jessie's heart hammered so hard she could barely hear the music. Every fibre of her being wanted to bolt off the stage but Michael was standing right next to her. Steady, solid, his body language relaxed. The hand that clasped hers warm and reassuring.

She had a moment to wonder that this man, who oozed confidence now, was the same one who'd been so uneasy talking to her sons.

Then he started to sing.

As his rich tenor voice wrapped around her, she tried to focus on that and nothing else. Soon there was no audience, no peering camera, no dazzling lights. Only Michael, unbelievably handsome in his black tuxedo, his powerful voice slicing through her nerves. The bright blue depths of his eyes fixed solely on her. Incredibly she was back in the fantasy world of last night. Michael kissing her; making love to her.

When it was her turn to sing, she sang with her heart.

'Incredible.' Michael's soft voice echoed in her ear as they finished the song. Feeling dazed, she looked to where she knew Phil and the boys were sitting. The lights were now on the audience and she saw them grinning and giving her a thumbs up.

All around them the audience clapped and cheered.

She felt her body begin to shake; adrenaline, relief, joy, who the bloody hell knew.

She'd only gone and done it. Got through the whole song without too many mistakes, without tripping over her gorgeous dress.

Without making a total arse of herself.

A warm, steady hand pressed at her back. 'Time to go.' Michael grinned down at her. 'Unless you want to do an encore?'

She shook her head violently and almost ran off the stage.

'I did it!' she squealed once they were safely out of sight, throwing her arms around his neck.

'You certainly did.' He hugged her back and she was immediately conscious of how tall he was, how broad his shoulders felt beneath her hands. His head dipped, his breath fluttering against her ear. 'If you're not careful, you might even win.'

Jessie didn't care. All she'd wanted from the evening was to not embarrass her family, or him. And she'd done it.

They waited back stage while the remaining contestants performed their songs. Michael disappeared for a moment, returning with two bottles of water.

'You need to lubricate your voice.' Smiling, he handed her the water.

'Do you really think we have a chance of winning?'

'If it was a competition to find the best singer, then sorry, no.' He paused, his brow furrowing as he chose his next words. 'I didn't mean that to sound harsh.'

Feeling almost drunk with relief, Jessie laughed. 'It's okay. I know I haven't become Adele overnight.'

'True.' His lips curved in the small smile that was his trademark. Michael wasn't like Phil, he didn't have a ready smile. Somehow, it made Michael's smiles that bit more special. 'As the purpose of the show was to find the most

improved singer though,' he continued, sipping at his water. 'I may be biased, but I think that's you. Come on, let's go and sit down.'

They sat where they could watch the other performances from the monitor. Michael was unusually twitchy, crossing and uncrossing his legs, drumming his fingers against his thigh. At one point, after watching the rapper and his pretty partner, Michael leapt to his feet, dragging his hand through his hair as he started to pace.

'If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were nervous.' She tried to keep the laughter out of her voice but as Michael narrowed his eyes at her, she began to giggle. 'Oh my God, you're getting nervous about the result.'

He squared his shoulders and sat back down. 'Hardly. That would be daft, don't you think?'

But when he didn't look her in the eye, Jessie had to stifle another fit of giggles.

After several seconds of studiously ignoring her, he finally met her eyes. 'Okay, okay, I'm a little on edge. Just sitting here, watching all the other contestants. It's doing my head in,' he muttered gruffly, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets. Laughter burst out of her, causing Michael to look furtively around the room. 'Look, it's been a long time since I've been in a competition of any sort, that's all,' he added defensively. 'I'd forgotten how ridiculously competitive I am.'

He gave her a sheepish grin and Jessie felt her heart swell. Determinedly she looked away. Whatever this had been between them, it would soon be over. She had to protect herself.

'Will the contestants please get ready to go back on stage for the results,' the floor manager announced.

Michael jumped to his feet but just as she was about to do the same, he huffed out a breath and sat back down. 'Ignore me. It doesn't matter what the result is.' He rested a hand on her cheek, his eyes staring straight into hers. 'I had the best partner, and I wouldn't have changed her for the world.'

While Jessie fought not to cry, he kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

The next few minutes were a blur. She was dimly aware of Michael taking her hand and leading her back onto the stage.

Dimly aware of the glaring lights as the presenter took them through how the voting had been conducted.

Her mind wasn't on the stage though, it was reliving every moment she'd spent with Michael over the last twenty-four hours. She felt like she was teetering on the edge of a cliff and just one more look, one more kiss, and she would fall headlong into love.

'And the singer who, in the opinion of the audience at home and here in the studio, has improved most over the last week is ... Jessie!'

Instantly Michael's arms wrapped around her and she was lifted into the air. 'That's my girl,' he whispered. 'You should be so proud of yourself right now. I know I am.'

She bit at her lip, drowning in emotion, unable to reply.

As the others came to congratulate her, Michael lowered her down, but not before giving her an uncharacteristic wink. 'Though you did have a good teacher.'

* * *

It was the post show party, and Jessie was having a fabulous time. Her family around her, people she didn't know coming up and congratulating her, laughing with her. A never-ending supply of champagne in her glass.

Through all that though, she was aware of exactly where Michael was. Who he was talking to. Now and then he'd catch her eye and they'd share a smile, but the constant flow of well-wishers made talking to him an impossibility.

'And to think, you nearly bailed on the first day.' Ken, the cameraman, was keeping her family entertained with tales from the week.

Jake glanced up at her, wide-eyed. 'Did you really nearly quit, Mum?'

‘She did.’

Jessie felt tingles shiver across her skin as Michael came up alongside her.

‘Why?’ Jake again, though from the look on Phil’s face he’d been about to ask the same question, no doubt with an extra one tagged on. *Why didn’t I hear about this?*

Jessie didn’t want to further diminish Michael in her family’s eyes — the first meeting had been bad enough — yet as she opened her mouth to reply, Michael beat her to it.

‘I wasn’t very kind.’

And God, he was being so honest, but it wasn’t helping. She could see the instant frowns on Jack and Luke’s faces, and the way even laid-back Phil looked ready to punch Michael.

‘That’s not true,’ she cut in hastily. ‘We had a misunderstanding which was soon sorted out and after that Michael has been very kind to me.’ Desperate to lighten the mood she added. ‘And that’s despite having to listen to me sing all day for a week.’

‘It was a pleasure.’ His deep voice floated over her. ‘Though perhaps more so at the end than the beginning.’

‘Yeah, ’cos she was really bad, and now she’s only bad.’ Luke grinned and everyone laughed, breaking the tension.

Just as Jessie started to think they could have an enjoyable few minutes without any awkwardness, Georgina decided to come over and pee on her bonfire. ‘Congratulations on the win, Jessie,’ she said with saccharine sweetness. ‘It seems Michael is a bit of a miracle worker. It’s quite impressive what he managed to do in a week.’

‘What *they* managed to do,’ Phil pointed out, and Jessie felt a rush of affection towards him.

‘Yes, of course.’ She gave Jessie a cool smile. ‘I guess now it’s back to the real world for you. For both of you.’ She turned to Michael. ‘I’m sorry to break up the party but they need you in LA earlier than planned so I’ve had to rearrange your flight for this evening. The chauffeur is waiting outside to

take you to the airport. I've already packed up your things. I hope you don't mind.'

'I ...' Michael looked both frustrated and lost. A man caught in a riptide with no clue how to break out.

'The rest of your luggage will follow later, as planned.'

Georgina placed a hand on his arm, and Jessie had the impression she was prepared to physically drag him away if needed.

'Right, well, I guess I have to go.' Michael's eyes sought hers and for once he let her see what he was feeling. He didn't want to leave her, not like this.

'Shall I walk with you to the car?'

A glimmer of a smile. 'I don't want to drag you away from your family.'

I want to be dragged away. She almost shouted the words at him. She didn't want their week to end this way. A stilted goodbye in front of everyone.

Georgina made a big show of looking at her watch and Michael let out a deep exhale. 'Sorry to leave like this. It was nice meeting you all.' He extended his hand to Phil, and then to the boys who shook it hesitantly.

Then he turned to her, and she felt as if her heart had jumped into her throat as she stared into his gorgeous blue eyes. 'Thank you,' he whispered, bending to plant a soft kiss against her cheek.

Her heart felt too full, her lungs too crushed to say anything back.

And then he was leaving, his tall, straight figure cutting a swathe across the crowded room. Georgina, bloody Georgina, by his side. At least she was struggling to keep up with him, Jessie thought cattily. With any luck she'd trip on those flaming stilettos.

She pictured it happening, Georgina sprawled in an inelegant heap across the floor, and it was the only way she

was able to hold in the tears. The only way she was able to turn back to her family and smile.

Chapter Fifteen

Michael was shattered. The highs and lows of the TV show were finally catching up with him. As was a shitty night's sleep on a plane. And yes, he was lucky enough to travel in First Class, but it only meant his body wasn't contorted into a pretzel. It didn't mean they turned the noise of the engines off. Nor, sadly, did it turn off his mind.

He couldn't get Jessie out of his head.

Georgina had practically manhandled him into the car, telling him she'd had to change the flights because they wanted him to be available for ad hoc press interviews the following morning.

Well, since he'd arrived at the hotel, he'd hardly been inundated with requests. Two quick interviews with local radio stations weren't, in his opinion, worth dashing over for.

Certainly not worth leaving Jessie without a proper goodbye. Whatever crush she might have had on him would be well and truly squashed now he'd ducked out of her celebration party so hurriedly. As if she wasn't important, when the way he felt right now, she was the most important thing he had going on in his life.

His mind hadn't been able settle since he'd left her. He felt on edge, torn over what to do. Put their encounter down to an incredible, but once in a lifetime experience?

Or pursue it further.

The latter would be total madness of course. They wouldn't even be in the same country for the next eight months. She had a family and a life a world away from his. Having met the star she'd fancied from afar, why would she want to repeat the experience?

With a huff of frustration, he jumped to his feet. Staying in this hotel room was driving him crazy. He'd go to the gym, work off some steam.

His phone buzzed and he glanced at the screen.

I'm heading for the airport. See you in LA J Georgie xxx

With a groan he turned the phone off. Emojis, kisses. He was worried Robert was right; Georgina was after him.

Damn it. For once in his life, why couldn't the woman he wanted, want him?

Quickly he donned shorts and a light training vest — Los Angeles was bloody hot. He was heading out of the door when his phone set off again, only this time with a call.

With a sigh he stepped back into his room and answered. 'Hello, Robert.'

'Someone sounds grumpy.'

'Yeah, well someone got shoved on an overnight flight and then dumped in a hotel room.'

'Blame the publicist, not me.'

'I'll blame my manager, thanks. He's the one who's supposed to be looking out for me.'

'Always, mate. Always. I was right about the show, wasn't I? You've had some great publicity from it. Your UK tour dates have sold out already. Got to admit, even I didn't expect you to go and win the bloody thing.'

Michael closed his eyes and lay back on the bed. 'Thanks for your vote of confidence.'

'Come on, Jessie was a terrible singer. You really shouldn't have won. The viewers must have been charmed by those vibes the pair of you were giving off. The press is full of speculation that something happened between you.'

Michael groaned and rubbed his eyes. 'So they're not talking about my singing, but my love life. Great.'

'Hey, it's selling tickets, don't knock it.'

'You know what, I don't give a shit about the bloody ticket sales. If Jessie's being hounded by the press—'

'She isn't,' Robert cut in. 'The show have released a statement from her which has basically put the lid on it all.'

He stared up at the ceiling. ‘What did it say?’

‘It said, and I quote. *Wow, I can’t believe some people seriously believe Michael Tennant would be interested in me. I’m hugely flattered, but I’m sure you realise how silly that is. I had a fabulous week and I couldn’t have wished for a better partner. It’s because of Michael’s amazing talent that we won but now he’s taking his incredible voice on a world tour. And I’m back in my pharmacy.*’

Michael blinked a few times, a lump forming in the back of his throat. It sounded so much like her. Self-effacing. Big-hearted. ‘I’m guessing she ripped up the bland studio press release she was given.’

Robert chuckled. ‘She was right to. This has stopped the speculation in its tracks.’ There was a pause, which was unusual for Robert. ‘Are you going to contact her?’

The million dollar question.

And Michael didn’t have an answer to it.

* * *

‘Go on you lot, out into the garden. Play nicely together and don’t come and disturb us unless someone is dying.’ Annabel shooed the boys — her two, plus Luke and Jack — out of the door.

‘What if Alex breaks his leg?’ Luke asked, looking over at Annabel’s youngest son.

Annabel rolled her eyes. ‘What do you think, Jessie? Is a broken leg serious enough to interrupt you spilling the beans about your week?’

Jessie laughed. ‘Yes, broken body parts count as serious enough, Luke.’

The door shut behind them with a resounding bang, and Jessie picked up her cup, ready for the grilling. She’d been expecting it ever since Phil had brought her and the boys home last night after the party. ‘Come on then, let’s get this over and done with.’

Annabel looked offended. ‘I waited until ten this morning to phone you.’

‘A fact my alcohol-soaked brain appreciates. Now fire me the first question.’

‘*Did* you sleep with him?’

As Jessie had predicted, Annabel had gone straight for the jugular. With deliberate slowness, Jessie eyed up the biscuits. If she was going to eat calories, they had to be worth it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her tall, slender, blonde friend tapping her foot with impatience.

‘Well?’ Annabel prompted.

‘First the press, now you. What is it with this fascination over my love life?’

‘Hey, you can’t lump me with the press. I’m your best friend. I have a right to know.’

Jessie put her hands up in surrender. ‘Okay, okay. The answer is yes.’

‘Oh my God.’ Annabel — cool, unshockable, gaped. ‘What was it like? Did the earth move?’

‘The whole damn universe moved.’ Jessie placed a hand over her heart, which still ached at the memory. ‘It was wonderful. He was wonderful.’

Annabel gave her a long, searching look. ‘Please tell me you didn’t go and fall in love with him.’

‘Of course not.’ Emotions that she’d put on hold since last night came rushing back and she had to look away. Love was probably too strong, but certainly her heart felt bruised.

Silently Annabel reached into the drawer behind her and pulled out a pack of tissues. ‘I think you’d better start from the beginning. I’ll put the kettle on again.’

An hour, two cups of tea and four biscuits later, Annabel gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘Maybe he’ll get your number from the studio and give you a call.’

‘If he’d wanted to see me again, he would have let me walk him to the car.’

‘But you said Georgina was there. Sounds like that bitch wouldn’t have given the pair of you a moment alone.’

‘She works for him. He could have told her to leave. I’m not convinced about the whole change of flights, anyway. Maybe it was a clever way to extricate himself from the situation.’ She shook her head, hoping it would shake out the memories. ‘Let’s change the subject. How are things with you and Edward?’

Annabel smiled sadly. ‘If you were hoping to lighten the mood, you’ve failed. My darling husband admitted he’s been having an affair. I told him I’m leaving him.’

‘Oh no, I’m so sorry.’ Jessie felt a wave of shame. ‘Why did you let me prattle on for so long about my foolish crush? What can I do to help? How are you feeling? Do you need somewhere to stay?’

‘Hey, calm down.’ Annabel brushed away her concern. ‘You know what, I’m actually feeling okay. Much better now that I’ve made a decision. It feels like a positive step. I’m going to find somewhere to rent for a while to give me space to think on what to do next.’

Jessie sighed. ‘We’re a right pair, aren’t we? Whatever happened to our young love?’

‘We grew up.’ Annabel smiled. ‘But love second time around is probably better. Let’s hope we both get the chance to find it.’

* * *

Later that evening, Jessie went to say goodnight to the boys.

‘It’s good to have you home again, Mum,’ Jack murmured as he shut his eyes, surprising her.

‘It’s good to be home,’ she replied gently.

Luke was more chatty. ‘Are you going to sing with that Tennant guy again?’

She smiled, kissing his cheek. 'I think I've probably done enough singing now to last me a lifetime.'

Her son giggled. 'Bet he thinks so, too. He was proper serious. Not like Dad.'

'No.' But where once she'd fallen for Phil's ready laughter, now his inability to take anything seriously irritated her.

Now she wanted a man with depth and substance. A man who thought before he spoke, before he smiled. And whose small smile was infinitely more precious than an easily given one.

Damn you, Michael Tennant. How am I ever going to forget you?

She kissed Luke goodnight and trudged back downstairs. On impulse she turned on some music, then snapped it off again when Michael's voice filled the room.

Great, now he'd ruined that for her, too.

As tears filled her eyes she lay on the sofa and gave in to them. This was absolutely the last bloody time she was going to cry over what had been, in essence, just a one-night stand.

The sound of the phone shattered her misery fest and she lurched to her feet, grabbing the handset.

'Hello.'

'Jessie, is that you?' She was so shocked to hear his voice that the receiver slipped out of her hands. 'Jessie, are you there?'

Panicking, her fingers not working properly, she snatched the phone up from the floor.

And accidentally pressed call end.

'Shit, shit, shit.' She stomped in frustration. She'd cut Michael off. What if he didn't try again? She didn't know his number.

She stared at the phone, willing it to ring again.

Just as she was about to give up, it rang. Heart beating wildly, she snatched it up. ‘Michael?’

‘Yes.’ His usually deep voice sounded strangely small. And so remote. ‘I hope you don’t mind me phoning you.’

‘No, of course not,’ she admitted breathlessly, trying not to read too much into the fact that he’d phoned. Trying not to hope.

‘I wanted to apologise for disappearing in such a rush.’

That’s why he was phoning. Of course it was. ‘That’s good of you, but there was no need.’ She struggled to keep the disappointment out of her voice. ‘It must be a relief to finally focus on your tour, instead of trying to teach me to sing.’ Though she tried to laugh, her emotions were running so high she sounded like she was being strangled.

‘I enjoyed teaching you to sing.’

Her eyes fluttered closed and she tried to picture his face. Was he being kind, or serious? ‘When is your first show?’

‘Tomorrow. I’m on my way to the theatre for a rehearsal. It will seem strange singing without you.’

Her heart gave a frenzied jump. ‘Strange, but tuneful.’

‘Let’s hope so.’ A pause, and she imagined him frowning as he considered what to say next. ‘Are Jack and Luke glad to have you home?’

‘For the moment, yes. It will all change when I start nagging them to tidy their rooms.’ Another pause and she clutched at the handset, wondering why he was putting himself through a conversation he clearly didn’t want to have. ‘I know you must be busy. Was there anything else—’

‘I’ve got a few shows in the US and then I’m in Europe, starting in Rome at the end of next week.’ His words came out in a rush, as if he was afraid he wouldn’t get them out otherwise. ‘Would you come to meet me in Rome?’

There was a rushing sound in her ears as her heart went into free-fall.

He wanted to see her again. In Rome.

A few days in Rome, with Michael Tennant.

‘I don’t mean to put you on the spot.’ He sounded strained. Hesitant. ‘I understand it would be difficult with the boys, and with work. I’m probably stupid to even ask. It’s just ... I wanted you to know how much I enjoyed your company. How much I’d like to see you again.’ He exhaled sharply. ‘God, I hate phones. I can’t see your face.’

She realised he’d taken her silence as reticence. ‘If you could, you’d see me grinning like an idiot. There’s shock there too, but mostly I’m grinning.’

‘Would you consider coming then? You could fly out Friday afternoon and back Sunday evening so you don’t have to take time off work. I’d buy the ticket.’

Her heart was racing so much she couldn’t think. She could barely take a breath. ‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘I do.’ His tone held enough force for her to understand there was no point arguing. ‘Think about it. Let me know.’

‘I will.’ Because she sensed the phone call hadn’t been easy for him, she added. ‘If I don’t make it, it won’t be because I didn’t want to.’

This time his breathing was softer, slower. ‘I hope you do make it, Jessie. I really do.’ Just before he said goodbye he gave her his mobile number. ‘Call me, message me. Even if you can’t make it, I’d like to hear from you.’

She remained where she was on the sofa a long time after he’d ended the call, the phone cradled against her chest. Her mind thousands of miles away.

Probably it was crazy to even think about going.

Shaking her head, she let out a sad laugh. Definitely it was crazy. She was a working mum, for heavens sake. She had responsibilities. She couldn’t just pack a bag and fly off to Rome on the whim of a man she didn’t really know.

Could she?

Chapter Sixteen

Michael knew he was obsessively looking at his phone, but he couldn't help himself. It had been three days since he'd called Jessie and he'd yet to hear back from her. He kept seesawing between confidence that she'd come out and crippling insecurity that she wouldn't.

If I don't make it, it won't be because I didn't want to. The truth, or a neat way to let him down gently?

'Michael?'

He glanced up to see Georgina frowning at him. 'Sorry?'

'I asked if you wanted anything from the bar? I'm going to get myself a glass of wine.'

They were sitting in the business lounge, waiting for a flight to Vegas. He'd done two back to back shows in two days in LA, his next was at Caesars Palace. If American Airlines ever managed to pull their damn finger out. Their flight was already an hour late.

And he was already fed up with touring.

'I'll take a beer. Thanks.'

He watched as she trotted off, trying to work out why she felt the need to wear her clothes so tight. Didn't she realise men were more attracted to curves than a skinny frame? Or was that just him?

And why was he thinking about Jessie again?

With a sigh he thrust his phone back into his pocket. Let's face it, asking her to meet him in Rome had been a moment of madness. He should have left their brief flirtation as a sweet memory, not hankered after more.

'Here, this will cheer you up.' Georgina waggled a glass of beer in front of his face. 'Seriously though, why the glum expression? You're on your way to Vegas.' She smiled provocatively. 'Sin City.'

He straightened his shoulders and took a gulp of the beer. ‘Yes, sorry, you’re right.’ No more moping. After Paula he’d vowed not to let a woman take over his life again. It meant sometimes he was lonely, but it also meant he was always in control. Uncomplicated relationships had served him well over the last ten years. A divorced mother with a warm heart wouldn’t fall into that category.

Inside his trouser pocket, his phone buzzed. Forgetting his internal pep talk he snatched it out so quickly he almost spilt his beer.

If the invitation is still on, I can make Rome. Jessie xx

A smile spread across his face that he was powerless to stop. Immediately he typed out a reply.

The invitation is still very much on. I’ll send you the plane tickets and details of the hotel. He hesitated, unsure how to sign off. Kisses — at least the non-physical type, weren’t his style. *Ciao, Michael.*

He tucked the phone back in his pocket and looked up to find Georgina watching him. ‘Something’s made you happy,’ she remarked.

‘Yes. Jessie’s going to join me in Rome for the weekend.’

Georgina’s blonde eyebrows arched into her hairline. ‘Oh. That’s quite a surprise.’

He frowned, not sure whether he wanted to pursue this conversation. ‘Is it?’

‘Well, yes. She didn’t strike me as the travelling type. More the type to stay in and watch the television with her kids.’ Georgina swung her big blue eyes in his direction. ‘Unless she’s bringing the boys?’

Michael recalled the painfully stilted conversations he’d had with her sons and winced. ‘No. It’s just Jessie.’

Georgina didn’t reply. She didn’t have to. Michael knew what she was thinking. It was the same thoughts he’d had many times since he’d made that phone call. Why bother to

invite Jessie over to Rome when he knew there was no future in it?

But for all that, his heart felt lighter than it had done an hour ago. And suddenly touring didn't seem so bad.

* * *

It was just over a week since Jessie had told Michael she'd join him in Rome. Since then she'd received a plane ticket, together with details of the hotel she'd be staying in. There had been no note, so she assumed Georgina had been the one to organise it.

Michael had texted once, to check she'd received the ticket and to tell her a chauffeur would take her to the airport and to the hotel.

And now the day had arrived for her to leave. To say she was nervous would be a misleading use of the word. She was bloody petrified.

Finally she caught sight of Phil loping up the drive, as if he had all the time in the world. 'You're ten minutes late.'

'Keep your hair on, there's plenty of time.' Phil greeted her with a casual peck on the cheek and wandered inside. 'Hey, boys, Dad's arrived. Time for a fun weekend.'

'Hi, Dad,' they chorused from upstairs.

'Looking forward to your romantic reunion?' Phil teased, wagging his sandy eyebrows.

'Of course.' And she was, she told herself. Or she would be, if she wasn't so worried that in the two weeks since they'd last seen each other, the magic might have disappeared. Their week had been surreal, but they were no longer two people forced together through circumstance. Now he had a choice, and she was terrified he would regret choosing to see her.

'Are you sure this is the right thing to be doing?' Phil gave her a concerned look, obviously picking up on her doubt.

'What do you mean?'

‘I mean, let’s be honest here, this fling with Tennant isn’t going to go anywhere, is it? I can’t imagine you married to the guy, living in a big castle while he trots around the globe. And gorgeous though you are, you’re heading towards forty with two sons in tow. You’re probably not what he’s planning to settle down with.’

Just what she needed when she was feeling vulnerable, a bloody dose of reality from her ex. ‘Thanks, that’s a real help.’

He sighed and put his arms round her. ‘Sorry. I never did know the right things to say, did I? It’s just this isn’t like you. You don’t go waltzing off with men you’ve only just met. I don’t want you to get hurt and for the life of me I can’t see any other scenario if you carry on with this.’

‘I know, I know.’ Jessie bit back her tears. This was a happy day. In a few hours she’d be seeing Michael again. ‘Still, I feel if I don’t go for it, no matter how short it might be, or how hurt I will be when it ends, I will always regret it.’

Phil smiled kindly down at her. ‘I hear you. And I’ll be here to help pick up the pieces.’

She gave his waist an affectionate squeeze. ‘That means a lot, thank you. And thanks for making it possible by looking after the boys. At least I don’t have to add them to my list of worries.’

‘Chauffeur’s here,’ Jack yelled as he and Luke dashed down the stairs.

Jessie looked out of the window at the sleek silver Mercedes and took in a deep breath. This was it. She gave them both a very tight hug, one that would have to last until she got back Sunday evening. ‘I’ll phone you tonight. Be good for Dad.’

Watching the three of them wave her off, she almost asked the driver to stop and let her out. Why was she leaving the people she loved most in the world, to spend a weekend with a man she barely knew?

The uncertainty, a dragging weight around her shoulders, was still there as she drew up outside the hotel in Rome

several hours later. A magnificent old villa on the outside, inside it had a lobby filled with grand antique furniture in rich reds and golds. To the left was a sweeping marble staircase. It was luxury with a capital L and she felt gauche, horribly, intimidated by it all.

‘Jessie Simmons. I think you have a room for me?’

The receptionist smiled and tapped something into the computer. Jessie felt her pulse start to race. She didn’t even know if she had her own room, or if she was sharing with Michael.

Or if he’d decided to cancel the room and not let her know.

Oblivious to her panic, the receptionist handed her a slip of paper to sign and a key card. ‘Room 502. Would you like help with your bag?’

Jessie shook her head, not daring to ask if the room was booked solely in her name.

Walking quickly to the lift she pressed the fifth floor.

The room was huge. A suite, overlooking the pretty Italian garden, it was furnished in the same opulent décor as the lobby area. Though the furnishings were antique, the bathroom was spectacularly modern, as was the entertainment system.

Jessie perched on the bed and tried to regulate her breathing. She wanted to enjoy the moment. To savour being in a five-star hotel in the beautiful city of Rome.

Instead she was freaking out.

A tap on the door caused her heart rate to rocket.

Taking a deep breath, she walked on trembling legs to open it.

Michael’s tall frame filled the doorway. He smiled hesitantly at her. ‘Hello.’

She tried to smile back but her lips weren’t behaving. ‘Hello.’

He looked so beautifully familiar in his habitual dark suit and white open neck shirt, but at the same time he was so achingly distant. A handsome face she'd seen grace magazine covers and CD sleeves, yet here it was, staring down at her and making everything inside her flutter and yearn. From the crinkles round his eyes, to the hint of dark stubble across his jaw, he looked so impossibly real.

'I'm sorry I wasn't at the airport to meet you. I've not long landed myself and, well, I didn't want to draw the attention of any waiting media.'

'I understand.' And she did. But why was he being so formal? Why couldn't he just sweep her into his arms and kiss her?

'Is your room okay?'

She nodded, his formality now affecting her. 'It's magnificent, thank you.' But was it wrong of her to feel gutted that they wouldn't be sharing one?

His gaze fell to hers and her breath caught. She'd forgotten how incredible his eyes were. The blue of the ocean on a sunny day. 'I'm in the room next door to yours. I didn't want to presume.' For a moment he glanced away, swallowing. Then he looked her straight in the eye. 'You should know, it wasn't my preference. Just my attempt at being a gentleman.'

His mouth curved in that shy, almost awkward smile, and a thrill pulsed through her. Be brave, she told herself. She'd come this far, there was no stepping back. 'I appreciate the sentiment. Though it wasn't necessary.'

Some of the tension in his face lessened and his eyes darkened. 'I've missed you.'

Taking a step forward he cupped her face, pausing a fraction to sear her with a heated look. Then he dipped his head and kissed her. Softly at first, his lips caressing hers until a groan escaped him and his movements became hungrier, his tongue sweeping round her mouth.

Holding her firmly against him he eased her backwards until the back of her knees felt the edge of the bed. 'I fully intended taking you to dinner first,' he breathed, his hands leaving her face to travel over her body, smoothing over her breasts. 'But now that you're actually here, and not just a figment of my overwrought imagination, I don't think I can wait.'

At his words, the swirling lust in his eyes, all the nerves, the doubts flew right out of her. 'I don't want to wait.'

He let out another groan, more guttural this time, and with quick fingers he undid the buttons on her black silk blouse, revealing her red lace bra. The one she'd bought after he'd told her red suited her.

His eyes flamed. 'Have I told you how hot you look in red?'

His movements became more hurried, more gloriously frantic, as he tugged down the zip on her black jeans. 'I should have worn a skirt,' she panted as the jeans got caught up around her legs.

But he shook his head, his lips kissing their way down her calves as his hands slipped the errant jeans all the way off. 'I like the challenge. And I like the way you dress.'

She melted, a puddle of hormones beneath his electrifying touch. Whatever happened in the future, it would be worth it for just this moment when she felt gloriously, liberatingly alive.

A swish of clothing, the clank of a belt buckle, the sound of a zip being pulled. The rustle of a condom packet. The thump of a heart beating. The warmth of his breath across her face as he slipped inside her.

'Welcome to Rome, Jessie.'

Chapter Seventeen

Michael let out a deep, satisfied sigh as he flopped onto his back, pulling Jessie against his side. Was there anything better in the world than spectacular sex?

Mediocre sex he'd had his fill of, but there was nothing mediocre about what he'd just experienced with Jessie. She had a body designed for pleasure, with her glorious breasts and her curvy hips, though he had a strong suspicion that wasn't the only reason he felt so content right now.

He angled his head to look down at her, brown curls a silky mess across his chest. Time to admit he was developing feelings for this lady that went beyond mere attraction. Though the thought unnerved him, he wasn't going to let his insecurities stop him from pursuing this. He'd been lonely for too long. Yes, he was at the start of a tour and yes, she had responsibilities at home but damn it, he wanted to give this a try.

On a rush of emotion he bent to kiss the top of her head. 'Thank you for coming.'

She stirred, smiling serenely up at him. 'Is that coming as in a moment ago, or coming as in travelling here?' As he began to laugh, she kissed his chest, sending a warm flush through him. 'Either way, the pleasure is all mine.'

He felt his heart stir. It had been so long since he'd felt this at ease with a woman. So long since he'd laughed and wanted to do nothing but spend the rest of the day in bed. 'I think you'll find the pleasure is mine, too.' He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it in a gesture that should have made him feel ridiculous. But didn't. 'Is there anything you want to do, now you're here?'

Her hazel eyes studied him a moment. 'I want to spend time with you.'

'In bed or out?'

'Both.'

He smiled, easing her head towards his so he could kiss her. 'I think that can be arranged.' Her eyes dropped to his chest and she began to trace her fingers across his pecs. It would have been sexy, had she not seemed so distracted. 'Jessie?'

She nodded and drew in a breath, obviously working up to asking him something important. 'Why did you invite me here?'

He felt his heart give a powerful thump, and he wondered if she felt it too. 'I was frustrated at the way I had to dash off. After the time we'd spent together it felt wrong to leave like that.'

'I see.'

But she didn't see. How could she, when he hadn't told her anything that would really explain it? 'I also wanted to see whether the connection we had back at the studio could work outside that environment.' With a grunt he threw his head back against the headboard. Could he sound any more pompous? 'I wanted more than a quick fling with you,' he said finally. 'I wanted to see if this could lead somewhere.' When she didn't reply, he touched her face, lifting it to his. 'Can I ask why you accepted?' If she said anything along the lines of *how could I turn down Michael Tennant* it was okay, he told himself. He could work with it. Work with *her* to prove he was more than a name on an album cover.

'Because when I'm with you I don't feel like a mother, or a pharmacist, or an ex-wife. I feel like the woman I used to be, before all that.' Her eyes sparkled with mischief. 'And because, while I've still got a major crush on Michael Tennant, I like *you* even more.'

The muscles he'd unwittingly tensed, relaxed. 'That's good to know, Jessie Simmons.' He shifted them both so they were lying on their sides, facing each other. 'Much as I'd love to stay here all weekend, I can't bring you to Rome and not take you out. What do you want to do?'

Her face lit up with excitement. 'Everything. Have a coffee in a piazza, throw a coin in the Trevi Fountain, sit on

the Spanish Steps. Take a tour round the Vatican, ogle at Michelangelo's David.'

Her enthusiasm was contagious and Michael threw back his head and laughed. 'We'll not be lazing around in bed with that itinerary. Though I'm afraid David will have to wait another time. He flexes his marble muscles in Florence, not Rome.'

'Oops.' For a moment she looked embarrassed and he was about to tell her it was an easy mistake to make but she spoke again. 'When is your next performance? Will I get to hear you sing?'

He felt a stab of disappointment. 'I had today to travel, tomorrow to recover. I sing on Sunday evening.'

'When I'll be back at home.'

For one mad moment he felt the wrench of her leaving, even though she'd only just arrived. 'But you're here now,' he whispered, nibbling at her full bottom lip. 'And I'm going to make the most of that.'

Her throaty moan was a total turn on but he gently pushed her away. 'I'm not feeding you room service tonight. I want to take you out. The restaurant is booked. We just need to get changed.'

'Has Georgina booked it?'

He blinked at her odd question. 'Yes. Is that okay?' Frowning, he brushed at a curl that was perilously close to her eyes. 'She won't be coming with us, if that's your concern. I want you all to myself.'

A slight flush spread across her cheeks. 'In which case, I'd better get ready.'

* * *

While Michael disappeared to his room to get changed, Jessie took a moment to lie back on the bed and just breathe. She knew she had to take a shower, sort out the hair Michael had gloriously, amazingly, passionately messed up. But first she needed a moment to drink everything in.

He wanted more than a quick fling. Though she tried not to get too carried away by his admission, she couldn't help but feel giddy and foolish. The girl who'd just been asked out by the best-looking boy in the school.

With a wry laugh to herself she sat up and skipped, yes skipped, to the bathroom.

She wasn't smiling quite so much when she walked into the fancy restaurant Georgina had booked for them. She's his PA, she reminded herself as they were shown to their table by a very serious-looking waiter. Of course she's going to book the restaurant.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder if this formal, very expensive-looking place had been deliberately picked by the woman to make Jessie feel small — something she could manage perfectly well all by herself. How could she have mixed up Rome and Florence?

Biting at her lip, Jessie straightened her spine. She couldn't, wouldn't, allow Georgina to make her feel unsophisticated.

Michael touched her elbow, drawing her eyes to his. 'Is this alright with you?' he whispered.

'Of course,' she replied brightly, reaching for the menu the waiter was handing her. 'I'm a great fan of Italian cuisine.'

Michael coughed and took a big swig of water. 'I'm glad, because we're having that tomorrow.' He looked very much like he was trying not to laugh. 'This is a Chinese restaurant. I hope you don't mind.'

Her eyes slid to the chopsticks on the table, the bamboo artwork on the walls and she felt herself blushing furiously. But then she met his bright, dancing eyes and instantly her embarrassment became trivial in the face of his amusement. She'd never seen him looking so relaxed, so boyish.

'At the risk of repeating myself. Oops.'

He started to laugh, a gorgeous deep chuckle that wasn't just sexy, it was contagious. I'll remember this moment for the rest of my life, she thought as the laughter bubbled out of her.

Michael reached across the table and squeezed her hand. ‘Did I tell you how glad I am to see you?’

A lump shot into her throat. It was gratifying to know that while he was undoubtedly giving her a weekend to remember, she was giving him something back. ‘You did, but I won’t get tired of hearing it.’

He smiled and this time it was fuller, really hitting his eyes. It felt like a breakthrough; as if he’d finally loosened up around her. He nodded over to her menu. ‘Is there anything in particular you fancy or shall I order some dishes for us to share?’

You, she thought. I fancy you. Closing the menu, she placed it down on the table. ‘I’ll be happy with anything you choose.’

‘Ducks feet? Fried scorpion?’

She didn’t care that he was gently mocking her. The light in his eyes was more than enough recompense. ‘As long as you try it first.’ He laughed again, softer this time but no less sexy. ‘You know you should do that more often.’

‘What?’

‘Laugh. It looks good on you.’

Surprise flashed across his face. ‘Thank you, though you’re the one who brings it out in me. Perhaps you should come on tour with me.’ And though his smile was teasing, the eyes that watched her were very serious.

Jessie fiddled with her napkin, not knowing what to say. Was he serious? Though he knew she couldn’t possibly do that, so it must have been a joke. ‘How is the tour going?’

He gave her a wry smile that told her he knew she’d deliberately veered the conversation onto safer ground. ‘So far, so good. I’m playing to full theatres, which is always a relief.’

The waiter came to take their food order, and fill their glasses with the crisp white wine Michael had requested. ‘And in between the concerts,’ she asked when he’d drifted away. ‘Do you have much time for play?’

‘Sometimes, like this weekend, there is a break to recover from the travel, but often it’s just arrive, rehearse, sing, move on to the next city.’

Because she’d already sensed it, she asked the question that had been burning in her mind. ‘Do you get lonely?’

‘Sure.’ He reached for his glass, long tanned fingers wrapping round the delicate stem. ‘Robert and my old PA travelled with me on previous tours, but now Robert’s married he’s cut back a bit so I only see him now and again. Georgina’s agreed to travel with me though.’

‘I bet she has.’

Michael stared at her and Jessie realised with horror she’d said the words out loud. ‘What do you mean?’

Her stomach dropped and a cold shiver ran through her. She’d sounded like a bitch. After all, it wasn’t like they were in a proper relationship. He hadn’t made any promises to her. Yet the thought of him sleeping with other women, especially Georgina, made her feel sick. Sick and stupidly naïve. ‘It’s none of my business. Forget I said anything.’

‘There isn’t anything going on between me and Georgina,’ Michael said quietly.

She nodded but couldn’t hold his gaze. If it wasn’t his PA, and Jessie was certain Georgina wanted it, even if Michael didn’t, then it would be someone else before long. He was a single, hugely talented, highly attractive, rich man. She had to accept this weekend for what it was. Then go home and forget all about him.

She felt Michael’s fingers curve round her chin, lifting it so she was forced to make eye contact with him. ‘I don’t know what you think is going on between us, but it’s very much your business what I get up to. For the record, I’m not in the habit of sleeping with more than one woman at a time, and I’m not in the habit of sleeping with anyone I don’t care about.’

She swallowed hard, feeling wobbly. ‘Thank you.’

His expression was pensive as he withdrew his hand. ‘You don’t need to thank me for not sleeping with other women.’

He sounded almost angry and she gave herself a mental shake. 'I wasn't. I was thanking you for explaining. For telling me it was my business.'

She heard him exhale and he looked like he was about to say something else but then the waiter arrived with their first course. Michael sat back in his chair as the staff fussed about, setting several exotic looking dishes in front of them. Steamed dumplings, fried scallops and tiger prawns, grilled coconut lobster.

Taking a sip of her wine she smiled, hoping to break the tension that had been lingering ever since he'd mentioned Georgina's name. 'I can't see the prawn toast.'

But instead of smiling back, he frowned. 'Sorry, I can order some if you like.'

Damn, damn, damn. He was back to being formal again. 'No, it's fine. I'm sure these will be delicious.'

What a shame that she'd just lost her appetite.

Chapter Eighteen

Michael knew he'd ruined the mood but he couldn't stop thinking about Jessie's reaction when he'd mentioned Georgina's name. Part of him was flattered she'd appeared to be jealous, but he was also irritated at her assumption that because he was famous he automatically slept around. It spoke volumes about her opinion of his morals, but it also suggested she didn't realise how heavily his feelings were already invested in her. Was that because she didn't feel the same? Had she only come here for a brief thrill; a chance to escape the kids for a weekend?

He'd seen how upset she'd been at the studio when she spoke about her sons, though. He didn't imagine she'd left them lightly.

All this was going round in his head while they ate. This was his favourite restaurant in Rome, which was why he'd asked Georgina to book it, but right now he might as well be eating McDonald's for all the pleasure he was getting out of it.

'You seem pensive.' Jessie reached out to touch his hand. 'Are you okay?'

And now he was ruining it for her, too. 'Yes. Sorry, I'm fine.' A few more awkward minutes went by and Michael sighed, putting down his chopsticks. 'Actually, no, I'm not okay. I'm still stuck on that conversation we had about Georgina.'

He saw the unease enter her eyes. 'Oh?'

'Not her specifically, but what's happening between us. I know this is bad timing, and in hindsight maybe it was wrong to invite you here.' Her face fell and he cursed inwardly. 'No, no. I don't mean I regret asking you. Just that I've made things complicated, for both of us. You see the thing is, I want ...' He hesitated, finding his nerve. 'I want to go out with you, Jessie. I want to date you.'

Her eyes flew up to his. 'You do?'

‘I do.’ He tried to read her thoughts, but all he could read was shock. ‘And I was hoping you felt the same way. But I’m also only beginning this damn tour and I still have seven months left. You have children and a job that you can’t easily leave. I’m wondering if I’ve been unfair on both of us, starting something. I was only half joking when I said you should tour with me. Relationships are hard enough to sustain when you’re both in the same country.’ And didn’t he know that, to his cost.

He had a flashback to that day Paula told him she wasn’t going to marry him. She’d found someone else.

Was he totally mad, wanting to dive into another relationship?

His gaze travelled back to Jessie. The frozen look on her face had worn off and she was smiling at him, her gorgeous eyes swimming with tears she was trying to bat away with her hand. ‘I do feel the same way. And I don’t care how difficult it might be. I want to spend more time with you.’

Slowly the knots in his stomach started to unravel and he began to wish they weren’t in a public restaurant so he could kiss the tears off her cheeks. Then kiss her, everywhere. The soft curve of her stomach, the mole under her left breast.

His thoughts must have reflected in his expression because she blushed.

Attempting to rein himself in, he dug his chopstick back into the spicy noodles that had been making him queasy only a moment ago. ‘I’m glad we had this conversation. Maybe now I can enjoy the food.’

She laughed. ‘Me too. Though I am still wondering why we’re eating Chinese in Rome.’

When she’d mentioned prawn toast earlier, his brain had been too fogged to realise she was teasing him. This time he recognised it. ‘I can admit that’s entirely my fault. I’m a huge fan of Chinese food. I eat it wherever I am in the world. And this place is one of my favourites.’

‘You’ve been here before?’

She looked surprised, and he thought he knew why. ‘Yes, I have. Many times. And no, Georgina didn’t recommend it. She booked it, but I chose it.’

She gave him a guilty look. ‘Oops.’

He burst out laughing. ‘I realised, after the last place I took you, that you weren’t a fan of her restaurant choices. You’re like Robert. You prefer casual, don’t you?’

‘I eat out to relax and enjoy food I haven’t had to make myself. I can’t do that if I have to concentrate on deciphering the menu or choosing the appropriate wine rather than the wine I want.’

‘I hear you, but we might need to agree a compromise. The advantage of expensive restaurants is nobody bats an eyelid when they see someone they recognise.’

Understanding dawned in her eyes. ‘I hadn’t considered that part.’

‘Don’t get me wrong. I’m not like Justin Bieber. I don’t get crazed fans tearing off my clothes wherever I go.’

‘But you do get recognised.’

‘Yes.’ Because she’d started to chew her lip, Michael decided it was time to get the other worry he had off his chest. ‘Is that going to be a problem for you? Being seen with me? I noticed how uncomfortable you were after our meal out in London.’

‘It took me by surprise. It’s not happened to me before.’ Her eyes skimmed past his and onto the wall behind him. ‘Since the show I’m recognised a bit in the village, and local reporters were interested for a while, but there’s been nothing like that time outside the hotel with all of those paparazzi. It unnerved me.’ Finally she brought her gaze back to his and smiled. ‘But I’m not going to let it scare me off.’

Though he wasn’t sure he believed her, Michael was determined not to ruin this evening for a second time so he kept quiet. He would enjoy finishing his meal with this breath of fresh air that had brightened up his life.

Then he would enjoy spending the night making love to her.

* * *

They spent Saturday sightseeing. Michael had donned jeans and a navy polo shirt, totally taking Jessie by surprise — her first glimpse of casual Michael. If anything, he looked even more attractive. Less austere and more approachable.

‘What?’ he’d said when she’d stared at him as she’d come out of the bathroom to find him dressed.

‘I didn’t think you did casual.’

He’d shrugged. ‘Don’t tell Robert, but I bought a few pairs of jeans in the US. I figured it was about time I tried.’

Then he’d pulled a light wool tailored jacket out of the wardrobe and she’d burst out laughing.

He’d simply raised an eyebrow. ‘I didn’t say I was going to change overnight.’

It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell him she didn’t want him to change, but she’d shied away from saying it. His admission last night that he wanted more than a fling had been almost too much to hear because now, in those quiet moments when she dropped her guard, she could almost imagine a future for them.

And that was terrifying. There was a huge leap between dating, and sharing a house with roses and a white picket fence. A huge leap, and a massive potential for heartbreak.

To protect herself as much as she could, she had to keep back some of her feelings.

As he held her hand through the quieter backstreets around the Trevi Fountain, she was reminded of the other reason she had to be careful. Michael had donned a baseball cap and dark sunglasses but she was aware of people giving them furtive glances.

Fame came at a price. She could only hope it wasn’t too high for her. The small dose of media attention she’d experienced following the show had been uncomfortable.

Despite her bravado to Michael yesterday, she wasn't in a hurry to find herself in the spotlight again. Once in a lifetime was enough.

'I guess Rome is somewhere you've performed a lot,' she asked, determined to distract herself from such depressing thoughts.

'A fair bit, yes. When in Rome, you need to take the pace right down, and enjoy drinking in the atmosphere. Here's just the place to do that,' he said, pointing to a quiet café in a small square.

They sat outside, and he ordered their drinks in fluent Italian. 'One of the benefits of having to sing in Italian,' he said with a shrug when she gaped at him.

After they'd been served their coffee, Michael glanced over at her. 'I hope it won't be long before you come and see me again.' His eyes held hers. 'You will come again, won't you?'

The vulnerability she saw in his blue gaze made her heart ache. 'Try and stop me.' Before she could question the advisability of it, she asked, 'When were you thinking?'

'I'll have to check the schedule, but I think in a few weeks there might be a free weekend in Frankfurt.' He smiled at her raised eyebrows. 'Perhaps not the romance of Rome, but I'm sure we can create our own.'

He gave her a smouldering look before his eyes darted down to her mouth. Jessie's pulse started to race and she gulped down her next mouthful of coffee.

Before she knew it, Michael was drawing some notes out of his wallet and placing them on the table. 'Come on.' He reached for her hand and drew her onto her feet. Then he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her tight against him. 'There's another ceiling I want you to look at, and this one isn't painted by Michelangelo.'

* * *

On Sunday morning Jessie woke before Michael, her mind unable to rest. Part of her was delighted to be going back to

Jack and Luke. The other part was dreading saying goodbye to the man breathing gently by her side. Unable to resist, she gently traced her fingers across the planes of his face, the square jaw, and down to lips that gave her so much pleasure.

He groaned and shifted, moving his arm so it fell across her. She ran her hands over the dark hairs of his forearm before wriggling further down the bed and trailing them over the finely muscled contours of his chest, then down to the sexy trail of black hair that snaked from his navel down to his groin. A series of small round scars were the only blemish on his otherwise perfect chest. She wondered how he'd got them.

Burning with a need to taste instead of touch, she kissed the scars, then ran her tongue upwards, licking at his flat, brown nipple. He inhaled sharply but when she looked up his eyes were still closed. With a playful sigh, she moved away and lay on her back.

His arm shot out, tugging her head back to his chest. 'Oh no you don't. You need to finish what you started.'

Laughing, she kissed him. 'I thought you were asleep.'

He lifted her head and gave her a heated gaze. 'With you touching me, never.'

It was a long while later, when she was lying replete against him, that her attention was drawn again to the scars on his chest. Her fingers ran across the rough edges.

'Where did you get these?'

He peered down to where she was exploring. 'They're from a snake bite,' he replied lightly, trapping her hand and bringing it to his lips.

'They don't look like snake bites.'

'I didn't realise village pharmacists were experts on them.'

Though his tone was still mild she could feel the tension creep into his body. 'We're not. But we're also not stupid.' Instantly his guard dropped and he looked away, his jaw

tightened. It scared her. ‘What happened? Is it what I think it is?’

‘That would rather depend what you’re thinking.’

It was beyond clear he didn’t want to talk about this, but Jessie had come too far. Though she felt sick at what she was about to say, she clasped his face and looked him straight in the eye. ‘I think it looks like someone stubbed their cigarette out on you.’

Immediately he jerked away from her, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. She was faced with the broad expanse of his naked back.

‘Did they?’ she whispered.

He let out a sharp breath. ‘I sung opera at school, Jessie. What do you expect?’

Her heart lurched painfully, and suddenly his quirks started to make sense. At school he’d been the oddball, the outsider. No wonder part of him still found it hard to mix. ‘Oh, Michael,’ she whispered, dropping soft kisses across his back.

He sat rigidly still for a moment before letting out a deep sigh and shifting to face her. ‘I don’t want you pitying me. I wasn’t an abused child. My parents had me late in life and were old-fashioned and set in their ways, which no doubt accounts for my love of classical music, but they loved me. And my singing might have seemed weird to a bunch of schoolboys from a poor estate, but it made me happy.’ He shrugged. ‘You know, really I should thank them. In making me angry, they also made me determined to succeed.’

Her heart aching for him, she reached up and kissed him. ‘Well, you certainly showed them.’

* * *

Her bags were packed and she was waiting for Robert. He’d arrived in Rome early that morning and kindly offered to take her to the airport in his hire car.

‘Are you all set?’ Michael came out from the bathroom tugging on a white T-shirt, his dark hair still wet from the

shower and his newly acquired jeans hanging loose on his hips.

Her heart sighed. 'I guess so.'

'Are you sure I can't come with you to the airport?'

'No. You need to get ready for your performance tonight.' And how could saying goodbye to him at the airport possibly be any easier?

Robert knocked on the door and took her bags, while Michael took her hand and walked slowly down to the car with her. As Robert climbed into the driver's seat, Michael took her in his arms. 'I'll let you know about Frankfurt once I've checked with Georgina.' He gave her one final, exquisite kiss. 'Until the next time.'

She slipped into the passenger seat and waved sadly back at him until the car disappeared round the corner. Then she began to cry.

'Hey, I don't allow women to cry in my car. Makes me look like a bastard.'

'Sorry.' She caught her breath on a sob. 'I'm stopping now.'

He glanced over at her. 'I'm worried about you two.'

Jessie blinked in surprise. 'Why?'

'I think you're in danger of falling in love with each other, and it's not going to be an easy ride.'

She let out a strangled sounding laugh. 'Michael isn't in danger of falling in love with me.'

Robert pulled up at the traffic lights and gave her a searching look. 'You're wrong. I've never seen him like this before.'

As she didn't know what on earth she could say to that, she kept quiet.

It was a few minutes before Robert spoke again. 'Just don't break his heart. He might look tough, but inside he's a softie. He usually puts up a protective barrier, but with you, I

can see his defences are down.’ Obviously sensing he’d been serious for long enough, Robert smiled. ‘And don’t think I didn’t notice those jeans he was wearing. He’s never worn jeans except around the house, so you must be loosening him up. You two looked so serious back there I kept quiet, but I’ll bust his balls when I get back.’

Grateful for the lighter comments she laughed, but her mind was an impossible muddle of emotion. Was Robert right, and she was falling in love? Was Michael? And if so, was it mad to think that when this ran its course, they could still part as friends, with neither of them getting hurt?

* * *

Many weary hours later, she arrived home.

‘Mum!’ Luke, already in his pyjamas, screeched as he caught sight of her putting down her bag. His arms wrapped around her and as she breathed in his familiar smell, her heart lifted and filled.

‘Oh, my darling, I’ve missed you,’ she told him, hugging him back, fighting to control her tears.

‘We went to the zoo with Dad and Annabel today,’ Luke babbled. ‘You missed the monkeys, they were so funny. They looked just like Jack.’

Jack snorted, but when she reached to kiss him, he didn’t turn away like he often did in that nearly-a-teenage-boy way.

Phil was in the lounge, his feet up on the coffee table, his eyes glued to a rerun of *Top Gear*. ‘The wanderer returns.’ He flicked her a glance. ‘How was Rome?’

She fought the urge to tell him to take his feet off the table. He was a guest now, and he’d just done her a huge favour. ‘Good, thank you. How have the boys been?’

Finally he dragged his eyes off the television. ‘Honestly? They missed you, especially at night when I was putting them to bed. How regular is this globetrotting going to be?’

Guilt squirmed through her, nipping away at her insides. ‘He’s asked me to go to Frankfurt in a few weeks.’

Phil slowly lifted his feet off the table and stood up. ‘So, this thing with him is serious?’

She bit into her cheek, determined not to break down. Now wasn’t the time. ‘I don’t know. How about you and Annabel?’

He flushed, confirming her suspicions. ‘Let’s just say we’re having fun. And for the record I’m willing to help out with the boys whenever you fly off to see Michael.’

‘So you can play happy families again with Annabel?’

He smirked. ‘Good turns deserve their own reward, don’t you think?’

Relieved to be laughing instead of crying, Jessie swiped him round the head with a cushion.

Chapter Nineteen

Michael looked again at his diary and swore. Since saying goodbye to Jessie four days ago, his mood had sunk, big time.

Finding out that Frankfurt wasn't an option to see her, had it plummeting still further.

Bloody German city. Bloody tour schedule. Bloody tour.

Robert, sitting at the desk in Michael's hotel suite going through some paperwork, tutted. 'Whatever it is you're going to moan about, suck it up. There are starving children out there.'

At the truth of his words, Michael scowled even more. 'You might be right, but remember I pay you to listen to my gripes.'

Robert, the bastard, only laughed. 'No way does the amount you pay me compensate for listening to you belly ache.'

Michael massaged his temples. He felt totally and utterly fed up. A long, deep sigh escaped him before he had a chance to stop it.

Robert glanced over again, only this time with sympathy. 'What gives?'

'I was hoping to see Jessie in Frankfurt. I thought I had a free Saturday. Looks like I was wrong.'

To his credit, his friend winced. 'Sorry. The schedule is a bit tight. At the time, we were focussed on making it as short as possible. You didn't want to do twelve months away, so we squished it up.'

'Yeah, I know.' He still didn't want any more time on tour than he had to. It's just he also wanted to see the woman he was falling for.

And wasn't that a freak out realisation? It was hard to believe he was even contemplating the L-word having only known her such a short time. It had taken months of dating

Paula before he'd felt this pull, this tug at his heart when he'd thought of her.

Yet he couldn't deny that with Jessie, he felt it already. And it was more than a tug. When his mind pictured her, it felt like his heart was being wrenched from his chest. Especially in moments like now, when seeing her again seemed like an impossibility.

'Have you spoken to her since Rome?'

'Not yet. I wanted to wait until I firmed up when we could see each other.' Robert let out a snort of disbelief and Michael glared at him. 'You've been with me these last few days. I've barely had a chance to piss, never mind have a meaningful conversation on the phone.'

'Me thinks he doth protest too much.'

Angry now, Michael stood and dragged a hand through his hair. 'Zip it.' As he started to pace, shame mixed with his anger, diluting it sufficiently for Michael to admit, 'You're right. I should have phoned her. I've put it off because I'm useless at finding the right words to say. It's hard enough face to face.'

'It's Jessie, Mikey boy.' Robert gave him a part understanding, part pull-your-ruddy-finger-out, smile. 'If you can't talk to her, you need professional help.'

'Okay, okay, you're right.'

'Second time you've said that in the space of a minute. Want to make it a third?'

'Never going to happen.' Though he couldn't resist the flicker of a smile at his old friend. There had been many times in his life he'd wondered where he'd be without Robert's friendship.

Robert's eyes drifted to the jeans Michael was wearing. Jeans he was slowly becoming used to. 'Want to bet?'

Thankfully a tap on the door signalling Georgina's arrival saved him having to admit to Robert that yes, jeans had their place when he was feeling relaxed.

Like when he was with Jessie.

As Georgina walked past him into the room, her strong perfume caught the back of his throat and he started to cough.

Robert waggled his eyebrows suggestively, and Michael knew exactly what he was saying. *That's in your honour, mate.*

Yet Georgina knew he'd invited Jessie out to Rome. Hadn't she sussed yet that his type ran to natural, curvy women and not slender, overly dressed, overly scented ones?

Together they went through their lists, first sorting out the mundane; travel arrangements, rehearsal times, a radio interview. Then the more interesting; two invitations to movie premieres, a request from a Saudi Sheik for Michael to sing at his wife's 60th birthday party — for a cool three hundred grand.

Robert started to laugh. 'And to think that first gig I got you, we had to pay them for the privilege of using their dingy back room.'

When they'd come to the end of their makeshift agenda, Georgina uncrossed her slender, stocking clad legs — just because he wasn't interested didn't mean he hadn't noticed — and stood up.

'Just one more thing.' Michael signalled to Georgina to wait. 'I'm trying to work out when Jessie can come out and meet me again. We had arranged to meet in Frankfurt, but I think that's a no go. Any thoughts when it might be possible?'

Georgina pursed her lips for a moment, then flicked through her iPad. 'She has children, doesn't she? Two boys, if I remember correctly. So I guess she needs to arrange for someone to look after them. She can't just fly off for a night at a moment's notice, can she?'

'No.' Was that a subtle reminder that Jessie didn't come alone. She came as a package?

'The weekend after Frankfurt, you're in Paris, but singing on the Saturday. Then you're heavily committed round Europe ... Oslo, Copenhagen, Finland, Vienna, Prague.' As she rattled off names like she was reading from a guidebook of Europe,

Michael's heart sunk even lower. 'There's a free weekend in Barcelona. In seven weeks.' Georgina smiled sweetly at him. 'Would you like me to phone her and let her know?'

Seven flaming weeks? He'd never survive it. Almost choking with disappointment, Michael shook his head. 'No, I've got it. Thanks.'

Georgina's phone started to buzz and when she glanced down, she grimaced. 'Oh dear, that's the concert hall messaging me. They've had some sound problems and they think it's best if you go down there now to make sure everything's okay for tonight.'

'Bloody great.' With a sigh, he rose to his feet. 'Guess that's it for today, guys. Thanks for coming round. I'd better get myself over to the hall. Georgina—'

'You need the car rescheduling. I'll ask them to pick you up in five minutes.'

He blinked. 'Okay, thanks. I've never had a PA who knows what I need before I've even asked for it.'

She slipped her handbag over her shoulder, flicked back her long, blonde hair and smiled. 'Well, you have now.'

* * *

Jessie pushed open the front door just as her phone started to ring.

'Shoes off!' she yelled as Luke and Jack barrelled inside.

She watched as the shoes were tugged off and flung haphazardly out of the way. One bounced against the wall, smearing it with mud.

With a resigned sigh, she looked down at her phone. Number unknown.

'Jessie, it's Georgina.'

The polished tones caught Jessie by surprise. She'd been hoping for a call from Michael for the last four days. Immediately her worry radar went on full alert. 'Is everything okay?'

‘Oh yes, the tour is going really well. It’s so exciting being a small part of it. I’m phoning to let you know Michael can’t do that weekend in Frankfurt. He will phone you, of course, but he’s really busy at the moment.’

‘Oh, okay.’ She hoped the disappointment she was feeling didn’t show in her voice. Four days without contact, and now this.

‘He doesn’t have a free weekend for ages, I’m afraid. I’m sure he’ll tell you himself, though. When he has time.’

Jessie narrowed her eyes at the second mention that Michael was too busy to talk to her. She’d like to bet Georgina was wearing her trademark smile; smug, with a heavy dose of sly and masked by saccharine. ‘Thank you for letting me know. I’ll look forward to hearing from Michael. When he can slot me into his schedule.’

I will not cry, I will not cry, she chanted as she ended the call. She didn’t want to go to flipping Frankfurt anyway. Especially not with a man who blew hot and cold.

So what if her heart ached whenever she thought of him and her emotions were a mess? She deserved to be treated better than this.

* * *

Once Luke and Jack were settled at the kitchen table doing their homework, Jessie dragged out the ironing board and picked up a shirt from the overflowing laundry basket. Thumping the iron down onto it, she imagined it was Georgina. With an evil smile, she turned up the temperature and watched the steam hiss across the front of the shirt.

Nope, she didn’t feel any better.

Later that night she was nodding off in bed while reading her book, when her phone vibrated with a text message. Despite the talking to she’d given herself earlier, her heart leapt when she saw Michael’s name next to it.

Are you still awake?

For a split second, she wondered whether to ignore it. Was she really ready for what he had to say?

He was calling to apologise. Having a relationship while touring was madness.

He was calling to tell her he couldn't see her for two months.

He was calling to tell her it was over. He'd begun to develop feelings for Georgina ...

Oh God, she was going to drive herself bat shit crazy.

Fingers trembling, she texted, *yes*.

A second later, her phone rang.

'Is this a good time to talk?'

His voice had never sounded deeper, or more thrilling. But he blows hot and cold, she reminded herself. 'Yes. Where are you calling from?'

'It's Thursday, so it must be Berlin.' She heard the wry humour in his reply. 'I've just finished a show and I'm on my way back to the hotel. How about you? Have I interrupted anything?'

She glanced down at her pjs. Their lives couldn't be more different. 'I'm sipping champagne in my jacuzzi.' She'd intended it to sound cool and witty but instead it sounded sarcastic and bitter.

'Hey, what's wrong?' he said abruptly.

'If you're phoning to tell me about Frankfurt you don't need to bother. Georgina has beaten you to it.'

She heard him curse. 'I told her I would let you know.'

Jessie shut her eyes, not sure what to say.

'Are you mad at me?' She could hear the worry in his voice but she couldn't in all honesty reassure him she wasn't.

'Jessie, I'm sorry I mucked up.'

In the background she could hear a siren. The honking of horns. He'd just finished performing, he had to be exhausted.

She shouldn't be giving him such a hard time over this. 'Never mind,' she said numbly, trying to hide the hurt she was feeling.

'Jess ...'

'Mum!' Luke's scream drowned out whatever Michael had been trying to say.

Panicked, Jessie slammed down the phone, dashing upstairs to find Luke bathed in sweat and clearly in the middle of a nightmare. Ignoring the phone that had begun to ring again, she tenderly smoothed back his matted hair and slid into bed with him.

'It's okay, baby. It was just a dream. I'm here. Go back to sleep.'

Slowly his rigid body started to relax. Within moments he was sleeping peacefully.

With her heart rate finally subsiding to normal, Jessie walked back to her bedroom. Her phone indicated she had a voicemail.

'Jessie, are you there?' Michael's anxious voice, followed by a muffled oath. 'I'm not sure what's going on. Was that an I-don't-care-any more *never mind* or a pissed off one? I hope to God you're pissed off. Never thought I'd say that. Damn these bloody machines. Look, if it's the latter, and you're angry with me, I'm sorry. Please phone back when you're feeling less mad.' There was a pause, and she heard his deep intake of breath. 'Please phone back anyway,' he ended quietly.

Jessie lay on the bed, trying to quell her instinct to immediately phone him back. His words tugged at her heartstrings, but did she really want to carry on like this, one minute on a high, the next a miserable low?

Wasn't she better off as she had been before she met him, content with her life?

Yet the moment she tried to close her eyes, her mind filled with him. His proud smile the night they'd sung together on the show. A pair of beautiful blue eyes, giving glimpses to the shy man behind the glittering image.

With a fatalistic sigh, she dialled his number.

He replied instantly. ‘Thank God.’ The relief in his voice made her feel guilty for leaving him hanging for so long. ‘I thought I wouldn’t hear from you again.’

‘Sorry. Luke had a nightmare.’

‘Shit, poor sod. Is he okay?’

‘Yes. He’s gone back to sleep.’

An awkward pause followed and she heard him take in a heavy breath; pictured him running a hand through his hair. ‘I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I miss you like crazy.’

It was her turn to say she missed him, too, but she was feeling too raw.

Michael’s voice again filled the silence. ‘I should have phoned you earlier. It’s been a crazy few days, three performances in four days. Between travelling, rehearsing and dealing with temperamental orchestras, I’ve thought of you a lot, but it always seemed too early, or too late to call.’ He let out a short laugh. ‘And I’m making excuses. I hate the phone. I’m better in person, though Lord knows that’s not saying much. On the phone, it’s too hard to read the other person’s feelings, unless you FaceTime I guess, but I’ve never got the hang of that. Truth is, I was scared to make a wrong move. Scared to misread what you were thinking.’

Tears threatened and Jessie drew in a shuddering breath. ‘How do you think I’m feeling now?’

‘You sound less angry, but beyond that I’m not sure.’

‘I’m disappointed I won’t be seeing you in Frankfurt. And it sounds like you’re going to be busy for a long while.’

‘Yes.’ He sounded as flat as she felt. ‘But if you’re still interested, I’ve got a plan.’

Hope punctured through her misery, and tears of relief began to stream down her face. Whatever his plan, it was too late to pull back from it, and from him. Her feelings were running too deep.

‘Jessie? Please don’t go quiet on me. Do you want to hear the plan, or do you want to slam the phone down on me again?’

The panic in his voice made her smile. ‘Sorry. Just having a moment here. I’d love to hear your plan.’

He drew in a long breath. ‘What do you mean, a moment?’

She raised her eyes to the ceiling. ‘Nothing you need to worry about. Tell me the plan.’

‘I’m in Paris the week after Frankfurt, but I’m performing Saturday night.’

‘That’s okay. We could still have Friday night. And part of Saturday.’ Until he had to leave to rehearse. She tried not to sound too deflated.

‘Yes. And if you brought Jack and Luke, you could explore the sights together while I’m not around.’

Jessie sat up with a jolt. ‘You’re joking.’

‘Not at all. It would be good to meet them properly. Make a better impression. Hopefully.’ She bit into her lip, utterly touched at both his gesture to include her sons, and his humble acknowledgement of their stilted meeting at the studio. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think that’s a lovely idea.’

‘I’ll buy the tickets—’

‘No,’ she interrupted, feeling her defences start to rise. ‘We won’t sponge off you. I’m perfectly capable of paying for us to visit Paris.’ Well, she was if she went into her rather meagre savings.

‘I know you are, but if I led a normal life you wouldn’t have to pay a fortune to come and see me. You have all the hassle of coming to Paris. Let me do my bit and pay for it.’

She started to laugh. ‘Hassle, coming to Paris? In my world, that’s a dream not a hassle.’ But her smile died when she realised the logistics of it all. ‘I’m afraid we’ll need two

rooms, and I can't let the boys stay in a hotel room by themselves.'

'Don't worry about the sleeping arrangements.' It sounded like he was smiling. 'I'll sort something out so we're all happy.'

For the first time in days, she felt a buzz of joy. 'Oh boy, I can't wait to tell them they'll be going to Paris. They'll be so delighted they might even start listening to your music.'

She heard a bark of laughter. 'I won't expect miracles.'

Her mind was humming by the time they said their goodbyes. The boys had never been abroad, money had always been too tight.

They were going to go ballistic.

It looked like her rollercoaster of a relationship was on the up again.

Chapter Twenty

Michael couldn't sit still. Jessie and her sons weren't due for another three hours yet. How on earth was he going to make it that long without having a nervous breakdown?

He'd sung at the Albert Hall, for God's sake, in front of the Queen. Why was he so keyed up about meeting two boys?

Because you've fallen for their mother.

The realisation hit him like a punch to the gut, making him feel queasy. He'd known he was falling for her, but now he realised he was no longer still en route. He'd reached the destination.

There was no other way to explain why he was so terrified at meeting the two people who meant most to her in life.

He knew if he didn't give a better account of himself this weekend than the shambolic effort at the studio, his relationship with Jessie was as good as over. She would always put her sons first. One of the many things he admired about her.

He snatched at his ringing phone.

Robert.

Relieved it wasn't Jessie cancelling at the last minute, he sat back down on the sofa.

'Has Jessie arrived yet?'

'No.' Michael glanced at his watch. 'Not for another two hours and fifty-two minutes. Approximately.'

His friend chuckled. 'Feeling a little on edge?'

Michael shoved at the fear threatening to cripple him. 'A little, yes.'

Michael didn't need to see Robert to know he was rolling his eyes. 'No need to be. They're good kids. I talked to them for a while on the day they came down to watch the show and introduced them to a few of the other singers. They loved your friend Jerome Stevens, aka Playit Kool. Thought he was *legit*.'

Michael let his head fall back against the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. ‘Not helping.’

‘Hey, come on. You beat the guy on the night, must say something.’

‘Yes. It says I had a dynamite singing partner.’

Michael’s growing panic must have finally got through to Robert because his next words were quieter. More serious. ‘Don’t make this into a big deal. Just be yourself and you’ll get on fine.’

Be himself? Michael still didn’t know who that really was. When he was performing, singing his heart out, he was unshakeable. A man who could look anybody in the eye at that moment and know he was their equal. It was why he loved it so much.

When he was away from the stage, the doubts crept in. Years of being the outsider, the weirdo. Years of being taunted at school, of having only Robert to count as a friend. It had taken its toll, the memories attacking his insides like a cancer, turning him into a quivering mess of insecurities.

‘Jessie must think you’re capable of getting on with her kids, or she wouldn’t be bringing them,’ Robert continued, clearly hell-bent on trying to reassure him. ‘From what I understand, their father is always happy to have them.’

The thought didn’t actually make him feel any better. Jessie might have divorced Phil years ago, but their relationship still appeared to be close. Michael had observed them at the studio, unable to stop comparing Phil’s easy-going nature, with his own uptight one. Her ex and him were beyond chalk and cheese. At least they began with the same letters. He and Phil were more ... apples and zebras.

And shit, he really didn’t want to add her ex to his list of things to worry about.

‘You still quietly stewing over there?’

Michael smiled grimly. ‘Only two hours and forty-five minutes to go. I’ll be fine.’

‘You dumb tenor, of course you will. Just for God’s sake relax, and I’ll catch up with you in Oslo. Oh and please make peace with Georgina. She’s been like a kicked puppy ever since you bawled her out for talking to Jessie.’

‘She should have left it alone, like I’d asked her.’ He didn’t add that her intervention had almost cost him his relationship with Jessie.

‘You’d just told her she was a mind reader. She thought she was doing you a favour. I’m not a massive fan of the woman but without her we’re screwed, so make friends. Send her flowers or something.’

After he’d put down the phone Michael rose reluctantly to his feet. Robert was right, he needed Georgina. And there was a florist opposite.

* * *

As the French countryside whizzed past their train windows, Jessie watched Jack and Luke become more and more excited. With her heart feeling full, she glanced back down at Annabel’s text message.

A: I was at Phil’s when the boys phoned to tell him they were going to Paris. OMG, my friend. Big step.

Jessie wasn’t going to be diverted from the standout part of that text. *You were at Phil’s?? OMG, my friend. Is this getting serious?*

A: I could say the same for you and Michael. For a one-week wonder, it’s now into its second month.

Jessie’s heart fluttered. The way Annabel phrased it sounded more than it was. Second month, yet in reality they’d only had one weekend together since the show. Was she mad to be involving her sons so soon? *One weekend doesn’t a relationship make*, she typed.

A: Yet. Saw your boss last night. John seemed disappointed when I said you and the boys wouldn’t be at footie training Saturday. If it all goes pear-shaped with the famous one, you’ve still got a fall back J

Choosing not to think about John and his supposed crush on her, Jessie hastily tapped out a reply. *Enjoy your weekend with my ex-husband. And if that goes pear-shaped, don't say I didn't warn you xx*

Slipping away her phone, she tried to work out how she felt at the thought of Phil and Annabel together. For so many years, Phil had been hers, so it was odd to think of him with someone else. Was she jealous? No, that wasn't the right word. She felt a little protective, of both of them. Annabel had been through a hellish time, and if Phil was making her happy, she was pleased for them both. But she worried, too. Phil and Annabel were a huge part of her life. She couldn't bear for either of them to be hurt.

Yet she was in danger of that happening to her too, the more she continued this affair with Michael.

'How long 'til we're in Paris?' Luke's question jolted her from her gloomy thoughts.

'Soon, my darling.' She glanced down at her watch. 'I think another twenty minutes.' A surge of nervous excitement ran through her.

In no time at all, they were following a man in a peaked cap and climbing into a waiting car. As the boys wriggled about, babbling about how awesome, cool and intense it was to be in a limo riding through Paris, Jessie relaxed against the soft leather interior. Stuff being sensible, stuff being careful. She was living for now, and she was going to enjoy every wild, crazy moment of it.

'Is this it?' Jake asked as they came to a stop. Jessie stared out of the window at the beautiful old building in front of them. It didn't look like a hotel.

But the driver was already out of the car and opening the door for her. Nodding towards the building entrance, he motioned for them to go ahead while he collected the bags.

Her legs weren't quite steady as she herded the boys through the main doors and towards a reception desk.

‘Bonjour,’ she began, but that was as far as her schoolgirl French took her. ‘We’re here to visit Mr Tennant.’

‘Ah.’ The man nodded and spoke in quick French on the telephone. ‘E will be down in a minute,’ he said in halting English.

Jack and Luke immediately started chasing each other through the large marble pillars, their loud voices penetrating the silence.

‘I hear Jack and Luke have arrived.’ Michael’s dry words drifted across to her from the top of the stairs. Within moments he came into view, his tall figure walking down to meet them. Dressed in black; black jeans, black jumper, he looked handsome enough for her heart to lurch, but forbidding enough for butterflies to swarm in her stomach.

And for Luke and Jack to screech to a halt.

Her heart was in her mouth by the time he reached the bottom step, but then he smiled. A full, warm smile that lit up his face. She could see the apprehension in his eyes, yet it was drowned out by his obvious delight in seeing her.

Feeling a million times lighter, Jessie smiled back. ‘I hope we haven’t disturbed the neighbours.’

He shrugged, his eyes still focussed on hers. ‘I don’t care.’ Bending, he kissed her chastely on the cheek. ‘Hello, Jessie.’

His breath tickled her ear and she shivered, though nothing about her felt cold.

Michael turned to Jack and Luke and held out his hand. ‘Hello again.’

The boys glanced at her. Smiling, she nodded and something in her shifted when she watched them solemnly shake Michael’s hand.

Please let them get on.

She knew Michael was trying to make an effort, and that Jack and Luke were on their best behaviour, yet the gulf between them was huge. Michael had no experience with kids; he found getting on with adults hard enough. Luke and Jack

were amazing, but they were normal, rap-loving, football-playing boys. Michael was a classical singer. And she couldn't see him getting muddy on a football pitch.

'Let me grab your bags.' Michael took the holdalls from the hovering chauffeur, rattling off something in French to him before casually slipping him a twenty euro note.

'We're heading for the top floor.' Michael told them as the chauffeur went happily on his way. 'I'm afraid we need to take the stairs because the lift is very old. I can't guarantee it'll make it to the top.'

The boys scampered ahead. The moment they were out of view, Michael dropped the bags and pulled her close for a long, drugging kiss. Her hand fell to his chest and she felt the wild beat of his heart. Mirroring her own.

'I've missed you.' He eased away, kissing her more softly this time, leaving her aching.

'Me too,' she breathed, then shook her head, laughing at herself. 'I mean I've missed you. Not that I've missed me.'

His lips curved in the delicious small smile that made her insides flutter. 'I think I got that.'

As they carried on up the stairs, Jessie looked around her. 'My powers of deduction tell me this isn't a hotel.'

'Ah, no.' He glanced sideways at her. 'I hope you'll like it. I come to Paris a lot, so a few years ago I bought an apartment here.' He smiled at her unspoken question. 'There are three bedrooms, though two are next door to each other. It would be easy to mistake which one you should be going to in the middle of the night.'

Heat flared in his blue eyes, and her heart skipped a beat.

That was what she'd never had with Phil, and what she didn't get from John. Fire, passion. The bolt of raw lust that didn't just lick at her insides when she looked at Michael, it scorched them. He made her feel sensual, attractive. All woman.

Jack and Luke were waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Michael turned the lock in the heavy wooden door and stood aside to let them in.

Jessie's jaw dropped.

While the boys dashed inside, shyness forgotten in the excitement of exploring something new, Jessie's eyes fought to take it all in. In contrast to the outside, inside was very modern. Stepping through the bright hallway she found a huge open living area. Grey leather sofas were arranged around the largest flat screen TV she'd ever seen, but that wasn't what drew the eye. Nor was it the shiny black grand piano, beautiful as it was. It was the view of Paris from the huge glass windows beyond that demanded the attention

It was nearly dark and the lights of the city glittered against the inky sky, the Eiffel Tower dominating the skyline. Incredible. As he continued to walk her through the rest of the apartment, she could only look and admire. Michael Tennant dripped money and oozed class.

What on earth was he doing with her?

'You haven't said anything since you walked in.' Michael turned to her, his eyes conveying his concern. 'Is something wrong?'

What was there to say? It's beautiful, but it's too much? *Stuff being sensible, stuff being careful*, she reminded herself. 'Just drinking it in. It's fabulous.'

'Mum, look in here, it's awesome!'

Jack's voice boomed across the apartment and when she glanced questioningly at Michael he smiled. 'I think he's found the games room.'

And sure enough, the boys had found a room that looked like a schoolboy's fantasy. Dark navy walls were lined with photographs of red Ferraris and yellow Lamborghinis. There was a bright red drinks fridge filled with Coke. Another flat screen TV dominated one wall, this time attached to a PlayStation. There was a leather sofa, a gaming chair.

Worry gnawed at her. Her feelings must have shown on her face because Michael sighed. 'It's all my stuff, Jessie.' As if to prove his point, he nodded over to Jack. 'Fancy a game?'

Jack looked at him hesitantly and once again Jessie felt that squirmy sensation in her stomach. She was scared Michael and her sons wouldn't be able to connect, yet also terrified that they would. She didn't want to be that woman who introduced her new lovers to her children, only for the lover to disappear after the kids had become attached.

But they have a father, she reminded herself. And she was allowed to find happiness, wasn't she?

Jack accepted the PlayStation control and sat on the gaming chair while Michael moved to the sofa.

'What's your preference?' As Jack frowned, Michael winced and tried again. 'Which game do you like best?'

'Oh, okay. Football. FIFA?'

For a second Michael closed his eyes and she could almost feel his annoyance at himself. It was like he was trying too hard. 'Sorry, I'm not a big fan of football. More of a rugby man.' The apology in his voice made her heart ache. She hated that he felt so unsure around her children that he was apologising for being himself. 'What about a car race?'

The tension radiating off Michael had now clearly reached her son, because Jack simply nodded.

The game had only just started when the doorbell sounded.

Michael flicked her a sideways look. 'Do you mind answering it?' He gestured to the cars whizzing round the track on the screen. 'I'm a bit tied up.'

'Absolutely.' Relieved to be doing something other than watching two people she cared about tiptoe round each other, Jessie almost ran out of the room. Luke was hot on her heels.

'Darling, you stay in there and keep Jack company.'

But her usually chatterbox son shook his head and clung to her side. 'I want to stay with you.'

With a heavy sigh, she went with him to answer the door.

The heavy feeling magnified the moment she opened it.

‘Oh, I didn’t expect to find you here.’ Georgina looked as shocked as Jessie felt. Her eyes swept down to where Luke was clutching her hand. ‘And who’s this?’

Luke, the traitor, grinned. ‘I’m Luke. My brother is playing a racing game. He’s called Jack.’

‘I see.’ Though clearly Georgina didn’t. ‘And where’s Michael?’

Before Jessie could open her mouth, Luke was there again. ‘He’s racing Jack.’

‘Right then.’ Georgina’s gaze swept over Luke. In the background, Jack could be heard shouting at the screen. ‘As Michael’s busy, perhaps you’d give him a message from me.’ Her cool blue eyes settled back on Jessie’s. And was that a smirk on her lips? ‘Could you thank him for the flowers? Tell him they were lovely. And very thoughtful.’

While Jessie tried to register the words, Georgina slunk back down the stairs.

‘She’s pretty,’ Luke declared. ‘Is that why Michael gave her flowers?’

Jessie tried not to overreact. Tried to push away the prickles of jealousy, the cold fingers of doom that gripped her insides. ‘You think she’s pretty, huh?’

Luke gave her a heart-melting smile. ‘Yeah. But not as pretty as you.’

Swallowing down her tears, she laughed and hugged him to her. ‘Have I told you recently how wise you are?’

Chapter Twenty-One

Michael nearly wept with relief when Jack started shouting at the racing game, shrieking when he overtook Michael.

He'd died a thousand deaths when the boy had asked for FIFA. Of course Jessie's sons loved football. Most kids did. He'd been an anomaly as a child. A freak, a misfit. Psycho, nutter, whack job were other ways he'd had it expressed.

He'd tried to fit in. Tried to listen to pop music and take an interest in football, but his parents had loved classical music and hated sport. They weren't going to change, no matter how much their son might have wanted them to.

'Who's winning?'

Michael noticed the younger son standing in the doorway. Shorter and skinnier than his brother, Luke was still a boy where Jack was growing into a teenager. He seemed the more gregarious of the pair, though. Until he looked at Michael, when the lad clammed up. Probably because of the atmosphere killing, tension-inducing vibe Michael was giving off. How else to explain how the same kids who'd laughed with their father at the studio, and with Robert and members of the crew, turned into robots when Michael was around?

'I am,' Jack boasted.

Michael fixed his gaze at the screen and let his fingers race over the control, causing his car to make a slick manoeuvre. 'Are you sure about that?'

Jack huffed. 'No way.'

Maybe beating the boy wasn't the best way to win him over, but Michael's competitive streak was in full flow now. He zipped round the rest of the track and took the chequered flag, raising his eyes triumphantly to meet Jessie's.

His smile died as soon as he saw her face. She looked upset. Cursing himself for not letting Jack win, Michael put down the control. 'Actually that race doesn't count because

it's my game, and you're not used to it yet. Maybe we can race again at the end of the weekend.'

A cautious smile crept over Jack's face. 'Okay.' His eyes dropped to the control, and then briefly back up to Michael's. 'You're pretty good for a grown up.'

Michael laughed out his relief. 'Thanks.' But he couldn't focus on the son when he knew the mother was standing in the doorway, looking like she was trying to be happy but failing miserably. 'You boys have a game. I'll talk to your mum about somewhere to eat.'

As Luke scuttled in and took his place on the sofa, Michael took hold of Jessie's arm and led her into the sitting room. 'What's wrong?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing. That was Georgina at the door.' Her hazel eyes darted away from his and over to the windows leading to the balcony. 'She wanted to thank you for the flowers.'

Irritation pricked. Didn't Jessie trust him? 'I yelled at her for phoning you about Frankfurt when I expressly told her I'd do it,' he explained flatly. 'Ever since then things have been a bit strained. I sent her flowers to keep the peace.'

'Oh.'

Sighing, he reached to cup her face. 'How can I convince you she means nothing to me? She worked for me for two months before you came along. Don't you think if I'd wanted something to happen, I would have done something about it by then? Not waited to date you and then tried to woo her behind your back? I mean, Christ, I know I said I'm rubbish with people, but I'm not that much of a cretin.'

Tears began to leak down Jessie's cheeks but she was laughing as she placed her hands over his. 'Sorry. It's just I look at all this,' she nodded over to the balcony, and the lights of Paris beyond, 'and wonder what I'm doing here.'

He frowned, wiping at her tears with his thumb. 'I hope you're here because you want to be.'

‘Yes, yes, of course. I didn’t mean that. I meant how did I get this lucky, being here with you?’

It was his turn to feel a wave of emotion and though he was damned certain he wasn’t going to cry, his voice was awfully hoarse when he tried to speak. ‘I think that’s my line.’

She smiled and he bent to kiss her, tasting the salt of her tears before diving into the heat of her mouth. ‘I’d love to stay right here and kiss you all night,’ he whispered as he reluctantly drew back, ‘but I fear one thing might lead to another. And there are two impressionable boys in the room next door.’ His eyes skimmed her face, checking for any lingering doubt. When he was reassured there was none, he smiled. ‘Shall we go out to eat? And before you ask, I chose it myself, booked it myself. And made sure it serves hamburgers.’

Half an hour later they walked into the casual, American style diner he’d chosen, complete with a pool table. Call him sad, but he’d been thrilled to see it when he’d booked the place.

‘I’m about to show off,’ he told Jessie as they walked up to the pool table after ordering their food. ‘I need all the cool points I can muster.’

As Michael fizzed a few balls in, Luke’s big blue eyes almost boggled out of his head. ‘Can I have a go?’

‘Sure. Have you played before?’ Luke shook his head. ‘Then why don’t I show you how to hold the cue?’

While he showed Luke what to do, Jessie fluttered her eyelashes playfully up at him. ‘I’m seriously impressed. Where did you learn to play?’

‘I spent my youth in dodgy clubs — singing, before your mind makes a leap in the wrong direction. Most of them had pool tables.’

‘Ah.’ She glanced over to where the boys were trying, and failing, to pot a ball. ‘Well I definitely think you gained a few cool points.’

He grinned back, though inside he was less confident. It took more than an ability to knock a pool ball into a hole to impress kids; to gain their friendship. As he hadn't been able to do it when he'd been a kid himself, what chance did he have as an introverted, reserved, socially inept adult?

* * *

Jessie felt a squeeze on her heart when Michael reached for her hand as they walked back along the Seine. She angled her head to gaze up at him. It felt like a dream. Paris. Her children happily playing ahead of her. Holding hands with this dishy man who made her heart both race and ache.

He caught her staring. 'What?'

'I like the glasses.'

He tugged self-consciously at the tortoiseshell frames. 'Apparently I don't look like me when I wear them.'

'Perhaps not.' She knew he'd donned them as a disguise, not because he needed them. 'You look like a handsome professor.' He frowned down at her. 'A young, handsome professor,' she added hastily.

A small smile, reaching deep into his eyes. 'Better.'

Luke yawned as they walked inside the apartment. 'It's time you two went to bed,' Jessie started to say, but Jack wasn't listening. He'd walked into the living room and was staring at the gleaming black piano that sat at the far end.

'Can I have a go?' Jack looked up at Michael, but he must have caught her out of the corner of his eye because he added, 'Please?'

'Of course.' Michael threw his glasses onto the side and walked over to the piano, pulling out the stool. 'Are you having lessons?'

'Sort of.' He cast a sheepish look in her direction. 'I have lessons but don't practice much. Mum says she's wasting her money.'

'Ah, I see.' Michael gave Jack one of his small smiles. 'I guess you have to want to play.'

‘Did you?’

Michael nodded. ‘I did. Very much.’

‘My mates think it’s dumb.’

A flash of sadness crossed Michael’s face and Jessie knew he was thinking of his own childhood. ‘Mine did, too. But I loved to play and sing too much to give it up. I figured if they were real friends they would accept me for who I was.’

Jessie recalled the cigarette burns on Michael’s side. He’d found out the painful way that his only real friend had been Robert. Children could be so cruel. Unconsciously she put her arm around Luke, who was standing beside her, and gave him a squeeze. Please God her children wouldn’t experience any of the nasty bullying that Michael had suffered.

‘Is that why you sing those weird songs?’ Luke finally found his voice. ‘Because you like it?’

As Jessie shot him a look of apology, Michael laughed softly. ‘When I’m singing on stage ... it’s hard to explain. I feel like a different person. Confident, strong, fearless.’ A slight flush crept over his cheeks and this time his laugh was strained. ‘Sorry. To answer your question, Luke. Yes, I sing because I like it. I don’t really mind what I’m singing, but my voice suits the more classic songs, so that’s what I focus on.’ He gave Jack a small nudge. ‘Sit down, have a go. See if you like the piano.’

‘You might even sound good on that,’ Jessie interrupted, ruffling Jack’s hair to take the sting from her words. She didn’t want to put Jack down, but she could see Michael wasn’t finding this easy. A joke, even a poor one, would hopefully help him relax.

‘You’ve got good hands,’ Michael remarked when Jack had navigated his way through a piece from memory. ‘The rest is just practice.’

‘Can you play us something?’ Luke asked, looking up at Michael.

‘Of course.’ Jack moved off and Michael slipped into his place. ‘What would you like?’

Luke looked at Jack, who shrugged. ‘None of the weird stuff. Can you do any of Playit Kool’s songs? We met him at the show. He’s awesome.’

Her heart shifted as Michael sadly shook his head. ‘Sorry, no. I can’t do rap.’ Tension radiated off him and she wished she could tell him to stop worrying, stop trying so hard. Her sons would like him because he was a good, kind man. Not because of what tunes he could play.

Jessie walked up behind him and touched him lightly on his shoulder. ‘Do you know any Queen?’

Michael darted her a look over his shoulder, his eyes swimming in gratitude.

A heartbeat later, his elegant long fingers began to fly across the piano keys. He started with ‘We Are the Champions’, slipping easily into ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’. Jessie grinned at the boys bug-eyed expressions and as they began to laugh, Michael’s shoulders relaxed. And he began to sing.

‘Why do you bother with those dumb songs when you can sing decent ones?’ Luke asked when Michael stopped.

Michael let out a rare bark of laughter. ‘That’s a question I need to ask my manager. Could be I’ve been going in the wrong direction all these years.’

Luke beamed, and Jessie felt the pull of her heart. In that moment, it was easy to look into the future and see Michael as part of it.

And by God, that was such a stupid, dangerous thing to do.

‘Come on you two.’ Pushing away her thoughts, Jessie draped an arm around her sons. ‘You’ve successfully managed to squeeze another forty minutes out of the day, but it really is time you were going to bed now.’

‘I can’t believe we’re in Paris,’ Luke whispered ten minutes later as she helped him into bed. ‘Have we really got all day tomorrow as well?’

‘Yes, and part of Sunday too.’ Jessie kissed his forehead, and then went to say goodnight to Jack who was snuggled into the bed next to Luke.

‘How much do you think I need to practice to play like Michael?’

She smiled. ‘Maybe you should ask him that tomorrow.’

‘Maybe I will. I was scared of him at first, but he’s alright, isn’t he?’

Emotion balled in her throat and she had to swallow before she could answer. ‘I think so, yes.’

* * *

After saying goodnight to them she went to find Michael. He was in the kitchen, pouring whiskey into a glass. He looked up when he heard her and gave her a half smile. ‘Whiskey, wine, coffee?’

‘Wine, thank you.’ She nodded over to the whiskey. ‘Has it been that stressful for you, having us here?’

He looked puzzled for a moment, then shook his head. ‘No, not stressful. I’m just ... relieved the evening ended better than I’d hoped. At least I think it did.’ Some of the laughter left his face. ‘Please tell me they enjoyed themselves.’

She walked over to him and touched a hand to his face, her heart fluttering as he leaned into her. ‘Stop worrying. They like you. How could they not? They’re my children. They have excellent taste.’

He bent his head to kiss her. ‘I don’t know about that, but they do have an excellent mother.’ His lips drifted over hers, caressing, teasing for a moment until he drew back. ‘They’re lovely boys, Jessie. You should be proud.’

‘I am.’

He pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge and poured her a glass. ‘And thank you for Queen.’ He handed her the glass with a wry smile. ‘It saved my evening.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘You were doing fine, stop putting yourself down.’ After taking a sip she studied him. ‘You know I was interested in what you said to Jack, about being a different man on stage.’

He pulled a face and swirled the whiskey around in his glass. ‘Yes, sorry. I didn’t mean to say all that.’

‘But I want to understand.’ She tapped his face, making him look at her. ‘Tell me how you feel when you’re performing?’

‘Truly? I feel invincible. I don’t mean to sound boastful,’ he added quickly. ‘But I know I’m good at what I do. When I get on a stage and start to sing, the crap that muddles up my head disappears and I’m the man I want to be.’

‘And who’s that?’ she asked softly, feeling his angst, his frustration with himself.

His eyes fell back to the whiskey he was holding. ‘A man capable of holding the interest of a pretty, sparky, vivacious woman with curves that make his body ache. And a laugh that goes straight to his heart.’

Her hands trembled as she put down her glass. She was so close to telling him he held more than her interest, but she was afraid of rushing in too soon. This was early days, only their second weekend together, and he still had a very long tour ahead of him.

So instead of saying anything, she took the whiskey tumbler out of his hands, placed her arms around his neck. And told him everything she was feeling in her kiss.

He groaned, deepening the contact, his hand lifting up her thigh to wrap it round his hips, bringing his hard core right to where she needed him most.

‘Come to bed with me,’ he murmured, trailing hot kisses down her neck. ‘I’ll make sure you’re in your own bed before the boys wake up.’

He lifted her up and she wrapped both legs around him as he walked them to his room. As he placed her carefully on the

centre of his huge wooden bed, Jessie smiled up at him. 'In case I forget later. Thank you.'

Midway through unbuttoning his shirt, he smirked over at her. 'For taking you to bed? Trust me, the pleasure will be mine, though I intend to make sure you get your fair share, too.' His eyes fell to her blouse. 'You need to get undressed.'

'Do I?' At his fierce, hungry look, her hands immediately began undoing her buttons. 'I meant, thank you for inviting the boys here. I love it when it's the two of us, but I'm always wondering how they are. Tonight, I feel complete.'

He shrugged off his shirt and for a moment she became completely distracted by his naked chest. 'Jack and Luke are part of you, Jessie.' Clearly clueless to the effect he was having on her, Michael drew down his trousers, revealing his black boxer briefs. 'They're as easy to fall for as you are.'

Stunned, her eyes flew to his face but he wasn't looking at her. He was focussed on pulling off his trousers.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her throat wouldn't work.

He was falling for her?

As his words permeated her shocked, overwhelmed mind, he joined her on the bed. And no further thoughts were possible.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Michael woke feeling unusually relaxed. It was true he was alone, but he knew where there was a warm, sexy body. One he'd cuddled until dawn, when he'd made love to her once more before carrying her to the next-door bedroom.

From the chatter of young male voices, it looked like Jack and Luke were already awake.

Today he was less terrified about talking to them. Last night had felt like a break through. When Luke had asked him to play that tosser Kool's music, Michael had thought his chance of ever redeeming himself from his godawful start had perished. Then Jessie had thrown him a lifeline.

Freddie Mercury, his unlikely saviour.

Sadly his optimism was soon, if not crushed, then severely dented as they spent Saturday morning walking round Paris.

Trudging was a better word for it. As Luke stared longingly at an advert for an amusement park, Michael kicked himself. Since when did kids like walking round city sights?

'I should have arranged to do something else,' he muttered to Jessie as she tried to encourage Luke to pick up his feet.

'No, this is fine,' she reassured, but some of the tension she'd arrived with yesterday was back on her face. 'You can't come to Paris and not do the tourist attractions.'

He was sure he heard Jack mutter something along the lines of *yeah but you don't have to walk to them all*.

'How much further?' Luke complained.

The boy looked pleadingly at him and Michael sighed. 'How about some lunch?'

He avoided the tourist places and found a quiet café in a backstreet. The sunglasses and baseball cap usually worked, but Michael didn't want to take any chances at being recognised, not now the boys were with them. He ordered them all a round of cheese and ham croissants which the boys

attacked — seems he'd finally got one thing right today. Actually ... Michael thought back to the earlier advert and wondered if he could muster a second. After excusing himself, he walked away and dug out his phone.

A short while later he strode back to the table. 'I'm afraid I'll need to be leaving soon.'

Luke looked up from his plate. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm performing later, so I have to go and rehearse.'

Luke chewed for a few more moments before asking, 'Can we come and watch you tonight?'

A dart of pleasure flashed through him. He knew it was a child's natural fascination for something he hadn't seen before, but Michael couldn't begin to explain how those words made him feel. 'I'm not singing Queen,' he warned.

He felt Jessie's eyes on him and she gave him a questioning look, silently asking him if he minded. He tried to convey with a look that of course he didn't mind. He'd love to have them there. To have her there. But he was terrified they'd hate it and it would wipe out any of the cool points he'd mustered last night.

She must have read his fears. 'It will be the same music you both complain about when I put it on at home.'

Michael spluttered out a laugh, grateful for the easy way she handled it. 'Consider my ego officially squashed.'

Her wink made every part of him tingle and tighten. 'Jack,' she turned to her eldest son. 'What do you think?'

'I guess I can put up with it, if you want to go.'

It wasn't the most encouraging reply. 'Maybe it's best if you don't go,' Michael started to say, because hell, he'd dragged these guys round Paris all morning. The last thing he wanted to do was drag them out to listen to him sing.

But Luke spoke over him. 'Can we take our iPads for the boring bits?'

And just like that, another laugh shot out of him. ‘Will the battery last that long?’

Jack and Luke exchanged looks of surprise — they clearly didn’t think he possessed a sense of humour — but then they started to snigger. Michael didn’t care that the joke was at his expense.

When his gaze fell on Jessie she smiled and he had a sudden, desperate urge to hug her. To kiss those full lips, tangle his fingers in her glorious curls.

Quickly he glanced away before his body betrayed his desire, but there was nothing he could do to protect his heart. He’d blurted out his feelings last night, yet he’d been too much of a coward to look up and see the affect his admission had on her. He could only pray she was falling along with him, or it was going to be a messy, lonely landing.

Regretfully he stared at his watch and stood up. ‘I’ve got to go. I’ll leave three tickets for you at the box office so you can decide later. If you don’t turn up, I won’t hold it against you.’ His eyes drifted to Jessie and as he bent to kiss her cheek, he whispered, in case there was any doubt, ‘I’d love to sing to you.’

‘I’d like that, too.’ Her voice was soft and husky. ‘Very much.’

He’d taken a step away when he remembered his earlier phone call. ‘Oh and I’ve also left three tickets for you at Disneyland, if you want to go there this afternoon.’

As he watched Jack and Luke’s jaws drop, and their faces light up, he felt a rush of intense relief. ‘For real?’

‘For real.’ He nodded to where the chauffeur was parking up alongside them. ‘If you want to go, Charles will return and take you there when he’s dropped me off.’

‘Wicked.’ They both chorused.

Their obvious delight boosted his confidence but it was the look he received from Jessie that really cemented his morning. Not just gratitude, not just joy. He was sure he saw a

spark of something deeper. Something that had him smiling all the way to the Casino de Paris.

As it came into view his phone buzzed with a message from Robert: *Are the boys and Jessie still talking to you?*

He tapped out: *Oh ye of little faith.*

Robert: *It was you who lacked faith. I knew they'd find something to like about you if they searched hard enough. Have you made peace with Georgina?*

Michael: *I sent her flowers. She came round to thank me. Jessie opened the door.*

Robert: *Guess she's clear where your interest lies now. Maybe her skirt hems will come down a few inches.*

Michael winced. He didn't want to think about whether Georgina really was that interested in him. *I won't be looking*, he typed back.

Robert: *What are Jessie and the boys doing tonight while you sing for your supper?*

Michael smirked: *They might be watching me.*

Robert: *Better make sure you don't make an arse of yourself then.*

Georgina met him in the rehearsal room. The short skirt and plunging neckline had been dialled down a notch and she wore what he supposed was her weekend casual; tight black trousers and a slim fitting jumper that emphasised every curve.

'I went to your apartment to thank you for the flowers and saw Jessie. I hadn't realised you were seeing her this weekend.'

Michael shifted on his feet. She was his PA, but surely that didn't mean he needed to tell her everything? Robert was right though, he couldn't afford to piss her off, not in the middle of a tour. 'As Jessie travelled by train and is staying with me, the arrangements were so simple even I could make them.'

She smiled, touching his arm in a manner that was just short of being too familiar. 'But it's my role to sort the details

out for you. You need to focus on your singing.’ Another smile. ‘I did appreciate the flowers though, it was very kind of you. It’s been a long time since a man gave me flowers.’

Michael felt a flush creep up his neck. Surely she didn’t think they’d meant anything more than a thank you? ‘I wanted you to know how much I appreciate all you do,’ he began, his mind stumbling over what to say. ‘I’m not sure I could manage without you ...’ He tailed off, blowing out a breath. ‘I mean without your organisation skills.’

‘Ah, that’s so sweet, but you won’t have to manage without me.’ She gave his arm a light squeeze. ‘I’m always here for you.’

Michael smiled weakly, making a mental note to tell Robert the next time he had a bright idea about sending Georgina some flowers, to keep it to himself.

* * *

Jessie was sitting with Jack and Luke in a box to the right of the stage. All around her was elegance, from the deep red velvet chairs to the glittering gold paintwork and the twinkling lights of the chandeliers.

In their box though, no so much.

‘I feel like a prince. Do you think I should do a royal wave,’ Luke asked, munching his way through the bag of Maltesers she’d asked him to keep until the interval.

‘I don’t think princes have chocolate smeared around their mouth.’ Smiling indulgently, she took out a tissue and attempted to clean him up.

‘Yes, result.’ Jack looked up from his iPad. ‘This place has Wi-Fi.’

It hadn’t taken much to persuade the boys to come out tonight. After all, they were the ones who’d applied for her to go on *The Week of Your Life* just because they thought she’d get the chance to meet her heartthrob. They weren’t about to stop her from seeing him sing. Or in their words, *as long as we have chocolate and our iPads we can put up with it.*

The lights dimmed and as the orchestra began to warm-up, Jessie felt a flutter of anticipation. It had been years since she'd last heard Michael live. Sure, she'd sung with him only a few months ago, but for the most part she'd been too terrified of her own performance to concentrate on his. This time she could give him her full attention.

Jack, Luke and Wi-Fi permitting.

Slowly the curtains moved back. Under the glare of a single spotlight, Michael strode on to the stage in a swirl of mist. Dressed in a black tuxedo he looked bold, dashing. Beautiful.

And then he started to sing.

His voice, so distinctive, so powerful, brought a massive lump hurtling into the back of her throat. It was so wonderfully familiar, yet she'd forgotten its pull. Forgotten how it could leave her enthralled, spellbound. Nailed to the seat by the raw emotion it conveyed.

The first song ended and the audience clapped wildly. Finally Jessie remembered to breathe. She glanced at Jack and Luke who were staring down at the stage, iPads temporarily forgotten.

Michael moved quickly from song to song. Some were classical opera, which had the boys turning back to their games, but others were well known pop songs. Classic ballads.

When he began the next song, Michael's eyes swept into the box. And straight into hers. *'You are so beautiful, to me.'*

As he continued to sing and hold her gaze, Jessie felt her heart swell, bouncing against her ribcage.

'OMG, Mum, he's singing to you,' Jack whispered.

'Can't be, she's not beautiful,' Luke countered.

'Shh,' Jessie admonished, her voice strangled by emotion. Jack was right. Though Michael looked around the auditorium, his gaze kept coming back to her.

'You're everything I hoped for, you're everything I need. You are so beautiful, to me.'

When he finished the song, tears were streaming unapologetically down her cheeks. She couldn't imagine a more romantic gesture, ever.

He gave a last, lingering look in her direction before accepting the applause of the audience.

'I'd like to add one more song,' Michael announced. 'This is for two special guests here tonight.'

The opening bars of 'Who Wants to Live Forever?' echoed round the theatre and Jack and Luke gaped at each other in disbelief, their grins a mile wide.

By the time Michael walked off stage, Jessie was so emotionally wrung out she could barely stand. But while his gesture had been incredible, it had also brought home, with crashing clarity, how she wasn't the only one at risk of being hurt when this fling came to an end. For this man who made her feel so alive, so beautiful — who'd done more than touch her heart, he'd slid right into it — this man had shown her tonight how he felt.

Not just one, but two hearts caught up in a relationship that had no realistic future. They were living off snatched moments, their lives at all other times heading in such very different directions. Her eyes swept over her sons, who were grinning and clapping.

A weekend to remember; a touch of the extraordinary. Yet a million miles away from reality.

Pushing her concerns away, Jessie led the boys out of the box, where a member of the security team was waiting to take them backstage. Looking tired but infinitely handsome still in his tux, with his bow tie undone, Michael ushered them into his dressing room.

'The Queen song was mega.' Luke stared up at Michael with something that looked like awe, and a little of Jessie's unease returned.

'Sorry it wasn't "Fat Bottomed Girls". I wasn't sure the rest of the audience would appreciate it.'

Though it was wonderful to see the boys talking to Michael now, after that awkward beginning, she couldn't help worrying if it meant they'd want to see him again. Worse, if they'd be disappointed if they couldn't because, while she could put up with her own heartbreak she couldn't, wouldn't, put them at risk of hurt, too.

Michael caught her eye and frowned. 'Something wrong?'

The concern in his eyes brought her up short. This man had just delighted her sons, and sung the most beautiful words to her. Now wasn't the time for a freak out. She pasted on a smile. 'Nothing's wrong.'

His eyes held hers, searching. 'Did you enjoy your song?'

He seemed to hold his breath, as if unsure of her answer. This time her smile was unforced and totally real. 'How could I not?'

'See, I told you it was for you,' Jack muttered, breaking the emotional tension, and they all laughed.

Michael held open the door. 'We'll leave through the rear stage door. Should avoid the crowds that way.'

But to Jessie's dismay, the moment they stepped outside, a burst of camera flashes lit up the dark night.

'No.' Grabbing hold of Jack and Luke she pushed them back into the theatre. Michael followed behind and they shut the door on the cameras, though not before several photographs were taken.

Feeling terribly shaky, she clutched the boys to her. 'How could you let us walk into a bank of photographers?'

He jerked back, as if she'd slapped him. 'You think I knew?' With a heavy exhale, he walked towards her. 'Look, I'm sorry.' He tried to put a placatory arm around her but she pulled away, still too shaken, too angry. Hurt flashed through his eyes. 'There aren't usually any photographers around when I leave. I don't know where they came from.'

'You sang extra songs, for your special guests.' *Too sharp, too sarcastic.* Later, when she wasn't so overwrought, she

knew she'd regret talking about his beautiful gesture in such a harsh way. 'Perhaps someone put two and two together.'

Michael's jaw tightened. 'I'm sorry,' he reiterated. 'But I think you're overreacting here. We're both single adults. We're not doing anything wrong. We've got nothing to hide.'

'It's very wrong if pictures of my sons are splashed over the newspapers.' Jessie took a few deep breaths and tried to calm herself.

'I don't mind having my picture in the paper.' Luke's small face looked up at her, watchful, innocent.

She smiled weakly at him. 'Better hope they took a good one, eh?'

'I'll go and speak to the security guys.' Michael's voice sounded resigned, his face strained, and shame slammed into her. Her bellyaching was the last thing he needed after a two-hour performance.

But this was a taste of the public side of him, and she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

Or if she'd ever be ready for it.

He needed a glamorous celebrity who'd lap up the publicity. Not an ordinary mum, desperate to shield herself and her family from the prying lens of a camera.

The security team managed to smuggle them out of an alternative exit and into a waiting car. The journey back was quiet; Jack and Luke tired, she and Michael on edge.

After tucking the boys into bed, Jessie found Michael on the sofa in the sitting room. Head back, eyes closed. He still wore his suit, though the jacket was flung over the armchair. He'd not put on the lights and the sight of Paris at night provided a dramatic backdrop to his darkly handsome figure. The mellow light of the moon touched his face, highlighting his fatigue. A sign of how much of himself he put into a performance.

As if sensing her watching, he opened his eyes. 'Are they asleep?'

Guilt brushed up against the dying embers of her shock and she felt tears prick. 'I never thanked you properly for the song. It was so beautiful,' she whispered, settling down next to him. 'I'm sorry I was such a bitch.'

He let out a faint laugh. 'You were a mum, protecting your children.' He sighed, and she sensed he was trying to pick his words. 'Please don't let what you saw tonight come between us. It doesn't happen often. I'm really not that newsworthy.' He gave her a searching look. 'We've talked about media interest before though.'

'I know, and I said it unnerved me.'

'You also said you weren't going to let it scare you off,' he reminded her quietly.

God, she had. And she didn't want it to come between them. 'Gossip about you and me is one thing. The boys were never touched by it.'

'Which is the part that angered you tonight.'

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway. 'Yes. I deliberately kept them out of the press, even though the show wanted to use their letter in the promotion.'

'And the speculation about us?'

'All the questions came through the studio because nobody knew where I lived or how to contact me. Once they released the statement, the interest stopped.'

'Ah yes. The statement that said you couldn't believe people thought Michael Tennant would be interested in you.' A smile tugged at his mouth. 'For your information, he's more than interested. He's besotted.'

His words washed away the last of her angst. There, snuggled in his arms, she felt spoiled, and unbelievably happy. 'I'll be free in a couple of weeks, in Barcelona.' He kissed the sensitive skin behind her ear. 'It's a beautiful city. Can you come?'

As his warm mouth nuzzled and teased, Jessie's eyes fluttered closed. 'I'd love to,' she found herself saying.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sunday evening and Michael had been in Vienna for an hour, not that he'd know it because he was sitting in his hotel room, curtains drawn. Insecurities snapping at his heels. It had been a week since he'd said goodbye to Jessie and every day he was apart from her, he feared the distance between them widening. And he wasn't talking physical distance. Paris had been such a tumult of emotions; joy at seeing her, relief at bonding with her sons. The intensely emotional moment when, for the first time in his career, he'd publicly sung to a woman.

A connection that had almost been obliterated by the damn press.

He was tangling himself in knots over a woman who couldn't bear to have her photograph taken with him. Unfair? Perhaps, but if she didn't feel he was worth the occasional moment in the spotlight, their relationship was doomed.

With a sigh he looked at his watch. He was due at the Wiener Stadthalle in half an hour for a meeting about tomorrow night's performance. Did he have enough time to phone her? He hadn't overcome his aversion to the method of communication, but he was trying. Sadly between her work, the boys and his travel there weren't many times they could actually talk, and when they did it was all so hurried.

Relationships were hard. Relationships when the couple were in different countries, harder still. If you add to that the complication of vastly different jobs (he was generally free during the day, her the evening) and children — did it all add up to being impossible?

His heart faltered and he snatched up his phone and sank onto the bed.

'Hey.' Her soft voice, laced with surprise, was a balm to his worry-riddled soul.

'Is now a good time to talk?' In the background he could hear conversation, lots of it. Female voices, male voices. Laughter. 'Sounds like you're having a party.'

‘Almost. We’re celebrating a famous victory for the boys’ football team.’ Her voice sounded breathy with excitement. ‘They’re into the area finals.’

Instantly he felt a million miles away. ‘I wish I was there.’

She let out a huff of laughter. ‘There aren’t many people who’d swop ... where is it you are today?’

‘Vienna.’

‘There aren’t many who’d swop Vienna for a muddy football field and a raucous pub.’

‘You would.’

The silence her end told its own story.

He heard a male voice shouting her name. ‘Hang on a minute.’ There was a brief, muffled conversation before she came back. ‘Sorry, just putting my drink order in.’

‘Was that Phil?’ Jealousy, mean and nasty, coiled inside his stomach.

‘Umm, no. He’s here, but that was John. He coaches the team. Also happens to be my boss so I have to be doubly nice to him.’

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask how nice, but he hauled his jealousy in. Possessiveness wasn’t attractive, so Paula had told him repeatedly. While she’d been banging another man.

‘Is this John single?’ So much for his internal pep talk.

She let out a long breath. ‘Yes. He’s also a good friend. Nothing more.’

‘Okay, sorry.’ He ran a hand down his face, wondering if this call had been a good idea. Not being able to talk to her, to share the triumphs and the mundane, the important and the trivial, was a constant source of frustration. How many times a day did he just want to hear her voice, see her smile? Yet sometimes phoning her when he couldn’t sense her mood, couldn’t see her reaction, was even harder. The phone left too many silences he could fill with his own paranoia.

‘It’s okay to ask.’ She paused and he heard another burst of laughter in the background. ‘I wonder about you and Georgina often enough.’

Frustration spiked again. ‘I told you—’

‘There’s nothing going on. I know. It doesn’t stop me thinking about how many women must be waiting for you at the end of every performance.’

He realised she must feel exactly how he felt now. Impotent. Unable to do anything but trust and hope. ‘This is hard, isn’t it?’

He didn’t know why he asked the question. If she said no, she clearly wasn’t as invested in their relationship as he was. And if she said yes—

‘Yes.’ Her voice was breathy, almost tearful. ‘It’s very hard.’

The answer felt like a punch to his gut. Hard enough for her to consider ducking out? He wasn’t ready for the answer, so he changed the subject, though what he had to say next was going to be no less difficult. ‘I don’t want you to flip, but I’ve been contacted by one of the gossip magazines. They want to know who I was singing to in Paris.’ Her sharp intake of breath caused his stomach to knot. ‘I’m not going to tell them, Jessie.’

‘I should hope not.’

Frustration reared inside him, adding to the churning in his gut. ‘It’s not the way I want it,’ he told her tightly. ‘Hiding this, hiding us. It feels like I’ve got something to be ashamed of, when in fact I feel entirely the opposite.’

For a few beats she said nothing, and once again he cursed the phone. All he could hear was the joviality in the background and her shaky breath. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered finally. ‘If you feel uncomfortable keeping your love life private, maybe you’re with the wrong woman.’

‘What?’ He lurched upright. ‘Christ, Jessie, you have to know that’s not what I’m saying.’ Hadn’t he just told her he wanted to announce to the world who he was seeing?

Again she went quiet on him, but her breathing ... was she crying?

‘Jessie, please tell me you’re not upset with me.’

‘I’m not.’ Yet her voice sounded so strained, it was hard to believe her. ‘At least not with you,’ she added. ‘Just with the situation.’

He fell back on the bed, his heart aching for her. For them both. ‘I wish I could put my arms around you right now.’

Her laugh sounded more like a sob. ‘I wish you could, too.’

He had no more words. Just a notification alerting him that his car was here to take him to his meeting. ‘I have to go.’

‘Yes, me too. There’s a glass of wine with my name on it and right now I really need it. Good luck tomorrow night.’

He was left with a dial tone, and a terrible feeling that Jessie was pulling even further away from him.

* * *

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Jessie rushed straight to the ladies. God, he’d said this was hard, but that wasn’t nearly strong enough for how she was feeling.

This was agonising.

She felt like she was on drugs. The ups — when she was with Michael — were incredibly intense, but they were followed by the most awful downs. Right now her withdrawal symptoms were so rough it was making her wonder if this was all worth it.

The door swung open and Annabel strode in. She took one look at Jessie and threw her arms around her. ‘I thought there was something wrong. I saw you walking further and further away from us, and your bottom lip getting more and more wobbly.’ Taking a step back she studied her, eyes full of sympathy. ‘Was it Michael?’

‘Yes.’ Jessie grabbed at a paper towel and inelegantly blew her nose.

‘Did you have a fight?’

‘Not exactly. He phoned to warn me some magazine was asking about the woman he sang to in Paris.’

‘Did he mention you?’

‘No, but then he said he didn’t like hiding our relationship. I told him if he thought that, he was with the wrong woman.’ She let out a pathetic sounding laugh. ‘How about that for a grown-up response? It’s not like I even need to put the idea in his head. There are plenty of women only too happy to do that for him.’

‘Why are you the wrong one?’ Annabel was wearing her don’t-mess-with-me expression. ‘And don’t give me any of the usual crap about him being rich and famous. Think about the person he is, away from all that.’

‘But that’s just it. He comes with all that.’

‘You sang on national television to millions of people,’ Annabel reminded her gently. ‘You’re hardly a blushing wallflower.’

‘I know, but that was me, a village pharmacist, having my five minutes of fame. I was being judged for my singing, not for how attractive I was. For how well suited I am to be dating a singing idol.’

‘That’s ridiculous. Aside from the fact that you’re gorgeous so therefore highly well suited, why would anyone want to pick you apart? Michael might be a celebrity but he’s hardly Justin—’

‘Bieber. Yes, I know. He’s already pointed that out.’

‘He did?’ Annabel smirked. ‘Well, well. Great minds obviously do think alike. Did he also point out that his fans are mainly middle-aged women more likely to knit you booties for your future children than want to stick pins in you for being with him? All of which is largely irrelevant because the only time you see him in the papers is when he’s advertising his latest album?’

Jessie hated being cornered. ‘No, he didn’t,’ she answered sullenly. ‘And I guess I can’t argue with you.’

‘That’ll be a first,’ Annabel murmured.

Jessie’s lips twitched. ‘I should rephrase. I can’t argue that particular point, though I can argue that a woman with children has to be the wrong fit for a man who spends a lot of his time on tour.’ She drew in a shuddery breath. ‘I’m meant to be going to Barcelona in two weeks and already the boys are giving me a hard time. They want to come too, no surprise there, but Michael hasn’t invited them. And why would he? We’re only just getting to know each other. Besides, the last thing I want is for them to get too attached.’ A sigh escaped her; deep and heartfelt. ‘I should never have started this. I’m much more suited to someone like John. Not that he’s asked me.’

‘Though we know, from the way he looks at you with his big brown puppy eyes, that he’s just waiting for a signal from you.’

‘Maybe.’

Annabel walked to the sink and turned on the tap. ‘We also know if you’d wanted that, you would have encouraged him months ago. You wouldn’t have been dazzled by a celebrity singer. A stunningly handsome, celebrity singer who’s given you the best sex of your life. Your words.’

Jessie fought not to laugh. ‘And your point is?’

‘Rather obvious, I think.’ Annabel wet some paper towels and started to wipe at Jessie’s face. ‘There, that’s better. Less upset panda, more pale and interesting.’

Jessie studied her gloomy face in the mirror. ‘Thanks.’ Her eyes crossed to Annabel’s. ‘Speaking of sex. Is this going to get awkward if you and Phil head that way?’

A rare blush settled on her friend’s cheeks. ‘Not if we don’t want it to be.’

‘In that case, we’ll make sure it isn’t. I won’t mention sex again, other to say that just because Phil and I ended up

preferring to read in bed rather than tearing each other's clothes off—'

'Doesn't mean it will be the same for me,' Annabel cut in. 'I know. Finding fabulous chemistry isn't easy though, which is why I also know you shouldn't give up on what you have with Michael. At least not without a damn good fight. Now come on. We need to find those sons of ours. I expect they're causing chaos.'

* * *

When Jessie said goodnight to Jack later that evening, he surprised her with a question.

'Who were you talking to on the phone at the pub?'

'Michael. Why do you ask?'

He gave her one of those shrugs that teenagers, and near teenagers, love to annoy their parents with. 'No reason.'

She didn't buy his response, but as it didn't look like he was going to venture any further information, she let it go. She had plenty of regrets about the way she'd handled the phone call. How incredibly flattering that Michael wanted to be seen in public with her. Yet instead of focussing on that, she'd allowed fear to rule, making her responses mean and sniping.

It would serve her flaming well right if he took her at her word and found someone else.

A lump the size of a fist shot into her throat and she blinked at the damn tears fighting to escape. No, she wasn't going to go there. She'd simply phone Michael back and apologise for being a miserable cow.

But when she tried his phone, it was switched off.

Sleep, when it finally came, was a relief, if a short-lived one.

The phone woke her at five to midnight and her heart jumped when she saw who it was. 'Michael?'

'Sorry, I know it's late. Have I woken you?'

'It doesn't matter. Is everything okay?'

‘I hope so.’

The uncertainty in his voice elicited a quiet sob from her. ‘I’m so sorry about what I said. I tried to phone you back but your phone was turned off.’

‘I was in the air.’

‘I thought you’d only just arrived in Vienna?’

‘I had. But now I’m here. On your doorstep.’

‘You’re what?’ Jessie shot bolt upright, her heart pounding.

‘I’m hoping you’ll let me in.’

She raced down the stairs, almost tripping over her feet in her dash to get to the door. She grabbed at the handle but the chain was on, thwarting her attempts to fling it open. ‘Oh my God, what are you doing here?’ she shouted through the door as she struggled with the catch, all fingers and thumbs.

‘Getting frostbite?’ he answered mildly.

Finally, *finally*, she swung the door open and threw herself into his arms, inhaling him as if it was the last breath she was ever going to take. He returned the embrace, wrapping his powerful frame around her and lifting her off her feet.

‘Hi.’ He smiled, looking so tall, so handsome. And so *on her doorstep*.

Awed, thrilled, her heart still racing, Jessie ran a hand down his face. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I think you know.’

Guilt swam through her. ‘Because of the phone conversation?’

He nodded, grasping her hands. ‘I needed to know we were still okay.’

Overcome with emotion, she started to cry quietly. ‘Of course we’re okay. I was just fed up and missing you. Scared about the media speculation, and missing you. Frustrated, and missing you. Did I mention I was missing you?’

Laughter shone in his deep blue eyes and he dipped his head to give her the most exquisite kiss. It left her hot, flustered and aching for more.

Taking hold of his hand she tugged him inside. ‘Have you eaten? Do you want a drink?’

He shook his head, following her into the living room where he almost fell onto the sofa, dragging her with him. ‘I know how hard it is to carry on a relationship at a distance. The misunderstandings, the frustration. I’ve been here before.’ He tucked his arm around her, piercing blue eyes locked onto hers. ‘I don’t want it to wreck what we have.’

Now he was here, his magnetic presence dwarfing her small front room, her earlier worries seemed totally misplaced. ‘Neither do I.’

‘And you have my word that I’ll try my hardest to keep you out of the press.’

‘I know you will.’ She leaned into him, resting her head on his chest, letting her hand drift inside his shirt and over his hard stomach muscles. ‘Thank you for coming, it means a great deal. How long can you stay?’

‘I’m performing tomorrow.’ His voice had gone quiet and when she glanced up, his eyes looked heavy.

She sighed. ‘And I’m working, so I guess that rules out anything but breakfast together. I don’t even know if I’ve got anything other than cereal. Last time I looked in the bread drawer the kids had swiped anything decent.’ As she babbled, she was aware of his shoulders relaxing, his breathing slowing. A quick glance confirmed her suspicions. His eyes were shut.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ she whispered, pulling him up. ‘If you’re going to go to sleep on me, you’re doing it in my bed. Come on.’

‘Your bed.’ His mouth twitched. ‘I’ve imagined you in it often enough.’

His sleepy voice sounded husky, and desire unfurled inside her. ‘I’ve imagined you in it, too.’

They were halfway up the stairs when she stopped. 'It's not a very big bed.'

She would have said more, but he shut her up with a kiss.

Leaving him to undress in her room, she darted into the bathroom. There she slipped out of the cotton pyjamas she'd been wearing and into a lacy number she'd bought for their first tryst in Rome, though it had never made it out of the suitcase. With desire pulsing through her she stepped eagerly into the bedroom.

And came to an abrupt halt.

He was already in bed, eyes shut, the top of his naked chest visible above the duvet, moving rhythmically up and down.

She eased carefully into the bed next to him, but she could just as well have jumped straight in because he didn't twitch, didn't move a muscle. He was fast asleep

As she stared down at him her heart filled, and filled, until it threatened to burst. This beautiful man had just flown hundreds of miles to see her for only a few hours. He wasn't just a man she was capable of falling for. He was a man she had fallen for.

She loved Michael Tennant. Only time would tell whether it was the most spectacular, or the most stupid, thing she'd ever done.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Michael woke with a start to the sound of a radio. It took a couple of seconds for his brain to work out where he was. And whose arm was currently slamming the snooze button.

‘Bloody alarm clocks.’ Jessie turned to face him and gave him a sleepy smile. ‘Morning.’

His eyes drifted over her tousled bed hair, across her soft pink lips and down to the curves of her breast, pushing against ivory lace. ‘Please tell me you weren’t wearing that last night. And that I didn’t fall asleep on you.’

‘I did put this on, but if it helps you were asleep before you saw it.’

Disappointment flooded him as he realised the lost opportunity. ‘How long do we have?’

She captured his fingers and kissed them. ‘I need to wake the boys in ten minutes.’

He groaned, his fingers diving past the lace and into the warm flesh of her cleavage. ‘Then prepare to have the fastest, hottest sex of your life.’

Her wicked laughter heated his blood even further. ‘Consider me prepared. And very willing.’

He was almost inside her before he realised what he’d forgotten to bring. ‘Shit, condom.’ The disappointment he’d felt a moment ago had nothing on what he was feeling now, his body all aroused and aching and needy.

She smiled. ‘That sounds familiar, but this time I’ve got it covered. I’m on the pill.’

Despair to elation in four simple words. ‘Thank Christ for that.’ Joyfully he thrust into her heat, trembling as she closed around him, her breasts rubbing against his chest as he found his rhythm. ‘Ten minutes is looking like a stretch,’ he panted, half amazed, half mortified at how close he was already.

Her moan of pleasure didn’t help the situation.

But then she was gripping his buttocks, urging him on before detonating around him. Her orgasm hastened his and he fell headlong after her, collapsing in a spent heap.

‘Heck of a way to wake up.’ She grinned up at him, eyes alight with laughter.

He glanced over at the alarm clock. ‘And we still have one minute to spare.’

As they shared a smile he felt his heart unfurl, reaching out to her, begging her to accept him. His awkwardness, his clumsy, introverted ways, his public side. To *love* him. He didn’t know how deep her feelings ran. He could ask, but he didn’t want to put her on the spot like that. Perhaps if he told her how he felt, she’d offer something back, yet when he’d blurted out that he was falling for her, she’d remained tight-lipped. He wasn’t sure he could take another disappointment. Not with their relationship still so precarious.

Instead he spent his luxury extra minute, kissing her.

‘We have to move,’ she murmured, when it became obvious he was enjoying himself a little too much.

‘You’d be amazed what I can do in ten seconds.’

Laughing, she gave his backside a playful smack. ‘If it’s anything like what you managed in ten minutes, I’ll take you up on that offer. Just not now.’ Reluctantly he rolled off her and she scooted out of the bed. ‘I’ll wake the boys. You’re welcome to take a shower. What time do you need to be at the airport?’

He didn’t have a clue. After their painful phone call yesterday, he’d asked Georgina to get him to England as soon as she could. He hadn’t thought to ask about the return trip. Grabbing his phone, he scrawled through his messages. ‘Looks like I’m on a ten o’clock flight.’

Midway through putting on her bra — the sight alone was worth the trip over — she scrunched up her forehead, clearly working her timings backwards. ‘I just have time to drop you off before work.’

‘I don’t want to put you out. I can cab it.’

‘And I want to take you to the airport.’ She slipped on a pale pink jumper, ruining his view, then kissed him lightly on the lips. ‘Please.’

He wasn’t going to argue. Not when it gave them an extra half an hour together.

While she went about her morning ritual he took a quick shower, the refreshing moment ruined when he had to put on the same clothes he’d worn yesterday.

Jack and Luke were already up and eating breakfast when he stepped into the kitchen. Their chatter stopped when they looked over at him, faces alert, interested. Not disapproving but not hugely welcoming, either.

Michael felt a moment of panic as he wondered what to say, but Jessie smoothed over any awkwardness by handing him a cereal bowl. ‘If you’d been here Sunday morning you’d have had bacon and eggs. Monday morning it’s cereal.’

‘Mum has bran.’ Luke turned his nose up in disgust. ‘It looks disgusting but it helps her poo.’

‘Thank you, Luke.’ Jessie rolled her eyes, her cheeks pink.

‘What do you have?’ Michael asked, his panic settled into a more reasonable apprehension as he joined the boys at the table.

‘Cornflakes. I’d rather have Frosties, but Mum says they’ve got too much sugar.’

Luke raised his eyes skywards in that way kids have when they can’t believe how dumb an adult is. Figuring he was already on shaky ground appearing in their house out of the blue, Michael chose not to comment.

‘Why are you here?’

Jack’s eyes, hazel like his mother’s, studied him, quietly assessing. Michael wished he knew what conclusions he’d drawn. In Paris they’d started to bond, though it had fractured a little when he’d seen how upset his mum had been after the concert. Michael wondered if he’d seen her cry yesterday, too, after the phone call.

‘I wanted to check your mum was okay.’ He glanced over to Jessie, wondering how much she’d told them.

‘Why wouldn’t she be?’

Though the tone was more question than barbed comment, the tension in the kitchen rose a notch. As did Michael’s anxiety.

Jessie stepped behind Jack and kissed his head. ‘Michael came to warn me that a magazine has been asking questions about whether he has a woman in his life.’

Red spots of anger appeared on Jack’s cheeks. ‘He has another girlfriend?’

‘No,’ Michael cut in sharply, hurt. ‘I love your mother.’

Jack’s mouth gaped open, his eyes as round as buttons, but it was only when he heard Jessie gasp that Michael realised quite what he’d done. He hung his head, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to compose himself. After dragging some air into his lungs he turned to Jessie, only to find her frozen to the spot.

Shocked he’d been so unromantic as to blurt to her sons, what he hadn’t had the balls to admit to her?

Or shocked he’d been so stupid to fall in love when she thought they were only having a fling?

* * *

Jessie could see a million questions in her sons’ eyes, but her own kept coming back to Michael’s. He looked as stunned as she at what he’d just said.

‘So are you Mum’s boyfriend?’ Luke looked confused, though probably no less confused than any of them right now.

Michael’s expression was tight, as if he’d rather be back in Vienna than in her kitchen, being interrogated about his love life by a pair of kids. ‘I hope so.’

Jessie considered intervening but stopped herself. Jack and Luke were her life. If there was to be any future for her and

Michael, he needed to understand that. More, he needed to fit into it.

‘Are you going to marry her?’

Her heart thumped wildly and she could feel her face burning up. This was no longer about rescuing Michael. This was about rescuing herself. ‘That’s enough questions for now. It’s time you were getting ready for school.’

With a sigh Luke pushed back his chair. ‘Mum says she’s going to Bar ... some place in Spain to see you. Can we come?’

Oh God. Why had she ever thought dating again was a good idea? And if this was excruciating for her, she could only imagine how Michael — intensely private Michael — was finding it.

‘It’s up to your mother,’ Michael was saying, his stiff shoulders and strained expression betraying exactly how hard he was finding this. ‘If you have no plans in two weeks, you’re very welcome.’

‘He doesn’t want us to come.’ Jack spoke this time, an edge to his voice Jessie didn’t understand. ‘And anyway we can’t. It’s our cup final.’

The blood drained from Jessie’s face as she looked from Luke, to Jack and finally to Michael. She shook her head, feeling as if a rug had just been jerked from under her. She had nothing to hold onto as her world span out of control. Michael loved her. But she was about to let him down. ‘I hadn’t realised.’

Jack clattered his spoon into his bowl and shot to his feet. ‘I suppose you’ll be going with him.’

She saw Michael flinch at Jack’s bitter tone. ‘Don’t speak to our guest like that.’

‘He’s only a guest if we invited him and we didn’t, did we? Yesterday he made you cry.’

Her mind flashed back to when he’d asked about the phone call. Her quiet, serious, sensitive son had seen how

upset she'd been. As she struggled with what to say, it was Michael who filled the void.

'I'm sorry your mum was upset yesterday. Believe me, hurting her is the last thing I want to do.' Michael kept his eyes on Jack, his tone quiet and respectful. 'As for your football match, your mother will always put you first. Always. And I wouldn't expect it any other way.'

Jack nodded and Jessie felt an unmistakable burst of pride. In protecting her, her eldest son had just taken his first steps into adulthood.

Luke sighed, hands on his hips. 'I guess we're not going to Barcelona then.'

Tears pricking at her eyes, Jessie wrapped her arms around him and kissed his soft hair. 'I'm afraid not.' She glanced quickly over to Michael but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were following Jack as he walked out of the kitchen. Always so elegant, so smart, right now Michael looked shattered. His shirt was crumpled, his face weary. Swallowing down her emotions, she tried to smile at him. 'The boys catch the bus to school. I'll just make sure they've got everything.'

He rose to his feet. 'No problem. I'll wait in the living room. Keep out of your way.'

Oh God. She hurried Luke up the stairs, desperate to be doing something so she couldn't think about the man who'd just travelled nearly a thousand miles to see her, who'd told her he loved her, and who now felt like an outcast.

'Go and brush your teeth.' She pushed Luke gently into the bathroom and went to knock on Jack's door.

'Can I have a word?'

Busy packing his schoolbag, Jack avoided her eyes. 'If it's to tell me to apologise for the stuff I said, don't bother.'

Her breath came out in a frustrated, exhausted, emotional sigh. 'Jack.' She walked over to him, putting an arm round his shoulders. 'Yesterday, at the pub, I was crying because I missed Michael, and because talking to someone on the phone

isn't easy. It wasn't because he said or did anything to upset me.'

'Oh.' He finally looked at her. 'Is it like when you go away and we have to make do with phone calls?'

Relieved, she smiled. 'It's exactly like that. When I'm with Michael, I miss you terribly.'

'But when you're with us, you miss him.'

'Yes.' She hugged him to her, her throat, her chest, impossibly tight. 'But you and Luke will always be the most important things in my life.'

'Even though you're going to miss a trip to Barcelona?'

There was a flicker of smile on his face as he said it, and Jessie swooped and kissed him. 'Who needs Barcelona when you have Hazelford Football Club?'

Chapter Twenty-Five

Michael sat on the sofa he'd nearly fallen asleep on last night. He didn't feel like sleeping now. What he felt like doing was phoning a cab and slinking back to the airport to lick his wounds.

He shouldn't have come, though that wasn't what he'd thought an hour ago when he'd been buried between Jessie's legs.

Heaving out a sigh he hunched forward, head in his hands. He was gutted he wouldn't be seeing Jessie again in two weeks, terrified she was about to end things, and at a loss as to how to repair his tenuous relationship with her eldest son. Mind you, if the second was about to happen he wouldn't have to worry about the third.

The thought didn't make him feel any happier.

At the sound of a door creaking, he jolted upright. A pair of hazel eyes stared back at him.

'Sorry I was rude.'

The sincerity in Jack's tone caught Michael off guard, causing a wave of feeling to flood through him, squeezing his chest. 'You were protecting your mother. I don't need an apology.'

Jack seemed to consider his words. 'I don't like it when she's unhappy.'

The constriction around his chest tightened. 'I don't like that, either.'

'That's why you flew here.'

'Yes.' There were probably a tonne of other things he should say at this point, but Michael couldn't think of any of them.

Jack shifted his schoolbag onto his shoulder. 'She's gonna stay and watch us play football, but I know she wanted to go to Barcelona.'

Michael felt the sting of tears. First the apology, then the olive branch. This boy was wrecking him. ‘Thank you. Perhaps I can persuade her to visit me somewhere else. If that’s okay with you?’

A miracle happened then. Jack smiled. ‘You don’t have to ask me. We don’t let her know it, but she’s in charge. I don’t mind her going, though.’ He turned to go but halted in the doorway. ‘You can come and watch the match. You know, if you wanted to.’

Michael had never felt so touched. A moment ago he’d been once again the outsider. Now he experienced that rare feeling. Included. ‘There’s nothing I’d like more, Jack, thank you. But I’ve agreed to go somewhere Saturday night, so it might not be possible. I’ll see.’

‘Okay.’ Was it his imagination, or did Jack look disappointed? ‘Bye then.’

Not wanting to leave it at that, Michael stood and held out his hand. ‘Thanks, Jack. Hope to see you again soon.’

Jack blushed and gripped his hand, his small fingers barely managing to wrap round Michael’s large hand.

At that moment, Jessie walked in. ‘Here you are.’ She did a double take at their handshake and her eyes softened as she glanced at Michael before focussing back on her son. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Yes, yes. Keep your frizzy hair on.’

Luke popped his head in and gave Michael a wave. A different child to his brother. More easy-going, perhaps because he didn’t feel the responsibility of being the man of the house. Michael hung back as Jessie shepherded Jack and Luke out of the door.

‘Phew.’ She walked back in, looking very professional in her dark trouser suit, her curls held back in a black clip. Her smile was cautious, her eyes guarded. ‘Quite a morning.’

He let out a short laugh. ‘You could say that.’

‘Bet you regret taking up with me now, huh.’

‘Regret, no. Never.’ He shook his head for emphasis. ‘But do I wish things could be easier? Yes. I can hold my hands up to that one.’

Her smile faltered and she looked away. ‘I’m sorry about Barcelona.’

‘Yeah. Me too.’

Tension hung in the air and Michael sighed and walked up to her, running his hands up and down her arms. ‘I’m not angry, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

She bit her lip, nodding, her eyes still not looking at him. ‘You should be. I totally ballsed that up.’

The coarse term, coming from someone looking as smart as she did right now, made him smile. ‘You got your dates mixed up. Easy to do when you’re juggling three sets.’ He bent to kiss her, groaning at how soft her lips felt. How warm and receptive. ‘We’ll work something else out.’ When he looked into her eyes he found them full of tears. Any residual frustration he’d harboured melted away and he hugged her to him, his heart feeling painfully full.

She let out a quiet snuffle. ‘I feel I’ve let you down.’

‘Don’t. As long as we’re good, as long as I can look forward to seeing you again, that’s all I care about.’ But he hoped that all the wanting, the frustration, the aching misery of missing someone, wasn’t all on his side.

Her hand came up to touch his face, her fingers warm and gentle against his skin. ‘What you said to Jack earlier ...’

He smiled at her hesitancy, though he felt his stomach tighten. Was this where she told him it wasn’t what they’d planned? Wasn’t what she wanted? ‘You mean the part where I inelegantly told your son I was in love with you, without letting you know first?’

Warmth filled her eyes and hope blossomed in his chest. ‘Yes, that part. I just wanted you to know, your feelings aren’t one-sided.’

He waited, heart in his mouth, for her to add to her sentence. To make explicit the words she'd implied, but instead she pressed her lips to his and kissed him. As he settled in, he told himself he wasn't disappointed. Not when he considered what the alternative could have been.

* * *

Jessie let Michael take control of the kiss, drowning in the sensation of his tongue, the lean, hard length of his body against hers. For a few precious moments, she forgot all that was terrifying her about their relationship, and remembered why it was worth putting her heart through the emotional battering. She knew he was hurt she hadn't said the words back to him, but she needed to protect herself. That he loved her was incredible, overwhelming. It would help keep her warm on those lonely nights when she missed his touch. Missed him. But could they seriously have a relationship, considering her responsibilities at home and his career? Especially as performing was his passion. What had he said? On stage, he was the man he wanted to be.

Suddenly Michael pulled away, his eyes searching hers. 'Jessie?'

Annoyed at ruining the moment, she gave him an apologetic smile. 'Sorry.' Her hand slipped to his chest where she found his heart racing, much like hers. 'I need to be in work by nine o'clock. We should go.'

His chest heaved as he drew in a deep breath, then let it out in a sigh as he clasped her hands. 'Okay.'

Within minutes they were in her Mini, Michael muttering as he struggled to push the seat back as far as it could go. 'These cars are meant for midgets.'

She arched a brow. 'Would you prefer to be in a taxi?'

He shook his head, letting out a soft sigh. 'I'd prefer not to be going to the airport at all.'

Her heart lurched and she bit into her lip, determined not to cry. Red eyes and tears running down her cheeks were not going to be the last things he saw of her. 'I'd prefer to be

taking you back to my house. Finish off what we started in the hallway.’

His eyes flared and he groaned. ‘Don’t. Leaving you is hard enough. Don’t tempt me with an alternative.’ He paused, seeming to consider his next words. ‘Jack invited me to come and watch the football match.’

‘He did? Wow.’ She felt a rush of warmth towards her son. And to the man who must have gained Jack’s trust and respect, or her son wouldn’t have made the offer. ‘That’s a big turnaround considering his reaction in the kitchen.’

‘Yes. He’s quite something, your Jack.’ He glanced over at her. ‘You should be very proud of him.’

‘I am.’ She turned off the roundabout, following the signs to the airport. ‘What did you tell him?’

‘The truth. That I’d love to, though it might not be possible.’ There was tightness to his voice and when she glanced over to him he was staring straight ahead, his face tense.

‘What are you thinking?’

He exhaled; a sharp sound, like a huff of frustration only laced with sadness. ‘I’m thinking I wish this wasn’t so damn complicated.’ He slid her a look. ‘I didn’t tell you before, because I didn’t want you to change your mind about coming, but I have this ... thing in Barcelona on Saturday night.’

‘Thing?’

He gave her a wry smile. ‘It’s an award ceremony. The Spanish equivalent of the Brits.’

‘You’ve won an award?’

‘Apparently so. Best classical singer. I was going to ask you to come with me. It didn’t have to be high profile,’ he added quickly. ‘You could have entered through a side door, though I would have liked to have had you on my arm.’

‘Oh.’ She didn’t have a clue what to say. She was hugely flattered, incredibly touched, but no matter how much he

downplayed it, her presence by his side would have been noticed.

She felt his eyes on her. ‘Perhaps it’s just as well you aren’t coming. Your response suggests you wouldn’t have wanted to go anyway.’

There was an edge to his voice that was mirrored in his tense body language. Carefully she navigated into a space outside the terminal before turning to him. ‘That’s not true. I’d have been honoured to go with you. Especially as you are going to win an award.’ She attempted a smile, hoping to lift the tension that lingered like an unwanted guest. ‘It’s just ... you know I don’t want the attention. It’s not cool for the boys to have the press speculating about their mother’s love life.’

‘So what do we do, Jessie? Hide away all the time, as if we’re having a sordid little liaison? As if we’re doing something wrong?’ He clearly didn’t understand where she was coming from and now his frustration had turned into something raw. He was hurting and letting her see it. ‘We’ve already been out to restaurants together. At some point someone is going to notice and what happens then? Is it over?’

A sob wrenched from her and she put her head in her hands. She didn’t have an answer for him. It terrified her to think of embarrassing Jack and Luke, making their lives difficult, but seeing how upset Michael looked she knew another terror. Hurting the man she’d fallen in love with. *Losing him.*

Beside her, she heard Michael sigh. ‘I know this is hard for you. And I understand why you’d do anything to protect your sons. I’ve already seen Jack do the very same thing for you and it awes me, seeing how much you love each other.’ He reached for her hand, his grip warm and tight. ‘I wouldn’t ask you to do anything to damage that bond. It’s just I’ve been in the spotlight for ten years now and I know how it works. I’m a private person who lives a boring life. Details of my latest love interest won’t increase circulation. And they won’t print photos of the boys. There are laws about taking pictures of kids without a parent’s consent.’

She lifted her head, pleading with him to understand. ‘The law won’t protect them from being teased though. Or God forbid, maybe bullied, when the grapevine gets going.’

His jaw tightened, the muscles twitching. ‘No.’

‘Nor will they prevent unkind comments about their mother.’

His eyes widened in confusion. ‘For God’s sake, Jessie, you’re being ridiculous.’

They were at a stalemate, but the ball was firmly in her court. He was right; if they carried on seeing each other, the news was bound to get out. It left her with two simple choices. End it now, or accept that she might be in the papers again soon. This time about her love life rather than her singing.

She studied his handsome profile. The square, tightly-clenched jaw. High cheekbones, straight edged nose. The mouth he could use to such devastating effect. All of that paled into insignificance when she considered the man beneath. Hugely talented yet at times, so painfully shy. Big hearted enough to invite her children to Paris on only their second weekend together. Thoughtful enough to have flown all the way from Vienna for a night, just so he could check she was okay.

‘I’m sorry.’ She leant across, the gear knob sticking awkwardly into her side as she threw her arms around his neck. ‘You’re right. I’ve been horribly paranoid about all this media attention and it’s going to stop. You asked me what happens when people find out about us.’ She kissed the warm skin of his neck, inhaling his scent. ‘We’ll deal with it.’

Beneath her arms his whole body seemed to sag, as if he’d been holding himself rigid all this time and could only now let go. ‘Are you willing to deal with it next Saturday? Because if the flights work out and I can get back in time for the award ceremony, I’d really like to take Jack up on his offer.’

Love filled her heart. Love and gratitude. ‘It would mean a great deal to both of them.’ Her lips found his and she kissed him once, then twice, then a third time. ‘To me, too.’

His arms tightened around her. ‘Then I’ll find a way.’

She stayed like that as the minutes ticked by, cocooned in his embrace, reluctant to let him go. In the end he was the one to ease her arms away. To kiss her gently on the tip of her nose. ‘You need to get to work. And I have a plane to catch.’

She’d promised herself she wouldn’t, but when she gave him one last hug, tears streamed down her face. ‘We always seem to be saying goodbye.’

‘I know.’ He tilted her head and kissed away the tears. ‘But for every goodbye, there’s a hello just round the corner.’

As his tall frame was swallowed by the terminal building two weeks didn’t seem just round the corner though. It seemed an age away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Michael stared at the magazine article Georgina had handed him, his pulse racing. It carried a picture of him and Jessie from their performance on *The Week of Your Life*. They were singing into each other's eyes and the caption underneath read: *They sang about love. Are they now in love?* The article went on to speculate that she was the new love interest of Michael Tennant, and gave details of how they had met on the TV show, and that she'd been seen leaving a theatre in Paris with him after his show. Michael had been contacted, but had declined to comment.

As stories went, it was pretty low key. But would Jessie see it that way?

Georgina's eyes flicked to the magazine. 'I suspect Jessica won't be very happy to see herself in the papers.'

'It's Jessie,' he reminded her firmly, then sighed. 'And I suspect you're right.'

'But it's part of you, isn't it? If she can't accept it, there are plenty of other women out there who would be very happy to.'

As her eyes lingered fleetingly on his, Michael wondered once again what was truth, and what was his paranoia. Was she coming on to him, or just being supportive? 'Thank you, but I have no interest in any other women.' He hoped that was a clear enough statement.

It seemed to be, because she nodded and gave him a professional smile. 'I've sorted the flights you wanted.'

'Thanks. Is there time for me to change into a tux, or do I need to wear it on the plane?'

She glanced down at her phone and tapped a few times. 'Looks like you have a whole half an hour at the hotel before the chauffeur collects you for the awards.' The smile she gave him slipped as she stared back at the article. 'It must be going well, you and her.'

Michael tensed. Not again. He didn't want to discuss his private life, especially when it all felt so fragile still, and even more especially with the woman who was asking him. 'I hope so, though what she'll think to this, I'm not sure.'

'Must be hard for her, you know, with the boys. Kids can be so sensitive.'

'Yes.' What else could he say? Except perhaps *please leave?*

Her mouth curved as she studied him. 'You don't want to talk about this with me, do you?'

He almost laughed. 'I don't want to talk about this with *anyone.*'

'Oh, okay.' She flashed him a smile. 'Do you need someone to accompany you to the awards on Saturday? It's just if you do, I'd love to go. It's every girl's dream to get glammed up and mix with the stars.'

Apparently not Jessie's, was her clear implication. Sadly it was also the truth.

'If Jessie doesn't mind, of course.'

He blinked. 'Why would she mind?'

'Well, it must be tough being away from you, wondering what you're up to while she can't be with you. I know I wouldn't like it.'

'She doesn't have to wonder. She trusts me and vice versa.'

His annoyance must have come through in his voice because she took a tiny step back. 'Of course, I didn't mean to imply otherwise.' She tucked a wayward strand of her otherwise immaculately straight blonde hair behind her ear. 'So can I come? It would be an honour to see my boss pick up an award.'

He felt like a dumb sheep, cunningly rounded into its pen by the savvy sheep dog. Say she couldn't come and it would look like Jessie had him by the balls and didn't allow him out on his own. 'Sure, if you want,' he found himself saying, at

the same time praying the words he'd casually tossed out would prove correct, and Jessie really wouldn't mind.

'Fabulous. Thank you.' She leant forward and kissed him on the cheek. A light, friendly gesture except her breasts pressed too closely against his chest and her hand wrapped too familiarly around his bicep.

As he watched her walk out Michael had the uncomfortable feeling she was playing a game and hadn't told him the rules. He had a grudging admiration for her supreme confidence, though mostly he was scared shitless by it. A shame, in some ways, because his life would be one hell of a lot simpler if he fancied her back.

Instead he was planning a 2,000 mile round trip, all to see an under 12 football match.

He didn't even like football.

His decision to go and watch hadn't been made from his head though, but his heart. When Jack had gazed at him with those serious brown eyes, so similar to his mother's, Michael knew he'd do everything in his power — hire a private plane if necessary — to get there. He'd fallen for their mum, but Jessie's kids were every bit as adorable as she was.

With a quick glance at the clock, and a mental adjustment for the time difference, Michael picked up his phone and dialled Jessie's number.

'Hey.' Her breathy voice caused his own breath to catch in his throat. 'This is a surprise. Aren't you supposed to be rehearsing?'

'I've got about five minutes before I'm invaded by the sound check guys.'

'Oh.' She paused and he imagined her on her bed, in the ivory lace number. 'Is everything okay?'

He cleared his throat. 'Yes. I'm phoning because I wanted to hear your voice. I also wanted to warn you the article I mentioned has been published, so you may get some fallout. They've included a photograph of us singing together at the show. I'll get Georgina to scan it over to you.'

He heard the sharp rush of her breath. Imagined her shutting her eyes. ‘Thanks for the warning.’

The silence felt cold and he gripped the phone. ‘Jessie—’

‘Relax. I’m not going to get in a stew over it. I promised I’d deal with it and I will.’

‘Okay.’ He felt his shoulders relax, until he considered what her version of deal with it meant. ‘By deal with it, you don’t mean ditch me, do you?’ He was only half joking.

Her laughter soothed his anxiety. ‘Of course not. The boys would never forgive me. They’ve already told the team they’ll have a famous person watching their match.’ She hesitated. ‘You are still coming?’

‘Try and stop me.’ It had been five days since he’d last seen her. Waiting another eight felt like an eternity.

‘I have no intention of stopping you,’ she replied softly.

‘Hell, Jessie, it feels much too far away.’ And even then, he’d have less than twenty-four hours with her. His life had turned into one long countdown. Counting down the days until he could see her again. Counting the hours he was with her until he had to leave.

The door opened and he bit back a sigh. He used to love performing, but recently he’d begun to resent it. Hate it, almost, for keeping him from what he now wanted more. Time with Jessie.

With a heavy heart, he said goodbye to the woman on the phone and went to greet the production team.

* * *

Jessie had done as she’d promised Michael, and dealt with the fallout from the article. Dealt was rather a strong word. Yes, a few reporters had contacted her through the *The Week of Your Life* production team, asking for confirmation of the rumours. She’d responded stating only that she didn’t discuss private matters.

On a local level, several customers had come into the pharmacy on the pretext of buying

paracetamol/shampoo/cotton wool, only to then quiz her about whether she really was dating a famous singer. She'd straightened her back, smiled and told them the truth.

And instead of being embarrassed, as she'd feared, she'd felt smug.

She, the local pharmacist who wouldn't see thirty-five again, was dating a stunningly attractive, world-renowned, singer. She'd done cowering in the corner and worrying she wasn't good enough/attractive enough.

If Michael was happy to be seen publicly with her, she was damn well going to do him proud.

It was the reason she was now standing on the touchline next to the man in question wearing new skinny jeans and cashmere jumper beneath her puffa jacket. And hair she'd spent the morning meticulously straightening.

'Run with it!' she shouted as Jack collected the ball from the goalie and made his way up the field. 'Luke, find space. He can't pass to you if you're surrounded.'

Michael slid her a look, the lips he'd brushed all over her body last night, now twitching. 'Do they listen to your touchline advice?'

'Of course.' She winced as Jack was tackled. 'Did you see that ref? Foul!'

For the next ten minutes she paced up and down, yelling encouragement, getting immersed in the game as she always did. Michael remained next to her, his body never leaving her side. She knew the other parents were gawping, the mothers giving him overly long glances, and how could she blame them? It wasn't just his height, or his film star handsome features that made them stare. It was the aura he carried. The private Michael Tennant was considerably less confident, but today it was the public persona on show. This Michael Tennant was polished, sophisticated, classy. Used to being watched.

As the whistle blew for half-time, Michael turned to her and smiled. 'You can relax for a few minutes, Mum.'

‘Yes, sorry. I forgot to warn you that I do get a bit carried away.’

‘A bit?’ His blue eyes danced with mischief. ‘I’m sure Jack and Luke appreciate your vocal encouragement.’

Groaning, she put her head in her hands. ‘I totally embarrass them. They hate me watching. I forgot to mention that to you, too.’

His rich laughter wrapped around her. ‘It wouldn’t have put me off.’ Gently his hand tugged at her hair. ‘I like the new style, though I have to confess, I prefer the curls.’

Her head shot up and she gaped at him. ‘You do?’

‘Definitely. This is very elegant, but your curls. They’re more you.’

She knew he meant it as a compliment, but still she felt a sting. ‘Are you saying I’m not elegant?’

‘God no.’ He thrust an agitated hand through his hair. ‘I should know better than to talk about a woman’s hair. It’s just I’ve never come across any like yours. It’s natural, bouncy. Like you.’ This time he groaned. ‘Scratch bouncy. I mean exuberant, full of life and energy.’ He sighed, drawing his hand down his face. ‘Look, I love how unaffected you are, how genuine. That’s all I’m trying to say.’

Her ego well and truly polished, she reached up to kiss his cheek. ‘Thank you. And I love how you’re this famous, hugely talented singer the women here can’t take their eyes off, yet you get flustered paying me a compliment.’

He let out a short laugh. ‘Thank heaven for that.’

A few moments later Annabel and Phil, who, after the initial greetings had been careful to give them space, wandered over to them. ‘As if it wasn’t bad enough having to stand on a windy field, you also have to listen to Jessie yelling in your ear.’ Annabel glanced up at Michael. ‘Bet you’re glad you came now, huh?’

Michael blinked, and Jessie realised he was trying to work out if Annabel was joking or not. ‘I confess I don’t know

much about football, so I'm immensely grateful for Jessie's erudite commentary.'

Annabel roared with laughter. 'You and I will get on famously, Mr Tennant. I hope the stares you've been getting all afternoon won't put you off coming to visit us again.'

Michael smiled, though Jessie could see it was strained. 'It's not me who's worried about people staring.'

Before Jessie could reassure him she wasn't going to be spooked, the whistle sounded for the second half.

It was as frenzied as the first, but also as goalless. That was until a minute from the end when Luke poked the ball into Jack's path. And Jack only went and scored.

Jessie leapt into the air, screaming. Automatically her eyes found Phil's and they shared a connection that divorce hadn't diminished. It was one of friendship, of a shared past. Of mutual love for the children they'd produced. He strode over and they hugged, laughing like crazy. When Jessie broke free she turned to find Michael watching her, his expression unreadable.

But when she smiled, he smiled back and nodded over to where Luke and Jack were high fiving each other as the referee blew the final whistle. 'Proud moment.'

'Yes.' Her voice was breathy with emotion and excitement. 'I feel like crying but I'm not sure why because I'm so damn happy.'

With great tenderness, uncaring of anyone watching, he kissed her on the lips. 'I'd rather you smiled.'

'Yes.' She nodded, though the lump in her throat felt like a tennis ball. To have her sons conjure up the winning goal, with everyone she loved most in the world by her side, was almost overwhelming.

The moment was broken as Jack and Luke barrelled towards them. Laughing now, the emotion still in her throat, she bent to hug their muddy, sweaty bodies.

Stuff the cashmere jumper.

John followed behind them, his face sporting a massive grin. 'Your boys did us proud, Jess.'

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Michael stiffen.

'I think you'll find it's me who did you proud,' she told John jokingly, ruffling Luke's hair. 'Clearly my touchline instructions were what made the difference.'

Everyone fell about laughing and when she glanced over at Michael she noticed he was smiling, too.

'You're embarrassing, Mum.' Luke gave her a little shove. 'Lucky we learnt to ignore you years ago.'

Phil bellowed with laughter and hoisted Luke up in the air, making him squeal. 'That's my boy.' Suddenly they all began to talk over each other, reliving the goal, working out how they were going to celebrate the win.

Jessie didn't notice Michael take a step back, hands in his pockets. Eyes staring into the distance.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Michael knew all about being on the outside, looking in; he'd experienced it often enough. Right now he felt so out of place, he wondered if he should just quietly disappear and call a cab.

Would Jessie even miss him if he did?

With a grunt of frustration, he shoved his hands further into his pockets and hunched up against the wind. Barcelona, at least, would be warm.

He dragged his eyes back to the group. Annabel and her sons had joined them now, threading her hand through Phil's arm, which at least dampened Michael's jealousy a little. When he'd watched Jessie and Phil hug after Jack's goal ... Christ, even now, the memory caused his gut to contort. Yet he had no right to feel like that because Phil was the boys' father. It was natural she'd turn to him in that moment.

By God he wished it had been his arms she'd leapt into, though. His face she'd squealed at, eyes alight with joy. It made him acutely aware that while he'd told her he loved her, she'd never said the same. She missed him, liked him enough to come and see him; to welcome him into her home. But was she as deeply invested in this relationship as he was?

His gaze flicked over to John; Jessie's boss who conveniently also ran the boys' football club. Shorter than he was, Michael noted with satisfaction, but with an athletic build and the type of good looking, open, kind face women were attracted to. The type Jessie must also be attracted to, because John was like a dark-haired version of Phil. And though Phil seemed to be besotted with Annabel now, it was clear John wanted far more from Jessie than the *just good friends* label she'd given them.

And didn't they make a perfect foursome? Two best friends, an ex-husband Jessie still cared deeply for and the football team coach who the kids thought walked on water.

Feeling twitchy, his hands balled into fists, Michael started to pace. As he turned back he almost fell over Jack. 'Hey

there.’ He removed his hand from his pocket, ready to — hell, who knew? Clap him on the shoulders? High five him? Shake his hand, even though the last few times he’d done that the boys had looked confused? Damn it, he still didn’t know what the correct procedure was to greet the son of the woman he was dating. Awkwardly Michael let his hand fall by his side. ‘Congratulations,’ he said, his voice sounding horribly stiff compared to the easy way Phil and John had been chatting to him. ‘Great goal. Both the timing and, well, the execution.’ As if he knew a damn thing about scoring goals.

Red bloomed across Jack’s mud splattered cheeks. ‘Thanks.’ He scuffed his boot in the ground. ‘And, err, thanks for coming.’

‘Did you really come all the way from Spain just to watch us?’ Luke appeared next to Jack, looking equally muddy, his hair sticking up at odd angles.

Technically he’d come to see Jessie too, but Michael wasn’t going to turn down a chance for a brownie point with her sons. ‘I guess I did, yes. Just a shame I have to dash off again so soon.’

‘Back to Spain?’

He nodded. ‘That’s right. I came from Madrid, but now I’m flying to Barcelona.’

‘Cos you’re singing there tonight?’

‘No. I have a ...’ He hesitated. ‘I have a function to attend. I’m singing there tomorrow.’

‘Can we come?’

Luke beamed up at him and some of the angst he’d been feeling started to slip away. ‘That would be great but I’m guessing you have school to go to on Monday.’

Luke pouted. ‘Yeah. School sucks.’

He felt a dainty but rather cold hand wrap round his and turned to find Jessie smiling up at him, her eyes that lovely soft hazel colour. ‘Sorry to interrupt but these two boys need to head to the showers.’

As Jack and Luke dashed off, Jessie squeezed his hand. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes. Why wouldn't I be?'

'Because I watched you slowly withdrawing while we all talked. I thought you might be feeling out of place.'

She knew him too well, it seemed. 'I was, a little. But Jack and Luke rescued me.'

The hand that wasn't holding his, cupped his face. 'You have no idea how many bragging rights they've gained from you being here.' Shaking her head, she let out a little laugh. 'There was me, worrying about how they'd react to being drawn into your limelight. Seems they're thriving on it.'

Reaching up he covered her hand with his, moving it towards his mouth so he could kiss her palm. 'And you?'

She gave him a small smile. 'If they're happy, I'm happy.'

Their eyes held and for a few glorious moments it was him and Jessie, her hair fluttering in the wind, her expression soft and warm. He started to move towards her, desperate for another taste of those lush lips.

'Jess.'

John's voice crashed into their moment and Jessie, consciously or unconsciously, took a step back. The action stung, as if she was embarrassed to be seen having an intimate moment with him.

'We're meeting in the clubhouse around five for a small celebration. See you there?'

Michael was aware of John's gaze falling on him, and he swore he could read the man's thoughts. *Will you be bringing that poncy singer or do I get a chance with you on your own?*

Jessie nodded. 'Great, thanks. We'll be there. Not Michael though.'

Michael waited for her to elaborate. For once in his life he wanted someone to big him up. I'm afraid Michael has to

catch a flight to Barcelona because he has to pick up an award for best classical singer.

She said none of that though. It shouldn't have annoyed him, but it did.

‘Do you like to be called Jess?’

And yes, his tone was sharper than it should have been.

A frown appeared beneath her fringe, which he was pleased to note was starting to curl again. ‘I don't mind it, but usually I'm Jessie.’

‘Except when it comes to John.’

* * *

Jessie stared back at Michael, wondering why he seemed so angry. ‘No, not just John. Many people over the years have shortened my name. It's not something I'm particularly fussy about.’

‘What if I chose to shorten it?’

His expression was taut, his eyes guarded and Jessie slowly began to understand. ‘I would be happy for you to call me Jess.’ She reached up to give him the kiss John had interrupted. While she didn't mind her friends seeing her kiss in public, she drew the line at that sort of thing in front of her boss. Sure, John was also a friend, but she was always aware of the need to retain at least a touch of professionalism when he was around. ‘For the record, I'd be happy for you to call me anything ... well maybe not mop head. But other than that, you can call me whatever you want, though I happen to like my real name.’

His face relaxed and he smiled. ‘Jessie it is then.’

‘Good. Now when do you need to go to the airport?’

He glanced at his elegant watch and winced. ‘About ten minutes ago?’

‘Damn. I'll just check Annabel is okay to take the boys home and then I'll take you.’

‘I can call a cab.’

‘No. You were only with me for twenty-four hours. I’m not going to let you waste half an hour of that giving the cab driver your company rather than me.’

Her heart sunk at the thought of another airport run. Another goodbye kiss. Determined to make the most of him while she had him, she leaned into his side, wrapping her arm around his waist as they walked towards where Annabel and Phil were talking to some of the other parents.

She no longer wanted to hide her relationship with him. Stuff the press speculation, for as long as it lasted she was proud to be Michael’s woman.

After giving Annabel some hasty instructions for Jack and Luke — make sure they put their muddy boots in a separate bag, ask them twice if they’ve collected all their kit — she waved goodbye, feeling the eyes of everyone following them.

‘You do realise you’ll be the talk of Hazelford for the next week,’ Michael remarked dryly as they climbed into her car.

‘Yep,’ she announced cheerfully. ‘They’re all going to be wondering how I managed to bag a singing superstar. I’ll be inundated with visits to the pharmacy from single women wanting some of the potion I slipped into your coffee while we were doing the show.’

‘I seem to recall coffee was a sore point between us.’

She caught his glance and as he gave her a sheepish smile she marvelled at how different he was now from that first day at the studio.

They chatted for the rest of the journey about little things; memories from the show, the boys’ football. Anything to not think about the biggest question hanging between them. When would they see each other again?

‘Is anyone going with you to the awards?’ she asked as she pulled into a parking bay, guilt pricking at her. For a man who wasn’t a people person, who didn’t like parties, it must be tough going by himself.

Michael shifted on his seat. ‘I’m taking Georgina.’

Jessie's hands clenched the steering wheel but she tried to keep her tone neutral. 'Well, I hope you have a good evening. It must be very gratifying picking up an award.'

'I wanted it to be you.'

The quiet tone, the serious expression, made her feel like a bitch. But why had he gone on to invite the woman he had to know was making a play for him? 'I know you did. I'm so sorry I couldn't go.'

His chest rose and fell as he slowly exhaled before slipping his hand into his jacket pocket and pulling out a rectangular box. 'When I thought I'd be taking you, I bought this. I had hoped you would wear it.' He handed her the red box and when their eyes met he smiled, though she saw in it his hesitancy, his vulnerability. As if he was afraid of her reaction.

Jessie's hands shook as she accepted it. She didn't need to be an expert in jewellery to recognise the name written across the top in gold letters. Carefully she opened it, her heart feeling like it was in a pinball machine as it bounced around inside her chest.

There, nestling in white silk, was a stunning ruby and diamond necklace, set in a modern white gold setting.

'I don't know if I've mentioned it, but I've got a thing for you in red,' he commented as she picked it up with trembling fingers.

'From now on I will always wear red,' she murmured, completely overawed. Longingly she ran her fingers over it before regretfully returning it to its box. 'It's truly breathtaking, Michael, but as I'm not going, you should have it back.'

But please God, don't give it to Georgina.

He raised an eyebrow. 'It would look pretty silly on me.'

She let out an exasperated huff. 'That's not what I meant and you know it. I can't accept this, it's too much.'

Picking up the necklace, he held it against her face. ‘If this was a film I’d put it on you, and the ruby would settle perfectly in your cleavage.’ He let out a strangled sound, part laugh, part frustration. ‘Then I’d kiss your incredible breasts and make love to you for so long we’d miss the damn ceremony anyway.’

That place between her legs pulsed and she gave him a wobbly smile. ‘I wish.’

‘Me, too.’ He dropped the necklace onto her lap. ‘Please, I want you to have it. Perhaps you could wear it for me sometime.’

Jessie knew she was going to cry again. It was such a beautiful gift, something she could have worn to the award ceremony with her head held high. In return, all she’d done was let him down. Unable to find the right words, her emotions too volatile, she settled for a simple, totally inadequate, thank you before draping her arms around his neck and hugging him. Hoping he could tell from that how touched she was. How utterly overcome.

He returned her embrace, his arms tightening as she sobbed quietly into his neck. But the angle was awkward and after a few minutes she reluctantly let him go. ‘Have a good time, but miss me occasionally.’

He kissed the tears on her cheeks. ‘I’ll have an okay time, and miss you always.’

‘Oh no, you can’t say that.’ She sniffed, wiping her face with the back of her hand. ‘You’ll make me cry again.’

‘Sorry.’ This time it was his thumb that brushed at her wet cheeks. His breath that fanned warm across her face as he sighed. ‘I have to go.’

She cried all the way home, feeling as if she’d lost part of herself. The better part of herself.

‘Good God, what’s wrong?’ Annabel exclaimed as Jessie stepped into the house.

‘Nothing.’ Annabel scowled and Jessie acknowledged that her red, puffy eyes were a dead giveaway. ‘Okay, Michael had

to leave because he's going to an award ceremony tonight. With Georgina.'

'Is that the super bitch PA?'

'The very same.'

'Wow, that sucks. He didn't think to invite you?'

'Ah, well, he did invite me.'

Annabel looked puzzled for a moment. 'But you said no because ... ah, I get it, because of the football match.'

'Exactly. And before he knew I couldn't go, he bought me this amazing necklace, which he's just given to me as I dropped him off. It said flipping Cartier on the box.'

'Flipping Cartier, eh? Not just your average Cartier?'

Jessie groaned. 'Shut up. You know what I mean. It has to be really expensive.'

'Let me get this straight. Michael wanted you to go to an awards ceremony with him, presumably because he'd won something?'

'Yes.'

'And instead of being annoyed you couldn't go, he gave you a necklace worth a month's salary?'

'A year's.' Jessie bit into her lip. 'God, how can he give me something worth a year's salary?'

'For the same reason he flew all the way here to watch a bunch of boys play football. He's besotted with you.'

But if he was, and who knew how long that would last, what sort of girlfriend was she if she wasn't by his side when he needed her? He'd downplayed it, but tonight he'd won an award and he'd wanted her there to see him collect it.

She'd not just let him down, she'd allowed Georgina, of all people, to take her place.

'I should have gone.' As soon as she said the words, Jessie realised ...

'You still can.'

Exactly that. If she was lucky, there was still time.

What followed was an hour of frantic activity. Annabel booked the flight while Jessie dragged out the red dress she'd worn at *The Week of Your Life* final. After throwing it into an overnight bag, along with a few toiletries, a change of underwear and a passport, she was bundled into the car by Phil who drove her to the same airport she'd just come from.

'When we were together we only once went on a plane,' he mumbled good-naturedly as he dropped her off. 'Now you can't seem to keep off the damn things.'

Because she wanted to surprise Michael, Jessie swallowed her pride and messaged Georgina to find out details of where the ceremony was, and to make sure she'd be allowed in. In her reply, along with the information, Georgina added:

He's expecting me to accompany him.

Much as the idea appealed to her, Jessie knew it was best not to trample on Georgina's toes. Frankly, she wasn't sure she was ready to walk down a red carpet with Michael in the full glare of the media, anyway. She just wanted to make the gesture, as he'd already done for her. So she typed back:

I know. I will come in via the back entrance. I'll let you know when I'm there.

Once she'd arrived she waited quietly, patiently in a side room, her necklace sparkling, the ruby nestled perfectly between her breasts, just as Michael had imagined, but he didn't show. An hour later, Jessie received a message from Georgina.

Sorry, we were held up at the reception. I'll bring him to you after the awards have been presented.

She wasn't sure whether she wanted to cry, or to scream. Why had she decided to surprise Michael? *Because you wanted to see his genuine reaction.* She couldn't deny there had been an element of that. A need to see how he really felt about her coming to see him on his home turf. Now, thanks to the super bitch PA, as Annabel had so aptly called her, the idea had spectacularly backfired.

One of the kind security staff allowed her into the main hall and though she had to stand, and the view was to the side, she did at least get to see Michael pick up his award.

And finally, three hours after she'd arrived, she got to see Michael.

The look on his face when he saw her, the utter disbelief, yet also the unmistakable delight, made up for the wasted hours and all the hassle. Almost as satisfying was the expression on Georgina's face as she turned and left them to it, having been totally ignored by Michael the moment he'd seen her.

And having had to witness him kissing Jessie like he hadn't seen her for months, instead of a few hours.

'You've been here all along?' His expression, as his eyes skimmed over her face and his hands ran up and down her arms, held a mixture of incredulity and joy. 'But I don't understand.'

'I realised when I got home that there was nothing stopping me coming to the awards. The football match was over.' She touched her necklace. 'And I had something to wear.' She leant into him. 'Twice you've flown to see me, to be there for me even though it was only for a few hours. I wanted to do the same for you.'

He looked like he still didn't believe she was there. 'Why didn't you tell me? I'd have saved you a seat. God.' His face fell. 'All that time I was with Georgina when I could have been with you.'

And though she'd felt that loss too — thank you bloody Georgina — Jessie wasn't going to let it ruin the twelve hours they had left. 'You're here with me now,' she told him softly. 'And I plan on making the most of it.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Four weeks later

Michael was never going to admit it, but he was pathetically grateful to see Robert's ugly mug as he got off the plane in Chicago.

'Good of you to finally turn up,' he said instead as they walked towards the car Robert had insisted on hiring because he hated anyone else driving him.

'I'm your manager, not your carer,' his friend remarked mildly, clicking open the black Chrysler with his key fob. 'Besides, you've had Georgina to look after you.'

He felt the traitorous blush sting his cheeks and quickly ducked into the passenger seat, hoping to God Robert hadn't noticed.

'How is the glamorous Georgina?' Robert smirked as he edged out of the car park space. 'Is she taking care of your every need?'

His emphasis on the word *every* wasn't missed by Michael. 'She's fine,' he replied shortly. 'Looking forward to her break. She's going to join us in New York.'

'Define *fine* for me, because I'm having trouble connecting the blush on your cheeks with your curt replies. And the fact that I thought you were madly in love with the delightful Jessie.'

'I am.' Damn the man and his ability to see too much. 'Look, Georgina wanted to do some sightseeing while we were in the States. And now seemed a good time to do it.'

Robert quirked a brow. 'Because?'

'Because we ... she ... damn it. Because she got drunk last night and tried to kiss me.' He left out the part where she'd brazenly started undressing in front of him when he'd seen her safely back to her hotel room. And then tried to undo his trousers.

The sting was back in his cheeks again. Not helped by Robert's burst of laughter. 'Oh man, I wish I'd been a fly on the wall. By the look of your face I'd say it was a bit more than a kiss she tried with you.'

Michael kept his mouth shut. Partly because it wasn't fair on Georgina, who'd surely only done it because a mixture of fatigue, relief that the European part of the tour was over, and alcohol had messed with her brain. And partly because he didn't want to give Robert any further ammunition to tease him with.

'Did you take her up on her offer?'

His head spun round just in time to see Robert's mischievous grin. 'Of course I bloody didn't.'

'Because you're in love with Jessie.'

He exhaled heavily. 'Yes.'

Robert manoeuvred onto the busy highway. 'Is she coming to New York?'

'I've booked her a flight so yes, I think so.'

'You don't sound certain.'

Truth was, he wouldn't believe she was coming to New York until he saw her walk off the flight. He knew it was a tough one for her, but now he was in the States he didn't have more than a day's break between travel and performances. He couldn't come to her, and if she didn't come to him it would be months before they saw each other again.

'Talk to me, Michael. Not much point in me being here if you don't.'

And that's why Robert was his best friend. He let Michael internalise his thoughts, stew away quietly, but only for so long. Robert knew exactly when to push. Basically, he knew when Michael needed him. 'Each time we've discussed New York, Jessie has seemed hesitant. I want to believe it's because it means an extra day away from the boys, but I'm just not sure. When I'm not with her I have this ...' He trailed off, trying to find the words. 'This ache; a pain in my chest that

won't go away no matter how many indigestion remedies I take.'

Robert snorted. 'Please don't tell me you've tried to get rid of heartache with Rennies?'

Michael flushed again. 'I might have.' How was he supposed to know it was heartache? It was a long time since he'd been in love. Not since Paula. 'Look, all I'm trying to say is that if I could, I'd see her tomorrow. Hell, I'd go right back to the airport now and happily squash myself into a metal tube for another ten hours knowing she'd be at the other end.'

'Flying first class is hardly squashing yourself,' Robert interrupted dryly.

'Jeeze, Robert, lay off. I'm baring my soul here. I'd wedge myself into a jump seat if it meant I could be with her tonight. I just don't get the sense she misses me in the same way. Instead of looking forward to New York, I can tell she's dreading being away from the boys for three days.'

'That's because she's a mum.' Robert sighed. 'Mere males will never understand a mother's all-consuming love for her child. Hopefully we'll get to experience the bond between father and child, but that between a mother and her child? You have to respect it, appreciate it. Be in awe of it. You'll never be able to compete with it.'

'I know.' And he did. He'd meant what he said to Jack. He knew her boys were the most important thing in her world. Accepted and admired that, too.

It didn't diminish the hurt he felt when she always put them first.

'Then stop moping about like a kid who's lost his teddy bear. So, you're missing her. At least you have someone to miss, right? It's a bloody sight better than being the lonely bastard you were before you met her.'

Michael acknowledged Robert's words with a nod of agreement, though sometimes he wondered if having nobody wasn't actually easier.

At least then he'd been content. There'd been no raging passion, no wild elation of the like he experienced at seeing Jessie again after a stint apart. No deep-seated happiness either, just knowing she was sleeping/eating/walking by his side.

But equally there'd been none of this miserable angst. This dread she didn't feel the same way he did. This deep-seated ache that only left when she appeared.

* * *

Guiltily Jessie turned on the television and pressed play on the most viewed item on the planner. A concert from Michael's last performance at the Albert Hall. It had been over a week since she'd seen him and she needed this dose. She couldn't smell him, taste him or touch him but at least she could watch him. And listen to him.

Funny how her life now seemed greyer and duller without him.

As his tall figure came into view, dwarfed by the huge stage and surrounded by five thousand people hanging on his every note, she recalled her own nerve jangling experience in front of an audience. How did he do it, week after week?

She tried to lose herself in the music, in the beautiful rich tone of his voice, but for once it didn't lift her.

God, she missed him.

'OMG, Mum, how many times have you watched that?' Luke burst into the room, threw himself onto the sofa and grabbed the remote.

'Hey, I didn't say you could turn it over.'

'But you've seen it loads already. You know how it ends. He bows, they clap. Blah, blah, blah.'

'It's not why I was watching it,' she muttered, but what did a ten-year-old boy know about coping with a long-distance relationship? With a sigh she stood up. 'Fine. I relinquish control. The television is yours to pollute with whatever rubbish you want to watch.'

Luke stared at her curiously. ‘Were you watching it ’cos he’s a long way away?’

She did a double take. ‘Actually, yes.’

‘Is it like when you took photos of us with you to that show ’cos you wanted to see us even when we weren’t there?’

Love rushed through her, soothing the ache in her heart. ‘It’s exactly like that. I miss Michael and I thought watching him on the television would help.’

‘Did it?’

Sadly she shook her head. ‘No, sweetie.’ She sat back down and put her arms around his slim shoulders. ‘But hugging you definitely does.’

‘You’ll see him soon when you go to New York.’ He frowned, his bottom lip jutting forward. ‘But then I’ll miss you.’

She swallowed and hugged him closer. ‘And I’ll miss you too, cutie chops.’

He screwed up his face at her nickname. ‘Not cool, Mum. How long will you be away?’

‘I leave Friday morning and I’m back Monday morning, hopefully before you go to school.’ Michael had pleaded with her to stay longer — he was in New York for a week — but how could she when she needed all her annual leave for when Jack and Luke broke up from school? Already she felt guilty taking a day, because that was one day less she’d spend with them in the holidays.

Luke counted up on his fingers. ‘That’s three days.’

‘Yes, but you’ll be at school most of Friday so it’s really only the weekend. And you’ll have fun with your dad and Annabel.’

‘Can’t we come to America?’

‘You know you can’t miss school, and with all the travelling and the time difference it won’t be much fun.’

‘So why are you going?’ Jack had come in and settled on the other side of her.

‘‘Cos she misses him.’ Luke pursed his lips and made lots of kissing noises which cracked Jack up.

‘But won’t you miss us?’ Jack challenged.

‘Of course I will.’ She put an arm round each of their shoulders, hugging them close. ‘You two are more important to me than anyone or anything else in this world. If you don’t want me to go, I won’t go.’

Luke bit into his bottom lip and stared at her with his guileless blue eyes. ‘I don’t want you to go.’

Jack gave his brother a prod. ‘But she wants to see him, so it would be mean to stop her. We’ll be okay with Dad.’

‘I guess.’ Luke sniffed and stared sullenly at the television.

It was two subdued children who later went upstairs to bed.

* * *

Jessie was getting ready for bed herself when Annabel phoned.

‘Don’t shoot the messenger, but have you seen that picture of Michael in the gossip rag? There’s a photo of him and Georgina leaving the venue after his last show.’

That was something she really didn’t want to see. ‘How did she look? Haggard? Overweight. A big juicy zit on the end of her nose?’

‘Umm ...’ She could almost see Annabel wincing. ‘If I say gorgeous, will you never speak to me again?’

With a huff Jessie slumped onto the bed. ‘You don’t get to be that lucky.’ Her pulse began to race as she asked the next question. ‘What were they doing?’

‘Just walking, though she does have her arm wrapped around him.’ Jessie winced as a barb of jealousy found its home in her chest. ‘There’s more, I’m afraid. Now they’re

speculating on a love triangle between you, Michael and Georgina.’

Jessie felt a flash of anger. ‘Have they got nothing better to do than write this sort of drivel?’

‘Err, no? It is their job, after all.’

‘Yes, to report the news. Not to make it up.’

‘Hey, relax. You know it’s not true so stop getting in a flap. I only told you in case one of your nosey customers asked you about it.’

‘Okay, okay.’ She drew in a breath, letting it calm her. ‘Thanks for the heads-up.’

There was a pause, and Jessie steeled herself for what was coming next. Annabel only thought before she spoke when it was something important. ‘If you want my advice—’

‘And even if I don’t.’

Annabel gave a little laugh. ‘Yes, even if you don’t. Stop expending all your energy worrying about why you and Michael can’t work and start focussing on why it can. I know it must be hard trying to be a mum and a girlfriend to a globetrotting superstar, but if you both want it enough, you can make it happen.’

‘Yes, boss.’

But after she’d ended the call, Jessie couldn’t stop herself. She opened her laptop and googled Michael’s name. A few clicks later she was staring at the photographs of Michael and Georgina. Him tall and handsome in his tux with his bow tie undone. Georgina, his perfect match with her beautiful face and shiny blonde hair, leaning against him, her left arm wrapped around his waist.

She’d finally dropped off to sleep when her phone rang. The clock by the side of her bed showed 11.30 p.m., but it felt like the middle of the night. Groggily she looked at the caller ID.

‘Michael?’

‘You sound half asleep.’ There was a pause, then a soft curse. ‘Sorry, I’ve just realised it’s half eleven for you. I’m on my way to the concert hall. Shall I phone back tomorrow?’

‘I guess, as you’ve woken me up, you might as well stay on the line.’

‘Not at your best when your sleep has been rudely interrupted?’

She could hear the smile in his voice but with the pictures of him and Georgina still vivid in her head Jessie found it hard to smile back.

‘What did you want?’

‘To talk,’ he replied quietly, the placatory tone making her feel like a naughty child.

She sighed, sitting up in the bed. ‘Sorry. You’re right. Sleep deprivation puts a real dent in my humour.’ Before he could take it the wrong way, she added. ‘But if you can put up with that, it’s lovely to hear from you. How are things across the pond?’

They spent the next few minutes talking about his tour, and the arrival of Robert.

‘And Georgina? How is she? She looked very glamorous in the photos I saw from your last performance in Europe.’ Jessie was pleased with her tone. She could be a grown-up about all this.

There was a long silence on the other end as she imagined him carefully considering his next words. ‘I’m going to ignore the part about her looking glamorous because it sounds like a trap,’ he said finally. ‘And I assume she’s okay but I don’t know because she’s taking a few days holiday.’

‘Oh?’ Was it her imagination or did he sound uncomfortable.

‘I don’t want to talk about her, Jessie.’ There was a hint of frustration in his tone. ‘I want to talk about us. Are you still coming to New York next weekend?’

‘I said I would, so I will.’ It was her turn to sound frustrated.

She heard his muted curse. ‘Look, I didn’t ring to check up on you. Just to hear your voice.’

Bam. Emotion flooded through her. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m not usually such a cow.’ She wiped at her eyes, hugely grateful this wasn’t Skype. ‘Of course I’m coming to New York. I miss you horribly.’

‘That makes two of us.’ He paused and she imagined him wondering how to balance over the eggshells she’d dumped in his path. ‘It won’t always be like this. The tour ends in five months. Of course then you might wish you were seeing less of me.’

She felt too flat, too down to laugh. Five months more of this sounded like hell. And as he’d already admitted he loved the man he became when he was singing to an audience, it wouldn’t be long before he was off again.

Even when he was home, would he seriously want to spend his free evenings in her small semi-detached with two boys as chaperones?

‘Jessie?’

‘I’m still here.’ She yawned, feeling emotionally wrung out. ‘But I’m going to have to say goodnight.’

‘I’ll call you in a few days.’

He sounded as flat as she did, but there was a tightness to his voice too, as if she’d disappointed him. No, as if she’d *hurt* him. Belatedly she realised why. ‘Michael, just in case there was any doubt, I will never tire of seeing you. Never.’ Because I love you. The words were there, on the tip of her tongue and deep within her heart.

Maybe in New York she’d be brave enough to say them out loud, as he had.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Michael felt out of sorts; a fact hard to explain, even to himself. He was singing to full houses every night, receiving great reviews. Robert was with him, keeping him sane. Georgina was back from her break and, thank God, keeping things professional.

Jessie was arriving in a few days.

Or so he hoped.

And immediately he'd cut to the heart of the problem.

'Michael?' Georgina walked across the hotel foyer towards him. Since throwing herself at him so obviously, and being rejected, she found it hard to meet his eyes. A fact he was grateful for. 'You did say you and Jessie were coming to the ball on Friday, didn't you?'

The hotel they were staying in was holding a function in aid of a local charity. Though it seemed churlish not to at least show their faces, he hadn't mentioned it to Jessie yet. Did that make him a coward? Most certainly. 'I said I'd ask her if she felt like going.'

'Oh, okay. If she does want to go though, she'll need to bring a dress so she'd probably appreciate a bit of notice.'

He winced. 'Crap, yes. You're right. I'll message her now.'

This time her eyes found his. 'She'd be crazy to turn down the chance to dance with you.'

Before he could react — and heaven only knew how he was supposed to react to that — she'd turned and walked away.

Pushing his concerns about Georgina aside, Michael typed out a quick text. *Fancy dancing Friday night? Charity ball here, no pressure to go. Only if you want to. All I want is to spend time with my arms round you. M xx*

Her reply was a long while coming, he imagined because she was at work. *Can't wait to have your arms around me, and mine around you. I'll bring a dress. Jxx*

Smiling, feeling a lot happier, Michael slipped the phone back in his pocket.

* * *

It was Friday morning and though her case was standing by the front door, Jessie was sitting on the sofa with Luke, watching cartoons to distract him. New York wasn't going to happen. He'd climbed into her bed at 2 a.m., complaining of feeling poorly. After paracetamol and some hugs he'd finally gone back to sleep but as they waited for Phil to arrive, Luke was giving her sad eyes.

'I feel sick, Mum, and my tummy hurts. Please don't go away.'

'Oh, Luke, do you really feel so bad?' His miserable face tore at her heart. How could she possibly get on a plane and go thousands of miles away with him looking like this?

The doorbell rang and she rose to her feet with a heavy heart and went to greet Phil. 'Thanks for coming but I'm not going to go. I can't leave Luke like this.'

Phil frowned over at where Luke sat huddled in the blanket he'd brought down, sullenly watching the television. 'I suspect he's just playing up because he doesn't want you to go.'

It had been her first thought too, before she'd felt his forehead. 'He's got a temperature. And he's complaining of stomach ache.'

Phil shrugged his shoulders. 'So, he's a bit under the weather. Probably just wants a day off school. He'll be fine.'

Jessie bit her lip. 'What if he isn't? What if he gets worse? I can't just dash back from New York.'

'Jeeze, Jessie, I'll be here. You're not abandoning him, you're leaving him with his dad. I can take today off and stay with him.' He gave her a long, hard look. 'You do want to see

this fella I take it? You're not just looking for an excuse not to go?'

'Absolutely not.'

'You're sure? It's me, Jessie. I've known you a long time, remember.'

Emotion reared, settling in the back of her throat and she swallowed hard. 'I want to see Michael again like you wouldn't believe. It was only supposed to be a bit of fun, a chance for some excitement. I didn't plan to fall for him, but I have.' Shaking her head, she blinked back her tears. 'I love him, but by God I love my boys, too, and I hate these goodbyes. I'm just not sure I can go through with it when Luke isn't well. And Jack wasn't exactly chatty over breakfast.'

Phil smiled in that easy, familiar way of his. 'Despite what you might believe, the boys don't fall to pieces when you're away, pining until you return. They have fun, laugh, drive their dad mad, all the usual stuff. Besides, it doesn't do them any harm to miss you now and again. Makes them appreciate you more when you're here.' He laughed, pointing to himself. 'I should know. I'm the best father ever now they don't live with me.'

She smiled, as she knew he wanted her to, but her instincts were telling her this was different. Luke wasn't putting it on. He was feeling awful and he needed his mum.

But then she thought of Michael. How could she possibly let him down? He'd think it was because she didn't want to go to the ball with him, which was so wrong because she'd made a promise to herself not to get in a tizzy about it. If Michael wanted to take her to a ball, she was going to put on her best dress, puff out her chest and flipping well revel in the fact that it was she, Jessie Simmons, he wanted to be with.

There was also a worse scenario than him thinking she didn't want to go to the ball. He might think she didn't want to see *him*. It was one thing putting her sons first. Another making Michael feel he would always come second.

As an anguished sob left her, Phil drew her to him, stroking her hair. 'Hey, come on. Wipe your eyes, call the cab and get on that plane. Luke will be fine, I promise.'

Because they were the words she wanted to hear, Jessie did just that. For seven hours she sat on a metal tube and tried not to remember how Luke's bottom lip had wobbled as she said goodbye. Tried not to think how selfish she was, putting herself before her child, jetting off to New York while he was sick.

By the time she'd touched down she'd managed to box up her guilt and dismiss her worries.

In the arrivals hall, her eyes scanned the boards held by the chauffeurs. Spotting her name, she followed him outside to a sleek, black limousine, complete with privacy glass.

The boys would love it, she thought with a small pang. Then resolutely turned her mind to what was ahead of her.

Soon she'd be seeing Michael.

Her pulse skipped a beat as the chauffeur opened the back door. Smiling her thanks, she stepped in. And yelped as an arm snaked out to wrap around her waist. Pulled into a tight embrace by a man who smelt and felt suspiciously like someone she knew, she started to laugh.

'I couldn't wait to see you,' Michael breathed huskily, gathering her back towards him and holding her close.

Wrapped in his arms, feeling his heart beating strong and steady, the lingering doubts receded. She was exactly where she wanted to be.

They kissed all the way to the hotel, acting like horny teenagers. She was barely aware of the car stopping, or how she made it to his room.

'Do you need anything?' he panted as he briefly raised his head. 'A drink? Something to eat? Shower?'

She stared into his eyes, awed by the emotion she saw in the beautiful blue depths. This gorgeous, gentle, huge talent of a man, loved her. 'I'd like all of those,' she told him softly,

running her tongue across his bottom lip. 'But first I need you.'

With a deep groan he pressed his hips against her. 'Hallebloody-lujah.'

* * *

Michael was starting to regret agreeing to go to the damn ball. Lying in bed next to Jessie, her leg wrapped over his, her naked breasts nestled against his chest, he didn't want to move. After they'd made love he'd watched her as she'd dozed, his heart feeling blissfully full.

Dropping a kiss on her tousled curls, he let out a contented sigh. 'Here's an idea. Why don't we forget the ball and stay in bed? In fact, let's do that all weekend.' *Even better, for the rest of our lives.* The thought bounced round his head and when it didn't scare the shit out of him he realised she was it. Not just the woman he loved, but the woman he wanted to marry.

Her breath teased his skin as she giggled. 'Don't tempt me.'

'I'm serious.'

'I can't tell the boys all I did in New York was stay in bed.' Her soft lips feathered kisses across his chest. 'Besides, you promised me a dance.'

'I did,' he agreed, his voice sounding hoarse, huskier. 'But if you carry on doing that we'll be sticking to my first suggestion.' With a laugh she sat up, holding the duvet up against her breasts. He tugged it from her hands. 'No blocking my view.'

She rolled her eyes but he could tell she liked that he wanted to look at her. And boy did he want to look at her. Just as he reached to touch her though, she gasped. 'What time is it?'

He glanced at the bedside clock. 'Half four.'

Her brow wrinkled as she worked out the time difference, and her face fell. 'I've missed calling home to talk to the boys. I meant to do it when I was in the car.'

‘I distracted you.’ He tried to smile but it must have looked strained because she immediately put a hand on his face.

‘And I loved the distraction, loved that you came to meet me.’ Her eyes softened, before worry clouded them again. ‘When I left home, Luke wasn’t well. I just wanted to talk to him before he went to bed. Reassure myself he was okay.’

And now he felt like an uncaring jerk for not asking about her kids before dragging her to bed. ‘Hell, Jessie, I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I’d have woken you.’

‘I’m sure he’s fine and I’m just being a worrier. I’ll phone Phil and check, if that’s okay.’

He frowned. ‘Since when did you have to ask my permission?’

She slipped from the bed, darting to the bathroom to grab a robe. ‘I know I don’t. I just ... God, this is going to sound stupid.’ Her hands grasped the belt, tightening it around her. ‘I feel like I’m always putting them first which isn’t fair on you. You have a right to expect to come first sometimes.’ Her eyes glistened as they found his. ‘You deserve to have someone who puts you first, Michael.’

His heart jolted. What was she trying to say? ‘Of course Jack and Luke come first. I wouldn’t expect, or even want, it any other way.’

She gave him a sad smile. ‘Liar.’

‘Okay, okay.’ He was starting to feel edgy now, like this was building up to something. ‘Sure, it can be a bit frustrating —’

‘Like Barcelona.’ She started rummaging through her bag, presumably for her phone.

‘Which you came out to.’

‘Yes, for a few hours.’ Finally, phone in hand, she looked at him. ‘Not for the weekend like we’d originally planned. Like you wanted me too.’

He conceded her point with a nod of his head. ‘But I understand you and the boys are a package deal and that’s fine with me. You’re a pretty amazing package.’ Thrusting aside the duvet, ignoring the fact he was stark bollock naked, he walked over to her, clasping her face, heart lurching at the sight of the tears in her eyes. ‘Where’s all this coming from?’

‘Don’t you sometimes consider how much easier it would be if you were dating a woman who didn’t have children?’

‘No,’ he replied firmly, squeezing away the tears that rested on her lids, ready to spill at any moment.

‘Never?’

He recalled how he’d briefly considered how much simpler his life would be if he’d fancied Georgina.

‘See?’ She was staring up him, and the sadness, the worry in her eyes frightened him.

‘Jessie, Jessie.’ He cradled her to his chest, her head against his heart, hoping she could somehow sense all the love he felt for her. ‘Sure, my life might be easier, but if easy is all I’d wanted, I wouldn’t have spent so many years alone.’ Gently he kissed her cheeks, her eyelids. The dimples either side of her mouth. ‘I don’t want easy. I want you. Your love of life, your natural warmth, your honesty, your luscious curves. Your sexy mouth that rarely shuts up.’ Pausing, he bent to kiss it. ‘And I want to get to know your kids, too, because they’re part of you. A very special part, from what I’ve seen so far.’

She smiled, though tears swam in her eyes. ‘They are. Thank you.’

Giving her a final kiss, he straightened up. ‘I’ll take a shower while you phone home.’

Chapter Thirty

As she got ready for the ball, Jessie wished someone with very strong hands would come and take her by the shoulders and tear her in two. Half of her could then go back home to be with her poorly son. The other half could look forward to tonight with all the anticipation, the pleasure a woman being taken on a fancy date by the man she loved, should be feeling.

Instead, as she applied the finishing touches to a look that would hopefully provide the dazzle she knew she was currently lacking, worry squirmed in her stomach. It didn't matter that Phil had said Luke's temperature had gone down with paracetamol. She hated being so far away from her sick child.

'Beautiful.' Michael was waiting as she came out of the bedroom, warm appreciation in his eyes.

She glanced down at her red dress. The same one she'd worn three times for him now. Tonight it felt alien on her. The stockings dug into her thighs, the thong felt like a cheese wire between her buttocks and her stomach was only flat when she breathed in. He was being kind. This wasn't her.

'I could say the same to you.' She wasn't just being kind. He *was* beautiful. The expensive tux hugged his athletic frame, the white shirt emphasised his tanned face, the beauty of his deep blue eyes. He looked like the superstar he was. It both excited and unnerved her.

His eyes settled on the ruby necklace, proudly sitting round her neck, and he gave her that rarest of treats. A full-blown smile.

'You brought it.'

'You gave me a Cartier necklace. Of course I'm going to wear it every chance I get. Do I look crazy?'

He ran a finger down her cheek, her throat, towards her cleavage, making her shiver. 'You look incredible.'

Her heart did a crazy dance at his flattering words. At the unmistakable desire in his eyes. ‘If I do, it’s because of the necklace.’

He smiled. ‘I predict you’ll look just as incredible when I take it off you in a few hours.’ She watched as he planted a gentle kiss where the ruby nestled in the V of her breasts.

Finally he raised his eyes to hers. ‘Georgina and Robert are waiting for us. Are you ready?’

‘As I’ll ever be.’

It was meant to be a light, throwaway line but the apprehension she was feeling must have registered with him because he didn’t move. Just gazed at her, concern etched across his face. ‘We don’t have to go. I know you’re worried about Luke. We can stay here and worry together if you prefer.’

She managed a weak smile. ‘No, I’m fine, let’s go. I’m sure champagne and dancing will take my mind off things, and I’ve got my phone.’

‘Okay, then.’ He held out his arm and as she slotted hers through it, he winked. ‘You shall go to the ball.’

Sadly it wasn’t long before Jessie began to feel like Cinderella. In fact all it took was to step outside Michael’s suite to where Georgina and Robert were waiting.

‘I recognise that dress.’

The glint in Georgina’s eye told Jessie she knew exactly how condescending her comment was. ‘Just getting my money’s worth,’ she remarked easily, flashing the woman a false smile before turning to Robert and giving him a real one.

They made small talk as they walked towards the function room but as they stepped inside, only Jessie gaped as she took in the magnificence of the room. Classy silver drapes, glittering chandeliers and elegantly dressed tables. It was like the photographs she’d seen of a high society wedding. Only on a larger scale.

Immediately a swarm of people surrounded them; women decked out in diamonds, men in their expensive tuxedos. Gratefully Jessie fingered her necklace, hoping their eyes would focus on that and not her dress. A small fortune to her, but decidedly high street compared to the designer dresses bombarding her.

As Michael made small talk he made sure to include her; a squeeze of her hand, a lingering glance, a smile aimed purely at her.

None of it helped.

While he modestly accepted the praise lavished on him for his performance the previous evening, she could only think *I don't belong here*. Michael could be stiff, awkward, formal — she'd seen it all — but tonight he was charming and confident, rubbing easily alongside these people of similar wealth or celebrity. It wasn't him, she knew that, but equally it could never be her. She didn't sing, wasn't in television, couldn't talk money. And who the hell would be interested in tales from her village pharmacy?

'I'm just going to powder my nose,' she whispered, shaking her head when Michael moved to join her. 'I'll be fine,' she mouthed before turning and hurrying off to find the ladies.

She lingered over the routine of touching up her face, listening to the gossip of the other women as they discussed who was sleeping with who behind their husband's back. It was idle chatter, no different to that she'd heard at other parties, except these women dripped with diamonds, and their dresses cost more than Jessie's annual clothes budget. When she emerged, she glanced across to where Michael was still surrounded by eyelash fluttering women. He caught her eye and gestured for her to join him but she simply smiled, for once happier to be on the sidelines.

'Not a bad looking bloke, is he?' Robert came up to her and handed her a glass of champagne. 'But for God's sake don't tell him I said that.'

Jessie accepted the glass with a grateful smile. ‘My lips are sealed.’ Involuntarily her gaze went back to Michael.

‘Can’t sing for toffee, mind.’

She laughed, appreciating Robert’s down to earth sense of humour. ‘You’re right. I really showed him up in that final.’

Robert’s eyes followed hers and he gave her a wry smile. ‘There’s always been plenty of women keen to get their hands on him. As if he’s some sort of trophy they want to put on their mantelpiece.’

The thought made Jessie bristle. ‘There’s so much more to him than that.’

This time his smile was genuine. ‘Which is exactly the reason he’s fallen in love with you. You can see him for who he really is, aside from a pretty face, a good voice and a large bank balance.’

Robert’s words, kindly meant, only made Jessie more jittery. Michael had already told her he loved her, but hearing the same words from his best friend cemented the knowledge. Made it feel real, rather than something he’d said in the heat of the moment back in her kitchen all those weeks ago. He’d not given his heart lightly either. Jessie knew he’d been badly hurt after Paula, so to realise she now held his happiness — as well as her own — in her hands, felt like a burden too heavy to carry.

‘Jessie, is everything alright?’

With a guilty start, Jessie waved away Robert’s concern. ‘Sorry. My youngest isn’t very well. It’s hard to shake him out of my mind.’

For a while Robert said nothing, just nodded and watched as Michael continued to be the focus of attention. ‘Do you mind me asking why you came then, if you’re worried about him?’

‘I’m not ... well, not really. He’s got his dad with him so I’m sure he’ll be okay.’ The lies tripped easily off her tongue as she’d told them to herself many times since she’d left Luke sitting on the sofa.

‘I suspect you’re not telling me the truth.’ Robert looked at her questioningly. ‘I suspect you came this weekend because you didn’t want to let Michael down, though your heart is back at home.’

At that moment Michael glanced in her direction, his eyes asking a silent question. *Are you okay?*

She wanted to nod and smile. Reassure him that of course she was, but her body wouldn’t conform. Even from across the room she saw Michael’s stance stiffen. Then suddenly he was shaking hands and moving towards them. Turning women’s heads as he passed.

Robert touched her arm, his face more serious than she’d ever seen it. ‘Just one piece of advice. If you have any doubts about your relationship with Michael, any doubts at all, you owe it to him to say something. Don’t let him carry on thinking everything is working if it isn’t. He’s been skewered already by one woman who did that to him. He doesn’t deserve it to happen again.’

* * *

Michael’s heart was in his throat as he strode towards Jessie. Shit, she looked ... frozen. Numb. All the usual vitality stripped from her.

He’d bloody kill Robert if he’d said anything to upset her.

‘Everything okay?’ He gave Robert a look intended to make the guy quake in his boots but Robert shrugged and as he walked away he held up his hands in a gesture clearly intended to imply he wasn’t the cause.

Jessie blinked a few times then seemed to gather herself, smiling at him in a pretty good imitation of a woman enjoying herself. ‘Everything’s fine.’

It was a shame he knew her smile was fake. ‘Robert hasn’t said anything to upset you? Because if he has, I’ll break his arm.’

Jessie’s eyes widened in shock. ‘I didn’t take you for a violent man.’

Michael took a breath, tried to push away all his churned-up feelings. 'I'm not. But I can't bear the thought of him, or anyone else, upsetting you.'

'Oh, Michael.' She reached up to kiss him, but he saw the sadness in her eyes. It didn't help his doom-laden mood. Suddenly she broke away and gave him a brittle smile. 'You promised me a dance.'

He didn't feel like dancing. He felt like dragging her back to his suite and making her talk to him. But they were being watched, and Jessie clearly didn't want to talk so he held out his hand. 'Jessie Simmons, would you do me the honour of dancing with me?'

She gave him a mock curtsy and slipped her hand into his. It felt small, fragile. Far too cold for the temperature of the room. 'I have to warn you,' she whispered as they made their way onto the dance floor, 'I'm as bad at dancing as I am at singing.'

Playing her game of let's-pretend-everything-is-okay, he smiled. 'That's okay, because I'm nearly as good at dancing as I am at singing.'

She rolled her eyes but the playful gesture looked odd on her too-stiff face. 'Is there anything you *can't* do?'

Relationships, he thought bitterly, because surely if he could she'd be able to talk to him rather than this current charade. 'I'm a lousy cook, wasn't much good at team sports and totally flunked science,' he told her flatly.

They danced to two songs but all the while Jessie felt like a plank of wood in his arms. He stroked her back soothingly, trying to get her to relax but if anything she grew even stiffer, clinging to him as if she was terrified he was going to leave her.

'Have you had enough?' he asked finally, because he certainly had.

She nodded and he led her away from the floor, stopping briefly to tell Robert he was leaving. When they got back to the room he marched towards the minibar. 'Something tells me

you could do with a stiff drink. Whiskey? Brandy?' He grabbed a miniature for himself and poured it into a glass before taking a deep swallow.

Tears fell down her cheeks as she shook her head. 'Oh God, I'm so sorry. I've ruined the evening for you. I shouldn't have come.'

His heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. 'I don't give a stuff about the ball and I'm immensely grateful to you for coming. You have no idea how much I miss you.' Clearly his words weren't helping because she started to cry even harder. Cursing himself he wrapped his arms around her. 'Hey, shush.' Once again he stroked her back, feeling utterly useless. Wishing he had the empathy, the sensitivity needed to help her.

She looked at her watch and he knew what she was thinking. 'It's five in the morning. I don't think Phil will thank you for phoning him.' He tucked a finger under her chin, raising her watery eyes to meet his. 'He'd have phoned if there was a problem.'

'Yes, yes. You're right.' She sighed, ducking her head and playing with the buttons on his shirt. 'Do you mind if we go to bed?'

He laughed sadly. 'You never have to ask. I'll always want to go to bed with you.'

But as he gently unzipped her dress and drank in her beautiful body, he couldn't help but wonder if this was the last time he'd be doing it for a long while.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jessie was wide awake at 4 a.m., gazing down at Michael as she tried to forever imprint the nuances of his beautiful face on her memory. She had no doubt she'd see it again, staring out at her from his latest album cover, or from her television if she ever found the strength to watch. Yet it was only being this close that she could see the crinkles round his eyes. Admire the sharp angles of his cheekbones. Witness the dark bristle across a jaw that was always clean-shaven for the cameras.

He was a beautiful man, inside and out. But one she was going to have to say goodbye to for the sake of her children. And her sanity.

She'd phoned home an hour ago and Phil had answered on the second ring.

'How's Luke?' she'd asked immediately.

'Much the same as yesterday. Listless, off his food, grumpy. He still has a temperature.'

'Have you checked for a rash?' The pharmacist in her knew what the symptoms could mean, and meningitis, though rare, was one of them.

'There's no rash,' he reassured her in an exasperated voice. 'Stop getting yourself worked up.'

Easy to say when you were the one sitting next to Luke. Jessie had felt so helpless on the other side of the Atlantic. A feeling that had only amplified when she'd asked to speak to Luke himself.

'When are you coming home, Mum?' he'd asked in a plaintive voice that had wrenched a quiet sob from her. 'I don't feel good and I want you to make it better.'

Her heart had shattered into a thousand pieces. 'I'm coming home today, Luke,' she found herself saying. 'Mum's coming home.'

Beside her Michael stirred, clearly sensing she was awake.

‘Hey, what is it?’ Immediately he shot up. ‘Have you heard from home?’

‘I phoned a while back.’ A look of alarm crossed his face and she shook her head. ‘Luke’s okay. No better, but no worse than yesterday.’ She touched a hand to his face. ‘But I have to go home, Michael. I can’t be here while he’s not well. I can’t.’

His lids lowered, masking his thoughts, and he rubbed at his chin, making a rasping noise as his hand passed over the dark shadow. ‘I understand.’ His eyes were so full of sadness it made her ache. ‘I’ll phone the airport while you dress and pack.’

‘I already checked. The first flight is at six. I’m booked on it. A taxi is coming in half an hour.’

His expression darkened. ‘You’re not paying for it.’ Before she could tell him she didn’t care, she wasn’t going to argue about something as stupid as money, he’d picked up the phone and managed to re-book her ticket with his card.

He was quiet as she packed up her things and she wondered if he sensed how she was feeling, or if he was just too scared to say the wrong thing to her.

‘When will I see you again?’ he asked finally as they sat together on the sofa, waiting.

A ball of emotion jammed into the back of her throat. She had to end it, and now, while she could do it face to face, but the words just wouldn’t come out. She could only shake her head.

‘I guess now isn’t the time to discuss it.’ He took hold of her hand and brought the palm to his lips. ‘I’ll call you when you’re back and we can check the diaries.’

Her heart felt crushed, her chest so tight she could barely breathe. ‘I can’t do this any more, Michael,’ she said on a sob. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t see you again.’

She heard his breath hitch, saw his head snap back as if she’d slapped him round the face. ‘No.’ The sound seemed to be prised from him. ‘I won’t let you end this.’

‘I’ve got to.’ Robert’s words from last night flew round her head. *Don’t let him carry on thinking everything is okay when it isn’t.* ‘We can’t carry on like this. It’s not fair on you, not fair on the boys.’

Michael’s jaw muscle jumped and she could see he was fighting for control. Fighting for calm. ‘You’re saying this because you’re worried about being away from Luke while he’s ill. I understand. When you get home and see he’s okay, you’ll think differently.’

Oh God. She wanted him to shout at her. To push her out. Not try and reason with her. ‘I won’t.’ She brought her hand to his face, wanting to soothe, to caress, but he jerked away from her. With a sigh she stood up, fighting back her tears. ‘I always knew our relationship had a time stamp on it. You need a woman who can drop everything and follow you round the world. I need to give my sons a stable home life. I want to be there for them whenever they need me.’

‘Don’t tell me what I need.’ He cursed softly as he, too, got to his feet. ‘You think this is the first time I’ve toured alone? You think I need a nursemaid? I have Robert for that.’ He stalked over to the window, staring out at the New York skyline. ‘What I need is someone who’ll make me laugh. Bring some blasted joy into my life.’ Finally he turned back to face her. ‘I understand you don’t want to leave the boys again but the tour ends in four months. At least wait until then before making a decision. Give me a chance to prove we can make this work when we’re both in the same country.’

She wanted to agree, wanted so much to simply nod her head and leave him thinking there was still a chance for them. But keeping him hanging wasn’t fair. ‘You deserve a woman who can always put you first, Michael. I can’t do that.’

‘Again, stop telling me what I need, what I deserve.’ A trace of anger threaded through his voice. ‘What I need, though I doubt I deserve, is you.’

She felt as if her heart was breaking all over again. First the call with Luke, now the anguish of hurting the man she loved. All her life she’d tried to uphold the values her parents

had drilled into her. Treat others as you'd like to be treated. Be kind.

Right now, she felt downright cruel.

But in the long run this was the right thing to do. Letting their relationship limp on, their feelings get deeper and deeper, wasn't going to help either of them. 'How exactly do you think this is going to work when we are in the same country? You live in London, nearly two hours away from us. I spend my Saturdays ferrying my kids to football matches and friends' houses. I wear jeans too much and have my pjs on by nine o'clock. My idea of a night out is a quick drink with the other parents after a match and picking fish and chips up on the way home. I can't remember the last time I went to the theatre. To a party.'

'I don't go to parties.' His eyes stared accusingly at her from across the room. 'You know me better than that.'

'I do know you. You like expensive wine, eating in discreet, classy restaurants. Wearing tailored clothes. You enjoy your solitude. Enjoy lazing in bed making love on your days off.' She let out a brittle laugh. 'Do you know what time ten-year-old boys wake up at the weekends?'

'You're acting like I've never met your children,' he replied tightly. 'I spent a weekend with them. I thought we had a good time.'

It was like he was hacking away at her, every word he spoke a fresh wound. 'We did have a good time, a special time the boys and I will remember forever. But it wasn't real life.'

* * *

It had felt real enough to him. Michael thought he'd been hurt by Paula. He was wrong. His fiancée telling him she'd found someone else was like a pinprick compared to the way Jessie was ripping open his heart. He'd sensed she was building up to suggesting they cool it while he was still touring but by God, call him naïve, arrogant, but he hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected such finality.

‘I love you,’ he told her, feeling like a drowning man desperately trying to grip at the rocks as the waves battered him. ‘I thought you were starting to love me. Everything else is superficial, irrelevant.’

‘My sons aren’t irrelevant.’

He let out a frustrated hiss. ‘You know what I mean. All this talk of how different we are. It’s a smokescreen.’

Her eyes blazed. If he hadn’t felt so wretched he’d have appreciated how good she looked all fired up. ‘Do you think I want this? That I’m happy admitting we don’t have a future?’

His jaw was clenched so tight it ached. ‘I think you’re using your sons, your ridiculous idea that because I have money I can’t do ordinary things, as an excuse. Just like you claim to know me, I know you, Jessie. You’re a strong, determined woman. If you loved me, you wouldn’t let anything come between us. You’d fight for us.’ Like she fought for her children, he thought hollowly.

‘That’s not fair—’ she began, but he cut her off, his pain too raw to listen to her.

‘These last few months have just been a bit of fun for you, haven’t they? A few dates with the celebrity you had a crush on.’ The realisation tore through him, making him feel like a prize idiot. ‘I bet you and Annabel had a field day gossiping about it all.’

She jerked back, as if he’d struck her. ‘I left my children to see you,’ she told him in a voice that was deadly quiet. ‘And I did it willingly because I cared so much for you.’

Cared. Not loved. She’d never felt that. ‘Last chance,’ he said brutally, desperately. ‘I love you, but if you say you want to end it I’ll respect that. I won’t beg or plead. I’ll just drop out of your life.’

‘It’s not what I want. It’s what I think is best, for both of us.’

Hearing the anguish in her voice he instinctively took a few steps towards her, wanting to soothe, to take away some of her pain. But she no longer wanted that from him.

‘Don’t kid yourself you’re doing me any favours,’ he told her bitingly, halting a few feet away from her. It was hard not to lash out. Even harder to look at her, to have her in his room, when all he wanted to do was curl up into a ball and lick his gaping wounds.

Her eyes dropped to the case she’d put by the door. ‘The taxi is due any minute. I’ll wait for it in the lobby.’

Numbly he nodded. ‘I hope you’ll excuse me if I don’t see you off.’ Christ, the thought of watching her disappear in the back of a cab. And then calmly walking back to his room.

At least here he could wallow in his misery away from prying eyes.

She swallowed several times, her slender throat moving up and down as tears ran down her face.

‘Goodbye, Michael.’ She reached up to kiss him, but he reared back, terrified if she touched him he’d get down on his knees and do what he’d promised he wouldn’t. Beg.

Then he watched, his chest a gaping hole, as the woman he loved walked out of his life.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Four months later

Michael had been true to his word. The only contact she'd had from him had come via Robert. He'd phoned the day after she'd arrived home, checking on Luke's health, which had taken a magical turn for the better when she'd walked in through the door. Robert had been curt but Jessie had understood. She'd done the one thing he'd asked her not to do. She'd hurt Michael.

A tiny part of her had felt angry she'd been duped by Luke into coming home.

The rest of her was just grateful to see him back to his usual self. Luke being sick hadn't been the reason she'd ended things with Michael. It had simply highlighted how impossible their situation had become.

They should have left it as a brief, but beautiful affair, she thought sadly. Instead they'd been greedy, trying to make it into something more, when the odds were so clearly stacked against them.

And, she was doing fine. Four months after saying goodbye in New York she hardly ever thought of Michael.

Fiercely she wiped at the tears creeping down her face.

'You're thinking about him again, aren't you?'

Luke's eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror as he sat with Jack in the back of the car. They were on their way to see Annabel, as they did most Fridays after school.

Except when she'd been going to Rome. Or Paris. Or New York.

'I think about Michael now and again, yes.'

'And it makes you sad.'

She watched Jack elbow Luke. 'Because she misses him, you cretin,' he hissed.

Pulling up outside Annabel's, she found herself smiling through her heartache. 'No need to call your brother names, but you're right, Jack. I do miss Michael. What I don't miss is leaving you and Luke.'

'It was Luke who was the baby. I didn't mind. I'd rather you were happy.'

The quiet words tore at her heart. 'Oh, my darling, I am happy. Don't worry about me.'

'I wasn't a baby. I was ill.' Luke glowered at his brother but then he frowned, confusion clear on his face. 'Was it my fault? Are you and Michael not friends because of me?'

As his voice started to wobble Jessie turned in her seat, grabbing at his arm. 'Of course not. It's nobody's fault. Sometimes relationships don't work out. Like your dad and me.'

'But we still see dad. Will we see Michael again?'

She felt a stab of pain and her hand flew to where it hurt, right above her heart. 'I don't think so.'

Luke let out a dramatic sigh. 'Shame. I liked him.'

Jack snorted. 'You liked his PlayStation in Paris.'

'So, you liked his piano.'

They grinned at each other. 'Paris was awesome,' they chanted together.

Jessie cried even harder.

* * *

The boys scurried off upstairs to play with Annabel's sons while Jessie followed Annabel into the kitchen. 'You look well,' she remarked as Annabel placed two mugs, a teapot and a towering plate of biscuits in front of her. She was horrified by the quick pang of jealousy she felt. It wasn't because her friend was dating Phil, she realised, but because she looked so happy. 'You're glowing, for goodness' sake. Dating my ex obviously agrees with you. Makes me realise how miserable you must have been those last few months with Edward.'

Annabel picked up a biscuit and took a delicate bite out of the corner. 'You, on the other hand, look bloody awful.'

'Thanks.' She didn't need anyone telling her that. She'd seen her face in the bathroom mirror enough times over the last few months.

'I still don't understand why you ended things with Michael,' Annabel continued, ignoring the daggers Jessie was metaphorically slinging in her direction. 'He was the best thing to happen to you since you had the boys.'

'We've been through this.'

'Humour me.' Annabel smirked. 'You're only tetchy because you know I'm right. The man was in love with you, for crying out loud.'

'He'll get over me soon enough.' She almost choked over the words, aware that Georgina was probably helping him do exactly that.

'And that's what you want, is it? Michael to date someone else while you settle back into spinster mode.'

Stung, Jessie blurted. 'I don't intend staying single. John's asked me out and I've accepted.'

She had the satisfaction of seeing Annabel totally wrong-footed. 'John?' her friend gaped. 'The same John you repeatedly told me you didn't fancy?'

Jessie squirmed on her seat. 'John's a good man whom I happen to like. I'm making him dinner on Sunday.'

'Oh? Phil didn't say he was looking after the boys.'

'He's not. The boys know John. They can stay at home. It seemed easier that way than bothering you or Phil.' It was a sensible plan, she told herself. No need to sound so defensive.

Annabel spluttered with laughter. 'You're kidding me, right? It's your first date and you've got the kids as chaperones? Tell me, would you have done the same with Michael on a first date?'

Heat pooled between her thighs as Jessie remembered her first date with Michael. How they hadn't even made it to the restaurant on time because they'd been too intent on tearing each other's clothes off.

Annabel held up her hand. 'You don't have to reply. Your tomato red face is doing it for you.'

'Some relationships take longer,' she replied diffidently. 'I'm sure the sparks will flare as we spend more time together.'

'Oh, please.' Annabel rolled her eyes. 'Stop trying to kid yourself.'

'I'm not.' Stung, Jessie thumped her mug onto the table. 'I'm trying to be sensible. I'm trying to be a grown-up, not a girl experiencing her first crush. If you think Michael and I could ever have made it as a couple, you're living in more of a fantasy world than I was.'

'You didn't give it a chance,' Annabel interrupted. 'You gave up on him, on yourself, before he'd even finished his tour. You'll never know if it could have worked with you both in the same country.'

'I do know. We'd have tried to catch each other between his recording commitments, media events, live performances and my life here. Work, school, football, scouts ... whatever else the boys will want to do. Until the next tour came round.' Her voice began to break as she looked her friend directly in the eye. 'I'm a mum with two kids who need me. And I need to be with them. Michael was wonderful and I miss him like you wouldn't believe, but the boys deserve a normal life with a mother who's always there for them. And Michael deserves more than I can give him.'

Annabel grasped Jessie's hands. 'What Michael deserves is someone who loves him.' She smiled softly. 'And what about what you deserve?'

'I was happy before I met Michael. I'll be happy again.'

'You weren't happy, Jessie. Why do you think you spent so many hours watching repeats of concerts by a certain

Michael Tennant? Because you were looking for love. And I don't mean a lukewarm feeling, liking someone you believe is right for you because he lives nearby, has the same interests, mixes with your friends.' She gave her a pointed look. 'Knows your sons. I mean the grand passion you've always banged on to me about.'

'I was naïve.'

'You were a dreamer. After you divorced Phil you told me you wanted a man who made your heart sing. Your blood fizz.'

'I'd never have said that. It's not anatomically possible.'

Annabel snorted. 'From what you described of sex with Michael—'

Jessie held up her hand. 'Stop.'

'For the sake of any young ears who may be listening, I will, but I'm not letting you off the hook. You've talked about not being able to fit Michael in around what the boys need, but what about your needs, Jessie? I know you don't want to think about it, but Jack and Luke will grow up, move away and start their own lives. You need to start thinking about what you want from life. Don't give up your chance of future happiness because the present seems too difficult. Fight for yourself, as well as your kids. I think you'll find your boys will be right alongside you.'

Feeling totally overcome, Jessie squeezed Annabel's hands. 'Thank you.'

'Does that mean you're going to think about what I said?'

Sadness filled her and she shook her head, knowing it was too late to change her mind even if she wanted to. It had been four months. Michael had probably moved on. It was time she did the same. 'I know you mean well but I've made my decision. I'm going to get on with my life now, no looking back.' Unsteadily she rose from the table. 'It's time we left you to get on with your evening.' Opening the door, she yelled up the stairs for Jack and Luke to come down. 'When are you moving?'

‘The removal men come next week. I can’t wait to get away from here and into a new place, make a fresh start.’

‘With Phil?’

Annabel smiled. ‘Not yet. With two failed marriages behind us neither of us want to rush into living with each other. Life is good as it is.’

Jessie went to hug her. ‘I’m so pleased for you. Phil’s a really good guy. Well trained,’ she added with a wink.

‘I hope you find happiness too, Jessie. I hate to see you down like this.’

‘Don’t worry about me. I’ll bounce back.’

* * *

Michael stared down at the letter in his hand, his pulse racing. Good idea, or bad idea?

‘It won’t jump into the letterbox by itself.’ Robert snatched it from him and stepped towards the post box.

‘Wait.’

Exasperation flashed across Robert’s face. ‘Why?’

‘I’m not sure it’s a good idea.’

‘It’s a bloody brilliant idea.’ Robert grinned at him. ‘Probably because it’s my idea.’

‘Not totally true.’

‘Okay, okay, I admit you helped refine it.’

‘Refine it? You had me arriving on her doorstep in a black limo with a rose between my teeth.’

Robert had the grace to blush. ‘Yeah, well, Georgina said she liked that idea.’

‘Georgina says a lot of things just to shut you up,’ Michael muttered, his eyes still focussed on the letter his friend held.

The letter that could possibly determine his future.

‘Am I posting it or not?’

‘You’re waiting, like I said.’

‘What for, divine intervention? Stop being a coward. Life’s about taking chances, putting yourself out there. You too could be as happy as me.’

‘Christ, you’re a smug git,’ Michael retorted disgustedly.

‘Ah but I’m a happy smug git. And did I mention a soon-to-be-father?’

‘Only seventy-three times so far, but the day’s still young.’

‘It won’t be if we stay hovering by this post box much longer.’ Robert glanced at his watch. ‘Train leaves in five minutes. Rehearsal starts in two hours. Make a damn decision.’

‘Post it.’ His heart thumped as Robert jammed the letter home.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Saturday morning and Jessie was in the back garden knocking mud off football boots. Stupid really because in an hour's time they'd be muddy again. The football season had started and Hazelford F.C. was gunning for another trophy. Their cup success at regional level hadn't continued into the nationals, but the team were undaunted. There was a shiny silver cup in the clubhouse trophy cabinet and they were determined to add to it.

Jack shouted through the window, holding out a plain white envelope. 'Post for you. And Annabel's waiting outside for us. She said to tell you to move your arse.'

'Well you could come and clean ...' She trailed off as she realised she'd lost her audience.

Kids.

Giving the boots a final bash against the wall she stepped back inside and picked up the envelope.

As she tore it open and read the contents, her heart did a flip and she gasped, sagging into the nearest chair.

'What is it?' Jack looked at her with worried eyes.

Jessie tried to talk, but no words came out. She felt numb with the shock of seeing his writing, his name, in a note addressed to her. Clearing her throat, she tried again. 'It's a note from Michael, sending us some tickets for the first of his UK shows. Tonight.' She knew her voice was shaking; wondered if Jack could see how hard her heart was thumping.

'Sick. Can we go?' His brown eyes pleaded with her.

'I'm not sure,' Jessie managed. 'I'll have to think about it. I'm just popping upstairs. Tell Annabel I won't be a minute.'

Trying to hold her emotions in check until she was alone, she dragged herself up the stairs and collapsed onto her bed. Clutching the envelope to her chest she closed her eyes and gave in to the sobs ripping through her body.

Dimly she heard a knock on the door. 'Jessie, Jack says you've had a note from Michael?'

Without waiting for an answer, Annabel strode in.

Wordlessly Jessie handed her the note, written in black ink on letterheaded paper. It was elegant, classy, a touch old-fashioned. Just like the sender.

'Dear Jessie. Please find enclosed three tickets for Saturday's performance. I hope you, Jack and Luke will be able to attend. I've booked a car for you at 4.00 p.m. Best wishes, Michael.'

'If he's booked a car, he seems fairly certain you're going to go,' Annabel remarked.

'He can think what he likes, I'm not going,' Jessie muttered into the pillow.

'But why? It's been over four months since you last saw him and yet he's sending you tickets. Doesn't that tell you he's still thinking of you?'

Jessie felt wretched. 'I wish he wasn't. I wish he'd just leave me alone.'

Annabel sat down on the bed next to her. 'I don't understand. Look at you. Anyone can see you still love him. Why won't you go and see him? He's broken the ice, made the first move. He's made it easy for you.'

'Don't you see, that just makes it worse. All the reasons why I stopped seeing him are still there. He's still a celebrity; he still performs across the globe. Nothing's changed.'

'If you love him, and he loves you, everything else can be solved.'

Jessie loved her friend but right now she didn't want her here, meddling in things she didn't understand. 'Trust me, Annabel, this can't be solved. For crying out loud, his idea of a quiet evening is to go to an expensive restaurant. Mine is to have beans on toast in front of the television.'

'I'm sure he enjoys beans on toast too.' Jessie saw Annabel's lips start to twitch, but when she resolutely refused

to laugh, Annabel sighed. ‘All I’m saying is think about it. You don’t have to decide until the last minute.’

‘He didn’t exactly give us much warning.’

‘No. Probably assumed you spend your Saturday evenings having beans on toast in front of the telly.’

Jessie threw a pillow at her. ‘Seriously, Annabel, I really don’t think I can do this. If I see him again, all the progress I’ve made over the last four months will be shot to pieces.’

‘Progress?’

‘Putting him behind me, moving on.’

‘You call making John a meal at your house tomorrow night progress?’

Jessie gritted her teeth. ‘You know sometimes I really don’t like you very much, Annabel Smythe.’

Her friend smiled sweetly. ‘Sometimes the truth is hard to hear. And if you can’t go for yourself, what about Jack and Luke? The tickets are for them too. The best seats in the house, a trip in a chauffeur-driven limo. If you don’t go, you’ll be depriving your sons of one heck of a night out.’

‘That’s a low blow.’

‘I never said I played fair.’

Jessie glanced down at the note again. ‘You know it’s not very personal. He’s probably just sent them for old times’ sake. A kind gesture towards someone he won a TV competition with.’

Annabel rose to her feet. ‘You’ll never know if you don’t go, will you?’

* * *

Michael paced up and down in his dressing room. Performing at the London Palladium wasn’t new to him so it wasn’t that which had his heart hammering, his stomach knotting. It was what he’d find when looked over to seats A1, A2 and A3.

There was a light knock on the door and Georgina popped her head round. 'Is it okay for me to come in?'

He stopped pacing and beckoned her in. Heart in his mouth, he asked the question he knew she'd come to answer. 'Did the chauffeur pick anyone up?'

'Yes.' Her smile held both sympathy and understanding. 'Two boys and a woman. They should be here any minute.'

Relief flooded through him. Finding his legs slightly shaky he went to sit down on the small leather sofa. 'Thank you.'

She nodded, eyes looking down at the floor before meeting his again. 'She's a very lucky woman.'

Oh crap. He wanted to run out of the room but he made himself stay where he was. Hold her gaze. Confront the issue. 'Thank you, though it's not her who's the lucky one, it's me. Jessie is one of a kind. If I have my way I'm never letting her out of my life again.'

'Then I hope it works out for you.' Walking towards him, she handed him an envelope. 'That's my letter of resignation. I've found myself another job, starting in two weeks.'

Shocked, he took the envelope from her. 'I'm sorry to hear that, truly I am. You've been ...' He searched for the right words. 'You've been a tremendous help these last few months. I'm not sure how we'll manage without you.' Deliberately he used we, not I. 'Is there anything I can say to persuade you to stay?'

'You could try inviting me back to your place tonight.' An uncomfortable flush crept up his neck and she laughed. 'Don't worry, I'm only kidding. I know by now where your heart lies.'

As he rose to his feet she took three paces towards him. He went hot and cold as he saw what she was intending to do, turning his face deliberately so her mouth would find his cheek, not his lips. But she simply smiled, whispering, 'Oh no you don't. Let me have this, at least.' And then her mouth was on his and she kissed him.

It was light, platonic almost, and he exhaled in relief as she drew away. ‘See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?’

Patting his cheek, she turned and walked out of the room. Her hips swaying beneath her short, tight skirt. When she shut the door, he collapsed onto the sofa, a strange mixture of relief and regret rushing through him. Regret, because he’d never find anyone else so efficient. Relief, because ever since that night she’d so blatantly come on to him, he’d felt even more uncomfortable around her.

His next PA was going to be male, or married and over fifty.

His door opened again and for a split second he worried it was Georgina again, back to kiss him properly this time.

‘You okay in here?’ Robert barged in and took one look at Michael’s flushed face. ‘What the blazes are you looking so guilty about?’

‘I’m not.’ Going to the mini fridge he grasped a bottle of water. ‘Since when was a star’s dressing room open house half an hour before a performance?’

Robert frowned, looking round the room. ‘Nope, don’t see a star anywhere.’

‘Funny boy.’ When he glanced back at Robert though, his expression was no longer mischievous. It was sombre. ‘What’s wrong?’

Robert went to sit on the chair in front of the mirror and pointed to the sofa. ‘Sit down.’

Fear wrapped round his insides and he began to panic. ‘Please God, don’t tell me there’s been an accident.’

‘No.’ Robert’s reply was sharp. ‘Nothing like that. I just wanted to warn you that Jessie didn’t come.’

Shocked, he ran a hand through hair the make-up artist had carefully styled. ‘But Georgina said the chauffeur had picked them all up.’

‘She said he’d picked up two boys and a woman. I’ve just been to welcome them and the woman isn’t Jessie. She said

her name was Annabel.'

Another wave of fear trickled through him. 'Is Jessie sick?'

Robert shook his head. 'That's what I asked, but no.'

Which left only one possible reason why she wasn't here. 'She didn't want to come.'

'We don't know that. She might have had another commitment.'

Michael laughed bitterly, his chest feeling hollow, as if someone had just snatched out his heart. 'Of course, because we know how much she loves leaving her sons.'

'She left them for you once. Don't make assumptions.'

'Don't assume she didn't want to see me? Don't assume she's seeing someone else?' Michael jerked to his feet. 'Hard to think of any other scenario here.'

Robert let out a deep sigh. 'We'll talk to them after the show. For now, get your head in the game. There are over two thousand people out there expecting you to deliver a performance worthy of the price of their ticket. Don't let them down.'

He wouldn't, Michael thought as he sucked in a deep breath and began his vocal exercises. He knew all about being let down and it bloody hurt.

* * *

Michael sat with his three guests in a nearby restaurant. He hoped Annabel didn't think he was ignoring her, but he found it too hard to look at her and not think who should have been sitting there instead. He hadn't had the balls to ask her outright why Jessie hadn't turned up, but he'd established she wasn't ill, so it left only one glaring reason.

Determinedly he focussed on Luke and Jack. 'How is the football season going?'

'We're not the top and we're not the one after that.' Luke screwed up his face, and Michael felt his heart stir. Jessie

hadn't just ended his hopes of marriage. She'd snatched away any dreams of a family, too. 'We're the next one.'

Jack gave Michael a look one adult might give to another. A sort of amused exasperation. 'We're third but we haven't played as many games as the first and second teams.'

The waiter arrived with the food he'd ordered — it was too refined a place for hamburgers but he'd ordered what he thought they might like; garlic bread, calamari and a huge side order of chips.

'Are those all for us?' Luke's eyes boggled at the chips. 'We already had tea.'

'You don't have to eat them if you don't want.'

Luke grinned and reached for the bowl. 'Don't tell Mum.'

And just like that, the pain was back again. Annabel caught his eye, her expression full of sympathy. 'I won't if you don't.'

'So.' He cleared his throat, desperately reaching for a topic that wouldn't require a mention of the lady who's lack of presence they had to all feel, though none as keenly as he. Because they all got to see her again. 'Are you still having piano lessons, Jack?'

Jack nodded as he reached for a chip. 'Been practising a bit, since Paris.'

'You have?'

'Yeah. I want to play as good ... err ... as well as you.'

A band tightened across Michael's chest. To think he'd inspired this boy to want to play, to practise. Christ. 'That's great. Really great.' His voice sounded choked, and Annabel gave him another sympathetic glance. He wanted to add that he hoped to hear him some time, but that would never happen now. The thought gutted him. 'Maybe I can send you some music, the things I used to play when I was your age. If your mum won't mind.'

'I'm sure she won't.'

He nodded at Annabel, aware if she looked at him with any more kindness, he was going to breakdown. *Talk to the boys*. Funny how he'd had so many insecurities about doing just that, yet now it was the only thing keeping him going. 'Have you tried the calamari, Luke?'

Luke stared at the battered ring he held out. 'What is it?'

'Deep fried squid.'

'What's a squid?'

Michael smiled, anticipating Luke's reaction. 'It's a bit like an octopus.'

His jaw dropped open. 'OMG, gimme that. I want to tell school I went to London in a limo and ate an octopus.'

They all laughed, and Michael felt another clutch at his heart.

* * *

Jessie leapt off the sofa when she heard the limo pulling into the drive. She opened the door to a chorus of excited chatter.

'We had a meal in a posh restaurant and I ate a whole octopus.'

'The limo was awesome. We felt like real celebrities getting out of it at The Palladium.'

'Someone asked us for our autographs 'cos they thought we were famous.'

Jessie put her hands over her ears. 'One at a time, please. You're giving me a headache.'

Annabel, who'd yet to speak which was unusual for her, gave her a knowing smile. 'Hurts, doesn't it, hearing what you missed out on.'

She refused to acknowledge the jibe, though she had to concede its accuracy. She felt like an outsider, her nose pressed against the window watching, aching to join in.

To make it worse, she'd been the one who'd slammed the door shut, locking herself out.

She listened to Jack and Luke's chatter as they got ready for bed.

'You should have come, Mum,' Luke said finally as she kissed them goodnight.

'I told you, Annabel hasn't been to one of Michael's concerts. I thought she'd enjoy it.'

'But he sent the tickets to you.'

Luke's eyes accused her, making Jessie feel even more awful. 'I know.' What could she tell him? Going would have been too painful? Opened wounds she'd hoped were starting to heal.

'We liked it when he was your boyfriend.'

'You did?' Jessie looked first at Luke, then at Jack. 'But you hated me going away.'

Jack looked pointedly at Luke who grinned sheepishly. 'Yeah, I know. But when we all went together, like Paris, it was awesome.' A smile lit his face. 'Best day of my life.'

Jessie laughed softly, emotion clawing at her. 'I agree,' she whispered, kissing the top of his head.

'Course we don't know why he likes you and not a babe like Taylor Swift,' Jack added, his expression deadpan.

Until they both started giggling.

Swatting them playfully she walked back downstairs to where Annabel was waiting for her in the kitchen. A stern expression on her face.

Jessie sighed. 'You're mad at me, aren't you?' she asked as she slipped onto the chair opposite her.

Annabel shook her head. 'I've been picked up in a limo, watched an incredible performance from the best seats in the house. Taken out to an expensive restaurant for what Michael referred to as supper but which included a bowl of fries so huge the boys' eyes were out on stalks.' Her expression turned

soft for a moment. 'I guess he wanted an excuse to chat to them. Anyway, it's hard to be mad at you after you've given me an evening like that.'

'He really made a fuss, didn't he?' And why did the thought make her ache?

'He did.' Annabel gave her a considering look. 'You know we weren't expecting to see him afterwards. The fact that he bothered to take us out when he must have been exhausted and you weren't even there, tells me it isn't just you he's missing. He has a soft spot for Luke and Jack, too.'

And they for him. 'Did he ...' she faltered, scared of hearing the reply. 'Did he ask after me?'

Annabel scoffed. 'Of course. He asked if you were keeping well, I guess hoping I'd say you were ill to explain your non-appearance.'

'But you didn't give that excuse,' Jessie said flatly.

'I didn't know what to say. Jack and Luke were there so I couldn't lie and say you were ill in case they ratted on me. I told him you were fine, though you didn't feel up to coming out tonight, which was sort of the truth. Then there was this awkward pause.'

Guilt lay heavy on her shoulders. Guilt and shame that only added to the misery she was feeling. 'I shouldn't have brought you into this.'

'I told you, I've had a fabulous evening. It's you I'm worried about.' Jessie felt the weight of Annabel's scrutiny. 'How long have you been crying tonight?'

'Oh, you know, not much. Just when I watched you go, and when I thought about what I was missing out on.' She took in a shuddery breath and tried to smile. 'So I guess most of the evening.'

Annabel reached out across the table to clutch her hand. 'It's not too late for you to reconsider.'

'What am I supposed to do, phone him up and say oops, I made a mistake, please can we start again?'

‘Why not?’

‘Because for all I know he only invited us to be kind.’ She hesitated. ‘Was Georgina there?’

‘The super bitch PA?’ Jessie nodded. ‘Not that I could see. It was just me, Michael and the boys.’

Jessie unfolded a tissue and blew her nose. ‘No turning back has always been my motto. I intend to keep to it.’

‘No regrets has always been mine,’ Annabel replied, rising to her feet and squeezing her arm. ‘It might be more suitable in this case.’

Annabel let herself quietly out of the house, leaving Jessie with a world of thoughts buzzing round her head.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Michael couldn't believe he was doing this. Who was it said love makes fools of us all? William Shakespeare? Or was it William Thackeray? Well neither of them was quite right. It might have made fools of most people, but it clearly made a complete idiot of him. There was no other explanation for why he was parked up outside Jessie's house.

Her message to him last night couldn't have been plainer. She didn't want to see him.

Why couldn't he just accept that and move on? Why had he decided it was a good idea to turn up unannounced at her house on a Sunday evening and have her tell him to his face instead? Plunge the knife in even deeper.

Gripping the steering wheel, he drew in a deep breath. He needed closure. Needed to know absolutely, once and for all, if there was any hope for them now his tour was coming to an end.

Bracing himself he climbed out of the car and walked up the gravel drive to her house. He could see her touches all around him. The messy but colourful flowerbed, the bright red door. The wooden sign stuffed haphazardly into a pot by the front door. *Warning, footballers live here. Beware flying balls.*

Standing on the step he tried to take another deep breath but his chest was too tight, his throat too constricted. His fingers shook as he pressed the doorbell.

It seemed like an eternity before she opened it.

As she stared at him in shock his eyes drunk her in; the jeans that hugged her glorious body, the soft pink cashmere jumper. He felt his heart opening, filling.

'Michael.' The shock was starting to recede from her face, confusion taking its place.

There were so many phrases he'd rehearsed. *I love you. I miss you. Please give me another chance.* But in that moment he felt so hurt, so angry, the words died on his tongue and

instead he barked. 'Why didn't you come to the show last night?'

He watched her flinch, taking a step back, and he cursed himself. They hadn't spoken for four months, and that was all he could come up with. Before she could say anything, he held up his hand. 'Sorry, that was rude.'

'No.' She brought a hand to her mouth and he saw that he wasn't the only one whose hands were trembling. 'It's a fair question. Truthfully, I ...' she hesitated, sucked in a breath. 'I couldn't bear to see you again.'

The heart that had started to open, shrivelled inside his chest and he turned, desperate to get away. What the hell had he expected, anyway?

But she reached out and gripped his arm. 'Wait.' He could feel the warmth of her hand through his jacket and it made his own blood heat. Stupid, instinctive reaction. His body didn't understand what his mind now knew for certain. There was no hope for them.

He refused to turn around, refused to look at her. 'I don't want the *it's not you, it's me* speech.'

She started to laugh but there was no humour to it, no joy. 'It's not you or me, Michael. It's beyond either of us. It's circumstance. The different way we live our lives. I'm trying to move on.'

'Is everything all right?'

Michael recoiled, lurching back as if he'd been shot as he saw John, flaming super coach, super boss, all round good egg John, step up behind Jessie. And put a protective arm around her shoulders.

Pain like he'd never experienced ripped through him and he staggered back down the drive towards his car. As he thrust open the door he glanced back at her. She looked horrified, anguished but he was hurting too much to feel any sympathy. This was her decision. 'Have a good life, Jessie.'

Tears blinded his eyes as he tore off down the road.

Going round to see her? Stupid fucking decision.

By the time he reached his apartment his anger had fizzled out, leaving only a gut-wrenching sadness he knew nothing would soothe. Not the new kitchen and décor the insurance company had paid for. Not the view of Tower Bridge he looked out at, nor the beauty of the London skyline at night. Not the huge tumbler of whiskey he was about to down, though enough of it would at least numb it for a while.

His phone buzzed and he glanced down at the call ID, the tiny spark of hope dying as he saw Robert's name.

He answered with two flatly spoken words. 'It's over.'

'What? Even after you told her your decision?'

'I didn't get a chance to tell her anything.' His mind flashed up the image of John with his arm around her. 'Wouldn't have made a difference anyway. She's moved on.' He heard Robert's deep breathing. No doubt the guy was trying to find the words to console him. 'Stop thinking what to say to me. There aren't enough words in the dictionary to help right now.'

'The announcement's gone to the press. Do you want me to retract it?'

'No.' His answer was sharp, instinctive. 'Leave it. I can't see me wanting to perform again anytime soon.'

'Do you want me to come over?'

Michael shook his head. 'You stay at home with your wife, daddy-to-be. I'll be fine.'

He ended the call and swallowed half the tumbler, relishing the burn. He would be fine, he told himself. Maybe not for a while, but he would be fine. He'd got over Paula, he'd get over Jessie.

But he'd never risk his heart again.

* * *

As she'd watched Michael's car tear off down the road, Jessie had sobbed so hard John hadn't known what to do with

her. He'd tried consoling her, putting his arms around her but Jessie had shaken her head, pushing him away.

They were the wrong arms.

Finally her tears calmed, though the ache in her chest was a ragged wound, seeping and raw.

'You're in love with him, aren't you?'

John sat opposite her, leaning forward and hugging the mug of tea he'd made them both an hour ago.

Jessie's remained untouched in front of her.

'The boys ...' She lurched upright, then remembered Annabel had insisted on having them over. *You and John have things to talk about* she'd said in that unsubtle way of hers.

'You told me they were with Annabel.'

'Yes, yes, sorry.' She sniffed, looking around for a tissue.

John smiled and pushed a big box under her nose. 'I found these. It was at least one thing I thought I could do that was useful.'

Embarrassment flooded her. 'I'm so sorry. You shouldn't have to see me like this.'

He cocked his head. 'We're friends, aren't we?'

'I'd like to think so.'

He smiled. 'I admit I'd hoped for more, but I can see your heart lies elsewhere.'

'I'm sorry.' She blew her nose. 'I didn't want you to find out this way. I should have told you as soon as you'd arrived, rather than waiting until after I'd fed you. I just worried you'd be offended and walk straight out, missing out on my amazing casserole.'

He laughed. 'I never turn down a free meal, hurt feelings or not.'

She sighed, thinking how easy things would be if she loved John instead of Michael.

I don't want easy, I want you.

Michael's words when she'd posed him a similar proposition flashed back to her. The man she loved had wanted her so much he'd risked coming to her today. She knew how much he'd been hurt by Paula's rejection of him. How much it must have cost him to come tonight after her own rejection of him yesterday.

Yet he'd still come.

A fresh avalanche of tears ran down her face as she realised how much she'd hurt him. And for what? Because she was afraid of giving them a chance? Afraid they wouldn't work even though there was no way of knowing without taking that leap of faith.

'Jessie?' John's softly spoken voice broke through her thoughts.

'Sorry.' She rolled her eyes. 'I seem to be saying that a lot tonight, don't I?'

He rose to his feet. 'You don't need to apologise. I'm here for you if you need me, but right now I think you probably want to be left alone for a while before the boys come home and shatter your peace.'

Jessie stood and walked with him to the door. 'Are you and I okay?'

'We're more than okay.' He kissed her cheek. 'We're friends.'

He would make someone a great husband, Jessie thought as she watched him walk away. But it wouldn't be her.

* * *

Monday afternoon and Jessie had a surprise visitor in the pharmacy.

Her friend looked so serious though, Jessie's pulse notched up a gear. 'Is everything okay? The boys, Phil ...'

'Everything is fine.' Annabel raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'Sorry, I didn't think me coming in to see you would give you an attack of the worries.'

‘It didn’t. Not until I saw the expression on your face.’

Annabel gave her a wide, false grin. ‘Better? I didn’t know what expression I should have when I came to give you this news. It’s to do with Michael.’

Jessie swallowed. ‘What about him?’

‘I read this in the paper. I think you need to see it.’

With trembling hands, Jessie reached for the newspaper clipping Annabel was holding. Please don’t say he’s getting married. Or that he’s been in an accident.

Frantically she read the article, her body relaxing as none of her fears materialised.

As she came to the end of it though, the implications began to sink in and she clutched at the counter for support. ‘This was his last tour.’ He was still going to produce albums and give the occasional live performance, but he no longer wanted to spend so much of his life on the road.

Annabel smiled hesitantly. ‘Do you think that’s why he came round last night? To tell you in person?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jessie replied falteringly, her mind in a daze. ‘I thought it was just his ego wanting to know why I hadn’t turned up.’ Liar, her inner self screamed. For all his beauty, his talent, Michael didn’t have an ego. In fact, he had very little sense of his own self-worth.

‘He knows you hate him touring, so now he’s giving that up.’

Shame surged through her. ‘He loves performing. He shouldn’t be giving it up, not for me, not for anyone.’

‘Perhaps he loves you more.’

‘What the hell have I done?’ she whispered. ‘I never even told him I loved him. I was always afraid of saying my feelings out loud, as if it could somehow protect me from being hurt.’

Annabel took hold of her hands. ‘You can rectify all this, if you want to.’

She smiled miserably. ‘Don’t tell me, you have a magic wand?’

‘Better than that. At considerable expense, and you can thank me later, I’ve bagged a ticket for his final performance at the Albert Hall this Saturday. Go. Send a note to him backstage, telling him you’d like to see him.’

‘Even if he read it, which I doubt because he’ll be inundated with requests like that, there’s no way he’d want to see me. Not after yesterday.’

‘Jessie, I love you, but sometimes you drive me nuts.’

A bell sounded, signalling the arrival of a customer, and Annabel leant across the counter. ‘Either you want to give this relationship with Michael one last chance,’ she hissed. ‘Or you want to live the rest of your life as a sad spinster thinking *if only*.’ She thumped the ticket onto the counter. ‘Your choice.’

Carefully Jessie picked up the ticket, her fingers tracing Michael’s name. ‘One last chance it is, then.’

Chapter Thirty-Five

Michael was back in his dressing room, wiping at the sweat a two-hour performance always left him with. He needed a shower, but he needed to get away from here more. He was exhausted, emotionally and physically. The tour had sucked a great deal from him, leaving him knackered.

And Jessie had sucked out the rest.

A tap on the door and Robert popped his head round the door. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like I can't wait to get out of here.' Robert winced and slipped inside, shutting the door behind him. Michael's heart sank. 'I did all the press interviews before the performance. You promised that was it.'

'It is, from the media side of things at least.'

As Robert paused, taking a second to study the floor, then his hands, Michael frowned. 'Should I worry that you're twitching like a rabbit's tail?' Robert didn't smile, which sent Michael's panic radar rocketing. 'For God's sake, man, talk to me.'

'Jessie is here. She'd like to see you.'

Michael froze. He could hear his heart thumping in his ears, see Robert's look of concern but he couldn't react, couldn't speak.

'What shall I tell her?' Robert persisted. Obviously sensing his meltdown, he walked up to Michael and put a hand on either side of his face. 'Breathe, you bugger. Breathe.'

Michael sucked in a breath, then recoiled as he realised how close Robert was standing. 'Get away from me, you daft sod.'

Robert chuckled, holding up his hands and stepping back. 'Just trying to bring you back to earth. So, what do I tell Jessie?'

As the shock began to leave him, the pain rushed in behind it. ‘Tell her if she wants an autograph she can write to me like everybody else.’

‘Seriously?’ Robert shook his head in disgust. ‘You’re not the teeniest bit interested in why she’s here? What she has to say?’

The image of John with his arm wrapped possessively around her shoulders was etched in his memory. ‘I don’t need her to tell me what I’ve seen with my own eyes.’

‘Maybe what you saw wasn’t quite the truth.’ Robert gave him a long, hard look. ‘She’s made the effort to come all the way here. Stop being a stubborn prick and see her.’

Michael wasn’t sure he had the emotional strength left to handle the encounter. Before he could tell Robert no, he wasn’t up to it, not tonight, his friend had gone.

And a few seconds later it was Jessie knocking lightly on the door. Jessie walking through, looking absolutely gorgeous in her snug black trousers and bright red jacket.

She smiled tentatively. ‘Robert said it was okay to come in?’

‘Robert’s a meddling git,’ he muttered to himself before finally looking her in the eyes. Those eloquent hazel eyes that even now, even when he wanted to hate her, he felt himself drowning in. ‘We’ve said all we need to say to each other.’

Jessie raised her chin, meeting his gaze. ‘That’s where you’re wrong. I have a few things I need to say to you.’

She looked so calm, so damn collected, while he felt like a mass of knotted gut, shredded nerves and shattered heart.

‘Would you like to change first?’ She waved a hand towards the suit he hadn’t managed to get out of yet.

That’s when he noticed it shake, before she quickly clasped it with her other hand. So he wasn’t the only one unhinged by this, after all. Good. ‘I was going to go home and shower.’

‘Oh.’ Her eyes slid away from his and his bubbly, chatty Jessie seemed to be at a loss as to what to say next.

She’s not your Jessie.

‘If John won’t mind you can come back with me and we can talk there. It isn’t far.’

Her eyes met and held his. ‘John won’t mind in the least.’ She hesitated, seemingly ready to say more, but then sighed. ‘I’ll wait outside for you.’

It didn’t take him long to change out of his suit — the shower could wait but getting out of his sweat soaked shirt couldn’t — and gather his essentials. A crowd of autograph hunters met him at the back door and he dutifully stopped and signed. Usually he took pleasure from the task but today it was a chore he needed to get done, finished, so he could go home and let Jessie have her few words ... consolation words, pity words.

Then he could get on with the rest of his life.

He’d like to bet part of what Jessie had to say included the dreaded *I hope we can still be friends*. Paula had once tried to fob him off with that, as if it could ever happen. He didn’t know how Jessie managed it with Phil. Michael didn’t have that strength. If he couldn’t have all of her, he didn’t want any of her. Being friends, seeing but not touching, would just about kill him off.

* * *

Jessie sat in the passenger seat of Michael’s sleek black Jaguar and watched the images of London flash by as they drove in silence towards his place. How unreal that she’d slept with him, dated him, visited him abroad but didn’t even know where he lived.

She kept her hands clasped in her lap so he wouldn’t see how much they shook. Inside her stomach was churning so much she thought she was going to be sick. If only he’d smiled at her, shown some degree of affection, of warmth. Right now all this seemed like a terrible idea. Maybe she hadn’t hurt him as much as she’d thought. Just because he’d been angry to see

her with someone else, didn't automatically mean *he* still wanted her.

A quick glance at his face and she was no nearer understanding how he was feeling. When she'd first met him she'd thought him arrogant, until she'd come to understand the aloofness was a mask he wore to protect himself. He'd once trusted her enough to let his mask slip. She just had to find a way to get him to trust her again.

'I didn't know you had a place in London,' she remarked as they sped along the Embankment, the London lights shimmering on the river.

Michael glanced over at her. 'As I recall, you weren't prepared to hang around for long enough to find out.'

His curt words stung and she kept quiet for the rest of the journey.

He pulled up outside a tall, glass-fronted building overlooking the Thames. At a push of a button the gates opened and he drove down into the underground car park. Without uttering a word, he parked, opened his door and then hers, and led her to a lift. He took out a key, turned it in the lock and pressed for the ninth floor.

The lift stopped and he allowed her out first before moving past and opening the door to his apartment. As he reached to turn on the lights she gasped. Beyond the hallway was a contemporary living room, set against the stunning backdrop of London by night. There were no curtains, just wall-to-wall glass. It shrieked class, style. Money.

'Stop it, Jessie,' Michael said quietly, watching her as she fidgeted on the spot, all her previous insecurities coming to the surface. What was she doing here? What could this rich, sexy, talented man possibly want with her?

'It's only money,' he said as he took her jacket before leading her into the living room. 'Nothing important, nothing that matters. I'm going to take a quick shower. Would you like a drink?'

‘Anything containing alcohol would be great.’ She felt she was going to need it.

He gave her the smallest of smiles before disappearing, presumably into the kitchen. He reappeared a minute later carrying a glass of red wine. ‘Make yourself at home. I won’t be long.’

The moment he was gone she took a large gulp of wine. Shit, why was she here? This man didn’t need her in his life.

But then she remembered how distraught he’d been in New York. How he’d sent her tickets to his performance, turned up at her door.

Given up performing.

He might not need her, but if there was the slightest chance he still wanted her, then she was damn well going to bury her pride and snatch it.

He was true to his word. Five minutes later he walked back in dressed in a black shirt and black dress trousers, holding a tumbler of whiskey. His feet were bare which made her shiver.

‘Are you cold?’

How to explain it was desire, not temperature that had sent tremors through her? ‘No, I’m fine, thank you. I see you’ve abandoned the idea of jeans.’

He gave her an odd look, something like pain flashing fleetingly across his face. ‘I haven’t felt like wearing them recently.’

His admission gave her a dart of hope. Maybe she was reading too much into it but when he’d been with her he’d relaxed into jeans. Now he was back to formal again.

‘So.’ He took a swallow of drink before perching on the arm of the sofa furthest away from her. ‘You said you had some things to say to me.’

‘Why did you come and see me last Sunday?’

His face remained expressionless. Only a tightening of his jaw told her he wasn't as cool as he was trying to appear. 'The reason is now redundant.'

She thought she knew what he was referring to but he was sitting so far away from her and looking so aloof, so cold. How could she spill her feelings to him? 'Why is it redundant?'

He looked at her sharply. 'You know why. You've moved on.'

'What if I haven't?' Her voice held a tremor she couldn't shake.

'Stop playing games with me, Jessie. You know how I feel about you. I've never hidden that from you. Never.'

As he spoke his mask slipped and she glimpsed his pain. Shamed, she squeezed her eyes shut, holding back the tears. She'd hated the woman that had first trampled all over his heart, leaving him simply because he wasn't rich enough. Had she been just as cruel though? She hadn't been strong enough to give their relationship a chance, hadn't believed in them enough to risk continuing.

'For a woman who said she wanted to talk, you've not said much so far.'

'Last Sunday, when you visited my house, you put two and two together and made five.' She hesitated, looking to Michael for encouragement, but his face wasn't giving anything away. 'John is just a friend. He did want to be more,' she admitted, noticing his knuckles whiten as his hand tightened round the glass.

'I knew it. Knew from the way he looked at you at that football match.'

She lifted her eyes to his. 'That day you came round, I'd invited John over with the aim of moving on, but even before he arrived I realised it was no use. There was no spark. I told him there would be nothing between us but friendship.'

Michael rose jerkily to his feet. 'So you're looking to move on — your words — but not with John?'

Slowly she shook her head, her heart thumping wildly. ‘How could I go out with anyone else after what I’ve shared with you?’

He didn’t drop his glass and rush into her arms, as she’d hoped. Instead he frowned. ‘Yet you didn’t come to the concert. You must have known how I’d feel when they told me Jack and Luke had come with Annabel, not you.’ His voice took on a raw edge as he relived the moment. ‘I’ve no idea how I managed to perform that night. I wanted to scream, to put thumb screws on Annabel to make her tell me why you hadn’t come rather than fob me off with an excuse about you not being up to it. I should have understood what was staring me in the face. You’d sent me the clearest signal that you still didn’t want anything to do with me.’

Jessie was no longer able to keep a check on her emotions. ‘That’s not true,’ she choked out. ‘I didn’t go precisely because I was still in love with you.’ Surprise flashed across his face before he quickly masked it. ‘I was a coward,’ she said quietly. ‘Too scared to reopen deep wounds I’d spent months trying to heal. What was the point of torturing myself when nothing in our circumstances had changed? Besides, I didn’t know how you felt. I didn’t know what was behind your gesture.’

‘You thought I just wanted to fill empty seats?’

‘I didn’t know,’ she reiterated, wiping her cheeks. ‘We hardly parted on good terms and I knew you’d have no shortage of women willing to take my place. Maybe Georgina, because we all know how much she wanted that.’

She stared miserably at him, wondering if there was any hope for them any more. Maybe there was too much hurt, too much distrust.

Slowly Michael stood and went to sit beside her. Her pulse leapt as he reached for her hand. ‘I’ve not been able to look at another woman since you walked out on me.’

She couldn’t help but feel dubious. ‘Even Georgina?’

His eyes slid away from hers, staring out of the window. 'Georgina did come on to me once.'

Jessie recoiled, trying to snatch away her hand, but he held it firm. 'She was drunk, I turned her down. She apologised the next day and said no more about it until the night of The Palladium concert.' He touched her face, forcing her to meet his eyes. 'She realised then how much I loved you and handed in her resignation. I let her leave straight away and haven't seen her since.'

Jessie felt a brief pang of pity for her but then Michael was ducking his head, his mouth hovering. His beautiful eyes searching hers. 'Since the day I met you there has only ever been you, Jessie,' he said softly. 'Only you.'

He lowered his lips to hers and Jessie was lost, submerged in the familiar feel of his mouth on hers, the smell of expensive aftershave. The arousing movement of his tongue as he swept it over her lips and into her mouth. 'God, how I've missed you,' he said on a strangled moan before returning his hot, needy mouth to hers, silencing them both.

Somehow she ended up in his bed, tangled in his sheets, exhausted and satiated. She registered that it was late, but didn't have the energy, or the inclination to do anything about going home. She wanted to stay cocooned in his bed, snug against his body.

His arm wrapped around her and he tugged her closer. 'Have you got to get home for the boys?'

'No, they're staying with Annabel.'

The face that had been so aloof, so unreadable an hour ago lit up and love blazed in his eyes. 'Good.'

Chapter Thirty-Six

Michael woke to a rare deep feeling of contentment. His groin was resting against soft curves, his chest against a warm back, his arm wrapped around a naked female body.

Desire pulsed through him and he shifted closer still, tracing his fingers over her skin. But as he raised on his elbow to look at her, he was alarmed to see she was wide-awake, and staring into space.

Fear almost paralysed him. ‘Jessie?’

She gave a start, then rolled over to face him, her mouth slowly curving. ‘Good morning.’

Her smile eased his worry slightly, but there was something in her eyes, a troubled look he didn’t like.

‘Any regrets?’ He almost choked on the words.

Her eyes flew open. ‘Of course not.’ With a happy sounding exhale she touched his face, her hands feeling so good he felt like purring. ‘Of course not,’ she repeated, her voice softer the second time, the emphasis making it sound firmer, more certain.

He relaxed, taking hold of her hand and kissing the palm. ‘Thank God for that. You looked so pensive just now.’

She smiled into his eyes. ‘I’m exactly where I want to be. But,’ the word sent prickles of fear racing across his skin, ‘there are a couple of things we should have talked about yesterday before ...’ A faint blush appeared on her face. ‘Before we got carried away.’

Her pink cheeks, tousled hair, sexy eyes. She was irresistible. Dipping his head he kissed her, tasting her, inhaling her. ‘I’m ready to get carried away all over again.’

She smiled against his lips. ‘Sounds good.’ But then she drew away slightly, though her arms were still around his neck. ‘Though perhaps we should talk first.’

‘Can we do it here?’

She dropped a series of soft kisses across his face, then down his neck and onto his chest, making him groan. ‘Absolutely.’

‘Carry on doing that and the talking will have to wait,’ he warned.

She sat up, hugging the duvet to her chest. ‘Sorry.’

‘No.’ Taking hold of her he turned her so she was sitting between his legs, her back to his chest, his arms around her. ‘Never be sorry for kissing me. Now tell me the things you need to discuss that are stopping me from making love to you.’

She sank back against him, angling her head so she could catch his eye. ‘Why did you give up touring?’

He let out a soft laugh. ‘You know why. I knew it was at least one of the things stopping you from seeing me. I thought if I could remove that barrier, it would give me a chance with you.’

She twisted around on his lap to face him. ‘But you love performing.’

‘I love you one hell of a lot more.’

Her expression softened but then she bit into her lip, shaking her head. ‘I don’t want you to give it up for me. You once told me being on stage is the only time you feel like the man you want to be.’

His eyes skimmed over her face before settling on hers. ‘That used to be true, before I met you. Now with you on my arm, in my bed, in my life, I’m not just the man I always wanted to be. I’m the smug, happy bastard I used to envy.’

Her eyes glistened and she leant forward, kissing him with the utmost tenderness. ‘I didn’t realise you were such a romantic.’

He moved his hands to her hips, holding her lightly. ‘You bring it out in me.’

‘So you really want to give up performing?’

‘Not performing,’ he corrected. ‘Touring. I’ll still do one-off shows, but I’ll fit them round my life, rather than the other way round.’ He smoothed back a curl that had fallen across her forehead. ‘I don’t want to be apart from you for any length of time ever again. That’s what I came round to your house to tell you last Sunday. Until my pride, and then John, got in the way,’ he added ruefully.

She nodded, taking in a deep breath, but there was still a wrinkle in her forehead. Worry in her eyes. ‘Okay, but I don’t want you giving it up for me. If you want to keep touring I *will* learn to live with it. That’s one of the things I came round to tell you last night.’ She laughed, looking up at him from under her lashes. ‘Until lust got in the way.’

His fingers tightened on her hips. ‘I can feel it getting in the way again. Better make the next item quicker.’

* * *

Jessie squirmed on his thighs, his desire sending her own body into a heightened sense of arousal. Her breasts, between her legs, her whole body hummed. But what she had to say was too important, too serious to be overlooked.

‘I’m sorry I hurt you. That I didn’t have enough faith in you, in us.’ She dropped her eyes. ‘In myself.’

He tucked a stray curl back behind her ear. ‘It’s okay. It’s in the past now, I hope.’

‘I was scared it was all just a dream. That when you woke up you’d look at me and wonder what you were doing.’

He gave a huff of frustration. ‘I told you I loved you, Jessie. I’ve only told one other woman that.’

Jessie dipped her head, ashamed. ‘I know and she hurt you, just like I did.’

He tapped her face, making her look at him. ‘Why would you think I didn’t mean it?’

Her eyes skimmed over his film star face, down to the hard muscles of his chest. ‘You and your,’ she waved her hand, ‘general magnificence. It always seemed so out of reach. I felt

any moment you'd notice we didn't match and kick me into touch.'

His head snapped back. 'Didn't match?' He smoothed a hand across her forehead, down the side of her face. 'Do you know what I see when I look at you?'

She shook her head.

'I see a woman who has no idea how utterly gorgeous she is.' With his index finger he gently outlined her face. 'A beautiful, sexy, clever, unspoilt, funny, genuine, down to earth, warm-hearted woman who came into my life and gave it meaning. Someone I love to the very core of my being, who I never want to lose again. Someone I hope will understand that we were made for each other, irrespective of how different our lives might currently appear.' He feathered kisses across her cheeks, down her neck. 'I was always worried any moment you'd realise I was a fake. That beneath the celebrity gloss, the man you once had a crush on wasn't who you thought he was. I'm too introverted, too standoffish, too ordinary when you, dear Jessie, are extraordinary.'

Her heart couldn't get any fuller. All this while she'd been concerned with her own doubts, forgetting that he'd have some, too. She'd done what he'd always asked her not to, and treated him as a celebrity. Not the modest, slightly insecure man she'd discovered.

'Michael we still live two hours away from each other. I still have two boys. Can we really make this work?'

'Yes.' His lips brushed over hers, caressing, teasing. 'I love you, Jessie Simmons. One day, when Jack and Luke approve of me, and when I've gained your trust sufficiently that you know we will always belong together, I'll ask you to marry me.'

Her heart stopped beating for a moment. 'Marry me?'

'Absolutely. So you'd better start thinking what your answer might be.'

Laughter bubbled out of her just as tears sprung from her eyes. She felt giddy, gloriously happy. Head over heels in love

with this beautiful man. ‘I won’t need long.’

‘Good, because I’m hoping it won’t take long to convince the three of you that I’m here to stay.’

She sighed into his arms, closing her eyes as his own wrapped around her, surrounding her in a hot, muscular blanket.

Then suddenly she snapped back, putting a hand to her mouth. ‘What time is it?’

Michael glanced at the bedside table. ‘Eleven thirty.’

‘Shit, the boys. Annabel. I need to phone her and let her know where I am.’

‘I think she might guess,’ he pointed out dryly. ‘But be my guest.’

He nodded towards the phone by his bed and she scrambled over to it.

‘Annabel, it’s me.’

‘Thank heavens. Are you okay?’

‘I’m better than okay.’ She glanced over to Michael who was smiling, amusement and a hint of smug in his expression. ‘I’m with Michael.’

‘Well, thank the Lord for that. For a moment I thought you’d shacked up with someone else for the night.’

‘Funny woman.’

‘So are you two good?’

‘Yes, very good. Very, very good.’ Michael raised a brow and she giggled, losing herself in his brilliant eyes for a moment before dragging her gaze away. ‘Don’t tell the boys yet. I’ll broach it with them when I get home.’

‘Err, that might be a bit difficult. You’re on speakerphone.’

As Jessie went hot and cold, thinking about what she’d said, she heard Jack and Luke laughing loudly in the background.

‘Way to go, Mum!’ she heard Luke shouting into the phone.

‘He’s obviously never met Taylor Swift.’ That was Jack’s deadpan voice.

Jessie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. ‘I love you all,’ she managed, her voice on the verge of breaking. ‘I’ll be home soon.’

‘We love you too. No need to rush back.’ Annabel had clearly taken the phone off speaker mode, as her voice added softly. ‘Take your time, Jessie. Enjoy the moment.’

Eyes brimming with tears she put the phone back on the bedside table.

‘What was that about Taylor Swift?’

Amusement danced in Michael’s eyes. Amusement and so much love. Jessie had to swallow several times before she could speak. ‘Long story.’

‘I have met her, you know.’

‘Of course you have.’

He nodded, clearly struggling to maintain a straight face. ‘She’s pretty hot.’

‘Is she now?’ Jessie wriggled round so she was straddling him. ‘But can she sing like me?’

Michael’s valiant efforts not to laugh, were starting to fail. ‘I can state, quite categorically, that she can’t sing like you.’ He dipped to kiss her. ‘Not many can.’

Then he burst into laughter.

Epilogue

‘Jack, Luke, will you please look after your sister for a minute? I can hear her crying.’

‘It’s okay, Mum, we’ve got it covered.’

The cries stopped, and minutes later the giggles began. Cute little two-year-old girlie giggles. Giggles that Lucy reserved specially for her big brothers.

‘Hey, Mum, that’s Michael coming up the drive. He’s home!’

Thrusting the washing she’d been collecting back in the linen basket, she dashed over to the huge bay window of the beautiful Georgian house they’d bought soon after they’d got back together. Just before they’d got married.

Sure enough, there was Michael, extracting his long frame from the low-slung sports car he’d insisted on buying himself a few months ago. There were now five of them, and the sports car could only fit two adults and one and half midgets, but Michael had been adamant that he still needed some credibility. If not with the public, he had argued, then at least with her sons. So the sensible four by four was considered her car, and the sexy sports car his. Which about summed them up, she thought with a smile, though it no longer made her feel insecure. Through some quirk in his nature, he had decided to make her the love of his life. She no longer questioned why. She just put all her heart and soul into loving him back.

She raced into the hallway, threw the door open and flung herself into his arms.

‘Hey, I guess you missed me a bit then?’ he asked, smiling into her eyes as he whirled her round.

‘You could say that.’ She laughed. ‘I know you don’t do many concerts any more, but could you make that even fewer from now on?’

‘I have to go away sometimes to stop you taking me for granted.’ He grinned, then he bent his head to hers and kissed

her until her knees gave way. ‘Every day I thank God that I finally persuaded you to become part of my life again.’

‘Err, as I recall, it was me persuading you.’

Michael chuckled. ‘When you turned up at the Albert Hall, the result was never in doubt, trust me. Now, where are those kids?’

Just then Lucy appeared, almost tripping up over her sturdy, toddler legs as she ran towards her dad with her arms outstretched. The look of utter adoration on Michael’s face when he caught sight of her nearly brought Jessie to her knees. Three years ago, the idea of Michael’s love being directed at another female would have brought the claws out in her. But this female was different. This little girl had launched herself into their lives and snatched all their hearts, even Jack and Luke’s.

As Michael blew loud kisses on Lucy’s cheek, sending her into fits of giggles, Jessie’s heart sighed. She was no longer first in his life, and it only made her love him more.

‘I swear she’s grown in three days,’ he said as he settled her back on her feet. ‘And her hair’s even curlier.’

Ah yes. Poor Lucy had inherited her brown curls, not Michael’s silky straight locks. ‘I thought you liked curls.’

He gave her a long, lingering look. ‘I love everything about the women in my life. Everything.’

‘Dadda sing.’

Lucy tugged at his hand, and Jessie laughed as Michael allowed himself to be pulled into the music room, and the grand piano. Two years ago, he’d have come home and whisked her straight to bed. Now he was happy to sing ‘Wheels on the Bus’ to his daughter. But the heated look he sent her just before he was dragged away, left her in no doubt that her time with him would come.

‘Mum, Annabel’s on the phone.’

Jack, now a big strapping fifteen-year-old, shoved a phone into her hand. Seems she’d been so besotted with the sight of

her daughter and her husband, she'd not even heard it ring.

'Is he back?'

Jessie didn't need to ask who her friend meant. 'He's singing to his daughter as we speak.'

'Remind him not to tire his vocal cords out too much. We're relying on him to use them tomorrow.'

Jessie peeked into the music room to find Michael crooning into the mesmerised eyes of his daughter. She knew exactly how Lucy felt. 'I'll remind him,' she promised her friend because she knew how important tomorrow was to her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Terrified? Excited? Like a kid at Christmas, but I'm scared it won't all happen as I've planned. As I hope.'

'Will Phil be turning up?'

'Of course.'

'And do you love him?'

'Of course.'

'Then relax. Everything else is just window dressing.'

* * *

Michael helped his beautiful daughter down from the stool and carried her to the sitting room, where his beautiful wife was just putting down the phone.

'That was Annabel, reminding you not to wear your voice out before tomorrow.' Jessie smiled at him in that way he still couldn't get enough of. A smile of love, of gratitude, of banked desire. A smile that only he received.

'I've still got enough left in the tank.' Seeing Lucy happily distracted by one of the boys' footballs — funny how the damn things turned up everywhere — he snuck Jessie a quick kiss. 'Besides, you could always stand in for me.'

She gave him a shove. 'We discussed that. No way am I ruining my best friend's wedding by singing at it.'

'Not even to re-enact a winning performance?'

Her eyes went all soft and her expression turned dreamy. ‘We were good together, weren’t we?’

‘I’d like to think we still are,’ he countered dryly. A few years ago, her words would have sent his insecurities into overdrive. Now those insecurities rarely surfaced. He knew how much he was loved, and was grateful for every moment of it.

‘Phil said he didn’t want me warbling at his wedding.’ Jessie rolled her eyes in that comic way that always made him want to kiss her. ‘He told me listening once was enough. So no, tomorrow I’m going to leave it to the professional.’

‘Maybe I’ll get you singing for me tonight,’ he whispered, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Instead of blushing, as she once might have done, she put a hand on his face and whispered huskily, straight into his eyes. ‘You always make me want to sing.’

It was he who was feeling hot under the collar now, and it had nothing to do with embarrassment.

The moment was shattered by a squeal. They both turned to find Luke and Jack had now joined them and were pretending to grab the ball from Lucy. She shrieked and started running away from them, the ball clutched to her chest. The damn thing was almost half her size, the boys definitely more than twice her size, but she wasn’t deterred. With a massive grin splitting her face, she weaved round the living room as fast as her little legs could carry her.

Jack and Luke would catch up to her every now and then, before falling dramatically and letting her escape. A girl couldn’t want for a more doting pair of big brothers.

Quietly, his heart full to bursting, he put his arms around Jessie and drew her in front of him, resting his chin on her head as they watched the comic show. It was at times like this — and there were plenty of them — that Michael found himself reflecting on how his life had changed since he’d appeared on the TV show. And to think, if it had been down to him, he wouldn’t have done it.

He owed Robert, big time. Not that the guy didn't frequently remind him about it. Still, it was worth listening to a lifetime of Robert's crowing, and his I-told-you-so's, to be part of this noisy, chaotic, happy household.

The Week of Your Life had turned out, rather spectacularly, to be *The Making of His Life*.

THE END

Thank You

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

This is the first book I ever wrote. Over ten years ago now, I made a New Year's resolution to write a book. And stuck to it. Not because I've got this thing about always sticking to my New Year promises (I hadn't done before, and haven't done since) but because I found, to my utter joy, that I loved writing. Sadly, the finished product wasn't quite the masterpiece my heart had insisted it was, so after too many rejections to count, the book was pushed to one side. Thanks to my husband though, the writing wasn't. He was the one who persuaded me to keep going, and then to become self-employed so I could pursue this mad dream to write books for a living. So thank you Andrew for putting up with my craziness, for encouraging me and for swallowing your dislike of reading fiction, especially romantic fiction, and reading both the initial (and now I realise, dreadful) draft and this new, improved version. If it wasn't for you, I might have stopped at one failed book. All of those that have come after it are your fault ☺

Further thanks to the following people:

My pharmacist friends, Charlotte and Warren, for helping me with the details of Jessie's job. Yes, I was a pharmacist once, but age has dulled the memory.

My publisher, Choc Lit, for taking on not just this book, but all the other books I wrote in between.

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My mum, who reads all my books even though I'm sure some (racing drivers and bodyguards) aren't to her taste. I think she'll like this one!

Finally, but most importantly of all, thank you for buying and reading Reach for a Star. It's taken a long time, and a major re-write, but I'm so thrilled it's found its way into your hands.

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.

For more information on Kathryn:

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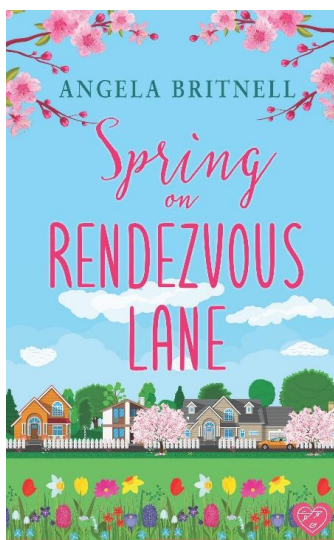
Running her busy concierge service usually keeps Cassie Travers fully occupied. But when a new client offers her the strangest commission she's ever handled she suddenly finds herself on the cusp of an Italian adventure, with a man she thought she would never see again.

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 ...

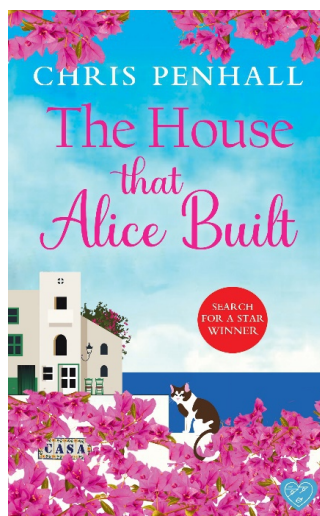
Then she attracts the attention of a major TV company, and before she knows it a clique of celebrities descend on Serenity Bay to film a new reality TV show.

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?