

COOPER

HOW IS HE GOING TO GET HER TO NOTICE HIM?

KATIEDOWE

Cooper

How is he going to get her to notice him?

A sexy medical romance by Katie Dowe of BWWM Club.

Dr. Brooke Campbell runs a clinic in the city's poorest area, choosing to help those in need over living a life of luxury.

Her past experiences have made her wary of close relationships... until Dr. Cooper Rochester comes along.

Cooper is not only a doctor—he's the heir to a multi-billion-dollar company, and he's determined to prove he's more than just his bank account.

Joining Brooke's clinic, he's looking to make a real difference—and ends up falling head over heels for her in the process!

Despite their relationship getting hot and heavy, Brooke is used to keeping her walls up.

But Cooper's relentless optimism and kindness makes her wonder if she's been too cautious...

Could Brooke really let her guard down for Cooper?

And can love find a place in a life committed to so many other important causes?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Katie
Dowe of **BWWM Club**.

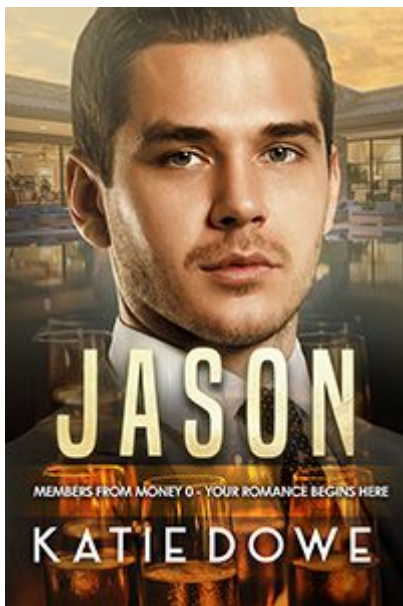
Suitable for over 18s only due to sizzling hot sex scenes
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Chapter 1

Brooke sat outside the wrought iron gate for five minutes, her slender fingers drumming on the wheel as she waited for her stomach to settle. She was thirty-two years old and a grown-ass woman who should be able to say no to these meaningless Sunday dinners.

She had faced down gang members and pimps, she should be capable enough of telling Marjorie Howell-Campbell that she would rather be anywhere else- A jolt went through her body at the tap on her window.

“You almost gave me a damn heart attack,” she muttered, pressing the button to wind the window down. “Can you be any creepier?”

Dwayne Campbell was not in the least offended. Going around to the passenger side, he opened the door and slid in, giving her a warm glance.

“Mother wanted to make sure that you didn’t turn around and go back to your crappy apartment.”

“Where did you come from?”

“The side entrance.” He eyed her outfit critically.

“Don’t start.” She muttered.

“Your braids are falling apart.”

“I work almost twenty-four hours a day and do not have the kind of time you do.”

“That’s no excuse.” He tugged at a loose plait. “Honey, you know you will be grilled through and through.”

“Can’t you tell her I am not feeling well and decided to return home?” Her large dark brown eyes pleaded with him.

“Lie to our mother?” He looked shocked.

“You do it all the damn time; you are a freaking lawyer.”

“I am not on the job.” Leaning over, he kissed her on the cheek. “Chin up, darling; you can do this.”

“I hate you.” She said without heat.

“You love me. Giving you the heads up that she heard about the latest incident at the clinic.”

Brooke closed her eyes briefly in resignation. “And?”

“She is going to double up on her campaign to get you to change your mind about going to the hospital.” Glancing at the watch on his left wrist, he pressed the button to open the gate. “Might as well go and face the music.”

Hands tightening on the wheel, she eased the car through the gateway, ignoring the burst of pansies and peonies on either side of the cobbled drive. She had grown up here but had never thought of it as a home because it had never been one, as far as she was concerned.

She and her brother had attended an exclusive semi-private school with less than twenty pupils to a teacher. She excelled in her studies - being an A student had been a rigid requirement of the Campbells, especially her mother.

Shaking off the unpleasant memories, she brought the vehicle to a stop at the sweeping porch. Alice, a wrinkled white woman of an indeterminate age, immediately opened the door. The woman had been a constant since they were children.

“Ms. Brooke.” Taking her hands, Alice drew her into the foyer. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You saw me last Sunday.” Brooke reminded her fondly, drawing her in for a kiss on the weathered cheek.

“You never come by often.”

“My stomach cannot take more than once a week.”

“My sister is not the soul of discretion,” Dwayne said dryly. “Is Mother still in the blue salon?”

“Yes, she is. Cocktails will be served as soon as you go in.” Patting Brooke on the cheek, she bustled away.

Tucking her hand through his arm, Dwayne led the way along the passageway until they came to an open door on the left.

The blue salon was so named because of the shimmering blue of the wallpaper and the blue and white decor. It was their mother's favorite room, and she had decorated it several times while maintaining the standard blue color scheme.

The woman seated behind the antique desk looked up as they made their way into the room, coolly beautiful dark brown eyes assessing her daughter, the displeasure immediately apparent on her lovely face.

Marjorie Howell-Campbell had a regal bearing and robust physical features, all of which she had passed to her daughter. They bore a strong resemblance to each other, the only difference being that Brooke had inherited her dad's coffee and cream complexion.

"You are late."

"Only by five minutes. Good day to you too, mother."

“You know how I am a stickler when it comes to time.”

“All too well. I am here, am I not?”

“And your hair -” Marjorie did her best to stifle the distaste as she took in her daughter’s untidy braids. “That place keeps you so occupied that you cannot find the time to get rid of those things?”

Brooke shrugged her brother’s calming hand on her arm and walked over to the cabinet where the pre-dinner drinks were already laid out. Selecting the brandy snifter, she poured a generous amount, knowing she would need much more to get through the evening.

“It does. And if getting all fancied up and running to the salon is a requirement for these little soirees, I will have to pass. You either take me as I am or not. Your choice, Mother.”

They stood there glaring at each other, two strong and indomitable females, neither one intent on budging.

“Why don’t we all settle down?” Dwayne, who had been playing the peacemaker for years, stepped into the breach. “Mother, I see you do not have a drink in your hand. What are you having?”

“Just a glass of sherry, darling. I have been battling this report for days and am not getting anywhere.” She flicked a glance at her daughter, her mouth tightening. “I hope I can rely on you to be at the function on Saturday.”

“Another of your endless rounds of parties? I will see if it fits into my busy schedule.”

“Brooke-”

“No, darling.” Marjorie shook her head at her son, giving him a fond glance before turning towards her daughter. “I do not require much from you, just that you are part of the family whenever needed.

You are so hooked on proving to yourself and others that you hate the privileges of belonging to a family of means that you would do anything in your power to shame us. I would like to remind you that the money you so despise helped you to attend college and go to medical school, not that it has done you any good.”

Brooke did her best to reign in her temper, shooting her brother a warning look as he stepped toward her.

“You know what I hate, Mother? It’s not the money. Oh, no. That I can tolerate or even accept; what I hate about this soulless society you belong to is the hypocrisy and the ability to ignore the fact that people are out there hurting - people are starving to death, our health and legal system are geared toward people who already have money.

I see victimization every damn day at that clinic - women who are afraid of their own shadow, who are battered and bruised, children, mere children so hooked on drugs, they don’t know where they are!

While you and your cronies are sitting pretty in swanky hotel rooms sipping expensive champagne and eating caviars, the real world is going to pieces. It's all good for you to sit around on your collective butts and talk about this charity and that charity and write a check, but then what? Easing your conscience is not the way to go about it."

The silence in the room after her impassioned speech was profound, and Brooke was about to apologize when there was a discreet knock on the door.

"Dinner is ready, Ms. Marjorie," Alice said quietly, poking her head in. Marjorie moved from behind her desk without a word and left the room, leaving them to follow.

"Was that necessary?" Dwayne pulled her back as she was about to follow.

"I was pissed."

“Brooke, you are always pissed.”

“It’s this damn house.” She hissed out a breath. “I have no idea how you can stand living here.”

“It’s a nice house, and we are supposed to have a normal family dinner.”

Brooke barked out a laugh. “That is never going to happen.”

“I need you to behave.”

“I am not a child.”

“Then start acting like a damn adult!” He snapped. Letting go of her arm, he marched past her. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she followed him into the formal dining room, where her mother was already sat at the head of the table.

She should have been accustomed to the formality but was not. She much preferred her tiny apartment, where she would get home from the clinic and have no time to do anything other than make a sandwich or some noodles.

Pulling out of her chair, she picked up the snowy white napkin and placed it on her lap.

“I am not going to apologize.” She remarked stonily.

“I never expected such politeness from you. The fact that your little clinic has been the source of discussion in the local newspaper again is no surprise to me.” Marjorie nodded at the housekeeper, who hurried out of the room to bring in the appetizer.

“A drug raid? How much did the officers recover? And right there in that clinic of yours. What will it take to make you realize that where you are is a dangerous place?”

“There is danger everywhere,” Brooke muttered, smiling her thanks as the soup was placed before her.

“Is that your response? There is danger everywhere? You are a brilliant surgeon whose talent is wasted at that dreadful place. I have been speaking to the head of the surgical wing at Hope General-”

“And let me guess? There is a shortage of GP’s, and he has a place for me.”

“As a matter of fact-”

“The answer to that would be a resounding no. Hope General is an institution geared toward the rich and famous. People with insurance and can afford to spend a week or more in its five-star opulence. I prefer to give my

services to those who need it.”

“Are you doing it to upset me? Is that it?”

“Yes, Mother, I bust my ass eighteen hours a day trying to make a difference to people who have nowhere else to turn to, and all I think about is if this is upsetting enough to you. Really?”

“This soup is delicious.” Dwayne ventured, turning their attention to him. “I must remember to compliment Ian on how wonderful it is.”

Brooke heaved a sigh and flashed her brother a smile. “You are not very subtle, are you?”

“I have no idea what you mean.” He told her obliquely, dark brown eyes twinkling. “We only meet each other once a week, and I prefer it to be a harmonious getting

together. There is enough drama in my line of work to last me a lifetime.

When I sit down to dinner with the two most beautiful women in the world, I would like to think I can find some peace.”

“You are right, darling.” Sending him a gentle smile, Marjorie turned to give her daughter a conciliatory look. “We should enjoy the meal.”

“I could not agree more.”

“I have to leave.”

“You are off today, and there is no harm in you walking with your brother and enjoying the ambiance. It’s spring,

the flowers bloom, the sun shines, and look! Birds are flying around the grand oak. Remember how you used to let me chase up the branches?"

"I almost always get a lecture from Mother on how unladylike I was."

"You still are." Taking her hand in his, he led the way to the hammock stretched from one sturdy branch to another. Sitting down, he pulled her next to him.

"I am who I am."

"I would not have it any other way." He reminded her gently. Using his toes, he pushed so the hammock swung gently back and forth.

"You are the only one in this family who has not tried to change me."

“Dad loved you the way you are.”

Her eyes flashed. “Please do not spoil the afternoon by bringing him up.”

“Your reluctance to talk about the past makes it difficult for you to look to the future.”

Turning her head, she lifted tapered brows at him.
“Where did you get that half-baked philosophy from? A fortune cookie?”

“My therapist.” He gave her a faint smile. “You could benefit from some sessions.”

“I tried already, and it did not work. He was a piece of

work and not fit to be a father.”

“He was weak, but that does not mean he did not love us. You have a high moral ground, darling, and God forbid anyone who does not meet your exacting standard.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, glaring at him. “The man was chasing after every piece of skirt in a three-mile radius. He was cheating on her, and she knew and did nothing but smile graciously and pretend that everything was okay, that we were this perfect family.”

“And what exactly did you expect her to do?”

“Leave his lying, cheating ass.” Her eyes flashed at the memories. “Kick him out of the house, anything, but sit there and take it, which was what she did.” Closing her eyes, she willed the anger away.

“But that was her deal. At least, I have learned from both of them. Derrick Campbell was too attractive for his good and knew it - he used it to his advantage. That’s why I choose the men I go out with.”

“When was the last time you were out on a date?” Her brother asked her dryly.

“Why, darling, are you trying to find out when I last got laid?”

“I would not put it so delicately, but that’s the question.”

“I do believe it was sometime last year. The sex was lousy, and the guy was too clingy. I got rid of him before he became a problem. I don’t need a guy to validate who I am as a woman. My hands are full with the clinic and trying to raise money for the homeless. I am not in a relationship right now, and that’s fine with me.”

“That’s the problem; you never really needed anyone.”

“I don’t see why it’s a problem.” She argued.

A smile crossed his lips as he stared at her. Brooke Campbell was stunning; her high cheekbones, small nose, and determined chin were delightful. She was fire and passion, and it showed in her eyes. She could not bear to see anything suffer and had been that way since she was a little girl. She was petite, barely passing five feet.

Her complexion was flawless, and even though she did not bother to wear makeup, she did not need it. She was down to earth yet uncompromising. She might be diminutive but made up for it in grit and strength.

“One of these days, you will meet someone who will make you forget that you do not need anyone.”

“I need you.” Leaning over, she kissed him on the cheek.
“Now, as pleasant as this has been, I must run.”

“Going somewhere?”

“I have laundry to do and cannot put it off any longer. I am running out of underwear.”

“Hire a maid.”

“I earn next to nothing at the clinic.” She reminded him.

“And you have a trust fund gathering dust in the bank, not to mention stocks and bonds.”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” She grinned as she hauled him off the hammock. “I used some money to purchase a few

things for the clinic. There is a playroom for the tender-aged children to gather and be taken care of when their mothers are being seen.”

“You can use the money to equip the clinic, but you still insist on earning a living when it comes to yourself.”
Shaking his head, he took her and guided her to the car.
“I am not like you, Dwayne; I have never seen the need to drive a fancy car or wear a different designer dress daily.”

“Nothing is wrong with spending the money we have.”

“I did not work for it, so yes, there is a problem.”

“You are being stubborn and unrealistic.”

“But you love me anyway.” Blowing him a kiss, she opened her door and got behind the wheel.

“Call me when you get home.”

He watched her drive away before turning around. Instead of going back inside the house to join his mother, he returned to the pool’s side, where the sun was shining on the stunning blue of the water. He had almost suggested to his sister that they go for a swim, but he knew it would have been a wasted effort.

Brooke hated being here because of the unpleasant memories. She had chosen to move out as soon as she finished medical school. He had decided to stay because he did not want to leave his mother on her own. Not that Marjorie Campbell had a problem being on her own.

His mother was strong and resilient and had weathered many storms.

Brooke might resent her for staying in a marriage that had been far from perfect, but he admired her fortitude.

She had stayed with a husband who had no qualms in shaming her daily, and she had borne the shame and whispers with admirable aplomb.

Sitting on one of the chaises, he allowed his mind to wander. His father had been absent – never attended any of their games or varied extra-curricular activities. Still, Marjorie had been there, making sure that a parent was represented.

Brooke's illusion had been brutally shattered because she had placed their dad on a pedestal, only to discover that he was human after all and a flawed human being at that.

They were both affected by the household's lack of love and fidelity. He was not comfortable in a relationship. He had ribbed his sister about her lack of one when he was no better. He used women, telling himself that he was not like Derrick Campbell because he did not have a wife to answer to. But he could not settle.

His relationships were only physical. He had never found a woman he wanted to settle down with. Staring at the ripples in the pool, he wondered why he was in this contemplative mood. His therapist was constantly telling him to verbalize his emotions, just let it out and break free from the crippling shadows of the past.

Dragging his hands over his face, he shoved himself to his feet and walked toward the house. He had a brief to study and a case beating the hell out of him. He did not have time to go back into his past to try and determine how the hell he was going to get ahead of the trauma.

His phone rang just as he opened the front door.

“Reporting for duty as ordered.”

“You are home.”

“Just going in the front door and about to do the most hated job on the planet. Hey, thanks for playing referee.”

“Aren’t I always?” He asked her dryly.

“You are so good at it. You okay?”

“I am.” Bypassing the salon where his mother was bound to work, he went upstairs to his suite. “Why?”

“You sound a little odd. That girl you are seeing, what’s her name again?”

“Janet?”

“I thought it was something beginning with a ‘d’.”

“That was months ago. You need to keep up.” Shoving his door open, he went to his office.

“How can I? When you change them every few seconds. Then you have the nerve to lecture me on relationships.”

“Quite a pair, aren’t we?”

“We are. I have to run, honey. Duty calls.”

Hanging up, he went to sit behind his desk and tried his best to get into work mode.

Chapter 2

Sliding out of the pool, Dr. Cooper Rochester dragged long fingers through his dense dark hair, made even darker by the water, as he plopped down on the chaise. Reaching for the towel, he sent a slow, intimate gaze towards the woman walking toward him.

“I think we should go on inside.” Wendy Baker, his current lover, suggested, green eyes wandering over the sleek muscles of his chest and shoulders. “I was thinking I could cook you dinner.”

“I was thinking takeout from that wonderful French restaurant a few blocks from here.” He countered. He was getting bored and restless, and those were two hazardous combinations.

Wendy was a doctor from another large hospital because he had one very rigid policy, never dipping into his pool. No matter the temptation, he never gets

involved with the staff at Hope General, where he was a trauma surgeon.

He had worked incredibly hard to make them take him seriously, which was not easy because of his last name. He was from an old family, the pharmaceutical company that had been in operation for several hundred years.

He was the heir to a fortune, and it constantly irked his mother that he had chosen to become a doctor instead of taking his rightful position at the company. He attended the requisite board meetings and was present for all the signings of relevant documents, but his heart was in medicine, and he loved what he did.

“Darling, I wanted to practice my culinary skills with you.” She said with a pout. She picked up the towel and dried her hair as she stared at him. “Or we could go out to dinner.”

“We both are on early rotations tomorrow.” He reminded her. He knew what she expected of him. After dinner, she was going to suggest they head on up to his

bedroom and try and get him to allow her to spend the night.

The sex might happen, but as for her spending the night, he was going to nip that in the bud.

“Let’s order takeout. I have to call and check in on my mother and sister anyway.”

“Didn’t they invite you over for dinner?”

“I managed to duck that by telling them I had some things to take care of.”

“I would love to meet them.”

He gave her a surprised look. “You already did.”

“That was at the charity where we were trying to raise money for the pediatric ward. I am saying that I would have loved to meet them in a less formal setting.”

He knew what she was hinting at, and he would not play. Sela Rochester was very exacting and had a very rigid code of conduct. Cooper enjoyed women and would go as far as to say that he loved them the way he loved and admired a fantastic work of art objectively.

But he had never been in love or felt the need to take one home to meet the family. He had too much respect for his mother and sister to subject them to someone he was having a casual fling with. He would never do that to them.

“Shall we?” Rising, he held out a hand to help her up, letting go before she could start to cling. “Make yourself at home. I will order the meal and then call my family.”

They stepped into the large entryway of the loft, their footsteps leaving water marks on the glossy black and white tiles. It was a relatively new building, part of the construction that had been put up only a year ago and was owned by the pharmaceutical company.

He was a doctor and determined to save lives, but he would do it while taking advantage of his position as the heir to a fortune. The loft was ultra-modern and designed to his specifications, and downstairs boasted a large, functional kitchen in creamy shades of yellow and white.

The downstairs area was open and spacious; the living room was decorated in light blues and greens, with a large fireplace covering up one whole section. There was a fully equipped gym, a home office, a powder room, and a theater. Upstairs, there were three-bedroom suites with a wrap-around balcony.

He had a maid who came in twice a week to care for the domestic side. He could have continued living at the elegant townhouse with his mother and sister but had decided he needed his own space.

Making his way into his office, he peeled off the damp shorts and dragged on a pair of sweats he had brought downstairs earlier. “Mother.”

“Darling, I thought you could have called a little earlier.”

“If you are in the middle of something, I could always call back.”

“No, your sister and I just reviewed the quarterly reports. We have a board meeting tomorrow, and you must be there.”

“What time?”

“Nine.”

He checked his schedule with a grimace and knew he would be in for a battle. “I have surgery first thing in the morning.”

“You know the rules, Cooper.” The cultured voice was implacable.

“Saving lives trumps sitting at a table surrounded by crusty old men and talking about restructuring the company, which will not happen. We have been lobbying for the R&D department to have bigger accommodation for them to do a better job than they are already doing, and this has been going on for months.”

“Nevertheless, you are a Rochester, and the board needs to know that as part of the family that owns the majority shares in the company, we are on the same page,” Sela told him firmly. “We do not require much from you, darling, just that you turn up for these meetings.”

He looked up as Wendy stepped into the doorway.

“So, you are saying that I should leave my patient waiting on the operating table and rush across town to sit and listen to some drivel about why the company cannot move forward with the votes?”

“We will put back the meeting for ten instead of nine. I hope that will be enough time to do what you must. I expect you to be there, darling.” Before he could respond, she hung up. Putting away the phone, he dragged frustrated fingers through his hair and forced a smile to his lips.

“I didn’t mean to subject you to my endless family drama.”

“She sounds like a very determined woman.” Wendy came forward with the glass of scotch and handed it to him. “You sound like you need this.”

“Oh, I am going to need more than this. The food will be here in fifteen minutes. Why don’t we go out on the terrace?”

“Perfect. I should go and change.”

“Your bag is in the guest room. I will be up shortly,” he told her absently. Flipping through his notebook, he made a few notes and returned a phone call to a patient’s mother before leaving for the front door to collect the meal. Tipping the delivery guy generously, he grabbed the bottle of wine and two glasses and went upstairs.

“I just love this view.” Wendy gushed as she stretched languidly and gazed at the pretty meadow surrounding the building. “If I lived here, I would eat on this terrace daily.”

Cooper poured the wine and handed her a glass before taking out the cartons with the food. “I barely make it home in time to eat a meal.” He passed the carton of food to her. “I ordered the Poulet aux Porto,” he added in perfect French.

“Excellent choice.” She murmured as she reached for her fork, watching him sit down gracefully and go for his wine. “I love being here with you, like this, without the rest of our colleagues, and getting away from the medical jargon and the operating theater. It’s just us, having a meal in a perfect setting and not thinking about work.”

“It’s nice to get away from it all now and then.” He agreed absently, his mind already on the surgery he would perform tomorrow. He was the best in his field and was constantly educating himself.

He might joke around whenever he was not working, but saving lives was his priority. He continually told himself that he did not have a God complex or was completely committed to his work, but sometimes he wondered if that was true.

“We have been going out for the past three months,” She began, and he felt his heart sinking as he realized where the conversation was heading.

“Sounds like we should be throwing a party.” He was enjoying the meal and the company and had hoped to avoid the heavy conversation.

“I am trying to say, darling, that we know each other and are compatible. I understand you and the crazy hours we put in for the job.

I do not mind being stood up on the spur of the moment or being called a few hours before to go and grab a drink. We are doctors who always put our careers first.” Putting away her glass of wine, she stared at him imploringly.

“I am also saying that I want to take this further.”

“We have already taken it another step,” he reminded her. “We are sleeping together.”

“I want to take it further.” She ventured.

His thick, dark brows lifted, and he injected a note of amusement in his tone. “Surely you are not talking about marriage.”

“Would that be so awful?” She asked him softly. “We are perfect together and adult enough to know what we want.”

Cooper saw the prospect of a pleasant meal dwindling rapidly and had to squelch the spurt of anger inside his chest. “And that is what you want? Marriage? Specifically, marriage to me?”

“Why not?” She asked lightly, picking up her glass and sipping the excellent vintage. “You are easy on the eyes; we are in the same profession and get along in bed and out of it.”

“Not to mention that I am heir to an immense fortune.”
He filled in the blanks.

“Do you think so little of me?” There was a wounded look on her face that almost had him regretting the sarcastic comment. But Cooper had been part of this scene too often to misread it. He was an eligible bachelor and a great catch.

Not only was he a doctor with looks, there was the icing on the proverbial cake. He had money. He liked Wendy. She was intelligent and articulate. She was lovely and graceful and a good conversationalist.

“Convince me that I am way off the mark.”

Her eyes flared. “You are way off the mark. I like you a lot, Cooper, and that like is blossoming into something stronger. I know you are accustomed to women falling over themselves to be with you for one reason or another, but I am not those women.”

“You are different ... because?” His eyebrow arched.

“Because I am different, damn it.” Rising gracefully, she walked over to the iron railing. Taking a deep breath and inhaling the scent of roses and peonies artfully planted next to the downstairs column, she turned to look at him. Cooper Rochester was a sight for sore eyes.

He had unruly dark hair that tended to curl at the front, one thick lock falling over his broad, intelligent forehead. His amber eyes were intent and direct, giving one the impression that he was staring into the soul.

His body was tanned and fit, the muscles well-defined. His mouth had a sensuous tilt that sent shivers along her spine whenever she looked at it.

He was cocky and arrogant, two characteristics she had first noticed about him. But why wouldn't he be? she thought wryly. He was every woman's dream and a fantastic lover in bed.

"You were saying?" There was an impatient note in his deep voice as he waited for her to continue.

"I am a catch." She told him wistfully.

A faint smile touched those sensuous lips and shivered along her spine.

"You are indeed." Rising from his lounging position on the chair, he walked over to stand before her. "How about we skip the rest of the meal and take this into the bedroom?" He suggested softly.

Wendy knew what he was doing and had to address the acute disappointment and frustration. But she knew him

well enough to realize he would show her the door if pushed.

She was going to have to bide her time. She had jumped the gun by mentioning marriage and her true feelings and would have to backtrack and readjust her strategy. Putting a seductive smile on her lips, she looped her hands around his neck.

“What do you have in mind, doctor?”

He whispered something in her ear that had her going warm all over.

“I think that can be arranged.” She whispered back.

By the time she was through the housework, Brooke was exhausted and ready to give in to the pressure and hire a maid. She was never domestic; considering that she had been brought up in a privileged, decadent household, that was not a surprise.

It was not merely the sorting into piles; it was the taking out of the washer and putting them inside the dryer and remembering to put in dryer sheets. The worst thing was that there were six damn loads!

She glared at the machines as if they were the ones who had gotten them into this mess. She was not a freaking clothes horse, far from it. She wore scrubs to the clinic, dark colored ones because of the conditions she worked in, and she had little to no social life because of her commitment to the clinic.

She had several pairs of jeans and a few cocktail dresses for when she was forced to attend the endless functions she was guilted into attending when her mother insisted on it.

The most money she spent was on underwear.

She was not a girly girl and did not care about shopping, but she had a weakness for expensive underwear and owned tons of it. She had been putting off doing laundry for the past four weeks- four weeks? That could not be right, could it?

Closing her eyes, she realized that it was longer than that. She had been scrubbing the arms of her scrubs, which looked clean enough to wear two or three times, and getting away with it.

“Okay,” Taking a deep breath, she moved slowly towards the washer and pressed the door open. Reaching inside, she dragged out the mountain of clothing and dumped them into the dryer unceremoniously. Pitching in the dryer sheets, she pressed the start button. She left more clothes in the washer and dealt with the detergent and softener.

That done, she wiped the moisture from sweat from her forehead. Walking into the kitchen, she removed a case

of beer from the fridge, pulled off a can, and popped the cork. Taking a long swallow, she put the can on the small counter and sat.

The memories she had been avoiding since she talked to her brother came tumbling back, and she could not stop them.

Her fingers clenched around the can so tightly that she almost bent it. Closing her eyes briefly, she willed the bitterness and disillusionment away. She had been seven when she first discovered Derrick Campbell's duplicity.

Dwayne had always teased her about being 'daddy's princess.' And she had not minded in the least because she had been proud to be his favorite. Dwayne had always belonged to their mother, but she was daddy's little girl, at least; that was what he had drilled into her since she could remember.

Marjorie Campbell believed in a strict and rigid upbringing for her children. They belonged to an elite

society and were required to get straight A's in school, be involved in the large Catholic congregation, and were not allowed to mix with the 'common' people.

Their friends were children of the parents who socialized with the family, and there were no exceptions. Brooke always had a mind of her own, and after a visit to the park, she befriended a girl from the downtown community and asked if she could be invited to their home.

The lack of action from her mother had not deterred her. She had found a way to wheedle her father into going to the park to meet with her new friend, and he had accommodated her.

She had thought he was the best dad in the world and idolized him. Nothing anyone had said to her could make her believe otherwise. Dwayne had tried to warn her several times with no success.

“He is not who you think he is, Brooke.” He had told her soberly. “I don’t want your illusions to shatter, but you must realize he is not perfect.”

The shock came one night while he was left at home with them. Her mother had gone to Europe with friends, and Brooke was excited to see her leave. It had been the middle of summer, closer to the time they would return to school.

It had also been a torrid night, the air still as if waiting for a storm to pass. The central air had been on, and she had also turned the fan above her bed on, but she was still hot, her nightgown sticking to her skin.

She still existed on the high of having pizza for dinner and sodas, which would never have happened had her mother been there. Dwayne had been allowed to stay overnight with a friend, something she had been happy about.

It meant she had her Daddy all to herself, which had been excellent. Not only had he ordered pizza, but she had been served her favorite ice cream, mint chocolate chip. She had worshiped him that night.

She had climbed out of bed, deciding to creep downstairs and dip in the pool. She was not allowed to do so without an adult supervising her, but she was an excellent swimmer.

Telling herself everyone was fast asleep and she would not get caught, she quickly stripped off her nightgown and donned a one-piece pink and white swimsuit. Grabbing a towel from the bathroom, she opened her door and peered out cautiously.

When she did not detect anyone in the hallway, she carefully descended the stairs, stopping now and then to listen. Grinning that she had gotten so far without being caught, she disengaged the alarm and skipped toward the octagonal body of water.

The moon was high in the sky, bathing everything in silver, and she could recall being amazed at how beautiful the night was. Before she reached the pool area, she heard the sounds that stopped her. Someone had the same idea she had.

She was about to turn back in disappointment when she was drawn to what sounded like moans. The curiosity of a seven-year-old pulled her towards the source, her tiny footsteps making no sounds in the springy grass. A man was moving on top of a woman, and even at that age, she realized what was happening.

She remembered clapping a hand over her mouth to stop the giggle. At first, she thought it was one of the maids having that kind of party with a man she had snuck into the yard until he lifted his head.

Shaking the painful memory away and tamping down on the rage and horror she had felt to realize that it was her father, she pushed away from the counter to take the clothes out of the dryer.

Chapter 3

“Brooke, this is Dr. Cooper Rochester.”

“What happened to Dr. Graham?”

“He had to fly out of town for a conference and asked me to replace him.”

“You are ten minutes late.”

“I apologize-”

“The waiting room is full, and we are behind.” She looked up from the notes she had made on a patient’s file and barely glanced at him before pushing away from the scarred desk.

“White lab coat?” Her brow drew in a frown as she gave his snowy white coat a scathing look. “Dr. Graham did not give you the heads up.? This is not some fancy hospital with rich people’s ailments. At the clinic, we wear scrubs; the darker, the better. You will find out for yourself why that is.”

Turning away from him, she gave Miranda, her receptionist, a brief nod. “Point him to where he needs to be. I have to deal with a patient.” Without another word, she turned on her heels and walked away, leaving Cooper staring after her with a frown.

“Is she always this pleasant?” He asked the woman who had accompanied him dryly.

“She is under extreme pressure, and you were late. Dr. Rochester? Any relationship to the Rochester’s?”

“I am afraid so.”

The woman gave him an appreciative look before indicating that he should follow her. “You are in for a shock to the system, I am afraid.” She continued. He passed a small lobby with doors leading off to the left. Opening one of those doors, Miranda gestured to the people waiting in that room.

“It’s not so bad.”

“There is another room with more people than this. Today is Monday, which means that it is our busiest day.” Her gaze wandered over his pristine white jacket with a grimace. “That’s going to get grimy pretty soon. I will leave you to it then.”

“Wait. What do I do now?”

“You see to the patients.” The cultured voice behind him had him turning around. “I hope we do not have to tell

you how to do that. Miranda, I just treated Sylvie; she needs a follow-up appointment.”

“I will see to it,” Miranda assured her before hurrying away.

“I just meant that I don’t know these people by name,” Cooper told her coolly, resenting that the petite woman standing before him was treating him like an imbecile.

“I made a list of the ones to be seen in order of priority regarding their illnesses.” Stepping into the room, she greeted the patients with a smile. “Okay, guys, we have a new fill-in doctor for today. I am going to need you to be very cooperative. Can you do that for me?”

There was a chorus of yes.

“I am sorry; what was your name again?”

“Rochester.” For the first time, he felt irritated at not being recognized.

“His name is Dr. Rochester.” Moving forward, she swept the door open to reveal a small examination room complete with a narrow bed and a file cabinet. “The list of the patients is on the table, and you can find their files in the cabinet. We have a very efficient filing system here, which makes it much easier to deal with all the patients we receive daily.”

Walking over to the table, she picked up the clipboard. “Your first patient is Sara Gleason; she is diabetic and should be on insulin, which she is refusing. Her file is in the second drawer. I will call her if you are ready to see her.”

“I am.”

“Good.” Sparing him a glance, she approached the doorway to call in the patient.

“Now Sara, this is a new doctor, and you are going to promise not to be as rude,” Brooke said, shaking her head. “As mean and rude as you have been with Dr. Graham, right?”

The woman gave her a broad smile, watery blue eyes twinkling. “This is a handsome one, so no problem at all.”

“And no flirting,” Brooke ordered as she left the room.

Leaving the door open, she stepped into the room filled to the brim with patients who had complaints as minor as the common cold to major ones, including a broken leg or arm, heart problems, high cholesterol, and the works.

Her heart contracted as her gaze swung to the teenagers who were swollen with babies - babies they had no idea who the fathers were. A never-ending cycle

of teenage pregnancy that pissed her off enough to have her marching over to the black girl with the straggly curls, one hand pressed to her bulging stomach.

“Odette, please come with me.” Without waiting to see if the girl was following her, she moved swiftly out of the room and into the tiny space she had designated to be her office.

“Leave the door open.” She instructed, going behind her desk. “Who is the daddy?”

The girl lifted her chin defiantly, dark brown eyes blazing. “None of your damn business.”

“It is my business, seeing as I am the one who will be treating you.”

“I thought the charming doctor would be doing that.”

“You are my patient. Look, this is your second pregnancy, and you are only nineteen. What the hell are you doing? Where is your little girl?”

“I left her with Mama.”

“Isn’t your Mama feeling ill?”

“So?” Odette had a belligerent tilt to the chin. “You expect I should leave her by herself? I am here for my monthly check-up, not to be questioned and judged by you or anyone else.”

Brooke gave the defiant girl a frustrated look and reigned in her temper. She was right. The clinic was a no-judgment zone; she had made that clear.

It was part of the reason she had started it in the first place, along with the fact that these people did not have the required insurance to go to a regular doctor or hospital that would send them bills they could never afford to pay.

She also treated the undocumented who could barely afford to eke out a living without the required papers, and she did so without questioning them, which kept them coming back to this haven. But girls like Odette were different. She was born in the USA and should be able to take advantage of the varied systems and opportunities.

“Is this what you want for your life?” She asked quietly. Sitting on the edge of the desk, she gave the girl a steady look. “I am not judging you here; I am just concerned. You have a sweet little girl who depends on you as her parent.

You were the one who told me the daddy did not give a damn, and it is up to you to provide for her. Now you are bringing another human being into the world, another mouth to feed. What’s the plan here, Odette?”

The girl glared at her briefly before hunching her shoulders defensively. “He said he is going to do right by me.”

“I have introduced you to several contraceptives so that you can avoid getting into this again. You are a smart girl, Odette, and you are a mother. It’s up to you to decide which direction your life will take.”

She rose at the sound of the commotion coming from the lobby. “Think about it. All of it.” Pushing the door open, she hurried to the source of the noise, her mouth tightening as she noticed the man stumbling in, blood dripping from his left shoulder.

“Alric, you are making a mess on my floor. What the hell have you done now?” The towering black man with bulging muscles and tattoos gave her a sheepish look, the grimace of pain evident on his sweaty face.

“The old lady was cleaning the gun, and it went off, I swear.”

“GSW? You know I will have to report it to the police.”

“I was hoping to avoid something like that.” He swayed slightly, teeth gritted.

“No way around it. Come with me.” She glimpsed the new doctor standing just inside the doorway. “I will take care of it. Go back to your patients.”

She just needed a minute, and she was taking it, Brooke decided as she stretched full length on the cot and closed her eyes. She had been running around treating patients for hours and needed the break. She had to admit the new doctor seemed to know his thing and was happy she did not have to hold his hand.

The waiting room was practically cleared out; it was only three in the afternoon. What was left were the runny noses and the allergies the season was famous for. Brooke could feel a low-grade headache at the back of her skull and was determined to ignore it.

She hated taking any form of medication, and it had to be dire for her even to consider it. That had been the case even when she was a child. Her brother would say that she was a classic case. “You prescribe medications to people daily, and yet you refuse to take any.”

“I am a doctor; I don’t need medicine.” She had retorted loftily. Turning her head at the knock on the door, she watched when it was pushed open, and Cooper Rochester stepped in.

“I see you have decided to remove the lab coat.”

“I had to after I was thrown up on twice. And I think a very adorable baby girl wiped something questionable on the sleeve. Am I disturbing you?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Are you always this friendly?”

Brooke had to bite back the grin at his sarcasm. “This is my good day. How may I help you?”

“What do you do for a meal around here?”

“Miranda was supposed to be dealing with that. Two local cafes and two restaurants in the area provide meals for us as part of their contribution to the clinic. They would not want their doctors or support staff starving to death.”

Swinging her legs off the bed, she stretched with her hands over her head, making him aware of the shape of her small breasts against the ash-gray top she had on. She was the most irritating female he had ever encountered, certainly the rudest.

Still, seeing her working tirelessly with these people, considered the dregs of society, he had gained his grudging admiration. Not to mention that she was stunning; she was not wearing any makeup whatsoever, not even the sheen of lipstick on her full and generous lips.

Her braids were untidy and piled on her head with little sense of style. But her skin was the most flawless he had ever seen, and combined with the wideness of her eyes and the shape of her face, he wondered if she had any idea that she was quite a looker. Probably not, he thought in surprise.

“Is there something else?” The calm and cultured voice broke into his reverie.

“No. Sorry for disturbing you.”

Brooke watched as he stepped out and closed the door behind him. Of course, she knew who he was; how could she not? Billionaire son of an empire playing doctor, she thought with a smirk.

She was probably thinking that saving lives would make him feel better that his pharmaceutical company had thrived on the backs of suffering people.

She had no time for big pharma, and even though she was a doctor, she hated the medicines the pharmaceutical companies produced with the pretense of caring about getting people better.

She saw it for what it was - a money-making venture, with the companies bent on profit. Get the people hooked on the drugs and insist that they would have to live on these same drugs for the rest of their lives.

It was a sick plan, but one that was working out very well. Shoving off the bed, she slipped her feet into the comfortable Crocs and left the room. First, she would find something to eat and then update her patients'

charts. It had slowed down somewhat, but the evening crowd still had to be dealt with.

When Cooper reluctantly agreed to fill in as a favor for Carl Graham at a downtown free clinic, he thought it would be a disaster. The place looked dilapidated and desolate; the paved parking lot had cracks running from one end to the other, not to mention the building itself, which needed a paint job.

He had almost turned back, but he had committed and was a man of his word. The red sports car he had arrived in was curiously out of place in such surroundings and, despite the sophisticated alarm system, would most likely be stolen or scrapped for parts.

But after spending several hours working with patients who did not have the means to go to a regular health center, he had to admit he was charmed. Rough and tumble men had swaggered into the clinic with various ailments, showing respect for the petite woman who did

not seem intimidated by their size or swagger.

He watched as she treated them, reprimanded them when needed, and ignored the heavy flirtation and invitations. Dr. Brooke Campbell was all about the work and was unafraid of anyone.

Sitting in what could be loosely called the staff lunch area, replete with the surprisingly delicious spaghetti and meatballs topped off by the scrumptious strawberry shortcake and not-too-bad coffee, he was ready to return to work.

The woman who had intrigued him when he saw her was sat near the doorway, absorbed in some files she had brought.

She had briefly acknowledged him before going off to sit by herself. Miranda had chosen to sit next to him and talked his ears off before leaving to go back out front.

Taking a leisurely sip of the coffee, he watched her surreptitiously, noticing the elegant length of her fingers

and how long her lashes were. And that she was biting down on her lush bottom lip as she penciled in something at the edge of the chart.

Suddenly, she looked up, golden-brown eyes colliding with his, a frown on her smooth forehead. “Is there a reason you are still here?”

“Just enjoying the coffee,” he responded mildly, a faint smile touching his lips. “Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“Of course not. But while you are lounging around and enjoying the coffee, patients are waiting to be taken care of. This is not your fancy hospital brimming over with doctors and nurses. If you recall, it’s just the two of us here to tend to these sick people, and we do not have the luxury of taking an hour for lunch.”

“I have been in here-” He consulted his watch. “Twenty minutes now.”

“That’s ten minutes overtime. You are needed in the examination room. A child was just brought in with an acute ear infection.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a mock salute, he rose and left the room without finishing his coffee.

Staring at the space where he had been, she shook her head and tried to get back to what she had been doing. She had felt his eyes on her and had been angry that she had been unable to ignore his presence in the break room.

Dr. Graham was a middle-aged man who had barely said two words to her, which was OK with her. She was here to treat her patients, and that was it.

She was not interested in some wealthy ass doctor with thick glossy black hair and amber eyes. No doubt he had a well-equipped gym from his looks, and she had

glimpsed outside and saw his red sports car.

What the hell was he thinking, driving that here? She had thought irritably. It would serve him right if the vehicle were gone when he was ready to leave. But she knew it would still be there. She had established a rapport with the gang members in the area, and they fiercely protected her and anyone else associated with her.

She was here to treat their loved ones, which was highly appreciated. She had shown her strength when one of them had sauntered in and tried to be aggressive with her; she had seen it for what it was - a metaphorical and physical flexing of power. She had met it with one of her own by standing up to him, which garnered her respect.

The rest had come by when they realized that she cared well and was not playing doctor.

Putting the folders away, she finished her coffee and left the room to return to work.

“I think we are through for the day.” Brooke rubbed a hand at the back of her neck and felt the tension building there. “If you are finished, you might as well go home.” She told Miranda.

“And leave you alone with McDreamy?”

“Who?”

“The hot doctor filling in for Dr. Graham. Have you seen the number of female patients we had today?”

“I am pretty sure we always have a lot of female patients.” Brooke retorted dryly.

“Not this many. It’s like those here before went out to spread the word. Some of them came in and insisted they wanted to be treated by the hot doctor, and I am using their words. A couple of them just had a few sniffles.”

“You should have alerted me, and I would have moved them along.”

“Ah, doc,” Miranda’s eyes twinkled. “Why spoil their fun? If looking at the sumptuous-looking doctor makes their day, who am I to stand in their way? The men come here to gaze at you with stars in their eyes, don’t they?”

“You are hilarious. Go home.”

“You are the boss.” Miranda grinned at her as she tidied her desk. “See you in the morning.”

Turning away from the desk, Brooke went to her office, diverting toward the open examination room. She was about to leave when she stood there watching as he spoke softly to the little girl, rubbing the tears from her eyes.

“It’s not going to hurt?” She asked with a sniff.

“Would I lie to you?” He asked her with a grin that had the little girl staring at him in wonder. It took all her self-control not to roll her eyes at the apparent fascination on the child’s face. “It’s just a prick that you will barely feel, and afterward, you will be running all over the place with Mommy chasing you.”

“Okay.” She nodded.

Moving away before he could notice her, Brooke went into her office to finish her paperwork. She was deep into it and never saw him standing inside the doorway until he cleared his throat. “I think that’s the last patient.”

Looking up from the files, she gave him a nod. “You did good.”

His thick, dark brows lifted as he propped a broad shoulder on the door jamb. “Is that approval I just heard?”

“For a preppy rich doctor, you seem to know what you are doing.” She told him coolly.

“Ah, so you do know who I am.”

“I know who you are; it is not a big deal here. You are just the doctor filling in for the regular and did a creditable job.”

“Ouch.” Cooper was determined not to show how much her barbs had hit a nerve. “I guess that is my cue to take my leave. It was a pleasure, Dr. Campbell.” With a mock salute, he turned and left.

Chapter 4

“You look like someone with many things on their mind.”
Caitlin stepped into her office and closed the doors behind her.

“I was just inside the conference room and had to endure the mindless drivel of the board members again.”
Striding over to the table tucked into the corner of the room, he poured coffee for both of them, bringing it over to her. “You look tired.”

“You are perfect for a woman’s ego.” His sister said wryly as she accepted the cup of coffee and settled back against the soft leather chair. She was older than him by two years and favored their mother. Instead of beauty, Caitlin Rochester was a handsome woman with robust features, unassuming sable brown hair, and light green eyes.

Her mouth was too thin, and her nose was too narrow.
But her skin was smooth alabaster, and her best feature

was the tapered brows and surprisingly sooty lashes. Her mind was as sharp as a razor, and like their mother, she did not suffer fools gladly.

“I always speak the truth.” Cooper flashed his charming grin, white teeth dazzling against his tanned complexion. He had inherited their father’s extremely good looks, lofty height, and legendary charm. “When was the last time you left this office and went on a date?”

Caitlin disliked discussing her personal life, even if it was non-existent. Something which plagued her constantly. She was a woman on top, a powerhouse in the business world. She was vice president of a multi-billion dollar Fortune 500 company from an old, distinguished family.

Most men could not bear being with a woman with that power and distinction. She was intelligent and had been to some of the finest schools in the world. She loved that she was not just here because of her name, but she also contributed to the company.

The opposite sex did not take too kindly to women of power, as she had found out when all of her relationships had ended disastrously. She was now concentrating on work, which was highly satisfying.

The problem was that the satisfaction did not stay with her when she slipped between the sheets at night. She was heading into spinsterhood, and it was happening without her realizing it. She also had no intention of finding a man just to be a couple.

“Cait?”

Shaking herself out of her depressing reverie, she gave her handsome brother, who would never have that problem, a steady look.

“I am a woman in a man’s world.” She told him blithely.

“What does that mean?” He stared at her with a frown.

“You are brilliant, so figuring things out does not take long. I am not like you, darling. I am intimidating and cold, as Brian told me several weeks ago.”

Cooper’s mouth tightened at the mention of the man who had shattered his sister’s heart not too long ago. Brian Jasper was a friend of the family, and there had been the hope that things would become permanent where the couple were concerned.

Cooper had never seen his sister so happy and content, only to discover that the man had also visited another woman. When Cooper confronted him, Brian told him he had tried. “My friend, your sister is a ballbreaker and not feminine enough to keep me in her bed.”

Cooper had punched him in the face for the first time, not caring about a lawsuit or the damage to his hands. His mother and sister had been furious with him, but he had told him it was worth it.

“He is an asshole and not worth your time.”

“I completely agree with you.” Light green eyes studied his face. “What’s on your mind? I noticed that you appeared distracted while we were in the meeting.”

Rising with his usual grace, he started pacing the length of the large office, stopping at the window where the other high-rise buildings speared upwards to the sky. It was a lovely day, the sky a deep cerulean blue, the sun a brilliant contrast. He had spent yesterday tending to the poverty-stricken, which had felt wonderful.

Not to mention the woman who runs the clinic. For the first time, he had not been courted as Cooper Rochester but treated like an ordinary person. It had been humbling.

“I volunteered at the clinic downtown yesterday.”

“So I heard. I cannot believe you went into that neighborhood. Mother was having a fit.”

He turned to look at her, a whimsical smile on his face. “I had misgivings going in, but it was not bad.” He shook his head. “It was wonderful, Cait.

The people, their needs, and the smiles on their faces, especially the children, made my day. I was propositioned sexually more times than I can recall and offered freshly baked cookies for my service. It was an illuminating experience.”

“And hopefully, a one-time thing.”

He grinned as he walked back over to sit on the chair facing the plain desk, large hands folded around the cup. “Dr. Graham is still at the conference and has asked me to fill in for him tomorrow. I am looking forward to it.” His expression became thoughtful. “You happen to know the

doctor who runs the place.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Dr. Brooke Campbell.”

“Any relation to Marjorie Campbell?”

“Her daughter. I had no idea that she was from such a wealthy family.”

“She is from a family and chooses to be at that clinic. The place is situated in the worst part of the downtown area.”

“And needs an influx of capital. The exam rooms are too small, and the medical equipment is from another

century. The lunch area is a joke, but only two people work there.

Dr. Campbell and her receptionist. Doctors and nurses from different hospitals do rotations to help out as part of an arrangement, but the place is packed with people needing help.

The place is not equipped for surgeries, but Dr. Campbell is determined to do what she can with the little she has available. I thought we could contribute to the place by donating some equipment and medicines. These people cannot afford a pharmacy or insurance.”

Caitlin stared at her brother curiously. “It sounds like you are on a crusade.”

He shrugged and leaned back, taking a sip of his excellent coffee. “I admire what she is trying to do.”

“And no doubt in the process, admire the woman as well.” She murmured intuitively.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” finishing the coffee, he rose and went to put away his cup. “I have to run, duty calls.”

“No doubt, we will pick back up this conversation at another time.”

“What conversation?” With his disarming smile, he left her, closing the doors behind him.

“I have made an appointment for you at Salon Absolute. I had to do some tap dancing and promised that dreadful Simone that I would get her some tickets to the ballet for next Saturday.” Marjorie squeezed the wedge of lemon into the sparkling water before taking a tentative sip.

“You are required to show up on time. It costs an arm and a leg, but the service is excellent, and the results are guaranteed.” With a grimace, she passed a critical glance over the haphazard braids.

“I wished you would have contacted me before doing so, Mother.” Brooke had been forced into the standing luncheon appointment and regretted it. She could not afford to take time off for lunch, which Marjorie Campbell refuses to consider.

“I knew you would have found some excuse to escape it. The spring ball is coming up, and you cannot deny it is for a worthy cause.”

“I had every intention of dealing with my hair-”

“By slathering gel all over it and brushing in the loose hairs. I know, darling. You are such a beautiful woman, if only you would-”

“What? Slap on makeup and wear heels to the clinic?
Put on designer clothing to take care of the sick?”

“You chose to work in that place.” She was reminded blandly. “I know you are trying to make a point, but you have already done so.”

Brooke could not help but laugh. Marjorie Campbell had a way of not seeing the point, especially if she did not approve of it. “You are priceless.” Shaking her head, she dug into her overpriced salad. The restaurant was uptown and trendy, mainly catering to men wearing three-piece suits and their very wealthy clients.

She spotted a few celebrities as well, not that she was in any way impressed or starry-eyed. She would have preferred to be in her tiny office or sitting in the small lunch room with the peeling walls while updating her patients' files.

“I care for people who cannot manage that for themselves. The clinic is a refuge for people who are genuinely suffering.”

“And you are their crusader.” Her mother’s eyes flashed fire.

“That’s right.” Brooke refused to be cowed. “I am who I am, mother, and have no intention of changing. Now, about that appointment-”

“I hardly ask anything of you.” Picking up her water, Marjorie took a sip, eyeing her daughter over the rim. She was still wearing the dreadful aquamarine scrubs she had worn for the clinic, not bothering to change.

Her braids were piled on her head in a haphazard, and there was no makeup on her face, not even a dab of lipstick. Marjorie had to admit grudgingly that even without the artifice, Brooke managed to be exquisite. She had seen several men admiring her as soon as she

walked in, and several were still trying to get her attention.

Not that her daughter noticed, or if she did, she ignored the overtures. Seeing her wasting her life like this frustrated her as a mother. “I tolerated your sense of independence that had you moving out of your home, and I cannot do anything about you wasting your life at that dreadful clinic.

But if you do not attend this appointment, I will be disappointed. Is it too much to ask? Am I not entitled to be a mother? Your mother? Or do I have to tumble into that clinic of yours wearing rags for you even to spare me a glance or get your attention?”

Brooke had to acknowledge that no one laid on the guilt as thick as her mother. She was a master at the game. “I will be at the appointment, not that I can spare the time, but to make you feel better and to get you off my case, I will be there.”

“That’s all I am asking.” Marjorie bent a genial smile on her as she dug into her salad. “Don’t waste the meal. Not only is it expensive, but it is delicious.” She gave Brooke a critical once over. “You look a little thinner than usual.”

“Why, thanks, Mother.” Brooke dug into the salad as she hastened to bring this torture of lunch to its finale.

“Now let’s talk outfit.”

“How was lunch?” Miranda gave her a sympathetic smile as she strode into the clinic.

“Don’t ask.”

“That good, huh?”

“I brought you back some cherry blossom truffles.”

“Yum.” Eagerly reaching for the fancy container, she handed Brooke several messages.

“There is also someone waiting for you in the waiting room.”

“Who?” She asked with a frown. After almost an hour with her mother discussing the proper outfit for the charity function, she was not in the mood to visit with anyone.

“Detective delicious,” Miranda told her with a grin. “I told him you were out to lunch, and he insisted on waiting.”

Biting off a sigh, she headed in the direction of the small room to see him drinking coffee and reading a magazine.

“Dan.”

Turning his head, he flashed her an admiring smile that was not lost on her. She was aware of his ‘crush’ on her. He had asked her out several times, and she had turned him down. He was a nice enough guy, attractive in a non-threatening kind of way, but she was not interested in a relationship. “I hope you don’t mind my waiting.”

“I have to dive right in.” She indicated the overflowing room. A nurse and doctor were helping out today, but the crowd was still thick.

“I can see that. You are doing a hell of a job, Brooke.”

“Thanks. How may I help you?” She jerked her head and indicated that he followed her as she made her way to her tiny office.

“The Billings gang.”

“What about them?” Going around her desk, she put the messages down and picked up a file she had left there.

“There are rumors of a gang feud stirring up.”

Looking up at him, she raised an eyebrow and waited for him to continue. Gang uprisings were part of the fabric of this neighborhood as much as the graffiti on the walls of the abandoned buildings.

The mayor and the governor had been making the usual political noises about cleaning up this downtown section, but as far as Brooke was concerned, it was just that - talk and nothing more.

The neighborhood was dilapidated, and the unoccupied buildings were havens for drugged-out individuals and perps running from the law. She was accustomed to seeing the thriving business of drugs being exchanged for cash, and it made her angry enough to march into the mayor's office to petition to get them to do better, to no avail.

“Oh?”

Dan's sparse light brown eyebrows lifted over his pale blue eyes. “I am just concerned-”

“No need. The gangs, even the opposing ones, leave us alone. We are a medical clinic, and a free one at that. We are on their side, and they are not that stupid to want to do anything to change that.

We take care of their loved ones as well as the various members who get themselves shot at or suffer from a knife wound. They don't worry me.”

“I wish you would not be so dismissive.” His expression showed her how much he admired her and was making her uncomfortable.

“I don’t have time to worry about the turf wars and all that nonsense. That’s your job.” She pointed out.

“And I assure you that we are here for you, Brooke. The entire precinct admires what you are trying to do here.”

She flashed him a smile that had his blood pressure spiking. “And we thank you for that.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall facing her. “I have to go.”

“I wish you would let me take you to lunch or dinner.”

“My schedule-”

“Is full, I know, but even one as committed as you have to eat.” His voice had turned persuasive, and Brooke had to tamp down the impatience. She was uninterested in him and would never be, but he refused to take the hint.

“I will let you know.”

He nodded with a pleased smile as if she had given him a total commitment. “I will leave you to it then.” With a nod of his ash blonde head, he turned and left.

Hissing out a breath, she put the file away and went out to dive into work.

His mind was not on the opening nor the woman clinging to his arm. And he realized what he was feeling was an acute sense of boredom. He was accustomed to the lavish lifestyle and well-dressed people milling around the newly appointed gallery and discreetly placing their orders for the paintings mounted on the wall.

He was even more than familiar with the primary artist. Jackson Colby was highly acclaimed, and his talent was well-known. His brother Jason, a sculptor, had also made his name. Both men were members of his club.

He had also been persuaded to purchase a piece for Wendy, one she insisted would look good in her home office. It cost more than they made in a year, but it did not faze her.

“Oh! Look at this, darling.” She brought them to a stop before a sculpture, unmistakable clean and graceful lines. “Isn’t it lovely?”

“I hope you are not hoping that I will purchase it for you. I am cleaned out.”

“As if you can be.” She scoffed. Letting go of his arm, she glided over to touch the smooth surface of a man bent in a crouching position as if shielding the woman from something dangerous. “It says so much.”

“I am sure it does.” He was in dire need of a drink. Beckoning to the white-coated waiter, he plucked off two glasses of champagne and handed her one. He had not wanted to come in the first place.

He had received the invitation two weeks ago and had been about to discard them, but Wendy had been horrified that he would consider doing such a thing. ‘We could go.’ She had said persuasively.

“It’s in the middle of the week, and I am on the early shift the next day.” he had pointed out.

“We could leave early. Oh please, I want to go.”

He had capitulated then, and now he regretted it. She had begged to be introduced to Jackson and Jason and had spent twenty minutes gushing over them.

He could not believe this was the same woman he had thought of as calm and collected when he first met her. On their first date, she insisted they go to a bistro. “Not your usual fancy restaurant. I know you want to lead as normal a life as possible, and I want to help.”

He had admired her candor and the fact that she was not dazzled by his name and social standing. Now he realized it had all been for show, something to trick him into thinking she was not like the rest. He was about to end the relationship anyway, making it even easier.

“I will be over there.” He pointed in the general direction of the buffet. Without waiting for her approval, he wound through the crowd toward the table where Jackson and Jason were surrounded by admiring patrons.

“I don’t know how you stand it.” He murmured as the brothers managed to move them along.

“Stand what?” Plucking a glass of champagne off the tray, Jackson eyed him curiously.

“The constant fawning.”

“They happen to be paying lots of money for my paintings; the least I can do is put up with the adulation,” he said with a grin.

“You love it.”

“I tolerate it.” Jackson corrected him, eyeing his friend curiously. “You, conversely, doc, seem to be at sea.” His gaze lifted to the woman who was now talking to Liam.

“Bored already?”

“What the hell is wrong with me?”

“It seems you are searching for something meaningful.”

Cooper laughed softly. “Trying your hand at psychology?”

“You are the one with the medical degree. I am just making a point.”

“And that would be?”

“You are not satisfied with your life or the woman in it. That simply means it is time for a change.”

“I am sick of the entire scene, and suffice it to say that I thought she was different.”

Jackson chuckled softly. “As opposed to?”

“The others I have been out with.” Shrugging that aside, he picked up a plate and loaded it with shrimp and canapes. “She got me to purchase the ‘Illusion.’”

“Ah,” Jackson grinned at him. “Excellent choice.”

“It also costs more than my damn salary for the year.”

“But you can more than afford it, my friend.”

“That’s entirely my point. I am a doctor, and she knows that.”

“She also knows you are not your everyday run-of-the-mill doctor. You happen to be worth a damn fortune.”

Chapter 5

“You again?”

“Your appreciation is starting to make me feel uncomfortable.” Cooper had to admit to himself that he had been counting the minutes till he got here, not just to see her, but the work that she does.

“What happened to Dr. Graham?”

“I am starting to feel unwanted.”

Her steely look from golden brown eyes had him almost smiling. “The conference ran over.”

She was about to turn away when there was a commotion at the front door.

“Bitch! I know you are here.”

“What-”

“Just go on into the examination room. We have a full house, as usual. I will deal with it.”

Ignoring her, he watched as the petite woman, wearing the burgundy scrubs, marched purposefully towards the large black man with tattoos all over his arms and shoulders.

“Marcus, how may I help you?”

“I know you have Lisa in there, and I am not leaving without her.”

“Then you and I are going to have a problem.”

He stared at her for a few seconds before grinning widely. “What are you going to do?”

Did she come crying to you, saying that I knocked her around?”

“She is so loyal to you that she is saying that she was mugged.” Brooke’s eyes flashed. “Are you admitting to abusing her? That woman in there is sporting a black eye and several broken ribs. I started to call the cops, but she would not hear of it. Do you like knocking women around, Marcus?”

Does it make you feel like a man? Is it compensating for your small...attitude?” The slur and the hesitation were not lost on the man, and Cooper took a step toward them, only to be halted by Miranda.

“She will handle it; just wait.”

“Bitch, what are you saying just now?”

“It’s Dr. Bitch, and I am giving you exactly two seconds to get the hell out of here before I have Miranda call the cops and have you taken out in handcuffs. Lisa might be too afraid of you to press charges, but I am not. Now go.”

“I am not leaving without her.” The man started to move her out of the way, but she had anticipated that. In the blink of an eye or so it seemed to Cooper, who stood there frozen in shock, the tiny woman with the untidy braids had her knee lodged in the man’s groin.

He toppled to the ground, his hands gripping the injured part of him protectively. His breath wheezed out as he stared up at her.

“You bitch.” He croaked. “You broke my balls.”

“I will do more than that if you don’t leave.”

“I cannot move.” He wheezed.

“Let me help you up.” Cooper finally managed to rise from the shock of seeing the large man brought down by the petite woman. Extending a hand, he helped Marcus up and toward the doorway.

“Nice move.” Amber eyes were alight with amusement as he made his way back.

“We have work to do.” Without another word, Brooke turned and walked away.

“I told you she could do it.” Miranda was openly laughing as she took a sip of her tea.

“She is something else, isn’t she?”

“She is the most unusual person I have ever met and the strongest, and you had better get your ass in gear before she starts shouting for you.”

Flashing the woman a smile that left her dazed, he hurried away.

Brooke felt the weariness invading her soul. She was not getting anywhere. She had treated the physical bruises but was stumped as far as the emotional ones were concerned. Lisa was still not listening to reason and she could not force the woman to leave a life she had become accustomed to.

Her job as a doctor did not stop at just treating a wound or prescribing the necessary medication; it went beyond that, and she could not help but care.

She had considered getting some women's movement involved to come in and give talks to these women who were battered and had the mindset that the kind of life they were living was acceptable, but she had not gotten around to doing so yet. She had a feeling it was time.

"He loves me." Lisa insisted, wiping her palms over the faded legs of her jeans. "It's just that finding a job has been hard for him."

"And in the meantime, he is using your body to alleviate his rage. Look," Brooke reigned in the impatience and reminded herself to tread gently. She had other patients requiring her attention, but she had to try at least to make the girl see reason. "I know you feel some sort of loyalty-"

"He loves me." She insisted.

“And I will point out that if someone loves you, they would never want to lay a hand on you.”

“I am not like you, doc.” She whispered. “I am not educated and from a rich family. I lived in the projects and was knocked around by my old man, who was a drunk. Mama was a junkie and did not know what was going on most of the time. Marcus saved me from all that.”

“And is now repeating the cycle by abusing you.” She reached for the girl’s hand. “I can help you to find a job-”

“Marcus does not want me to work.”

Brooke simply stared at her. “Why the hell not?”

Turning her head away, Lisa stared at the peeling wall.
“He is jealous.”

“So, he prefers you to starve to death.”

“He is looking for a job.”

“How hard is he looking?”

“You don’t understand.” She repeated.

“Then make me understand. You are young and pretty and have your whole life ahead of you. The state offers programs to empower you and make your life easier. Take advantage of what’s been offered. Go back to school, get your GED, and continue.”

“Marcus won’t let me.”

“It’s not his choice. You are going to go back to the very man who put bruises on you.” She looked up when Miranda came to the door.

“Little Bobby is puking his guts out.”

“Where is Dr. Rochester?”

“Seeing a diabetic patient.”

“On my way.” Looking back at Lisa, she pressed her point. “I am here for you; think about what I just said and get back to me, please.”

With a nod, Lisa rose gingerly to her feet, pressing her hand against her left side.

“And come and see me in a few days.”

Wishing she could say and do more, Brooke left the room to see her other patients. She could not be forced if the woman did not want her help.

He was finding it a pleasure just looking at her. The day she had zipped by with them treating nearly fifty patients ranging from minor ailments to multiple stabs and GSW. Some of the patients were resistant to getting involved with the police, and he had to admire how she dealt with every one of them.

Nothing fazed her. She would be brutal in defending battered women against their spouses and be as gentle as a dove when dealing with a frightened child. He was concluding that Dr. Brooke Campbell was the most fascinatingly intriguing woman he had ever met and, indeed, the hardest nut to crack.

She did not speak to him unless it pertained to a patient and avoided him at all costs. Now, he was invading her space. She was stretched full length on the narrow cot in one of the examination rooms. Her comfortable clogs were kicked off, and her eyes closed.

“You better have a damn good reason for standing there,” she remarked without opening her eyes.

“What if I said I am enjoying the scenery?” He crossed his arms over his chest and propped a shoulder against the doorjamb. Her eyes drifted open, and he was subjected to what he would interpret as an insolent stare.

“My heart is all aflutter.”

He laughed softly, amber eyes twinkling. “Then my work here is done.”

“What do you want?” She asked rudely.

“A mutual patient wants your input. Mr. James Freeman. He says he prefers to get the last word from you.’ His expression turned sober. “I take it you did not let him know the cancer is spreading?”

“Guilty. The man is ninety years old and does not need anyone prodding and poking around in his body. He wants to be left alone.”

“He lives alone.”

“The way he prefers it.”

“You don’t think he should have a nurse or someone caring for him?”

“He cannot afford it and does not want anyone in his space.”

“Except you. He told me you drop in to check on him repeatedly.”

“So?” She asked, glaring at him.

His eyebrows lifted. “Is there a reason you are so defensive?”

“You are just the guy who fills in for a fill-in doctor. Nothing that happens here should concern you.”

He stiffened at that. “I am a doctor, and when it concerns my patient-”

“He is my damn patient. When you leave here to return to your fancy hospital, you will forget all about this place. Because, let’s face it, it’s not your usual style, right?”

Cooper felt the pleasure drifting away as he stared at her furiously. “Is it my money that offends you? Because if it is, then you are a damn hypocrite, considering that you are not strapped for cash.”

“Get the hell out of my face!”

“Gladly!”

She stared at the space he had just vacated and willed her anger to dissolve. He got on her wrong side for some reason. Men like Dr. Cooper Rochester were accustomed to women falling all over them, but she was not that gullible.

Men like him also reminded her of her treacherous dad, which might account for why she was so jumpy around him and so pissed off. She could not wait for Dr. Graham to come back.

She would give it one hour, and then she was leaving. She felt uncomfortable. It was not as if she was not accustomed to a setting like this - she had grown up attending this type of function. The hotel ballroom might be different, but it was the same to her.

It looked the same, felt the same way, and was filled with the same kind of overdressed people who had more money than brains. The women looked like peacocks, decked out in all their finery with jewelry sparkling under the lights from the chandeliers suspended from the soaring ceiling.

And her dress was like a paper napkin. The more she tried to pull it down, the more it was determined to ride up under her ass. This was the last time she let her mother pick out her outfit.

She plucked a flute of champagne from the passing waiter, utterly oblivious that she was attracting much attention from the opposite sex.

“Want something stronger?” Her brother’s amused voice had her lurching around and almost spilling the drink.

“Oh God, yes. There must be a bar around here somewhere.”

“Aren’t you driving home?”

“I took a cab so I can numb myself with liquor all night long.” Tucking her hand through his arm, she leaned in to kiss him. “And these shoes, I swear I am walking on

stilts. They were designed to have me falling on my ass if I am not careful.”

“Love the dress,” he told her with a grin.

“Mother has a sense of humor. First, she had me going to that dreadful salon where I had to sit for three freaking hours to get the braids out; then it was time to shampoo and deep condition my hair, and then the blow dryer.

Afterward, I had to threaten that bitch to redo my braids because she was going on and on about the length and thickness of my hair and why I would not leave it as it was.

I had to explain to her while trying not to scream or choke her to death, that I am a doctor and my work consumes me. I do not have time to sit in front of a mirror and try to develop a style every day. Braids make it easier and are more practical for me.”

“It looks good.” Lifting a hand, he tugged at a loose twist that had escaped the bun on top of her head. “You look like a girl.” He teased her.

“Newsflash, I am a girl.” She turned to look around the room. “I am planning on ditching in thirty minutes.”

“Mother will be giving her speech by then, and she is going to be pissed if you miss it.”

“I need to go home-” Her voice trailed off as she stared at the man several feet away. Dr. Cooper Rochester looked unlike his usual self. He wore a dark blue tux, his thick dark hair brushed severely from his forehead.

Her breath caught in her throat when he laughed at something someone in the group said to him. As if he knew she was watching him, he lifted his head and looked right at her.

One dark brow lifted, his eyes wandering boldly over her. His gaze lingered on her lips. She had painted a bold red to walk down the rest of her body before returning to her face. Brooke found herself bristling at the intimate smile curving his lips.

“Brooke?”

“What?”

“Who- Ah, Dr. Rochester. Have you formally met him?”

“He volunteered two days at the clinic last week.” Tearing her gaze from his hooded eyes, she returned to her brother.

“Not his usual scene.”

“He was filling in for Dr. Graham.”

Dwayne lifted his eyes, amused that the man was staring at his sister. “He seems to like looking at you.”

“I suspect that a man like that enjoys looking at women as if they were a rack of lamb.” She said dryly, wringing a laugh from him.

“He is coming over.”

“What? Here-” She started to hand him the champagne glass to leave, but it was too late.

“Dr. Campbell, what a surprise.” The deep voice had her gritting her teeth as she turned to face him.

“Why? You did not think I could find the right outfit for the occasion?”

“Something like that.” His amused drawl was tinged with laughter. “It’s very - er- shall we say - gratifying to see you out of your scrubs.”

“Oh, just-”

“I am her brother, Dwayne.” The interruption was smooth and well-timed.

“Very nice to meet you,” Cooper said, reaching for his hand.

“I will see you in a few, honey.” He was gone before she could stop him, leaving her alone with the annoying man.

“It’s just you and me now; what shall we do?”

“I don’t care what you do, but I know I will find the nearest bar and drown my distaste for being here.” She started to turn and leave when she realized he was walking alongside her.

“Please go away.”

“It so happens I want to find the bar, too,” he told her smoothly.

“Isn’t that woman your date?” She jerked her head towards the woman in the group, watching them walk away.

“She is a friend.”

“I see. Does she know you are on the verge of dumping her?” They had reached the bar now. Sliding onto the stool, she ordered a shot of whiskey. “Hold the ice,”

“I did not say we were together.”

“And I could care less. Now leave me to enjoy my drink.”

“I’ll have what she’s having.” Taking the stool next to her, he propped his hands on the marble bar. “Is there a reason why you don’t like me?”

“Allow me to count the ways.” Nodding her thanks to the admiring bartender, she sipped her drink.

“Is it because I am rich?” He persisted. “Because I hate to repeat myself, but we are cut from the same cloth.”

She stared at him briefly before bursting out in genuine laughter. “Yeah, right.”

“What I meant was that you are here.”

“Under extreme duress. What’s your point?”

“We belong to the same society.”

“No, we don’t.” She denied forcibly.

“What do you have against money?” Turning sideways, he tried to stop from noticing the swell of her breasts beneath the clingy material of her dress. The color was attractive; a cross between orange and red suited her complexion perfectly.

She was only wearing lipstick and her hair - the braids had been drawn tight, leaving her face bare so he could see the curve of her cheekbones. She had multiple piercings in her left lobe, decorated with colorful stones; the first lobe had large gold hoops almost touching her shoulders. Interestingly enough, the right lobe just had two piercings.

“You did something different with your hair,” he commented softly.

“Nice of you to notice. To answer your question, I like money, it’s just that too much of it is concentrated in one place only. Look at this-” She waved a hand to encompass the room. “People are eating expensive food, and the cost of the liquor in this place could outfit a small third-world country or take care of the housing problems in the projects.”

“So, you are a crusader.”

Her eyes glittered at that. “I have a heart.”

“Isn’t this event supposed to be making money for the pediatric wing of several hospitals?”

He queried. He was enjoying sparring with her. He had agreed to attend the function and had even reluctantly brought Wendy along with him but had been bored and was about to make up some excuse to leave when he saw her.

The jolt had gone through him like a bolt of lightning. He had been pissed at her the last time he had been at the clinic and had left as soon as the previous person had been treated, barely saying anything to her.

She was frustrating and insulting, but besides her exquisite beauty, he admired her gut and grit and the fact that she cared about the people she treated. He had never met anyone like her.

“Rich people gathered around, drinking and writing checks. It does not mean a damn thing.”

“Are you always this ray of sunshine?”

She cut him a glance that could have pulverized rocks.

“By the way, a bit of good news. It seems like I will become a permanent fixture at the clinic.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” She demanded.

He bit back a grin at the harassed expression on her face. “I think the phrase is welcome to the family.”

Brooke had a difficult time biting back the smile at his cheekiness. “What happened to Dr. Graham?”

“He has a sick Mom and is moving to Florida to care for her. I am afraid I jumped the gun because he is supposed to be getting in touch with you tomorrow. I guess I can chalk it down to enthusiasm on my part. I don’t expect you to roll out the red carpet, throw me a party-”

“You are a moron.”

“Is that a smile I see?” His amber eyes twinkled, making her aware of his immense charm. The man was lethal. Before responding, she saw the stunning woman wearing emerald green approaching.

“Your date must be wondering what is keeping you.”

“She is just a...”

“Save it.” Finishing the drink, she rose and, giving the woman a faint nod, walked away.

“Who was that?”

“Dr. Brooke Campbell. She runs the clinic downtown.” He had to force himself not to follow her departure and tamped down his annoyance that Wendy had interrupted them.

“Isn’t that the place you have been going to?”

“Yes.” He clipped. Closing his eyes briefly, he expelled a breath. “I have to get out of here.”

“I was thinking that we could go back to my place.”

“Not a good idea. I am not good company tonight, sorry.”

Wendy kept the smile on her face as she tucked her hand through his arm. She had seen how he looked at her when they stood together and watched them together before she came forward. The woman was exquisite, and Cooper was interested; she had identified the expression on his face.

Chapter 6

“I brought coffee and cake.” He gave her a disarming smile as he carted the goodies in. “I figured we could use the sugar rush and caffeine.”

Barely sparing him a glance, Brooke went on into the waiting room.

“I think I am growing on her.” He turned a devastating smile on Miranda and brightened her mood.

“Don’t mind her. I hope there is a cup for me.”

“Of course.” He handed her one and opened the white cardboard box; he waited until she had taken a donut out before closing it.

“I suppose I will just have to take this to her.”

“Put it in her office. I heard the good news: you will permanently cover for Dr. Graham.”

“I will.” With another smile that had her beaming, he went to her office, stopping short when he saw her sitting on the edge of the desk.

“Here you go.”

Looking up from the patient’s files, she tensed as he came into the small space, crowding her in.

“You don’t have to bring food.”

“I wanted to.” He peered over her shoulder. “Anything I should know about?”

She started to open her mouth to tell him to mind his own business but decided against it. “Mrs. Crosby is suffering from chronic osteoarthritis in both knees and refuses to go and live with her daughter. I have prescribed something for the pain, but it’s not enough.”

“Is she here?”

“She is in the examination room. I am trying to find a solution. She lives alone and cannot afford the help.”

“Where does her daughter live?”

“With her husband and two children in a small apartment downtown. They are not wealthy, and the space is tight, but she needs someone to care for her.”

“How big is Mrs. Crosby’s place?”

“Two bedrooms, and it is run down.” She rubbed a hand at the back of her neck, and he had the insane urge to take the tension away.

“Wouldn’t Medicaid pay for her to have someone come in to prepare her meals and do the housework?”

“We are working on it. In the meantime, she is not budging and is a fall risk at best.”

She jumped when he placed a hand on her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“From your violent reaction, it looks as if I am violating you,” he remarked dryly.

“I don’t like people touching me.” She muttered.

“Good to know.” Removing his hand, he jammed it into his pocket and stepped back. “I know someone who could pop in and give her some assistance when needed. There are also meals for the elderly that are pre-prepared.”

“She hates microwave meals.”

“So do I. These meals are freshly prepared and ready to eat. Let me make some calls while you see her.”

She watched as he walked out, a frown crossing her brow. She did not want to be beholden to him or start liking him. She had no idea what he was doing here. No doubt, this was something to alleviate his boredom and to make him feel good about himself.

But she had to admit that he was an excellent doctor and was good with the patients, so good that they did not miss Dr. Graham. He had called to apologize this morning and hoped she was satisfied with his replacement.

“It’s been a pleasure working with you, my dear, and I am sure Coop will do an excellent job.”

“I am sorry to hear about your Mom.”

“She is ninety years old and still solid. I just want to spend as much time as possible with her.”

“And you should. I wish you all the best.”

She picked up the folder and left the office, taking the coffee.

“My tummy hurts.”

“And we are here to see why that is.”

Brooke stood just inside the doorway, watching him interact with the child while the mother looked with a bemused look on her plain face.

“Why do I feel it is because you have been eating too many candies?”

The child smiled at him, revealing two missing front teeth. “Betty Sue gave them to me and said I had to eat them all.”

“How many are we talking about?” Cooper asked as he examined her eyes and ears.

“A lot.”

“That will do it.”

“Am I going to die?” She asked, lips trembling.

“Would I let that happen?” He smiled at her as he pressed her stomach. “I am going to give you something for the pain, and I recommend that you eat lots of fruits and vegetables to counteract the sweetness. How about an apple? A nice juicy one?” To her delight, he plucked one from a basket behind him and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

“You are so pretty.”

Brooke had to bite back the laugh as she noticed the flush staining his tanned cheeks.

“No one has ever accused me of that before.” Touching her cheek gently, he lifted her off the cot and went to talk to the mother.

“I’ll walk you out.”

She stiffened slightly as he leaned off the doorjamb and came towards her.

“You did not have to wait.”

“I was doing some paperwork. It’s a beautiful night; how about dinner?”

“No.”

“Aren’t you hungry,” he fell into step as she started turning out the lights.

“I have food at home.”

“There is this lovely French restaurant-”

“The answer is no.”

“I guarantee you will enjoy the meal and the company,”
He teased.

She was about to blast him when they heard a
commotion at the door.

“Who-” The word was barely out of his mouth before the
door burst open.

“It’s my old lady.” Marcus gasped. “It’s Lisa, help her.”

“What happened?” Brooke was already turning on lights
as Cooper rushed into the nearest examination room.

“Put her on the bed,” Cooper ordered. “What the hell
happened?” He rasped, ripping off her blouse.

“We - she - I saw her with the guy at the mechanic shop-” He stumbled back. “He was touching her-” Cooper slammed him against the wall before Brooke could stop him.

“You son of a bitch! You did this to her?”

“I lost control-” He was whimpering.

“Dr. Rochester!” Brooke’s voice snapped him out of the desire to pound the bastard into the ground, and he released the man and rushed back to the table.

“Multiple contusions and her face - Jesus Christ!”

“I cannot feel a pulse.” Brooke’s hands were shaking, much to her dismay.

“Is she dead?” Marcus squeaked.

Ignoring him, Cooper stared at Brooke. “We are going to have to get her to the hospital. I believe she is suffering from head trauma, and she is not responding. We don’t have the necessary equipment here to treat her.”

Brooke nodded dazedly. “I will make the call.”

“And you are going to have to get the police involved.”

Brooke stepped over Marcus, who had slid to the floor, weeping openly. Cooper was too busy trying to get Lisa to respond to even look at him, but he could see that it was a hopeless case.

Her pulse had been faint when she was brought in, and no amount of CPR could get her heart pumping. Several

of her ribs were cracked and had punctured her lungs. By the time Brooke came back into the room, the sounds of the ambulance could be heard.

“She is gone,” he told her dully, shaking his head. “There was nothing I could do for her.”

“I realized that.” She was outwardly calm, but he could tell she was shaken up.

They both turned to look at the man, his head buried against his drawn-up knees. Cooper was about to say something when they heard the front door being pushed open, and the EMTs came rushing in.

“Doc?” One of them looked at Brooke.

“There is no pulse.” She turned as soon as the officers came rushing in. “It is now a homicide.” She gestured to the quivering Marcus, who was still on the floor. “She is dead.”

With that, she walked out of the room, leaving Cooper to give the details. Half an hour later, she was sitting at her desk when he had finished with the first responders.

“They took the bastard away in a squad car. My guess would be extensive brain damage. He admitted to beating her with a tire iron.” He stood inside the doorway. He was a trauma surgeon and a damn good one at that.

But seeing that young girl with her skull crushed and her body bearing so many bruises had turned his stomach. He had spent more than twenty seconds trying to wash her blood off his hands, and it was still not enough.

“I told her to leave him,” Brooke said tonelessly, leaning back against the chair. “She came in with a black eye just the other day, and I told her to leave him. He had been beating her for months now, and I wanted her to report it, but she refused. Now she is dead.”

“You cannot blame yourself.” He ventured. She looked so miserable that he just wanted to take her in his arms

and rock her. The feeling of protectiveness he felt towards her jolted him.

“I am supposed to be here to help them!”

“You cannot help someone who does not want it.”

Leaning off the door jamb, he came to sit on the edge of her desk, facing her. “The only thing you could have done was try and make her see reason. You could not have forced her to walk out on him.”

“I could have done more. I could have-”

“Stop!” He ordered sharply, causing her head to jerk in surprise. “You are torturing yourself with ‘what ifs,’ and I am here to tell you that it does not make a difference. She had a choice-”

Her bitter laugh cut him off in mid-sentence. “You live in an insulated world where there are choices, where

everything is black and white. Where you have the freedom of choice, girls like Lisa do not have that luxury.

She was from a home where her father abused her, and her mother was a junkie who did not make the effort to get clean for her daughter's sake. I come from a world where the only bad thing that happened was my dad-"
Sucking in a sharp breath, she shook her head. Her eyes were bright with the tears she was trying to hold back.
"Never mind."

"Brooke-"

The use of her name had her staring at him. He felt the painful thudding of his heart inside his chest. He had never seen her look this vulnerable before. He had been coming here for the past two weeks and had seen several sides of her, but never this.

Her golden-brown eyes were bright with unshed tears, her soft, lush lips were parted and trembling slightly, and he knew he had to have her. The desire inside him was

so strong that he could barely stand it.

“Let’s get you home.” He said roughly, getting to his feet.
“You need some tea with a little whiskey in it.”

“I am fine.” Shaking off the euphoria from shock, she pushed away from the desk. Grabbing her sweater and pocketbook, she inched past him and waited while he turned the light out.

“The cops will be coming around tomorrow to take your statement. They wanted to do that before they left, but I persuaded them to wait until tomorrow. I figured you would not be up to it tonight.”

“Thank you.” She told him quietly as they made their way toward the front door. Not having to do everything for herself felt strange, and she was unsure how she felt about that.

He waited until she had secured the lock on the door. It was a balmy spring night with the sprinkle of stars dotting the velvety sky, and a nineteen-year-old girl had been bludgeoned to death by her jealous lover. Another tragic story that happens much too often.

“I will drive behind you.” His quiet voice intruded on her depressing thoughts and had her turning around.

“You don’t have to.”

“Get in.” Moving around, he opened the door for her. With an impatient sigh, she slid in and closed the door.

Taking several deep breaths, she pushed the start button and headed out with him following her.

Traffic was surprisingly light at that time of night. She drove automatically through the intersection and made the turn-off to bring her to her apartment building. She

was on the lower level, and going into her designated spot, she switched the engine off and got out.

“Thank you.” He parked next to her and exited his car.

“This is me.”

“Give me your keys.”

“Now look-”

“I intend to see you inside the building.” His voice was implacable, and she felt that arguing with him would be futile.

Digging into her pocketbook, she handed him the key and led the way. Hiding his surprise at the shabby

exterior, he unlocked the door, stepping aside for her to pass him and enter the tiny living room.

“I will make you some tea.”

“You don’t-” She began talking to his back as he strode towards the small kitchen. Toeing off her shoes, she followed him, getting there just as he put the kettle on. He dwarfed the room even more with his height and the wide breadth of his shoulders.

He had gotten rid of the dark blue scrubs he had been wearing and put on a light green sweater. She could not help but notice the way the muscles bunched and flexed beneath the material.

“Where do you keep the hard stuff?”

“In the pantry next to you.”

She watched as he efficiently made them both tea and handed the cup to her. “Drink as much as possible; you are in shock.”

“You must be a doctor.”

“Ha. And you are very amusing.”

Picking up the cup, she took a sip, relishing the warmth floating down her throat and into her stomach. She had no idea she was still shivering until she sat down, and it all came flooding back. The horror of it almost crushed her.

“Drink.” His authoritative voice had her bristling, but she obeyed him and drank until the cup was empty.

“Hungry?”

She shook her head no. Finishing his tea, he came around to stand in front of her.

“What-”

“You are still shocked.” Taking her hand, he drew her to her feet.

“I am a doctor; I have seen dead people before.” Her voice broke, and to her horror, she felt the tears starting.

Making a decision that had been in his mind for some time, he lifted her into his arms. “Where is your room?” He asked softly.

Brooke had never felt the need to have a man take care of her. She was fiercely independent and accustomed to

doing things her way. But right now, it felt so good to relinquish control and have his strong arms around her.

He smelled friendly and expensive, and his chest was broad and made for snuggling. Lifting a hand, she pointed toward the left, and he strode off.

Switching on the light, he swiftly took in the sparsely furnished room with the colorful quilt on the bed and the matching rug at the foot of it. He placed her on it and sat next to her hip.

“I am not leaving,” he told her huskily, his eyes making his intentions clear. “If you have a problem with that, you must speak now.”

“I don’t.” She found herself whispering. She needed him - needed this and could not bear the thought of being alone tonight. Her heart quickened its beat when he rose. Keeping his eyes on hers, he dragged the sweater over his head and removed the white undershirt.

Her breath strangled inside her throat as she stared at the vast expanse of his chest with the furrows of dark hairs towering down to a washboard-flat stomach.

Her eyes fastened on the movements of his long fingers as they unfastened the belt. The sound of the zipper was unnaturally loud in the otherwise quiet room. Cooper felt his heart pounding as he kept his gaze on her. Dragging off the khaki trousers, he kept his underwear on and climbed in next to her.

“Now you,” he whispered.

“ Why don’t you undress me.” She heard herself saying, her voice husky.

“With pleasure,” he growled. Shifting so that he was crouched over her, he took off the top, his breath hissing through his nostrils at the sight of the flawless coffee and cream skin. His body jolted in a surge of powerful lust at

the sight of the delicate white lace covering the petite breasts.

“I am pleasantly surprised.”

“I love nice underwear.” She shifted restlessly as he unhooked her bra and took it off. Sliding the shoulders off, he lifted her slightly to take it off.

Shifting downward, he got rid of the bottom of her scrub and found himself admiring the scrap of lace covering her pussy.

“What are you doing?” There was a note of panic in her voice as he stared at her.

“Am I not allowed to admire?”

“Just get on with it.”

“I intend to take my time.” He told her hoarsely as he eased the panties off her. Coming back up, he laid next to her, turning her so that her petite body could align with his.

“You are beautiful.”

“I don’t need compliments-”

“And prickly.” His grin was wobbly as he reached out to cup her cheeks. “And completely irresistible.”

“Save it for,” She broke off with a gasp as his head swooped down to capture her lips. The breath whooshed out of her, and Brooke felt herself melting- the heat bursting into flames that enveloped her from the inside out.

She touched his chest, tentatively at first, shivering when the muscles flexed and contracted. His tongue felt the seams of her lips, parting them effortlessly.

A gasp was wrung from her helplessly when his tongue darted into her mouth. The kiss was wild and untamed, taking them both completely by surprise.

Shifting so he was covering her body with his, Cooper deepened the kiss, his mouth moving over hers with a hunger that was consuming. Her hands wandered over his chest to wrap around his neck, her body moving beneath his, the energy igniting a passion that shook them to the core.

Dragging his lips from hers to quiet his rampaging desire and to kiss her cheek, he fought to get control of his passion, unaware that his hands were shaking.

He kissed her cheek, the sides of her mouth, her neck, and the hollow of her throat before moving down to the top of her breast. By this time, Brooke felt like her entire body was engulfed in flames.

She had been in two relationships in all of her thirty-two years. The first had been when she was attending medical school and had hooked up with a study buddy who had clumsily taken her virginity.

The relationship had lasted for a year before it petered out. The second was when she was doing her internship at Hope General, and that had ended after only three months when she realized that the bastard was cheating on her. But none of those guys had ever managed to make her feel as if she was being burned alive.

The heat was impossible. Her fingers clutched his shoulders as he tongued her nipple. When he tugged it into his mouth and started suckling, she could not control the scream. Her hands automatically gripped his shoulders as she began to push him away.

“No. Oh, please, no. Stop.” Her voice was strangled, her body vibrating with a need she could not understand.

But he did not listen, and she felt herself drowning, fingers digging into his skin as she lifted her body toward his.

Reaching between them, his finger dipped into the moist warmth of her. The climax shocked her into crying out, her short nails dragging over his back.

Chapter 7

She was still vibrating, her body still trembling, when he lifted his mouth from her breast and moved down her body, kissing the flat planes of her stomach, his tongue tracing the indentation of her navel, moving slowly down until he was kissing her pussy.

Brooke reared up in shock, hands reaching to push him away automatically.

“Damn you! No.” Her fingers clutched at his shoulders, her upper body lifting off the pillows. Ignoring her, his tongue touching the swollen flesh.

Brooke was undone; her body was melting like wax beneath a flame. She had never done this before, never had it done to her.

In her way of thinking, it was the most intimate form of lovemaking, and she had never been interested enough to perform the act. But oh God! She thought, her mind in a whirl; it was the most exquisite feeling she had ever

experienced.

When his tongue dipped into her, she went wild! Lifting her hips frantically toward his mouth, she grabbed at the sheets, twisting them beneath her fingers as the climax erupted.

Cooper had followed his instinct. He was not one to indulge in oral sex himself, preferring to have it done to him. But the touch and feel of her body, the passion that had erupted between them, made it impossible for him not to want to take it further. His large body shuddered as he felt her reactions to his loving her.

Moving over her, his eyes held the golden-brown washed and glazed in passion. The parted lips were wet and trembling. When he slid into her tightness, his body went rigid savoring the moistness, the glove-like feeling of her wrapped around him as he filled her to overflowing.

This stunning creature who had impressed him with her bravery and fiery nature had surprised him again with

her passion and fire. There was simply no going back for him.

He was hooked! Never had he felt like this, and it bowled him over. Bending his head, he gently brushed his lips against her mouth, breathing in her scent, her muskiness still clinging to him.

He moved then, slowly, driving into her, the breath strangled inside his throat as she wrapped her legs around his waist and moved with him. Words were not spoken; the kiss was light, just lips brushing against each other.

Her hands were around his neck, fingers clutching at the hairs at the nape of his neck. He was fighting to keep from moving faster, from simply devouring her, but the control was slowly slipping away from him.

Deepening the kiss, he plunged his tongue inside her mouth. The control broke, sending his body driving into hers forcefully.

Swallowing her moans as she erupted again, he felt his climax starting, first as a gentle wave and then building up into a massive tsunami that took him over completely. The groan was torn from him, his body shuddering from the force of the climax, and before he realized it, he shot his load into her.

He continued to kiss her, lips sliding from her mouth to her cheek and then her neck, moving to her throat as he waited for his heart to stop pounding. Resisting her effort to push him away, he moved his hips and heard her gasp as he pierced her with an erection that had not quite deflated.

“You are making it worse.” He whispered in her ear as she renewed her efforts to shove at him.

“Stay still.” Her breasts were rubbing against his chest and creating sweet friction.

“Get off me.” Brooke did not recognize the voice as hers. Her body was weak, and the tremors were still racking her. A delicious feeling of euphoria was stealing over her. He was still deep inside her, and she did not want him to leave. But commonsense was kicking in.

“Not yet.”

“Listen-” She broke off with a gasp when he seized her mouth in a hungry kiss. Her fingers clutched at his broad shoulders as she opened her mouth and participated.

Cooper was not surprised to feel himself hardening inside her. He knew he was going to have her again and again.

Brooke’s eyes flickered open, and for a minute, she had no idea why her body felt so bruised and her nipples sore.

“I was hoping you would be awake before I left.”

The deep baritone voice had her jerking up in shock, and then the memories came flooding back, and the realization that she was completely naked.

“What are you doing here?”

“Should I be offended that you do not remember what we did all night?” There was an amused tone to his voice that had her bristling. Shifting aside, she glared at him when he came to sit on the edge of the bed. “You were not supposed to spend the night. What time is it?”

“A little after seven. I have an early morning shift and am running late.” He started to reach for her, stopping when she reared back against the headboard. “I see we are back to normal.” His smile was wry, amber eyes wandering over her face and settling on her lips.

“I need to get in the shower and get out of here. Just go.”

“No goodbye kiss or plans to hook up later?” He asked her lightly.

“Last night was something that I needed. I was in a terrible way and suffering from shock, and I needed company.” She took a deep breath. “We did something foolish and impulsive as well as irresponsible. I appreciate you being there for me, but this will never happen again-”

“The hell it will not!” She blinked at his fierce expression. “We have a connection-”

“Let me stop you right there.” She held up a hand, the other gripping the sheets over her breast in a strangling grip.

“You are the last person I would ever want to be involved with, so get that stupid idea out of your head, and we will simply chalk this down to a spur-of-the-moment deal. A man and a woman act in the moment of shock and grief and find comfort in each other.

Nothing more. You have your life and your relationship-” She glowered at him. “Which makes my point exactly. You were with another woman, and it took nothing for you to be with someone else. Men like you are not to be trusted an inch. What are you going to tell her?”

His eyes burned hot. He had sat there listening to her and felt the irrational anger at how carelessly and thoughtlessly she had decimated what had transpired between them last night and this morning.

“I am no longer with her,” he told her tightly.

Her tapered eyebrows lifted. “That was fast. Does she know that?”

“Yes.” He bit out.

“What did she do?” She shook her head. “You know what? Never mind. Like I said, this will not be happening again.”

Before she could stop him, he was hauling her into his arms. The sheets fell away as she landed on his lap.

Bending his head, he kissed her brutally as if punishing her for what she had just said. Planting her hands against his chest, she tried to push him away but found herself wrapping her arms around his neck as she kissed him back, body already weakening.

She could not believe the feeling of bereftness when he lifted his head, amber eyes smoldering. “Tell yourself all

you want that this was nothing, but we both know you would be lying,” he whispered harshly. “I am not going away.” Plucking her off his lap, he sat her on the side of the bed and strode out of the room.

Even when he had gone and closed the door behind him, she sat there staring at the door with a frown. His cologne, obviously expensive, was still lingering in the air, and the soreness of her nipples, as well as the tenderness in the center of her, was still evident enough for her not to ignore it or him.

It did not matter one bit, she told herself firmly. He was like her dad and could not stay with one woman. It would not matter if he could. He was not her type. Too damned rich and handsome and entitled.

Last night, he surprised her by standing with her and ensuring she got home in one piece. Not that she had needed his assistance, but she had welcomed it. She had been in shock, which was not surprising. A girl had died in front of her, and it was one she had known. She had been grieving, and his arms had been solid.

She had loved the feel of them around her, the solid length of his body. Closing her eyes, she allowed her mind to drift to the hours, which had been hours! Leaning her head back against the padded headboard, she let her mind drift to the stunning sensation of his mouth on her body, the feel of him against her.

It was sensational, heady, and wonderful. Her eyes popped open as she told herself he knew what he was doing. He was experienced and had set out to seduce her.

That was it. Biting down on her lip, she swept the sheets from her naked body, jolting as she stared down at the bite mark on her left thigh. She had left her mark on him as well, she recalled. With a heartfelt sigh, she headed to the bathroom.

Cooper was having a difficult time getting his head straight. He had rushed to his place to take a quick shower and a shave. It was while he was standing in

front of the oval mirror that he noticed the redness on his neck and chest where she had dug into him in the throes of her climaxes.

He had lost count of the number. He could still feel her tightness wrapped around him and countering that was the stinging diatribe she had delivered this morning before he left.

She was giving him the cold shoulder, letting him know that she did not want to have anything to do with him again. He should accept it and say to hell with her. He did not need the aggravation, and the woman was as prickly as a porcupine.

In bed, she was a wildfire that had given him so much pleasure that he could not comprehend it. But out of it, she had reverted to her usual self.

And he had made it plain that it would be a one-time thing. He was sure not to accept that, not after what they had shared. She had told him in no uncertain terms that she wanted nothing to do with him after this, but he was

not willing to accept that. And it was not his damn ego. He was falling in love with her.

The knowledge of that had him stumbling back and staring at himself. He had felt the distinct pull since he laid eyes on her, despite the untidy braids and the incredible rudeness he had thought it.

And then, when he saw how she operated around the people she cared for, the admiration had turned into desire, and last night, it had cemented it. The prickly Dr. Brooke Campbell had woven her way into his heart and every damn pore of his body.

Grabbing a towel, he whisked away the shaving cream and dumped it into the hamper. He would be late for his shift, but he had called and let them know.

She was punchy from lack of sleep, and returning to the scene of last night's horror was making it worse.

Miranda's avid curiosity about the incident was grating on her nerves, and she had to reign in her impatience.

The detectives who had been sent back to question her included Dan. Even though she appreciated his trying to ease things for her, she did not like that he was making it seem that they were a 'thing.'

"The moron confessed, of course, so there will be no need for a trial," he told her congenially. "I know this must be incredibly difficult for you—"

"It's harder for Lisa. She is dead." Closing her eyes briefly, she opened them to apologize for her abruptness. Her waiting room was packed as usual, and she did not have time for this. A woman was dead, and yet she still had people relying on her. "I apologize—"

"No need, my dear." She almost expected him to pat her on the head. "I understand that this must be a shock for you."

“And I have people waiting on me.” She told him pointedly.

“Are you sure you are well enough to work?” He asked her quietly.

Somehow, she stopped herself from telling him to get the hell out of her sight. “I have to.”

Her phone rang just then, and she plucked it out of her pocket in relief. “I have to take this.”

With a wave of one hand, he gave his assent.

“Dwayne.”

“I had to hear about it from a cop buddy of mine. Was there an incident at the clinic last night? Someone died.”

“Yes.”

“And you did not think to call and let me know.”

“I was busy-”

“You had Mother, and I worried about you, Brooke. A little consideration would go a long way.”

“If you would stop interrupting me, I could get a word in.” Taking a deep breath and heading out of the room, she cradled the phone on her cheek and picked up the files she needed. “I cannot go into details-”

“I already know the details. Gary told me that this -this person bludgeoned a woman to death and brought her to be treated at the clinic. But it was too late. Mother said she has been calling you.”

“I don’t have time to speak to her right now. If you call to check on me, I am fine and have patients waiting.”

“I am to let you know that she wants to see you at the house later to assure herself that you are indeed okay.”

“I am not sure-”

“Make the time, Brooke.” With that, he hung up, leaving her with the absurd need to stamp her foot in frustration. Since she had arrived, she had not given him a thought or the night they had spent together. Fortunately, he was not scheduled to be here for another few days.

Taking a breath, she headed into the fray of things.

Cooper slipped off the surgical gloves and felt the weariness invading every part of his body. The patient would live even though twice he had almost lost her. The fifteen-year-old would have a long way to go.

The accident had done a number on her, almost pulverizing her spine and breaking both her legs. The internal damage had been extensive, and if she made it through the night, chances are that she would make a full recovery.

“Good job, doctor.” Dr. Malcolm told him quietly. They both recognized it was not yet time to do a victory dance because it was still touch and go. Then there were the parents to confront and tell them the news they would have to wait and see.

“Team effort,” he responded automatically as he headed out of the operating theater toward where the parents

were huddled in a waiting room, hands clasped together. That was the thing when your heart was involved, he thought. It paralyzes you when something happens to the ones you love.

“Doctor?” They both rose slowly, a look of abject terror and anxiety on their faces.

“Terry made it through the operation.” He had taken off his skull cap and stuffed it into his pocket. “There has been extensive damage to her intestines, and we did manage to locate the source of the bleeding. She has a long way to go, but we watch throughout the night to see what happens.”

“Are you saying she might not make it?” The woman’s voice was quavering, her light blue eyes dripping with tears.

Cooper hesitated. Since the start of his internship, he had made a vow to himself that he would never give anyone false hope, and he had stuck to it. No matter how painful it was, he was going to be honest.

“That’s correct. I am sorry.”

“She is our only child,” The woman quavered. “She took the car out without our permission and will pay for that disobedience with her life.”

“We want her back.” The husband was holding tight to his control, which was in fear of slipping. “It doesn’t matter what she did. She is our daughter, and we want her back.”

“And we are doing everything we can for her,” Cooper assured them. “We will let you know if anything-”

“We are staying for the night.” The husband told him firmly.

Cooper nodded. "I will let one of the nurses find somewhere comfortable for you to stay. I am sorry." He left the grieving parents with that inadequate wording and headed to his next patient.

He was tired, angry, and frustrated and had almost picked up the phone to call to find out how she was doing. But the way he was feeling right now, he knew that one negative word from her would have him going off. So, he did not call her.

Pushing the double glass doors open, he forced a smile to his lips as he walked into the room.

"Hey doc, how is it going?"

"Great. It would be even better if I did not see a pizza box peeking out from under the covers." Pulling up a chair, he examined the man's vital signs and checked on the catheter.

“Ah, doc, a man must be able to eat whatever he wants. I am eighty-five and on the way to check out. Gus brought it for me after I threatened to tell his kids that he was smoking again.”

“Your cholesterol level is too high, and your blood pressure is not decreasing,” Cooper told him mildly.

“That’s because I am worried about my daughter. She is in a bad way.” His expression sobered. “She lives alone in that big house of hers, and those worthless grandkids of mine don’t give a flying fig that she needs them.”

“There is nothing you can do about that. I want you to stop stressing about things you cannot fix.”

“I just need to get back home to her.”

“Then how about you allow us to do our jobs?”

“You are right. No more pizzas and burgers.”

Cooper’s thick brows lifted as he rose. “Burgers, too?”

“That just slipped out.” The old man said with an impish smile. “But from now on, I will behave.”

“See that you do.” With a final look at his chart, he left, closing the doors behind him. He was about to head to one of the on-call rooms to get a shut eye when his pager went off. Cursing beneath his breath, he hurried away.

“I heard about Lisa.” Marge, a frequent visitor to the clinic, said quietly as soon as Brooke finished giving her an insulin shot.

“Yes.”

“I lived not far from her and tried to get her to leave Marcus. She was constantly telling me she loved him.”

“Some people just cannot be saved.” Brooke made a notation in her chart and wished she would just stop talking about it. “Your blood pressure is under control, and your blood sugar is stable.”

The woman’s eyes brightened. “I have been trying, doc. Eating better even though it’s not easy. That food place you referred me to supplies many fresh fruits and vegetables. I am doing my part. I have my grandchildren to think about.”

“That’s enough motivation,” Brooke told her with a brief smile.

“You know, doc, I can never say this enough, but you are a miracle worker in these parts. Not everyone would take on a task like this. You saved my life; many people in this area can say that, too. We are grateful for the things you do around here.”

Brooke, whose emotions had been veering crazily for the entire day, felt the tears prickling the back of her eyes. She was not one to give in to tears and all that emotional crap, but for the last twenty-four hours, things had changed. Damn him!

Chapter 8

“Are you listening to me?” Marjorie demanded, her strident voice making the headache pounding at her temple even worse.

“You are talking loud enough to wake the dead, so yes, I can hear you quite well.” Brooke knew she had fanned the flames as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

“I have been putting up with your insolence for God’s know how long. I stood aside while you stormed out of this house and insisted on leasing that dreadful apartment in that part of town and then blowing up what could have been a very lucrative career to run that clinic with those people.

Now I have to hear that they are bludgeoning each other to death. Not that I am the least bit surprised. Those kind-”

“Stop right there.” Pushing back her chair, Brooke rose. “They are human beings. Yes, they might not have the opportunities we have. They might not live in fancy houses with a sunroom and a lavish backyard and maids tripping all over them, but they are people too, and as far as I know, we were all created equal.

I know you are concerned about what happened last night, but it was a one-time thing. Nothing like that had ever happened before.”

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to look out the window, trying to bring her temper under control. It had been a dreadful day, but at least she had been busy until she locked the doors.

It was on the drive over here that the treacherous thoughts had descended. Thoughts of him and what they had done. And the fact that he had not called her. But that’s what she had requested. She was not going to get involved with Cooper Rochester. That would be asinine.

“I am not going to apologize. You are my daughter, and I have a right to be worried.”

Her expression softened as she turned to look at her mother.

“You do. And you and I are never going to agree on this topic. I am fine, Mother, shaken up, but I am okay.” She passed a hand at the back of her neck. “I just need to go home and sleep, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you stay the night? You could go to your old room and have the maid send you something. Please, Brooke,” She added quietly. “I need this.”

“What did she say to rope you in?” Dwayne entered the room and sat on the side of the bed, watching as she rubbed the overnight cream into her skin.

“She guilted me into staying.” Looking around the room with a grimace at the cream and lavender wallpapers,

she met his eyes in the mirror. “Nothing has changed.”

“She decided to keep it just like you left in case you returned.” Kicking off his shoes, he propped the pillows under his arm.

“Which is not going to happen.”

“You never know. And it’s great to have you here, even just one night. How are you?”

“I am fine and have you to blame for this. You threatened me.” Putting the jar away; she came to join him on the bed. “Move over.”

He did, making room for her. “I was damned scared. What if that moron had decided to pull a knife on you?”

“You are forgetting that I happen to be a jiu-jitsu expert and can pretty much hold my own. Besides, I was not alone.”

“Ah yes, the esteemed Dr. Cooper Rochester was present.”

“Yeah.” Hauling herself up against the pillows, she took in the room she had spent her childhood and teenage years in. She had been given carte blanche to redesign it when she turned twelve and had been so excited she could barely stand it. “I asked him to help me pick the colors.”

Her brother knew immediately that she was not referring to Rochester.

“He said the cream would go well with the lavender, and we hung wallpaper together.”

“I remember.”

“And we would go to these antique stores to pick out furnishings because I wanted the extraordinary.”

“Brooke-”

She shook her head. “It brings back memories. I adored him-”

“And he adored you. You were his princess.”

“He was a slut and a terrible father. I believed in him, put him on a pedestal, and he let me down.”

“He was human.”

“He was a husband and a father and failed at both.” She hissed out a breath. “Now you see why I hate coming here.”

“You have to give yourself a break and forgive him. He is dead and gone and is still hurting you.”

“That’s because I keep him here.” She touched her forehead. “To remind me not to get bowled over by a pretty face. That men are not to be trusted - present company excluded, of course.” She gave him a faint smile.

“And you are missing out. You are wonderful, and I am not just saying that because you are my sister. You have so much to offer, and I would hate to know that if the right man comes along, you will not give him a chance.”

The image of Cooper flashed before her eyes, and she blinked it away immediately. He was the opposite of

right.

Trying to get rid of the memories, she reached for the tray. “Elaine sent up ice cream - mint chocolate chip. Why don’t you join me?”

She ignored the fact that he was there, even though her heartbeats had quickened considerably when she heard him come in. She was with a patient when she heard him at the front desk and kept herself busy, praying that he would just go straight in and see the patients he had, but that was expecting too much.

Steeling herself to continue examining Sally-Sue’s inflamed throat, she pretended she had not heard him come in.

“I just wanted to let you know that I am here.” His deep voice was quiet, forcing her to look at him. What she saw made her pulse jittery. He had started wearing scrubs

from that first day and had on dark blue today. The top stretched across his shoulders, outlining the muscles there, muscles that had bunched and flexed at her touch.

“We have people waiting. Mr. Emerson needs an insulin shot, complaining that his arthritis is acting up.”

“I will see to it. How are you?”

“Fine.”

Her tone had his eyes narrowing. “I just want to”

“Dr. Rochester, as you can see, I am busy here, and patients are waiting.”

She held her breath as he stared at her briefly before walking away.

“Okay, Sally-Sue, let’s get you better.”

Cooper tended to the patient and told himself it was her problem if she was upset. Yesterday had been a hellish day for him. The fifteen-year-old had made it through the night, but she was going to be paralyzed from the waist down. She had wept brokenly for what seemed like hours and told them that she wanted to die.

The parents were broken up, and now their daughter was on twenty-four suicide watch. He had been so busy yesterday that he had barely found the time to have a meal.

Not to mention that Wendy was not taking the breakup well. She had accused him of playing with her feelings and giving her hope. Something he had never recalled doing. He had tumbled into bed late last night and could not sleep because of the prickly woman in the next room.

Concentrating on treating the patients, he stayed away from her, deciding it would be better for both.

At the end of the shift, things came to a head.

The guy came swaggering in and insisted that he wanted treatment for his friend.

“Where is the friend?” Brooke asked him.

“In the parking lot.”

“Is there a reason he is out there instead of here?”

“He has been shot.”

“Then I suggest you take him to a hospital.”

“Look bitch-”

“You heard the lady. Get out of here, and if you are not gone in five minutes, I am calling the cops.”

The man stood there glaring at them for a minute before leaving.

“I think we should call the police to be on the safe side.”

Ignoring him, Brooke turned to Miranda. “Go on home; I will lock up.”

“Sure?” The woman looked from her to Cooper.

“Yes. See you tomorrow.”

“All right. Good night, you two.”

Brooke waited until she had left before moving toward him. “The same goes for you, too, and I do not need rescuing. Before you came, I was fully capable of caring for myself.”

“What the hell is your problem?” He exploded.

“I do not have a problem. Now, if you don’t mind- hey!” She broke off as he grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Let go of me.”

“Or what? Are you going to kick me in the balls? Why the hell are you so angry, Brooke? Did I make you feel

something you never expected?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. We screwed, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Screwed.” His laugh was ugly. “Is that what they are calling it now?” Hauling her closer, he clamped his hands on her upper arms, fingers tightening. “Shall I refresh your memory, darling? Perhaps you need to recall what we did for the entire night and into the next morning.”

She shoved her hands against his chest to stop him from getting closer.

“I don’t want this.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Jerking her chin up, he crushed his lips to hers. She put up a token resistance, but it was futile. Her body melted into his. Feeling her capitulation, he softened the kiss, his mouth moving over

hers gently, hands drifting from her face to race over her back.

She was pressed flush against his body and could feel the rigidity of his thighs. Her fingers curled into his scrubs before going around his neck. The heat was spiraling throughout her body; it was intense, and she needed more. She had not initially believed it and figured it was a fluke, but the passion could not be denied.

Ending the kiss, he held her against him as he tried to quiet his rampaging desire. He cradled her head against his chest, where she could feel his heart racing. Hers was not doing much better, either.

“I will not ask you to come back to my place.”

“Good.”

Sighing deeply, he eased her back so that he could look at her. His knees weakened as he took in the lips that he had bruised with his potent kisses. Her golden-brown eyes were glowing with a fire that showed him how aroused she was.

“I want you, and you want me.”

Pulling out of his arms, she walked toward the desk on shaky legs. His presence was potent and disturbing. She could not deny the passion between them or the fact that she was attracted to him.

She could agree to something mutual as long as she controlled the relationship. It was no use denying them both. Looking up at him, she made a decision.

“Sex.”

“Pardon?” He stared at her with a frown.

“We can have sex. We are both doctors, and our hours are crazy enough as they are. Whenever we find the time, we could hook up. It would just be sex, a physical need to be satisfied, and then we move on. It would not matter to me if you had a relationship, as I know you will. Men like you tend to want to have varieties.”

“I see.” Cooper tamped down the frustration and anger at her words. “Let me get this straight - you want us to ‘hook up,’ as you so eloquently put it, without any strings attached.”

“Yes.”

“And I can be involved with someone else while this hooking up happens.”

“That’s what I said.” She was irrationally angry at having her words thrown back at her.

“Take it or leave it.”

“You are telling me I don’t have a choice.”

“I would think a man like you would love something like that.”

“What do you mean, a man like me?”

“Rich, good-looking, and never satisfied with just one woman.”

“And you know this about me - because?”

“I know men like you.”

“Lady, you don’t know a damn thing.”

Turning away, she picked up the messages Miranda had forgotten to give her. She heard when he came up behind her and steeled herself to stay where she was.

His hands clamped on her shoulders and turned her around. “Who was he?” He asked softly.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Who was the bastard who gave you this skewered view of what a relationship should be?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I am making it mine. An old boyfriend?”

“Are you accepting the terms or not?”

“Not.” His eyes flickered over her face and settled on her lush bottom lip. He wanted her so much he was aching. He had held her slender, petite body against his and had almost taken her right there against the dingy wall.

He had figured out that there was something there, some untreated issue that would interfere with him going forward, and realized from her speech what it was. She had trust issues, serious ones. She would have the upper hand if he gave into her ‘terms,’ as she put it, and he could not bear that.

From the start, he would be at her mercy; she would call the shots and never allow them to move forward.

“Well then-” She started pushing him away.

“I was not finished.” He held her firm.

“What else is there to say?” She demanded.

“You had your say, and now it’s my turn.” One hand clamped around her neck, fingers massaging the flesh. “I do not just want a physical relationship with you, Brooke; I want the whole works. I can get sex anywhere, yes-”

He interpreted the disgust on her face. “I am a wealthy man, and I happen to be a doctor. I can pretty much get any woman I want. But for the first time in my life, I have fallen in love-” His grip tightened as she jerked against his hold. “So, you see, I am going to want it all - going out on dates and getting to know each other.”

“Are you done?” She asked him freezingly. Her heart had started behaving erratically at his words, and she had to make a conscious effort to stop from trembling.

“Not quite.”

“Well, I am, and it’s getting late. Like I said before, if you are interested in having sex, then give me a call. I am not interested in a relationship with you or anyone else. And to throw around a word like that- I-” Her voice trailed off, and she refused to look at him.

“The word love?” He asked her softly. “Was I throwing it around?”

“I have to go.”

“Yes. But first-” Hauling her up against him, he crushed her mouth with his. Brooke thought about resisting, but the sweet, heady sensation tumbled through her body and had her clinging to him.

Her nipples were aching from the earlier onslaught and had become even worse. She wanted him so much that she could not stand it. Stifling her moan of disappointment when he pushed her away, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her scrubs.

“I will walk you out,” he said quietly, amber eyes searching her face.

Without a word, she turned on her heels and grabbed her things from the office. He was standing at the door when she came back out. They both went to the parking lot in silence. He waited until she backed out before getting in the vehicle.

She watched him through her rearview mirror until he peeled off at the intersection and went on his way. Clamping her fingers tight on the steering wheel, she called for some soothing R&B classics to get her mind off what had just happened at the clinic.

The man had a way with words, she thought sardonically. If he had not already gotten into her

panties, she would have figured that was what he was trying to accomplish.

But he was apparently after something else. What it was, she had no idea. It was not like she had anything to offer a man worth billions. He had it all. And she had refused his offer.

Love! She scoffed. What the hell did he know about that? Men like him could never be trusted. Her father had been a perfect example of that. He had used his looks and his station in life to seduce as many women as he could. And it had not mattered one damn that he was married with children.

He was supposed to be an example to his daughter, who had adored him so much and thought he could do no wrong. Stopping at the light, she wiped the tears that had drifted down her cheeks angrily and cursed the day Dr. Cooper Rochester had come to the clinic.

His sexual frustration followed him to his apartment. What the hell was he thinking? He had been dying to sink himself deep inside her since the morning he left her place, and now he was going to his lonely apartment and would have to endure another sleepless night.

Hissing out a breath, he turned into the parking lot and almost turned back out again when he saw who was waiting for him there.

Bringing the vehicle to a stop in the designated area, he alighted slowly, stopping just as the woman approached him.

“Wendy, I did not expect you.”

“I wanted to apologize for my behavior.”

“How long have you been waiting?” He had no intention of inviting her to his apartment, but the idea of standing here in the lot did not appeal to him, and the wind had picked up speed, the spring night turning out to be more than a bit cold. Gesturing toward the gazebo, he led the way to the padded bench and sat down.

“I had a late shift and decided to come instead of calling.” She sat next to him, eyes shimmering with tears. “I blew it, didn’t I?”

Cooper sighed wearily and figured he could not blame her for trying. Here he was, aching for a woman who was determined not to give him the time of day, and he was with one who wanted to be with him. Go figure.

“No, you didn’t.”

“I misbehaved,” She told him ruefully. “And please do not try to justify my behavior. I called you names and behaved like a child.”

“You expected more from the relationship.”

“Is there any chance-”

“No,” he told her firmly. “There is none.”

Turning away from him, she looked at the stream with the moon’s reflection clearly outlined. The flowers growing in abundance next to the gazebo permeated the air and usually made sitting out here a pleasant experience.

“It’s her, isn’t it?”

“Who?”

Turning to face him, she gave him a slight smile. "I am a woman, darling; we always sense these things. I knew something was happening when I saw you with her at the party. That's why I asked around and caught her name. Dr. Brooke Campbell. She runs the clinic downtown, in that rough area in the projects. What does she have that I lack?"

"Don't do that."

"Then what should I think?" She cried softly. "I am here, offering myself to you, and you are saying that's not enough. Where is she? This doctor of yours. Is she willing to be in a relationship with you? That night at the function, she just walked away-"

"I refuse to discuss this with you," he told her tightly. "It's over between us, and I apologize for any hurt and pain I may have caused you. Now, I am exhausted and have a hell of a long day tomorrow-"

“You are turning me away again.” She rose. “This is the second time, and I assure you there will not be a third time.” With that, she walked away, leaving him staring after her.

Chapter 9

Working with her was a torture he had never counted on. After the conversation, or rather the argument they had two nights ago, she had done her best to ignore him completely. She would only acknowledge him if they had to consult on a mutual patient. And she would do it with distant professionalism.

The meals were brought to them, but only he, Miranda and the nurse or physician's assistant would eat in the lunchroom. She would eat on the run, barely taking the time to digest the meal before returning to tend to the patients.

He wanted to warn her about getting indigestion, but she was in the medical field and should know that by now. She did not look at him if she could help it, and the frustration of his need for her was making it difficult for her to be around him.

He did not have to take this. He had told her he could get any woman he wanted, and that was not just spouting off at the mouth; it was a fact. Women threw themselves at him, for Christ's sake! And here, he longed for a woman who would not give him the time of day.

“Doc?”

Shaking himself from his tormenting reverie, he looked up at the woman who came hesitantly into the room. He had just finished prescribing antibiotics for a little girl with a chest cold and was writing up his notes.

“Yes?” He smiled at her encouragingly as she came forward. “How may I help you?”

“I have been sitting in the waiting room for almost an hour.”

“I am sorry, Ms.-”

“It’s Gloria.” She folded her hands before her. “Just Gloria. I am new here.”

“And you gave your information to Miranda at the front desk?”

She nodded her graying head. “I live at the shelter up the street, and they told me I could come here if I have a problem.”

“Would you like to take a seat?” He gestured to the single chair next to the battered desk.

Gloria sat on the edge of the chair, her hands clasped in her lap. “I am pregnant, or at least I think I am.”

Cooper struggled to keep the shocked expression off his face but did not quite manage it.

“I am in my forties.” Gloria smiled faintly. Lifting a hand, she passed it over her hair. “Life has not been kind to me. I lost my house in a fire three months ago, and I have no family member I am close to. I am forced to stay at the shelter, which is not so bad.” She added hastily. “The place is clean, and the food is ok.”

“And the man you are seeing?”

“I was raped.”

Cooper frowned as he stared at her. “Have you reported it to the police?”

She shook her head. “I cannot prove it, and I don’t know who the person was who did it. I was sleeping-” She pressed a hand to her chest and breathed. “I woke up

when I felt him inside me. My bed is at the end of the corridor and away from the others.

He had his hand over my mouth and was wearing a mask. He did not say a word, just -he just did what he did and left. I admit that I froze and stayed there for a few minutes before I could get up.”

“Surely you told the person in charge of the shelter.”

She nodded. “They said they would look into it.”

“Have they?”

“I returned to them a few days later, and they said they had not found the time. The shelter is full, and people rotate – coming in and staying for a few days to a week, and then they are gone. I am one of the few who have been there for so long.”

She bit her lip. “He has not come back to rape me again. It happened that once, and now I am carrying his baby.”

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “I want to keep the baby. I have nowhere to live and have no prospects, but I want to be there for my baby. I was thinking that I might be able to get a job here. To do the cleaning up and run errands. Before I was down on my luck, I used to work at a library. I am intelligent enough, but I just need a break.”

“I am not the one to speak to regarding employment.” Cooper was dazed at the things she had just thrown at him.

“I tried to talk to Dr. Campbell, but she was dealing with several patients simultaneously.”

“I will see what I can do. In the meantime, how about I examine you?”

Gloria nodded. "I am clean. I take baths as much as I am allowed, and I don't do drugs or anything like that."

"Good to know. Let me get the nurse, and I will do the checkup."

"Do you have a minute?"

"No." She said without looking up from the file she was updating.

"Too damn bad. You are just going to have to take the time."

She looked up then, eyes flashing, and he felt the familiar ache starting inside him. Damn her for making him feel so needy.

“What is it? If you are here to continue the conversation of the other night-”

“It’s about a patient.” He spat out, feeling the urge to haul her from the chair and shake her until her teeth rattle.

“Go ahead.” Sitting back in the chair, she waved a hand at him.

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his top, he glared at her for a few seconds before telling her about the conversation with Gloria.

“Is she pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“And she wants to keep the baby.”

“For the man who raped her.” Brooke shook her head.

“That’s completely weird.”

“Not entirely. She is a lonely woman approaching middle age and sees this baby as her chance at a better life and someone to love. We all need that, even if we tell ourselves we don’t.”

They stared at each other briefly, the air fraught with tension. Brooke knew he was hinting at their conversation the other night and ignored it. “She wants a job here?”

“Yes. She is willing to do whatever is required, and I think you should hire her.”

Her tapered brows lifted. “Is that so? You realize we run a free clinic and do not take in any money. Miranda and I do the cleaning up whenever we have the chance-”

“I will pay her salary.”

She gave him a measured glance. “Why would you do that?”

“Because this woman needs the chance, and everyone deserves that.”

“Or you are just trying to salve your conscience by offering her a pittance.”

His anger rushed quickly to the fore, and he had to tamp it down as he stared at her. “It’s a damn good thing I don’t give a shit what you think of me. I have been here for three weeks and have started caring about what happens to these people.

Do you think that you have a monopoly on caring, Brooke? Or are you so selfish that you want to be the only one to lend a helping hand?”

“How dare you!”

“I want to help, and if you are too egotistical and stubborn to accept the help, then you are not the woman I thought you were.”

Pushing away from her desk, she came around, eyes blazing. Cooper rose slowly, bracing himself for the storm about erupting. He had deliberately angered her to the point of breaking because he wanted to see her reaction.

“You bastard.” She whispered. “I have been at this clinic for years and care enough about what happens to them. I have gone to great lengths to beg for scraps to keep it running. Egotistical? You son of a bitch. I do this because I could not bear to see the suffering. You-”

“I want to help.” He started to reach for her, dropping his hands when she stepped back. “You cannot do this alone, and I have the means and resources to help you. I just do not want to treat them and be done with it. I want to do more. Let me.”

“Why?”

He hissed out an impatient breath. “Because I admire what you do here. I work at the hospital, and I love what I do. I am an excellent trauma surgeon, and that is a fact. But these people have basic needs, and that is new to me. I want to help.”

She stared at him for a few seconds before taking a step back. "I will talk to her." She told him coolly. "Now, excuse me, I have work to do."

"Brooke—"

"Please don't say anything else. I don't want to hear it."

"How long are you going to run away from us?"

She rounded on him. "There is no 'us.' Just- I have to go."

He stood there and watched her hurrying out. He had won the battle, but the war was still raging.

“Thanks for meeting me here.”

“I was pleasantly surprised when you called.” The detective beamed at her as he reached for his coffee. “I must tell you that this place is famous for its rhubarb pie. The entire precinct drops by every day to take advantage of the cuisine.”

He smiled at her warmly, admiring the striking contrast of her complexion against the lemon-yellow scrubs she had on. She had pulled on a matching green sweater over the top and left it open.

“Now, my dear, what can I do for you?”

“The shelter up the street.”

“I know the place, of course. What about it?”

“Without going into details, there is an occupant who is claiming that she was raped.”

“Ah.” Dan reached for his pie and cut into it. “We have had several complaints of sexual assault.”

“And?”

“The investigation is ongoing. I have to tell you that, unfortunately, in places like these, things like this happen with increasing frequency. These people are bunched together in the open, and there is no privacy. They receive over the maximum on any night, making monitoring what goes on difficult.”

“And that’s it? You just shrug your shoulders and say, ‘Oh well’?”

He gave her a patient smile. “We are doing our due diligence and investigating the allegations, but the women have the habit of recanting after we question them the third time.”

“So there is nothing to be done.”

“As I said, we are doing our best-”

“In other words, these are people who do not contribute to society; they are, in fact, a blight on the neighborhood, so no effort is being made to see to their protection.”

Sucking in a breath, she closed her eyes briefly. “I apologize. I am not supposed to be taking out my frustration on you.”

“I understand, my dear.”

She gritted her teeth at the patronizing note in his voice.

“I suppose these places are not equipped with cameras?”

He laughed at that. “None that are working.”

“Then I guess that is something I must take in hand,” she told him firmly.

“You don’t have to wait until the place is locked up.”

“I know I don’t. I choose to.”

“Suit yourself.” She said with a shrug.

“Always.” His eyes met hers briefly before she turned to pick up her files. He followed her back to the office, where she collected her things to leave.

“You offered Ms. James a job.”

“She starts on Monday, and I told her the starting salary.”

“Which I will be responsible for, all of it.” He stood inside the doorway, watching her pack up her desk.

“Of course.”

“I was thinking that we could let her crash here. Get her out of the shelter. I noticed an empty room that only needs to be cleaned and repainted.”

Her eyes flashed as she looked up at him. She had been thinking about that herself but did not like that he seemed to be taking over.

“Oh, is that what you think?”

“Am I offending you with my thoughts?” He asked her softly. “I don’t want it to look like I am taking over.”

“Oh, I never would have considered that in a million years. The fact that you are rich and accustomed to calling the shots does not come into the mix at all.” Slinging the strap of her backpack over one shoulder, she treated him to a look that could have pulverized rocks. “Get out of my way.”

“I also love the fact that you have such a sweet disposition. No wonder your patients adore you.”

Brooke had to bite back a smile at the droll look on his handsome face.

“Bite me.”

“Was that an invitation?” His deep voice had softened, and she realized the atmosphere in her tiny office had changed too late.

“Now look-” She went rigid when he tilted her chin up, amber eyes dull into hers.

“Let me go.”

“We need to talk.”

“Wasn’t that what we were doing all along?”

“About us,” he insisted.

“There is no us.” She insisted right back, the familiar heat of his nearness invading her body.

“I disagree.” His thumb caressed the lush fullness of her bottom lip, sending shards of desire flowing through her body. “This cannot continue, darling,” he whispered. “I cannot sleep- cannot function because I cannot stop thinking about you, wanting to feel your body against mine.” He bent to brush his lips against hers.

Her lips parted instantly, and his tongue darted into her mouth, his breath strangling in his chest as he sensed her surrender. Her bag slid from her shoulders as she leaned into him, fingers clutching at the front of his shirt.

She met his foray into her mouth hungrily, her body melting into his. She had been telling herself for days that she did not need this, did not need him, was not longing for his touch, and could do without it.

But feeling him against her, his hard body pressed against hers, was making her taut with a need that she was trying to process. She wanted to feel him inside her again and did not much care if it was right here in her dingy little office.

Cooper's hands came around her narrow waist, his hands clamping like steel bands as he molded her to his aching body. His rampaging desire was swamping him like a flood. Her mouth was addictive and sweet, reminding him of honey.

Her nipples were branding his chest through the material of his scrubs. But he had made a vow to himself and would keep it, even if it meant he would suffer through it. Tearing his mouth from hers, he shoved her away from him, heart pounding hard in his chest, his body shuddering.

He stared at her with eyes bright and feverish. “Are you willing to accept our relationship and for us to become public?”

“What?” Brooke found it challenging to collect her thoughts and put them in order. Her body felt weak, and she was hot as if she had been doused in flames.

“I want a relationship with you, Brooke, and I am not willing to settle for anything less. There is a showing at the gallery on Saturday, that could be our first date-”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“A date. With you.”

Shaking her head, she tried to focus and barely managed.

“We could go back to my place-”

“So, it’s just sex then?”

“I cannot offer anything more.”

“Then the answer is no,” he told her coolly, bringing his desire under subjection. “We should go.”

“You want me.” She said stupidly.

“More than I have ever wanted another human being before. But I am not willing to settle.”

“You son of a bitch. You wound me up, and now-”

“I am taking a stand. I am sure you will come to see my point in all this.”

Glaring at him, she bent to pick up her bag and sailed past him. She did not speak to him as she approached the parking lot and her vehicle.

‘I will wait,’ he told her quietly as she opened her door.

“Then you will be waiting forever.” Pushing the start button, she drove out of the lot with a squeal of brakes.

“She drives too damn fast,” he muttered as he got in behind the wheel and followed her.

Brooke was fuming. Punching the seek button, she tried to find something soothing to listen to. She could still feel the imprint of his lips on hers, his body against hers. The son of a bitch was playing with her, and she was damned if it was going to happen again.

He was toying with her; that's what it was. He was playing some sick game, and it would stop now. Dan had been asking her for ages, and she might just take him up on that. She did not like him that way, but it was something to get her mind off Dr. Cooper Rochester.

He could go to hell. She was definitely over him. Adjusting the mirror, she hissed out a breath as she noticed that he was behind her. She did not need him playing Sir Galahad and seeing her home or part of the way.

She was independent and had been caring for herself for a long time. He was trying to prove that he was nothing like her dad, but she would be a fool to fall for that. From now on, it would be business between them, she decided firmly.

He thought restlessly that he should have followed her home, dumping his keys inside the crystal ashtray in the middle of the mahogany table. The place smelled like Lysol, telling him his housekeeper had been there that day. She would likely leave something in the warmer for him to have a meal.

But he was not hungry. He was walking over to the recessed cabinet. He pressed the button and plucked the bottle of aged scotch from the shelf. Picking up the glass, he poured the liquor and took it back to the fireplace, a brooding expression on his face.

He was aching for her, and his good intentions were warring with the permanent ache he was feeling. He had contemplated taking her inside her office or on one of the beds in the examination rooms. That was how much he had wanted her.

Instead of becoming a distant memory, the first and only time he had made love to her was branded inside his brain. He recalled every touch, the feel of her skin, the musky scent of her on his tongue. Closing his eyes, he could feel her tightness wrapped around him—the texture of her nipples.

Downing the drink, he walked over to sit on the recliner by the fireplace. She was stubborn, and he was afraid that if he continued to push her, she would do something drastic, such as going out with someone else.

Just let her try, he thought darkly. He had seen one of those detectives looking at her and touching her lightly on the arm. Miranda had told him in confidence that the man was soft on her.

“He finds all sorts of reasons to come around on the pretext that he was making certain there is no trouble here.”

Leaning back in the chair, Cooper closed his eyes wearily. This feeling was new to him, and he feared that he was in danger of messing things up.

Chapter 10

“Darling, are you unwell?” Marjorie peered at her daughter closely as soon as she took her seat. “You look as if you have not slept, and your braids. Do I need to make an appointment for you again?”

“No.” Brooke lifted a hand reflexively to her hair and shook her head. “I think I might be coming down with something.”

“And knowing you, there is a chance you will not take anything for whatever is ailing you.” Marjorie shook her head and signaled for the waiter, who came hurrying forward to take their orders.

Since it was a charming spring day, she had taken one of the tables outdoors, overlooking the shops on the opposite side of the street. “We will start with the turtle soup and then have the delicious salad.

But bring us something to drink. I will have the sparkling water with the twist of lemon, and my daughter will have-” She looked at Brooke for confirmation. “Her usual tomato juice. Darling, I cannot for the life of me comprehend how you can stomach drinking that dreadful stuff.”

“I barely eat breakfast, and lunch is a luxury I don’t have time for.” Brooke reached for the glass of water and took a long sip to quench her dry throat. She had not lied when she said she was not feeling well. Aside from not sleeping, she felt lethargic, and her energy level was at an all-time low.

Cooper had not been at the clinic for two weeks and called to inform Miranda that he was swamped. She had also seen his company on TV introducing a new drug that, according to them, was a surefire way of slowing down the advance of dementia.

She also told herself that she did not care that he was not there. Gloria had started working, and several

neighborhood men had volunteered to pitch in and clean the room and put on a fresh coat of paint to make it more attractive and habitable.

Cooper had more than lived up to his promise of doing his part. Not only was there the agreed amount to pay Gloria a salary, but he had sent a truck over with furnishings for the bedroom.

Only he was not around. He had sent a doctor to replace him. The man was competent, but something was missing. She was also trying to tell herself that she was not ignoring him.

“You need a vacation.”

“I was thinking about that too.”

Her mother stared at her in surprise. “Really?”

Brooke managed a smile as she took another sip of water. “Several more doctors have signed up to help at the clinic, giving me a chance to take a break.”

“Darling, that’s wonderful! We could go somewhere as a family. Dwayne, the poor dear, has been working too hard at that firm of his and also needs to take a break. What do you say, we go to Europe? Madeline Turner has this lovely place in Paris and always told me we could stay there. Or, if you prefer, we could cruise the Caribbean.”

“I will think about it.” She nodded her thanks when the waiter brought over their soup. “I need to ask you something.” Brooke continued looking around to ensure they had privacy.

“Did you know about Dad?”

“Brooke-”

“No.” She shook her head. “I know the last thing you want is to bring up the past. Whenever I try to talk about it, you change the subject or become upset.” Leaning forward, she gave her mother an intense look. “I just need to know why you put up with him, with what he was going on with.

Dwayne and I cannot have a normal relationship-” She spread a hand. “I look at every guy and see the enemy. I cannot move forward, Mother, because of what he did. Just tell me why you stayed with him.”

Marjorie made a production of spreading her napkin carefully over her immaculate rose-pink trousers. “If I had known I was in for an interrogation, I would have come better prepared.”

“Mother-”

“Darling, it’s fine.” Reaching for the glass, she took a delicate sip. “Your father was my only man.” She smiled at that. “We met while I was at my debutante party, and the first time I saw him, I was dazzled. He was this handsome and debonair-looking guy with this charming smile, and when he asked me to dance, I fell in love right then and there.”

She plucked at the napkin in her lap, a faraway expression on her lovely face. “He made me feel like the only woman alive, certainly the most beautiful. We got married six months after meeting each other; it was first wonderful.

We went everywhere together, traveled extensively because his business called for it, and he refused to go without me. Then I had a miscarriage a year after we were married.”

Brooke stared at her in surprise. “I never knew that.”

Marjorie shook her head. “We never told anyone. I was so depressed that for months, I could not function. Nothing he did worked. I was locked away in my little world, and he stopped trying after a while.

He started staying out late, and even when he was home, he was distracted. I knew what was happening, but I did not care. Then we decided to try again, and I did not go anywhere this time. All I wanted was to carry my baby to full term.”

She paused again and took another sip of her drink.

“So, he would go off on his business trips without me. I started hearing rumors from friends, little hints here and there that he was seeing other people.” Marjorie smiled sadly.

“But I did not care; I did not allow it to bother me. I was pregnant, and it was going remarkably well. He would accompany me to the appointments, and when he discovered we were having a son, he changed a little bit and tried to be the man I had married.

It lasted until after your brother was born, and then I went into depression. Postpartum depression. I did not want to even look at him.”

“Your father hired a nanny, and it took me six months before I started playing my part as a mother. I would not allow him into my bed until Dwayne was almost a year old. By that time, the damage was already done.”

“You could have gotten therapy.”

“I refused to do anything. Your father suggested it, but I did not listen. When I was pregnant with you, I was much better. I wanted to be a full-time mother, but I had driven my husband out of our bedroom.”

“Are you excusing him-”

“No.” She shook her head. “I am blaming both of us. I mishandled the marriage. Your father was a very sexual being, and when we started seeing each other, he told me that. The first year of our marriage was one of sheer unbridled passion.

He made me feel like we were on our honeymoon for the entire time. I was so caught up in my little world that I had no idea that I was destroying my marriage. He loved me, you see, and I was the one who destroyed what we had.”

Brooke digested this in silence. She could understand her father’s need to seek solace and sex from outside the marriage, but she could not forget what she had seen with her own eyes. He had disrespected their home and his marriage bed by bringing other women into their space. That was unforgivable.

“He brought women home.” She reminded her mother.

“Yes.” Her smile was sad. “That was something I could not come to terms with. For the latter part of our

marriage, I hated him for it. He slept with my so-called friends, another betrayal I could not accept.

We fought bitterly the week before he died, but thank God, we managed to work things out a few days after. We wasted so much time being at odds and missed out on what should have been a wonderful life together.” Reaching across the table, she took Brooke’s hand in hers.

“Love is out there waiting for you, darling. There is a man who will love you how you deserve to be loved. When you find him, don’t make the same mistakes I made. I drove my husband out of our bed, and when he went to other women, I behaved like the wronged wife.” She squeezed Brooke’s hand. “I was not innocent, not by a long shot.”

“Doc, you don’t look so good.” Gloria stared at her in concern as she passed by the office later that day. “I am not the one with the medical training, but you look like you could use a cup of tea.”

“I will be fine.” Brooke leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “I just need to stay here for a bit, and then I will be fine. How are you doing?”

The woman beamed at her. “I have been given a second chance and will not forget it. The lovely Dr. Rochester has not been by for me to tell him a big thank you. I am working a steady job and have a roof over my head. I cannot thank all of you enough.”

“Just doing our part. And you don’t have to feel you must be on your feet the entire time. Take a break now and then. And speaking of breaks, you are officially off duty. The clinic is empty.”

“I will make us both a cup of tea and then retire.”

Before Brooke could protest further, Gloria was gone.

Maybe a cup of tea would work. The conversation with her mother was still playing repeatedly inside her head. Was her mother to be blamed? Perhaps a little, or more than a little. But she was not going to start excusing what her father had done. He could have handled the situation better.

Bringing women into their home had been inexcusable. Stirring herself when she heard footsteps, she felt her breath quicken when she saw the man moving toward the desk.

“I intercepted Gloria and took this from her.” Placing the steaming cup of tea in front of her, Cooper sat on the edge of the desk and peered at her closely. “You look like hell.”

“Why, thank you. Now go away.”

“Drink.” He nudged the cup toward her. “And afterward, I am going to examine you.”

“Like hell you are.”

“Either willingly on your part or me using force. You choose.”

Her eyes flashed. “You have been away for what? Two weeks and have the nerve to come here bossing me around? You have some nerve.”

“Missed me, darling?”

“Like a sore on my ass.” She muttered.

His chuckle warmed her heart, and she had to bite back the smile by lifting the cup and sipping the ginger tea.

“Finish the tea, and we will get you home.”

“Are you going to play doctor?” She asked hoarsely, feeling her throat closing up.

“No need to play.” He stared at her with a frown. Leaning forward, he peered into her eyes and touched her forehead. “Christ! You are burning up.”

“It’s the tea-”

“Dammit, woman, how long have you been feeling ill?”

“That’s none of your damn business.” she croaked.

Hissing a breath, he eased off the desk and came around to pull her out of the chair. She fought him on principle, but the energy was sucked out of her body, and she felt as weak as a kitten. Cooper sensed it, and without a word, he lifted her. He was more than a little concerned when she simply snuggled against him and closed her eyes.

“New plan. I am taking you to my place.”

“I am not going.”

“As if you have a say in it,” He told her grimly as he secured the alarm after closing the door. Keying in the alarm for his vehicle, he dumped her unceremoniously in the passenger seat and buckled her in before going around to the driver’s side.

Her head was lolled back against the chair, and her eyes were closed. The fact that she was not her usual feisty self was a concern to him, and her pulse was a little too faint for his comfort.

Backing out of the park, he went to his place, checking on her every five minutes. She was still very hot and had not stirred much since he put her inside the vehicle. Parking in his designated spot, he came around to unbuckle her belt.

“I don’t feel well.” She whispered.

Cooper felt the love and tenderness washing over him as he lifted her into his arms.

“You think?” Locking up the car, he strode with her toward the entrance and headed straight to the elevator. As soon as he stepped inside, he headed straight upstairs to his bedroom, where he laid her on the bed.

“Let’s get your clothes off.”

Her eyes popped open then, and he had to smother a chuckle at the light in her eyes.

“You want sex.”

“Eventually, but first, you have to get better. Pretend that I am a doctor.”

“You are funny. My throat is dry.”

“And your temp is through the roof. Any history of bronchitis?”

She nodded. "When I was a child. I am so tired."

"The fever is sapping every ounce of strength. We cannot rule out COVID."

She shook her head and felt the pain piercing her brow, causing her to gasp.

"What is it?" He was pulling off her top.

"Headache."

"You are burning up. Let me try and get the fever down. I will be right back."

"I need some water."

“In a minute.” Hurrying into the bathroom, he filled a basin and dropped a washcloth into the water. Returning to the room, he placed the basin on the side table before going to the cabinet to get her the water.

He had to lift her head to get her to drink the water.

He finished stripping her and started to cool her body, his movements gentle. Next, he got a t-shirt from the neat pile in his drawer and put it on her, pulling the blanket over her.

“You are very good.” She whispered.

“So, I have been told.”

“And cocky too.”

He grinned at her, the smile fading when her eyes drifted shut. He could not rule out pneumonia; all the symptoms were there. Or it could be a simple case of the flu combined with exhaustion.

He had seen her at work and knew she did not take a day off. She was at it from as early as eight in the morning until the last patient was out the door, sometimes at eight at night or even later.

He was going to talk sternly with her, not that she would listen, he thought with a sigh. Lifting a hand, he brushed the braid back from her cheek, his touch lingering.

He had not been able to go to the clinic for the past two weeks because of his workload at the hospital and the fact that he had some obligations at the company to see to, and being away from her had cost him dearly. He missed her.

Placing the back of his hand over her forehead, he was relieved that the fever had gone down somewhat. Easing

off the bed, he went to get rid of the basin and changed into something more comfortable. He had some over-the-counter medicines he could use if she were still feverish.

He rarely got sick, which was not surprising. His immune system was robust, and he had built it up even more by taking the necessary supplements.

He had his yearly check-up and ate right, avoiding fast food as much as possible. He could not afford to get sick because he had people relying on him. He was also not arrogant enough to think that he was indispensable.

He also told himself he did not have a 'God' complex. The surgeries he performed were a combination of team effort and divine intervention. It was that simple or that complicated.

Returning to the room, he stood there looking at her, a smile crossing his lips. He needed her, and staying away had only made the yearning even worse.

Her fever came back with a vengeance in the middle of the night. Cooper was jolted awake by her whimpers, which quickly turned to cries.

“Daddy, no!” She whispered. “How could you do this to us? You are married, and she is not your wife. She is not Mom. How could you?”

She was scorching hot, and he was afraid the fever was giving her delirium. Making a decision, he stripped off her sodden shirt and plucked her into his arms, taking her into the bathroom.

Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it around her braids before stepping into the large shower and touching the button. Water gushed out with a force that had her clutching at his shirt and hiding her face in his chest. Standing her up, he held her wriggling body as the water hit her completely.

“Stop it!”

“Shh, baby.” Holding her against him, he resisted her efforts to break free, his hands moving over her. He was getting soaked to the skin, but he did not care. After a few minutes, he lifted her soaking-wet body out. Grabbing several towels, he wrapped them around her and returned to the bedroom.

“You are going to pay for that.” Her voice was hoarse, but she felt better, and the fever had diminished.

“I am sure I will.” Putting her down, he stripped off his wet clothing and put on something dry.

“You were delirious.” He told her as he briskly dried her off and wore a dry shirt.

“What did I say?”

“Nothing of importance,” he told her lightly. “How about some soup?”

“It’s after midnight.”

“And you need something in your stomach.”

She shook her head. “I just need water. Tons of it.”

She watched him as he went to get it from a cabinet built into the wall. She was clear-headed, now a little woozy and a little weak. The place was shrouded in semi-darkness, but she could see enough of the room to tell it was the height of luxury.

“Here.”

Taking the glass from him, she forced herself not to gulp it. She was dying of thirst.

“Glass ceiling?”

“I like to look at the sky when I am in bed.” He said with a smile. “You are feeling better.”

“Thanks to you. It seems I owe you one.”

“Oh, I think it’s more than that.” Taking the empty glass from her, he checked her temperature. “Just slightly elevated.”

“Residual.” She plucked at the shirt. “You took care of me and did not ask permission to take me back to your

place.”

“You were out of it.” His amber eyes glinted in mirth.

“Would it have made a difference?”

“No.”

“You are too cocky for your good.”

“And you don’t know when to take a damn break. How can you be a doctor and not know when to stay home?”

“I felt a little off since the other day and thought it was not a big deal.”

“I get it. It will have to close its doors if you are not at the clinic.”

“That’s not- oh, just go to hell.”

“If you don’t take care of yourself, you will not be able to care for your patients.”

“You sound like a fussy old woman.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Is that the best you can do?”

“I can do a lot better, but I just want to sleep right now. Go away.” She slid down on the pillows and closed her eyes.

“This happens to be my bedroom.”

“And I am sure a place like this has several more.”

“It does, but I happen to like this bed.” Moving the sheets, he slid in next to her, bringing her body against his.

To his surprise, she did not try to move away. “Don’t try anything.”

“I will do my best to try and resist,” he murmured in her hair.

Chapter 11

She stirred sometime in the morning to find herself in a strange bedroom and a male arm imprisoning her body. The events of last night came tumbling back with all its vivid clarity. Cooper Rochester had shown up at the right time and had taken her to his place, where he had cared for her.

Turning her head slightly, she looked at him in repose. His face was softened by sleep, his lashes long and making shadows on his rugged cheeks. His dark hair was tousled, and a look at his sensuous lips had her heart hammering.

An overnight shadow added to the allure. Her limbs were still weak, but it did not stop her from feeling the incredible rush of desire that came whenever she was near him.

“Are you finished?” The amused drawl had her jolting in embarrassed surprise. His eyes flickered open, their amber color warm with laughter.

“I was just-”

“Checking me out?”

“I thought you were asleep.” He laughed at the accusatory tone in her voice.

“I felt you staring at me. You are feeling better.”

“Enough to go to the clinic.” A glance at the clock showed that it was a quarter of nine. “And I am late.”

“I already called to let Miranda know you are out sick. I also called in a favor to have another doctor cover for you.”

She bristled, her eyes flashing. “You had no right-”

“I have every right since you seem incapable of taking a bloody day off. You are still weak from the fever, and if I have to tie you down, you are staying put today. Who knows? With his fifteen years of experience as a surgeon, Dr. Carnegie might just be able to do a good job.”

She glared at him and tried to push him out of his arms.

“Relax. You are still weak, and I am sure you want to improve. What are you in the mood for?”

“I am not staying here.”

“We could have breakfast delivered. It’s my housekeeper’s day off today, and I am not ready to rustle

up a meal.”

“Are you listening to me?”

His arms tightened around her as he brought her flushed against him. “I heard you the first time, but I have to tell you that you are wasting your breath. You are staying put.” He kissed her on the forehead like a angry child who needed soothing.

“You are not my boss.”

“Right now, I am. We could forget breakfast unless you are on the point of starving to death and go right to making love.”

“I thought you were not doing that until I accepted your crazy request?”

“Ah,” his eyes twinkled. “The one where you realize that we belong together, and we start going out on dates? That one?”

“Which is ridiculous. I am sure you had the time to come to your senses.”

“The time away could not be avoided, and it only made me love you more.”

“You are crazy.” She whispered shakily.

“I do believe I am. What do you say? Shall we order a meal or wait until we have satisfied our vital needs here and now.”

“I am still not well.” She hedged.

He chuckled, knowing instinctively that she was prevaricating.

“Never thought you were a coward.”

“You are going to watch your words.”

“Hmm.” His fingers were trailing down one cheek, eyes darkening. “You had me worried last night.”

“I am not yours to worry about.” Her skin was starting to heat up, not from the fever.

“Are you not?” he traced the outline of her lush bottom lip, eyes darkening even more at her tremors.

“Just because you cared for me last night doesn’t mean anything.” She insisted a little shakily. The shirt was thin enough for her to feel the warmth of his skin seeping through.

“I think I might have saved your life.”

“Right.” She snorted.

“And that means your life belongs to me.”

“You are a moron.”

He grinned at her. “Is that any way to talk to your man?”

Her heart skittered inside her chest, and she felt her limbs going weak. “You are assuming an awful lot.”

“I think we both know how this is going to go. You will try and fight what we have, but it will be a losing battle.”

“Why?” She sneered. “Because you are so irresistible?”

“Because we belong together.” Bending his head, he lightly brushed his lips over hers, sensing heat to her core. She had missed him, and she had to admit it to herself, even if she would rather die than admit it to him. The feel of his lips against hers dramatically affected her in a way that she could not explain.

With a sigh of capitulation, she wrapped her hands around his neck as she opened her mouth beneath his. When he drew back, she tightened her hold, golden-brown eyes glowing. “Don’t even think about it.” She warmed.

“About what?”

“Turn me on and leave. Unless you want me to commit murder.”

He laughed softly. “Violence, darling?” The words were whispered against her lips. “All you have to do is tell me you want me.”

“I want you.” He stifled a groan as she reached a hand between them to cup his already rigid cock. “I can also feel that it is mutual.”

“Always.” He kissed her lightly, trying to quiet the passion riding him like a tumultuous storm. “Are you up to it?”

“Why don’t you find out for yourself.”

“I intend to.” Flipping her over, he dragged the shirt over her head, dropping it next to him. Then he undressed hurriedly, getting the clothing out of the way as he lowered himself on top of her. His hands framed her face, eyes searching hers. “The fever is practically gone.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“Your wish...” The rest of the words were indistinguishable as he crushed his mouth to hers. With a sigh of contentment, Brooke wrapped her hands around his neck, her slender body moving against his.

She no longer resisted him - it would have been stupid and counterproductive anyway. She needed him, needed this, and as much as she had tried to tell herself that she would forget him, it had not happened in the two weeks he had been away.

Cooper captured her sighs, his body shuddering when they turned into moans. He wanted to be gentle with her.

The fever had ravaged her, but the heat racing through her body was different. Her hands slid from his neck to the bunched muscles of his shoulders and down his back.

“Now.” She whispered when his mouth left hers to trace the outline of her cheek.

“Patience,” he murmured thickly. “We have time, and I have not been with you in so long.”

“Whose fault is that?” Her fingers were digging into his flesh as he created havoc with her senses.

“Yours.” His lips claimed hers again, muting her protest. Lord, the man could kiss, she thought hazily as his tongue plunged into her mouth and sent her senses whirling crazily out of control. She moved beneath him restlessly, the longing to feel him buried deep inside her more than she could bear.

As if her desperate need had been transmitted to him, he reached between them and guided himself into her wet warmth.

His body shuddered, and he stayed still except for his mouth, which distracted her. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, he moved then, going into her with concentrated slowness as if he was delaying the inevitable.

Brooke felt the exquisite pleasure of his thrusts - of him filling her up and overflowing. Her hands roved over his back and shoulders restlessly as she forced him to pick up the pace. The climax was swift and violent, the storm gathering force. Her body arched beneath his as she exploded, her slender body shaking before going weak and limp.

Lifting his mouth from hers, Cooper stared at her, his eyes stormy with passion. His trembling hands framed her face as he drove into her. The control he had tried valiantly to hold onto disappeared into thin air. His back arched and shuddered, and her name was torn from his lips as he climaxed.

“Christ!” He whispered against her lips as he slumped on top of her. Shifting slightly, he cradled her against his chest without breaking the intimacy. He kissed her cheek and the tip of her nose, hands roving up and down her back slowly as he strove to regain his breath.

Brooke could not speak. Words were tumbling inside her brain, but she could not vocalize them. She was hooked. There might be a better word for what she was experiencing, but she did not dare come out with it.

The tremors had quietened down somewhat, but the feeling of complete bliss and utter contentment was stealing over her.

“We could see each other on the down low.” She finally spoke.

“No.” His tone was implacable.

“For a month or two.”

“No. We already know what this is, and I am not prepared for anything less than a full-blown relationship that will eventually lead to marriage.”

“And if I say I don’t want to get married?” She was speaking to his chest, unwilling to look at him.

“Then I would have to ask you why not. Right now, you might be carrying my baby inside you.”

“That’s no reason to get married.” She argued.

Tipping her chin up, he gazed at her. “I want to marry you because I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“What if you changed your mind?” She persisted.

He wondered if now was the time to tell her what she had muttered in her delirium and decided to take a chance.

“Tell me about your Dad.”

She jolted at that and could not hide the consternation at the question. “Nothing to tell. He died of a heart attack when I was fifteen.”

“Before that. What did he do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“I would like to know Brooke.”

“Why? It has nothing to do with you.”

“You spoke in your fever. Some words were jumbled, but quite a few were clear.”

Her heart thudded. “What did I say?”

His expression gentled. “You told him to stop and accused him of cheating on your mother.” His fingers tightened, and he would not allow her to move out of his arms. “It would help if you talked about it.” He added quietly.

“You are a shrink now?”

“I am the man in love with you and would like to share what you are going through. I am not going to let this go, darling.”

“You are a pain in the ass.”

“Talk.”

“Okay, fine.” She grumbled, wrenching her chin away. When she started to push at his chest, he merely wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her still.

“You are pissing me off.”

“Something I have gotten used to.”

Taking a deep breath, she started. “He was very attentive as a dad, and I adored him ever since I could remember.” Her hands touched the hairs on his chest absently as if she needed the contact.

“To me, he could do no wrong. He was perfect, the best father a girl could ever want. He would read to me at bedtime, always bringing me gifts and calling me his princess. He was fun and had this ability to make me laugh.”

She took a shaky breath and lowered her lashes to hide the tears. “I was seven before I discovered he was not the man I thought he was.”

Cooper stroked her face gently as if trying to ease the pain.

“Mom and Dwayne were not at home. I was feeling hot and decided to swim in the pool. I was not allowed to do that alone but sneaked out the same. The door was not locked; I remembered thinking it was midnight and they had forgotten to turn the alarm on.” Her fingers tightened on his chest.

“I heard the sounds before I got to the pool and thought it was one of the maids-” She drew a shaky breath. “I almost turned back, but then something made me go

ahead, and I saw him. It was a moonlit night, and the lights were on around the yard.

I could see enough to realize that it was Dad and the woman was one of my mother's best friends."

Cooper swore under his breath. "Darling-

"No." She shook her head. "I am - just let me get it out."

"Baby, look at me." His deep voice was so gentle that she could feel the tears springing to the back of her eyes. "You are hurting, and I did not bring this up so that you could relive the nightmare. I got the gist of it, and I realize that you have heavy trust issues because of what happened back then."

"You think?"

His lips tilted into a smile. “I am here to tell you that I am not him. I am in love with you.”

“Mother said they were in love, at least from the initial start of the relationship.” Bowing her head, she burrowed into his chest, inhaling his scent. “She told me what happened.” She lifted her head to look at him.

“She drove him away after the miscarriage, and things were never really the same again. What if I-” She shook her head. “I am focused on work. My patients might not mean anything to most people, but I must be there for them.”

“What are you getting at Brooke?”

“I might get too busy to be with you.”

He chuckled at that, causing her to stare at him in surprise. "What's so funny?"

"You are forgetting that I am a doctor as well." He kissed her lightly on the lips. "We will find time to be with each other, and I understand your commitment."

"But that's just it. I am not certain I can give you one."

"Is that so?" He asked her mildly, thumb rubbing her bottom lip lightly.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

“We are supposed to be talking.”

“And that can wait.” Hauling her on top of him, he entered her swiftly, eyes darkened with passion. “There are more important things than having a conversation.”

“Stay the night.” He murmured much later in the day. He had kept her in bed for most of the day. He had also sent for takeout - breakfast and dinner, which they had eaten on the balcony with the fantastic view.

“It’s lovely and peaceful here.”

“Whenever I want to destress, this is where I come. Just kick back with a bottle of cognac and turn everything off.” Pulling her on his lap, he kept a tight hold around her waist. “You have not answered.”

“Was that a question?” She asked mildly. She was in no great hurry to leave, and that surprised her.

“It could be. What do you say?”

“I have to leave early.”

“You could take another day. As your physician, I insist on two days or possibly three.” He was nibbling on her neck.

“You are not my physician, and I am certain you have to go in tomorrow.”

“I could say that I must stay with my special patient.”

“You are hilarious. But no, I have to go in, and so do you. Lives to change and all that.”

“But you are staying the night.”

“I have nothing to wear.” She reminded him. “And my car is still at the clinic.”

“I will take you home, and you get changed, and then I drop you off.”

Turning her head, she rolled her eyes at him. “You have it all planned out, don’t you?”

“Hmm.” His hands cupped her face. “There is a function on Saturday at the Royal Court Hotel.”

“No. You are forcing my hand, and I am not ready for all the publicity our being together will generate. I have not told my mother-” She closed her eyes briefly.

“What is it?”

“She is going to be as pleased as punch. This was what she wanted all along, me hooking up with a rich guy, and you hit all the check marks.”

“Happy to be of service,” he told her with a grin.

“And in the meantime, your mother and sister will look down their noses at me. I run a free clinic in the most depressed area downtown.”

“What you do is commendable. I admire you for making a difference.”

“Will they think so?”

“Perhaps not. But that is of no significance to me.” He told her firmly. “I love you, Brooke, and I want you to believe that.”

“I don’t know if I can-” She shook her head at the frustrated look on his handsome face.

“These feelings are running the gamut inside me.

These are emotions that I have never felt before, and I am scared. You are the first person aside from my family I have ever opened up to. This is new for me, Cooper. I am not sure how to deal with any of it. I need time.”

“To do what exactly?”

“I thought I was the stubborn one.” She muttered. “Time to adjust, to get used to you, to these confusing feelings inside me. As soon as it’s out there, we will be bombarded, not only by the press but by our families as well. Not to mention the women of your past-”

“You do not need to worry about that.”

“I am not worried. I just need some time.”

“You have a week,” he told her implacably.

“What? No.” Pushing his hands away from her face, she started to rise, but he kept her in place. “A week is not enough time for me to -”

“Figure out how you feel about me. You already know that. I want us to go out on dates, Brooke and I am only prepared to give you seven days to get used to the fact that I am in your life.”

“You cannot expect to barge into my life and start thinking you are running the show.” Her eyes flashed as she pushed at his chest. “I am my person, and I am saying that one week is not enough time.”

“One week, darling. If you try to ignore me and ban me from the clinic, there will be consequences. I am not going away.” He had to bite back a smile at the anger darkening her eyes, turning them into molten gold. She was the most fascinating woman he had ever met and the sexiest.

“Are you threatening me?”

“More like telling you how this is going to go.”

“I want you to listen to me very carefully.”

“I am all ears.”

She sent him a look that could pulverize rocks. “I don’t allow any man to dictate to me; is that clear? I do what I want and go where I want. You will not think you can just come in and start taking charge. I-” She broke off with a gasp when he seized her lips in a hungry kiss.

Slapping her hands against his chest, she started to push him away at first, but he chose that moment to soften the kiss. Brooke simply melted, her body sagging against his, her arms wrapping around his neck as she surrendered.

By the time he lifted his mouth from hers, she was a puddle of melted wax in his arms, her breathing raspy and uneven.

“I hate you.” She whispered into the warmth of his muscular throat.

“I am sure you do.” He rotated his hips so that she could feel how much he hated her, too.

“I cannot make it into the bedroom,” he told her thickly. Lifting her arms, he tugged the shirt off so that he could explore her naked body.

“We are not through talking about-”

“You talk too much,” he told her as he cupped her breasts and rubbed his thumbs over the already rigid nipples. “And the time for conversation is over.”

“For now.” She arched her back and welcomed his mouth on her nipples.

Chapter 12

“You are not eating.” Dwayne pointed out. “I had originally thought about springing for the bill, considering that you earn next to nothing at your clinic, but I think I am about to change my mind.”

“What?” Brooke looked up from her salad in confusion.

“This must be very bad. Is it something legal? Are you in trouble?” A look of concern had replaced his teasing expression. “Honey, what is it?”

“I think I am in trouble.”

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“No,’ Shaking her head, she reached for her glass of fruit juice. “It’s not like that. I was ill the other day, and some virus was going around. At first, I thought it was the coronavirus, but I did not have all the symptoms.

It was just the flu mixed in with bronchitis or strep throat.” She waved a hand. “That’s beside the point. Cooper took me to his place and took care of me. I was there for the entire day and night.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” She hissed out a breath. “We are a thing.”

“You are in a relationship. Since when?”

“Since he started at the clinic a little over a month ago. When the incident happened, the one where Lisa died, I was so shaken up that he followed me home to make certain that I was okay, and he came inside. We - um-

we hooked up, and he spent the night.”

“I see.”

“Will you stop saying that in that tone of voice?” She hissed, eyes flashing. “I can hear the wheels spinning inside your brain.”

“What do you think it’s saying?” He asked her mildly, amazed that his usually composed sister seemed to be falling to pieces. She looked as if she was trapped and had no idea how to escape.

“I don’t know, and I am not playing that game with you.” She dug into her salad with little interest. “He wants us to go out on dates.”

“So he is serious.”

“He claims he is in love with me.”

Dwayne just stopped himself from saying- ‘I see’ again, barely. “And you believe him?”

“I don’t know.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “He has given me a week.”

“To do what exactly?”

“To come to terms with the idea of us being a couple. I asked for a month.”

“What was that going to accomplish?”

“I don’t know.” She repeated in frustration. “I spoke to Mom about him.”

“About Dad.” He studied her carefully. “What did she say?”

She told him about the conversation and watched the surprise on his face.

“You didn’t know?”

“No.” He shook his head. “That puts another light on the matter.”

“You think that excuses it. That excuses his reason for taking her friends to the house, to our house.”

“No, I am not saying that. But mitigating circumstances-”

“You are not in the courtroom now, dammit.”

“I know that.” Pushing away the bowl of soup, he took her hands in his. “You have been battling with this since you were a child. It did not affect me as much as it did you because you always put Dad on a pedestal. He was disappointingly human, and I realized that from an early age.

He was a good father, which was important to me. But honey, you have to look at all sides - he responded to what Mother did in the only way he believed he could.

You are looking for reasons why your relationship will not work, and going into something so important with your views colored will be a problem.” His eyes searched hers. “You will have to give Rochester the benefit of the doubt and ask yourself: How do you feel about him?”

“I am scared.” She whispered. Dwayne felt a jolt to realize that his usual fearless sister was frightened.

“You are in love with him.”

“No. I-” Pulling her hands away from him, she clasped them tightly as she stared at him. “Oh God.”

“Need a moment?” He asked her gently.

“I think I need more than that.” She expelled a shaky breath. “I have been trying to tell myself this was just physical. He is beautiful and compelling-” Lifting a hand, she rubbed her temple. “He wants marriage.”

“Ah. And what do you want?”

“If you had asked me that several weeks ago, I would have been able to answer definitively that I am where I

want to be. I am helping the so-called minority, and I am not standing on a moral high ground and feeling guilty because of my privileged upbringing.

I know you and Mother will never understand what I do, but it allows me to help people. But now-" She exhaled.

"He pisses me off, and yet being with him makes me whole. I can talk to him. We argue, and he is the first person who does not allow me to get away with anything. He overrides my protests without being high-handed about it. I cannot stop thinking about him.

He calls to check on me, and I snap at him for being a nag, but good Lord, I love that he does that. I never thought I would become that woman - the one who needs a man's touch and looks forward in eager anticipation to hear his voice. It's damned inconvenient."

She glared at her brother as he burst out laughing.

"What?"

“You are a piece of work,” he responded with a grin.
“And might I say, how the mighty have fallen, literally.
Does he know that you are gone over him?”

“No, and I am not going to tell him.”

“Mother is going to be beside herself with elation.”

The quick dart of panic set in suddenly. “You cannot tell her.”

“She is going to find out sooner or later. I recommend sooner.”

“I still have a week,” She muttered.

Dwayne eyed her mildly as he sipped his water.

“What?”

“You already know that your feelings will not change and are delaying the inevitable. Where will you be sleeping tonight?”

“My place, of course.”

“And will Rochester be there?”

She shrugged. “I don’t keep tabs on him, but he might barge his way over there.”

“Of course.” Dwayne’s grin widened.

“You are enjoying yourself a little too much.”

“Oh, it’s much more than a little. You are going to be fine, honey. So, when is the wedding? I need to get my suit cleaned. I assume it will be one of those big society-type ceremonies?”

She sent him a killing look and could already feel the panic setting in. “I am not the big society type, and I would rather poke my eyes out than be part of that. I am stressing that if I decide to give into this insanity, it will be a small, intimate ceremony with just family members and perhaps a few friends. Like I said, we are not there yet.”

“June is lovely for a wedding.”

The panic increased. Interpreting the look on her face, Dwayne burst out laughing. “Darling, you look like you are going to the electric chair.”

“It feels that way. Now shut up and let me finish my meal.”

“Don’t you have patients needing your attention?”

Cooper chuckled at her exasperated tone of voice. “I am on a break after surgery for the past three hours. I am exhausted since someone who will remain nameless sapped my energy by keeping me up last night and this morning.”

Stretching his legs, he put one hand behind his head for support, prepared to enjoy the conversation.

“It’s the other way around, and I don’t have time for this.”

“I miss you,” he told her softly. “You are playing havoc on my senses, darling. I cannot concentrate on anything. I would be in the middle of asking for clamps when I need retractors.”

“Then you should try and focus. A surgeon cannot afford to make mistakes.”

He chuckled at her lofty tone. “You are telling me I have not been on your mind?”

“Nope. Not since you left this morning.”

“Liar,” he said softly. “I think I will be off a little early today. What can we do?”

“We can each go to our place and get some sleep.”

“Is that what you want?”

“It is.”

“I thought you were the soul of honesty.”

“I am.”

“You have been lying ever since we started our relationship, darling. Where are we spending tonight?”

“Lord, you are persistent.”

“I am that.”

“Fine. My place.”

“I will bring takeout. What are you in the mood for?”

“Chinese. Now I am hanging up.”

“I love you, darling. How do you feel?”

“Great.” She muttered. “You do not have to call and check in every five minutes.”

“I want to make sure my girl is fighting fit.”

“I don’t like labels so that you know.”

“Christ! I love you. See you later, baby.” He hung up, a grin splitting his face. He adored her because what he was feeling was much more than love. He was giddy, like a schoolboy with his first look at a beautiful girl.

He had had crushes several times in high school and had been attracted to more than his share of beautiful women. But no one - absolutely no one had ever made him feel this way before.

She was prickly and thorny and fearless, he thought in admiration. His Brooke, he thought whimsically. She was his, and he was hers; it was that simple. He wanted her in his life, and the sooner, the better. He would give her the week, but after that, he wanted the world to know she was his.

“They told me I would find you here.”

His eyes popped open to see the woman leaning against the door jamb.

“Wendy. What are you doing here?”

“Is that displeasure I hear in your voice?” She tutted as she came into the room to sit on the chair. “We have a mutual patient. George Anderson. He was transferred here late last night. I came in to check on him.”

“I operated just half an hour ago. He is still in recovery.” Realizing that his much-needed downtime was at an end, Cooper sat up.

“I checked in on him before I came to find you. I was here yesterday as well.”

“Why?”

Wendy shrugged. "Maybe I cannot accept that you are through with me."

"Wendy-"

"I know." She lifted slender hands in acceptance. "You have moved on, and I am trying to accept it. I have also signed up with your girlfriend's clinic."

Cooper's eyes narrowed to slits. "Why would you do that?"

"It will look good on my resume that I am willing to go that route. A free clinic in a depressed area where I can offer my expertise. I hope it will not be a problem."

“Brooke already knows that I was involved with you, so if it’s trouble you are thinking of stirring up, I warn you against doing so.”

“Trouble? Why would I stoop to doing that?” She demanded. “Because you dumped me for her? I am trying to be the bigger person, Cooper, and move on. But first, I want to see this woman, to try and discover what made you choose her over me.”

“I am warning you-”

“To what? Stay away from her?” She rose. “It’s a free country, and I suddenly need to do some good. Give back to society. I hope that will not make you feel uncomfortable, and if it does, my work will be complete.” With that, she sailed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Cooper leaned forward, hands clasped loosely between his thighs. His relationship was new and fragile because of the woman he was in love with. Brooke had told him a

little of what she had been through when she was a child; because of it, she was prickly and wary about trusting men.

One hint that he was unfaithful to her and it would blow up in his face. He would have to talk to her later, and the prospect of doing so gave him indigestion. He would have to make her believe he was no longer interested in Wendy. He rose, dragging restless fingers through his hair, just as his pager sounded.

“Am I going to lose my baby, doc?” Gloria implored her as Brooke continued with her examination. “I know I am a little too old, and last night I felt the sharp pain in my lower back, and there was a little spotting. I have been reading the books you gave me.”

“You are going to have to rest up for the week,” Brooke told her, trying not to show her concern. “And no more heavy lifting. What were you thinking? Those boxes of medical journals weigh a ton. You could have fallen and

hurt yourself.”

“I thought I needed to do more to earn my keep—you and Doc. Cooper is so generous to me, and the only way I know to repay you is to do my bit. And that is not enough.”

“You do enough,” Brooke told her firmly. “I don’t need you doing any heavy lifting. Now, I am going to prescribe something for the pain and get the OBGYN to take a look at you.”

“I cannot afford-”

“Gail is a friend of mine and will do it for free. Don’t worry about it.”

The woman’s eyes filled with tears. “I thank the good Lord when he directed me here. You and that very

handsome Dr. Cooper have changed my life.”

Uncomfortable with displays of emotions, Brooke patted the woman’s hand awkwardly as she rose and slipped off her gloves, dumping them into the trash can. “Go back to your room and rest. I don’t want to see you for the remainder of the day. I mean it, Gloria.”

“Who is going to tidy up?” The woman fretted. “The trash cans need emptying, and the lunch room is a mess.”

“Miranda and I will take care of it. Now, not another word about duties. I don’t want to see you for the rest of the day.”

“Thank you, doc. You have no idea how appreciative I am.”

“I have an idea. Now go.”

She waited until she had left the room before going to the reception area to let Miranda know they were both on clean-up duty later on.

“Darling, I did not expect to see you today. Did we call a meeting I forgot about?” Sela Rochester reached for her appointment book with a frown.

“As if you would forget something like that.” Cooper greeted her warmly, kissing her cheeks. “I just dropped by to see my mother and find out how she is doing.”

Sela eyed him speculatively as she took her seat behind her massive desk. Reaching over, she pressed the intercom. “Ilene? Hold my calls for fifteen minutes and push back my dinner appointment for half an hour.” Looking at her son, she nodded regally. “I am all yours for twenty minutes.”

“I am extremely grateful, considering what an extremely busy woman you are,” he told her with a charming smile.

“What is it, darling? Nothing dire, I hope.”

“No.” Stretching his long legs out, he jumped right into it.
“I am seeing someone.”

“Aren’t you always?” She asked him mildly.

“Have I ever come to you and said that?”

She shook her head immediately. “This person must be important.”

“She is.”

“Anyone I know?”

“You might know of her. She is also a doctor.”

“From your hospital?”

“No. Her name is Brooke Campbell.”

“I don’t- Oh.” Her brow cleared. “I know her mother, of course, as we serve on some of the same charities. Isn’t she the doctor who runs that free clinic in that depressed downtown area?”

“She is, and if you are going to be biased-”

“On the contrary, I have heard wonderful things about her.”

“Pardon?” Cooper blinked at her in shock.

Sela smiled complacently. “You came here thinking I would disapprove. I was at a luncheon with several friends, and we were discussing that place. For a young woman of her standing to take on an enormous task like that proves she is very selfless.

We are planning on adopting the clinic. You told your sister that you would like the company to provide much-needed drugs and equipment to the clinic, and I completely agree.”

Cooper stared at her in shock. He had considered putting off coming here for a few days and had decided that he needed to get ahead of telling her what was what.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Isn’t that a first?”

“I am in love with her, completely and irrevocably in love with her. She is fiercely independent and says whatever comes to mind, but she has a heart as big as the moon.” The smile on his face had his mother staring in shock. “I am going to marry her, but she is being contrary.”

“She does not want to get married?”

“She has issues that she is trying to get through. I gave her a week, and then we will start dating.”

“Darling, I am so happy for you. And I hope you will bring her to dinner soon.”

“I am planning on it.” He rose and came toward the desk. Taking her hand, he pulled her up. “Thank you.”

“You can show your gratitude by giving me grandbabies.” Her hand lifted to cup his cheek. “You deserve to be happy, darling; if I have not said it enough, I am very proud of you.”

“I was not sure what your favorite flower was -”

“So you brought the entire flower shop.” She concluded, staring at the large bouquet in his arms and the variety there, some of which she could not name. “If you had contacted me, you could have saved some money. I am not a flower type of gal.”

Stepping aside, she allowed him to move past her. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the box of chocolate that the bouquet had hidden.

“What have you done?”

“We are dating.” Moving past her, he entered the kitchen to put the flowers in the sink.

“We are?”

“Yes. And these are Dick Taylor, Bourbon whiskey. Very expensive.”

“Okay, I am sufficiently impressed.” Planting her hands on her hips, she stared at him.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t I get a kiss, hello?” He hauled her into his arms and kissed her until she felt her head swimming. “Hello,” he whispered hoarsely.

She had to clear her throat several times before she could respond. The man had the most profound effect on her senses. “You are trying to distract me.”

“And it’s not working.” Pressing his lips on her forehead, he tried to think of a way to bring the topic up. “How about we go into the living room? Hungry?”

“A little.” She preceded him into the small room. She had knocked off early today and had to admit that she had been looking forward to seeing him. He was becoming so important to her that she could not stop thinking about him. It was frustrating.

“I ordered takeout on my way here.” He sat across from her, taking the small red sofa instead of sitting next to her.

“Okay. What’s going on?”

“You knew I was seeing someone when we met.”

“Yes.”

Rubbing his palms on his thighs, he took a deep breath.

“I saw her today.”

“Okay.”

“At the hospital, my hospital. I mean-”

“I know what you mean. Why is that important?”

“She is upset. I thought she had moved on-”

“But she hasn’t.”

“No. She has signed up to volunteer at the clinic.”

“I see.”

“You do?” He shook his head. “I mean, I think she wants to create problems.”

“By doing what exactly?”

He thought she was much too calm, heart pounding inside his chest. Or she did not care that his ex planned to be at the clinic. “I don’t know. She said something like she wanted to find out what she lacked and what you have that made me-” His voice tailed off.

“I think that’s the meal,” she said casually when the doorbell rang.

Chapter 13

He stared at her for a few seconds before rising. “I will get it.”

“I will be in the kitchen.” She watched him walk to the front door before entering the kitchen to get the wine out of the cooler. She stared at the flowers in the sink when he came in with the food.

“I am going to take them to the clinic. They will serve to brighten the place.” Turning away, she took plates from the cupboard. “What are we having?”

“A variety. I did not know what your tastes lean to.” He was aware that they were avoiding the topic he had been discussing.

“Let’s see what you came up with.”

With a nod, he took out the cartons and handed them over. “Beef, pork, and shrimp. Enough to take for lunch tomorrow. You went all out.”

“I did.”

He waited until they had the food on the plates and the wine poured before he broached the topic.

“You have not said anything.”

“About your girlfriend.” Brooke dug into the meal with gusto, not surprised to realize she was starving.

“Ex.” He said tightly. “You can always tell her you do not need her service.”

“Are you kidding? The more doctors sign up, the more people are seen. She is welcome.”

She eyed him for a few seconds. “Unless you are still screwing her, then we do not have a problem.”

“How the hell can you be so cavalier about it?” He exploded, his complacency disappearing.

“Is that what I am?” She mused, eyes glittering. “I am trying to be rational about the situation. Here I am, involved with a notorious playboy-”

“Hell, I am!”

“You are, too.” She contradicted. “I have a computer, and even though I don’t read society rags, some lie around the clinic. ‘Gorgeous Dr. Cooper Rochester, out on the

town with this model, or this actress or this doctor, this judge, this state senator, and so on. I am low-key; before now, I only wanted to highlight the clinic.”

She was glaring at him. “And then you had to volunteer to fill in for Dr. Graham and would not leave me alone until-” Blowing out, she speared a fat shrimp and popped it into her mouth.

“Go on,” he said softly, watching her. “Finish it.”

“Until we are now involved.”

“I am not holding a gun to your head.” He was stung at her obvious distaste. “You are free to leave whenever you want to.”

“Am I?” She fired at him. “I told you I did not want a relationship, and what did you do? You pushed and pushed until you are now in my life. I am going to have to

deal with your exes, and that pisses me off.”

“You don’t have to deal with her. Simply tell her you are overrun with doctors and don’t need anymore.” His ire was rising, and the joy of being with her was eroding. He damn well did not need this.

He had decided to have full disclosure because he wanted transparency between them, and this was the thanks he was getting. Well, to hell with her!

“I am not going to do that.”

“Suit yourself.” Pushing away from the counter, he started to walk out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going?”

“Home. Is that all right with you?” He asked sarcastically, turning to look at her.

“Is that the way you deal with arguments? Just turn tail and run?”

His amber eyes darkened, and she watched the dull flush staining his skin. “Are you calling me a coward?”

“I don’t know, Cooper. You came in here and dropped the news about your ex on me - told me about her signing up for my clinic, not to take care of people who need help, but to check out the competition.”

She pointed to herself. “Which would be me. What the hell do you expect me to feel? You were involved with this woman, and she has not moved on. And you are the angry one. Well, you can just go to hell.”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels and stared frustratedly at the woman who could

twist him up like a pretzel. “You make it seem like being involved with me is a curse.”

“It feels like it.”

Biting off a sigh, he strode over to take the chopsticks from her.

“What are you doing?”

“This.” Plucking her off the stool, he crushed his lips to hers. With a sigh of complete surrender, she melted against him and gave into the intense passion that had sprung up immediately.

He pulled her against his chest as he fought to get his breath back. His heart was hammering like a jackhammer, and his skin was still sweaty. They had barely made it to the bedroom before they were tearing off their clothing. The lovemaking had been hot and intense, and Cooper had wondered if he was going to end up having a heart attack.

“We should fight more often.” The incorrigible woman pressed against him whispered.

He chuckled softly, hands tight around her waist. “I am not sure my heart could take it.” Bending his head, he kissed the top of hers. “Yes, it was certainly passionate.”

“And rough.”

Putting his finger under her chin, he stared at her with a frown. “Did I hurt you, darling?”

“I am not a piece of glass.”

“I know that, but-’ His eyes drifted to her neck, where the bite marks were evident. Hissing out a breath, he trailed his fingers over the bruises.

“I should put something on it. I can never seem to control myself when it comes to you. When you are not making me so angry, I want to strangle you; you are making me crazy with need. It’s pretty exhausting.”

“Do you want out?”

“Hell no. Why would I want a normal life after this?” He asked dryly.

“My sentiments exactly.” She touched his face gently, the love she had just discovered overwhelming her. “I told my brother about us.”

He stared at her in surprise. "I thought you were waiting."

"I had to tell someone I am involved with a guy, and things are progressing rapidly."

"What was his reaction?"

"He is happy for me and delighted at my confused state of mind."

"Why are you confused?"

"I have been asking myself that very question. I am waiting until the last minute to break the news to my mother. She will be excited beside herself and start planning a wedding I am not ready for." She gave him a hopeful, speculative look. "We could live together for a year."

“No.”

“Why the hell not? It would simplify things. We live together and see-”

His eyes narrowed as her voice petered off. “Finish it.”

“You know exactly what I was going to say.” She muttered, avoiding his eyes.

“See if things work out between us. Your confidence in us warms my heart.”

“I am just being practical.”

Her eyes flared as she tried to jerk out of his arms. “I am being practical,” She repeated.

“You have been in numerous relationships before, and they did not last. What if the same thing happens?”

He gritted his teeth at her reluctance to accept what they had. “First of all, the word numerous is a stretch, and secondly, I have never been in love before.”

“How do I know that?”

His fingers dug into her back and caused her to wince. “Because I told you. And I expect my word to be good enough. Are you trying to start another argument?”

“Will there be makeup sex after?”

Just like that, Cooper felt the anger draining away. Shaking his head, he bent to kiss the tip of her nose. “You are the only woman with the ability to make me feel like a damn emotional yo-yo,” he admitted with a sigh. “And I have a feeling it’s deliberate.”

“I love being the first at something in your life.” She told him softly.

“Oh, trust me. There are a lot of ‘firsts’ where you are concerned.” Tipping her chin up, he kissed her with thoroughness that had heat spearing through her body.

“We never finished the meal.” She whispered against his mouth.

“Hmm.” He was already hauling her on top of him. “It will have to wait.”

Much later, with her face buried against his chest, the soft sound of her snores the only sound inside the room, Cooper found himself staring up at the plain ceiling, a whimsical smile touching his lips.

He had not been looking but had found someone who had stopped him in his tracks. It was indeed strange how life turns out. He was in love for the first time, and being with this prickly woman was an adventure.

He had become accustomed to women chasing after him. After all, he was Cooper Rochester, son and heir apparent to a fortune. He was thirty-two years old, and settling down just now had never entered his mind.

He had a fulfilling job, and if truth be told, even though his patients meant a lot to him, he had never been one hundred percent committed to his career. A colleague had told him that because he had a safety net, he would never be as dedicated as he should be. And he had resented it, only to reluctantly acknowledge that the man was right.

He had money and never had to depend on his salary. His apartment was the height of luxury, and he lived in an exclusive neighborhood. He partied hard when he was not working and traveled the world.

Not until he met Brooke did it occur to him that people were suffering. Yes, he made a contribution to several causes, of course. Rochester Pharmaceutical was involved with numerous charities, donating millions each year. But he had never been actively engaged.

His time at her clinic had taught him a lot. He saw the immense needs of people struggling to make two ends meet. The woman in his arms had used her incredible talent not to line her pockets or pad her bank account but to see the suffering people's needs.

He admired her and was fiercely proud of her. No wonder he had fallen in love so quickly and so hard. She was everything he wanted in a woman and never thought he would ever find.

He wanted to rush her to the altar and put his ring on her finger. He wanted her to have his name and bear his children. His heart melted as he wondered if that was happening even now. They had never talked using anything, and he was certainly not going to bring it up.

She had made such a profound difference in his life that there was no turning back for him. He dismissed the absurd talk of shacking up with her because that would not happen. He wanted total commitment. Tipping his chin down, he shifted to look at her face. And such an exquisite face at that, he thought whimsically.

Her complexion was flawless, her lashes thick and luxuriant, fanning her cheeks and making shadows. Her lush lips were slightly parted, starting the familiar yearning inside him. His woman, the love of his life - dammit! She was his life, his heart, and his entire being.

“Dr. Wendy Baker at your service.”

Brooke looked up from the files she had been updating to see the stunning woman standing just inside the doorway of her tiny office. Even though she had been expecting her and had firmly told Cooper that she was not troubled because his ex had signed on to volunteer at the clinic, she still felt a sharp jolt.

“You are not at my service. You are here to serve the people who come here to be tended to. I know who you are, and Cooper told me some nonsense about you signing on to check out the ‘competition.’ These people need me, Dr. Baker, and I am not the type of woman to fight over a man.

I refuse to demean myself in that manner. I will be frank with you and say Cooper is mine. It might sound territorial, and a few months ago, those words would never have left my mouth.

But things are different now. If you are here to lend a helping hand to these people who genuinely need the

help, then I am grateful. If you are here to try to rile me up or swap tales about your time with the man I am involved with, then you are wasting your time and mine. Am I clear?”

Wendy stared at her for a few pulsing seconds. She had been prepared to hate her guts and resolved to do everything she could to demean and belittle Cooper, but the blunt and straightforward speech had floored her.

“As crystal.” She responded softly. “Where do you want me?”

A glint of admiration entered Brooke’s eyes, and a slight smile crossed her lips. Taking up several files, she handed a few of them to Wendy.

“These are the must-see - the ones that cannot wait. Today is Wednesday, which is supposed to be clinic day, so we get pregnant women and mostly sick children, mostly babies. The cries and screams will echo in your ears even when you are away from this place. Ready?”

Wendy nodded.

“Then let’s go, and welcome to the Survival clinic.”

Brooke had to admit that she admired the woman. She just jumped right in and aligned herself with the patients. After watching her with a few of them, Brooke determined she knew what she was doing and left her to tend to her own.

She was in the middle of writing up a chart when he called.

“How are you?”

His deep voice had the incredible ability to soothe her nerves. “I am fine, and you?”

“Doing rounds. How is it going?”

“Great. We have several new babies here, and the mothers seem to be doing great.”

“And the doctors?”

“Three here are helping out, making the workload less so much.”

“You are going to make me ask, aren’t you?”

“Yep. What do you want to know?”

“Is she there?”

“She is.”

“And?”

“We went at it, and clothes went flying.”

There was a pause, and she found herself smiling as she waited.

“I have a question. Were there any boobs showing, and did someone manage to take pictures?”

Brooke laughed. “Pervert.”

“That’s me. Darling, are you okay?”

“If you ask if I am dealing with your gorgeous ex, the answer is yes. She is not that bad a person and might just be a good doctor.”

“That’s a relief, even though I was quite looking forward to you two going at each other over me.”

“Dream on. Now leave me alone, and let me get some work done.”

“I love you,” he said softly, causing her heart to flip in her chest.

“You are trying to butter me up.”

“Is it working?”

“I will let you know later. Since you provided dinner yesterday, I thought I would return the favor. Will we be going to your place?”

“My place.”

“What are you in the mood for?”

“You already sound like a wife.”

“Bite your tongue. For that remark, you eat whatever I feel like getting.”

“I am okay with that. Bye, darling.”

Hanging the phone, she had to take several breaths to settle herself.

“Darling, you sounded urgent over the phone. Is everything all right?” Before Brooke could respond, her mother instructed the housekeeper to bring in some refreshments. “I know you probably have not eaten since lunch, and I have been out all day.

The May benefit is almost here, and the preparation is getting hectic.” Settling in the wingback chair, she stared at her daughter and kept from criticizing her hair.

“I have something to tell you.”

“I see. What is it?”

Brooke had been rehearsing this since this afternoon and had left the clinic a little earlier than usual to get it over and done with. She had told Cooper that she was stopping by her place to pick up some clothes and order takeout.

“I am seeing someone.”

“Oh?”

Elaine came in with a tray and wheeled it in front of them. “We will help ourselves.”

“Who is this person?” Marjorie asked, determined to keep a clear and open mind.

“I don’t want you to make a big deal out of it.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I know you, Mother.” Puffing out a breath, she continued. “It’s Cooper Rochester.”

Marjorie paused while pouring the tea and stared at her daughter in shock. “The Cooper Rochester?”

“He is not ‘the’ anything. He is a man like the rest of them. Having loads of money does not make him. And if you will make a big deal out of it, I am leaving.”

Marjorie had to tamp down the sudden urge to get up and dance around the room in delight. “Is it serious?”

“He wants marriage.” Brooke accepted the tea and picked up a flaky pastry. She was indeed hungry. “And he is in love with me. At least, that’s what he said.”

Marjorie had to bite back the impatience. Brooke might be her daughter, but she was also tough and contrary.

“And you?”

Brooke shrugged. “I might have feelings for him.”

“Are you in love with him?”

“You are making a big deal out of the entire thing.”

“I am simply interested in what my daughter is feeling.”
Marjorie pointed out patiently.

“I guess I am, and I feel stupid. He is a pain in the ass and does not take no for an answer. I am going by his

place now after I leave here.”

“Am I allowed to say how happy I am for you?”

Brooke took up another pastry and examined it before popping it into her mouth. “Yes, you are allowed. Let’s clarify: I will not be part of a three-ring circus. When we decide to get married, it will be small and intimate, with just family and a few friends. I am not wearing white because it is not my color, and I am not a virgin.

I know he is a Rochester, and that means I am going to have the press dipping into my personal life and showing an interest in the clinic. It cannot be avoided, but what I can and will control is what my wedding will be like. Is that clear?”

Marjorie stared at her as she sipped her tea. “Are you annoyed at me or yourself?”

“I am annoyed at him.” She huffed out a breath. “He is -”
She closed her eyes briefly.

“He made me fall in love with him, and he is not even my type. If he cheats on me, I am going to cut his precious appendage off. I already told him that.”

Marjorie burst out laughing. “Does he know what he is signing up for?”

Brooke grinned, the tension leaving her body. “He does, and he seems to be sticking for some reason. Damn if I don’t love him to pieces.”

Marjorie’s eyes glowed with pleasure. “Then you are going to make it work.” Her expression sobered. “Just don’t make the same mistakes I did. Find time for him, and go on dates. Travel to faraway places and enjoy each other. Now, when can I meet this gorgeous man?”

“I think his mother is planning some kind of dinner.”

“Then I will look forward to it.”

Chapter 14

“Stop it.” He ordered mildly when she tugged the dress hem for what seemed the tenth time.

“It’s riding up my crotch.” She complained. It was their first date, and he had insisted on picking the restaurant.

“I don’t want our first time going out to be a Burger King.”

“I was thinking of Wendy’s - in memory of your ex.” She said cheekily.

“You are funny.”

“A regular comedian.”

He had insisted on buying her outfit. The dress, a Romano's original, was made of soft and shimmering material, the color an electric blue that was striking against her skin.

The bodice was fitted and tight enough to plump up her small breasts, and it was almost indecent as far as she was concerned. She had brushed her braids back and slathered the front of her hair with gel. She had put on large gold hoops in the first lobes.

"And you do not get to buy my clothes ever. That's not the deal."

"You don't like shopping," he pointed out. He enjoyed looking at her and was aware that she was the focus of every male eye in the room.

"There is a reason for that." She looked around the fancy restaurant and could pick out a few celebrities and some politicians. "It feels stupid dressing up so we can eat a meal."

“It’s called dating, darling.”

“I am not a moron.”

“Are you going to be bitching all night?”

“It depends. What are we having?”

“Something on the menu.” He grinned as she glared at him. Leaning forward, he stole a kiss, tongue darting into her mouth and melting her.

“Break it up, you two.”

“Kane.” Pulling back, Cooper gave her a lazy, intimate look before greeting his friend. “Meet my girl, Dr. Brooke Campbell.”

“Another doctor. It must make for an interesting relationship. Hi, Brooke.” He extended a hand, which she took with a smile. “My wife is around here someplace, and I am sure she would love to meet you. In the meantime, I recommend the house special.”

“Which is?”

Kane smiled at her. “Seafood a la mode. We have the best chef in town. And a complimentary bottle of the house white.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Wendy likes you.”

Her eyes glittered. "I don't know how I feel about you and your ex discussing me."

"She was just saying how much she admires you. She was prepared to hate you and came away a fan."

She shrugged. "She is not a complete moron. She enjoyed herself and will be returning, not because she wants to give the competition hell, but because she genuinely wants to help. My Mother wants to meet you."

"You told her."

"I figured I should in case you shoot off your mouth to the press."

“I was planning on taking out a full-page ad.”

She rolled her eyes at him, and he had to stop himself from stealing a kiss again.

“We could arrange dinner or something.”

“Mother wants us all to come over on Sunday.”

Her tapered brows lifted. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Later, in bed. When you are weak and sated from my excellent lovemaking.” He grinned at her.

“You figured you could get me to agree to anything when I am in that state?”

“If you want, I can prove it to you.”

She was about to retort when their meal was wheeled over.

“We will pour. Thanks. Cooper told the waitstaff.

“My husband told me we have a couple of friends in the house.” The woman wearing the stunning ruby red dress, with her natural, signature blonde curls, glided over, a smile on her exquisite face. Cooper rose immediately to wrap his arms around her.

The sharp jolt of jealousy she felt shocked her so much that it took a little while to realize that Kelly Takahashi was looking at her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Brooke Campbell.”

“Just Brooke.” She returned the woman’s smile and had the awful feeling that Kelly had seen the look of jealousy on her face. “Very nice to meet you.”

“I am completely in love with my husband.” She added with a wicked smile.

“I am sure you are.” Brooke returned, her smile widening. “I have heard great things about you and the others.”

“And I have been told you run a free clinic downtown. Very commendable.”

“She gives herself to the place.” The pride in Cooper’s voice was unmistakable.

“I am sure she does. Well, I will leave you to your meal. I will be here for the remainder of the evening and hope to

see you before you leave.” Turning, she took Brooke’s hand in hers.

“Welcome to the group, darling.”

“She is stunning,” Brooke remarked casually as she toyed with her prawn.

“Is she? I did not notice.” He had to tamp down his pleasure at her obvious jealousy. She had not said the words he longed to hear from her yet, but he already knew she was in love with him.

“Then you must be blind, or you are lying.”

“I think it’s the latter. It so happens that I am blinded by your beauty whenever I am in your presence.”

“You are an idiot.”

“That I am. Where you are concerned, there is no need for jealousy, darling.”

She had to bite back a smile when he patted her hand.

“I will shove this conch down your throat in another minute.” She warned.

“Darling, if you want to feed me, all you have to do is ask.”

He grinned when she burst out laughing.

“You are intruding.”

Kelly jumped slightly at the deep voice in her ear. She had been so intent on staring at the couple in the private booth that she had not heard him coming behind her. But then again, her husband moved like a graceful cat.

“I am watching for any discontent among our paying clients.” She retorted. His hands came around to rub up and down her arms. With a purring sigh, she leaned back against his solid frame and felt the overpowering love for him wash over her.

They had been married for several years and were parents of two adorable children, and still, the fire between them had not been doused. He could turn her on with just a look from his dark, enigmatic eyes.

“If you say so.” His lips teased her left ear, sending shivers along her spine.

“What do you think of her?”

“I cannot think about anything when you are in my arms.”

“Focus, darling. I have heard good things about her and that clinic. Leesa and I were thinking of paying a visit.”

Sighing at the realization that he would not be allowed to continue his seduction, Kane looked at the couple, who were utterly wrapped up in each other. “Cooper looks happy.”

“And so does she,” Kelly murmured. “I had to stop myself from asking about the wedding.”

“I am so proud of you.” He told her dryly.

Turning her head, she smiled at him with an intimacy that fired his blood. “I will ignore the sarcasm by telling you that I love you to distraction.”

His eyes darkened, and the urge to have her was so intense that he knew he would suggest they retire to his office.

“I love you more. Now, how about we do some paperwork in my office?”

“Is that a euphemism for taking off my clothes and having your way with me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I am all in.”

“Is this going to be a regular practice of yours?” Brooke was fighting to get her breathing under control.

“You are going to have to be more precise.” He was still panting, his skin coated with sweat.

“You tore the dress, ripped it right off me like it was a piece of napkin.”

“I was impatient. And it’s entirely your fault.”

Rolling to her side, she propped her elbows on his chest as she stared at him. “How do you figure?”

“You kept touching my thigh.” He reminded her.

“You were driving like a damn madman. I am surprised a traffic cop did not pull us over.”

“I got a peek when I bent to pick up the napkin. You did not tell me you were not wearing panties.”

“With that excuse of a dress, it was not practical.”

“You did it deliberately.” He accused her.

“Did what deliberately?”

“Opened your thighs the minute I was under the table.” Even the memory of it was making him hard. He had almost dislodged his brain by hitting his head hard against the table when he realized she wasn’t wearing underwear.

Kane and Kelly had intercepted them when they were ready to leave. He was about to hurry them along when they said goodbye rudely. The trip to his apartment had never seemed so long.

“Maybe.” She grinned at him. “You are a sex maniac.”

“Kindly remember that next time.” He hauled her beside him. “Now, how about servicing this sex maniac again?”

“Fortunately for you, I am in the mood.” She whispered against his mouth.

“My dear!” Sela held out both hands in greeting as soon as she entered the elegant manor’s foyer. “It’s a pleasure to meet you formally.”

“Thanks. You have a lovely home.”

“I am sure Cooper will give you the tour later on. This is my daughter, Caitlin.”

Brooke turned towards the woman, who was a pale shadow of her brother. Caitlin Rochester was angular, and her hair was a shade between ash blonde and sable brown. Her eyes were her most attractive feature and were the same shade as her brother's.

“It's very nice to meet you finally. I can see why my brother is so smitten.”

“Is that the word for it?” Brooke mused as she took the woman's hand in a warm grip.

“It's much more than that. Hey, sis.” He greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, and it was clear they were close.

“Mother and Dwayne-”

“They are in the yellow salon. We were waiting until your arrival to announce dinner.”

“I apologize for the lateness, but I had to run out to see a patient,” Brooke told Sela.

“No apologies necessary,” Sela told her graciously, leading the way along the wide passageway into a lovely sunshine-yellow room with white antique furnishings. Her mother and brother were comfortably ensconced in soft leather sofas and sipping cocktails.

“Darling, there you are.” Marjorie’s eyes drifted swiftly over her daughter’s petite frame, frowning slightly at the ensemble Brooke had picked out randomly. She had chosen to wear lavender-colored slacks with a thin peach silk blouse. Her braids were pinned neatly on top of her head.

“Mother.” Brooke threw her a warning look, reading her expression perfectly.

“Darling, get Brooke a drink.”

Cooper guided her over to a butter-soft sofa overlooking the east side of the building, where the blaze of what looked like larkspur was blooming in profusion.

“Mother does not serve beer,” he whispered as he handed her the glass of white wine.

“Perhaps you should buy some and leave them here.”

“Something to think about.” He nipped at her ear before she could stop him. Turning her head, she blinked slightly when she saw Caitlin watching them, her face expressionless. Brooke felt uncomfortable that the

woman wondered if she was good enough for her precious brother.

“My dear Brooke, we have heard such good things about the clinic.”

“If Cooper told you the story, he is biased.” She responded, settling back against the sofa, doing her best to stop Cooper from curving his hand around her shoulder, with no success. She gave him a blazing look that did not faze him one bit.

“It’s not only Cooper,” Sela told her, watching the interplay between her son and the girl he was obviously in love with. They seemed to have a rapport that made it plain that they were on one accord. It did funny things to her insides and brought her romance with her husband rushing back.

“That entire downtown area is known to be prone to violence from its residents.”

“Which is not entirely on them. I am not excusing the turf wars or the accumulation of drug dens, but people are products of their environment. The mayor is trying to beautify the area, but that will not make a great difference if the people are still the same.”

Sela smiled at her blunt way of speaking. She was perfect for Cooper, and he was happy he had chosen so well.

“Well said, my dear.”

“My daughter has a way of speaking that defies description,” Marjorie said in the way of apology as she sent Brooke a steely glance.

“I love it. Very refreshing.”

“My mother does not like me embarrassing her. I hate to tell you, Mother, but Cooper loves that I do not have any filter.”

“One of the many things I love about her.” He squeezed her shoulder, his eyes warm and intimate, leaving no doubt of his feelings.

The bell tinkled just then. “Ah, dinner is served.”

“Your sister hates me.” They had finished the sumptuous seven-course meal, and afterward, Copper took her on a house tour. Now, they were walking the vast grounds with the scents of begonias, pine, and manicured grass permeating the air.

“Why would you say that?” He had taken her hand, his fingers linking hers when she tried to pull away. She was

not accustomed to the constant touching, but she had to admit even to herself that it was growing on her.

“She stares at me as if she wants to find out if I am after you for your money.”

They had reached the tennis court. Turning her to face him, he gave her a quizzical look. “Caitlin is a very protective big sister.”

“How old is she?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“So, she chose not to get married.”

“You are talking as if she is an old maid.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“She isn’t!”

“I did not say anything.”

“Darling, you have a very expressive face. She is committed to the company.”

“And no doubt trying to prove to Mom that she can hack it like a guy. The cross we females have to bear.”

His eyes sizzled. “What cross are you bearing?”

“He is standing right in front of me.” She told him smugly. She squealed when he poked her in the stomach.

“That hurts.”

“So was the comment you made.” Catching her around the waist, he brought her up against him. “Mother likes you a lot.”

“Makes up for the fact that Caitlin thinks I am uncouth and barbaric.”

He gave her a pained look. “She is naturally cautious.”

“Do you always make excuses for her?”

“She does not need me to do any such thing. I like your family.”

“Mother is over the moon and planning our wedding.”

“Which reminds me.” Letting go of her, he dipped into the pocket of his tan trousers and took out a black velvet box. “I was thinking of doing this at the dinner table but was unsure of your reaction.”

Her eyes narrowed as she stared from the box to his handsome face. “What is that?”

“You are one of the smartest women I know. The shape of the box should tell you what’s inside.” He held it out in the palm of his hand and watched in exasperation as she stared at the box. “It’s not going to bite, Brooke.”

“Why here?”

“Really?”

“Someone might be looking at us.”

“As we are not doing anything illegal, I don’t much care.”

“It’s too soon.”

“For what?” His patience was getting low at this point. “I am in love with you and was thinking we could get married in June.”

“Which is next month.”

“Gee, I did not know that.” Deciding his hands, he flipped the clasp open to reveal a stunning square-cut diamond engagement ring. Knowing she would not initiate the movement, he tugged her left hand, opened her fingers, and slid the ring on. It was a perfect fit. Brooke stared at it, dazzled by the exquisite beauty of the stone.

“I have not said yes, and come to think of it, you never asked.”

“Let’s remedy that, shall we?” Still holding her hand, he got on one knee when she tried to jerk him up. Resisting the effort, he went on one knee, eyes bright with emotions.

“I adore you.” He told her humbly. “It is that simple. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, have children, and be there for you every day.”

To her horror, she felt the tears clogging her throat, her eyes swimming with it. “Get up, you idiot.” She ordered huskily, throat burning.

“Not until you say yes.”

“Oh damn you. Yes.” She tugged him up and wrapped her arms around him, her face buried in his chest as the tears flowed.

Caitlin jumped slightly as her mother came to stand beside her at the living room window overlooking the tennis court.

“She is perfect for him.”

“She is too outspoken.” Caitlin had been drawn to the window and watched the couple for ten minutes.

“And that’s a perfect thing.” Sela stared at her daughter thoughtfully. “He is completely in love with her.”

“Making it easy for her to wrap him around her little finger.”

Sela started to say something but decided against it. “He will always be your brother.”

“I know that.” She shrugged her thin shoulders as she stared at the couple. She had seen the production with the ring and the woman’s seeming reluctance to accept it. “She might end up hurting him.”

“She loves him. She might not be as demonstrative as Copper, but that makes them perfect for each other. And I happen to like her forthrightness.”

“I suppose you think I am just jealous.”

“Are you?”

Caitlin turned to face her mother. Copper had gotten the beautiful genes from her, while she had inherited everything except the amber eyes from her dad. She told herself that she never resented her very handsome brother and that his decision not to play an active part in the company was no big deal.

But she was aware that their mother adored him. She might fuss that he was not playing his part, but she did not mean it, and whenever he came around, Caitlin could see how her face lit up.

Now, he was in love, and it was clear from the look on his face that this woman was his world, which would end up pushing her out of his life.

“I am happy for him,” She finally responded, unable to tear her eyes from the couple. They were kissing.

Cooper had his arms protectively around her waist, and they were practically fused. “Let’s hope she does not change him too much.”

“I hope she does.” Stepping closer to the window, she smiled as she entered the intimate scene.

“I am not wearing it to the clinic. I might be the badass doctor who runs the place, but something like this will be hard to resist for the people I care for.” She was still examining the stone. Sela was delighted at the news, and Caitlin gave her polite congratulations.

She had made sure to call and tell her mother the news before she heard it secondhand.

“It’s insured.”

“Still...” Going over to the side of the bed, she threw her feet over his. They had decided to come back to his place tonight again, and she had moved some of her stuff into his vast closet. The man had more clothes than she did. But then again, she was not very fashionable. “We could elope. Just fly out to Vegas and get hitched.”

Pulling her on top of him, he flopped back against the pillows with her cradled in his arms. “What would your mother have to say to that?”

“You are right.” She sighed, nuzzling his neck. “Let’s celebrate our engagement.”

“What do you have in mind?”

She showed him by ripping off her top.

Chapter 15

She was getting married. For the first time in her life, she was in love, completely and utterly in love, and it scared the crap out of her.

She had finally agreed to a June wedding, at the end of June, as it was now the middle of May, and to plan a wedding in four weeks was insane. Her mother and Sela had utterly taken over, which was OK with her.

She had no time or inclination to deal with menus, caterers, or decorations. Monique Romano had called her, and she had been suitably impressed and pleased when the woman welcomed her to their large clique. Even though she was not a 'clique' person, she had never been and had told Cooper that.

They were almost living together. He had overridden her arguments as usual by saying that his place was bigger and it did not make sense for her to go back and forth.

“I am not sleeping a night without you.” He had told her implacably. And when he was like that, there was no moving him. The man was like a mountain, and he said she was stubborn!

But she loved waking up in his arms; when had that happened? She wondered dazedly. One night, he had to stay over at the hospital, and she had been unable to sleep. Cooper Rochester had become the most important person in her life in such a short time.

He made her laugh, and she found herself bouncing things off him. She had a problem with a patient, her ideas, and her troubled childhood. And he would listen. She could take up the phone and call him - just to chat. They were in tune with each other, and it amazed her. She never had that before.

Reporters bombarded them, but she was also learning to ignore that. And he did not pay her any mind when she told him to stop buying her stuff. His huge closet was filling up with outfits he had bought her. He had gone so

far as to redesign the entire thing with shelves and compartments.

“What do you think?” He asked, coming up behind her. It was Sunday afternoon, and they were scheduled to have dinner with the family to go over the plans for the wedding.

“I think you are insane.” She reached out a hand to finger an incredibly soft cashmere sweater that was folded neatly on one of the many shelves. There were already hundreds of dresses hanging neatly on the padded bar. “Where am I going to wear all of these?”

“We have several functions we are obligated to attend.”

“I am not a damn society princess. I am a freaking doctor, and all I wear most of the time are scrubs.” She turned to face him, heart jolting at the look of him. They had taken a shower, which had lasted longer than it should have because he had his hands on her body. “You did not consult me.”

“I knew what would happen if I did.” He pointed out, bracing for the argument he knew was coming. “And you needed the clothes. I have seen what you had inside your closet, and it’s pitiful.”

Her eyes blazed as she plopped her hands on her hips. “There are more important things than wearing the latest trend in fashion. People are dying of hunger and not having the basic needs to survive, so excuse me if I am not interested in what’s ‘in’ this year. I don’t need you to buy me clothes. I can do that on my own.”

“Will you?”

“You are running my life, and I was afraid of that. I am not some mindless bimbo who is willing to scream with pleasure because her boyfriend is rich enough to buy designer threads. You have the wrong woman.”

His hands came up to grip her arms. “I have the right woman, and I am not going to apologize, damn you, or feel guilty because I have the resources to buy my fiancée things.

That’s what the money’s for. I love you, dammit, and I take great pleasure in doing things for you. I get that you are fiercely independent, and all this is new for you, but I will not back down.”

“And I am not like the women in your past who you lavish your money on.”

His eyes blazed at that. “I have never bought clothing for women in my past. This is a first for me. Christ! Why does it have to be so difficult with you? They are just clothes, Brooke. Is it a crime for me to want to see you in them?”

“You should have spoken to me first. You took it upon yourself- Where are you going?”

“We are going to be late,” he told her coolly. “And I am sick to death of the senseless argument. You are on your own.” He stopped when he reached the closet doorway. “Return them if you like and continue wearing your accustomed rags. I don’t care.”

Her eyes blazed. “You are trying to change who I am, and I don’t like it.”

He gave her a cool look that made her feel lower than dirt. “If that’s the way you think, then you do not know me at all.” He left before she could say anything else. She heard the door slam shut and realized he had gone into the adjoining bedroom to finish getting ready.

Passing a hand over her face, she hunched her shoulders and convinced herself that she was right in being pissed. He was assuming a hell of a lot and taking over her life.

First, he forced her to get engaged, and now they are getting married in June. Then he convinced her to move in with him, and now this. Turning around, she took in the rows of shelves and the different compartments for shoes and handbags.

She had a leather backpack that she hauled around with her whenever she went to the clinic, almost every day. Yes, they had been to several functions and once to the opera since they had started seeing each other, and she had enjoyed the time out.

But this was too much, and she was not into him for his money. She did not even want to think about how much money he had because it would scare her.

He was a multi-billionaire who did not need to touch his salary as a doctor. He could afford to stop working and live off his enormous wealth. She had money, which enabled her to be at the free clinic and not pull in a salary. But she had a simple lifestyle, or at least she did until Cooper came into her life.

She shook her head and dragged down a chic lime green dress with long sleeves and a fitted bodice. Next, he was going to say that she should get rid of the braids. Dragging the dress over her head, she stared at herself in the full-length mirror, reluctantly admiring the simple cut and style that flattered her slender curves.

Pulling out a drawer, she discovered several stunning sets of jewelry. Picking out the thin gold necklace and slinky-looking earrings, she put them on. There was even a stool in the fricking room where she could sit and put her makeup on if she was the type to wear any. But she supposed she could spritz on the expensive perfume.

She peered at the label and shook her head. 'Allure' is a Romano brand, of course. Hesitating briefly, she added a touch of nude lipstick and a little eyeshadow. Her braids were frizzing out at the ends, but she had no time to sit for hours to finish it.

It's too bad if he could not accept her for who she was. He could always hook up with one of his fancy pieces and go his way. But he was stuck with her, and if he was

planning on leaving her- She jammed her feet into a pair of soft black ankle boots with heels and prayed that she did not break her neck.

It would serve him right, she thought angrily. If he was planning on changing his mind, she was a damn doctor and could kill without leaving any evidence. Let him just try.

After looking for him in the other rooms, he was already downstairs when she got there. Giving her a cool, assessing look, he held out the light cashmere jacket for her to put on.

“It’s chilly out.” He told her briefly.

Still mad at her. Well, she was not friendly towards him either. They were even.

But she suspected that she was the one suffering the most on the drive to his family home. He had selected something classical to play on the drive, and the only sound in the car was the strain of Beethoven, or at least, she thought it was that particular composer.

She preferred R&B herself, and he knew it. He had often teased her about her choice of music. “I need to educate you about the arts. You are sadly lacking.”

He had said the same thing when they went to a showing at Jackson Colby’s art gallery, and she had failed to recognize a piece by Monet.

“I went to medical school and did science, not art.”

“I went to medical school and managed to broaden my education.”

“You are a wealthy guy, that’s a requirement.”

“I am sure your poor mother tried to broaden your scope but failed.”

She had turned her back on him and tried to resist when he reached for her. They had ended up sparring before she had to surrender with him on top of her.

She shifted slightly in her seat and opened her mouth to say something. Folding her hands in her lap, she stared out the window at the passing scenery instead. She had spoken her piece, and if he wanted to carry a grudge, she decided to hell with him.

She would not apologize or demean herself by making the first move. That was not her; she certainly did not ask for all of this. She had been content to go on with her life as it was. He was the one who came barging in when he had not been invited. So, to hell with him. She could do the same thing if he wants to freeze her out.

“Come on in.” Sela greeted them graciously, her thick dark hair loose around her lovely face. She was wearing a floral kaftan, which floated gently around her slender body, and her signature perfume wafted around them. “Your mother is already here.” She kissed Brooke on the cheek fondly. “Love the outfit, my dear.”

“Thank you.” Brooke looked at the silent man to see his reaction, but he was already reaching out to hug his mother.

“We have decided to have dinner out on the patio. It’s such a lovely day for it.” She led them through the large hallway and turned left through a room with a piano that Brooke had never seen before towards an open glass door. The patio was large and filled with potted plants.

And it faced the east side of the gardens with an explosion of colors from the myriad of flowers there. An arbor with wisteria climbing the white lattice design was in the center, and the view was stunning.

Caitlin and Marjorie were already seated and sipping tea.

“Darling, you look wonderful.” Marjorie gushed, quickly taking in the entire outfit at a glance.

“Umm. Thanks.” She greeted Caitlin with a nod and took a chair across from the table.

Instead of joining her, Cooper went to sit next to his sister, and they engaged in conversation within minutes.

“Discussing business is something those two do whenever they meet,” Sela said with a smile. “Now, my dear, your Mother and I considered having the ceremony here.” She looked at Brooke. “You are still insisting on a small ceremony?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her gaze drifting unconsciously to Cooper, who had his head turned to Caitlin, his handsome face relaxed in a smile that jolted her heart. He had not smiled at her once since they were on their way here and had abandoned her to go to his sister as soon as they arrived.

“Well then, this will be perfect. I could get the gardeners to clear a path to the arbor and erect tents in case it’s too hot for the few guests to be seated outside.”

Brooke only nodded, focusing on the man who could drive her out of the ordinary. His not speaking to her made her crazy, and she was not used to anything like this.

The discussion of the upcoming ceremony gave her the excuse just to sit and contribute next to nothing. She barely tasted the combination of shrimp etouffee and lobster in garlic sauce. The conversation was light and uncomplicated, and she hoped no one noticed that she and Cooper were at odds.

When her mother suggested they walk in the gardens, she felt she was in for a lecture.

“Everything all right? You were a little quiet at dinner.” They had stopped at a delightful little stream, with the

clear water bubbling over the rocks.

“It’s so peaceful here.” She walked over to a padded bench and sat, drinking the scent of red and yellow roses blooming in significant quantities. “Cooper is mad at me.”

Marjorie came to sit next to her. “What did you do?”

Rolling her eyes, Brooke turned to look at her. “You are my mother, and you are supposed to be on my side.”

“Because I am your mother, I know you very well. You are in love with this man and have this insane thinking that you will not allow the emotion or Cooper to control you. So, knowing you very well, you will try your hardest to prove that is not the case.”

Brooke huffed a breath and stared at the antics of a gorgeous red and yellow butterfly hovering at a clump of roses.

“He bought me tons of clothing, which includes shoes and accessories. I was at the clinic the entire day yesterday, and when I looked inside the closet this afternoon, it was different. He had someone or people over to redesign the entire space.”

“And that upsets you because-”

“Oh, don’t patronize me.” She burst out. “He did so without consulting me. It’s like he is trying to say that I have lousy taste in fashion, which I do. But it does not give him the right to try and fix me.”

Marjorie stared at her mutinous daughter in frustration.

“And you think that’s what he is about?”

“Isn’t it?” She spread her hands wide. “He fell in love with the woman wearing scrubs and having natty braids. And

now what? I am not good enough for him?”

“Brooke, if you were not a grown woman, I would put you over my knee.” The exasperation was rife in her tone.

“The man worships the ground you walk on - I have seen how he looks at you.

He also knows you, and knowing you, he realizes that you will not happily walk into a store to try on clothes or even order them online. He is trying to make it easy for you.

You are going to marry a wealthy and powerful man, and like it or not, people in our society will look at what you are wearing and comment on it. The press will have time to comment on your outfit; get used to it. Now the question is- do you love him enough to compromise?”

Blowing out a breath, she leaned back against the padded seat. “I don’t see my life without him in it.”

“Then I suppose that answers my question. Not to upset

you even more, but you are not the easiest person to live with.”

Her head whipped around to glare at her mother. “I am not apologizing for not being a pushover.”

“You are confrontational and argumentative,” Marjorie told her mildly. “You insist on having things entirely your way, and you speak without considering the consequences.”

“Are you saying that I should lie?”

“No. But there are ways to bring across the truth without being rude and aggressive. I think we both know that you owe that man an apology.”

“You are troubled,” Caitlin murmured as she handed her brother the scotch.

“I have things on my mind.” He forced a smile as he stared at her. “What’s this I hear about you and Brad?”

He grinned as the color washed into his sister’s pale cheeks.

“We are just talking. It’s no big deal.” She shrugged her thin shoulders. “He is a nice enough man, and we have several things in common.” She looked at him as she poured herself a glass of wine. Their mother had retired to her office to make some phone calls.

“I am not like you, Coop. You always had it easy when it came to the opposite sex. You are incredibly handsome and charming, so dating was never an issue. I am just a plain Jane; men only look at me because I am a Rochester.”

“I hate when you do that,” he said with a frown.

“Do what?”

“Put yourself down. Some guy, and if it’s Brad, would be lucky to have you.”

“Speaking of having, I could not help but notice that you and Brooke seem to be at odds.”

Walking over to the window, he looked at the two women sitting in the garden. A slight smile crossed his lips as he stared at her. They seemed to be in some sort of heated conversation.

“Are you sure she is the right person for you?”

Caitlin stifled a gasp when he turned suddenly, a fierce expression on his face. “She is the only person for me. I understand that you do not care much for her, but you need to get to know her.

She is annoying, but I can deal with it, even if I have to freeze her for a few minutes to make her understand that I will not allow her to roll over me. But she is it for me, Cait. She is crazy, wonderful, and caring for people in need. And she loves me, even though she has not said the words-”

“I am saying them now.” The soft voice had them turning toward the doorway to see the woman under discussion standing there. “Could you give us some room, please?” she asked, turning to Caitlin, who nodded immediately and left.

“I was an idiot.”

“No arguments here.” He stayed where he was, determined she would have to make all the moves.

“Okay,” she said as she took a breath. “This is not easy for me, but I can do it.” Walking into the room, she stood before him and had to tilt her head to look into his face. “I was an ass. I was defensive and said some things I regret now.”

“Did Marjorie have to coach you on what to say?” He asked with lifted brows.

“I see that you are determined to make me work for this. But I don’t care. For the first time, it’s not about winning an argument, being right, or standing up for myself. It’s about you - about us, about knowing when to argue and not to.

I love you so damn much, and I am scared. I have no idea what to do or how to behave for the first time in my life.”

“You think I want to control you.”

“Yes. No.” She shook her head. “I know you love me too and are willing to do anything for me.”

“I am happy you have come to that conclusion.” He was still not touching her, and she needed to feel him. Taking another step, she walked into his arms, and that was all it took for his hands to wrap around her like steel bands.

Chapter 16

“You are leaving the hospital?” She stared at him with a frown. It was a couple of days before their wedding, and she was trying not to freak out.

She had moved into his apartment and was trying not to create a scene or argue about what he insisted on buying for her. She was also learning to condition her mind that her fiance was very social, which meant that they were out and about almost every weekend.

“Not leaving precisely.” Pulling up a chair, he sat beside her as she rubbed cream into her skin. She had gotten rid of the braids, and he was pleasantly surprised at the quality and abundance of her hair.

She told him firmly that she was leaving it in its natural state for the wedding, and afterward, it was back to braids again.

“Then what are you saying?”

“I would go in two to three times a week or whenever needed.” Taking the cream from her, he took her hands in his. “I have seen you at the clinic, privy to the work you are doing there, and I want to be part of it.

We could make additions where we could perform surgeries, make your office bigger, add more rooms, and have a better lunch room. We could hire a few locals to help Miranda at the front desk, things like that.”

She stared at him dazedly. “You have thought this through.”

“I don’t want you to think that I am stepping on your toes-”

“You are not. Darling, you are a trauma surgeon at a major hospital. You cannot just give that up.”

“I will be cutting back.” He felt the warmth inside his chest and wondered if she realized she had said the word ‘darling ‘ for the first time. “I want us to be in this together. And I have the resources to take care of almost everything.”

“You want to use your own money?”

“It’s been piling up in the bank and growing interest.”
Lifting her hands, he kissed her knuckles. “I adore you.”

The tears were threatening. Lord, the man had the ability to make the emotions swamp her and take over completely. Swallowing the golf-sized lump in her throat was proving to be a task, and at first, she could not say anything.

“Before I met you, I felt nothing. I just had sex as a rite of passage, something to do while I was in my so-called

relationships. It meant nothing to me.” She squeezed his hands.

“The first time you made love to me, I told myself that it was a fluke; it happened because you were so experienced, and you knew exactly where to touch me, how to make me come.

But then I started feeling something much more; I started looking forward to hearing your voice.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “Looking forward to telling you about my day. Even when I was pissed at you, I wanted to be with you.” She shook her head. “I never thought that could happen to me. God!” She blew out a breath.

“Something the matter, my sweet?” He asked her gently.

“Yes, damn you. I love you so much that it fills me up.”

“The feeling is mutual. Want to go to bed and figure things out?” He asked, drawing her to her feet.

“You just want to have sex.”

“I want to make love to my beautiful fiancée and run my fingers through all this hair.” He tugged at a fat curl, watching in fascination when it bounced back.

“I meant it, Cooper. The braids go back in as soon as the wedding is over.”

“Hmm.” Wrapping his hands around her, he hoisted her up and carried her off to the bed. Shrugging out of his robe, he immediately climbed in, reaching for her. He could not sleep without her and was not willing to do so.

She had stopped complaining about the amount of things he was buying her because she was just wasting her breath. Cooper was going to do whatever he pleased.

“I cannot wait to be your husband.” He took off the wisp of material to reveal her perfect skin. “Just think, in a couple of days, we get to pledge our lives together.”

“And you get to nag me for the rest of my life.” Her hands touched his bare chest, feeling the shudders racing through his body. It marveled her that she had that effect on him, but then again, he had the same power over her.

“I don’t nag.” His breath whispered against her cheek, sending shivers along her spine. “I direct.”

“Oh? A very fancy word for what you tend to Oh!” She broke off with a moan when his teeth nipped at her lips. His hand wandered over her flat stomach. He soothed the sting from the bite using the tip of his tongue.

She turned into his arms, her thighs parting to accommodate his curious fingers. Her hands fisted into his chest when he started to stroke the swollen and suddenly sensitive flesh. His tongue traced the outline of her lush bottom lip, plunging into her mouth and sending shivers all over her body.

His fingers stroked slowly, rubbing the flesh until she thought she was going to explode. This was Cooper, the man she loved, who had taught her to open herself up. By the time his finger dipped into her, she was vibrating.

Her fingers dug into his chest, her skin quivering when he started to slowly destroy her senses. She came violently; her cries swallowed inside his mouth.

Dragging her lips from his, she buried her face into his neck, the tremors wracking her body. The tears slid down her cheeks, and she could not speak.

Turning her onto her back, he studied her face. Her lips were trembling, her golden-brown eyes drenched with tears.

“I can’t.” She whispered huskily. “It’s too much.”

“Never.” He cupped her cheek gently. “It’s just enough, darling. You undo me.” He climbed on top of her, his body shuddering as her tightness gripped him. He had to stay still for a few minutes as he fought to get control of his rampaging emotions.

“My sweet.” He kissed her cheek, lips sliding to the seams of her lips. “My one, my only. My heart.” He brushed his lips against hers as she wrapped her legs around her waist.

“My love.” He drove into her. Her body arched, fingers digging into his shoulders as the climax exploded with a shattered groan that seemed to be torn from his chest.

He came then, the climax so powerful that it had him driving into her with a fury that could not be controlled. He emptied himself inside her, his body shuddering. His heart hammered like a wild thing inside his chest, and his skin was hot and moist.

Bowing his forehead to hers, he breathed through his teeth as he fought to get his breath back. Shifting so that

he would not crush her with his weight, he gathered her against him, hands wrapped possessively around her body.

Brooke burrowed into his chest, her heart still racing. Turning his head, Cooper kissed her forehead tenderly, overwhelmed by emotions. "I adore you." He whispered thickly. "There will never be anyone else for me as long as I live."

"I know." She whispered back, finally believing that this was the real thing. "You are mine."

She added fiercely.

"And you are mine," he told her with quiet conviction.

“Today is my wedding day.” She stared at her reflection in the mirror and shook her head.

“Beverly is on her way to do your makeup and hair. That man of yours should have allowed you to spend the night here.”

“It was not entirely on him.” Brooke smiled at her mother as she turned around on the vanity stool. “We decided that the groom not seeing the bride the night before was a load of crock.”

“You are probably right.” Marjorie came into the room that had once belonged to Brooke. “I followed all the usual rules, and my marriage failed.”

“Mom-”

She shook her head, delighted that her daughter had reverted to the term she used as a little girl. “I am fine, darling. Happy for you. You are glowing.”

Brooke blew out a breath. “I am so happy, Mom. We are a team, so in sync that it’s scary. I thought us working so closely together would make things weird, but it’s not. Work has started on the clinic, and the locals are chipping in. Cooper is a force and is not a pushover.”

She said with a soft laugh. “You should see how he dealt with those gang members who came with the idea that they were dealing with a regular rich guy afraid of his own shadow. I didn’t even have to go as his backup.”

“And no doubt you would have.” Marjorie shook her head and drew something out of the pocket of her robe.

“Something borrowed and blue.” She handed Brooke the stunning sapphire pendant. “It belonged to your grandmother, and it’s the only piece of jewelry I have left that belonged to her.”

“It’s lovely.”

“Now darling, let’s get you even more beautiful to go and meet your groom.”

Sela flitted around, making sure that everything was in place. The gardens were immaculate, and every dried leaf had been carted away. The entire ceremony would be outdoors, and the scent of blooming flowers made a heady ambiance. It was a perfect summer afternoon with no clouds to obscure the sky’s brilliant blue.

“Mother. Anything I can do?”

Sela turned to see her daughter standing just inside the doorway of the sunny yellow salon. The food would be served around small white canopied covered tables. The guests were already arriving and were being directed to their seats. A long trestle table had been set up for them

to nibble on finger foods while they waited.

Sela eyed the chic mannish suit her daughter was wearing critically. "A dress would be so much nicer." Walking forward, she reached behind Caitlin's head to take out the pins so the thick brownish hair tumbled artlessly past her thin shoulders.

"Mother, it took me half an hour to do that."

"And now it looks much better. Come, darling. Let's go and inspect your closet for something light and summery to wear. You are not attending a business meeting after all."

Half an hour later, when Sela was satisfied that her daughter would do, she greeted her son with a broad smile as she took in the dark blue pants and blue and green sports jacket.

"You look very dapper." She told him, kissing his cheek.
"Ready?"

“Since the day I met her,” he said earnestly. Looking over his head, he spotted his sister descending the stairs. “Wow!” He whistled. “Who are you, and what have you done to Caitlin?”

“Stop.” She blushed furiously as she walked into his arms. “Mother had everything to do with the way I look.” She hugged him fiercely. “I am happy for you.”

“I know.” Tucking her hand through his arm, he led the way to the designated area.

Brooke felt the frantic flutter inside her chest as she made her way across the red carpet that had been placed between the chairs. Her dress was a simple ice-blue color. Fitted from the throat to the waist, it billowed gently from the waist down to swirl around her slender legs to the knees.

Her hair was a wild mass of curls framing her perfectly made-up face. Golden-brown eyes glowed, and diamonds were at her ears and around her throat. She barely noticed the guests seated on the lawn as she stared at her groom.

The ceremony was lighthearted and sweet, with the couple exchanging their vows and their eyes focused on each other. Brooke had invited Miranda and Gloria, who had expressed her appreciation for being included.

“I don’t belong, Doc.”

“Nonsense. You are family.” Brooke had told her, something that Cooper had reinforced.

The ceremony was over, and the picture-taking made Brooke impatient. “How much longer?” She called out to

the official photographer as he had them again posing in front of the oleanders.

“A few more minutes.”

“I am going to take you at your word,” she warned the man.

“Impatient to start the honeymoon, darling?” Cooper asked her indulgently, his arm around her waist.

“It would help if I knew where we were going.” She said dryly, snuggling against him.

“Patience, my sweet. You are going to love the location.”

“It had better not be one of those tourist destinations with the honeymoon suite and people gawking at us.”

Cooper laughed, hauling her into his arms for an enthusiastic kiss caught on camera.

“You are such a treasure,” he whispered in her ear.

“Put me down,” She said with a smile as she wrapped her hands around his neck. “I love you.”

“I know you do.” He kissed her hungrily, forgetting their audience.

“Now we are done.” The photographer called out in delight. “That was perfect.”

“We are on a boat.”

“It’s a perfect day for it.” Her husband pointed out.

“You never asked me if I can swim.”

“Can you?”

“Now you are interested?” She joined him on the deck.

“And it is not a boat.” Grabbing her around the waist, he placed her on his lap. “It’s a yacht.”

“Yours?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It belongs to Liam Moses, a friend.”

“I know who he is. He just loaned you his costly yacht?”

“That’s what friends do. Mrs. Rochester, you look perfect in a bikini.”

“We are alone except for the - what do you call him, the captain at the helm of this gorgeous boat - no - yacht.” She grinned as he gave her a wry look. “It’s wonderful and better than being cooped up in an expensive hotel room. Can we get naked out here?”

“If you don’t mind people using long lens cameras taking pics.”

“Then I suppose we had better go below deck. I am horny.”

“Coincidentally, I am feeling the same.”

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You disappeared so quickly that I had to come and see what’s up.” His amber eyes searched her face. They had been married for almost three months, and work at the clinic was progressing.

A state-of-the-art surgery had been added, and her former office had been gutted to make more space to share the office. Two new people had been employed to help Miranda and Gloria, who had her daughter a week ago.

“I felt sick.”

Moving away from the doorway, he came and sat on the edge of her desk. Tilting her chin up, he peered at her. “Is it what I think it is?” He asked softly.

“I missed my period three weeks ago, but I thought it was the stress from the work we are doing.”

“And it’s not?”

“No.” Leaning her head back and taking a deep breath, she continued. “I just threw up the sushi you brought for lunch, and this morning, I got rid of the bacon and cheese Ms. Jenkins prepared for breakfast.”

He frowned at her. "You never told me."
"I thought nothing of it at the time."

"Want your husband to do an exam?"

"You are perfect for the job since you are familiar with my private area."

Grinning at her, he pulled her gently to her feet. "Is it too soon?"

"Isn't it too late to ask that?"

"I need an answer."

She shrugged, leaning into him.

“I had wanted to wait until about a year, but I am fine either way. How about you?”

“I am over the moon. Let’s go and get the confirmation.”

“Darling, shouldn’t you be on bed rest?” Sela exclaimed as soon came into Brooke’s office. “Aren’t you in the last month of your pregnancy?”

“Shh.” Waddling over, Brooke closed the door and tried to regain her breath. “Your son is threatening to divorce me. I feel fine.” She returned to lower herself into the chair, one hand rubbing her back.

“I promised him I would take two months away from the clinic when our son comes. I want to be here for Mr. Benn when he returns from surgery. And I feel okay. Why are you here? Not that I am not very happy to see you, of course.”

“I know, darling. I just stopped by the apartment to drop off some things for my grandson and decided to come and see how you are doing.”

Brooke shook her head at her mother-in-law. “Between you, my mom, Dwayne, and Caitlin, that little boy will be spoiled rotten, which I will not allow; I am making that very clear.”

“Of course, my dear. Have I told you how much happiness you have brought to my son and me?”

“I believe you did several times.”

“And now you will be bringing the next generation of Rochester into the world.”

“No pressure at all.”

“Absolutely none.” Sela smiled at the beautiful young woman who had changed her son’s life. “Now, I have to run. I am meeting your mother to review some details for the christening.”

“Could you kindly wait until I pop him out first?” She asked in exasperation.

“It does not hurt to be prepared.” With a wave, she was gone.

Shaking her head, Brooke rubbed the small of her back as the pain increased in intensity. She was eight months and a week pregnant and knew from experience that first babies had their own minds.

Her stomach was nauseous, and the pain in her stomach was not going away but was getting more intense.

Pushing away from the desk, she waddled over to the fancy cabinet her husband had insisted on having the contractor put in and made some tea with a touch of honey.

“Oof.” Putting the cup down, she rubbed her hand over her bulging stomach. “Okay there, little Jamieson, it’s not time. Mama is not ready for you to pop out just yet. I am not prepared.” Taking deep breaths, she took several sips of the tea. Her hand shook as the contraction leaped through her body like a sharp, pointed sword.

The cup fell to the floor with a crash. Leaning against the counter, she took several breaths to ride it out. “Oh God.” She whispered, the sweat popping up on her brow. She was about to gather her strength to go and get her phone when her husband came rushing in.

“Perfect timing.” She told him with a shaky smile. “How did you-”

“A patient was coming to see you when she heard the cup shatter. How far apart?”

“I think it’s ten seconds, and if you are thinking of going to the hospital, I have to tell you I am not going to make it. Oh, good Lord.” Gripping his hand, she bent over and took deep breaths.

“Dr. Johnson is still here.”

“That’s good.”

“Can you make it to the examination room?”

“We will see.”

She started to take two steps when she buckled again. Hissing out a breath, Cooper lifted her gently in his arms

and did not bother to argue that he had told her to stay home.

“Iram, my wife is in labor.” He told the man who followed him into the room.

“Let’s see how we can bring the little guy into the world.”

Their son, Jamieson Caleb Rochester, was born an hour later, healthy and weighing seven pounds despite being three weeks early.

“He is perfect,” Brooke whispered as she cradled her baby. “You are going to be a heartbreaker, darling?” She crooned.

“I sent home the rest of the patients. They understand, of course, that since one doctor was giving birth and the other was the Daddy, there would be no one to see them

for the remainder of the day. How is Mommy?” Cooper came to sit on the edge of the narrow bed.

“Just wonderful. My God, I am a mother.”

“That you are. I called the family, and they are on their way over. Why do I get the feeling that you designed this so that you could have our son right here at the clinic?”

“You might be right.” Lifting her head, she turned shining eyes to him. “I love you, darling.”

“Right back at you.” Kissing her on the forehead, he took his son and placed him inside the cot one of the patients had made for him just a week ago. Stroking a hand over the sparse black hair, he stood there looking at what they had created and felt his throat thickening with emotion.

The end... but wait:

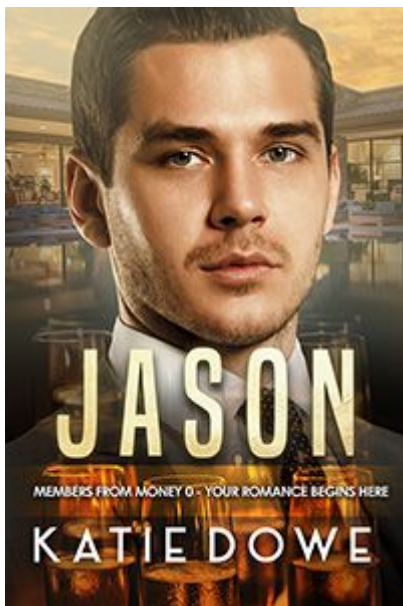
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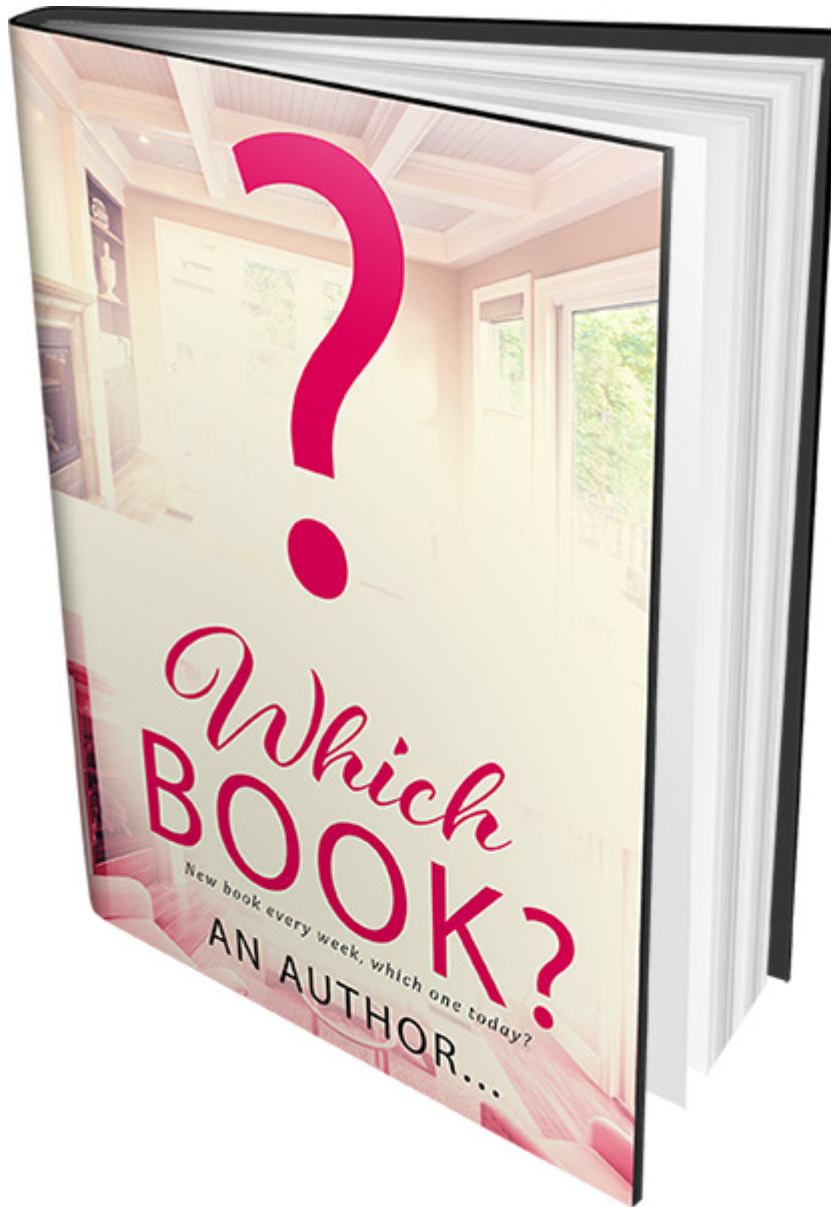
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Emma and Ian soon find an unexpected connection sparking between them, moving beyond the realm of work into something more personal and romantic.

Together they embark on a journey not only to combat a global health crisis but also to navigate the complexities of their heart...

Amidst the urgency of their life-saving mission, can Emma and Ian's bond withstand the pressures of the scientific world?

And as they strive to save the world from a deadly virus, will they also manage to heal the emotional voids within each other?

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In the high-stakes world of cosmetics, Madison Hunt lands her dream job as a personal assistant to CEO Elizabeth Connelly.

Bound by a contract that forbids marriage, Madison's life takes an unexpected turn when she falls for Brennan Hunt, her boss's charming son.

Their whirlwind romance leads to a secret marriage, hidden from Elizabeth Connelly's prying eyes.

But when crisis strikes, Madison and Brennan must now confront their family and tell them the truth!

As they steer through these challenging times, Madison's unexpected pregnancy becomes a beacon of hope for them...

But can their love withstand the trials that come their way?

Or will it end up being their downfall?

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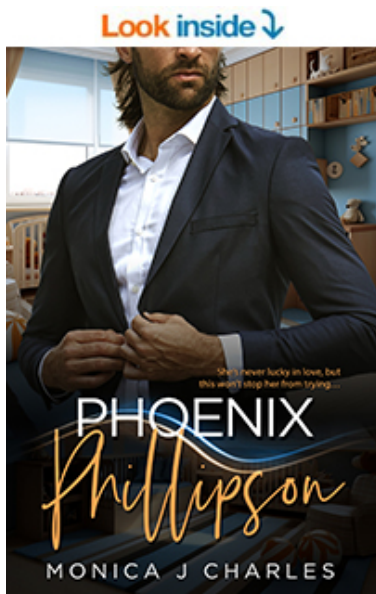


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Toni Love, a young African-American assistant bookkeeper, has struggled with finding love.

All that changes when she encounters Phoenix Philipson, a captivating billionaire and distinguished member of the Sunrise Society!

When single father Phoenix rescues her from an unwelcome advance at a bar, a spark is ignited, quickly blossoming into a passionate romance...

But as their relationship flourishes, an unexpected twist comes their way—Toni is pregnant with twins!

As they embark on this new chapter together, a dangerous adversary will test the strength of their deepening bond...

Can Toni and Phoenix's love flourish amidst the sudden complexities of their rapidly expanding family?

Or will their relationship crumble under all the pressure?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Monica J Charles of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to smoking hot sex scenes!

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Description:

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Laura Allamond has always been a goody-two-shoes, excelling in academics as well as winning her mother's approval.

However, taking a break from her dull job, Laura's trip to Las Vegas takes an unexpected turn when she wakes up married to a man she's just met!

Aspiring politician Cole Williams knows a wife will bolster his public image.

Caught off guard by his spontaneous marriage to Laura, he sees an opportunity to fit her into his campaign strategy.

But Laura's strong-willed nature turns out to be more powerful than expected...

Especially as they find themselves truly falling for each other.

Will they reconcile their vastly different worlds to make their marriage work?

Or will being a wife of a politician be too much for Laura to take?

Find out in this emotional yet sexy romance by Constance Michael of BWWM Club.

Suitable for over 18s only due to shockingly hot sex scenes!

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