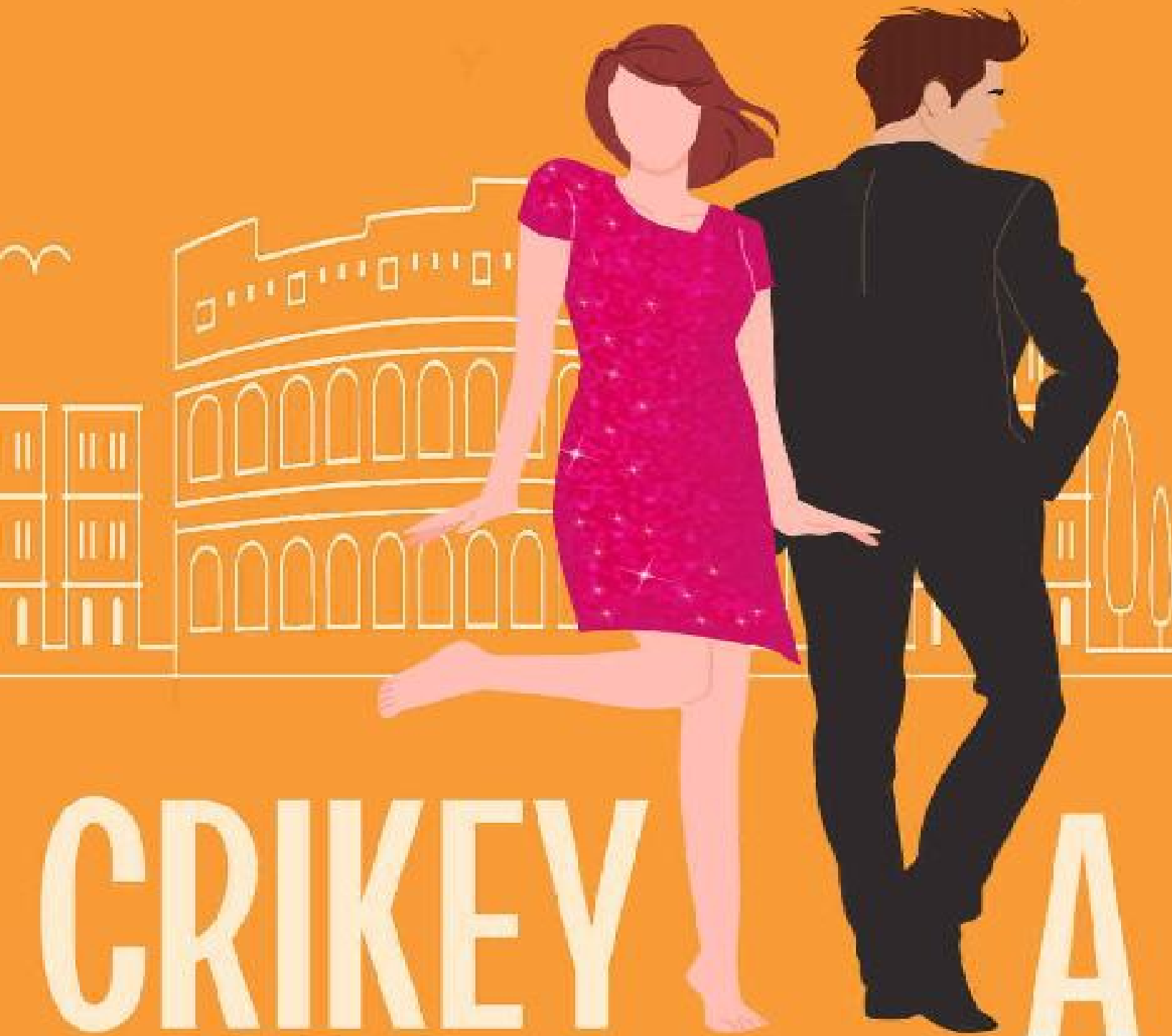


Kathryn Freeman



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BODYGUARD

CRIKEY A BODYGUARD

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romance

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Chapter One

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From her seat on the chintz-covered sofa in her parents' front room, Kelly stared at her father, flabbergasted by what she'd just heard. He wasn't prone to making jokes, but surely this had to be one. Yet when she searched his familiar face, all she could see was an earnest, worried expression. A sideways glance to her mother, sitting next to him, didn't help. She looked just as concerned.

'Please tell me you're winding me up.'

Her father shook his head, a sombre look in his eyes. 'I'm perfectly serious.'

'We're perfectly serious,' her mother added, making her father smile briefly.

'It's not often your mother agrees with me, Kelly,' he said dryly. 'On this occasion, I must be right.'

With a sigh Kelly allowed her gaze to skirt away from them and onto her surroundings. The room spoke of elegance and serenity. Early summer sun shone through the French windows, bouncing off a silver tray on the highly polished coffee table in front of her. The tray contained a bone china tea set. Complete with a rose petal design, for heaven's sake.

Definitely not the right setting for this conversation.

'I don't need a bodyguard. I don't want a bodyguard. I won't have a bodyguard,' she enunciated slowly, trying to keep a lid on her temper.

‘Darling, there’s no need to get so upset about this.’ From his seat opposite, her father reached across the coffee table and patted her hand. ‘I’m sure you’re absolutely right and we’re just being overprotective parents, but when it comes to the safety of our precious daughter, we can’t help wanting to be cautious.’

Kelly inhaled a slow, deep breath. She was prone to talking first and thinking later, but in conversations with her father she’d learnt the reverse was needed. Otherwise she’d be dragged into a conversational maze, from which the only way out was his way. ‘What I’m working on is of no interest to the black market,’ she explained, yet again. ‘It’s not like I’m developing a new smallpox strain, for goodness’ sake. I’m working on a *vaccine* to a strain we *think* some terrorist groups *might* develop. The only people who could possibly be interested in this are fellow scientists and other governments. Even if, God forbid, some nutter does decide to unleash a new pox strain, we’re hardly going to keep what we know under lock and key and only dish it out if . . . I don’t know . . . people promise to make a bronze statue out of us. We’ll happily give the research to those needing help.’

‘When it comes to biological weapons there’s always a danger, you know that. Terrorists might want the vaccine so they can extort money out of people in exchange for it.’ Her father visibly shuddered. ‘Or, good Lord, Kelly, has it not crossed your mind that if they are weaponising smallpox, you’re basically getting in their way. They’d want you dead.’

Kelly huffed out a breath. ‘The fact that I’m working on this isn’t something the department publicises. Besides, scientists round the world are looking into this, not just me.’ She cocked her head and gave him a smile. ‘Only my father would pick me out as being someone special.’

His face didn’t light up with an answering smile like it usually did. It remained worried, the lines around his mouth and across his forehead deeper than she’d ever seen them. Her parents were getting old. Unconsciously her eyes drifted to the photograph above the mantelpiece, taken when her father had been receiving his Nobel Prize. In that his hair was almost black and his handsome face relaxed. Her mother, a scientist of some standing herself, was standing next to him, blonde hair in an elegant bun, smiling with pride into the camera.

‘Please, Kelly. Will you do this for me?’ Her father squeezed his wife’s hand. ‘For us. You are publicly recognised as a leading scientist in this field.’

That alone would give us cause for concern, but add to that the mystery person you've had following you, and calling at your apartment, and we're more than concerned for your safety. We're terrified somebody is after you.'

'The mystery caller came to read my meter.' Though when she'd asked him for I.D. he'd said he'd left it in the car. And when she'd asked him to get it, he hadn't returned. 'And I only *thought I might* have been followed,' she replied with emphasis, though her body gave an involuntary shiver at the memory of that evening. The ripple of awareness that someone was watching her as she'd left work. The worrying glances in her rear-view mirror that confirmed she was seeing the same car behind her mile after mile. But then it had turned off and Kelly had no longer been sure whether it wasn't all just a figment of her far too fertile imagination.

Until it had happened again, two nights later.

Her father glanced down at his watch. 'I've got a man from a security firm arriving in ten minutes.'

Her head snapped up. 'You . . . what?'

'We've been worried for some time that your current work could put your life in danger,' he told her, his eyes steady on hers. 'Recent events have quadrupled that worry. I know you're too stubborn to raise any fears you might have with your bosses so I've taken the matter into my own hands.'

'I'm the stubborn one?' She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'If I told Richard I thought I needed a bodyguard, he'd laugh in my face, and quite right too. Crikey, Dad, bodyguards are for the rich and famous, for royals and those in power. Not for scientists.'

'I knew that's what you'd say, which is why I've sorted it for you.' Sighing deeply, he rose to his feet and went to sit next to her, clasping her hand. 'My precious daughter, we want you to have someone watching over you until you've nailed the formulation. Once the vaccine is in development, you'll no longer be a potential target. From what you've told us that won't be long. A month or so, I think you said.'

Dumbfounded, she gaped at him. 'I can't believe you've arranged this behind my back.'

He gave her a pained look. 'Come on, Kelly. We're worried.'

She leapt to her feet, fizzing with anger. 'So this is a fait accompli?'

'No.' He reached out to grab her hand again. 'This is more of a *talk to the man, see what you think*. He's an ex-soldier, so he should know what he's

doing but if you don't like him, we'll find someone else.'

'Dad,' Kelly cried in frustration. 'I'm not a child you can order around any more. I'm a grown woman who has a say in her life, and I'm telling you now, I don't want this. How would you like some stranger hanging round with you all the time, following your every move?'

He let out a sigh and his expression softened. 'If that stranger was there to protect me, to potentially save my life, then for the sake of my family, I'd accept it.'

'Low blow, Dad.' She groaned, shaking her head. 'Really low blow.'

'But effective, eh?' The twinkle she loved so much entered his eyes and his mouth turned up in a smile.

With a resigned sigh, Kelly turned to her mother, who was watching her with concerned eyes. 'I don't suppose there's any point asking you to talk some sense into him?'

'For once, I find myself agreeing with your father.' She smiled. 'It won't be for long. And it will stop your parents from going too much greyer over the next few weeks or months.'

In her heart, Kelly knew she was fighting a losing battle. All her life her parents had gently, and skilfully, manipulated her into doing things their way. She couldn't see this occasion being any different. They loved her, she knew that, but it didn't make living up to their high expectations any easier. 'Okay, you win. I'll meet him. Then we'll see.'

* * *

Ben Jacobs drew his car to a stop on the gravel driveway and killed the engine, whistling under his breath as he stared at the house. Was house even the right word? When did a house become a mansion? This sprawling place, with its high chimneys and elegant old brickwork, set behind an impressive set of electric gates he'd just been buzzed through, looked like a celebrity pad. No, it was too cool for that, too refined. Settled in the heart of the Chilterns, it was more like one of those National Trust piles he sometimes saw advertised but had never put his size thirteen muddy boots inside.

Easing out of the Audi, he slammed the door shut. Then winced. He was used to driving his old truck. The door on that wouldn't shut *without* a good slam. The Audi on the other hand, on loan for this latest assignment, required only a gentle nudge before she not only closed the doors, but locked them,

too. He imagined she was shuddering with disgust beneath her shiny black bonnet at his harsh treatment. Cocking her an apologetic grin, he set off towards the fancy house-come-mansion.

As his boots scrunched across the gravel drive, his mind clicked through what he knew about the people he was about to meet. The father had been the one to contact Panther, the security company Ben worked for, though it was the daughter they'd been asked to protect. Dr Kelly Bridge was apparently, according to his brief, a world-renowned virology and vaccines expert, even though she was only in her late twenties. As his knowledge of science experts was a big fat zero, he'd take their word for it, though he reckoned twenty-something was way too young for expert status. Mind you, considering her gene pool — both parents were said to be brilliant, award winning scientists — perhaps it wasn't much of a stretch. One thing he did know — she was a long way removed from anyone he'd provided protection to in the past.

Ben laughed under his breath. Wasn't this going to be an interesting meeting? Especially considering he'd flunked science at school. To be fair he'd flunked most things, so it wasn't that he'd been particularly crap at science. More that he'd been crap at everything.

Hadn't helped that he hadn't been at school much.

A few seconds after he'd rung the bell — he figured the big brass knocker was just for show — the door was opened by a smartly-dressed man, probably in his early sixties. The butler or the father? 'Professor Bridge?'

'Yes, yes. You must be Jacobs. Do come in.'

They shook hands, Ben aware of how rough his palm probably felt to the academic. 'Ben, please. Otherwise I sound like a biscuit company.'

Professor Bridge aimed him a quizzical look but then the penny must have dropped because he followed it with a smile. Instantly Ben warmed to the guy. He'd expected a stereotypical stuffy man full of self-importance and long words. If the prof could understand his humour, there was a chance they'd gel, which would make looking out for his daughter a hell of a lot easier.

'This is my wife, Margaret.'

Ben grasped the extended slender hand, appreciating the elegance of the lady in front of him. Refined. Classy.

'Nice to meet you.' She glanced at her husband, nodded once, and then turned back to Ben. 'I have a call to make but my husband will take you to

meet Kelly. She's waiting for you in the sitting room.'

'Follow me.' While Margaret Bridge slipped through a door to the right, the prof led Ben through the large entrance hall, complete with vases of fresh flowers and a polished wood floor that gleamed more than the plates he ate his dinner off, and down a corridor. Finally, he entered a room the Queen would probably be very happy to sit in. While enjoying afternoon tea.

Only it wasn't the Queen sitting there, but someone who could easily pass as a princess. Not one out of a fairy story, all simpering and beautiful, but a real one. Like her mother, the daughter was elegant, regal almost. Her blonde hair was neatly tied back and a pair of huge blue eyes dominated her make-up free face. Her straight, slender nose spoke of breeding and class. The wide mouth looked like it smiled a lot, though it wasn't at the moment.

'Kelly my dear, meet Ben Jacobs.'

At the prof's words, Kelly stood to greet him, and when her eyes found his, Ben felt a jolt of male awareness. Though her face was unremarkable, her eyes were stunning. Vivid, brimming with intelligence, snapping with attitude.

He held out his hand and slapped on his best *you can trust me I'm a professional* smile. The smile that came back at him was hesitant, as was the hand she offered. It felt delicate when clasped inside his huge calloused one, though the strength of her handshake indicated she was no shrinking violet.

He suspected the hesitancy had a very different cause. 'I take it you're not keen on having a bodyguard, ma'am?'

The almost-princess winced. 'Ma'am makes me feel like a grandmother. Please, call me Kelly.'

'Sorry, military habits die hard.' He smiled again, all part of his building trust routine, though he couldn't resist a brief up and down glance at her trim form. 'You sure don't look like anyone's gran.'

Kelly flushed and as the professor cleared his throat, Ben belatedly realised he should have engaged his brain before opening his mouth. He was here to prove he could be trusted with her safety. Right now they were probably considering getting a bodyguard to protect her from the bodyguard. Determinedly he focussed his eyes back onto her face. 'My question still stands. It seems to me you're either not on board with the idea of a bodyguard, or you've taken an instant dislike to me.' He levelled her a crooked grin. 'Wouldn't be the first time, though generally women don't start

to hate me till the second meeting.'

Her smile was polite but distant. Her eyes wary. 'You were right with option one. I'm not keen on having somebody watching over me. That's not particularly directed at you.'

'Good to know. So you don't mind me, but you don't like what I do. I've had worse starts to a job.'

An awkward pause followed his statement and Ben sighed inwardly. Nobody ever *wanted* a bodyguard. Never mind the intrusion, having to admit you needed protection meant acknowledging you were vulnerable. Who the hell was ready for that?

'Please, Ben, take a seat.' The professor rescued the silence, pointing to some posh looking chair with fancy winged arms and bandy wooden legs that looked like they'd snap if he breathed on them. It was even covered in velvet, for God's sake. If ever there was a chair he shouldn't sit on, this was it.

'I don't want to break it,' he blurted, then kicked himself for sounding like an ignorant working-class prick.

The professor laughed kindly. 'You won't. It's a lot sturdier than it looks. But if you'd prefer the sofa?'

Ben surveyed the cream sofa, upholstered in a material that surely should be on a dress instead of a place to park his backside. Hastily he shook his head. 'I'll wedge myself into the chair, thanks.'

* * *

Kelly watched as the bodyguard's mouth curved into another easy grin. The crinkles around his eyes suggested smiling was something he did a lot. It didn't fit with her image of a bodyguard which was more that of a bruiser; stern, forbidding, bulky. Not that this one didn't have the build. She was glad he was going to sit down because looking up at his face was giving her neck ache. If his height was impressive, then so was the way his black leather jacket strained across his muscular frame as he moved. But though he was physically intimidating, his easy smile and sandy brown hair made him appear approachable. On anyone else the combination might have been ordinary, but there was nothing ordinary about Ben Jacobs. Not the bold, confident way he carried himself, or the not quite handsome but incredibly eye-catching face. Then there was the cocky grin and the spark in his startlingly green eyes. No, Ben Jacobs was far from ordinary.

Yet it was this very . . . she supposed it was a strut, a brashness . . . that made her uncomfortable. The men she came across were mainly academics. Quieter, more serious. If she was going to have a man meddling in her life over the next few months, she'd prefer a type she was used to. A type she understood.

Ben hesitantly lowered himself onto the Queen Anne armchair opposite her, and Kelly had to stifle a giggle. The chair was dainty, elegant and pristine because it was hardly ever used. The man squeezing himself into it was large, solid, with a face that had clearly seen a lot of action. The chair was upholstered in fine blue and gold velvet. The man wore black jeans, a black T-shirt and a black jacket. It was an absurd combination.

He caught her eye and gave her a knowing look. One that seemed to say *Am I amusing you?*

She gave her head a small shake and took a seat next to her father on the sofa opposite.

'Okay then.' Green eyes held hers for a beat before turning to her father. 'Perhaps I should summarise what Professor Bridge and I discussed.' He leant forward, resting his arms on his heavily muscled thighs. It was entirely possible that he chose this stance because his broad shoulders were too wide to wedge between the winged back. 'As I understand it, your father believes you're at risk from elements interested in making sure you don't complete the project you're currently working on.'

'He's wrong.'

Kelly received another flash of his relaxed, easy smile. 'I sure hope that's the case. And if it is, you'll be able to tell your father you told him so.' Ben's face changed, the affable bodyguard replaced with someone harder, more dangerous. 'But I understand you've been followed, and had a strange visit to your apartment. If your father's fears materialise, having me by your side could save your life.'

The way he said it, so simply, so calmly, shook her. 'Please don't tell me you'd take a bullet for me. I'm going to think I'm in a bad movie.'

'You didn't rate Kevin Costner?'

'I loved *The Bodyguard*. But it bears no resemblance to real life, nor to my life.'

'You might reserve your singing for the shower, unlike Whitney, but real life carries danger, too. And real bullets do a lot more damage.'

What had begun as an innocuous conversation had turned horribly uncomfortable. Leaping off the sofa, Kelly began to pace. ‘This is ridiculous. There won’t be any bullets. I’m just a scientist.’

‘Who happens to be working on a vaccine against a possible biological weapon,’ her father interrupted quietly. ‘And might be being followed.’

She turned and glared at him. ‘I’m a scientist who specialises in vaccines. One of the many vaccines I’m looking into *might*, if we get the formulation right, protect against potential new strains of smallpox. The rest,’ she raised her hands in emphasis, ‘is speculation.’

‘I hear you.’ Ben gave a shrug of his huge shoulders. ‘It could be entirely a coincidence that one day you think you’ve been followed. The next day a man with no I.D comes to check your meter.’ His tone was like his expression, very matter of fact. ‘But telling yourself everything is okay, doesn’t mean it is. The car could have been following you to find out where you lived. The same person then came to your place pretending to be a meter reader. If you’d let him in . . .’ Another shrug.

Her heart thumped, and Kelly felt the first shiver of real fear.

Ben must have seen it on her face. ‘I’ve not come to frighten you,’ he continued, his tone noticeably softer. ‘None of the people I’ve been asked to protect have been happy with the situation. Many, like you, didn’t believe it was necessary. A lot of them were right, too.’ He shifted back, his broad shoulders now resting awkwardly against the delicately carved wings of the chair. ‘But those who weren’t right ended up happy to have me by their side when the shit hit the fan.’ He winced. ‘Ah, sorry. When things went tits . . . umm, belly up.’

Despite the gravity of what he was saying, there was something about watching the ex-solider attempting to be on his best behaviour that was surprisingly disarming. If his aim was to charm her into agreeing, it appeared it was starting to work. ‘Will it only be you? What about days off?’ A bubble of panic rose up inside her. Surely she wasn’t expected to share her whole life with him?

‘Yes, in the short-term it will only be me. We figure it’s easier for the client to get used to one person. Easier for us, too. Makes sure nothing falls through the cracks.’ Once again, his mouth took on that easy smile. ‘Look, why don’t you give it a go? If you hate my guts by the end of the week we can part ways and the guys at Panther can send someone else.’

Send someone else, she noted. Not forget the whole stupid idea. Seriously, how was she supposed to live with a stranger watching her every move? It was embarrassing. A total over-reaction. Her work colleagues would die laughing.

‘What do you say, Kelly?’ Her father’s voice broke through her thoughts. ‘Will you agree to this? If not for you, then for me and your mother?’

One look into his hopeful blue eyes, and she let out a long, slow exhale. Damn it, he knew which buttons to press. Knew too, how hard she’d always found it to say no to him. ‘Okay,’ she muttered resignedly.

Relief flooded his face, making her feel instantly guilty. He was clearly really worried about her, yet all she’d done was moan about a temporary lack of privacy. Reaching down, she gave his familiar, wiry body a quick hug before turning back to Ben.

Her eyes hit a wall of broad, solid chest — he’d stood up without her realising — and she had to crane her neck again to find his face. ‘You have yourself a deal. I only hope neither of us live to regret it.’

He laughed softly. ‘The only things to regret in life are the things you *don’t* do.’

He clearly lived by his philosophy. Confident, brash and full of life, he wasn’t the sort who stood on the sidelines and watched. No, he was the type who didn’t think twice, just got stuck right in. What a sad truth that if she applied his philosophy to her own life, she was hurtling towards one giant shedload of regret.

‘I’ll need to go home and collect a few things.’ Ben glanced from her to her father. ‘I suggest Kelly stays here tonight. I’ll get someone from the Panther team to come and keep watch, though the security looks pretty tight.’

‘We have the gates. And a house alarm,’ her father confirmed.

Guards, alarms, security teams. It was surreal. It didn’t seem possible they were talking about her.

‘Great.’ Ben suddenly turned his green gaze on her. ‘I’ll get whoever is assigned to you to drive you back to your place tomorrow and I’ll meet you there.’ He tapped his phone. ‘I have the address as being just outside Thame, is that right?’

‘Yes.’ She swallowed, feeling suddenly nervous. Was this really happening? ‘I guess I’ll see you Saturday morning.’

She knew she sounded off, perhaps even rude, but this was so far out of

her comfort zone. Suddenly she wanted to be back in her lab. Back in a world she understood, with people who spoke her language.

Leaving her father and Ben to iron out the details, she set off towards the study to seek out her mum, thankful she was at least staying here tonight. She might be nearly thirty, but she still spent great chunks of her free time at her childhood home. Oh she'd ticked one item off the *how to become an adult* list and bought an apartment, but going back to those four lonely walls every evening had quickly lost its sparkle. To say her life was insular and sheltered was a whopping understatement. All she had to show for it so far was a few fancy letters after her name and a portfolio of scientific papers.

Abruptly she shook off the melancholy. Self-pity was something she abhorred, and she had so much to be thankful for. A family who loved her, work that felt more like a privilege than a job. Heck, in the vaccine world, Dr Kelly Bridge was respected and even *admired*.

So it was churlish to complain that outside that rarefied field, plain old Kelly still felt like a lost little girl, stomping her feet. Looking for a way out of the maze she'd become stuck in — one where every turn seemed to involve work. If she wasn't at work, she was reading up on work. On the rare occasions she went out, it was with people from work. There was a certain reassurance to it all, a comfort, but more and more recently she was starting to feel like she was trapped.

She knocked gently on the open study door and her mother immediately looked up, her eyes narrowing in worry. 'My darling, what's wrong? Was the bodyguard that bad?'

'What?'

'You look so down.'

'Oh, sorry.' She forced herself to smile. 'Ben Jacob's seems fine. I'm sure I can put up with him for a short time while I finalise the vaccine.' It looked like she had even more reason to work late now. Not just to complete the project, but to get the bodyguard out of her hair.

'Then why the glum face?' Her mother patted her cheek. 'I worry about you sometimes. You don't get out enough.'

Kelly rolled her eyes. 'You weren't saying that when I was studying. Quite the opposite.'

'I know, and maybe we pushed you too hard.' Her mum frowned. 'I'm concerned that all you have is your work.'

Kelly felt tears prick. What with the uncomfortable talk about her safety, the mortification of having a bodyguard, and now this dissection of her non-existent social life, she'd had enough of today. 'I have you and Dad too,' she replied quietly, moving to hug her mum so she wouldn't see the tears. 'What more can a girl want?'

But you're supposed to be a woman. How sad that she'd never felt less like one.

Chapter Two

Ben was halfway out of his flat on Saturday morning when he ground to a halt, threw the holdall on the floor, and headed back to his bedroom. Hastily he snatched at the iPod and earphones on his bedside table, essential if Kelly watched highbrow TV in the evening. On a burst of inspiration, he also dived into his sparse wardrobe and grabbed a white shirt and his only suit. Just in case he had to escort her to some fancy do. After chucking the last minute items into his holdall he zipped it back up, threw it over his shoulder and was about to open his front door when his mobile rang.

Sighing heavily, he peered at the caller ID. Then grinned as he pressed answer.

‘Floss. What are you up to?’ he asked as he locked the door.

‘Sweet FA. Sitting at base in front of my computer, twiddling my thumbs as usual. How about you, big man?’

Andy Sturridge, known as Floss on account of the fact that his wife was a dentist, had been his oppo and best buddy during the gruelling Special Forces selection process. Through grit, humour and sheer bloody mindedness the pair of them had made it through the ordeal. And having tabbed through the beacons together in the pissing rain, a tonne weight on their backs, they’d also formed a bond that had proved so far unbreakable. Later they’d been assigned the same squadron and seen each other through hours of gruelling training, several high-octane missions and far too many days of kicking their heels, waiting to be called for duty. To some it sounded like a life made in hell. To Ben, it had been closer to heaven.

Except for the part when he’d been shot.

As if to remind him, his shoulder began to ache.

‘Crackers?’

Ben rolled his eyes at Floss’s use of the nickname. *Crackers*. Given his surname, he supposed it had been inevitable. ‘I’m off to do CP.’

Like him, Floss now worked for Panther, a security company run by Charles Lightfoot, ex Major from the Special Forces. Set up five years ago, it was starting to become the most highly regarded contract security company in the country. In the beginning the focus had been mainly protecting people — CP, close protection — or places. As the company had expanded, they’d

begun to take on other jobs, thank God; reconnaissance, rescue missions. Basically anything the government — and other respectable institutions — needed doing discretely, under the radar. Jobs where a paper trail wasn't wanted.

It meant they were currently stretched, having to turn down jobs because they lacked the manpower. They needed more ex-soldiers. Even poor suckers with busted shoulders.

'Still not ready for that desk job?' Floss returned and Ben could hear the laughter in his voice.

Although at times it felt they were joined at the hip, there was a world of difference between Floss and Ben. Floss had left Special Forces because he'd wanted to find a more settled job so he could start a family. Ben had been *forced* to leave, because of his damn shoulder. Being a whizz with technology, Floss had been able to take up a post as intelligence officer for Panther, which basically meant spending most of his day analysing stuff on his computer. The thought of having to sit at a desk brought Ben out in a cold sweat. What the blazes did an ex-soldier do in an office? Especially *this* ex-soldier. 'I'll never sit behind a desk,' he replied forcefully.

Floss laughed. 'Yeah. I heard you, big man. Still, are you sure you should be taking risks at your age?'

'Bloody hell, I'm only thirty-six. I'm not ready to sit on my arse and crochet just yet.'

There was another burst of laughter down the phone. 'You should try it, man. Make a couple of doilies for me.' Ben shook his head and waited while Floss cackled at his own joke for a few more seconds. 'Who are you protecting?'

'Some scientist.'

Ben had to endure the sound of more sniggering. 'Scientist, eh? Well that should be fun. I can just see you talking particulate physics to some crusty old prof.'

'*She* happens to be young and blonde. Plus, she's into vaccines, not physics, but yeah, I guess the sentiment's the same. Can't imagine we'll be talking about her work much.' The very thought made the hairs on his neck stand to attention. He was more than happy to face down a gunman for her, but as for discussing anything intellectual? Forget it.

'Vaccines, eh?' Floss's voice waffled on in his ear. 'That's a new one. A

scientist sure makes a change from royalty, celebs and diplomats.’

True, but Ben would take them any time. He knew and accepted that in terms of social class he hovered somewhere around the bottom rung of the ladder. Hell, someone had to be at the bottom, and he could live with it being him. What he found hard to live with was his lack of education. He hated — grinding his teeth, tying his stomach into a thousand knots hated — feeling thick.

‘And you said this scientist is blonde?’ Floss continued, clearly totally unfazed at having a one-sided conversation. ‘Well, lucky you. An added bonus.’

Ben wasn’t sure about that, either. If he looked, he liked to touch — wasn’t that the point of being single? But anyone he was protecting was off limits, which was a bloody shame because he reckoned he’d enjoy both watching and touching Dr Bridge. There was something about her cool, blonde, highly intelligent looks that appealed. Of course, that supposed he’d have a chance on that front, which was about as likely as him winning *Mastermind*. Opposites might attract, but like gravitated towards like in the end.

In which case he should be looking out for a busty barmaid with a wide grin whose idea of conversation was to tell him exactly where on her body she wanted his tongue.

‘You’re a bit quiet.’ Floss finally noticed he’d been talking to himself. ‘It’s lucky I only phoned to pass the time and not for the sparkling conversation.’

Ben grunted, trying not to smile. ‘Just waiting for you to let me get a word in edgeways, Floss.’

‘Ball’s in your court, Crackers. Entertain me with tales of life in the field. Shoulder still standing up?’

‘Yeah. Right as rain.’ A lie — it ached now and again — and it pissed him off that instead of doing the job he loved, he was now left doing pansy duties, like babysitting a scientist. A woman probably in no more danger of being abducted, or shot at, than the old dear who lived opposite him.

Ben was suddenly hit by a rush of longing for the life he’d known. He’d not admitted to anyone, even Floss, how much it had hurt to leave the squadron. The one place he’d actually felt he’d belonged. ‘Sorry to disappoint, Floss, but I’ve got to dash. Can’t be late on my first day.’

* * *

Kelly's first reaction when she opened the door was a very female one. Away from the formal, rather feminine surroundings of her parents' home, Ben's blatant sexuality slapped her straight in the face. And immediately made her aware of her own shortcomings in that department. Men with powerful intellects, she could handle. Ben's particular brand of powerful masculinity, made her feel horribly unbalanced.

But then he smiled. It was the same warm, boyish grin he'd thrown in her direction several times on their first meeting and her unease began to fade.

Until she noticed the large khaki green holdall he was carrying.

He lowered the bag and sighed. 'I take it your father didn't mention the part about me staying with you?'

'Err, no.' Her mind jammed and all she could think was how could she possibly let this man, this hulking lump of maleness, live with her. Under the same roof.

Another sigh, this time with an underlying edge of frustration. 'I can't guarantee that anybody wanting to harm you will only do it during daylight hours. You've already had a suspicious caller.'

'I know. It's just I hadn't thought . . .' She trailed off, too rattled to finish the sentence. She hadn't made the leap. Hadn't twigged she'd have to spend all day *and* all night with him. Twenty-four seven.

Again, he read her mind. 'I'll keep out of your way. Be as unobtrusive as possible.' The green eyes twinkled and a dimple flashed in his cheek. 'I'm housetrained and at a push I can even find my way around a kitchen. If you feel I'm getting in your way, you can always shove me out to watch from the car. The alternative is for you move to a hotel until the threat is over. And I stay in the next room. Or you stay at your parents' house and we up the security there.'

Great. Crappy choice after crappy choice. Have a stranger, a male stranger, sharing her apartment with her, live like a nomad in a hotel, or stay with her parents and potentially put them in danger. If, of course, there was any danger. 'You said it would only be you?'

'Yep,' he replied cheerfully, clearly not fazed by the prospect of putting himself in her space. 'But we'll see how it goes. If I'm spending a lot of time watching from the car, we might need to bring others in or I'll be knackered.'

Dumbly she stood in the doorway, trying to make sense of it all. Her life was dull, but at least it was hers to live how she chose. She didn't want this man poking his nose into it, making judgements.

Reminding her she could be in danger.

To her utter embarrassment, she started to tremble.

Ben let go of his bag and lightly held her shoulders. 'I know this is a lot to take in but it isn't the first time I've done this,' he told her quietly, his face turning serious. A hint of the soldier behind the friendly mask. 'I know how to watch out for you while maintaining your privacy. It'll seem awkward at first but you'll get used to me.' His lips curved. 'I'll be like a wart. At first you can't stop seeing it, but after a while you forget it's there.'

'Warts can be hard to get rid of.'

He laughed, the sound low and easy. 'You won't need to freeze this one out. I'll go when you say, as long as your safety isn't compromised.' His hands dropped to his hips. 'Look, just give it a try. I don't expect, or want, to be entertained, or waited on. Just to do my job.'

Kelly inhaled a long, slow breath. Okay, so when he put it like that. Stepping aside, she let him in. 'There's a second bedroom just down the hall. You can put your bag in there.' She hesitated, feeling at once hot, then cold. 'I presume I can at least sleep on my own.'

He chuckled, heaving his bag back onto his shoulder. 'I'm a very light sleeper so I won't need to share a room with you. Give me a second to dump my bag and then we can go through your schedule for the week.'

She watched as he disappeared down her hallway. A tall, broad shouldered hunk of a man with lean hips and an easy gait. He carried himself like a soldier, yet when he grinned he looked like a cheeky schoolboy.

'And yeah, thanks for asking.' His deep, slightly rough voice travelled down the corridor from the end bedroom. 'I could murder a brew. White, no sugar.'

Kelly huffed. What had he said about not expecting to be waited on? Typical man. Well she'd make him this one, just to be decent. After that, he could flipping well make his own.

* * *

They sat opposite each other at her small kitchen table. A table that hadn't looked small the last time she'd sat at it, when she'd been alone.

Ben dragged a small notebook out from his trouser pocket.

‘Before I start, I want to emphasise there are no rules about how we do this.’ He leant back casually against the chair as he thumbed to a blank page. Self-consciously Kelly unclenched her hands and tried to imitate him. ‘Somewhere in Panther security there’s probably an obnoxiously long list of set procedures I’m supposed to follow.’ He cocked her a grin. ‘But I’m not a great one for following the rule book. As far as I’m concerned, how we do this is up to you. If you want, I can be the big, overt close protection officer. I’ll dress in black, always wear shades and fold my arms across my manly chest while looking dangerous.’

Kelly guessed he was using humour to try and relax her. ‘And the alternative?’

‘You’re not digging the showy big, bad bodyguard idea?’

‘I don’t . . .’ She paused, not sure she could say *dig* without sounding insincere. She hadn’t been brought up to use slang. ‘I don’t like the idea of everyone knowing I’ve got a bodyguard. Can’t you just fade into the background? Act like you’re not with me.’

‘Sure, I can do covert, if you prefer.’

‘Can you really?’ The question shot out before she could stop it.

His lips twitched in a lazy smile. ‘I can, really.’

‘But you’re—’

‘Too outrageously handsome not to be noticed?’ he cut in when she hesitated, his grin taking the edge off his arrogance.

‘I was going to say too tall.’

‘Ah, I suppose I’m that as well,’ he conceded, ‘but there are tricks I can do to blend in if I need to.’ Leaning forward he glanced at the still empty page of his notebook. ‘Why don’t we make a list of what you’re going to be doing? You know, where you need to be and when. Then we can decide how to play it.’

‘Well, on Monday I’ll go to work as usual. I try to leave here by seven. I guess if you’re going to be hanging around, we’ll need to tell Richard why you’re with me. He’s my manager.’ She bit into her lip, imagining the conversation.

‘Whoa.’ He held up his hand. ‘What happened to the weekend? Let’s start from today. What are you planning to do this afternoon? This evening?’

Kelly threw a hand to her head. Damn it. Thanks to all this talk about

hiring a bodyguard, she'd clean forgotten about her conversation with Stuart earlier in the week. The one in which she'd agreed to meet him for dinner.

'Problem?'

'No,' she muttered. Not unless you counted going on a date with a bodyguard snapping at your heels as a problem. It made telling her rigid, authoritarian boss she was so scared she'd hired a bodyguard seem like a doddle. 'I'm meant to be seeing a friend for dinner this evening.'

'Fine. I'll just tag along. I don't have to sit at your table. Depending on where you plan on eating I can probably make do with observing from the car.' Kelly shifted on her seat, which he instantly picked up on. 'Ahh, you mean friend as in boyfriend?'

'Well, no, not exactly.' Why wasn't the phone ringing? Or the building being struck by lightning? Anything to stop this conversation. 'Stuart works in the same lab as me.'

'Okay,' he drawled, pulling out a sheet of paper and glancing down it. 'That would be Dr Stuart Jennings?'

'Yes.'

He cocked his head slightly to one side, studying her. 'From the way you're looking as if you want the ground to swallow you up, I'd say there was more to this dinner than a work catch up?'

Kelly stared down at the table. In truth, she wasn't sure if there was. She liked Stuart, but after three 'dates' and one uninspiring kiss, she was pretty sure she didn't like him in that way. Certainly he was easy on the eye and charming when he wanted to be, but in the two years since she'd started to work in the lab next door to him he'd never made her pulse race. In fact she wasn't sure why she'd agreed to go out with him again, other than the simple fact that he'd asked. As so few men ever did, she was loathe to turn down the invitation. He might grow on her.

'Sorry, I bet it feels like I'm prying into areas that are none of my business.' He rubbed a hand over his jaw and gave her a wry smile. 'The thing is, if I'm going to do my job properly, I need to know who you're hanging around with. Trouble can come from any direction.'

Kelly gaped at him. 'If by some remote chance there is trouble, you can't possibly believe the people I work with would be behind it?'

He shrugged those ridiculously broad shoulders. 'You say remote, yet you've already been followed.'

‘I said I *might* have been.’

‘Jacobs’s survival tip number one: trust your instincts. If you thought you were being followed, you were.’

‘Right.’ And wasn’t that reassuring?

‘As to your work colleagues, danger can come from unexpected sources.’

‘Trust no one,’ she muttered under her breath.

He leant back against his chair, put his hands in his pockets and laughed. ‘You’ve got it.’ As quickly as the light rushed into his vivid green eyes, it vanished. When he spoke again his voice was softer, but there was a ring of steel about it. ‘I’m more than happy to have a laugh about some of this, because life is sure as hell too short to be taken seriously, but your safety isn’t a joke.’

She looked into his hard, determined face and felt a real sense of fear.

This man, who was supposed to be making her feel safer, was actually starting to scare the pants off her. And as he started to make notes of the names of her friends and work colleagues, and where she — read that as they — would be going during the week ahead, it finally dawned on her.

This wasn’t all an inconvenience that she had to get through. She might actually be in danger.

Chapter Three

When Kelly walked back into the sitting room later that evening, Ben gave her a wide, appreciative smile. And a long, slow whistle. ‘Wow.’

She froze, her startled expression causing him to curse silently. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I have this habit of blurting what I’m thinking without engaging my brain.’ And if he’d taken just half a second to consider how his clumsy comment might be received, it would have dawned on him that the revered scientist wouldn’t want the man she’d hired as a bodyguard to make a personal comment on her appearance. Or to whistle at her.

Hell, she probably didn’t want any man to *whistle* at her. She’d consider it sexist and degrading, when all he’d wanted to convey was an appreciation of how hot she looked. He just didn’t have a sufficiently elegant vocabulary to do that.

‘It’s okay.’ She gave him a wary look and . . . was that a blush on her cheeks?

Embarrassed? Or irritated, and boiling into anger? ‘Are you sure? Because you kind of froze on me there for a moment.’

‘You took me by surprise, that’s all.’

Yeah, he could imagine. The last thing a female client needed was to think the guy hired to protect her, was actually coming on to her. Kelly wasn’t to know it was just his way. He appreciated women, and couldn’t imagine not letting them know he appreciated them. Until she got used to his ways though, he had to learn to keep his mouth shut.

‘Well then, Cinders.’ He reached for the jacket he’d hung on the back of the kitchen chair. ‘Time to get you to the ball. Don’t want to keep Prince Charming waiting.’

He led her to the door, opened it. Then collided with her as they both started to walk out at the same time.

‘Oh.’ She halted, giving him a confused look.

‘Sorry.’ He stepped out, checking the corridor before glancing back at her. ‘I’m afraid manners get shoved aside on the job for the sake of your safety.’

‘Seriously? I can’t even walk outside my front door?’

‘Not without me giving you the all clear. No.’

Her expression told him she wasn’t happy, but Ben let it roll off him. If he had to upset her to keep her safe, so be it.

Signalling for her to keep behind him, he ran his eyes up and down the street before tucking her tight to him as they walked to the car. He’d talked a good talk in front of her father, but he wasn’t totally convinced she was in danger. Far more likely that once she’d told her father about being followed, he’d become paranoid, which in turn had made Kelly extra aware. Still, until he spent more time with her, he had to assume the threat was real.

‘Are you really going to stay in the car, watching us eat?’ she asked as he slid into the driver’s seat.

‘I’m not much of a bodyguard if I bugger off and leave you.’

She let out a huff of frustration. He’d like to bet it was a noise he’d get used to hearing. ‘But we’re in a public place. And I’m with someone I know.’

He slid her a glance, briefly catching her eye before fixing his gaze back on the road. ‘You need to think of me as an object. Like your handbag.’ Jeez, he was really bigging himself up now. Bet that made her feel really protected. ‘What I’m trying to say, is I’m like part of the furniture.’ Nope, that didn’t work much better. Sofas didn’t leave the house. He tried again. ‘Just ignore me. Forget I’m there. Focus on your date.’ Suddenly he realised what she might be saying. ‘Are you thinking of continuing this beyond the dinner? Because if you are, it would be best to invite him back to yours. I can watch your place from the car—’

‘No.’ Her cheeks flushed as she shook her head. ‘God, this is awkward. I should have just cancelled.’

He sighed, understanding. He wouldn’t want anyone watching him cosyng up on a date, either. ‘If it helps, I’ll be watching the road outside, the people walking in. The other diners. Not you.’

Her face lost a little of its tension. ‘Yes, that does help. Thank you.’

* * *

After Kelly had shown Ben where the restaurant was, he manoeuvred the car into a space opposite. His movements were quick and sure. It would have taken her five goes, and then she’d probably have ended up four feet from the kerb.

When he turned off the engine, the car fell into silence. Somehow it

made the interior feel more intimate, and Kelly became extra aware of Ben's presence. The smooth leather of his jacket, the hint of his cologne. The sheer male bulk of him.

'I'm guessing you'd rather I didn't walk you in.'

'You guess right.' Heavens above, she'd had enough embarrassment already this evening. She hadn't known how to handle Ben's *wow* remark, but it was hard to think of anything she could have done that was more mortifying than freezing, then blushing like a virgin.

Then there had been his assumption that she'd wanted to invite Stuart back to her apartment afterwards. An entirely reasonable assumption. A man like Ben would of course go back to the woman's place. Spend the evening in her bed.

Unbidden, an image flashed through her mind of Ben bending to kiss a faceless woman. His big, muscular body leaning in to her, his hands clasping her face, running down her arms. Picking her up as if she was weightless . . .

'Is your date here yet?'

She jolted, feeling horribly flushed. And terribly guilty. Where on earth had that come from? She was here to spend the evening with Stuart. Thinking about another man was incredibly rude.

Hastily she stared into the restaurant, spotting Stuart sitting at a table near the window.

Great. They'd be fully on show.

'Yes, he's here.' Kelly climbed out quickly, before Ben decided to change his mind and escort her across the road.

Stuart stood as she walked up to the table, and bent to kiss her cheek. His aftershave was stronger than Ben's, she noted. More expensive. Less earthy.

'I didn't see your car pull up.'

'No.' She debated with herself, then went with honesty. 'You're not going to believe this, but Dad's worried I'm in danger.' Stuart's eyebrows snapped up. 'He's hired a bodyguard for me.'

'Good God. Danger from what?'

'I don't know. I guess he's being paranoid because of what I'm working on.'

He frowned. 'I suppose I can see where he's coming from, but it's a bit of a stretch, isn't it? You don't get many bad guys threatening to vaccinate people.' He started to laugh at his own joke, making Kelly feel even more

foolish.

‘That’s what I told him,’ she mumbled as she sat on the chair he pulled out for her. Not the best start to the evening but hey, it could only get better. ‘Please don’t tell anyone. It’s embarrassing enough without everyone at work knowing.’

‘I can imagine. My lips are sealed, though if he’s going to be hanging around, you’ll have to think of a good reason.’

‘I know.’ The thought of Ben trailing around after her was mortifying. Not because of the things he would witness, but the things he wouldn’t, like dancing in nightclubs, sessions down the pub with her friends. Things a man like him would expect a single twenty-nine-year-old woman to be doing.

‘Speaking of your apparently very dangerous work.’ Stuart interrupted her pitiful thoughts. ‘How’s it going? Any closer to finalising the formulation yet?’

Kelly didn’t bother to smother her sigh. This was why she hadn’t been excited about meeting Stuart tonight. Ben, who probably shouldn’t be commenting on his client’s outfit, had boldly done so. The personal comment had shocked her — she couldn’t remember the last time anyone had complimented her appearance — but it hadn’t upset her. Not when his eyes had burned with such blatant appreciation. Stuart on the other hand, who surely should be looking at her as if she was at least remotely attractive to him, hadn’t remarked on the outfit she’d carefully selected, or the make-up she’d painstakingly applied. He’d simply launched into work. As usual. And God, she was passionate about her work, loved to talk about it, but not *all* the time. Sometimes, she wanted to be reminded that she was more than a scientist. That she was a person with likes and dislikes, with needs that went beyond the practical and into the emotional. The physical. The intimate.

As the waiter took their orders, her eyes strayed outside, to the black Audi parked opposite. She could just about make out Ben’s large frame, but not those piercing green eyes.

‘Kelly?’

‘Umm?’ she replied distractedly.

‘I asked if you’d seen that latest piece of research on . . .’

Stuart’s voice drifted away and Kelly founded herself wondering if Ben had a girlfriend — she hadn’t spotted a wedding ring. What would she think about him sharing an apartment with another woman while he was on a job?

‘Kelly?’ This time Stuart sounded annoyed, and as his eyes snapped to where hers were still focussed, she flushed guiltily. ‘Is that him?’

It wasn’t cool to be thinking of one man, while on a date with another. ‘Yes. He’s waiting in the car outside.’

‘Is he taking you home then?’

‘Yes.’ She fiddled with her napkin. ‘He’s staying with me.’

She watched as Stuart’s eyes turned from surprised to cool. ‘I guess that means inviting myself over tonight is out of the question?’

Another sliver of guilt ran through her. Was she being a tease, going on dates with him when she wasn’t sure she wanted anything more? But how was she supposed to know what she wanted, if she didn’t get to know him outside work? ‘You’re welcome to come back for a drink.’

‘A drink wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.’ Stuart sighed, surprising her by reaching for her hand and giving it a kiss. ‘This is our fourth date, Kelly. I was hoping we would move beyond a goodbye kiss on the cheek.’

Kelly found she couldn’t look at him. Suddenly she wished they were talking about work again. Work she understood, she knew what she was doing. This, whatever it was she was doing with Stuart, something millions of women managed with confidence and ease, left Kelly floundering. Should dating really be this difficult? Wasn’t it meant to be fun?

‘I’m sorry.’ It was all she could think of to say.

As the food arrived and Stuart quietly tucked in, she could feel the irritation, the disappointment, radiating off him. What was she supposed to do though — invite him back so they could make out on the sofa, in the full knowledge that Ben was waiting in the car outside?

Is Ben really the problem?

The thought niggled at her while they talked, the conversation moving on from work, to science in general, to world affairs. It still niggled as they settled the bill.

Did she like Stuart enough to want to kiss him, or was she trying to force something that simply wasn’t there?

Chapter Four

Ben had told Kelly he wouldn't be watching her, and in the main it was true. Still, he couldn't help it if his eyes occasionally slid in her direction.

To his knowledge, she hadn't smiled once. Strange, because he had the impression she was a woman who liked to smile. Maybe the pair of them were having a more heartfelt conversation than the types he was used to.

Ben had taken an instant dislike to Stuart. There was something about the preppy, loafers-and-chinos intellectual type that rubbed him up the wrong way. Probably because he was a jeans and T-shirt guy who struggled to say intellectual and sure as hell couldn't spell it. Still, he supposed he could see the appeal to someone like Kelly. But then why didn't she look like she was enjoying herself? Or were deep, heavy conversations actually how smart people enjoyed themselves?

Damn, but that slinky black number suited her.

Determinedly he forced his eyes away. He'd already got into trouble once this evening having thoughts like that. Instead he scanned the restaurant. There was the occasional party of four or more, but it was mainly couples. Some dewy eyed, others not talking. It made him wonder when he'd last taken a woman out to dinner. He'd taken enough of them to bed, but on a date? Dinner, wine and conversation? Not in recent memory.

He shot Kelly another quick glance. Her face was still too serious. If he was sitting opposite her, he'd have her laughing and giggling in no time.

Yeah, but how long until she sussed out that jokey, easy going banter was the only conversation he was capable of? And let's face it, a woman like Kelly was hardly going to want to talk about his two specialist areas of knowledge — the battlefield and the football field.

Kelly pushed back her chair and stood up, sparing Ben the pain of dwelling any further on his inferiority complex. Pleased to have something to do besides watching and thinking, he climbed out of the car and headed to the restaurant.

On the other side of the window, her eyes locked onto his and she acknowledged his presence with a slight nod before turning back to Mr Big Brain Yet Clearly No Personality and giving him a brief kiss on the mouth. A brief *tepid* kiss, Ben noted with some satisfaction. Then she strode out of the

restaurant towards him.

‘Okay, honey?’ He took her arm and shepherded her into his car.

‘Did you really just call me *honey*?’ she asked once they were on their way.

Shit. Ben continued to fix his eyes on the road ahead. He knew it wasn’t pc to call any woman *honey* these days, but it was a habit he couldn’t seem to ditch. Most women he’d met didn’t seem to mind. Then again, the brilliant scientist by his side wasn’t *most women*. ‘You don’t like honey, huh? How about sweetheart? Sugar? Too sweet?’

‘I’m not sure.’ A quick glance to his side revealed she was more bemused than angry. Thank God. ‘I can’t remember ever being called honey before.’

‘Ah.’ *Of course she hasn’t, you prick. The men she goes around with don’t call women honey.*

He was aware of her eyes on his profile, studying him. ‘Let me guess, you call all girls *honey*, so you don’t have to remember any names.’

‘Ouch.’

‘The truth can hurt.’

He gave her a wounded look and she burst out laughing. As the rich sound invaded each of his senses, he took a moment to simply watch her. *Appreciate* her. Before dragging his eyes back to the road, where they should be.

‘That’s the first time I’ve seen you laugh all evening,’ he remarked, taking a quick glance in his rear-view mirror again. He was pretty certain nobody was following them, but pretty certain wasn’t good enough.

‘Is it?’ She sighed. ‘You’re probably right. It was meant to be a date, but somehow when we’re together we end up talking shop.’

Ben snorted. ‘The guy’s having dinner with an . . .’ He’d been about to say attractive blonde, but stopped himself. He made a shit tonne of mistakes in life, but not usually the same one twice. ‘He’s having dinner with you in a restaurant and all he can think to talk about is *vaccines*?’

‘Pretty much. Don’t get me wrong, I love that he’s so interested in what I do, but even I don’t want to spend my Saturday night talking about it.’ A soft sigh escaped her. ‘He also informed me he needs me to stand in for him at the virology conference on Tuesday, so that rather put a damper on the evening. Richard, our boss, will be there but apparently he’s too busy,’ she mimed

quotation marks with her fingers, 'to give the lecture. So that leaves me.'

'You don't like lecturing?' He asked the question in a tone that implied he understood. As if he was a man who lectured regularly. Not one whose idea of a lecture was yelling at the tearaways he caught vandalising his car.

'Actually, I love it,' she admitted. 'But only when it's on my research, something I feel really confident about. I hate having to do a lecture on behalf of someone else.' She gave a little shrug of her slim shoulders. 'Maybe I'll see if I can change the title.'

He knew he wasn't likely to understand the answer, but he asked the question anyway. 'If you had a choice, what would you talk on then?'

'Anything has to be more interesting than the current title. *The World Health Organisation review of variola virus research from 1999 to 2019.*'

'Sounds like a cure for insomnia.'

She giggled. 'Yes, it does, doesn't it? Rather than looking back, I'd want to talk more about the current research going on to develop better tolerated smallpox vaccines. Like an update on the new generation vaccines; the live vaccinia virus with specific gene mutations. They've already shown promise in early studies.'

He coughed. 'Right.'

When he glanced back at her, she was smiling. 'Sounds riveting, doesn't it?'

Thoughtfully he rubbed at his chin. 'Well, it would be a close call, but I'd probably rather listen to an analysis of the Man U, Arsenal match. Probably.'

Her soft, husky laughter filled the car and though he didn't want to break the spell, there was only one reason he was sitting in a car next to her, and he had to keep reminding himself of that. 'Is this the research your father believes might be putting you in danger?'

The laughter slid from her face. 'Not exactly. Making the current smallpox vaccine safer is one focus, but I'm also working on a formulation against new smallpox strains.'

'I thought smallpox had been eradicated?'

'As a disease, yes, but stocks of it are held in secure laboratories in Russia and the US. There are fears that some of these stocks have fallen into the wrong hands, leading to worry not just of the current strain being weaponised, but that some terrorist groups might use genetic engineering to

create a new strain.'

'Which the current vaccine won't protect against?' Hey, he was sounding pretty good for a boy who didn't know one end of a test tube from the other.

'Correct. We believe new strains could be even more lethal. If they were ever released, the ramifications would be . . . ' she shook her head, biting down on her lip '. . . awful. Catastrophically awful.' She gave him a wry smile. 'It's kind of ironic that I'm spending all this time working on something I hope will never be used.'

'Yeah, that's one thing we have in common.' Perhaps instead of *one thing*, he should have said the *only thing*. 'We both spend a lot of time working on *what if* scenarios we hope will never see the light of day.' He grinned. 'It's good to know you've got our back, honey.'

She shot him one of her cute smiles. 'Why thank you, sugar.'

He snorted at her less than subtle dig before jerking his gaze away from her and back to the road. *Concentrate on the job*. 'Where's the conference? If you tell me it's somewhere warm and exotic, I'm going to have to kiss my boss when I see him next.'

'Does Rome work for you?'

He rolled his eyes. 'You bet. I'm not sure how he's going to react when I snog him, but hey. Arrivederci Roma.'

'That's goodbye, Rome. I think you mean buongiorno, Roma.'

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. 'So I did.'

* * *

Kelly shut her eyes, wishing like crazy that she'd kept her big mouth shut. One minute she and Ben had been having fun, laughing and joking. The next he'd clammed up. A sideways glance at his tight expression was enough to confirm that yes, she had managed to embarrass him. Why did she have this awful habit of correcting people when they were wrong? Why couldn't she just have laughed along with him? Did it really flipping matter whether he'd been saying goodbye or hello?

She slumped back against her seat, hating the silence that now fell between them. Especially since she'd had more fun in the last ten minutes than she'd had in the three hours she'd endured in Stuart's company. At first she'd been flattered by Stuart's interest in her work, but now she was getting frustrated by it. Was it wrong to want her date to be fascinated by her, and

not just what she did?

Maybe the fault was hers, though. Maybe outside her work she just wasn't that interesting.

'Stay put while I get the door for you.' Ben's deep voice cut into her thoughts and she realised with a start they were already at her apartment.

Obediently she waited for him to walk round to her side, anxious not to upset him further. She noticed him scan the road as they walked into the building, keeping close to her. Although she'd never admit it to anyone, especially her father, it did feel good to have a man taking care of her for a change. It made her wish for a real man in her life. One who was with her because he wanted to be, and not because he was paid to be.

As the lift took them up to her floor, Ben leant against the wall and studied her. 'So, did your date appreciate the dress?'

'He didn't mention my outfit,' she told him honestly.

A pair of sandy eyebrows shot up. 'And this man is supposed to be a super brain? How does that work, if he can't see what's sitting right in front of him?' Letting out a slow breath, he shook his head from side to side. 'Sorry if that embarrasses you, but he's letting the male species down. It's time he pulled his head away from the microscope and started taking notice of what's staring straight at him.'

The lift doors pinged open, saving Kelly from a reply she wasn't sure her brain was capable of delivering.

Unconscious flirting from a natural born ladies' man, no doubt, because Ben, with his flashing smiles and lazy humour, was exactly that, but Kelly decided it didn't matter. She liked that, for a split second, he'd made her feel appreciated. Made her feel not just like a woman, but an attractive woman, instead of a brain dressed in women's clothing.

* * *

Kelly spent most of Sunday working on the lecture she would now be giving in Rome. Ben was true to his word and kept out of her way. She knew he'd made some phone calls to work — or base as he called it — because she'd overheard the deep hum of his voice. Other than that, and a brief appearance at meal times, she wasn't aware of his presence, or what he was doing in his room. They ate together because it seemed sensible to, and Ben pulled his weight, helping prepare the pasta dish. Insisting on clearing up

afterwards.

Monday, Ben accompanied her to work. Though she'd spent most of Sunday evening telling him it was ridiculous for him to think that the Biological Sciences and Biosecurity Research Institute, set in the Oxford business park, was anything but a safe place, he'd simply smiled. And on Monday morning, he'd not just seen her to her car, he'd got into it with her. She had the sense that was his *modus operandi*. Ignore anything he didn't agree with. But do it with a smile on his face.

At the security desk Kelly was put through the embarrassment of admitting she now had a bodyguard. It caused considerable smirking from the pair on duty, and that to her face. God knows what they would say behind her back. *Kelly Bridge has got so big for her boots she now thinks she's some sort of celebrity.*

'I'd rather the fewer people who know, the better,' she remarked to them as Ben was handed his temporary badge. 'If people ask, I'm going to say he's . . .' she trailed off, looking at Ben expectantly.

'I'm a counter terrorism security advisor, shadowing Kelly for a few weeks to see if we can learn anything from each other.'

Typical of the man that he had a ready answer. Then again, he'd clearly been intending to come all along, so no doubt he'd had his cover planned.

The security officers nodded, giving Ben far more respect than they'd shown Kelly. 'Fine.'

'Did I mention how much I hate this?' she grumbled as they walked towards her department. 'They probably think I'm some sort of prima donna now.'

'I wouldn't worry what that pair of muppets think,' he remarked disgustedly. 'They didn't even ask for my ID. No point having all this fancy retina scanning technology if you let a visitor in without the blink of an eye.' He turned to her, his easy strides so long she had to hurry to keep up with him. 'Are we heading for your lab?'

'Yes, via my boss's office.' She eyed him. 'And no, you're not following me in while I have to explain to yet another person that I'm so special I've got myself a bodyguard.'

He flashed her his grin. 'If you'd listened to me and kept it quiet, you wouldn't be squirming with embarrassment right now.'

'I owe Stuart and my boss the truth,' she countered, not willing to admit

he had a point. ‘They’re hardly suspects. And lying to security doesn’t seem like a sensible idea.’

‘Those muppets don’t look like they give a toss one way or another.’

Leaving him leaning against the wall, his stance at the same time powerful and chilled, she pushed open the door to Richard’s office.

His secretary, Mary, was already at her desk. In her late forties, with a ready smile, she was the total opposite of the dragon Richard had employed previously.

‘Morning, Mary. Is Richard in yet?’

‘You know Richard. At his desk by 7.30 a.m., regular as clockwork.’ She nodded towards the open door behind her. ‘Go straight on through.’

Kelly had a cordial, if slightly uneasy, relationship with the Head of Virology, Professor Richard Thompson. He was polite, but distant. A man with exacting standards who liked things done his way. A man to keep on the right side of. Hence her meeting with him this morning.

‘Kelly.’ He looked up at her, his long, thin face registering only a fraction of a smile. ‘What can I do for you?’

She sucked in a breath, finding it hard to believe what she was about to say. ‘I wanted to let you know that I have a temporary bodyguard.’

Richard’s jaw dropped open and Kelly could truthfully say it was the first time she’d seen him lost for words. ‘Pardon?’

‘I know it sounds ridiculous, but there have been a few instances recently that have caused me to wonder if I’m being followed. Add that to what I’m working on, and my father thought . . .’ She trailed off, annoyed with herself. Bringing her father into this made her sound like a silly girl. ‘I thought I may be a risk of being targeted by people keen for me not to finalise the new vaccine formulation.’

‘Good God, woman. I think you’ve been watching too many thrillers. You’ve become paranoid.’

‘Perhaps.’ She forced herself to keep looking him in the eye, even though she felt as crazy as she knew she sounded. Damn her father for putting her in this position. ‘Still, I’d rather be safe than sorry. I’ve told security and Stuart, but I’d rather as few people know as possible. To everyone else, he’s a counter terrorism security advisor come to shadow me for a few weeks.’

Richard steepled his fingers and gave her a long, searching look. ‘I hope you’re not going to let any of this distract you from the work you’re doing?’

You're so close to making a huge breakthrough in the field. It's vital you finish what you started.'

'I know.' She matched his stare. 'Nothing will stop me from finalising this formulation.' *Apparently not even a potential threat to my life.*

'I realise Stuart's been assisting you. If you need him working with you full-time, let me know.'

Kelly blinked. Stuart, assisting her? Only if bouncing ideas off him counted. Or being brought the occasional coffee. 'I will. Thank you.'

'Good, good.' He waved at her dismissively. 'Just make sure your man stays out of the labs and is kept well away from anything of a sensitive or confidential nature.'

'He's an ex-soldier, Richard. He's not going to be interested in my work.'

The thought of the burly bodyguard nosing about in the lab, looking for evidence of scientific breakthroughs, made her smile.

Ben eased himself away from the wall when he spotted her. 'All good?'

'Aside from him being concerned about you sneaking a peek at sensitive information, yes.'

Ben snorted. 'I wouldn't know a sensitive scientific document if it leapt out of the filing cabinet and waved its arse at me.'

The image had her fighting to suppress a giggle, and it was only when Helen, her lab assistant, gave her a funny look as she walked into the lab, that Kelly realised she never giggled. At least not at work.

Having Ben watching her every move might be frustrating, annoying and mortifying, but perhaps, now and again, it might also be *fun*.

Chapter Five

Ben was bored. He'd been shadowing Kelly at her work for three hours now, and though he was never going to tell her, he was starting to think she was right. He wasn't needed here. She was perfectly safe in her lab, with her hippy lab assistant. Safe and *happy*, he realised as she hummed away, her eyes looking down on some sort of squiggle — he guessed it was a graph — coming out of a fancy machine.

She'd not caught his eye once in the last two hours.

'Helen, what do you think?'

The hippy-looking assistant with hair tied up in some weird set of plaits, went to join her and the pair of them proceeded to have a lengthy conversation of which Ben could only work out the occasional words; yes, I agree, let's repeat it.

With a muted sigh, he shoved his eyes back onto the file Kelly had given him to read to protect his cover. Read being a loose term here, as all he was doing was staring at it. He wondered if it was giving his cover away too much to ask for the Ladybird edition. Then again, how much science was a counter terrorism security advisor supposed to know?

Slipping his phone out of his pocket, he snuck it on top of the file, half hidden behind a page, and opened up the app that might just save his morning.

A little while later he noticed Kelly was on the move. Whoa, wait a minute. The stool he'd been sitting on scraped harshly against the tiles on the floor as he jolted to his feet and strode up to her just as her hand reached for the door.

'Where are you off to?'

She blinked up at him, clearly startled. 'To get a sample from another lab.'

Ben could feel Helen's eyes on him, clearly wondering why he was acting so strangely. 'Don't you think, as I'm *shadowing* you, I should come too?'

Her gaze drifted over his shoulder towards Helen and she let out a soft sigh. 'Fine.'

Clearly determined to do things her way though, she marched out ahead

of him. It took him several strides before he caught up. 'Interesting morning.'

She slid him a look, part amusement, part annoyance. 'Glad you enjoyed it. How's the file I gave you to read? Finished it yet?'

'Not quite. It's so fascinating, I find I keep wanting to start from the beginning again. You know, prolong the excitement.'

This time her lips twitched. 'You didn't need to come. I warned you it would be boring.'

'I'm not here to be entertained,' he countered. 'I'm here to look out for you, and I can hardly do that if I'm not actually with you.' Though perhaps, on this occasion, if he'd sat in her apartment, feet up, watching the TV, he'd have been just as effective.

'I hardly need *looking out for*.' The glance she gave him was full of exasperation. 'Not when I'm in the safety of a science institute with its very own security guards.'

'It's very own highly ineffective security guards,' Ben corrected as they came to a halt outside another lab.

'In your opinion.' She waved her I.D. card at the black box on the wall and the door clicked open.

Once inside she nodded to a cluster of people wearing white lab coats huddled round a fancy looking microscope and went straight to a glass cabinet, entering a code into the panel.

'What's with the high tech lock? Is this where you keep the biscuits?' Her lack of a smile confirmed his own assessment. Yes, it was a lame joke. Clearly all this high science had knocked him off his game. Trouble is, though he was a pretty confident guy in most situations, right now he felt not so much a fish out of water, but a fish forced into a suit and asked to explain the theory of relativity.

'It's where we keep the samples we work on,' she replied finally, and then anticipated his next question. 'No, we don't keep the actual smallpox virus here. It's legally only stored in two government laboratories; one in the United States and one in Russia. All we keep here are inactivated samples of it.'

She withdrew a vial, closed the door, and he followed her back out into the corridor.

'Is this a typical day for you then?' he asked when the silence stretched out. She was frustrated with him, he got that, but as it wasn't a new concept,

he wasn't going to get his knickers in a twist about it.

'You mean working in a lab all day?' When he nodded, she gave him a half smile. 'I take it from your tone you don't see the fascination in what I'm doing.'

Peering at graphs, mixing up test tubes, squirting liquids from one vial to another? 'No?' It seemed the safest answer.

Another sigh. He wasn't sure which was winning the highest tally count, her sighs, or her huffs of frustration. 'It's hard to explain to non-scientists how exciting this world can be. Don't get me wrong, it can be utterly frustrating too, but that moment when you discover something nobody else has ever seen. It's like . . . making the first footprints in fresh snow. And when you realise the discovery has the potential to impact so many areas of science, and ultimately to help save lives.' Her face flushed, her eyes blazed with an intensity he'd not seen in them before, and in that moment he became aware of how attractive she really was. 'Those moments are worth all the days like today.'

* * *

Kelly was pretty certain Ben was staring at her as if she'd gone crazy, but she decided not to look at him. She didn't need another reason to be annoyed with him. His presence was enough.

Not that she could really blame him. After all, he was doing what he was paid to do, but it felt wrong lying to Helen and her other colleagues, pretending Ben was here to learn from her. It would have been so much easier if he'd just dropped her off this morning, and picked her up later. Plus having him tag around after her was exhausting. She felt like she should be entertaining him, which was obviously ridiculous but he looked so bored, she felt guilty.

As they walked back into the lab she noticed him staring at his watch and took pity on him. 'We'll grab some lunch when I've set this next test up.'

The gratitude in his eyes nearly made her laugh.

While he meandered back to his seat at the other end of the lab, Helen smirked at her. 'He looks like he's regretting coming here to shadow you.'

'I think he's finding it duller than he thought,' Kelly agreed, aware at least in that statement she wasn't lying. This had to be the most tame, boring assignment he'd ever been given. 'I'm taking him to lunch in a bit. Maybe a

stale sandwich from the canteen will perk him up.'

Helen's attention remained on Ben. 'He's a bit of all right though, isn't he?'

Kelly didn't need to look at Ben to understand what Helen meant. She could clearly picture his face, his broad-shouldered physique. 'I guess it depends on how you like your men.' She could see that his particular brand of earthy maleness would be attractive to some women. Confident women, who could flirt back with him.

'Umm, I bet he knows his way around a woman's body.'

Kelly felt a prick of discomfort. She hated talking about sex. If there was one thing worse than not having any, it was talking about it, because it only served to highlight what she was missing out on. 'I don't think this is an appropriate conversation to have. Think how you'd feel if you heard two men discussing a woman that way.'

'Yeah, I guess.' Helen winked at her. 'Can't promise I won't be thinking about it, mind.'

Kelly shook her head, though in truth she was pleased to see Helen finally animated about something, even if it was her bodyguard. 'You know it's good to see you smiling.' She scanned Helen's face, noticing the slight bruises under her eyes. The skin that was a little too pale. 'You've been really quiet recently. I began to worry whether there was something wrong?'

Helen's eyes darted away from hers. 'Nothing's wrong. I split up with my boyfriend a month ago, that's all. No big drama.' She walked over to the sink and began to wash her hands. 'It's not like he was the one, you know?'

'As long as that's all it is.'

Helen flashed her a smile. 'I'm fine. Now are you going to take Mr Jacobs to lunch, or shall I?'

'You can come with us.' On the one hand Kelly hoped Helen would take her up on the offer, because as easy as Ben was to talk to, she didn't feel fully comfortable with him yet. But if she did come, it meant awkward conversations about Ben's supposed job and what he was hoping to learn from his time with her.

'No, it's okay. I'll set the next two tests up and grab something in a bit.'

* * *

The canteen was fairly quiet, and Kelly managed to find her and Ben a

table far enough away from anyone else that they couldn't be overheard.

'Sorry it's not more exciting.' She nodded down to his cheese and pickle sandwich. 'We've complained about the catering so many times, but nothing seems to improve.'

'When you've eaten MRE ration packs, anything else tastes like haute cuisine.' As if to confirm he was quite happy with his choice he bit off a huge mouthful, chewed a few times, then swallowed. 'So what happens this afternoon?'

'You sound like you're hoping for something different than this morning.'

'Different from playing Fortnite on my phone while pretending to read a wodge of scientific spiel?'

It was hard not to smile when he looked at her like he was, with mischief in his eyes. 'You know you can always take the afternoon off. Come and collect me later, if you're worried I can't make it home by myself.'

'Fortnite it is then.'

'I might regret asking this, but what exactly is it?'

His mouth quirked. 'You've never heard of Fortnite? Don't you play games on your phone?'

'Err, no. Who has the time?' When he looked at her oddly, she realised how it sounded. A bit like she was a workaholic. A lot condescending. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to imply I'm too important to play phone games. It's just, well, in my down time I prefer to read.' And didn't she come across as super exciting now? Not that it mattered. Ben Jacobs wasn't here to judge her. He was here to stop her parents from worrying about her. Before she could dig herself any further into this awkward hole, Kelly added. 'If it helps at all, we'll be leaving early today to catch the plane to Rome.'

She could almost see him working out the times in his mind.

'The flight's at eight thirty. Leave an hour before the flight, an hour to get to the airport, an hour for packing and wriggle room. You live half an hour from work.' He leant back against his chair. 'By my reckoning we need to leave here at five.'

Okay, so the awkward hole had just got deeper. Taking a breath, she forced herself to look him in the eye. There was nothing wrong with being married to her work, nothing at all. It showed discipline. Dedication. 'Like I said, we'll need to leave early.'

‘Out of interest.’ His big hands scrunched the sandwich packaging up into a tight ball. ‘What’s a normal home time for you?’

‘Seven.’ She sighed. There wasn’t much point lying to him. Not when he’d find out soon enough after Rome. With a bit of luck it would put him off coming to work with her. ‘Okay, actually it’s usually around eight. Ish. Maybe nine some nights.’ She shrugged. ‘What can I say. I love my work.’

He let out a low laugh. ‘Looks like I’m going to get pretty damn good at Fortnite.’

Chapter Six

Rome was hot. To be honest, Kelly could only really guess at that because, other than a brief moment between taxi and hotel when they'd arrived late last night, she hadn't been out of the suite.

Ben had, but only to the hotel gym. And only then once he'd fixed up some camera device so he could monitor their corridor from his phone. She'd argued it was ridiculous overkill — why couldn't she simply agree not to open the door? He'd just given her that look he specialised in. The one that said *I'll listen to you, but then I'll do it my way.*

The door clicked open. 'Only me.'

From her vantage point peeking round the door to her bedroom, her eyes involuntarily drifted over the glistening hard muscles of Ben's upper arms. And then down to his legs. 'Did you have fun?'

He cocked an eyebrow up at her. 'My definition of fun must be very different to yours.'

She had no doubt it was. Thinking back to Helen's comment yesterday, about him knowing his way around a woman's body, she self-consciously tightened the belt on her bathrobe. 'There was just one knock on the door—'

'Housekeeping.' He flashed a grin. 'Picked it up on my phone.'

Because he looked so smug, she countered, 'Then you'll also know I didn't answer it, so there was no need for the overkill security after all.' Quick as a flash she closed the door, effectively ending the conversation.

When she reappeared fifteen minutes later he was sitting on the sofa, flicking through the channels on the TV. Dressed in dark trousers and a formal white shirt he'd not only showered but shaved too, which made a change from the last few days. Though she'd become rather fond of the rough, five o'clock shadow look on him, this smarter, more formal version was very easy on the eye, too.

'You ready to go?' he asked, looking up from his channel hopping. 'Got your lecture sorted?'

'Yes, thanks.' She'd worked on it again yesterday at work, and given it a final run through last night on the plane. Thank heavens she had, because she wasn't sure she'd have been able to focus on it since she'd arrived here. Sharing a hotel suite with him, she'd discovered, was highly distracting.

Somehow it seemed more familiar, more intimate than sharing her apartment. Not just because it was smaller, but because it wasn't her space. It was theirs.

'Kelly?' She blinked, looking up to find him standing by the door, jacket on his arm, waiting for her. 'You still with me, or has your head disappeared into the world of bugs and viruses?'

'Sorry.' Hastily she picked up her briefcase and followed him out.

'How do you want to play this?' he asked as they sat in the back of a taxi heading towards the conference centre. 'Keep to the same story that I'm a counter terrorism security advisor shadowing you? It makes sense to be consistent.'

'I guess, though wouldn't it be better if you were a fellow scientist? More believable, considering this is a general virology conference?'

'I can only get away with that if I'm a mute one. The moment I open my mouth, I'll give the game away.'

'I could brief you on the most common things you might get asked—'

'No.' He pushed a hand through his hair and inhaled deeply. 'Let's stick to the same story as before. You got called to make the lecture at the last minute, which is true, and I came along because I fancied a trip to Rome.' He slid her a smile. 'I didn't say I was a conscientious security advisor.'

'Fine, but I still say it sounds more plausible if you were from another institution. You could be from another branch of science so you wouldn't be expected to know much about virology.'

'Kelly.' His exasperation was obvious.

'Okay,' she conceded. 'You're a lazy security advisor.'

He disarmed her with a boyish grin; from hard-nosed to charming in the blink of an eye. 'I knew you'd see it my way.'

She huffed out a breath, uncertain whether, if he'd used the grin in the first place, she'd have rolled over without a fight.

* * *

Ben's pulse spiked as he walked into the giant lecture theatre, and it wasn't because he sensed Kelly was in danger. Not from a gun totting terrorist, anyway. Was she really going to stand up on that stage and talk to *this* room? It was frigging huge. He'd been in war zones, faced gunmen, but none of that seemed as terrifying as a lecture theatre full of scientists. People of all shapes and sizes were barrelling through the doors. Some in suits,

others in jeans, grey haired, blonde, dark, male, female. It seemed there wasn't a *type* when it came to virologists. The only thing they had in common was the grey matter between their ears.

Kelly nodded to the seats on the front row and Ben slid onto one, trying to act like he belonged there. A man who often found himself at scientific conferences. Right. If his mates could see him now, they'd piss themselves laughing. Ben I'm-full-of-myself Jacobs, turned into a mute wreck by the sight of a rapidly filling lecture theatre.

'Here, take my bag,' Kelly whispered. 'Then it will look like you're part of the conference.' She pushed the black rucksack she'd been given when she'd registered onto his lap. Apparently it was the norm for attendees at scientific conferences to be given a bag, usually sponsored by a drug company, and to carry it round like a sort of membership badge for the rest of the meeting. Funny to think that top notch scientists were happy to lug round a tacky synthetic sack.

'What's in it?' He delved inside and dragged out a thick A4 sized book, which he started to flick through. 'Ah, gobbledegook. My favourite.'

'It's an abstract book.' He must have looked as confused as he felt because she sat down next to him and took the book from him, turning to the contents page. 'It's a summary of all the studies the researchers have submitted to the conference. See, here are a couple with my name on, though I'm not presenting them. One of my colleagues is.'

As just looking at the contents page was giving him a headache, he decided to shove the book back into the bag. Turning, he glanced at the packed hall behind him. 'I don't know about you, but this lot gives me the jitters.'

'Seriously?' She bent her head so she could whisper in his ear. 'You think someone might stand up and fire a shot at me?'

'What? No . . . I wasn't thinking that. Far too public.'

Her shoulders relaxed. 'Why the jitters then?'

He studied her, taking in her very blue, very calm eyes and her genuinely perplexed expression. 'You mean you *aren't* nervous talking in front of this lot?'

Her front teeth bit delicately into her bottom lip and Ben had the feeling she was trying not to laugh. 'I've been making presentations like this for a few years now so no, I'm not nervous today. When I gave my first talk I was

so scared my legs shook behind the lectern, but then I realised I knew more about what I was saying than most of the people in the audience.’ She bit harder into her lip, this time shaking her head, too. ‘Wow, that came out as so arrogant. What I meant was that when I’m talking about my work, nobody knows more about what *I’ve* done, than me. So anyway, now my legs don’t shake.’

Ben’s eyes drifted over her shoulder to a man of average height and average build — average all over, except for his thin face and sharp eyes. She turned to look and broke into a smile. ‘Richard.’ Swivelling between the two of them, she made the introductions. ‘Ben, let me introduce you to Professor Richard Thompson. My boss. Ben is . . . the counter terrorism security advisor I mentioned was coming with me.’

Ben stood and shook the man’s hand, noticing that though Kelly was smiling, she was clearly not at ease. Mind you, Ben could understand why. Must be hard working for someone who fixed you with such razor-sharp looks. Shook hands like a pansy, mind you.

‘Interesting business you’re in.’ The prof gave Ben a cursory once over. ‘Kelly has filled me in.’

‘I’m just tagging along to see if there’s any new research on viruses that have potential to be used as germ warfare.’ Ben gave him a look that he hoped a guy of the prof’s intelligence would pick up on. *Stick to the blasted script.*

Whether he’d made his point or not Ben wasn’t sure, because the prof turned his focus back to Kelly and the pair of them continued to have a conversation that could have been in Russian, for all Ben knew.

‘Ben?’

He must have zoned out, because Kelly was nudging him, and Richard was giving him a hard, impatient look.

‘Richard was asking if there was anywhere in particular you wanted to visit while you’re here?’

Ben shot the guy his most charming smile. He sure wasn’t going to fall into that trap. If he said the name of a big tourist attraction, Richard would peg him as a philistine. But mention the name of some pretentious art gallery or museum and Richard would no doubt quiz him about it. And Ben would look like a prat. ‘Just happy to soak up the atmosphere,’ he replied mildly.

Richard bestowed a dismissive nod in his direction before rattling off

another few sentences of mumbo-jumbo to Kelly and wandering off.

‘He’s a real charmer.’

Kelly sighed. ‘He can be a bit curt.’

‘What’s he like to work for?’

‘He’s always been okay with me.’

Wasn’t hard to work out why. Richard clearly didn’t suffer fools gladly, but Kelly was anything but a fool.

She seemed more pleased to see the next man who came up to greet her. An American scientist called Eric Johnson who looked slickly handsome, spoke loudly and seemed full of his own importance. ‘Do you work in the field?’ he asked Ben finally, when he’d stopped talking long enough for Kelly to introduce him.

Ben itched to reply that yes, he did work in the field. It’s just his field was usually green and surrounded by trees. ‘I’m not a scientist, no. I’m a security advisor, shadowing Kelly.’

‘Dr Bridge?’ Thank God for the interruption by a woman in a natty suit and carefully applied make-up. Ben guessed she was one of the conference staff. ‘We’re ready for you now.’

As Eric Johnson wandered away, Ben whispered in Kelly’s ear. ‘Break a leg.’ He doubted that’s what scientists said to each other, but it felt stupid saying good luck. Who needed luck with all that knowledge kicking about in their head? She smiled back at him over her shoulder though, so maybe the term was okay. Or maybe she was simply being kind.

* * *

For the next hour Ben did nothing but scan the room. And watch Kelly. The slides she showed meant diddly-squat to him. All symbols and squiggles, he could just as well have been in a lecture on modern art. It gave him a great excuse to study her, instead. Who’d have thought he’d get so hot under the collar listening to a woman talk science? But the further she got into her presentation, the more he found himself in awe of her ability to talk confidently and professionally about stuff he couldn’t even pronounce. And the more animated she became, the more her face lit up. Though she wasn’t beautiful, he sensed she didn’t know quite how attractive she was. When she realised, when her fierce intelligence, dancing blue eyes and warm smile were wrapped in a layer of feminine confidence, she’d rock some lucky

man's world.

And he hadn't even mentioned her trim body, her flaring hips . . .

You're here to protect her backside, not admire it.

A loud burst of applause interrupted his monstrously unscientific, and totally unprofessional, thoughts, signalling that Kelly had finished. A few questions followed, which she handled with a poise and confidence that belied her age.

'Pretty impressive,' he remarked when she at last made it back to him, having been interrupted several times by people wanting to talk and shake her hand.

She laughed softly. 'Thank you. Did you understand any of it?'

'Hell, no. You lost me at good afternoon.'

Rolling her eyes at his poor joke, she followed him out of the lecture hall. 'What was so impressive then?'

'You,' he replied succinctly. She flushed and suddenly her eyes looked everywhere but at him, which made him laugh. 'Come on, you must have been called impressive before.'

'Maybe, but not quite so directly. That was an impressive *speech*, Kelly. Your *work* is really impressive, Kelly.'

'Well, from where I'm standing, *you're* very impressive. Now, do you need to stay and listen to some more riveting stuff about bugs, or can we head out of here?' He bent his head and whispered into her ear. 'This place gives me the heebie-jeebies.'

For a moment she didn't say anything. Just stood and looked at him. Then she seemed to become aware she was staring and started to walk. 'We're good to go.' She paused for a moment while they negotiated the doors. 'You know typically, bugs are bacteria. Viruses are very different. For a start, they're so much smaller. The biggest viruses are only as large as the tiniest bacteria.' She was in full flow, he noted, her face as animated as it had been on the podium. 'Bacteria are single-cell organisms that can survive independently,' she continued. 'You can kill them by interfering with their metabolism, which is basically what antibiotics do. Viruses, on the other hand, aren't cells at all. They don't have a metabolism and they can't survive alone. In fact a virus is simply a chain of DNA.' She glanced sideways at him. 'You know, genetic material. A virus needs a host cell in order to stay alive.'

‘Does it now,’ he murmured.

She came to an abrupt stop by the huge glass front doors. ‘Oh my goodness, that turned into another lecture, didn’t it? I’m so sorry.’

‘No worries. I’m getting kind of used to listening to you now.’

She shifted on her feet, transferring her briefcase to her other hand. ‘I hope there’s nothing in the contract about being cruel to bodyguards because I’ve just bust that wide open.’ She sighed. ‘It’s just that a lot of people get bacteria and viruses confused and really they’re very different.’

‘It’s not just me then?’

‘Oh no, it happens all the time. You should hear me ranting at the television when they get it wrong. It makes me so mad.’ She gave him a self-deprecating smile. ‘I know it must sound odd, but I feel very passionate about viruses and I hate it when people mix them up with bacteria. It’s probably the equivalent of . . . oh, I don’t know . . .’

‘Confusing Liverpool with Man United?’ he hazarded and she grinned.

‘Yes, that works. They’re both football teams, or in my case microbes, but they’re actually very different. Now the fungi is another type of microbe, but people don’t get viruses mixed up with fungi.’

‘I think I’ve got the message.’

Once again her cheeks flushed and immediately Ben wanted to apologise for the edge he knew his voice had carried. She thought he was taking the piss when in truth he was utterly in awe of her knowledge. So much so that it brought his own educational inadequacies into sharp focus, making him feel stupid and uncomfortable. Because he couldn’t admit to any of that, he changed the subject. ‘Do you want to head back to the hotel and see if we can catch an earlier flight home, or shall we do some sightseeing?’ He shrugged. ‘If we’re sticking to the cover we’ve been using, I’ve tagged along mainly to see Rome.’

‘So we should do Rome.’

She appeared hesitant though. ‘Are you sure that’s what you want to do?’ A thought struck him. ‘Do you need to meet up with your boss?’

‘Oh no. I see quite enough of him at work. I don’t have any obligations here other than delivering the lecture.’

‘Right then.’ In an effort to bring out that smile of hers again he began to reel off all the Italian words he could think of in a terrible accent. ‘Bellissimo. Tagliatelli, Vienetta, mamma mia.’ He scratched his head. ‘Pizza?’

Her lips began to twitch. 'If that's all the Italian you know, I think you'd better leave the talking to me.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

He was happy to do whatever she wanted. If it meant she kept smiling.

Chapter Seven

Kelly was acutely conscious of Ben sitting next to her as she sat in the taxi they'd hailed from the convention centre. It wasn't the first time she'd sat next to a man in a car, but it *was* the first time she'd felt so acutely conscious of one, even though their bodies had barely touched. Barely, but they had. Italian drivers had a bad reputation for a reason; they drove like maniacs. Each time their driver swerved, Kelly bounced against Ben's incredibly solid bulk.

She glanced sideways at him and saw he was watching the road, his green eyes alert and assessing. It hadn't been obvious to her when they'd first met, but now she'd become so attuned to him that she knew when he was relaxed, like in the hotel room or in her apartment, or when he was on guard, as he was now.

She also knew when she'd irritated him. Lecturing him on the differences between viruses and bacteria . . . seriously, could she have sounded any more arrogant? Or any more nerd-like? He'd been kind, taking it in his stride, but she'd found it hard to relax after that.

'Have you been to Rome before?' Ben asked as, miracle of miracles, the driver stopped at a red light. Rising majestically ahead of them she could make out the iconic sight of the Colosseum, with its distinctive oval shape and dramatic arches.

'Yes. It's a popular place for scientific conferences so I've found myself in Rome quite a few times.' Instantly she clamped her jaw shut. There she went again, blabbing on about conferences. It was probably fairly obvious to him now that she didn't have a life outside her work.

'Don't take this the wrong way, but you seem mighty young to be standing on that platform, lecturing to others.'

Automatically her spine stiffened. 'I know what I'm talking about.'

He put his hands up in a defensive gesture. 'Hey, why is it when people are asked not to take something the wrong way, they immediately do? All I meant was at, what, twenty-nine?'

'And a half,' she corrected.

'Okay then, at the grand old age of twenty-nine and a bit, you must have been one of the youngest people in that room today.'

‘I was an early starter,’ she mumbled quietly, turning to look out of the window at the Colosseum as they drove past, praying he would take the hint. She did not want to talk about this.

‘What do you mean?’

Either he was obtuse when it came to reading women — highly doubtful when she considered how at ease he’d made her feel — or he was one of those people who refused to back down if he had a question to ask or a point to make. She stole a look at him, noticed the stubborn set of his jaw and let out a loud, pointed sigh. ‘I took all my exams early.’

‘What exams?’

‘GCSEs, A-levels, degree.’ Exasperated and highly embarrassed, she dumped everything out in the open. ‘By the age of twenty-three I’d done my doctorate, okay?’

He whistled. ‘Bloody hell. Precocious kid, eh?’

‘It would seem so. Where are we heading?’ she asked, determined to change the subject.

‘Well, I know of a little café by the Spanish Steps. Might be a good place to watch the world go by.’

Instantly the tension drained out of her. ‘That sounds perfect.’

And it was.

Surprisingly, Ben turned out to be the ideal companion. Unstuffy, unpretentious. Always there with a quip, a grin, a twinkle in his eyes. Perhaps it was because she was becoming used to him now, more at ease, but sitting, sharing a drink with him, was how she imagined a real date should feel. Not the tepid, work filled dates she’d had with Stuart, but a date with someone she really, really liked. And okay she knew this *wasn’t* real, that he wasn’t with her because he wanted to be, but spending time with him was . . . crikey, she was actually finding it *enjoyable*.

The way he pulled out her chair, the way he listened to her . . . the way he smiled with his eyes as well as his mouth. For once she didn’t have to be the professional, or to think of something clever to say. Here, in a little corner of Rome, she could pretend to be a woman having coffee with a man because he found her attractive.

‘How did you get into body guarding?’ she asked as she finished off her latte. Around them tourists bustled, taking photographs of each other sitting on the steps. Following guides holding umbrellas aloft. The June sun wasn’t

too hot, and provided an extra layer of glamour to the Piazza di Spagna, glittering off the water in the fountain.

‘Well, I’m not a bodyguard, exactly.’

‘Oh?’ Surprised, she focussed back on him. ‘I’m pretty certain that’s what Dad thinks you are.’ Her pulse started to race and for a brief moment she wondered if this was all some big set up. If actually this man was softening her up with his easy charm just so he could then kidnap her. Or kill her.

‘Whoa.’ He put a hand on hers and shook his head. ‘I’m not one of the bad guys. Look.’ He took out his wallet and showed her his Panther ID. ‘I do work for Panther, it’s just that we don’t only do protection work.’

Her heart settled again. ‘Right. Good. I’m glad you’re not here to kill me.’

His rich laughter filled the air. ‘If I wanted to kill you I’d have chosen somewhere a little less public. And less pretty.’

‘I hear Largo di Torre Argentina is a popular place to be assassinated.’ At his blank look she died another few deaths. Crikey, why did she always have to sound like a boffin? Why couldn’t she just be normal for a change? ‘They think it’s where Julius Caesar was murdered,’ she explained, avoiding his eyes.

‘Ah. He should have had a bodyguard.’

She glanced up, caught his smile, and relaxed again. Maybe, just as she was becoming more comfortable with him, he was starting to get used to her. ‘So what else do you do, you know, besides protecting people?’

‘I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.’ He gave her a wicked grin. ‘And killing the lady I’m paid to protect would really bugger up my future employment prospects.’

Though she forced a smile at his joke, she felt cheated by it. If she was honest, a tiny bit hurt, too. ‘That’s it? Even though you know pretty much everything about me, you’re not even going to tell me what you do?’

He studied her over his coffee cup, his amusement fading. ‘I guess that’s fair, and I don’t mean to be evasive. Panther is pretty small right now and you’re right, we mainly do protection duties though we’re expanding into other areas, thank God. Doing this all the time would send me stir crazy.’ He gave her a wry look. ‘Not that I’m complaining about this assignment.’

‘Obviously.’ She tried to put herself in his shoes. ‘I bet you were thrilled

to hear you were being asked to guard a scientist.’

A burst of laughter rumbled out of him. ‘Okay, truth is I’m used to action. Protecting people doesn’t really cut it for me, scientists or not. Thankfully the boss is using his military contacts to get us some jobs that use our full skill set.’

‘He was in the army?’

‘Yes. He was my CO in the Special Forces.’

‘CO?’

‘Commanding Officer.’

‘I guess that makes you ex Special Forces, too?’

He drank back the rest of his coffee, setting it back on the table. ‘Pretty relentless with the questions, aren’t you? And yes, I am.’

Suddenly the pieces of his personality began to fall into place. His swagger, his air of absolute confidence. It wasn’t arrogance, as she’d first thought. More authority. A man who knew he could handle anything that was thrown at him. ‘Why did you leave? Is there an age limit?’

An amused smile hovered around his lips. ‘Exactly how old do you think I am?’

Kelly narrowed her eyes and studied his face. Craggy, with crinkles around his eyes and down either side of his mouth. A bold, attractive face that had experienced life and didn’t shy away from new adventures. ‘Middle thirties,’ she guessed.

‘Pretty good. I’m thirty-six, but I left not because I was too old, but because I injured my shoulder.’

The slight edge to his voice had her searching his face again. ‘You didn’t want to leave?’

His big shoulders rose and fell as he sighed. ‘No. The military was my life. Without it . . .’ He rubbed at his forehead. ‘I was lost for a while, but then Panther took me on and I guess I’m slowly finding my feet.’

‘But you’d rather be back with the military?’

His soft, low chuckle did something to her insides. ‘This was supposed to be a relaxing afternoon in Rome. Not a re-enactment of the Spanish Inquisition.’

‘Sorry.’ But she wasn’t, as he could no doubt tell. Talking to him was *fascinating*. ‘You know all about me, I thought it was fair that I know a bit about you. What happened to your shoulder?’

* * *

Ben was listening with only half an ear. 'Bullet,' he replied distractedly, his attention diverted to his left. Was there a man, staring?

He angled his head to take a better look, but the man had gone. Blink. Saw him. Blink. Vanished. It was so fleeting that if he hadn't been an eagle-eyed son-of-bitch, trained by the very best to be alert to danger *at all times*, he might have dismissed it as nothing. Maybe wouldn't have even seen it. But he had. There had been a man, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans, with a camera slung over his shoulder, looking for all the world like another tourist. But watching them.

'What is it?' Kelly asked, anxiety clear in her voice.

'I'm not sure,' he answered honestly. 'I saw a guy staring at us.'

'Lots of people stare. Maybe he thought he recognised us. He could have been at the conference and trying to work out if I was the same person who'd been speaking in the lecture theatre.'

'Maybe,' he conceded, wondering now if he was being paranoid. Sure he'd only had a glimpse, but the guy hadn't looked like a scientist. Then again, as he'd seen in the conference hall, scientists came in all shapes and sizes. 'Still, I think it's time to move on. Anywhere else you fancy going before we hit the airport?'

Her face brightened. 'I know it's corny, but can we throw a coin in the Trevi Fountain?'

'Seriously? You want to head to the pickpockets paradise?'

'I've got you to protect me, haven't I?'

Coming from another woman, pretty much any he'd ever come across, the sentence would have been flirty, but while Kelly's smile was wide, it was totally without guile. For all her confidence and authority when it came to science, outside that she seemed refreshingly innocent. As if life had barely touched her. 'Come on then, but my contract states I'm responsible for your safety, not the safety of your handbag.'

As they walked through the quieter back streets towards the fountain, Ben had to fight the compulsion to take her hand. He wasn't sure whether it came from a desire to protect, to reassure, or something more. Something that crossed that fine line between making a client feel at ease, and getting too close. It was a line he'd crossed once, and would never cross again.

They stepped into the piazza and Kelly halted, a look of wonder on her face. 'Isn't it incredible? I've seen it several times but I can never get used to how immense it is. Or how stunning.'

He admired her ability to see beauty in the marble monstrosity. It was probably that innocence again. She looked through eyes unjaded by the crappier side of life, whereas all Ben could see was men wearing too little, and a couple of horses desperate to get away from them. 'He should have gone with women, whoever designed it.' And he'd stake a week's wages she knew.

'This version was mainly Nicola Salvi.'

He smiled to himself when she bit into her lip. It was like she was embarrassed at her knowledge. 'Is there anything you don't know?'

Her cheeks flushed and she turned away from him. 'Sorry.'

'Hey, don't be.' Baffled, yet fascinated too, he forced his eyes away from her and onto the people around him. *Do your job, Jacobs.* 'Most people I know would happily let the world know how clever they are, given half a chance. You seem to be the opposite. You hate people thinking you're bright.'

The area around the fountain heaved with tourists, making him antsy. How the hell was he supposed to spot trouble in this lot?

'That's not quite true,' she answered quietly. 'I hate people thinking I'm a know-it-all.' She quickly changed the subject. 'We need to get a bit closer, so I can throw my coin into the fountain.'

The hairs on Ben's neck started to prick and he scanned the area again, his pulse spiking. Shit, why had he agreed to come here? It was too busy. If he took his eyes off her for a second, she could be dragged into the crowd and lost forever. 'Fine, but do it quickly. We need to get moving.'

She gave him a wide-eyed look. 'Please don't tell me you've seen someone watching us again.'

'I'm not sure.' Everywhere he looked there seemed to be a man wearing a black leather jacket and jeans. Holding a camera.

'Oh God. You're starting to scare me.'

He kicked himself. This wasn't like him. He was the laid-back bodyguard. The one who joked and put the client at ease. 'Sorry, I don't mean to, but there's no point in taking any chances. Chuck your coin and then it really is arrivederci, Roma.'

Chapter Eight

Kelly had been enjoying herself. Not just the sights of Rome, or the warmth of the sun, but the company. Taking to Ben, finding out more about him . . . it was hard to describe how exhilarating the last few hours had been. She was used to dry scientific conversation, yet she'd been hearing about the military, life in the special forces. All from a man with sexy crinkles around his eyes and a smile that was starting to cause a squirming sensation in her stomach every time he directed it her way.

But now her previously chilled bodyguard was looking tense and the day had lost its lustre. Throwing a coin into the Trevi Fountain now seemed ridiculous.

'Let's just go.'

He looked briefly relieved, but then he frowned as he searched her face. 'Hey, it's okay. We've got time for a quick coin throw.'

'It's a silly tradition.' She tried to dismiss it, but he must have sensed her disappointment because he gave her an understanding smile.

'Name me a tradition that isn't daft. Doesn't mean we stop doing them. Come on.'

She felt the press of his body as he manoeuvred them through the crowd towards the edge of the fountain, and despite the tenseness of the last few minutes, a shiver ran through her. Not fear, but something warmer, softer. Energising. An awareness of him as a man.

Clearing the tightness from her throat, she glanced up at him. 'Do we have time for one coin, or three?'

'What's the difference?'

'Legend has it throwing one coin guarantees you come back to Rome. A second coin will bring a new romance, and a third will ensure marriage.'

He was clearly distracted, his eyes focussed on the crowd milling around them, but she caught his smile. 'Well hell, I don't want to be accused of getting in the way of true love. It's got to be three.'

Kelly dutifully placed the coins in her left hand and threw them over her right shoulder. Let's face it, with her miserable track record, she needed all the help she could get in the love department.

As soon as the coins had landed, Ben eased her through the crowds, his

big body plastered against her side. At one point he tucked an arm around her shoulders and her heart bounced. She told herself it was because she was worried.

Once they'd made it out of the busy piazza, Ben seemed to relax, drawing away from her, though a quick glance at him told her he hadn't dropped his guard. 'We'll head for the Pantheon. There should be a taxi stand there.' He slid her a quick smile. 'And I'm sure you've got some interesting Pantheon facts you can fire at me.'

She was used to being teased about her knowledge, though often there was a side to it. *Look at Kelly, showing off again.* Oh, it wasn't said in so many words, not since school anyway, but whether it was real or just her neurosis kicking in, she'd felt the dig. A search of Ben's eyes though, found only genuine amusement — even, perhaps, a touch of admiration. 'I might have.'

'Well, don't be shy. And it has to be better than it being very old, because even I know that.'

She cast him another look. *Even I know that.* Self-deprecating humour, or had that edge now shown itself? His shoulders were relaxed, his hands in his pockets, and to the casual observer he probably looked like a man strolling round Rome with his wife. But she could see his eyes flickering to and fro across the street. He was in full alert mode, and the unease she'd felt at the fountain returned.

'You're only asking to divert my attention from whatever, or whoever it is, you're looking out for.'

He smiled, but didn't look down at her. 'Busted. Humour me and give it your best shot anyway. I promise not to call you a know-it-all.'

Because she desperately needed the distraction, she played along. 'Okay then. You're right, the current Pantheon is old. Around two thousand years old, they think. Its giant dome was the largest in the world for thirteen hundred years.' Ben slowed, his eyes narrowing on a man wearing jeans and a leather jacket coming towards them. There was an almost imperceptible stiffening of his stance until the man turned the corner.

'What's the largest now?'

She forced her mind back into the conversation, determined to play her part in this *everything is normal* charade. 'The National stadium in Singapore. But the Pantheon can still boast that it has the largest unsupported

dome in the world, so all is not lost.'

'I'm on the side of the Romans. It was one hell of a lot harder to make a dome two thousand years ago.' Ben nodded ahead of them. 'Better take your fill of the Pantheon now, because we're heading straight for a taxi.'

'Do you really think we've been followed?' Kelly asked breathlessly as his strides lengthened the closer they got.

'No, but I can't absolutely rule it out, so I'd be happier to kill an hour at the airport than out here.'

Moments later they were sitting in the back of a cab, the sights of Rome speeding past. The afternoon that had started out so promising had come to an abrupt, and disconcerting end.

* * *

Kelly was uncommonly quiet on the plane journey back to Heathrow. Instead of her usual sparky conversation Ben had put up with monosyllabic replies, mixed with the occasional tight smile. Entirely his fault, for being so jumpy after he'd seen that guy at the Spanish Steps. It pissed him off, because while he was known for bending rules, he was also known for having a cool head.

A few days into what he'd blithely called a babysitting assignment and he was already like a blasted jumping bean. It was one thing making sure she knew to be alert, it was another making her a nervous wreck when so far they hadn't come across anything more dangerous than a leather jacket clad tourist with a camera. 'Just because someone might be following you, it doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you,' he stressed after they'd both turned down the chance to sample an over-priced sandwich from the flight attendant. 'I won't let it.'

Her troubled eyes sought his. 'How can you be so certain? You're not God.'

'No, I'm way better.'

All he received for his effort was a half-hearted smile. Soon afterwards she pushed back her seat and closed her eyes.

He consoled himself with the fact that she was at least safe, though he suspected she'd still have been safe if he'd kept his gob shut and let her enjoy the afternoon in Rome.

The rest of the journey was uneventful and, following a brief hold up at

immigration thanks to a long queue, they set off towards his car. As they neared it, he raised his hand.

‘Wait here. I just need to check it.’

He hadn’t bothered looking for Improvised Explosive Devices previously because, frankly, he hadn’t believed she was being followed. Now his distrust of everything and everyone had raised its ugly head so he took his time to carefully check the vehicle over. If someone had followed them all the way out to Rome, there was a pretty fair chance they knew his car and where it was parked.

It was reassuringly clean, but he still had a bucketload of questions.

‘Who knew you were lecturing in Rome?’ he asked as they drove out of the multistorey.

‘Stuart, obviously, because he asked me to go.’ Her voice was small and tired and his heart went out to her. He guessed she hadn’t really believed she was in danger either, until now. At least his jumpiness meant she was taking her situation more seriously. ‘Then there’s Richard, and the conference organisers. Helen. Mary, our secretary, who sorts out all the travel. Of course Mary is a gossip and will tell anyone anything, whether it’s of interest or not, so you have to factor in all the people she’s talked to.’

‘So we can pretty much assume that everyone in your department, plus the conference people, knew you were going to Rome. What about anyone else outside your department, like the American guy you met?’

‘I wasn’t down on the programme because I replaced Stuart at the last minute but, yes, I told Eric I was coming because it came up in discussion about something else.’

Ben shook his head. ‘It doesn’t make sense. I can’t see how any of them would pose a threat. Which means we also have to factor in the possibility that you were *followed* to Rome. Goddamn, that’s worse, because I should have noticed.’

‘There is a third option,’ she replied quietly. ‘Nobody is following me and you’re being paranoid.’

‘I know you want to think that, but I’ve been in this game too long not to feel a prickle on the back of my neck or a twitch in my gut when someone’s watching me. At the Spanish Steps, I had both.’

She started to cry then, quiet sobs that he wouldn’t have known about if he hadn’t glanced in her direction. As he caught sight of the fat teardrops

sliding down her pale cheeks, he winced. ‘Sorry. I should have sugar-coated that more.’

‘No,’ she interrupted sharply. ‘I don’t want to be mollycoddled. It’s better I know.’

He nodded at that. ‘Yes, it is, because being aware that you’re being followed is half the battle. The other half is finding out who’s doing it and knowing how to stop them. If you’re careful, you can stay safe. If you’re careful and you’ve got me, you can’t lose.’

She didn’t reply, which he guessed meant he still had a way to go to convince her he knew what he was doing.

For the next half hour they travelled in silence. Every few seconds Ben religiously checked and double-checked his rear-view mirror because it was always a bitch trying to work out a tail now it was getting dark. One set of headlights looked pretty much like another. Especially when the damn motorway was as busy as it was now.

‘I’m sorry, but I need a bathroom break.’

He clamped down on the oath hovering on the tip of his tongue. Though he’d been dying to hear her talk again, those weren’t the words he wanted to hear. ‘Can’t you wait till we get back?’

Her expression turned mutinous. ‘If I thought I could, I wouldn’t have said anything.’

‘Okay, sorry.’ Why couldn’t women be more like men and have bladders like camels, rather than flaming gnats? ‘The Oxford services are in two miles. That do you?’

He took the slight tilt of her head to be a nod of agreement.

A few minutes later he reluctantly pulled off the motorway and into the car park, hovering near the entrance while he searched for a space. Several cars and a van had followed him in but it was impossible to say whether they were being tailed because the place was so damn busy. Cars arriving, parking, leaving. Shit. Ben’s danger radar was starting to bleep again. He really — make that really, really — wasn’t happy about letting her out.

‘Look, honey, you’re not going in there without me. We need to find another toilet, maybe a disabled one where I can—’

Stand right outside. The words died on his lips because she’d already pushed the car door open and was jumping out.

‘I’m not your *honey*, and I can manage a trip to the loo without your

help,' she yelled over her shoulder as she scurried towards the entrance.

Cursing loudly, he tried to manoeuvre into a space, but cars had come at him from both sides, hemming him in. It was several minutes, and many oaths later when he finally threw the car into a disabled parking space. With a hasty prayer of contrition to the car park God, he shot out, slammed the door shut, and went to follow her.

Damn it, why were women so contrary?

* * *

Kelly knew she was being totally irrational, but she couldn't help it. The realisation that this wasn't all a big game, that someone might actually be after her, was bloody terrifying. All she really wanted to do was hide in the ladies and have a jolly good cry. And Ben wasn't going to stop her.

Totally ignoring the part of her brain that yelled stop, you're making a twit of yourself and might even be putting you both in danger, she ran into the service station and headed for the toilets.

As she dashed across the concourse towards the toilets sign, tears began to blind her eyes. Great. Lurching to a stop she dragged a pack of tissues out of her handbag.

Just as something hard was pushed into her back.

'Make a noise and you're dead.'

She froze, fear fizzing down her spine.

'We're going to walk calmly out of here, with no fuss.' The voice in her ear was as cold as the object pressing into her. 'If you so much as twitch, I'll pull the trigger on the gun I've got pointed at your back.'

With her heart pounding hard against her ribs, Kelly prayed for someone to notice them. A gun was being pointed at her, for God's sake. Surely someone would realise?

People scurried past; several men wearing football shirts, laughing. A hassled father with a kid dragging his feet behind her. An elderly couple.

Nobody glanced in her direction as she was manoeuvred into a quiet corner by a man with his arm casually resting on her back. A man everyone no doubt assumed was her husband, or her boyfriend. Not a man about to kill her.

'Put these on.'

She risked a look at the man behind the deadly voice. Dark hair, average

height and build. Nothing that would make a person look twice at him, except for the mean eyes. Blocking her view of everyone but him, he passed her a jacket, pair of dark glasses, brown wig and a large brimmed hat. When she hesitated, the gun pressed harder into her side.

‘Now.’

Her hands shook wildly as she shrugged on the jacket and secured the wig on her head.

The door to the ladies opened, but the woman with the toddler took no notice of the brown-haired lady adjusting her hat. Her male friend waiting patiently in front of her.

An insistent jab of the gun told Kelly it was time to leave.

With his arm once again wrapped round her back, she was almost dragged out of the service station.

She didn’t dare look anywhere but straight ahead.

Chapter Nine

Ben loitered outside the ladies' toilet, shrugging off the weird glances he was being given. How long did it take a woman to pee? She'd been gone four minutes now and his danger radar was bleeping louder and louder. With a sigh he looked behind him, watching the people coming and going through the double doors to the service station. A hassled mother with her unruly toddler daughter. A man with his arm around his elegant-looking companion with a large hat. An elderly lady with white hair and a walking stick.

None of them were Kelly. He glanced at his watch. Five minutes. What the hell? It was too long to stand out here, waiting.

He dived inside, brushing past a *cleaning in progress* sign, which clattered to the floor. 'Kelly? You here?'

Silence. Shit. Now his danger radar had gone into overload. 'Kelly?'

'Looking for your girlfriend?' A middle-aged woman gave him a wary glance, clearly wondering whether to help him, or scream at the top of her lungs.

'Yes. Slim, blonde hair in a ponytail. Wearing a dark trouser suit. Have you seen her?'

The lady shook her head. 'Nobody like that's come in while I've been here.'

Probably because she was already there when this lady had walked in. But where the hell was she now?

His mind flashed through the women he'd seen leaving the ladies in the last few minutes. No.

Then to the people he'd seen leaving the services.

The man with his arm draped round an elegant-looking woman with the large hat and sunglasses? Fuck.

He flew out of the service station, grabbing his phone and dialling her number. It went straight to voicemail. He pressed the app on his mobile and got what he was looking for. A signal from her phone. She was on the move, flying down the motorway. What the . . . ?

Diving into his car, he jammed it into first and screeched out of the car park. Had she been snatched, right from under his flaming nose?

The red blob on his phone screen continued to flash, confirming his fears.

Calling himself all the names he could think of, from asshole through to zero-brained-dickhead, he clutched at the steering wheel and followed the red light on his screen down the M40.

Half an hour later, Ben found himself on a dark, deserted road deep in the Cotswolds. He'd managed to catch up with the signal and now knew she was in the black van ahead of him. At least her phone was.

There was so little traffic he was forced to hang back so the driver didn't suspect he was being tailed. Suddenly the van turned off and bumped its way down a long drive. Ben slammed his foot on the brake and pulled over to the side of the road. Snatching at the night vision goggles he'd had the foresight to store in the glove box, he watched as the van halted at a set of twelve-foot-high gates and a bulky figure dressed in black jumped out and unlocked them. The van drove through and stopped while the figure in black pushed the gates shut, then jumped back in.

A quick scan to the right and Ben saw a derelict old building, probably an old farmhouse. He judged it was a couple of miles away from where he was now. It must be where they were heading; he'd bet his life on it. His stomach churned violently. Yeah, it wasn't his life he was betting on, but Kelly's.

Gripping at the NVGs, he tried to think rationally. The emotional part of his brain told him to chase after them. To screech down the track, storm into the building and take back his girl . . . the girl. Hell, even that sounded wrong. Rescue the lady scientist. Pronto.

But the clinical side of his brain, the one he'd trained himself to use in combat, searched for another option. Racing after her like a charging bull would lose him the element of surprise. Potentially get them both killed.

Damn, he had to call this in. And how lucky that it was the boss manning the phone line tonight.

'You've got to be fucking kidding me.' Major Charles Lightfoot was from a privileged background and spoke like a gentleman. He could also swear like a trooper when he needed to.

He often swore when he spoke to Ben.

After taking a few precious seconds to reassure his boss he knew where Kelly was (he omitted the bit about it only being her phone he knew for certain was there), he received instructions on where to head once he'd rescued her (please God), and confirmed he'd call if he needed backup

(though apparently it would be a while coming seeing how short-handed they were). Ben then drove the Audi up near a set of trees and pulled off the road. From the glove compartment, he drew out the pouch containing his trusty mini penknife. The one so small, nobody ever noticed when he was patted down. From the boot he pulled out a secure comms radio and some better NVGs. All put there in the certain knowledge he wasn't going to need the damn things. Thanks to his staggering incompetence though, this cushy babysitting job had turned into a monstrous car crash.

Throwing the bag over his good shoulder, he trekked off through the undergrowth.

* * *

Kelly lay on the cold, concrete floor, a string of four letter words running through her mind. Words she'd never say out loud because swearing wasn't something her family did. Even now, said to herself while at the mercy of gunmen prowling outside, the profanities sounded incongruous. Like a nun saying shit in church.

Sucking in another deep breath she wriggled her body, pulling against the sharp plastic binding that tied both her hands and feet together. It dug into her wrists but she kept trying. *If you want something, you keep trying till you get it.* Her father had told her that as a child. So far being stubborn and determined hadn't failed her. She'd wanted a job that stimulated, that challenged and excited her, and she'd got it.

Now she wanted to live to go back to it. And she had an ace up her sleeve.

Ben.

If you've got me, you can't lose.

She remembered him saying those words in the car only an hour or so ago and she clung to them now, needing the comfort. The hope. That strut of his, the aura, they were signs of a man who would never be beaten. She was counting on the fact that he was lurking outside right this moment, working out how best to break in.

It was up to her to play her part as well as she could.

Once again, she tried to move her hands. Once again, the plastic binding bit into her raw skin.

* * *

Ben crouched behind the bushes in front of the farmhouse. Ignoring the scratch of the brambles on his hands he assessed the situation again from his trusty NVGs. The good, no, the brilliant, *I promise to always behave from now on God, as you've done me this stonking big favour* news, was Kelly was still alive. He'd been able to make out her bound and shackled body as they'd hauled her out of the van. If they'd wanted her dead she would be, so it told him they were after her skills. It also told him he was one lucky bastard, because he could so easily have been looking at her lifeless body.

He shuddered, shame knotting his stomach. By Christ, he'd let her down. His mind hadn't been fully on the game right from the start. One look into those intelligent blue eyes and he'd spent too much of his focus getting to know her, and getting her to like him, instead of keeping his distance and doing his effing job.

And now she was paying for his stupidity. If they were hurting her . . . he broke off, wrenching his mind away from negative thoughts.

She was alive and he was going to get her out.

He focussed back on the view through the NVGs. As far as he could work out there were two men and one woman holding Kelly. Three against one were good odds. He'd take them any day. Hell, he'd have to, because from the look of her agitated hand signals, the person the woman was talking to on the phone wasn't happy with them.

It meant there was a risk they'd move her. Maybe take her straight to whoever was behind all this, because Ben had a strong feeling she'd been captured to order. Why else leave her bound and gagged in an old building miles from anywhere?

If he didn't get her out now, he'd run the risk of losing her again.

And next time he might not be lucky enough to find her.

* * *

Kelly heard the thud of something hitting the floor and froze. Was that good or bad news? Someone come to help her or kill her? Her heart thumped violently as she angled her prostrate body so she could see the door. *Please God, let it be Ben.*

A scuffle, followed by a faint, strangled cry. Another thud.

Her heart lurched again.

'Kelly?'

Dizzy with relief at the sound of Ben's voice, she tried to make a noise. And couldn't.

'Where are you, honey?'

She shuffled along the floor and banged at the wall with her bound feet.

Within seconds the heavy door opened and Ben strode in. Gun in hand, odd looking binoculars slung around his shoulders, face set in hard, resolute lines. He looked like an avenging God.

Or maybe she was being fanciful because she was so pathetically happy to see him.

His eyes found hers and he cursed crudely before crouching down and quickly releasing her constraints. First to come off was the gag, and she started to cough as the air hit her dry throat. Then he cut through the strapping on her hands and legs.

'You okay?' His voice sounded oddly rough.

She nodded, managing a squeaky, whispered, 'Yes.'

'Atta girl. I need you to keep quiet and follow me. We're heading back towards the road to find the car.'

He grabbed her hand and led her out through the rear of the building before setting off at a run across the scrubland. Her legs didn't seem to want to co-operate; two useless lumps of jelly, stumbling over every tuft of grass.

She opened her mouth to ask him to stop. To explain that she needed a few minutes to get back to strength. Then snapped it shut as a crack of gunfire ripped through the night. As she stumbled, a strong pair of arms reached out to catch her.

'It's okay. I'm not going to let them get you. Trust me.' He cursed under his breath. 'As if you've got any reason to trust me after I let them snatch you, but . . .'

Another explosion of gunfire burst into her eardrums, briefly lighting the dark sky.

'Crap.' The mild annoyance in his voice, such a contrast to the white-knuckle terror she was feeling, almost set her off into hysterical giggles. He lifted up the strange looking goggles and shoved her none too gently behind him. 'Looks like there were four of them, not three.' Her heart flew into her mouth as she watched him scan the area. 'Are you up to a fast sprint?'

'A . . . what?' Putting aside the small fact that her legs weren't working, did he seriously expect her to run while someone was firing bullets at her?

He pointed to a small copse about a hundred yards away. ‘Run to the trees. When you get there, hide behind the biggest bugger you can find.’

‘What about you?’ Stupid, stupid thing to say. He knew what he was doing, but she needed to know he wasn’t going to leave her.

‘I’ll be right behind you. Now, go.’

Like a runner out of the blocks, she fled. Within seconds gunfire echoed round her ears. It sounded so horribly, horribly close. Fear seized her heart, squeezing the blood from it, and she stumbled again. Oh God, she couldn’t do this. Frantically she glanced behind her. There was Ben, crouching low, shooting towards the warehouse. Momentarily he turned and caught her eye, frantically gesturing at her to keep moving.

Heart pounding, legs trembling, she struck out again towards the trees.

He was right on her tail, pushing her behind a trunk before she had time to dither about which one to hide behind. ‘Blondie, when I say run, you have to actually *run*.’ He wedged himself fully against her, his heavy breath warm against her face, his heart a steady, reassuring thud against her chest. ‘That means putting one dainty foot in front of the other and not stopping. Understand?’

She wasn’t sure she understood anything. Why she was being shot at. Why he was so calm when she was seconds away from meltdown. Most of all, why, with all of that going on, her heart had fluttered at his use of the term *Blondie*.

With his body wrapped around her, almost smothering her, he peered out from behind the trunk. Seemingly satisfied the immediate threat had disappeared, he moved away and gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘Sorry, but we need to do more running.’

Nodding, she braced herself. Now wasn’t the time to moan her legs were still wobbly, or that she was desperately thirsty. Or that the wee she’d wanted at the service station still hadn’t happened. Now was the time to run for her life.

They covered the rough ground quickly, at least Kelly thought so. Whether it was adrenaline, fear or simply pride, she stuck in there and ran faster than she’d ever done before. But as they scampered through the dense undergrowth the egg-sized blister on the back of her heel began to scream. It wasn’t long before the muscles in her calves and thighs joined in. Without warning she stopped, dropping to her knees. ‘Sorry,’ she gasped. ‘I can’t go

on.'

Ben stopped, immediately scanning the horizon for signs of movement. 'We're nearly there. Are you sure you can't manage a bit more?' His voice was calm, his breathing regular. He looked like he'd barely broken sweat.

'Do you think I'd be stopping now if I could?' she hissed, hating herself for being so weak. 'What a stupid question.'

* * *

Ben flinched. Sure, it wasn't the first time he'd been called stupid, and technically she'd called his question stupid and not him. But coming from a woman as intelligent as Kelly, the phrase stung. And damn it, she was right, too. It was stupid to expect a civilian scientist, one who'd just been kidnapped and forced to run across tough terrain while being shot at, to have the stamina of a soldier. Even an ex-soldier.

'Are we still being chased?' she whispered, her eyes fixed on the horizon as she struggled to regain her breath.

'I can't be certain we're not,' he replied carefully, having clocked the fear in her big blue eyes. 'So we need to get to the car as quick as we can.' Slung the gat rifle he'd pinched off one of Kelly's captors round his neck, he bent his back and patted at it with his hand. 'Time for you to go piggyback.'

She raised incredulous eyes to his. 'You've got to be kidding.'

'Do you want to carry on running?'

Shaking her head, she swiped a hand across her sweat-drenched forehead. 'Sorry, but I really don't think I can.'

'Nothing to be sorry about. You've done really well but now it's time to take a rest.'

Again she hesitated, making him antsy because it wasn't as if they had all the time in the bloody world to have this conversation.

'What about your shoulder?'

'Fu—' He bit off the curse, remembering who he was talking to. 'Forget my shoulder. Climb on.'

Staggering to her feet, Kelly warily eyed up his back. 'Do you really think you can carry me *and* run?'

He fought against the impulse to grab her legs and hoist her up. 'Look, honey.' He grimaced. 'Sorry, Kelly. It's time to move. Now.' She climbed

onto his crouched back and he lifted her up, pulling her legs firmly around him. 'See,' he remarked as he jogged off, 'you're no heavier than a bergen.'

'A what?' she puffed, bouncing against his back.

Well, hey, score a point to him. He knew one thing she didn't. 'They're like rucksacks,' he explained, finding his rhythm. 'We have to lug them about when we go on exercises. Carrying you will be a doddle compared to that.'

It wasn't long before Ben was forced to re-evaluate his statement. Carrying Kelly on his back wasn't a doddle. It was agony. The pain wasn't due to his shoulder, or even her weight. Hell, he'd spent more hours than he cared to remember tabbing his way across moors and through jungles with fifty-odd pounds of kit on his back. He could manage a slip of a girl like Kelly on this short dash. What he couldn't manage was how her weight was distributed. Or, to be more exact, the feel of her toned thighs wrapped around his middle. Her soft, full breasts cushioned against his back. And Jesus, that was exactly what he *shouldn't* be thinking about right now.

Focus, Jacobs. Focus.

It was another half mile before he finally, thank you God, saw the car.

'Time to get some real miles between us and the gun-wielding psychos,' he remarked, wrenching the door open for her and throwing his jacket onto the back seat.

'Can I just.' She crossed her legs in what he guessed was the universal sign of a woman wanting to take a piss, and pointed to a clump of bushes.

At least he knew where she was this time. 'Be quick. And please don't disappear on me again.'

Before the words were out she'd darted off, returning a minute later with an expression of almost awed relief. 'You have no idea how good that felt.'

'Happy for you to explain to me, but maybe save it for when we're definitely out of danger?'

Immediately her face paled and she ducked into the passenger seat. 'Crikey, I'm sorry. I forgot they could follow us in the van.'

He darted her a look. 'You think that? Really?'

A slow smile crept across her face. 'You disabled it, didn't you?'

He let his grin reply for him as he curbed his instinct to screech away like a bat out of hell, instead easing the car as noiselessly as possible onto the road.

'Where are we going?' She was back to looking tense again.

‘I’d like to tell you you’re going home, but it’s too risky.’ He darted another glance at her, relieved to find that at least she wasn’t crying. Handling a crying woman was way, way outside his comfort zone. ‘There’s a place we can lie low for a while though. Sort of like a safe house. We’ll drive until we’re certain we’ve not been followed, then we’ll ditch the car and take a bus to the nearest city centre where Panther will leave us another car. Once we’re safely holed up, we can work out our next steps.’

‘Okay.’

It was the voice of someone who’d had the stuffing knocked out of them, which made his guilt ramp into overdrive. ‘Try and think of this as an adventure,’ he told her as he checked again in his mirror. Nothing. ‘A tale to tell your grandkids when you’re old and grey.’ When he saw her smile was about as weak as his humour, he sighed and gave up. ‘Shut your eyes and rest for a bit.’

At least then he wouldn’t be forced to look at her haunted face, reminding him how badly he’d let her down.

Chapter Ten

Wearily Kelly lay back against the passenger seat. Think of this as an *adventure*? Easy for Ben to say. Even with a gunman firing rounds of bullets at him, he hadn't lost his cool, or his temper.

She'd done both.

Not only had she frozen like a fool when he'd told her to run, she'd followed that up by yelling at him when he'd had the temerity to check whether she really couldn't continue to run away from the bad men with the guns.

After which she'd clung to his back like a frightened limpet while he'd done the running for her.

She sighed and dropped her gaze to her lap, wincing as she noticed the gashes on her wrists. Hastily she pulled her shirt cuffs over them. Now was definitely not the time to be melodramatic about a few scrapes.

What a few hours it had turned out to be. She'd taken the job at the biosecurity institute because it had sounded exciting.

Little had she realised quite how 'exciting' it would turn out to be.

Too hyped to rest, Kelly slid a surreptitious glance at her companion whose eyes were fixed on the road ahead. Not only a bodyguard, but a man who understood all about living life on the edge. His hands, relaxed and sure on the steering wheel, looked strong and capable. Slowly her gaze shifted to his forearms, to the veins that twisted around his corded muscles like ropes. Then upward to his hard, pronounced biceps.

Hastily she turned away. She hated objectification of any kind. Looking at someone as if they were only a body. Or a mind.

'Seen anything of interest?' He shot her a lazy, cocky grin.

A hot flush scorched her cheeks. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to stare.'

'Not many muscles on show in the science labs?'

'I don't know. I don't look.' He gave her a look of disbelief. 'Very often,' she added, feeling the absurd desire to giggle.

'Let me know if you need a fuller examination. All in the name of scientific research, obviously.'

'Obviously.' The giggle burst out of her.

'Something funny, Blondie?'

‘No,’ she choked out, putting a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter. ‘Crikey, I can’t believe I’ve been kidnapped and shot at, and now I’m on the run. Yet I’m laughing.’

‘I am pretty funny.’

Heck, now her sides were aching. ‘Modest, too.’

‘Nah. If you’ve got it, big it up and flaunt it.’ He slid her another look, his face turning serious. ‘You know if you weren’t finding me hilarious before today, there’s a high chance it’s actually the adrenaline making you laugh, and not me.’ He paused, adding more quietly. ‘I’m sorry I ballsed-up.’

‘You didn’t,’ she replied firmly. ‘I was the one who insisted I went to the toilet, remember? What were you meant to do, let me pee myself?’

‘Well, actually, yeah. I should have done that.’

‘I’d have hated you for it.’

‘Better that than putting your life at risk.’

‘These people, whoever they are, were clearly following us. They’d have tried again somewhere else,’ she countered.

‘I should have seen them.’ He sounded disgusted with himself.

Despairing, she threw up her hands. ‘For crying out loud, Ben. You’re not Superman.’

‘No?’

Though his expression held amusement, she sensed he was only half joking. ‘You really do see yourself as part superhero, don’t you?’

‘I’m under no illusions that there’s anything heroic about me. Or super, for that matter.’ She noticed his hands grip more tightly to the steering wheel. ‘But I do expect a certain level of competence from myself. Today I failed.’

She let out a strangled noise, exasperated with him. ‘The only thing you failed to do was stop my bladder from filling, and I rather think that’s outside your job description.’

‘Superman would have stopped you having that second coffee on the plane.’ His expression was totally deadpan.

‘Then we can agree I was right. You aren’t Superman. I’ve seen the clothes in your holdall and there are no blue tights or red underpants.’

He let out a long, deep breath. ‘Jesus. Please don’t refer to my boxers as underpants. I’ve got a reputation to maintain.’ She had no comeback for that — his wit was far sharper than hers — but apparently she didn’t need one, because he was back to beating himself up again. ‘The fact is, I should have

been more aware.'

'Ben.'

She only had time to squeeze in his name before he added. 'But believe me when I tell you that I'm now on hyper alert. I won't let anyone take you again.'

His final words were uttered with such deadly conviction a lump lodged in her throat.

* * *

They made it to the 'safe house' without any further incident. It was a wooden cabin, reached via a dirt track and miles from the nearest town, somewhere in the Malvern Hills. When she considered where she could have been spending the night though, it felt like a slice of heaven. Basic, yes, but it had everything they needed. Kitchen, bathroom, a place to sit, bedroom. She wasn't going to think about the lack of a second bed. Ben had already caught her ogling his biceps. If she raised the issue of how they were going to sleep, he'd think she was gearing up to pounce on him. Pretty hilarious really, considering her record with the opposite sex.

'Why don't you go and grab a shower while I see if there's any scoff?' She must have frowned because he grinned. 'Food. Something to eat.'

A shower sounded like bliss. She smiled her thanks and had taken two steps past him when he reached out his hand to stop her.

'Shit.' His eyes focussed on the gashes on her wrists. 'Are they sore?' His thumb trailed gently over one of the marks. 'I'm sorry, honey. I shouldn't have let them get within a hundred yards of you.'

The feel of his thumb against her skin sent another uncomfortable flush of awareness through her. 'They'll heal.' Her voice sounded odd, all throaty and hoarse. 'And if you blame yourself one more time, *sugar*, I'll make you sit through my lecture again. Twice.'

Chuckling, he let go of her. 'Crap, sorry, the honey thing is a hard habit to break. But you win, I'll stop beating myself up. When you're finished, I'll put something on those cuts.'

He turned away, shrugged off his jacket, draping it over the back of the chair, and began to open the kitchen cupboards. It was her cue to shower but her eyes remained glued to his back and wouldn't budge. The black T-shirt he'd changed into outlined a set of powerful shoulders. And beneath his

figure hugging denims was a backside her hands had this almost uncontrollable itch to touch.

God, what was happening to her?

With a small sigh she forced one foot in front of the other and walked towards the tiny bathroom.

* * *

Ben shuffled through the cupboards in the cabin's tiny kitchen. It was a place Panther kept on a you-never-know-when-you-might-need-it basis. He pulled out a packet of powdered eggs and a tin of beans. Boy, he knew how to treat a lady. Opening the small freezer, his eyes landed gleefully on a small bag of sliced bread. Eggs and beans *on toast*. Almost gourmet.

Before conjuring up the meal, he slid the handgun he'd procured from Kelly's *friends* out of his jacket and placed it on the worktop. He'd had to leave the gat back in the Audi, figuring it might make too much of a stir on the bus. Still, having the Glock next to him made him feel less naked. He'd promised Kelly hyper alert, and by God he was going to follow through on it. Then he pulled out the secure radio — though after today's debacle he wasn't sure anything was safe or secure — and phoned base. Technically it was the office, but military habits were hard to break.

The conversation with Charles was a bit one-sided. It went something along the lines of.

'What the fuck happened?'

Then there was the predictable.

'How the hell did you not spot these bastards?'

Finally, he'd had the dreaded. 'We'll have a talk when this is over.'

Thankfully, he was then put onto Floss.

'In the doghouse again, eh, Crackers?'

Okay, maybe he'd been a bit optimistic with the *thankfully*. 'Floss, as always, talking to you is a beam of sunshine in my day.' Heaving out a sigh, he looked down at the scrawled note he'd made himself. 'Look, here's an initial suspect list. All the people who knew Kelly had gone to Rome. There's Mary—'

On the other end of the phone, Floss burst out laughing. 'Fuck me, Crackers. I hope you've got more on your list than the sweet secretary?'

Ben was too annoyed with himself, with the situation, to find Floss's

particular brand of humour funny right now. ‘How do you know she’s sweet?’

‘I don’t, but I’ve already run quick checks on the people in Kelly’s department, and Mary runs a volunteer knitting group in her local community, and is an organist for the church.’

‘Always thought there was something dodgy about bell ringing,’ Ben muttered under his breath, which only made Floss laugh harder. ‘Look, smart arse, do you want these names or not?’

‘Feeling a bit tetchy, eh? I guess having your client kidnapped from under your nose will do that to a man.’ Floss must have heard Ben’s sharp exhale because he immediately sobered. ‘Sorry. I took the joke too far again. Go on, fire away. We have her work contacts on our list already, but won’t harm to narrow it down so we know who to concentrate on.’

Ben reeled off his paltry list. Richard, Stuart, Helen and an American scientist. Oh and anybody else Mary might have told. It wasn’t exactly a list to get his hopes up over.

‘Okay, so we haven’t got Eric Johnson on our radar yet, we’ll add him, and focus the checks on those we’re certain knew she’d gone to the conference.’ There was a pause, and when Floss spoke again his tone was quietly serious. ‘The boss reckons the guys who kidnapped her were pros, so don’t sweat over losing her, Crackers. Just be proud you got her back. I’ll be in touch a bit later, once I know more.’

Proud? After what he’d put her through today?

With a muted curse, Ben shoved aside his recriminations for another day. One when he wasn’t knee deep in a screw-up of his own making. Stashing away the radio he methodically opened the beans, settled the bread in the toaster and listened to the sound of the shower. It didn’t take much effort to imagine Kelly in it. Naked, wet blonde hair streaming down her back.

He clattered the pan onto the stove.

Talk about wildly inappropriate thoughts. Inappropriate on so many levels, it made him dizzy thinking about it.

Level one, though given the enormity of it, this was probably an entire block all to itself; the pretty doctor wasn’t out of his league, she played a game he hadn’t even heard of. Socially and intellectually she totally outclassed him. If her body ran on brainpower, she’d be at the finish line while he was still trying to work out how to get out of the starting block.

Going with his level theory, on level two was the small issue of him being here to protect her, not have sex with her. He'd already done a pretty shitty job of the former and that was without the complication of sex. And actually sex didn't just complicate a protection duty, it totally ballsed it up. He should know.

And then, as if the first two levels weren't enough, there was the shame of level three. Coming on to a woman when her head was full of fear, and she was at her most vulnerable, would put him on the same evolutionary scale as a sewer rat.

With a flick of his wrist he turned on the gas and emptied the beans into the pan. Time to get his head screwed on.

But God help him, the beans had only just started to bubble when she appeared in the kitchen dressed in a large towel. *Only* in a large towel. Her skin all pink and glistening.

Not that he was looking at her.

'Umm, are our bags still in the back of the car?'

It was rude not to look at someone when they were talking to you, right? Involuntarily, because he was a man first and a bodyguard second, his eyes skimmed across the drips of water beading on her slender shoulders, before meeting hers.

'You don't need to change on my account,' he drawled, the words flying off his tongue despite everything he'd just told himself. But though he *was* going to keep his hands to himself, it didn't mean he'd had a personality transplant. Flirting with women was what he did. It was ingrained in him, as natural as breathing.

The woman who'd stood on a lectern and lectured to a thousand scientists without batting an eyelid, didn't roll her eyes as she should have done. As he'd wanted her to, because then it would have reassured him she now saw him for what he was. A chronic, but harmless flirt.

She blushed.

And bugger, now she was starting to shiver. 'I'll go get them,' he said quickly, abandoning the beans. Way to go, Jacobs, he muttered to himself as he hauled in the bags. Make the lady feel both uncomfortable *and* cold.

She reappeared a few minutes later wearing the three-quarter length jeans she'd travelled to Rome in, and a pink blouse with white daisies on it. Cute.

At long last his common sense put in a show though and, instead of

remarking on her appearance, he turned the conversation to more important matters.

‘Can you tell me exactly what happened?’ he asked as they sat down to eat the poor excuse for a meal he’d thrown together. ‘Start from the moment you walked into the service station.’

‘I didn’t walk.’ She picked up a fork and stabbed at the grey looking egg. ‘If you remember, I was pretty desperate so I ran.’

The sight of her barrelling out of his car and into the station would be forever fixed in his memory. ‘Yeah, I remember.’

She caught his eye and gave him an apologetic smile. ‘You weren’t very happy with me. Now I know why.’

‘Maybe you’ll listen next time.’

‘Don’t hold your breath. I don’t like being told what to do.’

‘I can see that.’ It wasn’t hard to imagine her in her lab, handing out instructions with a grace, wrapped in authority. ‘So, you’ve ignored the stooge in the car telling you not to go in without him and you’re flying into the service station. Leaving him in a blind panic, by the way. What happened next?’

She ran a hand across her damp hair and sighed. ‘There isn’t much to tell. I didn’t notice anything unusual, or anyone following me, if that’s what you’re trying to get at. I was feeling pretty desperate to pee though, so my mind was on other things.’

He raised a hand. ‘Just to clarify, there are some details I don’t need to know.’

She gave him a half smile. ‘I was rushing towards the ladies when I stopped.’ Her eyes shifted downwards, to her plate.

‘You stopped?’ he prompted.

‘Err, yes. I was quite upset.’ She huffed out a deep sigh. ‘Okay, I was crying and couldn’t see where I was going. I stopped to get a tissue.’

‘There’s no shame in being scared, you know. You wouldn’t be human if you weren’t.’

‘And how many times in your life have you cried when you were scared?’

Her expression was full of such self-disgust he had to laugh. ‘If you asked me to talk about viruses to a lecture theatre full of scientists I’d definitely bawl my eyes out.’

‘One man’s nightmare is another man’s job.’ Understanding crept across her face. ‘Yes, I can see that.’

She bent her head to fork up some beans and even that simple action tugged at a place deep inside him. The delicate way she held the fork, the parting of her soft lips.

He dragged his eyes away and cleared his throat. ‘You’d just stopped,’ he reminded her. Reminded them both.

‘Yes. I was looking in my handbag for a tissue when I . . .’ The fork clattered to her plate and she took in a deep breath. ‘I felt a cold, hard object pushed into my back. A man told me if I made a noise, I was dead.’

Slowly Kelly shook her head, though her eyes told him what she couldn’t verbalise. That moment of absolute terror when you realise what’s about to happen, and you can’t do a damn thing to stop it. He knew it well.

‘What happened next?’ he asked gently.

‘I was made to put on a jacket, glasses, wig and hat and propelled through the service station into a waiting van. There I was bound, gagged and shoved on the floor.’ Her striking blue eyes filled with confusion. ‘I don’t understand why they want me. It doesn’t make sense. Not considering what I’m working on.’

‘A vaccine to a potential biological threat.’

She nodded. ‘Exactly. A *vaccine* to it. A vaccine against a new strain of smallpox we fear might hit the black market. Terrorists surely want the weapon itself, not the antidote.’

‘Maybe they want you. From what I understand, you’re a bit of a whiz kid when it comes to viruses.’

There was no blush this time. Just her eyes meeting his with a confident acceptance. ‘I’m an expert, yes, but I’m more of an expert in vaccine formulation than viruses. The variola team — sorry, that’s the scientific name for it — the smallpox team,’ she amended, ‘have come up with strains they believe terrorists could engineer and I’m . . .’ she raised her hand, moving her index finger and thumb so they were only an inch apart ‘. . . I’m this close to finding a formulation that could be effective against them. I’m working on combining the genetically engineered strains with a series of adjuvants, including those containing immunoenhancer molecules, which should lead to a broader immunity—’

‘Whoa. Easy with the long words. I’m a soldier, not a scientist.’

And yes, that must have come out sounding curt, because she stiffened. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to throw jargon at you.’ Avoiding his eyes, she stared down at her plate. ‘Was there anything else you wanted to know?’

Frustrated with himself for being so damn sensitive, he sighed. ‘And I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just I’m more interested in what you can tell me about the people holding you, than the immuno doodahs.’ He sat back on his chair and tried to look relaxed. ‘Did they speak to you at all? Tell you what they wanted?’

‘Not really. They said I must be important because they were being paid a tidy sum of money for me. I overheard enough to know they were arranging to transfer me to someone, and that person was getting frustrated with how long it was taking.’ She pushed the beans round her plate but didn’t attempt to eat any more. ‘How did you know where to find me?’

He pointed at her plate. ‘Finish your meal and I’ll tell you.’ When she simply shook her head, he reached over, picked up her fork and handed it to her. ‘You’ll need your digger.’ She took hold of it but still didn’t make a move to eat. ‘You know, some women would give their right arm for a dinner cooked by me.’

There it was again, a small smile. Pretty gutsy for a woman who’d been grabbed at gunpoint and scared half to death.

Thanks to him.

‘I mean no slight to your culinary competence, but I’m just not hungry.’

She placed the fork back neatly on the plate and Ben shook his head. Her use of long words, the polite manners; it was all so alien to him. Most women he knew would have given him the middle finger and/or told him to piss off. ‘You might not be hungry, but you need the energy. Impossible to know how long we’ll be stuck here.’

She let out a long, soft exhale and picked up the fork. ‘Okay, you win. Now tell me how you found me.’

At her expectant look, he grinned. ‘If you’re expecting some flash wizardry on my side, you’re heading for crushing disappointment. I tracked the signal from your phone, that’s all. Can’t believe the muppets didn’t search you for it.’

‘They did.’ Her smile held a hint of smug. ‘At least they searched my handbag for it, but by then I’d already stuffed it down my knickers.’

A blush stained her cheeks even as her eyes sparkled, and Ben started to

laugh. 'Clever girl.'

'So they tell me.'

They shared a smile, and Ben found he couldn't look away, at least not until he'd taken his fill of her flushed, pretty as hell face. But that was a road he dare not travel, so he forced his attention back to his plate.

Chapter Eleven

Kelly tried to swallow down the rest of the food on her plate. Beans and some dirty looking concoction she was pretty certain even if she did force down, would make its way back up again.

She was exhausted, physically and emotionally. Left alone she wouldn't go anywhere near food. But she wasn't alone. And when Ben had gazed at her with those mesmerising green eyes, she hadn't wanted to let him down.

She owed him her life. A fact simply stated, yet it made her current situation infinitely more complicated. As if having a nutjob wanting to kidnap her wasn't complicated enough. Ben wasn't just the bodyguard hired to protect her, even though she hadn't felt she'd needed it. Now he was the man who'd been there when she'd needed him most. No matter how much he'd blamed himself for what had happened, in her mind he'd taken on hero status.

It had to be the reason she was now hyper conscious of the flex of his muscles beneath his T-shirt as he moved. Of the size and strength of his hands as he pushed his finished plate to the side. Of the way his eyes crinkled when he unleashed that roguish grin.

With a quick, fluid movement he rose to his feet, and suddenly the cabin seemed hopelessly tiny. Far too small for both of them to occupy.

Her heart bumped up against her ribs. 'What do we do now?'

'We wait.' He reached to take her plate and she tried not to notice the hairs dusting across his forearm. 'There's nothing to connect you to this place so you're safer here than anywhere else. I'll update the team with the info you've just given me and hopefully they can work out who's behind this.'

She was struck by a terrible thought. 'Do my parents know what's happened?'

'The boss will brief them and let them know you're unharmed.' He glanced down at her wrists and winced. 'Relatively.'

'Thank you.' Feeling self-conscious she tugged her sleeves down over her wrists. 'I can't believe I didn't think of them earlier.'

He gave her a small smile. 'Having a gun pointed at you tends to scramble the mind.'

And being rescued apparently scrambled the hormones. Determined not

to be drawn into looking into his eyes again, she rose to help him clear up, but stopped short at the sight of a gun on the worktop. 'Are you expecting company?'

Damn, even she could hear the tremor in her voice. But the sight of that menacing black object was a sharp reminder of how serious the situation was. How potentially deadly.

Ben followed the direction of her gaze and gave her an understanding smile. 'I'm not expecting any company. But I'm not about to take any chances.'

It was then that it began to dawn on her. 'I won't be safe until they're caught, will I?' The fear began to claw its way back. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot. Her life was no longer her own. It was in the hands of the big, vital man standing next to her. A man whose soft expression belied his looks.

'Not true.' He gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. 'You'll be safe with me. I won't make another mistake. I won't let you down.' His eyes stared unflinchingly into hers. Secure, confident, filled with determination.

It was enough to send her worries scuttling into the background. And her hormones rushing back to the front line. With her pulse going into overdrive at his touch, she wondered if he felt the same pull, the same strong attraction? But all she could see when she stared into his eyes were two green ponds, deep and still.

A beat later he'd dropped his hand and moved away towards the living area.

Drawing in a shaky breath she gave her heart time to resume its normal speed before following him in. 'Is there a television hiding somewhere? Or some books?' She shrugged awkwardly. 'You know, something to do?' Her watch said it was ten o'clock, but her mind was too wired to sleep just yet.

He sank back against the sofa, legs casually crossed at the ankle. 'Afraid not. When they kit out these places, they don't seem to consider the entertainment side.' Slowly the edge of his mouth lifted. 'I guess they rely on the inhabitants finding their own ways to pass the time.'

Heat immediately surged into her cheeks. Oh *no*, she was flushing again. Mortified, she pretended a deep interest in the opposite wall. Why couldn't she handle his flirtatious comments? It wasn't as if he meant anything by them. She knew his type, even before Helen had pointed it out. Good looking, confident. A real one for the ladies.

Ben sighed and a pained expression crossed his handsome features. ‘Me and my big mouth again. You know I was only joking, right? Force of habit. I’m a chronic flirt but rest assured I’m not, repeat not, about to jump you. Okay?’

‘I doubt us swotty girls are your type,’ she replied with forced lightness, sitting down in the chair opposite him.

He rubbed at his face and began to laugh softly. ‘Is that really how you see yourself?’

‘It’s how men see me,’ she corrected him, annoyed she’d started this now. ‘I don’t suppose you’re any different.’

He leant forward, arms resting on his knees, eyes demanding her attention. ‘Trust me, I’m very different from any man you’ve ever met.’

She swallowed, but couldn’t find a suitable reply.

Slowly he sat back again. ‘The reason I’m not about to jump you is because you’re my assignment and I’m here to protect you. Nothing will get in the way of that. Nothing.’ His green eyes tore into hers. ‘I promise.’

The force of his gaze almost slammed her back against the chair and once again Kelly found herself tongue-tied. Did that mean if he wasn’t here to protect her, he *would* jump her? Her heart began to beat erratically and heat rushed through her, leaving her hot and flustered.

Anxious for a distraction she lifted her foot, wondering what damage the blister had made. It had stung like crazy in the shower.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Ben shot up, shaking his head at her.

‘What good would it have done? Just my bad luck I get to run without my trainers.’ She attempted one of his cocky smiles. ‘You know if I’d had them on, I’d have cruised through it. Maybe overtaken you.’

‘Sure, Blondie.’

There was that name again. ‘Why do you call me that?’

He looked at her as if she was crazy. ‘I thought you were smart?’

‘I know I’ve got blonde hair, but, well, I’m not used to being called anything but Kelly.’ At least not since school, when geek and swot had been two of the kindest names thrown at her. ‘What is it with you and nicknames?’

A huff of breath left his lungs and for a moment he looked . . . if she didn’t know him as a deadly ex-soldier, she’d have said *embarrassed*. ‘To me honey and Blondie are . . . well, terms of affection. I use them because I like and admire women. It’s the same reason I flirt.’ Another exhale, this time

more of frustration. ‘But I know not all women see it that way and I’m sorry. I’ll try and cut it out.’

‘I’m not offended,’ she stressed. ‘Merely curious.’

‘Then I should warn you, I also do babe, or sweetheart.’ He darted her one of his crooked smiles. ‘I draw the line at cutie chops.’

A bubble of laughter shot out of her. ‘Thank heaven for that. And I should warn you, I prefer Blondie to honey.’

‘Noted.’

For as long as she could remember, people had looked at her and seen only her brains. Here, finally, was a man who’d noticed the colour of her hair. Who saw not only Dr Bridge the scientist, but Kelly the woman. It didn’t matter that Blondie was clearly just one of many nicknames he threw out on a regular basis. By his own admission, he used it as a term of affection, and that gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling. It made her feel special.

‘Here, let me take a look.’ Squatting down in front of her, Ben reached for her foot, and the blister she’d almost forgotten about. His hands felt rough against her skin, though their touch surprisingly gentle.

He twisted her ankle first one way, then the other. Finally he lurched to his feet. ‘I’ll . . . umm.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I’ll find something to put on it.’

‘Rescuer and medic all rolled into one. Impressive.’

‘You forgot chef,’ he called over his shoulder as he walked towards the bathroom.

‘Ah, yes, so I did.’

To her complete surprise, she started to laugh again. How odd that she’d laughed more in the few days since Ben had come into her life than she had done in years. Yet she’d never been in more danger.

* * *

When he’d finished performing his medical duties, Ben used the radio to call base again, relating what Kelly had told him to Floss.

Then he asked for an update from their end.

‘We’re not miracle workers, Crackers. It’s only been a few hours since you called us.’

‘Give me something, anything. What about the guys who kidnapped her? Have you talked to them?’

‘We’ve tried, but they aren’t saying much. The medics have looked them over and it’ll be a few days before we can grill them properly, but I reckon it’s a pointless exercise. If they’re hired muscle like we think, they won’t know squat. The person who hired them contacted them through a burner phone, that’s as far as we’ve got. And as that person will now be aware they’ve lost Kelly, the phone’s a dead end.’

Floss rattled off the grim prognosis far too cheerfully for Ben’s liking. Then again, Floss hadn’t met Kelly. To Floss, she was just another client.

And that’s all she is to you, numskull.

Ben shook himself. ‘Great,’ he replied heavily. ‘Are we involving the boys in blue on this or do we have lead?’

‘We have lead, but the police are helping with the intel. Relax. It’s all in hand.’

Yeah, relax. He could do that. He took in a deep breath and slowly let it out. ‘What are my instructions?’

‘Funny you ask that. When I requested them off the boss for you, he muttered, and I quote. *What’s the bloody point? Damn man doesn’t follow them.* Unquote.’

Ouch. Charles was definitely not part of his fan club right now. ‘Okay, okay. Any suggestions what I should do with myself?’

‘Your favourite.’ Ben could hear the glee running through Floss’s voice. ‘Stay put and sit tight while us techno whizz kids work on finding some leads.’ When Ben let rip a few ripe swear words, Floss had the balls to laugh. ‘Come on, Crackers. You and a blonde locked away in a cabin where nobody can find you. That’s one cushy assignment.’

Ben grunted the words *piss* and *off* at him, and ended the connection. Sure, he could see where Floss was coming from, but when his shift was over, Floss would be going home. To his wife. He wasn’t cooped up in a titchy cabin, miles from anywhere, with the only company a fiercely intelligent, pretty, funny lady he wasn’t allowed to touch. Even though every single one of his male instincts were goading him to do exactly that. Hell, when he’d looked at her blister earlier . . . for Christ’s sake, when had he started to be turned on by a woman’s *foot*?

‘Is there any news?’

He flinched, her voice cutting into his fantasies. A quick glance in the direction of the laughably small living area found her still sitting on the chair,

legs curled beneath her. Huge blue eyes gazing at him as if he were some kind of hero. Couldn't she see he'd already let her down? He might have wriggled out of his screw up by rescuing her, but it didn't make him a ruddy hero. It simply made him a lucky bastard.

'The order is to remain here,' he said as he rejoined her. 'They don't have any leads . . . yet. It's likely you were kidnapped to order, but they don't have a trace on who did the ordering . . . yet.' He let out a deep sigh. 'Notice a pattern?'

With a muted curse he slumped back on the sofa, certain he would go stir crazy if he had to remain in the same room with her for much longer. Each time he touched her, accidentally brushed against her, even bloody looked into her eyes, he wanted her.

Clearly wanting, and not being able to have, was his superpower. As a kid he'd wanted parents who loved him. Later he'd wanted to be clever. More recently he'd wanted his old job back in the Special Forces.

Now it seems he wanted Kelly.

He was a master at wanting the impossible.

They sat in silence for a few long drawn out moments, the only noise an occasional rustle of leaves from the trees outside.

Suddenly Kelly jumped to her feet. 'I think I might go to bed. The excitement of the last twenty-four hours seems to have caught up on me.'

'Sure.'

Automatically he stood, too, and they almost collided, her breast brushing against his arm. Inhaling sharply, he took a step back.

'Umm, about the sleeping arrangements.' She turned, but didn't look him in the eye.

A stream of flirty replies crowded through his head, but he managed to squash them. 'You're the girl, Blondie. You get the bed. I'm the bloke. I get the couch.'

She gave him the whisper of a smile before vanishing down the hallway.

With a groan, he slumped back on the sofa. Damn it, his arm still tingled from the feel of her breast. It had been the faintest of touches, yet he'd felt it all the way to his core. Why was he so hooked? He liked blondes, but he'd seen prettier, so it wasn't how she looked.

An image of her flashed through his mind; the high cheekbones, the striking blue eyes. Okay, it was partly how she looked, but it was the

intelligence that brimmed behind her eyes, the class that oozed from her pores, that hadn't just reeled him in. It was threatening to capture him.

This was supposed to have been a breeze of a job, but it was rapidly becoming one of his toughest assignments. And the sad part was, the greatest danger wasn't even outside. It was right here, in the bedroom down the hall.

Hands off the girl.

How was he supposed to remember that, when the matter between his ears couldn't always be relied on?

Chapter Twelve

Following a restless night on a couch designed for midgets, Ben woke in a foul mood. A brief conversation with the team back at base didn't lift it. Apparently there was still no good news. Only the bad variety.

As he signed off, Kelly walked into the kitchen. Wearing cotton bottoms she must have slept in and a loose shirt he imagined she'd pulled over a tight, barely there top, she looked warm, soft. And kissable. Fleetingly his spirits lifted — touching might be out, but appreciating sure as hell wasn't. Then he remembered what he had to tell her.

'Good morning.' The sweetness of her smile caught at his throat. 'I don't suppose you can conjure up some tea?'

'It'll have to be black.' Wow, where had his forty-a-day smokers voice come from? Coughing, he tried again. 'Unless you like the powdered sh — rubbish.'

Her lips curved in what he was sure was a smirk at his attempt not to swear in front of her. 'I'll stick to black. Thanks.'

Figuring she deserved a few minutes to wake up before he ruined her day, he took his time over the tricky job of dipping a tea bag into a mug of hot water. After watching her take a few sips, he sat down opposite. 'Kelly.' Her eyes flared in surprise, he guessed because he'd used her proper name. Something he needed to stick to from now on. All this chummy stuff was only okay with clients he didn't want to sleep with. 'I've got a couple of updates. First, your parents are absolutely okay, but there has been an incident.' She gasped, clutching a hand to her chest as her face drained of all colour. 'They're okay,' he repeated firmly. 'As soon as you were kidnapped, men were put on duty to protect them. Seems someone tried to hijack the car they were in, but fled as soon as they realised one of our guys was driving it.'

'Thank God,' she whispered.

'There's more, I'm afraid.' As he'd never had a skill with words, he just laid it on the line. 'Your apartment's been ransacked. Whoever's after you clearly isn't going to be put off by one failed attempt.' He paused a moment, allowing his words to sink in because shock made even smart people think less clearly. 'It means we'll have to stay put a little longer. At least until we can get a clearer picture of who's after you.'

‘How long is a little longer?’ she asked quietly.

The trouble with smart women was they asked tough questions. ‘Not as long as a lot longer?’ He sighed, knowing he didn’t have the answers she needed. ‘We will catch them,’ he reiterated instead. ‘And in the meantime, you’re safe here.’

Kelly shot to her feet. ‘It could take weeks to find these men. Weeks during which I should be finalising the vaccine formulation.’ She perched on the edge of the table and he was reminded of a pocket rocket, primed and ready to go off at the slightest provocation. ‘Maybe this is what they want, to stall me. It’s a horrifying thought, but this monstrosity of a biological weapon we’ve been talking about in abstract might actually be in development.’ Warming to her theme, she stood and started to pace. ‘And if it is, I can’t just sit about here, twiddling my fingers.’

‘Now wait a minute—’

‘No. Don’t you see, if this is really happening, we can’t afford to wait any more minutes.’ She twisted her hands agitatedly. ‘I need to get to my lab. If I had the results I’ve been working on, I could be doing something useful here. I could be finding a way forward instead of kicking my heels, wasting time, allowing them to beat us to it.’

‘No.’

* * *

Kelly blinked at Ben’s hard tone. ‘What do you mean, no?’

‘It’s too dangerous.’

That was it. She finally snapped. ‘I’ll tell you what dangerous is. Some nutters out there with their hands on a variant of smallpox we don’t have a vaccine to. Have you any idea of the damage it could do? *Variola major*, that’s the potent strain of the original virus,’ she added when he stared at her blankly, ‘had a mortality rate of around thirty-five per cent.’

‘It’s your mortality I’m concerned with right now.’

‘Well you can’t guarantee my safety indefinitely. In fact, all evidence points to the contrary.’

Ben visibly flinched and immediately she felt contrite. ‘I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I only wanted to point out that using a philosophy of wait and hope seems naïve, not to mention frustrating and unbelievably boring. If I could use the time to finalise the vaccine formulation and get it to a stage

where it can be tested in clinical trials, it wouldn't only mean there was a potential solution to any threat. It would also mean their interest in me would likely end. *This would end.*' She glanced over at him, unable to read his expression. 'You can see what I'm saying, can't you?'

He met her gaze with his direct green one. 'I can see it, but I won't pretend to like it.' Slowly he rose to his feet, his large frame dominating the tiny kitchen. 'We don't yet know who wants you, or *why*. It could be nothing to do with your work. It could be a deranged stalker.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Sure. That's far more believable. A man out there has seen me walking down the street, taken a fancy to me and hired a bunch of people to kidnap me so he can have his wicked way.'

His jaw tightened. 'Whatever the reason, the person intent on getting hold of you knows where you live, and probably knows where you work. Going to any of the places you usually hang out is like deliberately walking up to a man with a loaded gun.'

'Not if you went with me.'

Slowly but firmly, he shook his head. 'It's not a risk I'm prepared to take.'

With a despairing sigh Kelly walked into the living area and flopped onto the sofa. It was still far too close to where he was standing. How on earth were they going to stay here, living on top of each other, day after day? Even now, when she was so frustrated with him she wanted to scream, he twisted her into knots. If he were to touch her, she would probably implode.

She needed an outlet, something to focus on because if she had nothing to do but think, she would start to worry about her parents. And fantasise about him.

Both would make an already difficult situation, intolerable.

She stiffened automatically when his large frame walked into the small sitting area and sat down opposite. *Keep pushing*, she told herself. He was stubborn, but by God she could be, too. 'Going with the most logical working assumption that this is about my work, why don't we talk to Richard? Get him to bring the information I need to us.'

Again Ben shook his head. 'Do you trust him? Absolutely, implicitly, one hundred per cent?'

'For heaven's sake, he's my boss. Of course I trust him.'

'One hundred per cent?'

The question made her hesitate. Richard was aloof, the sort of man it was hard to get a read on. ‘Perhaps ninety per cent. Maybe ninety-five,’ she hedged.

‘Then it’s a no,’ Ben replied firmly. ‘Anything less than a hundred per cent puts your life at risk.’

‘It’s my life,’ she muttered.

‘Yes, Kelly, it is. But I’ve been tasked with protecting it.’

She huffed in frustration. ‘I see you’ve stopped calling me Blondie.’

His green eyes blinked. ‘Does it matter?’

Of course it didn’t. At least it *shouldn’t* matter. ‘When you use a nickname, it makes me feel there’s a level of . . . I don’t know.’ She caught at her bottom lip. ‘Friendship, between us.’

‘And being friends is important?’

‘If I’m trusting you with my life, I’d like to know we were friends.’

A low, soft laugh rumbled through his chest. ‘Let me guess, *Blondie*, this is the part where, as your *friend*, I let you persuade me into your way of thinking.’

‘Too obvious?’

‘Yep, though I’ll give you credit for having a shot at it. You sure are stubborn.’ He cocked his head. ‘Tell me, does it usually work? Do you usually get what you want?’

She dropped her gaze to her hands, wondering how honest to be. ‘It’s not as simple as yes or no. There have been lots of things I’ve wanted and don’t have.’ A life outside science. A man to share that life with. She could hardly admit to that without sounding tragically sad. ‘Then again some of the things I’ve wanted in life.’ A first-class degree. A stimulating job. A chance to make a real difference in the scientific field she loved. Oh God, admitting that would make her sound unbelievably arrogant. ‘Some things I’ve wanted have come pretty easily,’ she finished lamely.

‘I’m glad we cleared that up.’

His expression was one of wry bemusement. Because it looked so good on him, the slightly crooked smile, the twinkle in his eyes, she had to look away. The situation was too serious for her to be distracted by this ridiculous crush. ‘Most of the stuff I need is already on the computer I have with me,’ she told him, focussing back on what was important. ‘It’s only the latest results I don’t have. Can we ask Richard to email them to me?’

‘No. We’ve already established we can’t one hundred per cent trust him. I don’t want contact with people we can’t trust.’

‘What about Stuart?’

His jaw jutted. ‘No.’

‘And you called me stubborn.’ She huffed, exasperated with him. ‘Is it worth me suggesting Helen, or is a twenty-three-year-old, skinny as a rake girl, still too dangerous?’

‘As there’s a chance she’s working for the creep who wanted you kidnapped, no, it’s not worth mentioning her.’

Damn him, she wasn’t giving up. ‘What if we went after hours? Only the security guards would be there.’

‘Are you with me in this scenario?’

‘I have to be. Access to the building is by a retinal scan. I’m not prepared to let go of my eyeball, even for you.’

His mouth remained firmly set, lips not even twitching. ‘It’s too risky.’

‘Why? You’d be with me. Nobody knows we’re going.’

‘If anyone has hacked into the systems, they’d know you were there as soon as you scanned in.’

She hissed in frustration. ‘So? By the time they arrived, we’d be long gone.’ Exhaling sharply, she sank back against the sofa. ‘You know it would help if you were coming up with answers instead of objections.’

He looked away, staring off into the distance. ‘You really want to do this?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you have to stick to my side like glue and do everything I say.’ His eyes swung back to hers, fierce and determined. ‘Everything.’

Hallelujah. She tried to keep the delight from her expression. ‘I promise. When do we go?’

‘It’s not a trip to the park, Kelly.’

And just like that, her brief fizz of happiness was extinguished. ‘I know it’s not.’ Did he think she was some silly girl, with no concept of what she was facing?

Ben exhaled sharply. ‘Sorry. Mr Sensitive, I’m not.’ He leant forward, resting his hands on his thighs. ‘I just want you to understand that what you’re suggesting is extremely dangerous. While we’re holed up here, we’re relatively safe. Nobody but the guys at Panther have a clue where you are.’

The moment we start to move towards somewhere you're associated with, be it your apartment, your parents, the lab, there's a risk the people or person who want you will be lurking. Waiting for you.'

Though on one level she knew that, hearing him say the words out loud sent a shiver of fear down her spine. 'I understand.'

'Do you still want to do this?'

She almost laughed. What she wanted was to go home. To have her life back to how it was a week ago. 'I don't want to do this, I *need* to do this. The thought of someone wanting to stop me from cracking the vaccine formulation so they can do their worst with a mutant smallpox virus.' She shuddered. 'I couldn't live with myself if that happened.'

He nodded grimly. 'Okay then. I admire your balls, even if I'd rather keep you safely tucked up here.'

'I'm not brave,' she admitted quietly. 'I just don't believe sitting back, keeping our fingers crossed and hoping nothing bad happens is a sensible tactic. Plus, I can't stand being idle.'

'You and me both, Blondie. You and me both.' He got up and, following a quick rummage in the drawers behind, produced a pad and pen, which he thrust under her nose. 'I've spent a day there, but you've worked there for years. I want you to draw me a map of the site. Every entrance and exit you can remember. Every window, every staircase.'

At his curt instructions, she briskly nodded her head. 'Roger that.'

His left eyebrow shot up. 'Getting into character?'

A slow grin spread across his face, crinkling his eyes, forming deep, sexy grooves at the side of his mouth. It left her unable to do anything but smile back.

Her life might be at risk, yet she'd never felt more alive.

* * *

They set off as soon as it was dark, driving the car to the next village where they swapped it for another dropped off by the team. *You can never be too careful* was a motto the Panther group lived by. Ben's conversation with Charles while he'd been procuring said car mind you, hadn't been an easy one.

'You want to do *what*?' the boss had asked in a tone heavy with disbelief.

Somehow Ben had managed to convince him that sneaking into Kelly's lab tonight was a top idea that he had totally under control.

He wished he could convince himself of that, too. If he'd been going alone, he probably could have done because just as he knew what he was crap at — paperwork, complex written instructions, clever conversation — he also knew what he was capable of. Breaking into a lab was definitely within that.

He wasn't doing it alone though. He glanced sideways at the passenger sitting quietly beside him in the car. A brilliant scientist who liked, actually bloody *liked*, him referring to her by her hair colour. Because it meant they were friends. Jesus.

She looked pretty damn cute sitting there in one of his black T-shirts, but by all that was holy he did not want to be going into that lab with her tonight. He'd acquiesced only because she'd been so hell-bent on doing something, he'd feared if he hadn't agreed, she would have contacted Richard or Stuart behind his back. And yeah, it was possible she was wanted for a reason not connected with her work — very rich, very sick stalker who'd go to any lengths to have her — but Kelly was right. Logic said there was a connection, and that same logic said that someone at the lab had to be involved, even indirectly. How else would the bastards know who to target?

'How much longer till we're there?'

'About another hour.' He gave her quick glance, noticed her clasping and unclasping her hands. Time to take her mind off things. 'What's the story with you and Stuart? Is it serious?'

Her lips curved gently, as if she was having a private laugh to herself. 'No.'

'You're just using him for sex?'

'No!' The denial almost exploded out of her. 'We've been on a few dates, that's all. It's nothing serious.'

'Let me get this straight. You're dating but you're *not* sleeping together?' The concept blew his mind so much he found himself chuckling.

'What's so funny?'

'I was just thinking, with me it's the other way round.'

'You sleep with women but don't bother to get to know them?'

He winced. 'You don't pull any punches, do you? But yeah, I guess that's close enough. Posh restaurant, candlelight and all that jazz?' He shook his head. 'Not my style.'

‘Probably because you choose women who aren’t capable of conversation.’

Again, her aim was true. Intelligent women scared the shit out of him. Much like Kelly did. ‘You’re probably right,’ he agreed affably. ‘What I can’t figure out is how any man can date you and *not* go to bed with you.’

He wasn’t sure whether she blushed or not, it was too dark, but he gave himself a mental kicking anyway. He had to stop his damn mouth firing off before his brain engaged.

‘What about you?’ she asked after a few moments. ‘Do you have a woman you’re sleeping with but not dating at the moment?’

She was only repeating his words back at him, but out of her mouth it made him sound callous. ‘There’s no woman, no. And it’s not that I’m against dating,’ he explained defensively. ‘Or having a steady girlfriend for that matter. But the job doesn’t exactly lend itself to slippers by the fireside and tea on the table at six.’

‘Satin slippers by the fire.’ She smirked over at him. ‘Tea lovingly prepared by the man.’

He grinned, enjoying the banter. Happy to be put in his place. ‘If you say so. Either way, this job really fu — messes with a relationship.’

‘I can imagine.’ She let out a small laugh, her face appearing soft and pale in the moonlight. ‘That’s a lie. I can’t, not really, because you’ve only given me snippets of what you do. It must be tough having to watch someone you love work in a dangerous field. I bet your family worry about you a lot.’

Well, that sure broke the spell. ‘No one worries about me, Blondie, except for me.’

Uncomfortable with the way the conversation had now headed, Ben turned on the radio and zapped the volume up to *conversation impossible* level.

* * *

An hour later they ditched the car and began to stalk through the tall grass towards the institute. He’d opted against going into the car park because the security guy would have to put the barrier up, and the less head start he gave anyone on their arrival, the better.

Instead they were approaching from the rear through a hole he’d neatly cut in the fence. It hadn’t even been electrified, he realised to his disgust.

After fifteen minutes of walking, he put out a hand and motioned for her to stop. Drawing out his NVGs he peered through the darkness towards the building.

‘Okay. As you guessed, there’s no security — of the human kind, that is — at the entrance, only in the hut by the car park. So we walk up discretely, but confidently. Anyone asks, you’re picking up something you forgot from the lab. I’m with you because I was worried about you entering a building at night by yourself. You don’t wander off, don’t leave my side, don’t sneeze, unless I tell you to.’

She looked quizzically at him.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Just funny to see you in full combat mode even though all we’re doing is walking into the building I work in, through the front entrance, to save some of the information I’ve been working on onto a data stick.’

‘You were only going to the ladies,’ he remarked bluntly. When she inhaled sharply, he knew his point had hit home. It needed to, because if she wasn’t fully alert to the danger, they were screwed. ‘I don’t want to scare you,’ he added more gently, ‘but I do want you to realise the risk we’re taking here. Until we can narrow down who wants you and why, everywhere we go, everybody we see, is a threat.’

He watched her slender neck move as she swallowed. ‘Understood.’

To reassure them both, he plastered a smile on his face. ‘Okay then. Let’s get those big blue eyes of yours into the iris scanner, save whatever you need to save, and get the hell out before anyone realises you were here.’

Chapter Thirteen

They moved quietly through the building, though Kelly winced every time the energy saving lights flickered on. With the rest of the place so dark, it was like being caught in the spotlight.

‘This way,’ she murmured, leading Ben towards her lab.

Beside her he was like a panther. Powerful but graceful, too. He seemed to have this ability to move his six-foot plus frame without causing any noise.

She put her security pass into the slot and the door to her lab clicked open.

‘Which of these things carries the answers you need?’ he asked, eyeing the lab equipment.

Hastily she took the USB stick out of her pocket and walked towards one of the analysers. ‘A few of them. I’ll be quick.’

‘I hope so. I’m getting nervous prickles down my neck. I don’t know if it’s from being in the presence of all this whizz bang technology, or if it’s my danger radar going off.’

Sliding her ID card into the slot, she set about saving everything to the USB, printing some because a hard copy was often easier to visualise. All the time she was acutely aware of him. The poise of his body, as if expecting to fight at any moment. The way his eyes constantly flicked between the corridor, the window. And her.

‘Need me to press any buttons?’

His voice was easy, even carrying a hint of humour, but she knew it was an act. He wasn’t happy they were doing this. She sent up a silent prayer that her determination to come here wouldn’t backfire on her. On them, she should say, because much as he kept talking about her being in danger, he was too, by association. Everything she’d learnt about him so far told her he’d do anything he could to protect her.

‘We’ve got company.’ Ben’s quiet words sent her pulse scrambling. As if he could sense her jolt of panic, he added in the same calm, steady voice. ‘This is your lab, and that’s your data. You’re not doing anything wrong.’

Despite the warning, she still jolted when she heard the tap on the window. The security guard peered in, mouthing, ‘Everything okay?’

She put her thumb up and smiled.

He nodded and as he turned to walk away, she let out the breath she'd been holding.

Ben shook his head. 'Security like that's about as useful as a hedgehog in a condom factory. How did he know I wasn't pointing a gun at you?'

'Are you seriously complaining the guy didn't come in and grill us?'

'Fair point,' he conceded. 'Later I'll raise a glass to crap security guards everywhere. For now, move that pert arse of yours because we needed to be out of here ten minutes ago.'

There was such an urgency to his voice she almost didn't register his personal comment. Almost.

* * *

Ten minutes later they were walking out of the front door. 'Won't security wonder where my car is?'

Ben nodded over to the hut, where the security officer had his eyes down. 'Does he look like he gives a rat's arse about how you got here? He's more concerned with beating his last score on Flappy Birds.'

'Not Fortnite?' And wow, look at her, rattling off names of games like she knew what she was talking about.

'Nah, he's still stuck in the dark ages.'

'What about the other guard,' she whispered as they made their way round the back of the building the way they'd come. 'The one we saw in the lab?'

'If he couldn't be bothered opening the door to speak to you, he's not going to be bothered how you got there. He knows you, knows you work here. It won't raise any alarm bells in him.'

'You're very confident.'

'You know bugs . . . sorry viruses. I know security.'

As they disappeared through the scrubland behind the building, Ben increased his pace, seeming to glide across the rough terrain. 'How can you be making less noise than me?' she grumbled after a while. Compared to him she sounded like a charging rhino.

'Takes training, dedication.' He glanced down at his large, heavy-duty boots. 'And a pair of dainty feet.'

Relief made her want to giggle but he placed a finger on her lips, silencing her. 'We're not out of the woods yet,' he said softly, gazing at the

trees that marked their exit route. ‘No more talking until we’re in the car.’

Kelly followed, keeping his dark figure in her sights. A couple of times he turned to check on her, giving her a thumbs up when he saw she was right behind him. She almost cried with joy when she caught sight of the car. Tired and drained, she slept all the way back.

She wasn’t aware of Ben lifting her out and carrying her into the cabin. And onto her bed.

She wasn’t aware when he eased off her boots and loosened her belt. Or when he gently placed the duvet over her.

She wasn’t aware when he stood and stared for a while in the doorway, a confused expression on his face.

* * *

When she padded into the kitchen the next morning Kelly found Ben awake and drinking coffee. His face was unshaven and he wore a slightly frayed, and crumpled, blue T-shirt.

‘Thank you.’

He glanced up, giving her a puzzled look. ‘Usually when a woman thanks me, I remember why.’

‘For carrying me to bed,’ she explained, averting her eyes before she blushed. ‘I guess I must have fallen asleep.’

‘No problem, Blondie. You were out for the count.’

He leant back in the chair, raising his arms above his head to stretch. Automatically her eyes drifted to where his T-shirt rose, exposing a tantalising glimpse of hard, tanned midriff. And a sexy trail of dark blond hair disappearing into his jeans. Then he lowered his arms, and her erotic glimpse was gone.

‘I don’t know how you can possibly make any sense of this.’ He nodded at the wedge of papers in front of him on the table; a printout of the results she’d obtained yesterday.

‘It’s relatively straightforward, once you know what you’re looking for.’

‘I’ll take your word for it.’ He eased back so she could get a closer look.

‘You see all these numbers here?’ She pointed to a long list. ‘These are the combinations of adjuvants I’ve narrowed it down to.’

He let out a short laugh. ‘Save your breath, Blondie, not much point explaining it to me.’ With a surprisingly abrupt movement he leapt to his feet

and went to fill the kettle.

‘Aren’t you the tiniest bit interested in what I’m doing?’

‘You’ve already told me all I need to know.’ He kept his back to her as he fiddled around spooning out coffee.

Sighing, she started to flick through the listings she’d printed out. ‘Sorry. I guess it’s hardly surprising that what’s fascinating to me sounds impossibly dull to someone like you.’

His shoulders tensed slightly. ‘Like me?’

‘Well, yes.’ Had there been an edge to his voice? ‘You’re a man of action. I can’t see you enjoying poring over a load of numbers and graphs.’

Finally he turned, handing her a mug of black coffee. ‘You’re right there. Just the thought of it makes my head swim.’

‘A perfectly normal reaction. I’m the weird one, because I get a thrill out of all this. Working out what the results are telling me, how I can use them to solve the next piece of the puzzle.’

‘I bet you love doing crosswords.’

‘I do.’ She shrugged, painfully aware she’d just cemented her geek status. ‘Quizzes, brain teasers, the more cryptic the better.’

‘Can’t stand them myself.’ He leant against the worktop and folded his arms across his broad chest.

‘There are times I wish I hated them, too,’ she admitted. ‘Times I wish my brain was more normal, instead of always trying to work ten steps ahead of the rest of me.’

‘You wouldn’t want the opposite,’ he replied quietly. ‘To be thought of as thick.’

The depth of feeling she sensed behind his words caught her by surprise. ‘Is that what sometimes happens to you? People assume you’re . . . what’s that phrase . . . all brawn and no brain?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Why let it worry you? People assume because I’m blonde, I’m dumb, but I actually enjoy that. The look on their faces when I take out my business card is priceless.’

His face remained expressionless, his eyes staring at the floor rather than at her. He looked awkward and surprisingly defensive. *Embarrassed?*

‘If I had to take a punt I’d say you didn’t enjoy school much,’ she said conversationally, sitting down at the table. ‘You were probably too busy

bunking off, having a good time, flirting with the girls. I used to envy people like you.'

His eyes shifted to hers, his surprise clear. 'Why?'

'You were wild and carefree. Part of the cool gang everyone wanted to emulate. Me on the other hand, two years younger than my year group, I was in the weirdo group along with the other swots.' She grimaced at the memory. 'My life was one long study period. Day after day. Night after night, all I did was pore over textbooks.'

'All work and no play, huh?'

'You bet. Part through choice, part because my parents were pretty strict.' A frown crossed his forehead and she shook her head. 'Don't get me wrong, I love them to pieces and I know they only wanted the best for me, but I was made to feel guilty if I wasn't studying. They even banned boyfriends in case they distracted me from my schoolwork. Not that there was any chance of me getting one because no boy in his right mind fancied a geek girl.'

'Geek girl?' He shot her a half smile. 'Sounds like a fancy superpower.'

'I doubt you'd have thought that when you were fifteen,' she countered dryly. She could easily picture Ben as a schoolboy. Rebellious and cocky. Prowling the playground with a grin and a swagger, all the kids eating out of his hands. 'You wouldn't have looked twice at a girl like that.' *Then or now.*

'You expect me to feel sorry for you, Blondie?' he asked, at last flashing the grin that was starting to become the highlight of her day. The one that probably didn't look very different to the one he'd worn as that cocky schoolboy. 'At least you achieved something from all that hard work. A raft of qualifications, letters after your name, a platform into a brilliant career. Something both you and your parents can be really proud of.'

'You don't need qualifications to give you pride. I bet your parents are proud of what you've achieved.'

He laughed softly, but this time there was no amusement in his eyes. 'That assumes I have parents who give a damn about me.' Before she had a chance to speak he stalked towards the door. 'I'm going to recce the perimeter. Won't be long. You stick that pretty nose of yours into those printouts.'

Chapter Fourteen

Ben grew increasingly restless as he struggled for something to do to fill the hours. Kelly was okay. She had those hieroglyphics she'd risked her life getting hold of. From his perch on the sofa he kept glancing over at her as she worked at the kitchen table, typing stuff into her laptop.

'What are you hoping to find?'

Her attention remained focussed on the screen, her blonde hair obscuring her face. 'A picture, a pattern.' With a sigh of frustration, she pushed back the chair. 'Somewhere in here is, if not the answer, then at least a hint of what the answer could be. Trouble is, doing this away from the lab is painfully time consuming. So far the only thing I've achieved is a stiff neck.'

Yeah, he knew all about stiff parts of the body. He was fully, agonisingly, aware of her as she eased to her feet and walked over to where he was sitting.

'Didn't you do that this morning?' She pointed to the coffee table, and the gun he'd been cleaning.

'Probably.' With a few deft movements, he quickly reassembled it. 'I hate all this waiting around shit.' He cocked her an apologetic look. 'Sorry. It's just I'm designed to do stuff. Patience isn't part of my DNA.'

She arched a blonde eyebrow. 'No kidding.'

'And there was me thinking I'd nailed the laid-back and chilled look.'

A smile tugged at her lips. 'A week ago, I'd have been convinced. Now all I see is a bundle of coiled energy, waiting to spring into action at a moment's notice.'

She wasn't kidding there. Please God the only *action* she believed he was ready for was running away from the bad guys.

'Would you like me to talk you through what I'm looking for?'

It was so far away from what he wanted to do, he almost laughed. 'No, it's okay. I'm good.'

She let out a huff of exasperation. 'Please don't give me any more of that *it's no use explaining something like that to me*, piffle.' His eyes flew to her face, registering her frustration. 'I can no more put a gun back together than you can develop a vaccine. We have different skills, that's all. And it's your lucky day because one of my skills happens to be explaining science to non-

scientists.'

'Did you really just use the word *piffle*?'

'I might have done.'

His lips twitched as he tried not to laugh. 'Well hell, anyone who has the guts to use a word like *piffle* deserves to be listened to.'

'Right. Okay then.' A huge smile lit up her face and she almost leapt into the chair opposite him.

And now he was stuffed, because there was no way he wanted to dampen all that glorious enthusiasm by telling her she was about to waste her time.

She leant forward and he was hit by the force of those intelligent blue eyes. 'Let's start with the fundamentals. Do you understand the principle of vaccines?'

'Whoa, hang on a minute.' He sat bolt upright, heart rate notching up a gear. 'I didn't sign up for a quiz.'

'I'm not trying to catch you out,' she said quickly, clearly noticing his alarm. 'I'm just trying to find out how much you know. I don't want to bore you by starting too basic, but then again if you don't know the basics, you won't be able to understand the rest.'

He shifted on the sofa, trying not to make it obvious he was bricking it. 'I think you can safely assume my level is around the rock bottom mark.'

Her gaze softened. 'You do know you're not expected to know any of this, right? I know it because it's my job to know it,' she added, reminding him of the words he'd spoken to her yesterday as they'd left the lab.

'Point taken.' Steeling himself, he tried to smile. 'Okay then, fire away.'

She tucked a strand of wayward blonde hair behind her ear, and his fingers twitched. How soft would her hair feel? He already knew how bloody amazing it smelt . . .

'When the body is attacked by an infectious bacterial or viral strain.' Her words crashed into his daydreams and he snapped to attention. 'We call that infection a pathogen, but you can think of it as the enemy. When it's being attacked, the body detects the invasion by recognising the surface proteins on the cells of the enemy. We call these proteins antigens. The body then arms itself, ready to fight off the attack, but instead of using guns to fight the invasion, it uses a protein the body makes, called an antibody.'

He grinned, relaxing. This he could cope with. 'I'm liking it so far.'

'Good. A vaccine is simply a weakened or inactive form of the infection,

or enemy. It can't actually cause an infection but when it's injected, the body thinks it's under attack so it produces antibodies to fight it. Then if the real infection, or enemy, attacks, the antibodies are already lying in wait, ready to kill it. That's what we call immunity.'

'Pretty clever. It's like the training ops we do. If those situations happen for real, we're prepared.'

She beamed. 'Exactly. Now some vaccines contain a live, but weakened form of the enemy or what we call the pathogen. That's said to be an attenuated form. Mumps and polio vaccines are two examples. They work pretty well, but not everyone can have the live form, and there's always the risk they can mutate.'

'Mu — what? Sounds painful.'

She giggled. 'Sorry, a mutation is a mistake or change to our DNA. The parts making up the DNA are arranged in a particular order, which forms a code that tells the cells what to do. If the parts are damaged or altered in any way, which we call a mutation, it can alter the message. In this case, it could mean the weakened form of the pathogen becomes strong again.'

'Ouch.'

'Exactly. To reduce that risk, we don't usually use a live form of the organism, not if we don't have to. We use a dead virus, or even a piece of one. That way the vaccine is safer. Plus they don't need to be refrigerated so storing and transporting them is easier.'

It was weird, but he was actually enjoying listening to this. Listening to her. 'Sounds like shooting a piece of dead virus into a person is better than giving them the real deal.'

'In many ways, yes, but there's one big downside. The immune response to an inactive form is weaker than that from the live form, which means the immunity achieved is weaker, too.'

'Bugger.' He grinned. 'Nothing's ever easy, eh?'

'If it was, I wouldn't have a job.'

Now he wasn't just interested, he was intrigued. 'So where do you come in?'

She leant back and paused a moment. He guessed to work out how to squish her super complicated job description into a few simple phrases. 'In order to make the inactive vaccine more effective we can do things to it, like adding something we call an adjuvant.' Her eyes caught his and she gave him

an understanding smile. 'I know, I know. It comes from the Latin word *adiuvare*, meaning to help. An adjuvant is simply an ingredient that stimulates the body's immune response to the vaccine. It amplifies it, if you like.'

'Gotcha. At least the parts without the Latin.'

'I'll keep the Latin to a minimum.' He watched as her gaze dropped to her hands and a flush crept up her neck. It struck him then that she was embarrassed by her education, whereas he was mortified by his *lack* of education. 'So anyway, this concept of adding something to help enhance the body's response to the inactive vaccine isn't new.' Her eyes swept back up to his again. 'Eighty years ago, they used a salt of aluminium called alum, and it's still used today.'

'Looks like you're out of a job then.'

She smiled, and though he'd made plenty of women smile over the years, never had it given him as much pleasure as causing one on Kelly's face. 'Luckily, just because we have an adjuvant already, doesn't mean it can't be improved.' And now it wasn't just the smile giving her face that gorgeous glow. It was the passion she had for her work. 'We're constantly looking for newer, better adjuvants, or combinations of adjuvants, that can make the vaccines we do have, even more effective. But we're also seeing if they can help us develop vaccines against diseases we previously haven't been able to.'

Ah, now he was starting to see the picture. 'So how do the adju—' He paused, gave her a sheepish grin and started again. 'How do these adju-vants work? And for the record, that's a sentence I never thought I'd say.'

Her laughter filled the room and he bloody *loved* knowing he'd been the cause. 'How adjuvants work is a question I spend a lot of my days trying to answer, because if we knew that it would make finding new ones so much easier. What we do know is that somehow they help to make the invading foreign body more visible, or more reactive, to our immune system.'

He nodded slowly. 'So, if I'm following this correctly, what you're doing now is looking at really small parts of the smallpox virus and changing them in the same way you believe the terrorists might be doing. But if you make a vaccine from this, it won't be potent enough because the parts are too small? So you need to add the right combination of adju-thingys to make it more effective.'

A satisfied grin spread across her face. ‘Correct first time, Jacobs. Go to the top of the class.’

‘Do I get a prize?’

‘How about, as your reward, you get to choose what we have for dinner?’

He groaned. ‘Don’t tell me. Then I get to make it too, right?’

‘Wow, you are a fast learner.’

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head a few times for good measure. ‘I blame the ruddy teacher.’

* * *

Ben watched as Kelly settled down again in front of the computer. Christ knows, he wasn’t clever, but while she’d been explaining her work to him, he’d not felt stupid either. Odd to think before he’d met her he’d been worried he wouldn’t be able to talk to her. Seems incredibly intelligent scientists were human too. At least Kelly was.

She was also far more attractive than he’d first realised, with those vivid blue eyes and her gorgeous warm smile. Things he really had to stop noticing.

Frustrated with his inactivity, he called up base again, hoping not just for an update, but a bit of banter with Floss. Sadly he was put through to the boss. Ben was always acutely aware that Charles was everything he wasn’t. An ex-officer with rich parents, he’d gone to school at Eton, and university at Oxford.

It wasn’t hard to see why the pair of them weren’t bosom buddies.

‘What’s the sit rep?’ Ben almost added a sir, out of habit, even though it had been over a year since he’d left the military.

‘The police are helping us trawl through the backgrounds of the people on your list. Basically everyone who works with Kelly.’ Ben grimaced, wondering if that was a dig. ‘But we haven’t seen any major flags yet.’

‘Right.’

He must have loaded that word with a day’s worth of irritation, because he heard a low chuckle on the other end. ‘Getting restless, Jacobs?’

‘While Kelly’s working on the results we took from the lab, I’m debating what to cook for dinner. And having taken note of what we have in the cupboard, it’s going to look suspiciously like breakfast. So no, restless doesn’t come close to how I’m feeling.’

Charles, the bastard, started to laugh. ‘Good to see you learning new skills.’

‘I’m about as useful at cooking as I am at waiting around.’ He took in a breath, fighting to keep the conversation reasonably polite. ‘Shouldn’t we be shifting out of here? You know, keep on the move, just in case?’

‘No point moving from a place of safety just for the sake of it.’

Several days’ worth of frustration came out in one sharp exhale. ‘What the fuck am I expected to do all day then? Take up needlepoint?’

‘If it helps pass the time and keeps you out of trouble, then yes,’ came back the smooth reply.

‘Great.’ Ben thumped the arm of the sofa. ‘Earlier, you said there were no major flags. Any minor ones?’ Give me something, he almost pleaded.

‘Probably nothing but there’s a Richard Thompson—’

‘Kelly’s boss.’

‘Yes. He seems to be having a tough time financially at the moment. We’re looking into why he’s remortgaged his house.’

Ben cast his mind back to their brief meeting. ‘The man has a steely look and walks round with a stick up his arse. Didn’t seem the sort to get involved with murky criminals though. Then again, desperate men will do anything.’

‘Exactly. We’ll keep digging. You sit tight and embroider those doilies. Let the guys here do their job.’

Ben had to work really hard to laugh at the lame-ass joke. It was the second time he’d been told to make sodding doilies in the space of a week. It hadn’t even been funny when Floss had said it. And that had been before he’d started this assignment. Before he’d got to know Kelly.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Chapter Fifteen

It was past midnight and Ben was still trying to get comfortable. A pretty impossible task for a six foot something man lying on a five foot something sofa. Kelly, of course, was safely tucked up in the big double bed. Probably fast asleep, though he wasn't certain. He could sneak along the corridor and take a peek, but aside from being outright creepy, he was terrified the sight of her stretched out on the bed would make him want to climb in and join her.

He shifted again, willing himself to fall asleep. He'd learnt years ago to shut his eyes when he could because in this game you never knew what the next day, or next hour, would bring. But each time he closed them and prayed for the dark oblivion of sleep, images of the lady in the bed down the corridor crept into his mind, leaving him wide awake. And wanting.

Outside a twig snapped. Ben bolted upright, adrenaline firing round his system, heart hammering against his ribs. It could just be an animal. Or a local who'd got lost on his way back from the pub. Unwilling to take any chances, he moved silently off the sofa and slipped on his jeans. His eyes rested on Kelly's laptop and he snatched it, along with his gun, shoving the latter down the back of his jeans.

Noiselessly he crept towards the bedroom and laid his hand over Kelly's mouth.

Her big blue eyes flew open, but calmed the instant they saw him. Putting a finger to his lips in the age-old signal for her to keep quiet, he shoved her trainers at her. Then grabbed at the sweatshirt flung over the chair. It might be June, but it was still chilly at night. Though her face showed fear, she didn't hesitate in slipping them on.

Taking her hand, he drew her into the gap between the wall and the open bedroom door. There he flattened himself against her, making his body her shield.

Was his imagination running wild, or was that footsteps moving round the cabin? He strained to listen but all he could hear was Kelly's shallow breathing. And damn it, all he could feel was the soft curve of her breasts as they crushed against his chest.

He clenched his jaw, fighting to control his baser instincts. They could be about to be attacked, for Christ's sake. He couldn't afford to make any noise.

Yet if he didn't move away, his damn body was going to betray him.

Her startled eyes flew to his face and he had to bite his cheek to stop a groan from escaping. Way to go Jacobs. Danger was sniffing at their heels and he was thinking with his dick.

A scraping noise sent fear fizzing through him. A chair leg against the floorboards? Whatever, it was a mighty big signal that someone was inside. Reaching behind his back he grasped the gun, mentally slotting into the starting blocks. As soon as they entered the bedroom . . .

Thump.

The body he'd whacked round the head with the barrel of the gun slumped to the floor. Behind him Kelly gasped and he whipped round to face her, silently telling her to keep quiet. There was probably more than one.

She nodded and once again they stood together though this time he shifted, putting his back to her. Yeah, even he could be wise — after the damn event.

Another noise and he rocked back on the balls of his feet, listening to the faint sound of footsteps down the hall. Judging his moment, he leapt from behind the door and fired the gun. As the body hit the floor, Ben marched to the window, opening it up and signalling for Kelly to climb out. After pushing the laptop more securely under his arm he followed her out, scrambling towards the car. A scrunch of tyres later, they raced off down the hill.

'How the hell did they find us?' he muttered, his hands wrestling with the steering wheel as he slung the car round a corner.

'I don't know.'

'I wasn't expecting an answer,' he replied tightly, driving as fast as he dared along the twisting road, constantly checking in his mirror. Please God he hadn't fucked up again.

The minutes ticked quietly by, the only sounds those of the throb of the engine and Kelly's anxious breathing. When he was certain they weren't being followed, he brought the speed down. And let out a long, deep breath. 'Sorry, didn't mean to snap.'

'It's okay. You were kind of distracted at the time.' Her voice was a faint whisper.

'This shouldn't have happened. I'm damned if I know why it did.' He gave her an apologetic smile. 'But yelling at you is unlikely to help.'

She shrugged. ‘Worth a try though.’ Briefly her eyes caught his. ‘I guess there’s nothing like a near death experience to fire up the emotions.’

Ah, yes. He’d wondered when they were going to get to that. He’d banked on later — a lot later — but she’d given him an opening. And the night couldn’t get a lot worse. ‘Speaking of fired up emotions. About earlier.’

She slid him a glance. ‘In the bedroom, earlier, you mean.’

‘Yes.’ His throat felt dry and tight. ‘My umm . . . unfortunate reaction when I was shielding you against the wall.’ Since when had he started calling it an *unfortunate reaction*? ‘It sometimes happens,’ he ploughed on. ‘You know . . . with the surge of adrenaline.’ Hell’s teeth, could he sound any lamer?

‘Are you apologising for becoming aroused?’ she asked quietly.

Jesus. He ran a hand down his face, wondering how he’d got himself into this quagmire. Given a choice of facing another gunman or having this conversation, he’d take the risk on the gunman. ‘I guess I’m doing that, yes. I don’t want you to worry that, well . . .’ He trailed off, not sure how to politely say what he was picturing.

‘It’s fine.’ Her voice sounded small in the dark of the car. ‘I understand. It wasn’t because you find me attractive.’ She stared resolutely out of the window.

‘I didn’t say that.’

Still looking ahead, her lips formed a tight smile. ‘Not in those exact words.’

‘Why do you think I don’t find you attractive?’

Briefly her gaze met his before it dropped to her lap. ‘I think that’s rather obvious.’

‘Not to me. You’re going to have to spell it out.’

She folded her arms, as if defending herself from an attack she knew was about to come her way. ‘I’d rather not, thank you.’

He knew he shouldn’t push it, not least because he was meant to be keeping a professional distance. Then again, he’d always bucked the rules. ‘Come on, Kelly. Tell me why I’m not allowed to find you attractive.’

‘I’m not stupid. I know I’m reasonably good looking.’ She let out a long breath and closed her eyes. ‘But not to a hotshot ex Special Forces soldier.’

He fought not to smile. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m digging the hotshot, but I still don’t see where you’re coming from.’

‘I’m the quiet girl in the corner with her nose in the book. The studious one who always did her homework. Sometimes more than she had to, because she was really into it.’ Her voice was quiet. Flat. ‘I’m the one who never got invited to a party.’ Suddenly her eyes flashed angrily at him. ‘Damn you. I’m the boring one.’

‘*Boring?*’ His laughter exploded out of him. ‘Blondie, there is absolutely nothing boring about you. Looks and brains is one hell of a heady combination. Trust me.’

* * *

Kelly kept looking sideways at Ben as he continued to chuckle to himself, as if her description had been the funniest thing he’d ever heard. The man was such an unbelievable flirt. It was like being with the human equivalent of Pavlov’s dogs. They were conditioned to salivate when they heard a bell. Ben, by his own admission, flirted when he was in the company of a woman.

A smile tugged at her mouth. But so what? Why over analyse what he’d said when she could simply enjoy it? It wasn’t as if she was inundated with things to enjoy right now. Unless she counted that moment when she’d been jammed against Ben’s hard body.

Arousal flushed through her, warming her cheeks. Sending waves of heat to that long forgotten place between her legs. Embarrassed, she forced her mind to the moment just after that, when she’d seen the masked men.

Yes, definitely a passion killer.

‘You said you didn’t know how they found us.’ She turned to glance at Ben’s strong profile. ‘Could they have tracked the cars?’

His big shoulders shifted in a brief shrug. ‘It’s a possibility, but we’ve been really careful, swopping them round, using public transport.’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t see how they’d have done it.’

‘What about if they put some sort of tracking device on something of mine? Something I always have on me, like my handbag or . . .’ her eyes shot open ‘. . . my laptop.’

Ben brought the car to a tyre squealing halt at the side of the road and twisted round to snatch the computer off the back seat where he’d thrown it as they’d left the cabin. Following a close inspection, his lips twisted. ‘Good call, Blondie. Good bloody call.’

He pointed underneath and there, small enough not to catch the eye, was a tiny microchip. Cursing under his breath, Ben ripped it off before flinging the car door open and stomping on it. ‘At least now we know how they’ve been tracking us,’ he said when they were back on the road. ‘The next question is who put it there? Do you always have your laptop on you?’

‘Pretty much, yes.’ And how sad did that make her?

His face was as serious as she’d ever seen it. ‘Let’s ask this another way. When don’t you have it on you?’

‘I don’t take it to bed with me, if that’s what you mean.’

He let out a huff of exasperation. ‘Come on, this is important. What about at work? Do you leave it in your lab when you go to lunch?’

‘Yes.’

His mouth tightened. ‘So it’s likely that someone at your work planted it.’

‘No.’ He gave her a sideways look and she slumped. ‘Okay, I’ll concede it’s a maybe. But equally anyone visiting could have planted it, or someone sitting next to me at a café, or on the bus.’

‘You travel on the bus?’

‘Yes. Sometimes,’ she qualified.

‘Don’t tell me. You travelled on the bus to the café, and while you were drinking the coffee that’s so spectacularly good it’s worth you traipsing across town by public transport for, you didn’t notice the guy next to you lifting your laptop out of your bag and sticking a tracker underneath it.’

‘Okay,’ she conceded. ‘I admit there is a high chance that someone at work put the tracker on.’

‘Halle-bloody-lujah,’ she heard him mutter. ‘Now we just have to work out who.’

The thought that someone she worked with wasn’t just betraying her, they were knowingly, willingly, putting her in danger, sent a cold shiver through her.

Suddenly a warm hand covered hers. ‘We’ll save that conversation for another time. You look bushed. Why not grab some shut-eye for a bit?’

She slipped him a grateful look, relieved to see he appeared totally alert, those keen green eyes focussed on the road. And just like that, she was hit by the weirdest feeling — one of utter safety. Slowly her muscles started to relax, her eyes grow heavy.

Within seconds, she was asleep.

* * *

She woke again when the car came to a complete stop. A glance out of the window told her they were in the car park of a budget hotel chain.

‘I think we’ll be okay here for the rest of the night.’

She nodded, content to go anywhere he went. Right now, he was everything to her. Companion, friend, bodyguard. The man who was keeping her safe.

‘Where are we?’

‘Near my old stomping ground of the Brecon Beacons.’

The guy on the desk didn’t bat an eyelid when they checked in. With the air of a man who’d seen couples checking in at two in the morning many times before, he took the cash payment and gave only a cursory glance at the driving license Ben showed him. One she noted had Ben’s face, but the name of Simon Jones.

The room was clean and functional. A bed, a television. A small en suite bathroom. Her eyes hovered over the king size bed.

Ben caught her look and gave her a wry smile. ‘Sorry, I don’t want to waste the cash on another room and I feel better if I can see you. I’ll kip on the floor.’

Perfectly reasonable. And yet . . . nervous butterflies began to buzz inside her. The room felt tiny, Ben dominating the space with his vital masculinity. She swallowed, holding a hand to her fluttering stomach. ‘That’s not fair. You need your sleep as much as I do. More, because I’ve been dozing while you’ve been driving.’

He perched on the bed and started pulling off his boots. Her eyes were drawn to the way the denim of his jeans strained across his muscular thighs. ‘It might have escaped your notice, Blondie, but I don’t need much beauty sleep. I’m beautiful enough already.’

He was impossible, she thought, rolling her eyes. But he was also an expert at defusing an awkward situation. ‘Even your beautiful self should make the most of a decent bed when the opportunity presents. We can always put a couple of pillows down the middle if you’re worried.’

He laughed softly. ‘If I was planning to jump you, a couple of pillows wouldn’t stop me.’ His eyes zeroed in on hers. ‘But my only plan is to protect

you.'

With the shadow of a beard on his chin and tiredness etched across his face, he should have looked dangerous. If she'd met him in a bar, she doubted she'd have wanted to be in the same room as him, never mind the same bed.

But though she'd seen his dangerous side, seen what he was capable of with a gun, she'd seen a softer side, too. This man who'd put masked gunmen out of action had also gently cleaned her blistered foot. Cracked jokes to keep her calm. Listened patiently while she'd explained her work to him, though she knew he hadn't wanted to. Even now, he was trying to put her at ease, making it clear she was safe with him.

She didn't want to feel safe though, she realised with a shock. Not in that sense. She didn't want a wall of pillows between them in the bed. She didn't want anything to stop him from reaching across and holding her. Maybe even kissing her.

The awareness sent her pulse into overdrive and she found it hard to look at him. 'Please. The bed is big enough for both of us. I'd feel better if you were in it, rather than on the floor.'

His eyes skimmed over her face, as if assessing how serious she was, and it was a few pulsing beats before he gave her a brief nod. 'Okay.'

He pulled back the sheets and climbed straight in, keeping his clothes on. Taking her cue from him, Kelly pulled off her sweatshirt and did the same. She was still wearing her nightwear of cotton pyjama bottoms and vest top. Not the clothes she'd envisioned wearing when she finally sunk into bed with a man who made her knees weak.

With a sigh she lay back against the pillow, angling her head so she could make out his outline. Though it was hard to see him in the dark, she could feel the warmth pulsing off his big body. 'Ben?'

The bedding rustled as he turned on his side to look at her. 'You okay?'

'Yes. I just . . . I was wondering. Have you ever killed a man?'

He let out a deep sigh and rolled onto his back again. 'I didn't kill those guys back at the cabin. Just stopped them from following us.'

'But you have killed.'

'Yes.' He said the word heavily, as if it had been dragged out of him.

'And?' She knew she should back off — it was clear he was reluctant to talk about it — but she was fascinated by his past. Fascinated by him.

'As a soldier you see the enemy as a target, not a human being.'

‘It doesn’t give you sleepless nights?’

‘Worried I’ll toss and turn and keep you awake?’ Now her eyes had adjusted to the dark she could make out his face and the slight curve of his mouth.

‘Maybe. But really, I’m trying to understand a little of your world, like you’ve tried to understand mine.’

‘Blondie, I’m not sure you could ever understand my world, so why don’t you turn off that brain of yours and get some sleep.’

‘Why couldn’t I?’

* * *

Why the hell wouldn’t she just close her damn eyes? Silently Ben willed Kelly to go to sleep so he could pretend to do the same. He knew he wouldn’t be able to actually sleep. Not with her lying so close to him, her floral scent invading his nostrils, her slender body only an arm length away.

‘Ben?’

A gentle reminder that he hadn’t answered her question. ‘You grew up in a different environment to mine.’

‘So? It doesn’t mean I can’t listen, like you listened to me when I explained my work.’

He was tired and tetchy. He didn’t take kindly to being woken up in the middle of the night by men wanting to kill him. He took even less kindly to sharing a bed with a woman his body ached to touch but who was strictly off limits. Combine all that with a total unwillingness to talk to this lady about his life, and frustration burst out of him. ‘Hell, Kelly, will you just bloody turn over and go to sleep.’

For a few blessed minutes there was quiet. Then he heard a sniff. Heaving out a sigh he turned, only to find that she too was lying on her back. Tears rolling gently down her cheeks. Damn it.

‘Sorry. I turn into a cantankerous bastard when I’m attacked in the middle of the night.’ Automatically he reached a hand out to comfort her, then snatched it back the moment he realised what he was doing. Touching Kelly while they were sharing a bed wouldn’t just be dangerous. It would be insanity. He locked his hands firmly behind his head.

‘No, it’s me who’s sorry.’ Her own sigh was softer. More graceful. ‘Here I am, wittering on, when all you want to do is sleep. It’s just . . . I’m wound

up. My head is buzzing and I thought if we talked a bit, it would calm me down.'

'Okay.' He resigned himself to more tortuous conversation. 'What do you want to talk about?'

'Your *very different environment*,' she replied, and he could almost see her putting quotes round the words. 'Your childhood, why you chose the military. Anything.'

'I joined the army because it sounded exciting and I had no real roots.' He carefully omitted any mention of his life before that, or the part about his lack of other options. 'A few years later someone told me I had what it took to become Special Forces. I remember liking the sound of that. You know, the chance to do something different. Not always follow the rules.'

'I can see why that would appeal.'

He smiled into the darkness. 'You've got me sussed, eh, Blondie?' The thought gave him a strange, fuzzy feeling. He'd spent a huge chunk of his life being misunderstood. 'Anyway, somehow I blagged my way through the recruitment process and survived ten years before a bullet forced me out. The rest you know.' He turned to glance at her. 'Are we done now?'

A quick glance to his side told him she was still looking far too alert. 'That was a remarkably condensed version.'

'Yeah, well, let's save the uncut version for another day.'

'For which read, *Kelly please shut up and go to sleep.*'

A laugh shot out of him. 'Looks like you're an expert at translating Jacobs.'

He watched her mouth curve before turning away and closing his eyes. He'd only had them shut for a few seconds when he felt the soft press of her lips on his cheek. He snapped his head round with a start. 'What the hell was that for?'

'For talking about yourself, even though you didn't want to,' she whispered. 'Oh, and for saving my life.'

With that she turned over, leaving him with a view of her slender back. Within seconds he heard the gentle, rhythmic sounds of her breathing.

Great. Looks like his potted life story had successfully bored her to sleep. He, on the other hand, was more aware of her, and consequently more *awake*, than he'd ever been.

Chapter Sixteen

Kelly woke to the sound of running water. It took her a moment to realise where she was and who was in the shower.

She almost jumped out of her skin when the bathroom door opened and Ben strolled out in a fog of steam. A white towel was wrapped loosely round his waist and his heavily muscled chest was naked. Her eyes caught on the droplets of water trailing slowly over the ridges of his tanned skin.

Biting her lip, she forced herself to look away. He made her want to touch. To explore how the hard planes of his chest would feel under her fingertips. Against her skin. Against her breasts.

Heat shot through her, pooling between her legs. He made her want a whole raft of things she couldn't put a name to, but which made her body hum and ache.

'Did you sleep okay?' He threw the question at her as he grabbed the jeans he'd discarded on the floor.

'Err, yes thanks.' She tried not to stare as her eyes rested on a couple of jagged scars on his shoulder. His massive — could have been hewn out of oak — shoulder.

He caught the direction of her gaze. 'That's the reason I was kicked out of Special Forces. Sorry, I'll cover it up as soon as I find my damn T-shirt.'

'You don't need to.' When he directed her an amused look, she blushed furiously. 'I mean I'm not upset by the scars. I was just wondering how they happened.'

'Well, let me see.' He scraped at the stubble on his chin. 'I was surrounded by twenty tangos, that's terrorists to you, all of them armed and dangerous. I took a deep breath, because though I'm Special Forces, twenty to one is still pretty high odds. Then I dragged out my MP5 and fired off a few rounds to the guys in front of me, at the same time catching those behind with a few cool ninja kicks, and—'

'You're joking.' It wasn't that she didn't believe, utterly, that he was capable of what he'd just described. It was more because he was saying it all with laughter in his eyes.

'I guess you really are smart, eh? Fact is, I got shot. The rest I really can't tell you.' With that he grabbed his clothes and disappeared back into the

bathroom.

She knew enough about the military to know much of what they did was shrouded in secrecy, so she didn't press. 'How did you sleep?' she asked instead when he reappeared a minute later, fully dressed. 'I didn't snore, did I?'

'Why, have you been told you do?'

'No. I've never—' Oh no. She felt another traitorous blush creeping over her cheeks. Why had she mentioned snoring? Stupid. How could she tell a man like Ben that she didn't know if she snored or not, because she'd never spent the night with anyone else?

She couldn't. So she climbed off the bed, keeping her back to him. 'If you don't mind, I need a shower.'

She felt his eyes on her as she walked past him into the small bathroom. No doubt he was speculating why she'd just turned into a tomato on him. Again.

'Kelly.'

She stopped, but didn't turn around.

'For the record, you don't snore.'

'Thanks.' Quickly she shut the door and sagged against it. She didn't really care whether she snored or not. What she did care about was that she was nearly thirty years old and she'd never slept the night with a man. Until last night. And even though he'd only lain next to her, and even though he was only there because he was doing his job, it had felt incredible having him by her side. Oh she'd felt safe, yes, protected, but so much more. This startling awareness of him was growing hour by hour. Now when she watched him smile she wasn't just thinking how much she liked his boyish grin. She was looking at his mouth, his lips, and wondering what it would be like to feel them on her skin. To be kissed by him.

In fact she was thinking of kissing Ben so much, she'd almost forgotten to think about who was after her, and why.

Just before she stepped into the shower she heard a tap on the door.

'I need to go out. We need food, a change of clothes and a burner phone so I can contact base. Stay put. Don't call anyone. Don't answer the door. Don't, under any circumstances, leave this room.'

She smiled at his official tone. 'Yes, boss.'

Laughter rumbled through the crack in the door. 'That's the type of reply

I could get used to.'

As she stepped under the hot spray, she realised she should have told him what to buy her. At the very least, told him what size she was. Heaven only knew what he'd find her to wear. He didn't look the type to enjoy picking out women's clothes. More to enjoy ripping them off. She had a sudden vision of him doing exactly that, and had to brace against the shower wall to stop her knees giving way.

* * *

Ben clutched tightly to his newly purchased burner phone as he spoke into it. 'I'm telling you, it's someone she works with. Nobody else has that sort of access to her laptop.'

'Heard you the first time, Crackers. Doesn't change my reply. Still nothing in the back-ground searches to really point a finger at any of them.'

Floss's cheerful voice was beginning to grate on him. 'Charles said her boss was having financial problems,' he reminded his friend grimly.

'He is, but so far there's no obvious evidence of anything shady. No gambling debt, no loan sharks. We're digging deeper. I thought you told Charles that Richard didn't seem the type?'

Ben grunted. 'I rely on you guys to disagree with me. You usually do.' He wanted a name. A lead. Something that meant this shitstorm would soon be over and Kelly would be safe. 'What about that prick she's dating? Stuart.'

'How do you know he's a prick?'

Ben froze. If he wasn't careful, Floss was going to clue into the fact that he had the hots for the lady scientist he was supposed to be protecting. 'Just another hunch,' he answered guardedly.

'Based on the fact that he's dating the woman you've started to like?' Floss's voice had lost its amusement.

'Yes. But like as in respect, you dumbwit. Nothing more.' It was partly true. He respected the hell out of Kelly. It's just he fancied the hell out of her, too.

'Your hunch is probably right, but only because the dude looks to be married.'

'Married?' Ben felt the taste of bile at the back of his throat.

'That's what I said, though their addresses are different, so maybe he's separated. He also doesn't look to be a threat to anyone. At least not on

paper.’

Ben had to concede that one. Stuart was more plonker than danger. ‘Well dig harder,’ he told his friend bluntly. ‘A tracker on her laptop tells me she knows whoever’s behind this.’

‘I’m digging so much I’m wearing the flaming spade out.’ Floss paused. ‘Look, this Eric bloke might be interesting. There’s a lot of contact between him and Kelly. Probably just work, but he’s someone we’ve got our eye on. You said she saw him at the conference?’

‘Yeah. He looked kind of smooth. And a know-it-all.’

‘Could he have put a tracker on her laptop while they were talking?’

Ben searched his mind. He’d not watched the interaction that closely. Too intent on surveying every other buggler around them. ‘Couldn’t rule it out.’

‘Okay, Crackers, we’ll keep looking and keep you posted.’

He ended the call and shoved the phone back in his jeans pocket. Task one — buy the phone — and task two — call Panther — were now ticked off the list. Only shopping to go.

Determinedly he headed for the department store. Within five minutes he had all he needed for himself; spare T-shirts, boxers, jeans, razor, deodorant and a couple of baseball hats.

Next stop, stuff for Kelly.

After two minutes in the women’s clothing section, he felt a moment of blind panic. Holy shit, why couldn’t women’s clothes be more like men’s? Small, medium, large. Pretty bloody simple. But no, women had to have numbers. Ten, sixteen, fourteen. What the hell was that all about? He headed for the jogging bottoms and found one in small. Hurrah. The tops weren’t so easy. She might have a small frame, but her breasts, the ones he definitely hadn’t noticed, also definitely weren’t small. Hedging his bets, he grabbed a couple of T-shirts and sweatshirts in various sizes and headed for the till.

Having paid — thanks to the cash Panther had thoughtfully left stashed at the cabin, and he’d immediately shoved into his jeans the moment he’d got there — he thrust his own shopping into the same bag and headed gratefully towards the door. He was halfway out when he let out a loud curse.

Underwear. Female underwear, to be exact. With great reluctance, he turned round. Not that he wasn’t all for the lacy stuff, but he preferred it already on the woman. Or discarded on the bed next to her. Hell, slipping

down her body and pooling on the floor by her feet worked, too. Anywhere but on a shop rail.

Feeling hugely self-conscious, as if he had *virgin-bra-buyer* stamped across his forehead in florescent pen, he headed for the lingerie section.

And shuddered to a halt.

The rails teemed with the stuff. Greedily, feeling like a kid in a candy store, his eyes ran over the lacy cups, the satin black thongs. But then he remembered, he was a *sad* kid in a candy store. The one who'd been told he could look all he wanted, but he couldn't taste the merchandise.

Tentatively he ran a hand over a cream silk number. Immediately his mind filled with explicit images; Kelly wearing it as she sat astride him. Him tearing it off her with his teeth.

He let go of it as if he'd been electrocuted. Exhaling in frustration he marched towards the more practical cotton numbers, though his head still span over the number of options. Shorts, thongs, low rise, high leg. He dragged a hand through his hair. It was a flaming minefield. And as for the bras. How many sizes could there possibly be between a big handful and a small handful?

He reached for the safest pack of knickers he could find. White, with a tiny bow. Several pairs in the same bag. Small.

It would do.

As for the bra? Forget it. She'd have to go without.

Which actually wasn't a bad result.

* * *

Kelly looked up sharply when Ben opened the door to their room, her face flooding with relief when she saw who it was. He had to admit to feeling a similar sense of relief at seeing her. Leaving her alone hadn't been easy. The cold, unemotional side of his brain had known there was no way anybody knew where she was. The emotional side though, the one that shouldn't be operating when he was on a job yet seemed to be thoroughly alive and kicking, was mighty glad to see her.

'I hope those bags contain something to eat and something to wear. I'm starving and I've had it with the pyjamas look.'

He dumped the bags he was carrying onto the bed in front of her. 'Don't let your hopes get too high. Breakfast is a Danish pastry. As for the clothes,

I'm an expert when it comes to women's clothing. But only at taking it off.'

'I can imagine.'

She bent her head to look into the clothes bag, her lovely blonde hair hiding her blushing face. He knew he had to stop teasing her. God knows it wasn't sensible, not with this attraction humming between them, one he sensed might not all be one-sided. Still, it was so rare to find a woman who was so wonderfully *innocent*.

'Jogging bottoms?' She wrinkled her nose up at the pair she pulled out.

'And what else was I meant to buy when I didn't know your size?'

She nodded, the twitch of her mouth a dead giveaway that she was fighting the urge to laugh. 'The jogging bottoms will work just fine. They'll look perfect with the T-shirts.' She held one of the larger ones against her. 'This look is exactly what the catwalks are full of this season.'

She looked too damn gorgeous, her eyes sparkling, her mouth a wide grin. He forced his gaze away and his mind into professional mode. 'When you've had your fun, I suggest you go and use this.' Delving into the final bag he took out some brown hair dye.

'You don't like me blonde?'

He exhaled sharply, just about at the end of his tether. First the bad night, then the shopping and now a question he knew he shouldn't answer. 'Blonde is . . . good, but they're looking for a blonde woman. Time to change.'

'Well, they say blondes have more fun but I never managed that. Perhaps my time will come as a brunette.' Giving him a lingering look from under her lashes, she took the carton and headed into the bathroom. Before he had a chance to wonder about that, and the extra sway to her hips, she was speaking again, her voice raised above the sound of running water. 'Are we staying here?'

'No.' *Focus on the job, Jacobs.* 'Advice from base is we keep moving. So turn into a brunette fast, Blondie.' With any luck, a brown-haired Kelly would lose her appeal.

When the new Kelly emerged twenty minutes later though, Ben knew he was sunk. The hair might have changed, but the wide mouth, soft lips and bright blue eyes that screamed with intelligence, all packed the same powerful punch.

* * *

They were on the road again. It was a different car — Panther had dropped it off in the multistorey — and they were heading north, towards Stoke. To a different town, a different hotel. But still, it felt familiar; Ben driving, her with her laptop on her knees, trying to focus on her work while getting occasionally distracted by the man sitting next to her.

The more she worked though, the easier it was to stop her eyes from straying. In fact as the results from the final experiments she'd conducted slotted into place, Kelly felt a bubble of excitement. This could be it. To be sure though, she needed to repeat the tests. Which meant going back to her laboratory. Or finding a new one.

Once they'd checked into a hotel and eaten the takeaway they'd smuggled into the room, she broached the subject.

'Absolutely not.'

She'd expected that. 'So instead we're going to keep driving around the countryside like a couple of nomads, hoping your team find the bad guys before the bad guys find us?'

'It's not a hope, it's a certainty.' He stared up at her from his position on the floor where he sat with his back against the wall. His face was etched in tough, hard lines. The warrior now, not the flirty bodyguard.

'From what I've seen, there's a distinct possibility it could go the other way.' At his visible flinch, she sighed. 'I didn't mean that as a dig but a statement based in realism.'

'Are you doubting my ability to keep you safe?' Though his voice was soft, his mouth, his expression, was tight.

'No. I'm still here, thanks to you.'

A deep sound rumbled out of his chest and he drew up his knees, resting his arms on them. 'I realise this sucks, but you have to be patient.'

'I have been patient. And it's now wearing thin. I've been kidnapped and shot at. Men have broken into a place I was assured was safe. I mean, you called it a safe house, didn't you? Well, it wasn't.' Her voice caught and she stopped. It seemed the events of last night were finally catching up with her. She was tired, scared, angry and fed up with running. If Ben hadn't heard those men breaking into the cabin. If he hadn't been prepared . . . her stomach lurched and unaccountably, she started to shake.

Next to her the bed sank and a warm, calloused hand stroked her arm. 'I know this is tough on you.'

His voice was kind. Exactly what she didn't need. 'Don't.' She put her head in her hands and tried to hold back the tears. 'Please don't be nice to me. It'll just make me cry.'

His soft laughter filled the room. 'Jesus. You're upset, probably scared to death, and I'm not allowed to be nice to you?' She heard him scratching his head. Could imagine the wry smile on his face. 'What am I allowed to do?'

'Hold me.' Beside her she felt his body tense. Heard the sound of his raspy exhale. 'Please.'

Strong arms circled her, pulling her towards the haven of his chest. She lifted her head out of her hands and rested it on his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. It felt so good to be held, but even better to be held by him. Ben was a solid, warm, reassuring presence.

But he was also so much more.

As the fear and panic slipped quietly away, yearning filled their place. Her breasts, crushed against his chest, started to tingle, her nipples hardening as she became more aware of him. Hands that had thrown themselves around his neck now ached to stray through his hair. She lifted her head and without thinking, kissed him. Straight on the lips.

She'd shocked him. Either that or . . . she froze, mortified. His hesitation, his stillness wasn't down to surprise. It was because he didn't want to kiss her back.

She jerked away but didn't get very far because suddenly his hands were clasping the side of her face, his head bending towards her. His lips finding hers.

All hesitancy had vanished.

This wasn't the gentle testing of the waters she'd experienced with other first kisses. Ben's mouth demanded a response from her, his tongue firmly pressing against her lips, pushing its way inside. The passion, the controlled power, ripped away her uncertainty and she opened her lips wider, welcoming him in.

Eager to get closer she pushed against him, toppling him onto the bed. For a few stunned seconds she lay on top of him, her body crushed against his, her stomach pulsing to the feel of his heated arousal.

A second later he tore his mouth off hers and rolled away. 'Jesus, Kelly. No.'

In a flash, she went from wanton siren to humiliated fool. Abruptly she

turned away, curling into a ball as she willed the ground to open up and swallow her. Her ears rang with the sound of her thumping heart.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, not daring to look at him.

‘What for?’ His voice sounded strained.

Staring at the wall, she bit into her cheek. ‘For leaping on you like that. I asked you to hold me.’ Her voice broke and despite her best efforts, she started to cry. ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

She heard the creaking of springs as he climbed off the bed. Moments later he was crouching on the floor in front of her, his startling green eyes staring straight into hers. ‘Fear,’ he said softly. ‘That’s what came over you. It makes us do crazy things sometimes.’

He traced a finger down her cheek, wiping up her tears, and she stiffened. ‘Don’t touch me.’

He sighed and dropped his hand. ‘Anyway, I’m the one who should be apologising.’

‘Why?’ His eyes were so kind. It made her want to cry more.

He stood to his full height, towering over her. ‘Because I’m here to protect you, not be distracted by you. Because I knew you were vulnerable, yet I kissed you back.’ His mouth curved into that crooked grin. The one that made her heart flutter. ‘I’ve never been able to resist a pretty face.’

But you just did.

She bit back the words, but couldn’t prevent the quiet sob.

‘Kelly.’ A deep inhale, followed by a loud exhale.

‘I’m tired and I’m going to sleep.’ Feeling embarrassed, humiliated, overwrought, she shuffled up the bed and under the covers. ‘Goodnight, Ben.’ Turning onto her side she closed her eyes, deliberately blocking him out.

He heaved out another sigh. The man was going for the world record. ‘Okay. Goodnight, Kelly.’

Dimly she was aware of the bathroom light going on, the toilet flushing and the light going off again.

She braced herself for the dip of the mattress as he climbed into bed, but it didn’t happen.

It was a long time before sleep finally came.

Chapter Seventeen

Kelly woke early and went straight to the bathroom, almost tripping over Ben on her way through. The big tough ex-soldier was obviously so scared she was going to pounce on him again, he'd opted to spend the night on the floor. If it wasn't so pathetic, if she didn't feel so mortified by the whole thing, she might have laughed at the idea.

She was damned if she was going to cry about it again, though.

Turning on the shower, she gasped when she caught sight of the brown-haired woman staring back at her in the mirror. She'd forgotten she was no longer blonde. Twisting her head, she wondered if it made her look better, or worse.

Worse.

Then again, that probably had more to do with the dark circles under her puffy eyes than the colour of her hair.

She sank gratefully under the hot spray, her mind spinning with everything that had happened to her over the last week and a bit. How had her sheltered, boring life come to this? Days spent on the run, terrified of being captured. Nights spent with a sexy man who made her ache, made her want, but who preferred to sleep on the floor than with her.

When she came out of the shower, Ben was awake and dressed. An array of Danish pastries lay strewn across the bed.

'Thank you.'

He gave her a small smile as he took a bite of pastry and settled down on the floor with his back against the wall. Just as he had yesterday. 'Another day, another hotel, another inspiring pastry selection.'

This time she found she couldn't smile back. 'And another morning where I'm left feeling useless and not in control of my own destiny.'

'Kelly.' There was a warning to his tone, as well as a bucketload of the same frustration she was feeling. 'We've been through this. It won't be for long.'

The way she was feeling, even another hour felt impossible. Especially as the atmosphere between them was stilted and uncomfortable, thanks to last night's fiasco. Yesterday she'd have chatted about something and nothing. Now she didn't know what to say. Or even where to look. If his body

language was anything to go by, he felt the same way.

‘I’m going to phone Stuart,’ she declared into the silence. She needed to do something. Anything.

‘We agreed you couldn’t trust him.’

‘We didn’t agree anything of the sort. You’re twisting my words. I’m dating him, for God’s sake. I’m pretty certain I can trust him.’

‘Pretty certain.’ In a gesture of barely controlled violence, he threw the remains of his pastry into the bin. ‘You’re going to risk your life on a *pretty certain?*’

‘The key words there are *your life*. I should be allowed to dictate what I do with it, don’t you think?’ She pressed on before he could give her one of his *I’m being paid to protect that life*, sermons. ‘I’m not prepared to waste this life of mine sitting around, waiting to be caught. I’m going to ask Stuart to find me another lab with the equipment I need to replicate the tests. If he can get my samples to me, either bring them to us, or take them to a place where we can collect them, I can complete the tests and hopefully finalise the formulation. Once that’s in the right hands, I won’t be of interest any more and this ridiculous fiasco will be over.’

‘You’re making a big assumption there, honey.’

This time his use of the term *honey* grated on her. It sounded chauvinistic and condescending. ‘What’s that, sweetheart?’

A frown appeared between his eyes and his jaw tightened. ‘You’re assuming these people are after you for this particular vaccine, and not your expertise.’

‘It has to be the vaccine they’re after. There are plenty of virologists out there with more experience than me.’

He grunted. ‘Well, I’m sorry to bust your little fairy tale, but we can’t afford to bring Stuart in. That’s tantamount to suicide.’

‘As is waiting here like sitting ducks,’ she replied fiercely, frustration bubbling into anger. How could he expect her to do *nothing?* ‘How many leads have your brilliant team come up with so far?’

‘They know your pal Stuart is married.’

* * *

Ben watched the blood drain from Kelly’s face and cursed his temper — and big mouth. He knew she was dating the prat. He hadn’t needed to shove

the wife in her face.

‘He’s not living with his wife,’ he added in a more sympathetic tone, but it was too late. Kelly had buried her face in her hands. Her long hair, now brown, falling over her face and hiding her from him.

Before last night he might have gone and put his arm round her. Now, because he’d gone and done what he absolutely knew he shouldn’t have, he couldn’t. Oh sure, she’d kissed him first, but she’d reached out to him for comfort and reassurance.

He’d responded with lust.

With a heavy heart, he ignored his desire to wrap her in his arms and remained rigidly on the floor, giving her time to pull herself together. The tension in the room bordered on the unbearable. How in the hell were they going to get through the next few days, shit it could be weeks, when they were barely able to speak to each other?

Slowly her head came up, cheeks glistening with tears, and she fixed him with an angry glare. ‘Aside from withholding the details of his marriage from me, is Stuart a suspect?’

‘Not at this stage,’ Ben was forced to admit. ‘But we’re not ruling him out.’

‘Have you ruled anyone out yet?’

The question made him squirm. ‘Mary. Probably.’

And his answer made her laugh. ‘Oh, wow. I’m reassured by the Panther powers of deduction.’

Annoyed, frustrated, and yes, embarrassed, Ben picked up the burner phone, put it on loud speaker and dialled Floss. ‘Hey. I’ve got Kelly with me. She’d like an update on how the background searches are going and if we can trust anyone at this point.’

Floss being Floss, didn’t get straight down to business. ‘Well, hello, Dr Bridge. How are you doing? Besides having the misfortune of being cooped up with Crackers?’

For a brief moment the irritation slipped from her face and the corner of her mouth lifted. ‘Crackers?’ Then she laughed softly. ‘Ah, I get it. Jacobs Crackers.’

Floss chortled down the phone line. ‘He told me you were sharp. Did he tell you I’m the good-looking one? It’s why they have to keep me hidden away. Don’t want the female clients falling for me.’

Ben groaned inwardly as Kelly shot him a dark look and the temperature in the room returned to frigid. ‘The background searches,’ he cut in. ‘We’ve not got all day.’ A total lie of course, as they had bugger all else to do. Still, he’d rather sit in a hotel room with a pissed off Kelly than listen to Floss and his dubious brand of charm.

‘Okay then. Not in the mood for small talk. Noted. The bottom line is we can’t rule anyone out yet. Not definitively. Everyone on that list you gave us has something in their background that causes us to pause.’ He hesitated. ‘Can I ask about Eric Johnson? There seems to be a lot of emails going back and forth between the pair of you recently.’

‘He’s a virologist from Texas. We’ve been consulting with each other on a joint project.’ Kelly’s voice was cool and factual. ‘He would have no reason to kidnap me.’

‘Would any of the people on the list we compiled have a reason to kidnap you, in your opinion?’ Ben asked pointedly.

She gave him a withering look but didn’t reply.

‘What about Helen, your lab assistant,’ Floss probed. ‘Have you noticed a difference in her behaviour over the last few months?’

Ben watched as Kelly narrowed her eyes, clearly trying to search her memory. ‘I suppose I’d have to say yes to that. She’s more withdrawn. Quieter. And she’s been off sick a few days which is unusual for her.’ Kelly sighed. ‘Look, this is getting ridiculous. Right now you have all of them in some sick, devious plot to kidnap me for reasons unknown.’

‘That’s about the gist of it,’ Floss agreed, too cheerfully. ‘But give us a few more days and the picture will become clearer.’

‘What about Stuart and Richard?’ Kelly insisted. ‘Surely you can clear them?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Ben made a mental note to tell Floss not to sound like he was enjoying this so much. ‘Poke beneath the surface and there are warning signs for both of them.’

Kelly gave Ben an incredulous look before speaking into the phone again. ‘You’re telling me that by day they’re scientists, and by night they live this secret life of crime, kidnapping people to order?’

‘Not exactly,’ Floss admitted. ‘But they both have things going on in their lives, things I can’t tell you for privacy reasons, that could be leveraged by the wrong people.’

Far from reassured by the phone call, as Ben had hoped, Kelly looked like she wanted to scream. Taking the phone off speaker, he moved away and spoke to Floss directly.

‘Okay, it’s just me now. Anything I need to know?’

‘We suspect the lab assistant, Helen, has a drug problem, which brings her further under the spotlight.’

‘A spotlight already being hogged by the American, Stuart and Richard.’ Ben shook his head. No wonder Kelly was getting frustrated. Instead of crossing people off the suspect list, they seemed to finding ways to keep them on the damn thing.

‘Afraid so. We now know Richard invested in a company which went tits up, hence the big debt. And it looks like Stuart is in the process of getting a divorce which puts him in the same “money difficulties” pot because we all know that doesn’t come cheap.’ Floss snickered. ‘Maybe just as well you’re resolutely single.’

Resolutely? Had he ever said that? And why was that the part he was focussing on? Ben took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘So in summary, we’ve still got everyone and his dog on the list. Maybe next time we talk you’ll actually have managed to narrow it down. Even if it’s just taking off the damn dog.’

‘Err, Crackers, there’s no dog . . .’ A pause while the cogs of Floss’s brain started to work. ‘Oh, right, that was a joke. Everyman and his dog. Very funny.’

‘No. Not even slightly funny,’ Ben countered, his frustration still bubbling. ‘Got to go now. I’ve got four walls to stare at.’

And a gorgeous, highly annoyed woman, he added silently. After tucking the phone back in his pocket, he looked over to Kelly. She was sitting on the bed, back against the wall. About as far away from him as she could get in the cramped room.

‘Nothing I’ve just heard is going to change my mind. I’m going to call Stuart and see if he can find me another lab. And you can’t stop me.’ She angled her head, defiance etched across her face and snapping from her eyes. ‘Unless you plan on kidnapping me?’

His hands fisted and Ben had to work hard not to march over to the bed and shake some bloody sense into her. ‘I wish I could,’ he muttered. If he had his way he’d find a damn vault and lock her in it until they’d found who was

after her.

Her blue gaze remained coolly focussed on him, and he cursed silently. He had no choice. Not really. Not if both of them were going to remain sane. ‘Fine. If you insist on doing this, I’ll find you a lab.’

‘And the things I’ll need from my lab?’

‘I’ll get them.’

A burst of harsh laughter left her. ‘For Pete’s sake, you probably can’t even say the names of the stuff I need, never mind find them.’ And damn, his poker face must have slipped because her eyes rounded with horror. ‘Oh God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.’

Funny. It was his experience that when emotions ran high, people said exactly what they meant. And though it shouldn’t matter that the good scientist thought so little of him, her words hurt more than any of the snide, sarcastic comments he’d had hurled at him by his teachers. And his stepfather.

‘You made your point.’ He screwed his poker face back in place as the room descended into another tense silence. Damn it, damn it, damn it. She’d not just boxed him in, she’d locked him in the box and thrown away the blasted key. And unless he literally did that to her, locked her up, this smart and fiercely determined woman would find a way to contact her precious boyfriend.

The only play he had left was to make sure it was under his terms. ‘Okay. If you think you can trust Stuart, call him on the burner phone. But I listen in, and if I’m not happy with any of the arrangements, it won’t happen.’

She nodded stiffly. ‘Thank you.’

‘I hope you’re still thanking me later.’ He directed her a long, hard look. ‘I can’t bring the team in on this. If I told them what we’re planning they’d put a halt to it because guess what, it’s . . .’ *a clusterfuck waiting to happen.* ‘It’s incredibly dangerous. We’re on our own.’

‘I understand.’

He wished he could say the same. Oh, he understood, in every horrifying detail, about the potential danger. He also understood the frustration of inactivity, the need to bend the rules, to do what others were telling you not to. Hell, one of the mottos he lived by was *do first, admit later. And only if forced.* What he didn’t understand was why he suddenly had this burning need to stick to those same rules he hated. To wrap Kelly up in cotton wool

— and damn it, in bubble wrap, too — and let others risk their lives. While he kept her safe.

Chapter Eighteen

The following evening they were back in the car, Ben driving them towards Birmingham and the lab Stuart had arranged for Kelly to use. Stuart had been shocked to hear from her yesterday, and had sounded genuinely concerned. Of course he'd also been full of questions about why she needed a lab, and why he hadn't seen her at work. The official line was she was ill. That's the message that had been relayed to the department.

As Ben had warned her against telling Stuart the truth, Kelly had been left with asking him to trust her, telling him she'd let him know more when she could. If that wasn't bad enough, she'd then had to beg him not to mention her request to anyone else because what she was working on was sensitive. It was a lot to ask of a man she had a lukewarm dating history with, but Richard would most certainly refuse her request and call the police, Helen was too young to risk asking, and nobody else could access the things she needed from her own lab.

Once again her eyes strayed to the man beside her. It was as if she couldn't resist watching him. His tight profile told her he was on edge. 'You're not happy about this, are you?'

'What we're doing goes against every single one of my instincts so no, I'm not doing cartwheels.'

His mouth didn't smile. Sadly she hadn't seen it smile for over twenty-four hours. Not since the night before last, when she'd come on to him.

Mortification flashed through her and Kelly dropped her gaze. Somewhere between her fumbling attempts at kissing him, her refusal to sit put like he wanted her to, and her snide comment about asking Stuart to help her find a lab because Ben couldn't even say the names of the equipment she needed . . . yes, somewhere between all that shameful behaviour, she'd ruined the friendship that had been blossoming between them.

With a resigned sigh she turned her head away from him and stared out of the window.

Half an hour later, Ben indicated and turned into the grounds of a small business park.

Kelly scanned the area and pointed to a square white building with dark glass windows.

‘That looks like it.’ Biogenius was a company that rented out lab space to small biotechs. It was owned by a guy Stuart had once worked for.

Ben stopped at the barrier and a security guard strolled out.

‘Mr Jones and Miss Evans,’ Ben told the guard after letting down the window. ‘We’re here to have a private viewing of the facilities. We’re expected.’ It was the cover she’d agreed with Stuart.

The man checked on his sheet, nodded and let them through.

Ben parked in the almost deserted staff car park. There was an eerie feel to the place and Kelly couldn’t tell if that was because it was late and only the night security staff were here, or if her paranoia was telling her she was walking into a trap.

A shiver zapped down her spine and Ben shot her a look. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes, sure. Just . . .’ She waved at the shadowed buildings looming ahead of her. ‘It looks a bit spooky.’

‘Sure, Daphne.’ When she frowned he shook his head, his mouth curving upwards. ‘Don’t tell me you were too busy reading science books to watch *Scooby-Doo*?’

The glint of humour back in his eyes, along with the smile, felt like gifts after all this time without either. ‘Daphne wasn’t the one who got spooked easily. That was Scooby.’

Another smile, slightly wider. ‘I figured it wasn’t very gentlemanly of me to call you a dog.’ He rolled his shoulders. ‘But I’m with Scooby on this one. I don’t like the look of it.’

Slowly he climbed out of the car and Kelly watched as he took stock. The security guard who’d let them in was still in his glass panelled office, watching. There were a couple of other cars in the car park, none of them occupied as far as she could tell. Walking round to her side, he opened the door. ‘Do you recognise any of these cars?’

Kelly looked around and shook her head. ‘I don’t remember what Stuart drives. I only went in it twice. It was pretty nondescript. Silver, I think.’

He huffed. ‘Great. A silver car. Not too many of those on the roads.’

* * *

Ben scanned the car park again. Two of the seven cars he could see were silver. He ran a hand over his face, grimacing when it shook slightly. My God he was jittery. Far too jittery. It wasn’t like him. He was the chilled one.

Frighteningly calm, an officer had once told him. He needed a large shot of that inner calm right now, because he had the disturbing feeling he was about to massively regret his decision to go ahead with this half-cocked arrangement.

Kelly climbed out of the car and he turned his back to her, shielding her body whilst keeping his eyes trained on what was happening around him.

Cautiously they walked towards the door.

It was then that he saw it. The flash of a gun from an open window on the first floor. Instinctively he pushed Kelly to the ground, just as the shooter fired. The bullet ricocheted off the tarmac near his head.

‘Back to the car,’ he rasped as he helped her up, pushing her forwards. Another shot was fired. ‘Shit.’ Several far more pungent words came to mind as the bullet nipped past his arm, clipping the skin.

Shoving her into the car, he ran round to the driver’s side. As bullets pinged off the bonnet he jumped in, jammed it into gear and screeched out of the car park. Bouncing over the speed humps and smashing through the flimsy barrier, before hurtling down the road.

‘Crikey, Ben, you’re bleeding.’

Despite the situation, he started to laugh. ‘Is that the best profanity you can come up with? No shit, no fuck? Not even a damn?’

Her cheeks coloured but she didn’t look away. ‘Excuse me for showing concern.’

Immediately he felt churlish. ‘I appreciate it but you can relax. It’s a flesh wound.’

‘Still, you shouldn’t be driving. Pull over and let me.’

His jaw hung open. ‘Err, yes, sure. Any moment we’re going to have a madman with a gun chasing us, but what the heck, let’s do it. I’ll just park up over here so we can swop seats.’

She let out a snort of annoyance. ‘It doesn’t sound any crazier than you thinking you can drive with a bullet in your arm.’ Her voice trembled slightly but he admired her for not giving in to her fear. For using it to get angry, instead.

‘First off, the bullet isn’t in my arm. It clipped it, that’s all.’

‘Oh.’ He was driving at eighty miles an hour, squealing rubber as he careered round sharp corners, yet all her attention was focussed on his flesh wound. ‘We still need to stop the bleeding.’

‘Sure.’ He wrestled the car round the next tight bend. ‘If you go into the glove compartment you’ll find a first-aid kit complete with sling, bandages and a sterile needle and thread. You can sew me up.’

Incredibly, she actually opened the compartment. ‘There isn’t one.’

‘No shit.’

‘Oh, you were kidding. Very funny.’ She banged the compartment shut. ‘If your company was as great as you seem to think, they’d have planned for this type of scenario and actually have a first-aid kit in there.’ She glanced down and with one quick movement tore at the hem of her T-shirt. ‘There. One bandage. I might not be funny, but at least I’m resourceful.’ She tied it tightly round the top of his cut. ‘What was the second thing?’

‘The second thing?’ he blurted, his mind reeling from the sound of cotton tearing, followed by the sight of the smooth naked skin around her belly. Oh boy, he really didn’t need to see that.

‘You said *first off*,’ she reminded him. ‘It implies there was another reason you weren’t going to pull over.’

‘You mean apart from the crazy nut with a gun?’

‘Yes.’

He looked ahead, judged the distance between him and the lorry coming towards him, and swerved out to overtake the slow jeep in front of him.

‘Ben,’ she yelled, holding onto the door handle. ‘Are you trying to kill us?’

He nipped back onto his side of the road, having missed the lorry by at least three feet. ‘That was the other reason. You can’t drive as fast as I can.’

‘Maybe not, but I’d get us there in one piece,’ she muttered. When he glanced over, about to reply, she interrupted him. ‘Don’t tell me, you’re trained to drive like a raving nutcase.’

‘As a matter of fact—’

She held up her hand. ‘Forget it. I don’t want to know. Just drive, and try to keep on the road.’

His lips twitched. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

* * *

As Ben put more miles between them and the lab, Kelly’s confidence that they were out of immediate danger began to grow. As it did, her shocked mind slowly started to unfreeze, until finally it burned with the question she

couldn't avoid. 'How did they know we were going to be there?'

'You're the one with the brains. You tell me.'

She flinched, but couldn't blame him for the barbed dig. Not after she'd been the one to insist on getting the lab. 'Who knew what we were planning?'

His eyes remained fixed on the road ahead. 'Stuart. Presumably the owner of the lab we were going to. Plus anyone else Stuart might have spoken to, even though we told him not to. Like your boss.'

'So it's likely to be Stuart.'

'That would be my take on it, yes.'

She shuddered. 'I don't want to think it's Stuart.'

'You don't want to believe your boyfriend's up to no good?'

'I don't want to believe I'm being betrayed by someone I thought I could trust.' Ironic really, as Stuart had clearly already betrayed her by not telling her he was married.

'You wouldn't be the first person to be let down by someone you thought cared for you.' His voice had softened, and there was something in his expression that hinted he was speaking from experience.

'I guess it's time to admit that someone I considered a . . . friend is involved in this.' And how horribly sad was that?

'Stuart may not be directly behind it. He could be an unwitting pawn in the whole thing.' Though Ben was doing a pretty solid job of trying to keep her spirits up, it was hard to be convinced by his act when she knew very well he'd suspected Stuart all along. 'At least now we have a few more leads to look into.' After flicking her an encouraging smile he fiddled with the radio and found a station playing soft jazz. 'Why don't you try and sleep?'

She sank her head against the backrest. 'I can't. I keep hearing the shots. A few inches higher and the bullet that clipped your arm could have caught your neck instead. It could have severed your carotid and—'

'Whoa. Stop there. If we're going to go through the *could have* scenarios, we could have had a puncture and careered off the road into a tree before we'd even got there. You could have slipped on the bathroom floor this morning and broken your neck.'

'That would have been one heck of a slip.'

'My fault. I make a lot of splash when I shower.'

She sighed. 'I know what you're saying, but I think you know what I'm saying, too. Those bullets were far too close.'

‘Those bullets were meant for me,’ he told her quietly. ‘I’m the one they want out of the way. They need you alive.’

She shuddered. ‘That’s not helping. I don’t want you hurt, either.’

It was too dark to see his face, but she thought he was smiling. ‘Reassuring to know, but neither of us are going to get hurt. Not if I can help it.’

‘Is this the part where you tell me you’ll lay down your life for mine? I’m sure that’s what all good bodyguards say in the films.’

He snorted. ‘I refuse to be a Hollywood cliché.’ He hesitated a moment before speaking again, and this time his voice was serious. ‘But know this. I’ll die before I let anyone harm you.’

Her heart seemed to make a giant leap into her throat. ‘Because I’m your client?’

Another hesitation. Longer this time. ‘Yes.’

Slamming her eyes shut, she turned away from him. Pretty stupid to ask the question if she didn’t want the answer. Of course, that’s all she was to him.

A client. A job.

Chapter Nineteen

Ben lurched upright. It took him a second to realise he was on the floor in another faceless hotel. And the quiet sobbing noise that had woken him up was coming from the bed.

His muscles groaned as he climbed to his feet and crouched down by Kelly. Her slight figure was curled into a ball, her shoulders shaking.

No way could he leave her like that. No way on God's earth.

Slipping onto the bed he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against him. 'Shhh,' he whispered, and even to his ears it sounded hollow. Inadequate. He knew how to arouse, but it had been a long time since he'd tried to give comfort. Shamefully, he'd not hung around long enough in recent years to need to.

He ran a tentative hand up and down her back and gradually her body started to relax, her face nuzzling into his neck, her breathing less laboured.

The longer his hand smoothed across her back though, the more aware he became of the satin of her skin, the intimacy of her warm breath against his neck. The softness of her body. Arousal rippled through him, reminding him why sleeping next to her was damn near impossible. Carefully he began to extricate himself.

Her arms tightened around him and she peered up at him, her eyes glistening. 'Won't you stay?'

He froze. 'I can't.'

'Please?'

God help him. 'What are you trying to do to me, Kelly? I'm a man. When I lie next to a woman in a bed, my body has more than sleep in mind.'

A heavy silence followed and he shifted again, moving away from her arms.

He almost didn't hear her next words, they were uttered so quietly. 'What if mine does, too?'

And now he'd heard them, he desperately wanted to un-hear them. Snapping his head round, he tried to read her pale, tear-stained face. 'Whatever you think you want right now, you need to trust me when I say it won't be what you'll want when all this is over.'

She angled her chin, eyes flashing at him. 'I can't abide people who think

they know my own mind better than I do.'

'Abide? Christ, who says abide these days?' Instantly hurt flashed across her face and he mentally congratulated himself for being a total arse. Just because he was floundering out of his depth, there was no need to take it out on her. With an effort, he gentled his tone. 'Look, this isn't a normal situation. You're scared and your emotions are going haywire. It isn't the time to rush into something you'll regret in a few weeks when you get your life back.'

And she would regret it. He wasn't certain of many things in life, but he was damn certain of that.

As his eyes skimmed over her unmade-up face with its unconscious beauty, the need to cover her body with his, to sink into her, became almost painful. He ached, he wanted.

Which was why he had to push her away.

He couldn't allow anything to distract him from keeping her safe, and tangling in the sheets with Kelly would be a *major* distraction. If he then factored in how awed he was of her intelligence, how much he enjoyed her humour and her company . . . hell, it wouldn't just be career suicide to take things any further, it would be emotional suicide, too. He'd only ever experienced love once before, but he had a strong feeling Kelly could change that.

How long though until the woman she'd been before all this had messed with her head, and the woman she'd be again when it was over, started to see him for what he was? Hired muscle.

Kelly raised her head and looked him straight in the eye. 'I wouldn't regret it.'

He groaned. Was she trying to kill him? 'You say that now, but you're not exactly experienced in these matters, are you?'

He knew, from her sharp intake of breath, that his words had hit their target. 'I'm not a virgin, if that's what you mean.'

'No?'

'No.' But then her eyes fell away from his and she gripped the sheets.

He reached out and laid his hand over hers. 'Talk to me.'

She shook her head, turning away from him, and he thought that was the end of the conversation. But then she started to speak, her voice so quiet he had to strain to hear. 'I told you before. Boys didn't fancy the geek girl two

years younger than they were. Not at school, or at university. I was twenty-four before I had my first boyfriend.'

'What happened?' he prompted when she fell silent.

'I was so excited when Roger asked me out.' She hesitated, and he guessed whatever she was about to say was really hard for her. 'He made such a fuss of me, and when he tumbled me, very willingly, into bed I thought it was the start of something precious.' Another pause, as her breath hitched. 'As soon as he realised he was my first though, he was horrified. He wanted a sexually mature, adventurous woman to have fun with. Not a shy, inexperienced virgin. After that night, I never heard from him again.'

'Bastard.' Ben hated that he couldn't see her face. Hated even more that in turning her back on him, she'd made it quite clear she didn't want him to touch her, to comfort her.

'Roger was the only man I've ever slept with,' she continued, her voice now a whisper, 'though he didn't stay long enough to actually sleep.'

Ben's heart lurched and he felt gutted for her. More than that, he wanted to punch the living daylights out of the guy who'd been so clumsy with such a precious gift. 'I'm sorry.' A woefully inadequate reply.

'So am I.' She remained turned away from him. 'And now, as you clearly don't want to sleep with me either, can you please get back to the floor.'

Her words sliced through him, tearing at his heart. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, that he didn't just want to make love to her, he felt honoured, privileged to be asked. And by God he knew he could make her feel good — in the short term. But after that? When this was over he'd just be another man who'd used her. Taken advantage of her.

She deserved one hell of a lot more than that.

So with a heavy heart he dragged his wretched body away from what he wanted, and back where he needed to be. On the hard floor. His chances of sleeping now were zero, but as he lay in the dark, frustrated, *aching*, he drew comfort from the fact that at least Kelly wouldn't have any regrets in the morning.

* * *

As they sat quietly in their room eating breakfast, Kelly couldn't look at the man sat on the floor a few feet away from her. She was mortified by her behaviour last night. Twice now she'd effectively propositioned Ben, and

twice he'd turned her down. For a supposed genius, she sure was stupid when it came to men. And how galling to find she couldn't even be angry with him, because he'd let her down so kindly, implying he didn't want to take advantage.

As if.

The Ben Jacobs she knew was a maverick and a flirt. Not the type to turn down the chance of some no strings action with a woman he was attracted to. Fact was, though she suspected he liked her, he didn't like her enough.

She'd admitted her pathetic sexual history to him, she thought with a shudder as she booted up her computer. From now on, the only looks he'd be giving her would be those filled with pity. How embarrassing that she was sexually inexperienced not through choice, not because she was saving herself for that magical special person. No, she was inexperienced because her job was her life. Outside it, she had nothing, did nothing. Add to that the fact that men didn't, as a rule, find precociously brainy women attractive and it was no wonder Roger had been one of the pitifully few men she'd gone out with.

Until he'd fled because of her inexperience.

After that, her already shaky confidence had taken a nose dive and for the last few years she'd chosen to keep her head down, devoting herself to what she understood; her work. Stuart had been the first man since to show any real interest, though he hadn't exactly lit any fires.

Nobody had, until Ben.

His powerful blend of courage, kindness, wisecracking humour and rugged good looks were the reason she'd shoved away her insecurities, screwed up her courage, and asked him to sleep with her.

Blah, who was she kidding? She'd asked him to have *sex* with her.

She didn't know who was the more embarrassed, her because she'd been rejected, or him for having to find a way to politely reject his client.

No wonder the atmosphere in the room this morning was so strained it set her teeth on edge.

Sighing into the uncomfortable silence, she picked up the burner phone and pretended an interest in it.

'There's a message from Stuart,' she blurted a moment later. 'He wants to know what's going on. Says he heard there was a problem last night and that guns were fired. He's anxious to know if I'm okay.'

When no reply came, Kelly was forced to glance over to Ben. He was staring into his cup, a sober, rather intense look on his face. ‘Ben?’

‘I heard.’ He ran a hand through his hair before sighing heavily. ‘You know if Stuart *is* the weak link, maybe we can use him,’ he said eventually.

‘How?’ Briefly her eyes caught his but she was too ashamed, and yes, too hurt, to hold his gaze so she dropped it back to the phone.

‘You could let him know what happened yesterday, tell him you’re scared and ask to meet him. Alone. When he turns up, I’ll grab him and we can squeeze him a little. See what he knows.’

She could imagine Ben’s version of *squeeze him a little*. ‘And if he’s innocent?’

‘I won’t hurt him. Not in the way you’re thinking. But we need to know whether to eliminate him from the suspect list or not.’ He downed the rest of his coffee. ‘You can call him on that phone.’

‘Okay.’ As she started to look through the call record for Stuart’s number, Ben let out a long, drawn out breath.

‘Look, about last night.’

She glanced over at him. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Okay.’ He hesitated. ‘Does that mean things are going to be weird between us now?’

Oh no, she wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easily. ‘I told you I wanted to make love to you and you turned me down.’ She made herself look him in the eye. ‘What do you think?’

He let out a muted oath. ‘I didn’t turn you down.’

‘Oh? Well sex must be a lot less fun than I thought because I’m pretty sure I don’t remember having any last night.’

Another curse. ‘You’re deliberately misunderstanding me. You’re my client. I’m here to protect you.’

‘And you can’t have sex with your client, huh? How convenient for you.’ When he opened his mouth to speak again, no doubt to give her another kindly meant let down, she cut him off. ‘Forget it. I said I didn’t want to talk about it and yet here I am, making a fool of myself all over again. Let’s just focus on finding a way out of this mess.’

She hopped off the bed and deliberately turned her back on him, stalking to the other side of the room as she dialed Stuart’s number.

Behind her she heard him mutter. ‘Weird it is then.’

Chapter Twenty

Ben rested his hands on the steering wheel and surveyed the car park where they'd arranged to meet Stuart. Good idea, bad idea? Who the hell knew?

Floss hadn't, when he'd phoned base.

Of course first he'd had to explain the lab fiasco. 'Bloody hell, Crackers,' had been Floss's strangled response.

On hearing Ben outline this latest plan, Floss's response had been even more vocal. 'Bloody hell, Crackers. Have you lost your ever-loving mind?'

Ben had answered that it was quite possible he had, at which point Floss had started laughing. 'Hey, don't sweat it. You actually lost it a long time ago, though you usually come through.'

The *usually* had made Ben wince. But not as much as the conversation he'd had with Charles right afterwards.

'Christ, Jacobs, we can't spare anyone to help at the moment,' his boss had snapped. 'You're certain you know what you're doing?'

'I'm certain I can handle it,' Ben had amended.

'You won't get yourself or Kelly shot at like in your last *foolproof* plan?' Charles had added, rather unhelpfully in Ben's opinion.

Ben turned his thoughts back to the present as a sleek silver Jaguar XK coupe turned into the car park. Kelly nudged his arm.

'I think that's Stuart.'

Ben did a double take, remembering what she'd said yesterday. 'That's what you call a nondescript silver car?'

'I'm not into cars,' she replied stiffly.

Typical. The brainy bastard was also a *rich*, brainy bastard. 'Okay, listen up. We wait for him to get out. When we're certain he's alone, and I mean certain, you can get out of the car and show your face. But you don't, I repeat *don't*, move towards him. Let him come to you. When he's close enough I'll leap out and grab him. Got it?'

The Jaguar parked and Ben studied the tall, fair-haired man who climbed out. To Ben's mind he was soft looking, but probably a woman would say he was handsome with his sharp cheekbones and carefully styled hair.

'Shall I get out now?'

'Not yet.' He scanned the car park again. It was reasonably busy but no

cars sent his danger radar tripping; no vans, no big as houses SUVs. An elderly couple stood over in the far corner, arguing about where on the windscreen to put the car park ticket. Even he couldn't find anything suspicious about them.

'How about now?'

Ben turned his eyes back to Stuart, who was now standing by his car, hands in his pockets. Clearly waiting for Kelly to appear. Well, he'd let the genius scientist stew a bit. 'Not yet.'

He wasn't letting her out of the car until he was absolutely certain no one had followed Stuart. Out of habit he patted his jacket, reassured to feel the weight of the Glock. Then he checked his jeans pocket. There she was, the lucky mini penknife he never went anywhere without.

Another minute ticked by and Kelly's frustrated sighs were getting louder and louder. Her hand clutched at the door handle. 'Now?'

Ben realised he was running out of excuses to keep her inside. 'Wait one more minute.'

'You said that two minutes ago. He's going to get suspicious if we keep him waiting. I'm getting out.'

The moment she was out of the car there was a squeal of tyres. Snapping his head round, Ben watched in horror as a van parked at the side of the road broke through the fence and screamed into the car park towards them. Letting rip a string of expletives he leapt out of the car and ran towards Kelly. As he reached for the Glock, two masked men leapt out of the back of the van and lunged towards him.

He had time to get in one shot, before everything went black.

* * *

'Stupid, stupid, stupid,' Ben muttered to himself over and over again.

Kelly raised her head and grimaced, her face tightening in pain. Then she sank back down to the floor.

'Kelly?'

Again she tried to sit up, but like him her hands were tied behind her, making moving really difficult. He'd like to bet her body also felt uselessly weak, like his did. With a wail of frustration, she flopped back to the floor.

'It's okay,' he told her. 'It's just the effects of the tranquiliser wearing off.' He longed to touch her but his arms were trussed up like a chicken.

Her whispered voice finally penetrated his miserable thoughts. ‘Have we been captured?’

God love her, he almost smiled. ‘Either that, or my choice in hotels has plummeted dramatically.’ He wasn’t sure whether the noise she made was a laugh or a sob so he shuffled further along the wall until his legs were alongside hers, though it was her back that faced him. ‘I’m sorry, Kelly.’ He raised his eyes to the ceiling. ‘That seems to be my mantra.’

‘I don’t know why. This isn’t your fault.’

‘No? Meeting Stuart was a stupid move.’ An impatient plan, hatched out of desperation. A burning need for this to all be over.

With another burst of effort Kelly wriggled around so she was half facing him. ‘At least now we know Stuart is definitely involved.’

He took in her pale face, the streaks of dirt on her cheek. The bruising round her wrists where the new restraints rubbed against wounds from her previous capture. ‘Yeah, but at what cost?’

Before he could reflect any more, and he *really* didn’t want to go down that path, the door to their small soulless room opened and a short, heavily muscled man entered. Black trousers, black T-shirt and black balaclava, he carried a big, don’t-mess-with-me AK47. The bruiser leered, displaying a set of teeth that would make a dentist cringe.

‘Come with me,’ he barked, grabbing hold of Kelly’s arm and hauling her up.

‘Hey.’ Struggling to his feet, Ben lowered his shoulder and powered into the guy. ‘Don’t you bloody touch her.’

By the time he caught sight of the butt of the rifle heading towards the side of his head, it was too late. As it clattered against his skull, Ben staggered back against the wall, bracing himself from falling. It was a matter of dogged principle to remain on his feet. ‘I won’t let them hurt you,’ Ben promised Kelly furiously, praying to whoever was up there that this was one promise he’d be able to keep.

She nodded, her blue eyes so full of trust that his dumb heart jumped and lodged in the back of his throat. How could she still trust him after all this?

Their captor signalled with the gat. Get moving.

They shuffled out, only to find another guy in a black mask — also carrying an AK47 — waiting for them. Where Dentist’s Nightmare was stocky, this one was built like the proverbial brick shithouse; tall, thick set

neck. Freakishly big chest. Ben straightened, widening his shoulders, letting the bastards know he wasn't intimidated. It took more than muscle to worry him, though the pair of assault rifles were doing a pretty good job.

After pushing him and Kelly into the corridor, the men followed behind. Every now and again Ben received a jab in the back with the muzzle of the gat.

A delightful reminder of the mess he'd brilliantly manoeuvred them into.

Shoving aside his self-directed anger, Ben doggedly focussed on his surroundings, memorising every doorway, every exit route as they were marched along the corridor towards a large . . .

What the hell? It was a bloody laboratory.

And standing meekly against the wall, his previously fastidiously styled hair now matted, his clean-shaven face looking haggard, was the man who'd helped propel them into this screw-up.

'Stuart?' Kelly was clearly as shocked as he was to see her boyfriend.

'They made me do it.' Jesus, could the guy sound any more pathetic, Ben thought with disgust. 'They threatened my daughter. I had no choice.'

'Your *daughter*?' Kelly gaped. Clearly another piece of information Stuart hadn't bothered to tell her.

'I'm separated from my wife—'

'Shut the fuck up.' A cold voice sounded behind them. 'This isn't a flaming cocktail party.'

Ben twisted to stare at the man behind the voice. He was dressed like the others, straight out of the baddies-are-us catalogue. They must have got a job lot on the black. Or maybe it had been buy two black masks/shirts/combat, get a third thrown in free. Tall, though not as muscled as the others, this one carried the air of a man used to being listened to. Ben guessed it made him the one in charge.

'You're here to work,' the guy continued, his voice as hard as the stare from the pale eyes behind the mask. He pointed at Kelly. 'Dr Bridge, I presume?'

'What do you want?' She raised her chin a notch. Sassy, with just the right amount of anger. Ben had never wanted to hug her more.

'I'd have thought a bright woman like you would have worked that out already.' Ben couldn't see his mouth properly, but he was damn sure the guy was smirking at his own feeble joke. 'What I want is the formulation you're

developing for the smallpox vaccine.’

‘It’s still a work in progress.’

‘So I hear. I also hear you’re close to finalising it.’

Kelly glared at Stuart, who shrugged apologetically. It wasn’t hard to work out how she’d got mixed up in all this now. Looked like this merry gang had started with Stuart, and when they’d exhausted his knowledge, the spineless asshole had put them onto Kelly.

‘I’m not that close.’ Though her voice shook a little, she stared the git straight in the eye. ‘It could take months more work.’

‘You don’t have months.’

‘Says who?’ Ben interrupted.

The guy shifted his focus to Ben. ‘Says me.’

‘And you are?’ It never hurt to ask the obvious. Sometimes these guys were so damn self-important they *wanted* to talk.

‘God, as far as you’re concerned.’

‘Fair enough, though calling you God seems a teeny bit egocentric, even for a man carrying a gun.’

‘If you prefer, you can call me sir.’

‘Haven’t you got a normal name, you know, like Adam or Peter?’

You-can-call-me-sir nodded to one of his goons and in a flash Ben was on the wrong end of a sharp punch to the stomach. Gritting his teeth, he hunched over. Okay, so that hadn’t gone as planned.

Straightening slowly, Ben tried a different tactic. ‘How about you tell me what you’re planning to do with this vaccine?’ He understood why a group of vicious thugs might want the virus, but the goddamn vaccine to it?

The guy leant nonchalantly back against the wall and calmly pulled up his mask. ‘Aren’t you the one for questions?’

Embedding his features to memory — dark hair, grey eyes, scar across his lip — Ben smiled genially. ‘Questions are pretty dull without answers.’

His hopes of a reply — and yeah, they’d been pretty slim — were smashed when the bastard simply laughed in his face.

‘Why are you interested in a vaccine against a virus that’s been eradicated?’ Kelly, bless her, was also trying to provoke an answer.

‘Come now, Dr Bridge. We all know smallpox isn’t wiped out. There are still some stocks left, and not all of them safely protected in government institutions.’

Now they were getting somewhere. Ben knew when to back off and let someone with more knowledge take over. Glancing at Kelly, he silently encouraged her to carry on.

‘But researchers all over the world are looking into that biological threat,’ she insisted, her voice the right amount of confusion and defiance. ‘Why this formulation? Why me?’

‘Because you’re the closest to finding the formulation for a vaccine that can protect against new smallpox strains. When governments hear terrorist chatter about a deadly smallpox strain on the verge of being released, can you imagine the panic? Can you imagine how much people might be prepared to pay for a solution to it?’ Ben could almost feel the evil dripping off the guy’s smug grin.

Still, because the nutter had wanted to show off in front of Kelly, now they knew what all this was about.

‘So it’s about *money*?’ Her face filled with disgust.

‘Isn’t everything?’ The guy moved towards them and planted himself menacingly in front of Kelly, his body right in her personal space. ‘And you, my good doctor, are the goose that will lay the golden egg.’ He waved an arm towards the back of the room. ‘You’ll find everything you need to finalise your work right here, including your precious samples. Stuart has been most helpful in getting it all together.’

Kelly shook her head. ‘You’ve got to be joking. Why should I do this?’

In a flash Mr Bad Teeth rushed forward and grabbed Ben by the neck, flinging him onto the floor. He landed with a thud on his busted shoulder, which immediately began to throb like a bugger. And that was before he was kicked. After that, he couldn’t feel his shoulder much.

He grunted as a boot caught him again in the stomach.

‘Stop!’ Through a haze of pain, he was aware of Kelly trying to push her way towards him.

‘There is your incentive, Dr Bridge,’ You-can-call-me-sir announced calmly. ‘I was planning on shooting your friend, but since he managed to dodge my attempt at the last lab, I’ve had a change of heart. Think of him now as your motivation. Every morning and every evening we will take him and, how shall I put this? Rough him up a little. The quicker you solve the puzzle to the correct formulation, the less he’s beaten to a pulp.’

From his foetal position on the floor, Ben started to laugh. ‘Go ahead,

you dumb motherfuckers. Do your worst. I'm nothing to her. I'm just the guy paid to look after her.'

Another boot hurtled towards him. Ben clenched his stomach muscles and rolled with the force.

'Not done a great job so far, have you?' the main man spat back. 'Besides, you'd better hope that's not true because if it is, you're surplus to requirements.'

'I'll do whatever you want me to,' he heard Kelly say through the ringing in his ears. 'Just please stop hurting him.'

From the responding laughter, Ben guessed these guys weren't big on doing as they were asked.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kelly couldn't concentrate. It wasn't even the presence of the masked gunman, his cruel eyes fixed on her, though that didn't help. It was Ben. She flinched at every pain filled grunt he emitted, hurting for him.

And they expected her to focus on her work?

The sound of another punch, followed by a string of swear words, echoed round the lab. Stiffening, she started to turn but immediately a gun was jabbed in her ribs, forcing her to stay where she was. Biting at her lip, she slowly began to set up the tests.

At least in this area, she was one step ahead of them. She already knew the results of the tests she was about to perform. They'd been in the set they'd snuck out of the lab, days ago. Stuart wouldn't have known that. He'd have only seen the work she'd put on the shared area. Being forced to repeat the work was actually a golden opportunity to confirm what she'd already seen. If Ben wasn't being kicked half to death, if she didn't have a gun to her face . . . well, she might even be excited. Years of research, months of testing, boiled down to this. If the results came out the same as the previous ones, she'd found the answer.

To the men holding them though, these tests would only be the first step. They would need to be analysed and repeated before a conclusion could be drawn.

By then, please God, it would have bought them enough time to escape.

Opposite her Stuart stood awkwardly, watching her every move. Each time she opened her mouth to talk to him, a dark glare from the gunman stifled the words in her throat.

But ten minutes later she got her chance. 'Get on with it. No funny business. I'll be watching you.' The guy ambled over to the other end of the lab to talk about whatever men who captured and threatened people for money talked about.

'Kelly, what can I say?' Stuart whispered, his brown eyes pleading with her. 'I'm so terribly sorry to have got you into this mess.'

'A wife and a daughter?' she hissed, all the resentment, the anger at his betrayal, burning through her voice. 'When were you going to tell me about them?'

He ran a hand through his overly long hair. Funny, a few weeks ago she'd convinced herself it was attractive, in a quirky, floppy haired sort of way. Now it just seemed messy and effeminate.

Now she preferred short, sandy hair.

'She might technically still be my wife but we've been separated for the last six months. And I would have told you, of course I would. It just hadn't come up yet.' He gave her a disbelieving look. 'Are we seriously going to have this discussion now? We're being held prisoner by armed men and you're having a go at me because I didn't tell you I was still married? That I had a child?'

'Getting angry with you helps take my mind off things,' she retorted. 'And if you can forget to tell me you have a wife, it makes me wonder how many other things you've forgotten to tell me.' She sighed. 'I take it you put these people onto me?'

He sighed heavily, leaning against the workstation. 'It wasn't like that. They asked me for the vaccine and I told them they could take a running jump. But then they threatened Lucy, my daughter, so I gave them what I could.' His mouth twisted. 'I wasn't the wonder girl developing it, though, was I?'

Kelly looked up sharply. There it was again. The jealousy. What was it with men? They were either too terrified of her brains to even approach her, or highly competitive and jealous of her success. It seems Stuart fell in the latter camp.

And Ben? Where did he fall? He certainly wasn't jealous, but equally she couldn't imagine he was scared of anything, so he must be the third type. Those who were indifferent to her.

'So that's why you were always so interested in my work.' Slowly — far too flipping slowly — she began to put two and two together.

'I didn't want you dragged into this. I asked so I could get to the answer by myself. It's why I said I couldn't do the talk in Rome. I figured if I got you out of the way, I could get into your lab and work it out, but I hadn't reckoned on not being able to access your results without your ID.' He thumped his hand against the worktop. 'Can't you see? I wanted to save you from being involved.'

His self-righteous tone angered her. 'And yet here I am.'

His eyes darted away from her face. 'In the end, I didn't have a choice.'

he muttered, slumping onto a stool, the fight seeming to flood out of him. ‘They’re going to hurt Lucy if we don’t deliver this blasted vaccine formulation . . .’ He trailed off, rubbing at his eyes in a weary gesture.

Kelly studied his drawn face, his wretched body language. He might not be the man she’d thought, probably hadn’t be interested in her all along, but he was a father, scared for his daughter. With a small sigh, she put her arms around him and hugged him.

* * *

So far today Ben had been bound by his arms and legs and kicked around the back of the lab like a football. Every part of his body screamed out in raw, burning agony.

But nothing hurt as much as the sight of Kelly with her arms wrapped around Stuart. Jealousy, the likes of which he’d never felt before, sliced through his battered, bruised body like a sharp blade.

Immediately he cursed himself for being a dumb ass fool. Stupid to develop feelings for a woman like her. Kelly needed a man who was her equal, her match.

Hell, though he nearly gagged on the thought, she needed someone like Stuart. A man she could discuss the adju — whatever the damn things were — with over a glass of Sauvignon in the evening.

Ben was a watching football with a beer in his hand, kind of man.

Dimly he became aware of a tug at his feet. Miracle of bloody miracles. They were being untied. Painfully Ben stood up, turning to show the guy his cuffed hands. All he received was a sneer and a shake of the head.

‘I’ll take it as a compliment.’ Turning, he spat out some blood, then ran his tongue round his mouth, gauging if any of his teeth were looser now.

‘You what?’ Rotten Teeth jabbed him with the AK47.

‘I mean I’m flattered. You’ve spent the last hour kicking the crap out of me but you’re still too scared to uncuff my hands.’

‘Funny man.’

He considered saying he’d take that as a compliment too, but reckoned his ribs deserved a rest. With a shove, Ben was propelled toward the end of the lab, not far from where Kelly and Stuart were locked in some deep conversation. Before he had a chance to rejoice that at least she was no longer touching him, Ben received a neatly timed elbow in his side, causing him to

exhale sharply and fall to his knees. As his mind saw stars, he came to the belated conclusion that winding the bad guys up wasn't such a bright idea.

Seemingly satisfied with his handiwork, Rotten Teeth left him to go and talk to the others.

Any hope Ben had that he looked better than he felt was squashed when Kelly turned his way and gasped. It was small consolation to see her leaving Stuart and rushing towards him.

'Oh my God, what have they done to you?' she whispered, her hand trailing delicately over his bruised face.

'Nothing I couldn't handle.' He gave her an encouraging smile, though maybe it didn't look that reassuring because she clutched at her stomach.

'I'm sorry. I'm going to be sick.'

Lurching towards the sink she leant over, reached to secure her hair behind her head, and vomited neatly into it. After rinsing out her mouth she stared back at him, blue eyes huge in her pale face.

He tried to quirk an eyebrow, but possibly he came across more Quasimodo than James Bond. 'Do I look *that* bad?'

'No.' She rubbed at her face. God, was she crying? 'I just can't bear the thought of what they did to you.'

His heart flipped. 'Stop right there.' Ignoring the explosion of pain, he clambered to his feet and went to stand next to her, lightly touching her shoulder with his. 'I'm a tough sonofabitch,' he whispered. 'It's what I'm trained for. This lot think they're hard but they're amateurs, believe me.'

She sniffed, her eyes welling. 'I don't want them to hurt you.'

Suddenly his heart felt too large, jammed up against his battered ribcage. She *cared*.

Instinctively he straightened his back. Even puffed out his damn chest. She might have mocked his desire to be a superhero, but by God, right now he felt like ruddy Superman. 'What you see are scrapes and bruises. Surface stuff. I've been trained to handle and resist torture, Kelly. I mean, when you've got a body like mine, you're going to learn how to protect it.' He grinned, ignoring the flash of pain as the action pulled on muscles that didn't want to be pulled.

'That all sounds very macho.'

Damn, he'd forgotten Stuart was still there, listening to everything. 'Not macho,' he replied lightly, fighting the desire to punch the smirk off the guy's

face. *Brains aren't always the answer to everything, asshole.* 'Just my job.'

'At least let me clean you up,' Kelly pleaded, either ignoring or not picking up on the *I don't like you and you don't like me* vibes pinging between him and Stuart. 'You don't want me throwing up again, do you?'

She reached for some paper towel and Stuart moved away, clearly not a fan of watching the woman he fancied playing nurse to another man. Feeling ever so slightly smug, Ben stood still and let Kelly gently wipe at the scratches, wincing as she drew up his shirt.

'They're going to look pretty colourful in the morning,' he mumbled, staring down at the bruises already starting to form. Trying to distract himself from the soft pressure of her touch. Yes, he was in pain, but that sure didn't seem to bother one part of his anatomy, which started to twitch. Reluctantly he pulled away. 'I'm going to sit here for a bit while you and Stuart do . . . whatever it is scientists do.'

Giving Kelly what he hoped was an *all's fine here* smile, he settled on the floor to watch, resting his back against one of the cupboards. As he began to notice how in tune they were with each other, each knowing what to do without being asked, the smugness from before drained right out of him.

Turning away, he rested his head on his knees and shut his eyes.

* * *

Kelly glanced over at Ben and felt her heart falter. He had to be hurting more than he was letting on. The Ben Jacobs she knew would never have fallen asleep in the middle of the afternoon.

'Is he all right?' Stuart nodded over to where Ben was hunched over.

'I think so.' *Hoped so*, was nearer the truth.

'He looks okay, you know, for an army type.'

Kelly frowned. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, I'm guessing he's an ex-soldier, they usually are. A bit like legalised thugs, aren't they? You want them next to you when the going gets tough, but not when you're at a dinner party.'

She gaped at Stuart in disbelief, thinking of the understanding and kindness Ben had shown her. And heavens, the laughter, too, despite the really crappy circumstances. 'You have absolutely no idea what people like Ben are really like.'

Stuart's sharp eyes studied her. 'Dear God, Kelly, don't tell me you've

developed feelings for the guy?’

‘If by that you mean do I respect and like him, then the answer is yes.’

‘Are you sure that’s all it is? I’ve read about women falling for the men who rescue them. It’s why firemen are apparently so popular.’

‘And you’re an expert on women and their feelings, are you?’ If he was an expert on women, she thought irritably, he’d have known not to lie about something like being married. ‘I told you, I like Ben. That’s all. What is it to you, anyway?’

He gave her a look like a slapped puppy. ‘I thought we were dating.’

‘So did I.’ And the humiliation of knowing he hadn’t been into her at all, churned inside her, bubbling out in angry resentment. ‘But those meals out were never about me, were they? They were set up so you could grill me on how I was progressing with the adjuvant combination. Then feed the information to these people.’ She jabbed her chin in the direction of the men at the end of the lab. Violent men with dangerous weapons resting carelessly by their side.

A flush stained Stuart’s cheeks. ‘That’s not true. I had dinner with you because I like you.’

‘Really? All we talked about was work.’ He opened his mouth to speak again, probably to tell her more lies about how much he liked her, even though he’d never once complimented her on how she looked. Never once gazed at her as if she meant something to him. ‘Leave it,’ she hissed. ‘We’re not even meant to be talking. Please let’s not aggravate these people. Let’s just get the tests done.’

And pray, she thought miserably as she caught sight of Ben, his body still hunched over.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Finally, finally, Kelly was told to finish what she was doing. She watched Ben's eyes fly open as he was hauled unceremoniously to his feet. It took him a second to steady himself. A second for those stunning green eyes to sharpen into focus and swing in her direction.

Are you okay? he asked her silently.

She nodded and tried to smile, though it was hard to when he looked so beaten. Not that there was anything beaten about his manner. His back had straightened, his eyes filled with a fierce determination.

'You.' The gunman signalled to Stuart. 'Stay where you are.'

'Why is he so special?' Ben asked as the pair of them were pushed into the corridor. 'Don't tell me, it's actually us who are the special ones, because we get to return to the luxurious four walls we now call home. He has to stay behind.'

Their guard grunted, not amused by Ben's brand of humour. 'Keep walking.'

'Is he in detention? Does he have lines to write? I promise not to backchat my captors. I promise to—'

'Shut it.'

Ben let out a low laugh. 'I'm wrong, it's the opposite of that, isn't it? Good old Stuart is teacher's pet. He gets to stay behind and snitch on Kelly if she's not been behaving.'

'Yeah.' The guard's eyes briefly tracked her way and he gave her a hard look before turning back to Ben. 'And you'd better hope she's not yanking our chain, pretty boy.'

Fear rippled through her at the menace in the guy's voice, but Ben simply snorted. 'I didn't realise you cared. I take it you trust the good Dr Jennings then?'

'We'll hurt his baby girl if we find he's lying to us.'

Oh God. That fear wasn't just rippling now, it was rushing through her in ice cold waves. Please God nobody knew she was repeating tests she'd already done.

Their room was unlocked and they were shoved inside.

'Still too scared to uncuff my wrists?' Ben taunted as he turned to face

the gunman. ‘Terrified I’ll overhaul you with my bare hands?’ He let out a soft chuckle. ‘Yeah, best keep me trussed up. Safer all round.’

The door was slammed shut.

‘Well, that went well.’ Like her, Ben turned to scan the room. It was the size of a small office, minus the furniture. But now with the addition of two mattresses, a pair of pillows and a couple of blankets. ‘Hey, look, they’ve left us a bed. We must be growing on them.’

For once, she found his humour, his optimism, too much. Slumping onto the floor she put her head in her hands. ‘Oh my God.’

She felt the mattress dip next to her. Then the warmth of his shoulder as it brushed against hers. ‘Not one of your better days, huh? Me neither. And I thought maths lessons were torture.’

Lifting her head, she found him grinning at her, green eyes glittering in a bloodied and bruised face.

If he could act like this was all one big adventure, it was about time she did the same. Swallowing down a couple of deep, shuddering breaths she leant back against the wall. ‘Are you okay?’

His grin became wider, a trickle of blood oozing from his split lip. ‘Yeah, I’m just dandy, thanks. How about you?’

The face might be battered but his grin still had the power to lodge in her heart. Swallowing hard, she blinked away her tears and smiled back. ‘A little scared, a tad mentally exhausted. A lot worried about you. Aside from that though, I’m pretty dandy, too, thank you.’

‘I’ve already said—’

‘I don’t have to worry about you,’ she interrupted. ‘I know.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘But whether you like it or not, I am. I can’t help it. I’m programmed that way.’

‘Then thank you. Not sure anyone’s ever worried about me before.’

So many questions lined up on her tongue, she didn’t know which to ask first. Before she could ask any of them though, footsteps sounded outside. Seconds later the door opened and a plate containing several slices of bread and a couple of chunks of cheese was thrust at them. ‘Enjoy.’

‘Bread and cheese?’ Ben shook his head. ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

The door clunked shut, followed by the sound of a key being turned in a lock. Then footsteps fading away.

‘So, Blondie, welcome to a nice meal out, Jacobs style.’

‘I’m not blonde any more.’

He levelled her a look. ‘You’ll always be Blondie to me.’

Until the next blonde woman he met, she thought miserably, glancing at the paltry offerings. ‘I’m not sure food is your forte. Perhaps when this is over we can go out for a proper meal, Bridge style.’

His hesitation lasted only a fraction of a second. ‘Sure.’

It was enough to send another bucketload of embarrassment rocking through her. How long was it going to take for the message to sink in? This was just an assignment to him. When it was over he’d move onto the next one. Probably call her Blondie, too.

In the awkward silence that followed, Kelly stared down at the plate. Though eating was the last thing she wanted to do, she tentatively reached for the bread. ‘Do you want me to feed you?’ Unlike her, Ben’s hands were still cuffed.

He laughed. ‘We can do better than that.’ He indicated towards the top pocket of his jeans. ‘Somewhere in my pocket there should be a slim pouch. If these are standard cuffs, you’ll be able to use the lock pick on the penknife to open them.’

Dropping the bread, she wriggled her hand into his pocket, acutely aware of how intimate it felt, pushing against the hard muscle of his inner thigh. As her fingers delved deeper he turned away from her, his breaths sounding strangely harsh in the quiet of the room. Suddenly his breath hitched and he shifted. But not before she’d felt the heavy heat of his arousal.

Her fingers clasped the pouch.

‘I’ve got it.’ She dangled it in front of his eyes, trying hard not to look at his crotch. ‘Sorry I had to dig around a bit.’

‘I noticed.’ His voice held a rough edge, his eyes dark and hooded.

An answering heat burst through her, pooling between her legs. ‘I know you did.’

His lips twitched. ‘I know you know I did.’

In the silence she could hear the pounding of her heart. ‘Don’t tell me, it’s just the effect of adrenaline?’

‘Something like that.’ He shuffled round so his back was facing her, along with his cuffed wrists. ‘How about you use the thing you worked so hard to find, and open these damn cuffs?’

Now his glittering green eyes weren’t looking at her, she felt bolder.

‘You turn me on, too,’ she told him softly, working to free his hands.

‘Fuck, Kelly.’

His hoarsely muttered words were nothing like the ones she wanted to hear. Shame stung her cheeks as she slid out the penknife and selected the thin, pin-like lock pick. ‘I can’t believe I said that. I keep coming on to you, don’t I? I’m supposed to be intelligent but around men I seem to turn completely stupid.’ Oh help. How was she ever going to free him with her hands trembling like this? ‘I’m sorry. You’ve made it quite plain, in a very kind way, that you’re not interested. I really hope for both our sakes that I keep my mouth shut from now on.’

‘Kelly,’ he rasped, then sighed, his huge shoulders lifting and falling. ‘This has absolutely nothing to do with how I feel about you, and everything to do with the emotionally volatile situation we’re in.’ She focussed on the cuffs, twiddling the metal pin back and forward, happy to be having this conversation with his back, not his face. ‘I’m here to protect you, and that includes not taking advantage of you.’ He shook his head. ‘Though right now I’m unlikely to be awarded Bodyguard of the Year.’

Bingo. The cuffs opened, revealing raw, bloodied, wrists. A glaring reminder that worse things were happening right now than her hurt feelings. Tenderly she ran a finger over the cuts. ‘I’ll get some water to clean them up.’ As he climbed to his feet, visibly wincing, her heart went out to him. The rest of him wasn’t in any better shape. ‘To clean *all* of you up.’

They had access to a small cloakroom adjoining their room and she grabbed at a handful of paper towels, wetting them under the sink. As she turned back to wipe him, he took them off her. ‘Thanks. I’ll take it from here.’

Reluctantly she handed the towels over. Couldn’t he see she *wanted* to clean him up? That she took pleasure in trying to help him? Clearly he didn’t even want her to touch him now. How sad that despite everything she’d gone through today, that was the thing that upset her the most.

* * *

Ben cleaned himself up as best he could. To think, he could have had Kelly washing him down, much like she’d done earlier in the lab. Stifling a groan, he shut his eyes.

You turn me on, too.

His hand clenched around the paper towel and he began to rub viciously at the blood on his shoulder, welcoming the pain as it took his mind off his thoughts. He had to be the strong one here. If he wasn't, sometime in the not too distant future, she'd hate him for it.

They ate in silence. Every now and then she'd glance at him and he'd slap on a stupid grin and pretend to be eating a juicy burger. Anything to lift her spirits and help the dry food go down. Food meant energy, and they both needed that.

'What do you think they're doing with Stuart?' she asked, washing back the bread with a mouthful of water.

'I don't know.' Of all the subjects in all the world, she had to choose that one.

'Surely you have an idea?' she persisted. 'Do you think he'll be locked up somewhere else? Oh God, you don't think—'

'They won't harm him,' he interrupted. 'They need both you and Stuart. You to deliver them the vaccine, Stuart to confirm you're doing as you're told.' He was expendable. As a soldier it was something he'd understood and learnt to accept a long time ago. Considering the perks life in the military had given him, the adventure he'd lived over the last two decades, the feeling of family he'd discovered, it was a cost he willingly accepted. He waited a beat, then decided what the hell, he had to ask. 'You still have feelings for him?'

She blinked, her eyes moving away from his and towards the clearly fascinating piece of wall beyond his shoulder. 'If you mean am I worried about him, then yes, of course I am. He's my colleague and, well, a friend.'

His mind flashed back to the sight of her with her arms around the man. She'd said there was nothing serious between them but when this was all over, would they look back and laugh over their shared experience? Would it bring them closer?

Would she cringe as she recalled kissing the man paid to protect her? Resolutely bury the memory of telling him he turned her on?

The shuffle of footsteps outside their room crashed into his dark thoughts. 'Someone's coming,' he whispered, thrusting his arms behind his back. 'Here, put the cuffs on again.' He flashed her a grin. 'And don't lose the bloody penknife.'

Kelly just managed to snap them back when the door bust open and You-can-call-me-sir walked in, flanked by Rotten Teeth and his ever-present

AK47. ‘The bodyguard and the scientist,’ You-can-call-me-sir drawled, casting his eyes over them both. ‘What an intriguing combination.’

The derisory look in the guy’s eyes made Ben’s gut clench. Funny how he could take a kicking and it didn’t mean shit, but make a snide comment about how totally unsuitable he and Kelly were together? Yeah, he was ready to tear the bastard apart with his teeth.

‘What do you want?’ Kelly asked and yes, Ben knew *that’s* what he should have been focussing on.

The pale, cold eyes swung towards her. ‘I’ve made it quite clear what I want. I want you to find me the formulation for the vaccine.’ The chill in his voice was enough to make even Ben sit up and take notice. God only knew what it was doing to Kelly.

‘I’m working on it.’ She stared the guy straight in the eye but a glance at her lap and Ben saw her hands tremble.

‘Indeed you are, but not fast enough for my liking.’ Suddenly he reached down and yanked Kelly to her feet. ‘I believe you might need a bit of extra incentive.’

‘Don’t touch her,’ Ben growled, clenching his fists so tight he drew blood. If the sonofabitch hurt her, he was dead.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. One minute Kelly was standing. The next she’d been smacked around the head and shoved to the floor.

‘You fuckers.’ The noise wrenched out of him was like something from a wounded animal. Struggling to his feet Ben jerked at the cuffs, desperate to free his hands so he could throttle the guy until his eyes popped from their sockets.

Instead all he could do was shuffle uselessly and make impotent threats.

‘Perhaps you’ll work faster tomorrow.’ As the chilling words echoed round the room the door closed with a loud clunk.

‘Christ, Kelly.’ Ben dropped to his knees, dipping his shoulders so he could push at her prone body. ‘Will you get these effing cuffs off me so I can hold you?’

He knew he’d never sounded so desperate. Some of his emotion must have filtered through to her because she pushed herself into a sitting position and reached into her sock to pull out the penknife.

‘Does it hurt?’ It was torture having to face away from her when all he wanted to do was run his hands over her face and check she was okay.

‘It stings a bit.’

The instant she freed his hands he flung his arms open and wrapped them around her. ‘Kelly, Kelly,’ he mumbled against her hair, needing the contact more than she did. When at last his heartbeat began to regulate, his blood to unfreeze, he drew back. Placing a hand on either side of her face, he scrutinised her. And almost detonated in horror as he saw the bloom of a raw red mark across her cheek. ‘Do you feel muzzy headed? Sick?’ He could put his hand up to both, just looking at her.

She shook her head, then winced. ‘No. As long as I keep my head still, I’m fine.’

Satisfied she wasn’t concussed, he went to wet some paper towels and placed them carefully against her cheek. Then he bundled her back in his arms. Probably he was holding her too tightly, but he couldn’t seem to relax and let go. Not yet. Not while he could still hear the sickening sound of a hand smacking against her cheek.

‘That’s it,’ he muttered after a while. ‘I’m never going to let those bastards touch you again.’ He drew them both down onto one of the mattresses, chucking a blanket over them. Keeping her back against his chest, he folded his arms around her. ‘Try to sleep now, Kelly. Tomorrow morning we’re getting out of here.’

It wasn’t long before she fell asleep, her breaths soft and warm against his hand as he continued to secure her firmly against him.

As for him, he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to sleep again. When he shut his eyes all he saw was her head snapping back, her body falling to the floor. While he’d stood uselessly at her side, powerless to stop it.

All the pain he’d had inflicted on him today felt as if it had been delivered to him in one single, brutal blow.

If this was love, he wanted no part of it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ben had been banking on more time to be fully certain of the routine before engineering their escape. As he watched dawn break through the small skylight in the ceiling though, he knew time was a luxury he didn't have. Hell would have to freeze over, pigs fly and Ben Jacobs get signed up to play right back for Man United before he'd watch Kelly get struck a second time.

Kelly murmured in her sleep, pushing her bottom more snugly against his groin. Sweet Jesus. Carefully he eased away. He needed to be planning the best route out of here. Not dreaming about what he wanted to do to her. Stifling a groan, he pushed himself into a sitting position.

'Ben?'

'I'm here.'

She rolled over and he grimaced as he saw the bruising on the side of her face. Gently he rubbed his thumb over the broken skin. 'You've got a beauty of a shiner coming through.'

Smiling ruefully, she pointed at him. 'I bet you look worse.'

Gingerly he ran a hand across his face. 'Nope, not taking that bet. I looked worse before we started.'

Aware he didn't have much time, he quickly outlined his plan to her. Clearly sensing his urgency, this time she didn't ask any questions.

He'd only just finished when he heard the sound of footsteps. 'We're on.'

Jumping noiselessly to his feet, he moved to stand against the wall by the door while Kelly shoved a couple of pillows under the blanket on one mattress, and lay back on the other.

The door swung open and from his position behind it, Ben heard the guard — sounded like the stocky one with the thick neck — bark at Kelly. 'Time to work.'

He imagined Kelly biting into her lip as she glanced down at the mattress next to her. 'Ben's not well,' she whispered, doing a pretty fair impression of a terrified woman. Or maybe she really was that scared. 'I'm worried. He's not moved.'

Ben crossed his fingers, hoping the guy was as thick as his neck. Must be, because he heard him stride into the room to take a better look. Instantly Ben bolted out from behind the door and lunged at him, wrapping his hands

around his throat. The struggle was minimal. In seconds the guy slumped to the floor.

Kelly gaped. 'Is he—'

'No. It was a sleeper hold. I compressed his carotids.' Ben ripped the rifle from the guy's hands and shoved it over his shoulder before dragging the body towards the wall and cuffing one of his legs to the radiator pipe.

'Come on.' He reached for her hand. 'He won't be out for long.'

Turning the opposite way to the lab, Ben led her back through the maze of corridors they'd been brought through when they'd first arrived. He'd seen a Fire Exit sign. He was sure of it.

Hadn't he?

He was starting to doubt his sanity as they turned down the third corridor until there, like the pot at the end of the rainbow, the answer to his prayers, the winning goal for Man United in the FA cup final, was a set of double doors. Locked with a giant padlock.

'Stand back.' With the rifle he'd acquired, Ben fired into the lock, smashing it open. 'They'll have heard that,' he told her as he pushed open the heavy door. 'Time to leg it.'

Once again he found himself on the run with Kelly at his side. Call him crazy, but there had been times in his past when he'd almost enjoyed playing chase with the enemy. Weaving away from them, finding ways to outsmart them. It had been heart thumping, exhilarating. Had made him feel not only alive but, for that short space of time, *superior*. He might not have outwitted anyone in the classroom, but by God he'd outwitted the enemy a time or two.

With Kelly by his side though, that exhilaration turned to flat out terror. As adrenaline surged through him, he almost dragged her through the modern industrial estate. The place was quiet because sensible people weren't up and about when dawn was only just breaking. Not daring to stop and look back, he tugged her hand, racing them across the road and down the alley behind a large glass fronted office building.

Cars. Well, at least a handful of them. Thank you, God. Within minutes he'd 'acquired' one and they were hurtling onto the main road.

'Are we safe?'

Ben glanced across at his ashen-faced passenger. She was stoically looking out of the window, her hand gripping tightly to the door handle. 'Not yet, but we will be.'

When he spotted the sign to a train station — Cambridge North — he followed it and slung the car into the car park. Immediately he headed for the payphone, putting in a reverse charge call. His burner phone had been swiped by their friends back at the lab.

‘No time to talk,’ he told a bemused Floss who answered the call, before giving him a quick rundown of what had happened.

‘You’re sure you’re not making this shit up?’

‘Tell that to my bruised and battered body. You need to get eyes out here now, before the bastards we left behind disappear into thin air. It’s on a science park close to Cambridge North train station.’

‘Fine, but forgive us for being confused. Last we heard you were taking Stuart in for questioning. Stuart the scientist, who might be knee deep in this quagmire but who has to be about as harmless as a toothless wombat. Then we don’t hear from you—’

As Floss waffled into his ear, Ben watched a train pulling into the platform. He slammed the phone down and grasped Kelly’s hand again. ‘Platform two. Get on that train.’

Pushing past a few dazed commuters, they scampered down the stairs and onto the train, collapsing on the nearest available seat.

As their lungs clawed in oxygen, Kelly glanced out of the window. ‘Where on earth are we going?’

Ben started to laugh. ‘Who the hell cares?’

* * *

They stayed on the train till the end of the line, which turned out to be King’s Lynn. Looks like they were having one heck of a tour round the middle of England. Ben managed to find another payphone outside the station.

‘The elusive Mr Jacobs,’ Floss answered again. ‘The boss is keen to talk to you.’

‘Thought he might be.’

‘Good luck,’ Floss said cheerfully before putting him through to Charles, who barked a single word at him.

‘Talk.’

After swallowing hard, Ben gave Charles a brief account of the last two days. Then took a metaphorical step back and waited for the inevitable fall

out.

‘What happened to the part where you were *certain you could handle it?*’ In the subtle emphasis of the last five words, Charles managed to effectively convey his annoyance. And make Ben feel about three inches tall.

‘Sorry, sir. I ballsed up, sir. It won’t happen again.’ He paused, before concluding it couldn’t harm, and added another ‘sir’ for good measure. As head of a civilian security company, Charles had waived all army protocol aside and insisted on being called by his first name. When Ben had rehearsed this conversation in his head on the train though, he hadn’t been able to muster a single credible excuse for this latest cock up. So he’d gone with the sucking up theory, instead.

‘Sir-ing me to death isn’t going to help the situation,’ Charles muttered.

‘No, sir.’ Wincing, Ben started to take in a deep breath, but cut it off as the smell of stale urine and fag ends drifted up his nose. Blasted payphones.

‘For Christ’s sake, Jacobs, just take her to the bloody safe house Floss mentioned and bloody stay put until I bloody tell you otherwise.’

‘Yes, umm, sir. Did you get to the lab in time, sir?’

‘Funny how the respect only comes through after the event,’ Charles muttered dryly. ‘We didn’t get there in time to catch them, but one of the guys got sight of the van number plate as they drove off. We should be able to track their location down through CCTV. Now go.’

Ben clattered the phone back onto the hook. Then stepped out of the stale piss radius, and sighed.

‘Are you in trouble?’ Kelly asked quietly.

‘No more than usual.’ He knew his attempt at a smile was woefully short of the mark. ‘He was right, though. I was reckless, and that recklessness almost cost you your life.’

Vigorously she shook her head. ‘No. We both agreed to take a risk, counting on the fact that Stuart had . . .’ she glanced away ‘. . . feelings for me. I guess now we know he doesn’t.’

‘He didn’t betray you through choice.’ The words nearly stuck in his throat. Why did she care how the jerk felt about her, when she was worth so much more?

‘I know.’ When she looked back at him, her expression was fiercely determined. ‘At least now we know this is all about money. It’s a big step forward.’ Suddenly she slammed a hand over her mouth. ‘Oh my God, we

left Stuart.'

Ben felt a twinge of guilt. The guy was intelligent, he reminded himself. He'd find a way to keep himself alive for a little longer. 'Forget Stuart. The guys are dropping a car off in about an hour, then you and I are going to another safe house.'

* * *

Kelly had forgotten how good it felt to shower and put on clean clothes. Didn't matter that they were from a drawer in the safe house and several times too big for her.

As she stood in the bathroom and towel dried her hair she looked at her face in the mirror.

And nearly recoiled.

Brown hair — how had she forgotten that? And a nasty bruise on her cheek. Experimentally she touched it. Yep, it still hurt. She looked a bedraggled, exhausted, mess.

It wasn't just outwardly she'd seen better days, either. Her eyes looked haunted. The terror of having a gun to her head, of watching Ben kicked and thumped. The punch to the ego of finding out that Stuart hadn't been interested in her at all. He'd only wanted her knowledge of the vaccine in order to save his daughter. The daughter he hadn't bothered to tell her about, because he hadn't ever intended them to have a relationship.

Only her pride had taken a knock though. Her heart, she was coming to realise, was heavily tangled up with the man on the other side of the door.

When she finally emerged from the bathroom Ben was sitting on the sofa, head back, eyes closed. Knowing he couldn't see her, she drank her fill of him. Cuts and bruises marred his face but despite them, maybe because of them, he looked potently sexy. A man in every sense of the word.

Carefully she went to sit next to him, her eyes travelling over the hard dips and curves of his powerful chest — she was now a firm fan of snug fitting T-shirts — before sweeping up to his face. She itched to smooth his hair. To touch her mouth to lips that, even at rest, had a sensuous curve to them.

Suddenly his eyes snapped open, their brilliant green gaze zeroing into hers.

'I . . .' she floundered, all bravado vanished now he was looking at her.

‘Kelly?’

I want you to kiss me. They were the words she didn’t dare say. Her expression must have given her away though, because his eyes darkened. For a few humming, thumping heartbeats, he held her gaze before slowly lowering it to her mouth. Her pulse scrambled.

He wanted her. Even she, pathetically inexperienced when it came to men, could tell that.

‘Kelly.’ He repeated her name, only this time it wasn’t a confused question. This time it was said in a husky groan that seemed to be wrenched from deep inside him.

Not giving either of them a chance to think, she threw her arms around him, clinging tight while she buried her face into his neck, inhaling his utter maleness. How to get this man to kiss her? To make love to her?

A split second later she didn’t have to wonder, because his mouth was on hers. Hot, searching, needy. He kissed her thoroughly, deeply. Long, drugging, sensuous kisses that scorched her mouth and set the rest of her body on fire. His lips were greedy but soft, and his tongue . . . oh wow, his tongue. Eagerly she pressed into him, unsure of the right moves, but absolutely sure that she needed to feel every part of his heavy, muscular body tight against her.

Slowly Ben pulled away, his breath hot and ragged against her face as he rested his forehead against hers. And damn it, she knew what he was going to say now, and she didn’t want to hear it.

‘I want you,’ she told him in a voice shaky with need.

His chest rose and fell as he took in a deep breath. ‘Kelly, honey, we’ve been here before.’

‘I know. You don’t want me in the same way.’ She jerked her head away so he couldn’t see the tears squirting down her face. Humiliation number . . . God, she’d lost count.

With another sigh he tugged her back towards him, sliding his arms around her and hugging her close. ‘You can be pretty certain that isn’t the case,’ he replied dryly, nodding down to his crotch.

‘Then why won’t you sleep with me?’

With a muffled curse, he dragged a hand through his hair. ‘Kelly, please. Don’t demean yourself like this. You’re not that sort of woman.’

‘What sort?’

‘Well, let me think.’ He made an exaggerated expression of concentration. ‘You’re twenty-nine and you’ve only slept with one man. I’m not sure what that says in your world, but in mine it doesn’t scream *woman who enjoys casual sex*. You haven’t even slept with your boyfriend, Stuart.’

‘I’ve been working too bloody hard to find someone to have casual sex with.’ Angry with him, she shoved at his chest. ‘And as for Stuart, I told you, we’d only started dating and the chemistry wasn’t there. I could die today, tomorrow and all I’ve had is one completely crappy sexual experience.’

‘I’m not going to let you die.’ His voice was almost a growl.

‘You’re going to try your best to stop that from happening, yes, but you can’t guarantee it won’t.’

‘I told you. I’ll die before I let you die,’ he replied grimly.

For some reason, that made her laugh. ‘You’ll die for me, but you won’t make love to me? Wow. That makes me feel really special.’

‘Jesus.’ She knew she was getting to him when he shifted her off him and lurched to his feet, dragging his hands across his face. ‘I won’t take advantage of you,’ he said finally, turning to look at her, his eyes like glittering emeralds. ‘Can’t you see that?’

Frustrated, embarrassed, and yes, damn it, *angry*, she jumped up from the sofa. ‘How can it be taking advantage of me, when I want it to happen?’ She drew in a shaky breath and deliberately stood in front of him. ‘It’s my body and my right to choose what I do with it. I want to give it to you.’

‘God, Kelly . . .’

* * *

Ben felt his knees buckle at her words. A man would have to be a saint to resist her, and he was no damn saint. Not by a long shot.

‘Do I have to beg?’ she asked, her huge blue eyes awash with unshed tears. ‘Because I will, you know, if I have to.’

Enough.

He screwed up his remaining arguments, bundled them up with the last of his principles, and tossed them both out of the window. No doubt a better man, a stronger man, wouldn’t have given in at that moment. He’d have kissed her chastely on the cheek and taken a very cold shower. But Ben didn’t have the strength, or the will, to fight this any more. Not when it was all he dreamt of doing when he closed his eyes.

‘You don’t have to beg.’ Taking her beautiful, bruised face in his hands, he kissed her softly, using his lips to tell her what he knew he couldn’t. That he was falling hopelessly in love with her.

Taking her by the hand, he led her towards the small bedroom. ‘It’s not what I’d have wished for you.’ His gaze fell on the basic wooden bed, the utilitarian furnishings. Jacobs the master seducer. Yeah, right.

On an impulse, he gave her a quick kiss and told her to wait.

After a dash to the kitchen he returned with two candles and some matches. It smacked more of electricity failure than seduction, but it sure as hell beat the artificial glare of the energy efficient light bulbs. After lighting the candles, he turned off the light and reached for her hand.

She gave him an amused look. ‘I didn’t have you down as a romantic.’

He stared at his makeshift attempt. ‘I’m not.’ Yet for her, he thought he could try. For her, he wanted this to be more than a coupling. More than a release, more than the act itself. For only the second time in his life, he wanted sex to mean something.

Brushing away a lock of hair from her forehead, he bent to kiss her, shaken by how much this moment meant. And by how much he desperately didn’t want to let her down. ‘I’m guessing as it’s been so long, there’s a chance this will hurt.’ His voice caught and he grasped her hand, feeling the wild scrambling of her pulse. ‘Hurting a woman isn’t something I like to do.’

‘You won’t hurt me,’ she whispered against his lips, her wide eyes full of trust. ‘Though you will annoy me if you keep thinking of me as this silly, inexperienced girl. I want you to think of me as a woman.’

The groan came from deep within his chest. Lifting her up, he placed her carefully on the bed. ‘I haven’t been able to stop thinking of you as a woman,’ he told her honestly.

Slowly, he began to remove her clothes. Removing her socks. Drawing down her tracksuit bottoms to reveal yards and yards of glorious slim leg. When it came to taking off the T-shirt that was at least three sizes too big for her, he whistled. ‘Oh boy.’

‘I look like a boy?’

‘Hell, no. No way. No.’ As his brain scrambled to find the right phrases, he caught sight of the teasing smile. The laughter in her eyes. ‘Very funny, Blondie. You’ll have to pay for that now.’

Gently, worshipfully, he placed his hands over breasts so perfect, he was

almost scared to touch them. Almost.

After tracing his fingers over the soft swells, he bent to flick his tongue across a rosy pink nipple, testing them both. When she arched her back, pushing herself further into his mouth, he had to shut his eyes and pray for the control he was in danger of losing.

‘If that’s how I’m paying, I’m happy to write a big cheque.’

He threw back his head and laughed. ‘Hell, Blondie, you’re supposed to be shy and nervous. Not wanton and demanding.’ Once again he rasped his tongue over her nipples, but this time his fingers trailed between her legs, probing and teasing.

She gasped. ‘Keep doing that and I’ll be whatever you want me to be.’

Her husky voice was going to send him spiralling out of control far too quickly. Determinedly he moved his mouth to hers, enjoying keeping her quiet for a bit while his hands kept busy between her thighs. Her enthusiastic response to his touch, her lack of hesitancy, delighted him. Perhaps her inexperience really wasn’t something she’d been deliberately cultivating, waiting for the right man. Perhaps the men she met really were so blinded by her intelligence, they forgot to see the gorgeous woman behind it.

He turned his attention back to her breasts, feeling smug when her breathing quickened. Smugger still when the combination of his fingers and his tongue became too much for her and she cried out his name, her hips rearing off the bed.

Grinning, Ben stroked her cheek, bringing her slowly back to earth. ‘Are you ready for me now?’

Cheeks flushed, eyes bright, she nodded.

He shrugged off his clothes in record time, but as he pushed his boxers down the grin slid off his face. ‘Bugger, condom.’

She looked as devastated as he felt. ‘Surely they’ll be one here?’

Bending over, he attacked the bedside drawers like a madman. Please, please, please. He’d do exactly as he was told from now on. He’d send the people who took care of the safe houses a box of chocolates every month. Just please, please, let him have this one night.

As his hands settled on a box, he nearly screamed with joy. ‘You beauty.’

A subtle cough came from the bed. ‘Shouldn’t you be saying that to me?’

He ripped the box apart with all the restraint of a hormonal teenager. ‘Now you’re an expert on sex, huh?’ God, he loved to see her smile.

Especially when it was directed straight at him, as it was now.

But as his eyes held hers, the teasing laughter died, replaced with something hotter. More raw, more powerful. His heart filled as he settled over her, a tight band around his chest, and suddenly Ben wanted to call time. To freeze the moment so it could last forever. The pair of them naked on the bed. Kelly looking into his eyes, a beautiful mixture of laughter, of desire and, God help him, something akin to adoration on her face.

‘You’ve got no idea how much I want you,’ he whispered thickly as he eased himself inside her.

She inhaled sharply.

‘Sorry.’ Shit. He had all the finesse of a raging bull. Gritting his teeth, Ben forced himself to keep still, allowing her to adjust to the feel of him.

‘No, I’m fine.’ He gazed into her eyes and was relieved to see only pleasure mirrored in there. ‘There was a small twinge but now it feels . . . nice.’

‘Nice?’ Well, hey, there went his macho pride. ‘I have to say, Blondie, I was hoping for an adjective a lot stronger than that.’

* * *

Ben looked so indignant, Kelly couldn’t help herself. She started to giggle. And if she hadn’t already been convinced that what she was doing was right, this moment would have sealed it. She might not know what the future held, but she did know, with absolute certainty, that asking this man to be her lover was the best decision she’d ever made.

Because now she knew what all the fuss was about. That first, painful, crushingly disappointing experience with Roger was no longer going to define her.

If a man like Ben could look down at her with such naked desire, such *lust*, then she had nothing to fear from the future. From now on she was going to embrace life, reach out and grab what she wanted. She wasn’t going to die a shrivelled old maid in the back of her lab.

Slowly Ben started to move inside her and the laughter died on her lips. This was a different feeling altogether. This feeling had her reaching for his back, digging her fingers into ridges of solid muscle as waves of pleasure rippled through her.

This feeling had her gasping out his name.

‘Hold on, Kelly. We’re coming to the best part.’

‘Promises, promises.’ She let out a squeal as he sank deep, his powerful body rocking into her, sending bolts of heat to her core.

‘I don’t make promises I can’t deliver on.’ His eyes burned into hers as his body began to move, slowly thrusting into her.

‘Ben, oh, wow.’ Her voice failed as the feeling became stronger, more and more intense.

‘Still feel *nice*?’

It was a struggle to speak. ‘Better than nice.’

‘You think of any stronger words,’ he grunted, angling his hips, ‘you just let me know.’

‘Oh my God.’ He felt even deeper now, and yet it still wasn’t deep enough. Her hands flew to his buttocks, clutching, pulling him further into her. Desperate for every inch of him as his thrusts picked up pace. Oh, she was going to . . .

She erupted on a scream of ecstasy, arching her back, digging her fingers into him.

‘I’m right behind you,’ he murmured, thrusting several more times before crying out her name as he came.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ben knew he had to move. Kelly was small. Slender. Being covered by nearly two hundred pounds of hulking male had to be squashing the hell out of her. She'd drained him, though. Sucked all the damn strength out of him so he couldn't do anything but lie on her like a dead weight.

Even his bruises didn't hurt any more. Sex with Kelly . . . off the charts. Even better than he'd imagined, and his imagination had been pretty damn hot. He only hoped she'd enjoyed it as much as he had, because now he'd proved what an unprincipled bastard he was, he figured it wouldn't hurt to do this again.

And again.

Digging deep for the last vestiges of his strength, he rolled off her and lay on his back, pulling her against him. A warm rush of contentment flooded him when her head rested on his chest. 'So, what do you reckon?' he asked, playing with the fine strands of her hair that fell across his chest. '*It was nice but I don't want to do it again, thanks.*' He felt her lips twitch against his skin. 'Or, maybe. *It was better than nice and I'll give it another go some time, but not with you?*' Her head shook, tickling his chest. 'Did I aim too high? Should I have started with *what are you still doing in my bed, get out you bastard?*'

Laughter burst from her, fanning his sensitised skin. 'I'm going with *it was utterly fantastic and I want to do it again, right now.*'

It was with no small amount of relief that he kissed the top of her head. 'Sounds good, though your expectations of the male recovery rate are a mite high. I need a few minutes to recharge.'

She wriggled, lush round breasts squashing against his chest. Maybe he wouldn't need those few minutes after all.

'I love your body,' she told him softly, leaning over to kiss his nipple.

Pleasure shot through him. 'Hey, don't pinch my lines.'

'I mean it. Look at the way your muscles ripple when you move. So powerful, so sexy. Even the scratches and bruises look good on you.' She brushed her lips over his chest, kissing him, licking him then moving on. Moving down. His breath caught in his throat.

'As a scientist, I think I really need some time to study the male form in

all its true glory,' she whispered as her hair tickled his stomach.

He let out a strangled laugh. 'Speaking of true glory. I think I underestimated my powers of recovery.'

She smirked and as she reached down to circle him with her hand, he let out a heartfelt groan of appreciation.

'Show me what to do, Ben. How to pleasure you.'

Saints alive. That wasn't something he was asked every day. 'You feel like heaven, Blondie. There's nothing I can tell you that you don't already know, instinctively.'

'Really?'

With a hand on either side of her face, he hauled her up to his mouth. 'Really.'

* * *

Kelly lay back on the bed, feeling boneless but too wired to sleep.

She turned to find Ben also awake, his eyes staring up at the ceiling. 'Is it always like this?'

He rolled over to face her and her heart jumped. Sexy didn't do him justice. He was more than that. More potent, more male, more vibrant. 'Is what always like what?'

'Making love,' she answered quietly. 'Was my first time just a blip? Is this how it always feels?'

His eyes lowered and for a moment he said nothing, just gently stroked a hand down her arm. 'If you have the right combination of people, then yes,' he said after a while.

'Are we the right combination?'

His hand paused in mid stroke. Exhaling deeply, he turned onto his back. 'We are for sex, yes.'

Ouch. 'Is that all?'

'You know it is.' He rubbed a hand restlessly over his face, making a scratching noise as it reached his chin. 'In a day or two this will be over. There's bound to be evidence left at the lab which will help I.D. the guys behind this, plus we have a number plate. When they're safely behind bars, you'll be free to go back to your life.'

'And you to yours.'

'Newsflash, Blondie. This is my life.'

It was so different to hers, it was hard to imagine it. Except for a short while, she was living it with him. ‘Do you know what your next assignment will be?’

‘Not a clue.’

‘Do you get a say?’

‘I’m not fussed what I do, where I go. As long as I’m not stuck at a desk, I’m happy.’ He turned his head and searched out her eyes. ‘I’m doing something I enjoy, Kelly. Something I’m usually pretty damn good at.’ He let out a low laugh. ‘Though I might scrub this venture from my CV.’

She tried to absorb both what he was saying, and what he wasn’t. ‘You’re warning me off, aren’t you?’ She realised with a sick feeling. ‘Telling me you’ve no place in your life for a relationship.’

He had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘Thought I was being subtle.’

‘As a brick.’ The heady joy of the last few hours leached out of her, leaving her hollow, and unconsciously she edged away from him. She wasn’t naïve enough to think that now he’d slept with her, he’d started to fall for her. But still, the knowledge that this time with him was going to be so short, cut deeply. How sad that already she’d begun to imagine a future where some of her days weren’t spent working. They were spent laughing, with a very special man by her side.

‘Kelly.’ He reached to pull her back towards him. ‘It doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy the time we have left.’ He gave her a wry smile. ‘Powdered egg and masked gunmen aside.’

With a deep sigh she burrowed into his chest. He was the man who’d saved her life. The first man to really make love to her. And if she spent much longer with him, he’d be her first love, too.

Whatever happened in the future, Ben Jacobs would always be a huge part of her.

* * *

The following morning Ben forced himself up and into his jeans before Kelly woke up. If he stayed in bed with her any longer, he’d make love to her again. It might be what his body ached to do, but it sure as hell wasn’t wise. He knew what last night had really been about for her. A primitive need to reaffirm life. To remind her that, though she’d stared death in the face, she’d stuck two fingers up at it.

He'd seen it before. To his shame, he'd grasped that opportunity when it had been offered, too. Another woman who, for a short while, had imagined herself a little in love with the guy hired to protect her. A guy she ordinarily wouldn't have looked at twice.

He'd come out of the whole sorry mess emotionally battered. This time round he was wiser; he knew the dangers. The sooner Kelly gained some distance from him, some perspective, the better.

His heart tugged as he glanced at the woman fast asleep in the bed, her hair a mess on the pillow, her body hogging more than her share of the bed. Yeah, he might be wiser, but he needed that distance, too.

Dragging his bruised, aching body into the kitchen, he filled the kettle. While he was waiting for it to boil, he pulled the secure radio out of the drawer and contacted base. Please God they'd found the bastards by now. His heart and his mind couldn't take much more of this.

When he was immediately patched through to Charles, he felt a spike of worry. That spike turned into a sledgehammer when he listened to what Charles had to say.

Kelly chose that moment to wander in. After one look at him, her eyes widened in fear.

So much for his poker face.

'Ben?'

'Your parents have been kidnapped.' In his experience, it was better to get the bad news out quickly, in one straight hit.

He watched in anguish as her face drained of colour. As her legs buckled. His heart hurting, he lunged for her, holding her against his chest. 'I'm so sorry,' he murmured. 'So very sorry.'

'How? I thought they were being guarded.' She raised her head, her face ravaged, her eyes tormented.

'They were.' He hesitated a fraction. 'The men guarding them were shot.'

'Oh God.' She shut her eyes. 'Are they—'

'No,' he cut in quickly. 'They were wearing bulletproof vests. I suspect their pride hurts more than their injuries.'

For a moment she clung to him, but then suddenly she pushed away and started to pace. 'You told me these men were going to be caught.'

'They will be.'

‘But when? I’ve been kidnapped. Now my parents.’ A sob broke out from her and she glared at him. ‘This isn’t supposed to happen.’ As quick as a flash anger replaced the despair and she marched up to him, shoving at his chest with her fists. ‘You told me in a day or two this would all be over.’

‘It will be.’ Pain jolted through him as she hit a bruised rib, but it was nothing to the agony of seeing her so distraught. ‘This is a temporary setback.’

‘A *setback*?’ She stared at him incredulously. ‘My parents have been kidnapped and you call it a setback? Oh my God.’ With a strangled cry she turned her back on him and walked stiffly out of the kitchen. He watched helplessly as she opened the door to the bedroom and slammed it behind her.

Wretchedly he stared at the closed door. How he ached to comfort her, but there was little hope of that. He knew exactly why she’d pushed him away. Back at the lab he’d had a chance to take out these bastards, yet he hadn’t even considered it, far too intent on getting Kelly to safety to think of other options. If he hadn’t been so wrapped up in her . . .

He balled his hands into fists. Damn his stupidity. He knew better than to get emotionally involved with someone he was meant to be protecting. It led to mistakes. And mistakes cost lives.

Struggling to control his self-directed anger, he stalked to the bedroom and knocked on the door. ‘Can I come in?’

‘I’m hardly in a position to stop you.’

Okay then. He found her sitting on the bed, her back towards him, staring at the opposite wall. ‘We know who’s after you.’ When she didn’t turn, he ploughed on. ‘When the team arrived at the lab, the bastards had vanished, along with Stuart. But the police sent a forensic team down there and they found enough traces of DNA to identify them. The leader is Jon Sullivan, a known mercenary who’s kidnapped for money before, though he usually picks a more traditional victim. Daughter of a business tycoon. Heir to a throne, that sort of thing.’ Still she didn’t budge. Exhaling in frustration, Ben moved a few steps further into the room. ‘That wall must be mighty interesting.’

‘It beats the alternative.’

Despite the dig, he almost smiled. Even angry, she was classy. ‘Fair enough. You keep staring at the wall, I’ll keep talking. Sullivan must have decided he could pray on the fears of the smallpox virus being weaponised to

feather his nest. The others are just thugs he hired.'

A shudder ran through her and Ben's arms twitched, desperate to hold her. *She'll slap you round the face.*

Reluctantly he remained where he was. 'We also know where they're keeping your parents, Kelly,' he told her quietly. 'The team managed to track down the van and while they were staking it out, they saw a man and woman being . . .' he wracked his brains for a word that wasn't hauled, or shoved ' . . . transferred into it.'

'So they just watched, while my parents were manhandled?'

Damn. 'There was only one guy on stakeout. He couldn't risk approaching them alone.' Ben didn't add the obvious, that doing so would have endangered her parents lives. 'We'll get them out.'

Finally she turned, tears streaming down her face. 'How?'

That was the million-dollar question. 'They've asked for you, in exchange.'

She nodded, as if he'd asked her to pass the butter. 'Fine. If it means my parents are released safely, I'll do whatever they want.'

He almost choked. 'No bloody way.' Her mouth opened — to yell at him, if he read her expression correctly — so he held up his hand. 'A tactical team has been set up. Between Panther, the army and the police, we'll find a way to rescue your parents without involving you.' He almost added trust me, but he'd lost the right to ask that.

'I want my parents released,' she replied flatly. 'I don't care how it's done. Just make sure it happens.'

The lack of warmth in her tone, the distance, sliced through him, but he told himself he'd better get used to it. This was how their relationship needed to be. 'Fine.' He made his voice equally dispassionate. 'Let's get going.'

Chapter Twenty-Five

The journey to the makeshift headquarters where the tactical team had congregated — somewhere outside Stevenage — was a silent one. Kelly was too distraught to bother with conversation. While she and Ben had been romping around in bed, her parents had been kidnapped. Because of *her*.

‘This is it.’ Ben drove into the car park of a seventies-looking office building.

‘Why here?’ It was the first time she’d spoken since they’d left the safe house.

‘We’ve traced the van to the place opposite.’ He nodded to a red brick building with boarded windows and peeling paintwork.

‘The van they could have abandoned.’

He gave her a small, tight smile. ‘Yes, they could have just left it there, but why do that? They have no clue we’re on to them. No reason to suspect that we spotted them leaving the trading estate. They’d disabled the CCTV trained on the car park, so they think they’re in the clear.’ He slid her a glance. ‘Where’s your sense of optimism?’

She’d had some once. Before the scares she’d tried to dismiss as coincidences had turned out to be real. Before she’d been captured and held at gunpoint. Before she’d fallen for a guy who wasn’t interested in more than a few nights in her bed. And before her parents had been kidnapped because of her.

She could sense Ben staring at her, tension lining his face, worry filling his eyes, but she couldn’t deal with him right now. She was too full of her own guilt-riddled anguish.

They were greeted by a tall, slender man in cargo pants and green T-shirt. ‘It’s a bloody SNAFU, as our American pals would say.’

Ben gave the man a sharp look, shaking his head before glancing at Kelly. As the realisation of who she was began to hit home, the man flushed.

‘Don’t mind Floss,’ Ben said dryly. ‘He can’t go anywhere without shoving his size eleven’s right in it.’

‘Damn, I just hate it when the big guy’s right.’ The man called Floss held out his hand. ‘Sorry, Kelly. We’ll have your parents out in no time, don’t you worry.’ He indicated for them to follow, and led them to a vacant meeting

room with a television, coffee machine and a pair of large black sofas. ‘It’s not the Ritz, but there are worse places you could wait, I guess.’ He gave her a final sheepish smile before turning back to Ben and waggling his eyebrows up and down in a very unsubtle gesture.

Ben narrowed his eyes and mimicked slicing his throat. ‘Go off and annoy someone else.’

‘Are you sure? I could hang around—’

‘I’m sure,’ Ben cut in.

Floss stood his ground for a second and Kelly tried, and failed, to read the unspoken messages humming between them. Then Floss retreated and closed the door behind him.

‘What’s a SNAFU?’

Ben waited until she’d sat down before perching on the arm of the sofa. At the opposite end to her. ‘It’s US military jargon. Nothing you have to worry about.’

His dismissive tone fired her temper — and by God, she was grateful for the excuse to release some of the rage burning inside her. ‘Don’t treat me like some ditzy female,’ she snapped angrily. ‘Just because I haven’t objected to you calling me honey and Blondie, doesn’t mean you get to treat me as anything other than an equal.’ Hurt flashed through his eyes but she ignored it, her emotions too jumbled to cope with their non-relationship right now. ‘My parents are being held by a terrorist. I’ve got the right to know what’s being said about their situation.’

His jaw tensed. ‘SNAFU is slang for a cock-up.’ He leant forward, resting his arms on his thighs and avoiding her eyes. ‘You know, situation normal, all fucked up.’

‘I see.’ She let the anger bubble, relieved to channel her emotions into something other than tears. ‘It’s reassuring to have Britain’s finest . . . what is Panther again? A security agency? Well, it’s reassuring to hear you refer to my parents’ situation so eloquently.’

This time, along with the clenched jaw, he flinched. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘How marvellous. That’s just made everything all right then.’

He let out a small, humourless laugh. ‘Fuck.’ He squeezed the bridge of his nose with his finger and thumb.

She stared at him, desperate to cling to her anger. She didn’t want to notice the tired lines etched across his face. The defeated slump of his usually

proud shoulders.

But she did, and it left her feeling cold, mean and empty. 'It's me who's sorry. I shouldn't be taking this out on you.'

'Maybe you should.' He turned to her, his expression bleak. 'I should have finished this at the lab. I had a bloody gun, for Christ's sake. I could have taken them out, but I didn't.'

'Because you were focussed on getting me out alive. You weren't to know what they were going to do afterwards.'

He shot to his feet, over six feet of powerful, edgy male. 'They were hardly going to tidy up and wait for the police, were they? I made a mistake. One your parents are now paying for.' Suddenly he was hunkering down in front of her, green eyes blazing with intent. 'I'm going to make things right, Kelly. I know I don't deserve your trust, but I am going to put an end to all this.'

Shame washed through her and her heart felt unbearably heavy. She knew he set himself impossibly high standards, yet she'd let him think she blamed him for what had happened to her parents.

I do trust you. I'm falling in love with you.

Before she could say the words, the door opened.

Instantly Ben jumped back to his full height, nodding towards the tall, dark haired man striding confidently into the room.

'Kelly, this is Major Charles Lightfoot.'

Kelly shook the man's outstretched hand. Like Ben, Charles stood straight and proud.

'I've been appraised of the situation, Dr Bridge, and I want to reassure you that we will get your parents out alive.' He nodded over to Ben. 'Briefing in D1.'

With that he left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

'He's usually more charming than that.' Ben grunted. 'At least to the ladies. His underlings, not so much.'

'I expect he has other things on his mind.' Kelly made to stand, but Ben put a hand on her arm and pushed her none too gently back onto the sofa.

'The briefing is for me and the team. We need you to stay here.'

'No way.' The blessed anger was back. Evading his hand, she leapt to her feet. 'This involves me. They're my parents, for goodness' sake. I'm the ransom. How can you expect me to just sit here and watch TV while you

discuss us?’

‘No.’ His voice was quiet but very final. ‘You’re way too close to this. It won’t help to have you listening in. The best thing you can do right now is stay here and rest.’

‘Rest? You think I can calmly sit here and, what, just fall asleep?’

For the first time today, a flare of amusement touched his eyes. ‘Knowing you, probably not.’

But it was clear, from the stubborn set of his jaw, the way he stood with his arms crossed over his chest, that he wasn’t going to give in. ‘I don’t like this. I feel I’m being kept in the dark.’

‘I hear you, but this isn’t about bugs and Petri dishes. Some of the things we’ll need to discuss . . .’ he thrust a hand through his hair and moved towards the door ‘. . . you’re better not knowing.’

‘Because you see me as a wimpy female who needs sheltering from the truth?’

‘There’s nothing wimpy about you, Blon — Kelly.’ He gave her a sad smile. ‘Except maybe your biceps. They could do with a bit of work.’

She let out a curse of frustration. ‘I meant it. I want to know what’s going on. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.’

‘I know you can.’ His eyes met hers and, though there was a whole raft of emotions she couldn’t get a handle on, she could read his sincerity. ‘I promise I’ll come back after the meeting and tell you everything you need to know.’

She guessed that was as good as she was going to get. ‘Okay.’ He turned to leave but she hadn’t finished. ‘Have you been in this situation before? Rescuing people who’ve been kidnapped, I mean.’

He gave her a small smile, eyes calm and his manner oozing that same confidence she’d seen when he was facing danger. ‘I have. We all have. This isn’t our first rodeo. We know what we’re doing.’

She didn’t know what to say in reply. All this was totally outside her sphere of experience. Maybe Ben was right. The less she knew, the better.

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can,’ he told her, before slipping out of the door.

* * *

It was over an hour later when Ben strode back up the corridor to find Kelly. Tense was the most pc word he could come up with to describe the

meeting. A few other words circled his mind though, far more descriptive and a bloody sight more accurate. At least everybody was acutely aware of their responsibilities now. Of course they were also painfully aware of all the glaring mistakes he'd made during the entire mission.

Protect the scientist had somehow become *allow her to be kidnapped, twice. Allow her parents to be kidnapped.*

Allow his heart to become entangled.

Pretty much a step-by-step guide in how not to perform protection duty.

At least now they had a chance to end it.

He found Kelly lying flat out on the sofa, her head resting on her arm. To a casual observer she looked like she was watching television. Yeah, sure.

'Hey.'

She snapped her head round and yes, her face was glistening with tears. He'd like to bet she'd been crying off and on for the last hour. Off when someone came to check up on her. On when she was alone.

She sat up, hugging her knees. 'What's happening?'

'The negotiation team have agreed a time for the swop. Just over three hours.'

'Good.'

One word, said quietly, but with so much bravery he had a hard time not stalking over, yanking her against him and squeezing the living daylights out of her. This time yesterday he might have done that, but now there was an awkwardness between them. Something he'd helped put there. He had to hand it to himself, he sure had a way with women.

'Do I need to be briefed beforehand?'

She looked so earnest, it took him a while to realise what was going on in her huge brain. 'Jeez, Blo — Kelly,' he amended belatedly, her words from earlier coming back to haunt him. *Just because I haven't objected to you calling me honey and Blondie, doesn't mean you get to treat me as anything other than an equal.* Christ, to think she believed he thought she was less than him, when he'd never met a person he was more in awe of. 'We're not doing the swop.'

'But that's what they want.'

His cool started to slip, not helped by the picture of her at the mercy of those assholes. 'You really think I'd put your life in danger like that? Again? You've got to be out of your frigging mind.'

Her spine stiffened. ‘It’s my life, my choice. I’m not prepared to risk the lives of my parents.’

‘And I’m not prepared to risk yours,’ he countered bluntly. ‘So live with it.’

Instantly she was on her feet, hands on hips, blue eyes flashing at him. ‘What gives you the right to stand there and make decisions about me and my family?’

He opened his mouth to yell *loving you gives me that right*, but shut it fast. He needed to remove the emotion from their relationship, not bloody complicate it. ‘You’re too close to the situation to make a rational decision,’ he told her instead. ‘We’re not.’

‘I love them, Ben. I’d do anything for them. Can’t you understand that?’

Wearily he shook his head, moving away from her before his control snapped and he did what he really wanted to do. Kiss her — preferably for the next three hours to take both their minds off what was coming next. ‘No,’ he admitted. ‘I didn’t have that sort of relationship with my parents.’

‘What relationship *did* you have?’

He stopped his pacing and let out a small laugh. ‘Whoa, hold it there. We’re not getting into a conversation about my childhood. If it’s distraction you’re looking for, I can think of far more interesting ways of passing the time.’

‘Can’t you be serious for once?’

‘I was.’ He might be thinking with the wrong part of his anatomy again, but a choice of kissing her or talking about his past, was no choice.

‘You really want your boss to come in and see you making out with your client?’

He reeled, the sting of her *client* comment burning all the way through to his bones. It didn’t matter that she was merely repeating what he’d been trying to tell her. Before he’d blown the whole bodyguard-client concept apart by sleeping with her.

Sighing heavily, he perched on the edge of the sofa. ‘Okay. If telling you about my childhood works as a distraction, so be it. But know that in my top ten list of ways we could pass the time, talking about this shit comes in at around the million and seventy-two mark. At a million and seventy-one is wiping the toilet clean with my tongue.’

He received a small smile and a single nod of her head. Translation, *get*

on with it, Jacobs.

He drew in a breath and wondered where the hell to start. ‘My dad, well, genetically I must have had one, but I never knew him. I had a stepdad from the age of five, but I use the dad term loosely.’ He huffed out a breath, hating talking about this crap. He’d put it behind him, moved onwards and upwards. Didn’t need the reminder of it all now. Especially didn’t any pity. ‘Look, he didn’t rate me much, and wasn’t shy about letting me know it. I was a complication he didn’t need. They left me when I was eight.’

‘What do you mean, left you? Died? Kidnapped?’

He snorted out a laugh. ‘If you’re going to fire questions at me, this is going to be a long afternoon.’

‘If you provide sufficient details, and I mean specifics rather than bland generalisations, I won’t need to ask the questions.’

Raising his eyes briefly to the ceiling he shifted forward, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘Fair enough. I know better than to argue with someone like you.’

Her expression sharpened. ‘What do you mean, like me?’

‘Jesus, nothing. Just that you’re too clever for me.’

It was the wrong thing to say. ‘Stop thinking like that,’ she told him tightly. ‘We have different skillsets, that’s all.’

The fierce look in her eyes sent a rush of warmth settling over his heart. ‘Okay.’

Her fine features softened. ‘I’m glad we’ve got that straight. You were telling me why your mum and stepdad left you.’

Oh joy, so he was. ‘To this day I don’t really know what finally triggered it. One day I woke up and they were gone.’ He stared down at the hands he’d clasped loosely on his thighs. It was a whole lot easier to talk about this when he wasn’t looking at her. ‘I’d got into trouble at school the day before and Frank, that’s my stepdad, he tore into me. Maybe that was the final straw for Mum. She was fed up with being stuck in the middle of us. And it wasn’t like she’d planned to have a child.’ He’d been told he was an accident often enough. Had heard Frank moan about being saddled with a kid not being part of the bargain. ‘Mum was an addict, dependant on Frank for everything. Money, her fix. Maybe he forced her hand. All I know is the note Mum left said she wouldn’t be coming back. I was to go to school and ask the teachers to find me a new family.’

‘Good God.’

He glanced up, smiling at her cuss, and was shocked to find her looking upset. ‘Hey, don’t waste your sympathy. This happened nearly thirty years ago. I’m more than happy to talk about something else though, if you’d rather.’

‘No, I want to hear what happened next. Please tell me a nice family adopted you?’

‘You like a story with a happy ending, huh?’

‘Doesn’t everyone?’

‘Depends whether you like your story to mirror real life, or take you off to fantasy world. This was real life and frankly I didn’t deserve a nice family, because I wasn’t particularly nice myself. I had a bad attitude, angry at everything and everyone.’

‘And why wouldn’t you be, after the way you’d been treated?’

He grinned at her indignant tone. ‘Where were you when I needed someone to stick up for me?’

She blushed, eyes briefly dipping down before returning to his. ‘I was being brought up in the cushioned security of a loving family.’

‘I’m glad.’ A ball of emotion raced into his throat as she held his gaze, her eyes swimming with compassion. ‘Don’t you go feeling sorry for me,’ he said roughly. ‘I did okay. Between foster parents and the social services, I always had a place to sleep and clothes on my back.’

‘But nobody to love you.’

He shrugged, avoiding her eyes. ‘I taught myself not to mind. Convinced myself that, actually, I was the lucky one. Nobody cared whether I went to school or not. Nobody shouted at me when I got bad grades. My classmates had to study. I got to bunk off and play with the big boys.’

‘Dare I ask what you got up to?’

‘This and that.’ They’d been wild times and he’d done plenty of things he was ashamed of. ‘In my middle teens I was part of a gang years older than me, and involved in all sorts of stuff I shouldn’t have been. The school tried to rein me in, foster parents tried. By then I was with Walter and Julie, and Walter was the nearest I’d come to a father figure.’ He smirked, remembering. ‘They fostered so many kids, I think it got too much for Walter. He called all the boys mates, the girls sugar or honey. Even Julie was sweetheart. It’s probably where I got it from.’

Her expression turned tender, soft. ‘He sounds like a good man.’

‘He was. All the kids loved him, but though I respected what he was trying to tell me, I was too headstrong to change my ways.’

‘Is that why you chose the army? Because it would give you the discipline you lacked?’

The gentle understanding in her voice caused a band around his chest to tighten. ‘You’ve given me credit for a self-awareness I didn’t have. I joined because there wasn’t exactly a wealth of other opportunities for a guy like me.’ He lifted his eyes to hers, determined she’d see him for what he was. ‘I left school with nothing, Kelly. Didn’t even bother to take the bloody exams.’

‘It doesn’t make you thick, Ben,’ she told him firmly.

‘Maybe not, but it did severely cut down my options.’ He shifted back, rubbing at the back of his neck, feeling unbalanced. Awkward. This conversation was headed down an avenue he couldn’t discuss with anyone, let alone her. How could a science genius understand how much it had rankled when younger, less experienced men had automatically become officers over him? Given the right to order him around because they’d gone to university.

Feeling restless he stood, stretching out his legs. He was making for the coffee machine when her question stopped him in his tracks.

‘Would you be doing anything different, if you’d done those exams?’

He filtered back through the last twenty years. He loved what he did. Fact. Promotions aside, the only part he’d change was when the bullet bugged his shoulder, pushing him out of the Special Forces. Still, being with Panther wasn’t a bad second home. ‘No, I guess I wouldn’t.’

Truth was, his lack of education wasn’t stopping him from doing the job he loved.

What it did stop him from doing, was feeling he could hold his head up high with Kelly. A woman he hadn’t planned to fall for, but stupidly, moronically, had done.

A woman he had no right to see after this night was over.

* * *

Kelly’s brain was bursting with questions. Top of the list — how could a mother leave her son? Choose a man over her own child? And sure, she could bet Ben had been a handful, but that smile of his. It looked so boyish even

now, she could easily imagine him using it to devastating effect as an eight-year-old.

Ben was on his feet though, his back to her as he fiddled with the drinks machine.

‘Do you want a coffee? Tea?’

His intention couldn’t have been clearer. He was putting a stop to any further personal conversation.

‘Tea, thank you.’ And just like that, reality came crashing back. She wasn’t having a fascinating conversation with a fiercely attractive man who’d finally started to open up. She was waiting uselessly while other people talked about rescuing her parents, who were being held against their will. ‘What’s the plan for tonight? You promised you’d tell me.’

He handed her the tea and this time sat on the edge of the coffee table, facing her. ‘Sullivan thinks we don’t know where he is.’

‘You don’t. You only think you do.’

‘We saw them being transferred to the same van parked outside the building, Kelly. We’ve used thermal imaging to confirm. They’re definitely in there. Sullivan wants to do the exchange at seven. Said he’ll call with details of where and how, an hour before.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘That’s in ninety minutes. But in thirty minutes, we’re going in.’

‘They’ll shoot my parents.’ Agitated, Kelly made to stand but Ben put a hand on her knee, easing her down.

‘They won’t.’ He took hold of her hand and squeezed it. ‘You’ve got Special Forces and ex Special Forces working together. All of us trained to handle these types of situations. We’ve been in similar scenarios, run through so many of them in practice, it’s almost second nature to us.’

‘You’ve not done it with my parents as hostages.’ She tried to ignore the prick at the back of her eyes. She wasn’t going to cry.

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘But we have done it with someone else’s mum, dad, brother, daughter.’

Inhaling a jerky breath, she stared down at their entwined hands. Hers slender and pale, his large and tanned. Strong and capable. ‘You make it sound like you’re going to be part of this.’

‘I am. Your parents know me, which is going to be a help when a man in a mask runs up to them after an explosion, telling them to run.’ He gave her a smile she knew was designed to reassure. ‘Plus, the more of us against them,

the better the chance of success. And we will succeed. I promise.'

'You don't make promises you can't deliver on.'

Gently he touched a hand to her cheek. 'Exactly, Blondie.' His eyes slammed shut and exhaled roughly. 'Sorry. Can't seem to stop using the term.'

Tears welled as emotion slammed through her. 'I don't want you to stop using it. I just wanted you to treat me as an equal.'

He shook his head. 'Can't do that. You're better than me in every way.'

Before she had a chance to disagree with him, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kelly stood and watched from the sidelines as the team gathered for their final briefing. She'd never been so nervous in her life. These men, carrying respirators and lethal looking guns, were responsible for making sure her parents came back alive. One glance at their grim, resolute faces and she didn't doubt their resolve.

Beside her Floss, who had obviously been assigned to look after her, smiled. 'I know what you're thinking. Ugly buggers, every one of them. But I can tell you this. They make a cracking assault team.'

At that moment Ben looked up and gave her a flash of his *don't worry, I've got this*, smile. She'd seen it many times over the last week and it always helped to calm her. Taking a deep breath, she smiled back, trying not to let him see how scared she felt, how jumpy and utterly useless. Before today she'd felt part of things, even if it was insisting on finding a lab, or working against her will while Ben was beaten up. Now she was a bystander. Unable to do anything but sit and pray as the assault team prepared to take up their positions surrounding the building opposite.

They turned to move and Kelly kept her eyes trained on Ben, willing him to look her way. He must have sensed the weight of her gaze because he whispered something to the man to his left and strode over.

Resolve was stamped across his ruggedly handsome face. Confidence ran through his tall, strong body. Calm pooled in his unwavering green eyes.

Her heart faltered, then thumped hard against her ribs. 'Ben.' She trailed off, swallowing deeply.

'We'll bring them back,' he told her gruffly.

Her eyes filled with tears. 'And yourself,' she whispered. 'Make sure you come back, too.'

His cocky grin appeared, tearing at her heart. 'I always do, Blondie,' he said softly, briefly cupping her face. 'I always do.'

* * *

Ben glanced first to his right, then to his left. They were all in position, ready to go the moment they received the signal. His fingers tightened on the stun grenade. They would do this the traditional way, with a flash bang. Designed to create a blinding flash of light and one hell of a lot of noise, its

aim was to distract the enemy. He was banking on the grenade giving him long enough to grab Kelly's parents — thermal imaging had revealed they were being held in a room to the right — and rush them to safety. The rest of the team would take out the kidnappers.

At least that was the plan.

The signal came. No time to wonder now if it was going to work. Only to trust in the men around him. Donning his goggles and respirator, he released the grenade.

Bang.

Didn't matter how many times he'd done this, the impact always gave him a massive jolt. Still, he'd bet his paltry life savings it would make Sullivan and his crew shit themselves. As the explosion burst around him, Ben charged through the smoke and tear gas, heading towards the room on the right.

He exhaled in relief as he saw the two hunched figures sitting on the floor, shackled back to back. They looked startled, scared, confused. Hastily he shoved up his respirator so they could see his face, and immediately their eyes glazed with relief. Within seconds he'd torn off their gags and freed their arms and legs. After shoving a respirator on each of their heads, he pushed them towards the exit. They caught on quick, not stopping to ask stupid questions but running for the opening at a pace that surprised him. It wasn't hard to see where Kelly got her smart genes.

A crack of gunfire echoed behind them and for a split second they froze. Ben, running right behind them, hustled them forwards. 'Run to the truck,' he shouted, pointing to where a huddle of people waited for them. The medics must have spied them because they picked up their stretchers and ran towards them.

Satisfied Kelly's parents were safe, Ben headed back into the derelict building.

* * *

At the sight of her mum and dad being brought in, Kelly almost fainted on the spot. Clutching at the back of a chair for support, she took a moment to reassure herself they really were both in one piece before bursting towards them.

'Are you okay?' she croaked, inspecting and hugging each of them in

turn.

‘Yes, yes,’ her father replied, dismissing her concerns and running his hand over her face, doing his own inspection. Wincing at the bruise she knew was still on her cheek. ‘What about you? We’ve been so worried.’

‘I’m fine.’ She was half laughing, half crying. ‘And I don’t know why you were so worried. You paid someone to look after me, remember?’ She scanned behind them. ‘Where’s Ben?’

‘He took us outside and then went back in.’

‘Oh God.’ She slumped onto the nearest chair. It wasn’t over. Her parents were safe, but Ben wasn’t. Was this nightmare ever going to end?

‘Kelly?’ Her father clutched at her in alarm but she waved him away.

‘Don’t worry. I just . . . I just . . .’ She realised she couldn’t tell them. They’d judge, put their own spin on the situation. Make her feel stupid, and Ben into some monster for taking advantage of her. ‘I’m just so relieved you’re both here,’ she said finally. It was the truth, just not the whole truth.

* * *

Leaping off the wall at the back of the warehouse, Ben was also wondering if this was ever going to end. They’d caught two of the men, but not the ringleader. Not Sullivan. In true rat style, he’d deserted the sinking ship and scurried off.

Landing with a thump, Ben set off after him, hauling his respirator into a hedge, along with his Kevlar vest. He didn’t need the added weight. Then again . . . his hands clutched the gat. Some weight, he was happy to put up with, because even if it was the last thing he did, he was going to bring that bastard down. Kelly wouldn’t have to live with the threat of kidnap any longer. Not if there was a breath left in his body. And the way his lungs were burning, that might come sooner rather than later. Sullivan was frighteningly quick.

It meant he’d have to be faster. Gritting his teeth, pumping his legs, Ben found another gear.

Slowly the gap between them closed. As if aware of it, Sullivan suddenly swung round and reached for his gun. Almost instantaneously, Ben did the same.

Both men fired.

* * *

Kelly was out of her mind with worry. Where the heck was Ben?

‘Dr Bridge?’

She spun round to see the man she’d met earlier, Ben’s boss. What was his name? ‘Major Lighthouse?’

He smiled. ‘Actually it’s Lightfoot, but I answer to most things. I’d prefer you call me Charles, though.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ The brown eyes that stared back at her were surprisingly warm, considering she’d just got his name wrong. ‘Is there any news?’

‘Two down, one still to go, I’m afraid. Jacobs is in pursuit.’

‘You mean Ben?’

The major’s eyes flickered and Kelly wondered if he guessed Ben was more than a bodyguard to her. ‘Yes, ma’am. We’ll let you know when we hear anything further.’

As he walked away, Kelly felt her mother’s eyes on her. Her father was in another room, talking to the police. ‘Kelly, darling. I couldn’t help but notice how upset you are that the bodyguard didn’t come back with us.’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ The emotion she’d been trying to hold back reared up, fighting to be let out. ‘He’s the man who’s been keeping me safe. If anything happens to him.’ Her chest felt crushed with the weight of her misery. Turning away, she bit at her lip and tried to breathe.

Her mother’s hand reached into hers. ‘Should I take it from your reaction that you’ve developed feelings for him?’

Kelly didn’t have the energy to lie. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh, Kelly.’ To her surprise it wasn’t disappointment she heard in her mother’s voice, but sympathy.

‘I know people will think I’m being stupid, but it’s real.’

Her mother stroked her hand. ‘I believe you, dear. A woman usually knows her own heart.’

Suddenly there was a commotion near the doorway. One look at the reason for it, and a sob wrenched from her. ‘Ben.’ Not giving a flying fig who was listening, or how embarrassed Ben would be, she hurled along the corridor and threw herself into his arms. ‘I’ve been so worried.’ She sagged against him, tears breaking free. ‘Thank God you’re okay.’

For a few seconds, his arms tightened around her. ‘Told you I would be.’

When she felt him beginning to extricate himself, she clung tighter. ‘I know you did, but I’m a scientist. I work on evidence.’ She tilted her head

and gazed up at his beautifully familiar face. 'I have to see something to believe it.'

Behind her she heard a small cough, reminding her she and Ben weren't alone. Reluctantly she stepped away, only to find they were being watched by her mother, father, and what appeared to be a whole squadron of very interested men.

'Sorry.' She tried to laugh, but it came out sounding hollow. Brittle.

A fierce look entered Ben's eyes. 'I got him, Kelly. You're safe now. It's over.'

So many emotions, so much she wanted to say and do. Burst into tears. Throw her arms around him and kiss him. But there were too many curious eyes. 'Thank you,' she whispered.

Charles cleared his throat. 'Debrief time.'

Ben gave her a wry smile and bent to whisper in her ear. 'Catch you later, Blondie.'

In a daze she watched him walk away, the tug on her heart so sharp, it was painful.

* * *

The medical team had checked them over, questions had been asked and answered and Kelly was free to go home. But she stubbornly refused to leave.

'Not until I see Ben,' she told her parents. Again.

'He's got a job to do, sweetheart. He's working. Come home with us. Let's all relax together, as a family.' Her father gave her a weary smile. 'It seems a lifetime ago since we last did that.'

The wistful note in his voice, coupled with the exhaustion in his face, made Kelly finally realise what she should have known an hour ago. She was being selfish. Her parents had just survived a terrifying ordeal, of course they wanted to go home. Yet they wouldn't, not without her.

The simple answer was to text Ben, asking him to contact her when he'd finished. Simple, if their relationship had been a normal one, but of course it wasn't. She'd made love to a man, and there was no doubt in her mind now, had fallen in love with that man, yet she didn't even know how to contact him.

It didn't seem possible. Then again nothing about the last ten days seemed possible. Her life had changed so much it was hard to remember what

a normal day felt like any more. A day when she wasn't on the run with a wise cracking, green-eyed ex-soldier.

'Kelly? Are you coming?'

Her father was clearly anxious to get going. 'Sorry, yes. I just need to leave a note for Ben.'

A note she'd have to trust to one of the police officers to give to Ben. And then trust, *hope*, Ben would read and want to act on it. The same Ben who was adamant they had no future, so had no real reason to contact her now his job was over.

Heart in her mouth, she scribbled down her phone number next to the words *please call Blondie*, and handed it to one of the police officers before climbing into the back of a cab with her parents.

* * *

Ben held the note Kelly had left for him in one hand, and a phone in the other. The honourable part of him — yeah, it did still exist, even if it didn't always show itself — knew continuing anything with her was wrong on pretty much every level.

Yet his fingers itched to press the numbers.

'You look like a man who can't make up his mind what to do.' Floss appeared before him, giving him a close scrutiny. 'Deciding what topping to have on your pizza?' His eyes flicked to the paper with Kelly's number on it. 'Or which girl to call?'

Ben didn't even have the energy to flip him the middle finger. Instead he leant back against the wall, and cursed under his breath.

Floss sighed and mirrored Ben's stance. 'Sucks when you fall for them, eh?'

'Christ, Floss.' Ben rubbed a hand weary hand over his face. 'You should write books. Shame to waste such a vivid imagination.'

'Don't need to use my imagination. Not when the signs are so obvious.' He nudged Ben's shoulder. 'She ran into your arms, Crackers. We all saw it. Be stupid not to see where it could go, now the job's over.'

Not when he could only see it going one way, Ben thought grimly.

But then he remembered how she'd clung to him, as if he'd really mattered. Nobody had ever held on to him like that. Nobody.

Hell, it was hard to admit, but he needed her. It had been one hell of a

day. One hell of a week. He needed another dose of Kelly Bridge, of the warmth, and damn it, the *happiness*, he found with her.

He turned to find Floss watching him shrewdly. ‘You think I don’t know what’s got you all freaked out?’ Floss let out an exasperated huff. ‘Kelly isn’t Katia. The good Dr Bridge strikes me as a strong, determined woman.’ His mouth curved in a grin. ‘And she knows her own mind, that’s for sure.’

Ben could wholeheartedly agree, but . . . *but*, what Floss didn’t know was how inexperienced Kelly was when it came to sex and relationships. And how that could easily lead her to confuse the two. On this, he was the wise one. So it was up to him to guide Kelly on the right path.

Pushing himself off the wall, Ben gave Floss a tired smile. ‘Thanks for the pep talk, but it’s time you stopped analysing my love life, and headed back to your own. Give my love to your saint of a wife.’ Aware of Floss’s eyes on him, Ben walked into the nearest room and shut the door firmly behind him.

Immediately he snatched at the note, his fingers, almost of their own volition, stabbing out the numbers on his phone. ‘Hey, Blondie.’

‘Thank God.’ The relief in her voice had him swallowing, and blinking back a ruddy tear. She was turning him into a pussy. ‘I was starting to worry the officer hadn’t given you my number, or you’d lost it.’ He heard a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. ‘Or maybe you didn’t want to talk to me.’

He felt that hard yank on his heart. The one that told him how perilously close he was to falling for this woman. ‘If I have my way, we’ll do more than talk.’

Her soft laughter stroked his senses. ‘I like your way. Have they finished with you yet?’

He thought back to the draining debrief. The one he’d been booted out of because he’d literally fallen asleep at the table. ‘Yeah, pretty much. They’ve let me go, anyway. Told me I need to rest up for a few days.’

There was a pause on the line. ‘Would you mind . . .’ She trailed off. Whatever she wanted to say was obviously hard for her.

‘Now you turn shy on me? Come on, Blondie, spit it out.’

‘I know you’ve had a tough day and probably all you want to do is go home but . . .’

‘Where are you?’

She sighed. 'I'm at my parents' house.'

He made a quick calculation. It would only take three quarters of an hour. Then he laughed at himself. He'd make the same offer if she'd gone to Aberdeen. 'Do you want me to come and get you? Take you home?' He let out a ripe oath. 'I've just remembered, they trashed your place, didn't they? I'm not sure if it was ever cleaned up.'

'It doesn't matter. I want to go and see it anyway. Plus.' Her voice caught. 'I want to see you.'

And yes, this was wrong, but he'd crossed that line days ago. Right now, nothing, not even a stampede of those legendary wild horses, was going to stop him from seeing her. 'I'm on my way.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Kelly put down the phone it wasn't only joy that bubbled through her. It was relief. Thanks to her obsession with studying, she'd missed out on teenage crushes. Never understood why her friends had spent hours debating whether the boys they fancied really liked them, or not. Whether they would call.

She'd just had ten years' worth of angst jammed into the last two hours.

But Ben *had* phoned, and he was coming to get her.

Kelly hummed happily to herself as she showered and changed into the spare clothes she kept at her parents' house. It was a relief to put on a pair of jeans and a silk blouse, rather than the jogging bottoms and T-shirt she'd been living in.

And a bra. The luxury.

She even had time to make herself blonde again, courtesy of a pack of hair dye bought from the late-night chemist on the way home. She doubted her mother would have suggested the idea if she'd known how much her daughter enjoyed being called Blondie.

When she glanced in the mirror, the face that stared back looked like her again, albeit the pale, tired version.

But then she stared further into her eyes, and realised it wasn't the same old Kelly any more. Surprisingly, her eyes weren't haunted by the experience she'd had. They held an awareness. A spark.

She'd changed in the most important way a person could change. She'd fallen in love.

'What's put that smile on your face, darling?' her mother asked as she walked out in the garden to join her parents. They'd opened the patio doors and were sitting enjoying the warm evening and the inky night sky.

Honeysuckle invaded her nostrils and Kelly sighed with contentment. 'Ben called. He's finished the debrief.'

'Did he say anything more about what happened?' Her father's face still carried the strain of the last twenty-four hours. No, Kelly realised. Longer than that. Their worry would have begun the moment they'd heard she'd been captured at the service station. 'Are the men who did this in custody?'

'I didn't ask.' Surprise crossed his face and Kelly knew he was

wondering why it hadn't been at the forefront of her mind. 'I'm sure he'll tell me what he can, when he comes to collect me.'

'Oh?'

It was said by both of them, at the same time. A single word, weighed down by a hundred questions. 'Yes, he's going to take me home.'

Her mother's face fell. 'I thought you were going to stay here tonight.'

Kelly steeled herself. They meant well, but it was time to do something for herself. 'I need to get back, Mum. The place was broken into while I was away and I want to check on it and see what damage they did.'

'But it's so late. Surely, it's a job for the morning, when you're fresh.'

'I want to do it now.' She tried to take the exasperation out of her voice, though judging by her mother's hurt expression, she'd failed. 'I know you're only looking after me, but you don't have to worry. Ben will be with me. He'll help sort everything out.'

'And will he stay?' Her father's pointed question hung in the air.

'I hope so.' There, she'd said it. She was twenty-nine years old. She wasn't going to ask her parents' permission to allow a man to stay the night in her own apartment.

Abruptly her father jumped to his feet, concern etched across his face. Concern with an edge of anger. 'I know this man saved your life, but it doesn't mean I approve of what's happening between you. I hired him to protect you, Kelly. Not sleep with you.'

'Dad!' Kelly exclaimed, horrified. 'This has nothing to do with you. It's personal, between Ben and me.'

'When my daughter is taken advantage of, it becomes very much my concern,' he retorted, his expression grim. 'Can't you see what's happened here? He's abused his position. Exploited you when you were at your most vulnerable.'

She recoiled at the unfairness of his words. 'You don't know the first thing about what happened between us. I love you both to pieces, but all my life you've had far too big a say in what I've done. I'm old enough to make my own mind up and when Ben comes for me, I'm going home. With him.'

* * *

From his position by the garden gate, just out of view, Ben slammed his eyes shut. What did they say? Nothing good ever came of eavesdropping?

Well hell, they weren't wrong. When he'd arrived, he'd rung on the doorbell like any normal person, but no one had answered. That was the point at which he should have phoned her. Better still, seen sense and gone back to his own place. But no. Used to investigating, to pushing into places he wasn't wanted, he'd seen a light on round the back and decided to open the side gate into the garden.

He's abused his position, taken advantage of you.

He hadn't meant to listen in on the tail end of a conversation clearly not intended for his ears, but thanks to his training he was pretty light on his feet. Useful when approaching the enemy. Not so good when it meant overhearing private judgements on his character. Not that he could say the professor's damning views were a surprise. If it were his daughter, Ben would have wanted to punch the guy who'd been entrusted to protect her, and then broken that trust by sleeping with her. So yes, he deserved the condemnation.

But by God, it hurt.

He let out a loud cough, something he wished he'd had the presence of mind to do a few minutes earlier, before walking up the garden path towards them.

His breath caught at the sight of Kelly. Blonde again, back in her own clothes.

Christ, she was a sight for a pair of tired, sore eyes. 'Sorry to come round the back, but there was no answer at the front door.'

Like a mini blonde tornado, Kelly stormed towards him, flinging her arms around his neck. And just like that, his heart lifted, his own arms automatically moving to hug her back. His whole body feeling lighter, pulsing with something that felt a lot like joy.

Yet even as the delicious scent of her streamed through his nostrils, the warmth of her seeped through to his blood, he felt the heavy weight of her parents accusing stares. Reluctantly he let her go, standing awkwardly while Kelly slowly peeled herself off him. And damn, now he had the chance to study her properly, there was tension on her face. A troubled look in her eyes.

The prof cleared his throat. 'Thank you for saving my daughter's life.' The tone was polite yet cool. As Ben braced himself for a roasting, the prof shocked the hell out of him by offering his hand.

Embarrassed, Ben shook it. 'It's what you hired me to do,' he replied, forcing himself to look the man in the eye. The prof already had him down as

a jerk for taking advantage of his daughter. He was damned if he was going to let him label him a coward, too. ‘And in truth, she helped save her own life. Your daughter isn’t just smart, she’s gutsy and tenacious. I’d go as far as to say she’d make a great soldier, but she’s lousy when it comes to following orders.’

The prof’s expression softened a smidgen. ‘Yes. I’ve experienced that, too.’

‘And I think now is a good time for us to go,’ Kelly interrupted, holding tightly onto Ben’s arm. He suspected she was prepared to pull him out of the garden if he didn’t leave willingly. ‘I’ll give you guys a call tomorrow.’

‘Before you go, I have a favour to ask Ben.’ Kelly’s mum stood and smiled at him. Unlike the prof, her eyes were warm and accepting. ‘I’d like to hold a small party to celebrate having Kelly back with us. To celebrate this all being over. Would you come, please? There’ll just be a few close family and friends. Perhaps Major Lightfoot, too, if he can make it.’

Ben watched a look of muted horror cross the prof’s face and guessed the guy hadn’t expected his wife to extend the invitation. Not now they knew Ben’s relationship with Kelly had slipped from professional, slap bang into monstrously unprofessional. A polite brush off was needed — especially considering he’d stick out like a dog’s balls at such an event. ‘Thank you, but I’m not sure where I’ll be.’

‘How about we arrange it for tomorrow? Surely you don’t have to be back at work by then?’

Crap. What the hell was he supposed to say now? The prof looked like he wanted to muzzle his wife, yet Kelly’s mum, clearly ignoring the mental daggers being thrown her way, continued to smile gently at Ben. Hopefully. ‘No,’ he replied at length. ‘That is, no I don’t have to be back for a day or two.’

She beamed. ‘Excellent. We’ll look forward to seeing you again tomorrow evening. Around six.’

Ben was pretty certain the *we* in that sentence was way off the mark. He and the prof were clearly anticipating it with equal delight.

‘Thank you for coming for me,’ Kelly whispered as they climbed into the car. He’d wangled a huge black four-wheel drive off Charles because he had no clue where his loan car was any more. Last seen abandoned near a ditch the day he’d rescued Kelly.

He studied her pale face before starting the engine. 'You seem upset.'

Her breath hitched, though she covered it with a laugh. 'I had a brief row with Dad.' She slid him a sidelong glance. 'You might have heard some of it.'

Ben wisely decided to keep his big mouth shut and instead focus on manoeuvring the car out of the drive and onto the road. 'What I heard was your mother springing a party on me,' he replied eventually.

Slowly Kelly's lips tilted in a smile. 'Ah yes, she's famous for her ambushes. And for not taking no for an answer.'

'Like mother like daughter.'

She gazed back at him, her eyes holding a world of promise. 'I'm glad you realise that.'

* * *

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. Kelly hoped if she repeated the words often enough, it would start to come true. And in truth, compared to the stress of the last week, having her apartment trashed was child's play. Still, it angered her to know someone had rifled through her personal items, and it hurt to see photos, mementos, treated with such careless disregard. All because some greedy men believed they could make money from a vaccine against a smallpox strain she hoped to God would never be released.

Wordlessly Ben set to work, first making sure the door was safe, then helping her right the furniture and tidy up. It worried her how quiet he was. Made her wonder how much he'd really overheard back at her parents' house.

'That's it,' she announced finally, collapsing exhausted onto her bed. 'The rest can wait until tomorrow. I'm too tired to do any more.'

The bed dipped as Ben's large frame perched on the edge. His hand cupped her face with a gentleness that made her heart flutter. 'Will you be okay to stay here tonight?'

'Of course. I mean you've fixed the locks, so I'll be fine.' She placed a hand over his, drawing it away so she could plant a kiss in his palm. 'But I was kind of hoping.' Her heart picked up pace, drumming against her chest. Ridiculous to be this nervous. She took a deep breath and forced the words out. 'I was hoping you would stay,' she said in a rush. 'I mean obviously you don't need to protect me now, so if that's the only reason you'd consider

staying, then don't.'

'Kelly.' He clasped her hand, his green eyes blazing directly into hers. 'Do you really think protecting you is the only reason I'd stay?'

A lump lodged in her throat. When he looked at her like that, letting her see the desire he was feeling, she felt important to him. Felt like more than a momentary sexual distraction. But then she remembered the way he'd warned her off. The argument they'd had when her parents had been kidnapped.

'I don't know,' she admitted.

'Then let me show you.' He dipped his head, and her eyes rested on his mouth. God, she wanted that mouth on her again. On her lips, her skin. Her breasts. But to her dismay, he drew back. 'First, I need to shower. Explosives and sweat aren't a great aphrodisiac.'

'It was working for me.'

He grinned, hauling her into his arms. 'I've got a better idea.'

Moments later she joined Ben under the hot spray. As her fingers danced across his slick, well-muscled body, he lifted her up and onto him.

'Better than my dreams,' she whispered, though apparently not quietly enough because he crooked her a grin.

'You been dreaming about me, Blondie?'

'Maybe.' Only every time she closed her eyes.

He moved slowly, teasing her, driving her crazy. 'What did you dream about?' When she didn't answer — couldn't, because the feelings he was eliciting were too intense for speech — he shifted, thrusting deeper. 'You and me. This?'

Her answer was an explosion of feeling.

'My legs are shot,' he groaned finally, sliding them both down into the shower tray, moving her so she was nestled between his legs. Her back against his chest. His arms wrapped tightly around her as the hot spray cascaded over them. It felt sexy and intimate. So much so that at that moment, she felt closer to him than anyone else in her life. He knew her. Physically, emotionally, he knew her.

Dropping a kiss on the arms that held her, she sighed. 'It gets better and better.'

His arms tightened, and she tried not to be too hurt when he didn't reply.

After a while he turned them so she was facing him, straddling his lap. 'Why haven't you been snapped up by now?'

The fierceness of his expression made her smile. 'I told you. My life is my work. I'm not very interesting.'

'But look at you.' His eyes skimmed over her body and then back up to her. The appreciation she saw there, the raw desire, bulldozed through her insecurities.

'Maybe I was waiting for you.'

She knew the moment her whispered words sunk home. His body stiffened and he started to stand. 'Come on,' he said brusquely, helping her up. 'The water will be going cold in a minute.'

She bit into her lip, angry at herself for ruining the moment. But damn it, she felt what she felt. He was going to have to live with it. So instead of backing off, she turned to him. 'What are you so afraid of?'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

What are you so afraid of?

Kelly's words echoed round the steam-filled bathroom. Ben busied himself with drying off, belatedly realising he didn't have any spare clothing with him. His heart feeling full and yet unbearably heavy, he shoved on the boxers he'd arrived in. He sure as hell wasn't going to have this conversation stark bollock naked.

'This thing between us,' he said finally, raising his eyes to her confused blue ones. 'As wonderful as it feels, it's not real. It's just heat.' Pain flashed across her face, mirroring the pain in his chest. He didn't want to hurt her. Never that. But she needed to realise how adrenaline and gratitude had muddled her emotions. 'Please tell me you understand.'

'I don't.' Drops of water trickled over the glorious smooth skin of her still naked body. Her chin titled proudly. 'It's way more than that for me.' With that she turned her back on him and strode into her bedroom.

What a sight.

He followed her out, his body reacting even as his heart felt as if it was being dragged along the floor. 'Whatever you think you're feeling, it's a by-product of the roller coaster time we've had together.'

'Don't you dare tell me what I'm feeling.' Her eyes blazed as she shimmied into a cornflower blue silk number that rippled over her curves. 'Only I know that. And whether you like it or not, I've fallen in love with you.'

'No.' He could barely get the words past the tightness in his throat. 'Don't do this to yourself.'

She dropped onto the bed, her laughter edged with bitterness. 'I've got a newsflash for you. This isn't something you or I can control.'

'We aren't a combination that will ever work, Kelly.' With every fibre of his being he wished they were. She had no idea.

'Not the correct *combination*?' She gave him a look filled with disgust. 'Good God, what on earth do you mean by that? I'm a scientist, and even I understand that when it comes to love, there's no flipping formula.' With that she lay down on the bed, turning her back on him.

'Kelly, Kelly.' With a frustrated curse, he dumped all her fancy pillows

onto the floor before sliding onto the bed alongside her. ‘What you’re feeling is a perfectly normal reaction to the last few days. I ballsed up many times, but I also helped save your life.’ Framing her face with his hands, he kissed her softly on the lips. ‘Add in the fact that I’m a handsome son of a bitch, with a world-class sense of humour. What’s not to fall in love with?’

She shoved at him. ‘You don’t have to try and make excuses for me,’ she muttered. ‘I can take the truth. You don’t feel what I feel.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

Her big blue eyes rested on his. ‘That’s what you’re implying, isn’t it?’

Shit. He was meant to be closing this bloody door, not leaving it gaping open. ‘We’re talking about you.’ Sighing he turned onto his back, staring up at the ceiling in the hope it held all the answers. ‘Your father was right. I took advantage of you, Blondie. I’m not proud of that.’

‘My God, you’re *both* ridiculous.’ She sat up and stared down at him. ‘I gave myself to you willingly and I’d do it again. And again. I’d do it every time I got the chance because I love you, damn it. Don’t you see that?’

‘What I see,’ he replied quietly, ‘is a beautiful woman with a brilliant future who thinks herself in love with her protector because he helped to rescue her.’ He should know all about that, he thought grimly.

‘I thought we’d established that I’m bright. Give me credit for knowing my own mind.’

‘I might not be as bright as you,’ he answered flatly, ‘but on this occasion, I know what I’m talking about.’

He watched as the understanding dawned in her intelligent eyes. ‘I take it I’m not the first woman under your protection that you’ve taken to bed.’

And boy did *that* smart. She made him sound like an unprincipled gigolo. Still, at least now she’d stop seeing him with those rose-coloured glasses she insisted on wearing. Shifting so he was sitting next to her on the bed, shoulder to shoulder, he started to talk. ‘When I first joined the Special Forces, I was assigned CP duty to the daughter of a very wealthy foreign dignitary visiting this country.’ He let out a brief smile at her frown. ‘Sorry, CP is close protection. Basically, I was her bodyguard.’

‘But you call it close protection because Hollywood hasn’t made a film called that yet.’

He choked out a laugh. ‘Probably. Don’t get me wrong, Costner was pretty good, especially considering all the distractions he had with Whitney.’

Kelly arched a brow. 'I take it you mean her singing.'

'Sure, that's exactly what I meant. Very distracting, all that, umm, singing.'

She punched him in the side. 'Back to the story, Jacobs.'

Why did his surname, falling from her lips, make his stupid heart squeeze? God, he was sunk. Now he had to spill his sordid tale not just to warn her off, but to remind himself. 'Katia was the woman I was tasked with protecting. Dark hair, even darker eyes. Utterly beautiful and way beyond the reach of a soldier. But I was young and stupid, so of course I fell for her. It didn't matter that my job was to protect her, not get involved with her. I was smitten. In love for the first time in my life.' Shame trickled through him at the memory. God, he'd been naïve. Naïve and foolish. 'At first the assignment went well. Her family had got wind of an attempt to kidnap her — hence the need for protection — and we managed to foil it. Suddenly I was a hero in her eyes.' Deliberately his gaze sought Kelly's. 'I wasn't a hero. I'm not one. I do what I'm trained to do.'

'A hero is someone admired for their courage,' Kelly interrupted. 'You can't do what you do and not have courage.'

His gaze fell from her wide, adoring eyes to the faded bruise still on her cheek. For a supposed hero, he made a shitload of mistakes. 'I wasn't much of a hero a few days later. Her father was due to return home but she begged him to allow her to stay in England for another week. He agreed, as long as I promised to protect her. Of course by then we thought the threat was over. It was going to be a week of fun.' He halted, appalled even now, years later, at his ignorance.

'Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to enjoy this particular story?'

'I told you before, I'm not one for happy endings.' He paused, his stomach already clenching at what he was about to say. 'I let my guard down one night and Katia was snatched from right under my nose. By the time I realised what was happening, I was knocked unconscious and she was gone.'

Kelly's eyes widened in horror. 'I take it that's why you were so adamant you didn't want to get involved with me.'

He turned to face her, wondering if perhaps it was her eyes he loved the most. So intelligent, so clear, and at the moment so totally focussed on him. 'I should have stuck to my principles, Blondie. I put you at risk.'

* * *

Kelly stared back at Ben's handsome, earnest face and wanted to tell him she didn't care. Any risk had been worth it. But he'd withdrawn from her, still locked in the past with Katia. A woman he'd fallen in love with.

A tight, hot pain ripped through Kelly — jealousy. It had to be, because even though this had happened years ago, and he'd been with plenty of women since, this woman had touched a part of him nobody else had, including her. His heart. 'Did you find Katia?'

A bleakness came and went in his eyes. 'Eventually. But not before they'd roughed her up a little first.'

She could just imagine how much he must have beaten himself up over that. 'It wasn't your fault. Not everything is your fault, Ben.'

His lips curved, half grimace, half smile. 'What is it about you women, huh? Katia thought the same way. She couldn't see it was my mistake that caused her to be kidnapped. All she saw was the man who rescued her. So she stayed for the end of that week, telling me over and over how much she loved me. Like the fool I believed her, and loved her back.' He hung his head for a moment, rubbing at his eyes. 'I really thought we had a future together.'

'I take it she went home and you never heard from her again.'

'Nope. That wasn't humiliating enough for me. You're right that I didn't hear from her, but instead of taking the hint, I thought something was wrong. So I flew out to see her.'

She dreaded asking the question, but she had to know. 'And?'

'She acted like nothing had ever happened between us.' As if he'd flipped a switch, a guard slipped across his face, making it very hard to read. 'By now she was engaged to the son of some business tycoon, a friend of the family. She thanked me politely for visiting, and for protecting her while she was in England. Then I was asked to leave.'

How could she? To treat a man she'd been intimate with, so callously — it was impossible for Kelly to comprehend. Especially when she considered the man wasn't just any man, but Ben. Didn't Katia realise what an absolute rock — make that a huge glittering diamond — she'd turned down?

With a quiet sob of anguish, Kelly flung her arms around him. Tears rolled down her cheeks, some for him, and some for herself, because now she understood that Katia's cruel actions had ruined things for her, too.

It was a split second before he relaxed and held her back. A few minutes before she felt his chest rise and fall as he sighed and drew her further against him.

‘So you see,’ he told her. ‘What you’re feeling now isn’t real. I’m not being coy when I say I know I’m not a bad catch. I’ve got my own hair and teeth, my face doesn’t scare babies and my job is pretty sexy to some women. But to you I’m the type of catch that’s fun to play with for a while because it’s different. Now you need to throw it back in the water. Tomorrow you’ll find a catch far more suitable, far better for you. Trust me.’

He couldn’t be more wrong. What had her mother said? *A woman usually knows her own heart.* Well Ben had turned her into a woman. And this woman knew when she’d fallen in love.

If he thought his tale of the rich bitch was going to put her off, he’d seriously underestimated her levels of determination. And her intelligence. Katia might have been dumb enough to let Ben slip through her fingers, but Kelly wasn’t.

For now though, she knew it was time to back off and change the subject, though the fact that she’d taken until now to ask this, was very telling. ‘What happened in the debrief? Did they find Stuart?’

His gaze flicked to hers. ‘Stuart is fine.’

‘Surely you can tell me more than that?’

‘We found him cuffed to a pillar in a different part of the warehouse to where your parents were held. He admitted to placing the tracker on your laptop and helping Sullivan but said he’d done it under duress.’

She studied Ben’s carefully guarded expression. ‘You don’t honestly still believe Stuart is part of this? That he set me up willingly?’

Ben’s hands stroked her hair and she sensed he was doing it as much to soothe himself as her. ‘No, probably not.’

‘You don’t like him because he dragged me into this.’ She peered up at him, noticing the lines around his mouth had hardened. ‘I don’t like him much for that either, but I can’t blame him. Not when he was protecting his daughter. Just as you were protecting me.’

* * *

Ben bit his tongue. There was something about Stuart that nagged at him, though he couldn’t be certain his instincts weren’t getting drowned by all the

other feelings swamping him. Perhaps Kelly was right. Perhaps he wanted to pin something on Stuart because the bastard had hurt her. Or perhaps it was just plain jealousy that had him flagging Stuart as a bad egg.

Suddenly he felt a pinch to his nipple and almost flew off the bed.

Kelly's eyes held a glint of amusement. 'You disappeared on me. I want to know what's going on in that head of yours.'

He stared down at her fingers, now employed tracing maddening circles around his pecs. 'Do that again.'

Her tongue darted across her lips. 'What, this?' She pinched him again, the sensation going straight to his groin. 'Do you like it?'

He huffed out a laugh. 'I can pretty much guarantee I'd like anything your hands did with my body.'

Her lips curved in what he could only describe as a satisfied smile, but to his disappointment her hands remained still. 'You were telling me what you were thinking.'

'Was I?'

Smirking, she tapped her fingers against his chest, close to his nipple yet not quite touching. 'I believe you were.'

Now he got it. She was trying to blackmail him with her touch. Jeez, he'd created a femme fatale. 'Okay, minx. I can't help wondering why Sullivan first went after Stuart instead of you. If he had enough intelligence to know your department was working on the vaccine formulation, how come he didn't know the project was yours rather than Stuart's?'

She rolled those huge eyes. 'Come on, Stuart's a man, Jon Sullivan is a man. All men think they're the superior species. Sullivan probably assumed I was either Stuart's admin or his lab technician.'

'Perhaps.'

He felt her smile against his chest. 'If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to convince me Stuart's evil because you don't want me seeing him again.'

He grunted. 'If you're half as astute as I think you are, you won't need me to convince you of that.'

Yet she'd liked the guy enough to go out with him, and despite how much Stuart had lied to her, and how he'd plunged her into danger, she didn't seem to harbour any ill will towards him.

In a matter of days, the pair of them would be working together again.

Maybe, because of what they'd been through together, the chemistry would be there this time.

Jealousy tore through him, leaving him raw, aching. By God, he had to get out of this . . . thing he had with her, and get out quick, or his heart was heading for another trampling. The ending of his affair with Katia would feel like a walk in a daisy strewn park compared to what Kelly's inevitable severing of their ties would do to him.

He was older than the last time he'd fallen in love, but sure as hell wasn't any wiser.

Kelly ran gentle fingers across his cheek. 'You've gone quiet on me again.'

Her touch was so tender, her expression so full of concern. He heaved in a shuddering breath. 'Thought that was the general idea of going to sleep.'

'Is that what we're doing now? Sleeping?'

She smiled up at him, part coy, part siren, and Ben shoved his shitty thoughts aside. Tomorrow could go and take a running jump. He was going to focus on the here and now.

Carefully he slipped the strap of her nightdress over her shoulder, revealing the curve of her breast. 'Anything else you'd rather do, Blondie?'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Kelly woke, she was alone. She'd spent most of her twenty-nine years waking up alone, but this morning it felt wrong.

Frantically she yanked back the sheets and stumbled out of bed. Was this it? After last night's insistence there was nothing real between them, had Ben now upped and left? Gone from her life forever? Her heart pounding in panic she ran in a daze to the bathroom, flinging the door open.

And landed slap bang in the middle of a solid wall of muscle.

'Whoa.' Ben put a steadying hand on each of her shoulders. 'Where are you going in such a tearing hurry?'

'You're still here.' She slid her arms around his waist, part because she wanted to, part because she *needed* to.

'Shouldn't I be?'

'I woke and you weren't next to me. I remembered what you'd said last night.' She tightened her arms, squeezing him to her. Reassuring herself he really was still there. 'I thought you'd gone.'

He smoothed a hand gently over her hair. 'And miss your mother's party?'

She let out a strangled laugh. 'You'd rather paint your nails and dye your hair pink.'

Laughter rumbled through him. 'You're not wrong. But it would take a braver man than me not to go now she's expecting me.'

Kelly searched his eyes. 'How long will you stay?'

He groaned, kissing her forehead. 'Blondie, sweet Blondie. Drawing this out much longer won't do either of us any good.'

'In your view of the world. The way I see it, the longer I'm with you, the more you'll not want to leave.'

His body heaved out a deep sigh. It could have been borne of many things, including boredom or frustration, but she sensed it was darker than that. 'I don't need to be with you to know that,' he told her against her hair. 'But we've been through this. Given time and distance, you'll realise I'm right.'

She itched to pummel his chest, to yell at him for being so pig-headed, but knew she'd be wasting her breath. He was too stubborn to listen. 'Well,

Mr I'm Always Right, have you finished hogging the bathroom?

'*Hogging?* Men don't hog, not when it comes to bathrooms. We wallow occasionally, but we never hog. That implies we want it to ourselves when actually we're very happy to share.'

She swatted his backside. 'Too late, you've vacated the premises. It's all mine now.'

'Before you head in there, I thought you might be interested in the update I had from Charles this morning.'

She stilled. She'd forgotten there was unfinished business. Ben made it so easy to forget everything else but him. 'Yes?'

There was an intensity to Ben's look, as if he was trying to judge her reaction to what he was about to say. 'Sullivan has been squealing like a stuck pig, apparently. When asked where he got his information about the vaccine from, he says it was Richard.'

'*Richard?*'

'Yep. Sullivan says he knew him from various contacts. Friends of friends. A few months ago, Richard phoned him out of the blue, telling him he had an idea to make them both rich. They met, and Richard explained about the vaccine, and how the formulation could be worth something if the right rumours were started.'

A wave of nausea rolled through her and Kelly turned, slumping back down on the bed. 'I can't believe the man I worked for betrayed us like that. He's spent a lifetime trying to fight infectious diseases. How could he throw all that good away, just for money?'

Ben let out a low laugh. 'You'd be amazed what people do for money.'

'But why involve me and Stuart? Why didn't Sullivan just get Richard to give him the vaccine when I'd finished it?'

'They couldn't risk you letting anyone else know the finished formula. For it to be worth anything, they had to be the only ones with their hands on it.'

She still didn't fully understand. 'So why did Stuart get caught up in this? I was the one working directly on the formulation. Stuart helped from time to time but he has his own project.'

Again, she felt the weight of Ben's scrutiny. 'Sullivan says Richard told him both of you were working on it. They went to Stuart because having a daughter made him easier to blackmail.'

Kelly frowned. ‘Stuart was always interested in what I was doing. And Richard told me he knew Stuart was assisting me, which I did think was odd. He must have got the wrong impression.’

‘Or maybe Stuart deliberately misled Richard into thinking you were working on it jointly so he’d get more brownie points from the boss. Either way, it looks like your man is in the clear.’

Kelly glanced at Ben sharply. His obvious dislike of Stuart gave her a crumb of comfort. If Ben was jealous, he had to care more than he was letting on. ‘I told you. Stuart isn’t my man.’ *You are.* Rather than get into another argument about that, she smiled sweetly. ‘At least now I get to say I was right.’

‘You reckon?’

‘I told you I didn’t think he was a willing part of this.’ *Just as I told you I know how I feel about you.* For the second time, she bit her tongue.

* * *

Kelly dressed for her mother’s party with care. She knew Ben would be leaving soon. Perhaps even tonight. So if he was determined to end the incredible thing they had between them, she was equally determined to make sure the image he’d remember her by wasn’t that of a scared, brown haired girl wearing jogging bottoms and baggy T-shirts.

She wanted it to be of a freshly highlighted and blow-dried blonde, wearing the most knock out outfit she owned.

The vivid red, figure hugging dress had been a purchase in last year’s sale, but she’d never had the confidence to wear it. Thanks to Ben, she now felt sexy enough to carry it off. Even if she wasn’t sexy enough to keep him.

‘Wow.’ She turned, pleased to see his jaw drop as he stared at her. Slowly he whistled. ‘I don’t suppose you fancy taking that straight off again, do you?’

Smiling, she gave him a twirl. ‘We can’t be late.’ Even as she said the words, she started to pull down the zip she’d just fastened.

‘The way I feel now, this will take no time at all,’ he told her hoarsely, taking charge of her zip and yanking it straight down.

She shuddered, arousal pulsing through her, making her feel alive. Desired. Wanted. As her fingers fumbled with the clasp of her bra he pushed them away.

‘Let me.’

This, she thought, as his rough hands ran hungrily over her skin. She’d once feared she’d never experience it. It made everything that had happened, and the heartache she knew she was heading for, seem worth it.

* * *

They set off to her parents’ house half an hour behind schedule. The journey was a quiet one, with Ben becoming noticeably tenser the closer they got. Though her mother had promised a small gathering, family and a few close friends, the hum of voices coming from inside told Kelly it was a little more than that. Typical of her outgoing mum. Any excuse for a party.

As they walked through the hallway and into the sitting room, Kelly reached down and squeezed Ben’s hand. ‘You’re very quiet.’

‘I’m not a big fan of parties. I’m happier with a pint and a pack of pork scratchings.’

He slid her a small smile and her heart bounced against her ribs. In his dark blue suit and white shirt, he looked remote and dangerously handsome. A man who drew the eye of every woman in the room. *Her* man. If only for tonight.

She gave his recently shaven cheek a kiss, taking a moment to inhale his unique male scent and lock it into her memory bank. ‘I’d better find my parents and apologise for being late.’

‘What can I say? You’re a hard woman to walk away from.’

Instantly he said the words his expression tightened and the atmosphere between them turned heavy with unspoken messages. *But you will*, she wanted to scream back at him, though what was the use? She could hardly force him to stay. ‘You go and mingle. I’ll find you.’

* * *

Mingle? Ben shook his head at Kelly’s retreating back. He had no clue what to say to these people. Shoving a hand in the pocket of his trousers, he was about to bolt outside when he spotted salvation, in the form of his boss. It wasn’t often he looked forward to a chat with the man, but right now he had to stop himself from running over and leaping into Charles’s arms. He could usually manage a bit of polite conversation — he wasn’t totally ignorant — but here he felt so out of his depth he was terrified of turning into a monosyllabic dimwit.

He was as good as any man in this room tonight. On one level, he knew that. The squadron had given him discipline, strength, fitness, strategy. A detailed knowledge of how to take a life. A rudimentary knowledge of how to save one.

Plus, he could blow things up.

Through his time with them he'd slowly grown to accept that qualifications were just pieces of paper. Out in the field it was thinking on your feet, anticipation and courage that earned respect.

Yet standing here, in Kelly's parents' house, all that understanding seemed to have flown right out of their handsome French windows. He was back to being his sixteen-year-old self again. Unqualified, uncouth and ignorant.

Oh and did he mention totally out of place?

Charles caught his eye and signalled for him to join the group he was with. Uneasily Ben walked over. Polite introductions were made and the conversation continued.

'I agree. Oxford was a beautiful city to study in.'

A shudder ran through Ben. A discussion on universities. Just what he bloody needed. When the waiter with the tray of drinks hovered nearby, Ben stuck out his arm. One wouldn't hurt. He needed it to take the edge off his blasted inferiority complex.

And to help him forget he was saying goodbye to Kelly after tonight.

A blessedly short while later, clinking of glasses echoed round the room and Kelly's father stood, signalling for quiet. 'Friends, I wanted to take a minute to remind ourselves why we're here this evening.' He held out his hand, and Ben watched as Kelly slid into his arms. 'We're here to thank God.' His eyes picked out Charles. 'And Major Charles Lightfoot and his team, for the presence of my beloved daughter tonight.' There was a loud murmur of agreement but her father held up his hand, stopping the ripple of applause. 'In particular, we want to thank the man standing next to Charles.' The prof stared Ben straight in the eye. 'If it hadn't been for the remarkable skill and bravery of Ben Jacobs, I know she wouldn't be here with us today.'

Ben sucked in a breath as a giant ball of emotion flew into his throat. He hated being thanked for doing his job, yet at the same time he felt suddenly taller, his back straighter. That her father was happy to say what he had in front of this crowd, despite knowing Ben had crossed a professional line with

his daughter, made him both humble and incredibly proud.

Kelly caught his eye and the smile she gave him, filled with joy, with adoration, hit him straight in the middle of his chest. It packed such a punch, he almost reeled backwards. It took all his effort not to give in to the tears that pricked at his eyes.

He nodded back, and as the conversation began again around him, his eyes darted towards the door. He needed to get out of here. To get some air.

‘I do hope you’re not leaving?’ An elegant looking woman, Ben guessed in her mid-sixties, put a hand on his arm. ‘I was hoping to talk to the man who took such good care of my niece.’

For a split second, he considered bolting. Ignoring the woman and legging it out as fast as he could. He felt like a wild animal, trapped in a beautifully maintained petting zoo. He didn’t belong.

But then he saw a look of worry cross Kelly’s face, and he knew he couldn’t do that to her. Instead he fought to control his panic.

To smile at Kelly’s aunt and make conversation.

* * *

Kelly glanced over to where Ben was talking to her aunt. He looked so tense, as if he was ready to take flight at any moment.

‘Is it serious between you?’

She turned sharply to find Charles watching her, watching Ben. ‘No. We’re not. We didn’t . . .’ Oh God, she was stumbling over her words.

‘If you’re worried you’re going to get him into trouble, don’t be. Jacobs is a maverick. A risk-taker. A non-conformist who doesn’t just not play by the rules, he doesn’t even bother to find out what they are in the first place.’

Relieved laughter fluttered through her. ‘I gained that impression.’

‘They’re traits that drive those who work with him crazy, but they also make him incredibly good at what he does. So we put up with them.’ Charles smiled. ‘Which means you can safely answer my question without any fear of reprisals.’

Kelly studied Charles’s handsome face. ‘Is it that obvious?’

‘Put it this way, I wish I had a beautiful woman looking at me the way you look at Ben.’

She felt herself blush. For years she’d wanted men, heck any man, to take notice of her. Now it seemed they were. What a shame it was no longer any

man she wanted, but one specific man. ‘It’s serious on my side, yes, though I fear it will be over after tonight.’

‘Oh?’

‘Ben’s convinced I don’t really love him.’ She turned, anxious to make it clear to Charles where her heart lay. ‘He’s wrong.’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time a woman has fancied herself in love with the man who saved her life.’

Kelly’s answering sigh was one of pure frustration. ‘I’m not stupid, Charles. I know the difference between hero worship and love. Please don’t presume to tell me what I’m feeling. There are enough people doing that already.’ Immediately the words were out she cringed, wondering what Ben would think of the way she’d just spoken to his boss. But she was fed up with people not taking her feelings seriously.

Charles acknowledged her rebuke with a nod and a slight smile. ‘Sorry. Perhaps it’s his own feelings Ben’s worried about. Men get scared, too. Even soldiers. Give us a dangerous situation and we’ll head on in without blinking. Give us an emotional one and we’re often found fleeing in the opposite direction.’

‘It sounds like you’re talking from experience.’

His eyes twinkled back at her. ‘It does, doesn’t it?’

Finding she was enjoying his company, she leaned closer. ‘Do you have any advice for how to stop the fleeing?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t.’ A wry grin hovered over his smooth features. ‘Though you could try picking a different man. One whose days of fleeing are over. You won’t find yourself short on offers.’

There was absolutely no way she could mistake his message. Not when it was coupled with a look of such blatant appreciation in his eyes. All these years being ignored, yet here was a second man to look at her with heat. Major Charles Lightfoot. Head of Panther Securities. Good looking, charming.

But not Ben Jacobs.

* * *

Ben knew he had it bad when all he wanted to do was storm over and wrestle his boss to the ground. Charles and Kelly had been together for a good fifteen minutes now. He knew, because he’d watched every gut

clenching, infuriating minute of it. He'd seen the way Charles had smiled at Kelly. The way she'd leant into him. It didn't help that they looked so damn good together, either. Or that Charles wasn't just his boss, wasn't just the owner of a prestigious security company. He was an officer who Ben deeply respected.

Clenching his fists, Ben tore his eyes away, gave his apologies to the people he'd been speaking to — people whose names he couldn't even remember — and strode through the patio doors.

And straight into Kelly's parents.

'Ben, I'm glad we caught up with you.' Her mother reached up and kissed his cheek. 'We wanted to thank you once again for all you've done for Kelly.'

'It was only what any other member of my team would have done.' His collar felt too flaming tight and he shoved a finger into it, trying to loosen it. He needed to get away. To take in some fresh air and clear his head. 'Why are you being so nice to me?'

Confusion clouded her eyes. 'Why shouldn't we be?'

'I slept with your daughter when she was running for her life. I took advantage of her.' Desperately he swung his focus towards the prof. 'Your words.'

Her father jolted in surprise. A second later, understanding dawned across his face. 'I'm sorry you overheard what I said in the garden the other night. Call it the instinctive reaction of a father. Kelly's put me right since then. I know she made the running, not you. I also know you brought her safely back to us. Whatever happens, you'll always have a special place in our hearts. Always.'

The tightness was back in Ben's chest. How could they be so kind, so accepting of him? Incapable of speech he nodded his thanks and turned abruptly away, marching into the garden as if he had a mouthy sergeant snapping at his heels. There he sank onto an empty bench and put his head in his hands, taking refuge in the darkness.

That was how Kelly found him.

'What are you doing out here, all alone?' His head snapped up at her voice. 'You're the star attraction. We want you inside.'

'You're the star attraction, Blondie, not me.'

She slid beside him on the bench. 'No. My parents laid all this on for

you, to thank you for protecting me.'

'Some lives are a pleasure to protect. An honour.' God his throat was so tight now he could barely get the words out.

'Then why are you're sitting out here trying to work out how to say goodbye to me? And don't dare try and deny it because I know that's what you're doing.'

Tears stole down her cheeks and his heart ripped into shreds. 'Blondie, honey, I'm so damn sorry. I never intended to hurt you.' He reached out to wipe away the wet trail but she pushed him away.

'Well it's too late. You have.'

The squeeze on his chest was brutal. 'I know,' he choked out. 'But trust me, you'll soon heal.'

'Because none of this is real.'

'Yes.'

Instantly she was back on her feet. 'That's just bollocks!' He was so stunned to hear her swear he couldn't formulate a reply. It would have been wasted anyway, because she hadn't finished. 'Go ahead, walk away from me,' she yelled, giving him a giant shove. It was so unexpected he nearly fell off the damn bench. 'But remember, I'll never walk away from you. I'll love you forever.'

With that she executed a neat one hundred and eighty degrees spin and walked back into the house. Back straight, hair swinging, neat buttocks gliding sensuously beneath her hot red dress.

For several stunned seconds, he didn't move.

Am I wrong?

For one incredible moment he considered the possibility that she could really be in love with him.

Then he recalled how inexperienced she was with men. How he was her first proper lover, so she had nobody else to compare to.

He didn't imagine that would last long.

She looked bloody good with Charles.

Weighed down by his misery, Ben dragged his sorry arse off to the car. This wasn't the first time a woman had told him she loved him.

His mother had, before she'd met Frank. Then she'd left.

Katia had. Two months later she'd forgotten all about him.

There was no reason to suppose Kelly would be any different to either of

them.

He was the stupid sod who kept getting his heart broken.

Chapter Thirty

Kelly drove to the lab alone the next morning. The same way she'd gone home. The same way she'd slept. And woken up.

Alone.

It seemed that was the way she was destined to be.

Thank God for her work. A reason to get out of bed.

Her phone began to ring. Grateful for the intrusion, Kelly clicked answer on her hands free.

'Kelly, sweetie, are you okay?' Her mother's concerned voice sounded through the car speakers.

'I'm fine, Mum. On my way to work.'

'Yes. It's probably the best place for you at the moment. I'm phoning to tell you your cousin Tom and his wife are coming round tomorrow. They're sorry they couldn't make the party. Will you come and have dinner with us?'

Kelly smiled sadly. This was her mother's way of keeping an eye on her after she'd sobbed all over them last night. 'Making sure I don't waste away?'

'I thought I was being subtle.' Her mother sighed. 'We're concerned about you. After all you've been through, don't blame us for wanting to look after you for a while.'

A fresh batch of tears threatened. 'I won't. And thank you, yes. I'll be there.'

'Good.' There was a pause, and Kelly knew her mother was debating whether or not to say something. 'And, darling, try not to dwell too much. Ben might be right, you know. His leaving might be for the best.'

Kelly's hands gripped tighter to the steering wheel. 'Thank you for your concern but please stop treating me like a girl with her first crush.'

'But this is your first real crush, darling,' her mother replied gently. 'And I'm just asking you to have an open mind. See how you feel in a few months' time.'

'There's not much else I can do, is there?' she replied bitterly. She had no mobile number for Ben, not even an address.

Pretty stupid to imagine herself in love with a man she didn't even know how to contact, except through his company.

* * *

The building felt odd as she walked through it. The last time she'd been here it had been at night. And with Ben. Pushing the reminder away, she walked towards her lab, pausing when she came across Richard's office.

The man who'd betrayed them. It was a hard thought to swallow.

His secretary glanced up from her desk and Kelly gave her a hesitant smile. 'How are you doing, Mary?'

'I'm not sure. Still in shock.' She nodded towards Kelly. 'More to the point, how are you? I didn't expect to see you here today.'

'You know me, I can't keep away.' Unless there are men with guns stopping me. She nearly laughed, before realising how sad it actually sounded. 'Has anyone told you what's happening to Richard?'

'Only that he's been arrested.' Her face paled. 'I can't believe it. He wasn't an easy man to work for, but to think he's been mixed up in something so terrible.' She shuddered. 'It's hard to take in.'

'For all of us. Have you seen Stuart?'

'No. I don't expect him in. You shouldn't be here either.'

'Better here than sitting at home. I want to keep my mind occupied.' The absolute last thing Kelly needed was time on her hands. That led to dwelling, which led to all the misery she'd tried to keep locked down, rushing up to the surface again.

Saying goodbye to Mary, she walked purposefully towards her lab; her sanctuary. At least there she could occupy her mind with something useful.

* * *

Ben woke in his creaky old bed with a raging headache.

A glance at the half drunk bottle of whiskey by his bed told him why.

You could have woken up beside a gorgeous, smart, warm, willing woman.

He groaned, climbing gingerly out of the bed. Yeah, he could have woken next to Kelly. But for how many nights? Better this way. He'd ripped off the plaster. Now he just had to let his heart heal.

He trudged to the kitchen, throwing open the fridge, only to find nothing there but a pint of sour milk.

Hell, there was nothing wrong with black coffee. As long as he actually had some coffee.

He poked around in the cupboard, grabbing gratefully at a jar of instant. As he filled the kettle, thoughts of Kelly wouldn't budge from his head. There was something he needed to do. A niggle he'd had in his gut that her parents' party, saying goodbye to her and half a bottle of whiskey had managed to drown out.

In a blinding flash, he realised what it was. Fumbling round for his phone, he called Floss.

'Hey, Crackers. The boss tells me you and the lady scientist were out partying together last night. Rumour has it you even wore a suit.'

For a hugely uncomfortable moment, Ben wondered how much Charles had seen at the party. Had he noticed Kelly holding his hand? Had he seen her give him an almighty shove on the bench, tears running down her cheeks?

Was he in line for another dressing down, this time about professionalism and keeping his pants zipped?

'Relax.' Floss chuckled. 'He didn't say anything incriminating. Just that the Bridges' laid on this do to thank you.' He paused. 'Guess you must have phoned her number after all.'

'Whatever you're thinking, scrub it. I said goodbye to Kelly last night. End of.' Feeling the emotion climb back up his throat, Ben added quickly. 'I want to tie up all the loose ends from the job. Can you find me the address of Stuart's wife?'

Floss, used to receiving requests for the unexpected, didn't hesitate. 'Anything for you, Crackers. But it's a damn shame you're too chicken shit to give things a go with Kelly.'

'*Chicken shit?* How do you know it wasn't Kelly not wanting to give it a go? Not that I'm admitting there was anything to give a go,' he added hastily. Inarticulately. And yes, belatedly.

Floss snorted. 'I know it wasn't Kelly, because I know you. You've told yourself it's better to duck out now, before she starts to question what on earth she's doing with an ex-military man with a dodgy shoulder.'

'The address, Floss,' Ben reminded him pointedly. After he'd scribbled it down, he added, 'And ducking out isn't being cowardly, it's being sensible.'

Before Floss could come back at him with some convoluted tale about how love conquers all — since the man had found his happy ever after, he was convinced everyone else got to have one — Ben ended the call. Shoving the emotions, the doubts, to the back of his mind he focussed on what was

important. That niggle in his gut.

Staring back at the address, he realised Stuart's wife lived only a few miles from the lab where Kelly and Stuart worked. Looked like he was heading back east. All he had to do now was pray the wife was in.

His GPS took him to a modern, gated housing estate. A few minutes later he was walking up the drive of an impressive detached house.

The door was opened by a woman who'd probably once been pretty but now looked worn down by life. Bitter. 'Sharon Jennings?'

'Who's asking?' The woman eyed him suspiciously.

'Ben Jacobs. I'm a friend of Dr Kelly Bridge, a colleague of Stuart's.'

'Oh, yes, I've heard of her. Stuart used to bang on about her. Kelly this, Kelly that. Blah, bloody blah.' She let out a hollow laugh.

'I'm actually calling to check how your daughter is,' Ben continued, ignoring his flare of jealousy.

Sharon frowned. 'Lucy? She's fine. Why wouldn't she be?'

'No reason,' Ben replied hastily, realising he had to tread carefully. He didn't know how much Stuart had told his wife of the threat against their daughter. 'There was an unfortunate incident a few days ago involving Dr Bridge and her parents. Everyone is okay and we've caught the men who did it, so there's no need for concern. We're just catching up with families of other staff members, reassuring them that the matter's been dealt with, in case there have been any other threats.'

'I've not heard anything. He might have been a lousy husband but I'm sure Stuart would have told me if there had been.'

'Yes, I'm sure he would,' agreed Ben, his gut firing off those warning signs again. On instinct, he asked, 'Has Stuart ever mentioned a Jon Sullivan to you?'

'Jon was Stuart's best friend at school. Couldn't stand the man myself, but Stuart seemed to like him. They often went out drinking together, leaving me stuck at home with Lucy.'

Ben didn't hear her bitter tone, his head was too busy sounding alarm bells. 'Well, thank you for your time Mrs Jennings.'

His heart raced as he legged it back to the car. Of course, it could just be a coincidence that Stuart had gone to school with Sullivan. And Stuart might have chosen not to worry his wife about the threat against their daughter. Had it been *his* daughter at risk though, Ben would not only have told his wife.

He'd have made damn sure she took his daughter far, far away until everything was over.

Fear surged through him as he phoned through to Panther, escalating higher when he was told he was the closest person they had to the lab. Kelly was fine, he told himself. She would be back at work where there were plenty of people around her. She was safe. The police had been contacted. Security at the lab had been warned Stuart was volatile and not to allow him in.

Instinctively he pushed his foot down harder on the accelerator.

* * *

Kelly checked over the results again and her pulse rose up a notch. Every test she'd repeated so far today, including those she'd done at gunpoint, had backed up the first set of tests. Grinning from ear to ear, she performed a little pirouette to herself. This formulation was so close to being finalised. So close. Immediately she thought of Ben, and how badly she wanted to share this with him. He might not understand the details of what she did, but he, more than her parents, more than her colleagues, understood the important part. How much this meant to her.

But Ben was no longer in her life.

The lab door swung open. 'How's it going?'

'Well, hello. I didn't expect to see you today.' She tried not to look too horrified as she registered Stuart's appearance. Usually so pristine, today his shirt wasn't ironed, his hair not combed. His chin unshaven. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm fine.'

Awkwardness crackled between them and that, together with the sharpness of his tone made her feel uneasy. She could guess the reason behind it though. 'I'm sorry if you feel we let you down, leaving you behind at that place.'

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'Why would you and your soldier friend bother about little old me, huh?'

'It wasn't like that.' Her words sounded hollow, even to her own ears. It had been exactly like that. Aware that Stuart was staring at her oddly, she turned away slightly, pretending to tidy the papers on her workbench. 'You look exhausted, Stuart. After everything you've been through, maybe you should take some time out.'

‘By all accounts you’ve had an equally trying time, yet here you are.’ He stabbed at the air, his eyes sweeping round her lab. ‘Saving the world.’

His voice had an edge to it; harsh, like the expression on his face. Unease crept through her, winding its way round her stomach and pulling tightly. Was she being paranoid? ‘What’s with the sarcasm? I’m finishing what I was working on, that’s all.’ She didn’t think now was a good time to tell him about her discovery. ‘I assumed you’d be taking some time to be with your daughter.’

Bitter laughter echoed around the lab. ‘Is that the daughter I’m barely allowed to see?’

‘I don’t know about that side of your life.’ She tried to keep her voice calm, non-judgemental. ‘You didn’t tell me, remember? But after the threats against Lucy, I’m sure your wife will understand if you want to spend some time with her.’

He smiled, but it wasn’t a smile. It was something twisted and nasty that sent a bolt of alarm racing through her. ‘Maybe,’ he agreed. ‘If there had been any threats.’

Stuart began to walk slowly towards her. Heart thumping violently now, Kelly took an involuntary step back. ‘I don’t understand.’ She felt the hard edge of the workbench jutting into her hips. She had nowhere to move to.

‘Don’t you?’ he whispered, his face jutting right up against hers. ‘A clever girl like you?’

His breath stunk of stale alcohol and now he was this close she could see how clammy his face was, how grey. But it was his eyes that scared her most. They stared at her with pure hatred.

‘You’ve been working with them all along,’ she said slowly, as the truth began to dawn.

Again he unfurled that cruel, twisted smile. ‘I knew you’d get there in the end.’

The air turned sinister and his hands reached to touch her throat, thumbs rubbing menacingly up and down her neck. He’d know how terrified she was now. He’d be able to feel her hammering pulse.

‘Why?’ The strangled question had trouble clearing her airway.

His thumbs pressed lightly on her windpipe. ‘Why not? Perhaps I’d had enough of working under your shadow. *Kelly’s such a genius. Kelly can crack this. We’ve got a real star in Kelly.* Have you any idea how infuriating

it is to be overlooked in favour of a girl five years younger than you?’ He gave her a hard shove, jarring her spine against the bench.

‘But we went on a few dates.’ Her mind, usually so sharp, struggled to unscramble what was happening. ‘I thought you liked me.’

He cackled in her face. ‘Like you? Yeah, having dinner with you wasn’t a hardship, but four dates and all I got was a peck on the cheek? You’re one cold fish.’

Anger mixed with embarrassment — stupid because he’d been the one who’d been lacking. He’d been the one who’d made her feel cold when Ben had filled her with heat. But suddenly none of that mattered, because Stuart was reaching into his pocket and pulling out a knife.

Blind terror slammed through her and she gasped as his eyes took on a desperate, manic look. She needed to keep him talking. Frantically she grappled for something to say. Anything to take his mind off the knife. ‘I still don’t understand.’ She dragged in a breath, trying to remove the tremble from her voice. ‘Why kidnap me? Where did the other men come from? Is Richard involved too?’

Stuart casually flicked the knife around in his hands. Occasionally the blade caught the sun, sparking off a flash of light. ‘The clever girl suddenly doesn’t have the answers, huh?’

‘No, I don’t.’ His eyes narrowed on her and she wondered if pandering to his ego was the right thing to do, or whether it was going to get her killed.

After a few seconds, he smirked. ‘Then let me educate you. Jon and I were buddies at school and we kept in touch. He was always on the wrong side of the law, searching for his next payday, but by God he was pulling in the money. I was the poor sucker who’d studied hard, worked hard but was now living in a crappy flat, watching while my wife took the house and prepared to bleed me dry. Over a few beers we got talking about work, and when I mentioned we worked with smallpox, Jon became excited. Reckoned we could make some money out of it. I told him it was the vaccine, not the virus, but he said it didn’t matter. If rumours were circulated about a new deadly threat in the wrong hands, the vaccine could be worth a fortune.’ Another burst of harsh laughter. ‘Of course it wasn’t me working on the vaccine, was it? Still, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. A chance for me to use that stellar brain of yours to make some serious money. Enough so I could escape this shithole and not have to work again. Even better, my ex

wouldn't be able to get her thieving hands on it.' Eyes wild, he jammed the knife up against her neck. 'Then you and that bloody soldier you hired went and screwed it all up, didn't you? Well, Jon might be behind bars, but thanks to his lies about Richard being the one he was working with, I'm not. And you're going to give us our payday. Starting with the results you've got in your hand.'

The shrill ring from the phone on her desk interrupted him.

She swallowed, the knife pricking her skin. 'I should answer that.'

'I don't think so.' Eyes that were flat and cold stared straight into hers. 'You're going to do exactly as I tell you, or I'll slice open that pretty neck of yours.'

Chapter Thirty-One

The tyres screeched in complaint as Ben threw the car into the institute car park and slammed on the brakes. He prayed that his warning message had reached Kelly. When he'd tried to phone her, the guy he'd been put through to had sourly informed him that no, he wouldn't give out her number but he would give her a message. Of course when Ben had tried to explain the issue; that he feared another one of their respected scientists was about to morph into a psychopath, intent on attacking Dr Kelly Bridge, the guy had clearly not believed a word.

Ben tore into the building, bypassing the retinal scanner and leaping over the pathetic security barrier. As it set off the alarms a surge of adrenaline pumped through his system, helping to keep his mind focussed on the task. Preventing it from wandering into dark thoughts of *what if he was too late?* Please God he'd find her at her bench, hair primly tied back, studying the hieroglyphic mumbo jumbo that spouted out of those complicated machines she loved so much. She'd laugh at him as he stormed into her lab. Then take him gently by the hand and kiss all this fear right out of him.

His hopes of that happening plummeted fast when he caught sight of two burly security men running down the corridor ahead of him.

He raced after them, catching up as they came to a halt outside her lab. Frantically Ben stared through the crack in the blind and his heart froze.

Kelly was a long way from laughing.

Not surprising, as she had a knife pressed against her throat.

For a split-second, fear wound so tightly round him he almost couldn't breathe. Mercifully instinct and training took over.

'I'm with Panther.' He showed his ID to the guards. 'Wait here for the police and leave Stuart to me.' He must have sounded like he knew what he was doing, or maybe they were bricking it at the sight of the knife. Either way they nodded and handed him a keycard. Before taking a big step back.

Ben felt eerily calm as he swiped the card through the lock on Kelly's door.

A second later, he was facing Stuart.

'Get your hands off her,' he said slowly, enunciating every word.

'Well, if it isn't the bodyguard to the rescue.'

Stuart kept the knife firmly jammed against Kelly's throat. A deadly cold blade against soft, warm skin. A spurt of anger pulsed through Ben and instinctively he lurched forward, only to still when Stuart's fingers twitched on the blade. 'One more step and she's dead.'

It was the wildness of Stuart's eyes, rather than the chill of his words, that turned Ben's insides to ice, but he couldn't dwell on either. This was brawn versus brains, and in that he always came out on top. 'Do you have any idea how to actually kill with a knife?' He smirked condescendingly at Stuart. 'The angle to use, the pressure? How long it takes?'

In the nanosecond it took Stuart to digest what he'd said, Ben was onto him. Grabbing at Stuart's shoulders, he tore him away from Kelly. As Stuart lurched back, the knife flashing perilously, Ben landed a punch on Stuart's temple, knocking him to the ground. The bastard was tougher than he looked though, because he tried to struggle to his feet. Forcefully Ben shoved him back down, punching him again. And again. Fighting as an angry man, and not the cold-blooded killer he'd been trained to be.

'Ben, stop!'

It took another second for the anguished plea in Kelly's voice to penetrate the red mist fogging his brain. With one last glare at his bloodied opponent on the floor, he turned to her. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she whispered.

Her face was so pale, her eyes huge. Distracted, heart twisting painfully in his chest, he strode towards her, needing to feel her in his arms. Needing to know she was safe.

Suddenly she screamed. Pivoting, Ben saw the flash of the blade a moment before it landed on his throat. He lunged at the hand carrying the knife, feeling the bite of the blade against his bicep before he grasped Stuart's arm and twisted it ruthlessly. A crunch, followed by an almost primal howl, told him he'd made his mark.

This time, the blow he delivered to Stuart's head knocked him out cold.

* * *

Kelly sat in her office in a daze, tugging her coat around her to try and stop the shakes. She wanted Ben, his arms wrapped around her, but he was busy dealing with the police, who'd arrived three minutes after Ben had knocked out Stuart.

Three minutes during which she could have been killed. Another shudder ran through her and she grabbed at the hot drink offered. For a woman who'd never witnessed violence before this week, she was now a bit of a pro at staring at death and coming out the other side.

'Kelly, my darling.'

At last, a pair of arms. Two pairs, to be precise. Her parents, not Ben, but still very welcome.

'We've just heard what happened. My goodness, are you all right?' Her mother clucked around her, pushing back her hair, peering into her eyes.

'I'm fine, Mum. A bit shaken, but okay.'

'I can't believe Stuart would do this to you.'

No, Kelly couldn't quite believe it either. How had she missed the jealousy that had been eating him up? the world of science she understood most concepts thrown at her. In the world of men, she was pathetically clueless.

She'd had a man take her virginity and flee. A man ask her out only so he could hatch a plot to extort money.

And Ben, who'd probably only slept with her because he'd felt sorry for her.

A fresh wave of tears threatened and she burrowed into her mother's arms.

By the time Ben appeared she'd managed to get herself under control. That was until she looked beyond his tired face to the bandage on his arm.

'You're hurt,' she exclaimed, leaping out of the chair towards him.

Her heart twisted when she saw him stiffen. 'This is the part where I say the knife only nicked my skin. It's nothing serious.' He gave her wry smile. 'Sound familiar?'

Ignoring the *don't touch me* vibes he was hurling her way, she peeped beneath the bandage. 'That's not a nick. It'll need stitches.'

He drew the bandage back over the cut and took a step back, managing to dismiss both her and her concerns in one tidy gesture. 'I'll sort it out when we get out of here.' Somewhat awkwardly he nodded over to her parents. 'Professor Bridge. Dr Bridge.'

'It seems we're indebted to you again.' Her father looked as tired and strained as Ben did. 'If you hadn't realised when you had . . .'

Ben shook his head. 'Should have twigged sooner. Stuart shouldn't have

managed to get this far.'

'That's ridiculous.' Kelly was almost vibrating, she was so angry. Why was he always putting himself down? Then she recalled his touchiness about his intelligence, his shame filled admission that he'd left school with nothing. The fool always thought what he did wasn't good enough, when from what she'd seen he went way beyond what was expected of him. She gentled her tone. 'You were the only one switched on enough to consider that Stuart might be part of this. I didn't. A team of police officers didn't. Panther didn't.' Swallowing a sob, she drew her hand gently down his rugged face. 'Please, for once in your life, accept that you did something special. At least in our eyes. You came to my rescue. Again.'

'It was my privilege, Blondie.' His green eyes lowered and she couldn't tell what he was thinking, though she could have sworn she felt a tremor run through him as he clasped her hand.

Her mother coughed. 'Darling, are you coming back with us?'

Carefully Ben released her hand and took a step back from her. Both physically and emotionally, she thought miserably. It looked like he couldn't get rid of her fast enough. 'I'll be out in a minute, Mum.'

She waited for her parents to leave before turning to face him. He seemed more distant than ever. Restless, anxious to go. 'I guess this means goodbye. Again.'

He sighed deeply before planting a kiss on her forehead. 'This doesn't change anything, Kelly. Everything I said yesterday is still true.'

'Then you'd better go.' Blasted tears welled in her eyes and began streaming down her face. Damn him. Damn all men.

Ben groaned and wrapped his arms around her. 'Hush, Blondie.'

His hands stroked up and down her back. Warm, soothing. It only made her cry harder. 'He wanted me dead,' she whispered shakily. 'What sort of man dates a woman just so he can use her. And then tries to kill her?'

'A sick one,' he replied roughly.

'He told me I was a cold fish. He must have really hated me.'

Ben tilted her face towards his. 'Everything you've said is on him. He was the cold one. Not to mention arrogant, greedy and downright nasty. None of this was your fault. Don't you dare believe what he said about you is true.' He showered her face with a trail of kisses, tasting the salt of her tears. 'You're the sexiest, most passionate, warm-hearted woman I've ever met.'

A strangled sob left her and she pushed him away. 'Yet you don't want me either. I guess I should be grateful you don't want me dead.'

'Stop that,' he muttered harshly. 'You know why I have to go.'

'I know you don't care for me enough to trust my feelings. To trust what we have between us.'

'It's not a matter of trust.' His eyes looked flat, expressionless. 'It's a matter of experience.'

'Oh yes, and I'm woefully lacking in that department, aren't I?' She didn't bother to hide her bitterness.

Ben let out a violent curse, turning away and thumping his hand against the wall. 'Please, let's not part like this.'

The tart response she'd been about to give died on her lips when she caught sight of the agony on his face. She might disagree with his reasons for leaving, might doubt the depth of his feelings for her, but it was clear this wasn't easy for him, either. Drawing in a shuddery breath she took a step towards him and placed a hand on his face. 'Thank you for coming back for me. Thank you for looking out for me.'

He caught her hand. 'Always,' he replied hoarsely. 'I'll always look out for you.'

How, she wanted to ask, when he was about to walk out of her life? But because she didn't want to leave on harsh words either, she put her head against his chest and squeezed him tightly. 'And I will always love you.'

His big body tensed, then shuddered, before his arms wrapped round her and he hugged her back.

A minute later he gently extricated himself from her arms, kissed the top of her head and walked out of the door.

* * *

Ben knew Kelly would never know what it cost him to leave the haven of her arms and walk away. Tears blinded his eyes as he strode down the corridor. Her parents, waiting outside her office, moved towards him, possibly to say something, but Ben didn't stop. He couldn't, because if he did he'd turn right round and wrap Kelly in his arms again. And this time, he wouldn't let go.

And that would end up hurting them both.

So instead he stumbled across the car park, a raw, gaping wound in the

middle of his chest where his heart should be.

As he turned on the engine he punched Charles's number into his phone.

'Jacobs, everything okay? I hear you caught Stuart. Good work.'

'Thanks.'

'If you're calling to request a leave of absence, you've got it.'

'No.' Ben rubbed his eyes, clearing his vision. 'I'm calling to request another assignment. The further away, the better.'

Chapter Thirty-Two

Four months later

As news of the discovery of a vaccine formulation with the potential to counter new strains of smallpox finally hit the scientific press, Kelly wondered if Ben was aware of it. If he knew he'd played a large part in finding a way to counter the threat of smallpox variants as a biological weapon.

It had been four months since she'd told him she'd love him forever, and he'd walked out on her. Only his stormy eyes had betrayed his tortured emotions. If he'd had any second thoughts since though, he certainly hadn't made them obvious. There had been no phone calls, no letters, no knocks on her door in the middle of the night, despite her pathetic hopes that there would be. If it hadn't been for her regular phone calls with Charles, Kelly might have believed Ben had vanished off planet earth.

But no, he'd done as he'd promised. Disappeared out of her life. It was thanks to Charles she knew Ben had endured a long training exercise overseas in practice for a classified mission. And that he was now on that mission.

What Charles couldn't tell her was whether Ben was happy.

'I can't answer that,' he told her in one of their regular catch up calls. 'He's never been one to wear his feelings on his sleeve. He turns up and does the job, Kelly.'

She sighed. 'I need to see him, Charles. How much longer do I have to leave it before I can prove what I feel is real? Another four months? A year?' *He might not care*, the voice in her head told her. *He never told you he did.*

'I can't answer that one either,' Charles replied dryly. 'Look, I'll let you know when he's back in the country. Meanwhile get on with your life and try to forget about him.'

Great advice. If only she could follow it. After saying goodbye, Kelly put down the phone and picked up a cushion, hugging it to her. Where was Ben now? Was he safe?

* * *

Ben was, at that precise moment, also wondering whether he was safe. It

had started out as a simple mission in the Middle East to rescue four charity workers held hostage by a local terrorist group. A task entrusted to Panther as it was considered too politically sensitive to send the military in.

But then two of their four-man team had been captured trying to enter the building, so now there were two to rescue six. And their captors knew they were coming.

‘What’s the plan, Crackers?’

He smiled grimly at the sound of Floss’s voice in his earpiece. ‘I thought that’s what you were meant to tell me.’

‘Hey, don’t get shirty with the man at base. I’m just asking if you’re still okay with plan A.’

‘You mean storm the joint, grab the hostages and run for our lives?’

‘Yeah.’

A laugh borne of weariness rolled out of him. ‘Why not? Tucker and I might only make two, but we’re more than equal to the eight of them.’ Who said he couldn’t do maths? ‘Plus we still have our guys on the inside, if they’ve not been injured. What could possibly go wrong?’

Code for *there was so much that could go wrong, it wasn’t worth planning for*. Ben cut the connection with Floss and sat back against the rock he and Tucker had stationed themselves behind. For the first time since he’d joined the army all those years ago, he thought about the danger he was about to face. Really thought about it. A lot of his career had been spent on training exercises, where death was only temporary, but sandwiched between the exercises had been missions, where the threat of death was very real. It had never really bothered him. He’d had nobody to go home to. Nobody to miss him if he died.

Now, as he waited in the hills of this arid wilderness for night to fall, his mind wandered again to Kelly. A habit he so far hadn’t managed to shake.

‘You think your missus will be worrying about you back home?’ he asked Tucker, the giant of a man sat beside him. His nickname had come from Friar Tuck, on account of his size. In Tucker’s case though, every inch was muscle.

‘Nah. She stopped worrying the first year after we were married. Said she wasn’t going to spend the rest of her life dreading the knock on the door.’ He glanced at Ben. ‘You found anybody to worry about you yet?’

Ben shook his head. ‘Nobody.’ Or had he? Maybe. Perhaps.

‘Rumour has it you and the pretty scientist got cosy.’

Ben grunted. He knew where that had come from, and he couldn’t blame Floss, or the boss. Word had spread the moment Kelly had flung herself into his arms after they’d rescued her parents. ‘It was a heat of the moment thing.’

Tucker shuffled his huge frame so he was lying more than sitting. ‘You sure about that?’

‘Yes. For her, anyway.’ Hell, the thought of possible death must be making him sloppy. Why had he admitted that?

‘Bloody hell.’ Tucker unleashed a monstrous grin. ‘Fast and loose Crackers finally fell in love, eh? Don’t be mad, mate. It happens to the best of us.’

‘Fast and loose?’

‘That’s your reputation. Love ’em and leave ’em.’

Ben winced, though he could hardly refute it. He’d fallen for Kelly and left her, hadn’t he? ‘Yeah, well, you don’t want to believe everything you hear.’ He shut his eyes and practiced breathing deeply, trying to find his control.

‘You ever tell her how you felt?’ Tucker asked after a while.

Ben cursed under his breath. Here they were, two men with guns, preparing to storm a hostile building, and they were talking about his *feelings*? The world had gone mad. ‘Shut the hell up, Tucker,’ he replied bluntly, slipping down against the rock so he could lie down. ‘Get some rest. We move at nightfall.’

Much as he tried though, Ben couldn’t doze. He lay looking up at the cloudless sky, wondering what Kelly was doing. Was she missing him at all? Or was she happily involved with someone else now. An image of her smiling at Charles fluttered across his brain, but he rigidly shut it out.

The hell of it was, Tucker was right. He’d never actually told her how he felt. Great for self-preservation, but not so great when he thought of it from her perspective. If he died tonight she’d live her whole life believing what they’d shared had meant nothing to him, when in fact it had meant everything.

Hadn’t she deserved to know the truth?

* * *

It was early Saturday evening and Kelly was part way through opening a

bag of pasta for her tea. Who said her life wasn't exciting? At the sound of her doorbell, she jumped, spilling some of the pasta onto the work surface. Muttering under her breath — the only people who rang on her bell were delivery men or neighbours who'd locked themselves out — she opened the door to find Charles. And nearly collapsed on the spot.

'Oh God, no, don't tell me.' Clutching her chest, she stared into his eyes, dreading what he was about to say.

He surprised her by cursing, then laughing ruefully. 'Ben's fine, Kelly,' he told her firmly. 'Sorry, I should have known better than to call on you uninvited. It's just I was visiting my mother who lives in the area and, well, it seemed like too good an opportunity to miss.'

Kelly was vaguely aware of Charles continuing to talk to her, but she couldn't take in anything beyond, *Ben's fine*. She stumbled over to the sofa and collapsed onto it. 'Well.' She sat on her hands to try and stop them from trembling. 'You certainly gave me a fright.' Embarrassed now at her overreaction, she laughed awkwardly. 'You must think I'm a right nutter.'

Smiling, Charles went to sit next to her. 'It's me who's the nutter. I didn't think you'd associate me coming in person with bad news.' He shook his head. 'Stupid really, when I think of the times I've had to do exactly that.'

'Is Ben back?' Her heart was still thumping heavily in her chest, but at least it was now more a fast trot than a gallop.

'Yes, that's what I came to tell you. I've not seen him yet, the guys only landed back yesterday, but I hear he's fine. A few scrapes, but nothing serious.' She felt his eyes on her, studying her as she tried to bring herself under control. 'It isn't easy, is it?' he asked finally.

Being away from Ben, worrying about him, vainly hoping for him to come to her . . . no, none of it was easy. 'What isn't?'

'Loving someone. Especially when they do what we do.' Charles sighed and sat back against the sofa. 'Wonder if I'll ever find anyone willing to take both me and the job on, even though I spend most of my time behind a desk these days.'

Kelly smiled over at him. 'You will.' She liked Charles, a lot. Over the last few months she'd come to realise he was kind and easy to talk to, as well as being easy on the eye. The thing she liked most about him though, was his connection to Ben. 'The right woman will support what you do, not be put off by it.'

‘True, but it’s finding her.’ He smiled. ‘Maybe I’ll have to get out in the field more. Do some CP work.’

Kelly rolled her eyes. ‘Not if you’re as stubborn and blinkered as Ben.’

This time Charles laughed. ‘Good point.’ But then his face sobered. ‘Much as I like Ben, I don’t often agree with him. Yet on this occasion I think he was right to do what he did. What you went through was a whirlwind — kidnapping, being forced into close proximity twenty-four seven, held at gunpoint, facing death. In a short time you were bombarded with more emotions than most people experience in a lifetime. You both could be forgiven for confusing feelings of attraction, perhaps relief and gratitude, for something more.’ His gaze sharpened. ‘Has he told you about Katia?’

‘Yes, but how do you know about her? I thought it happened years ago, when he was in Special Forces.’

‘It did, but I’m ex Special Forces, too. I knew Ben then, and saw how cut up it left him, both professionally, because he knew he’d been wrong to allow it to happen, but also personally. By distancing himself, he wasn’t just trying to protect you. He was protecting himself.’

Kelly felt heaviness settle over her chest as she remembered the way Ben’s body had shuddered when she’d told him she loved him. Would it still shudder if she told him now? Or had he forgotten her, in the same way he’d insisted she forget him?

She stood, keen not to dwell on bleak thoughts. They took up enough of her headspace as it was. Tonight she had company to distract her. ‘Where are my manners? Would you like a drink? Actually, I was just about to eat. I know it’s a bit early, but are you hungry?’

A flash of his kind smile. ‘Now that’s an offer I’d find hard to refuse. Are you sure I’m not putting you out?’

‘Not at all. Truth be told, it’s good to have someone to eat with for a change.’

Kelly threw some pasta together and they ate at her glass-topped dining table, Charles carefully answering a selection of the multitude of questions she threw at him about the mission Ben had been on.

She was just about to take a sip of wine when the doorbell sounded.

‘You’re a popular woman,’ Charles remarked as she stood to answer it.

‘Not usually.’

When she opened the door, she nearly collapsed for the second time that evening, though this time it was with delight. ‘Ben!’ she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

* * *

Ben sank into her embrace like a homeless man who’d been given the keys to a castle. He squeezed her back, inhaling the sweet scent that was Kelly. God he’d missed this. Missed her. He’d forgotten how petite she was. How perfectly she fitted into his arms.

‘Good to see you, Jacobs.’

He recognised the voice instantly. Jerking his head up from the softness of Kelly’s hair, his eyes scanned the room behind her. His boss, standing near the dining table. A candle flickering softly between two place settings. Two half-filled glasses of red wine.

Staggering back, Ben pushed Kelly away. As a roaring noise erupted between his ears, something vice-like gripped his heart. ‘My apologies,’ he ground out. ‘I can see I’m interrupting.’

He didn’t wait for Kelly’s reply. He couldn’t bear to hear her apologise or, God forbid, try to explain how she’d fallen for his boss. Instead he slammed the door behind him and legged it down the stairs two at a time, barging past a couple on their way up. The man started to give him a mouthful but Ben could hear nothing above the pounding of his heart.

By the time he reached his truck he was gasping as if he’d run ten miles over gravel. Hauling himself into it, he jammed the thing into gear and tore away, totally unaware of Kelly screaming at him from the bottom of the stairs. His brain began to shut down, too full of pain to function properly, and he drove purely on autopilot. Scenery, towns, traffic were all a blur as the truck ate up the miles back west to his flat.

It was only when he was five miles away that Ben’s mind began to unfreeze and he started to rationalise the situation to himself. Hadn’t he already predicted this? So why was he so damn cut up? Kelly had simply got on with her life, just as he’d told her she would. And let’s face it, she could do a lot worse than Charles.

Charles was steady and good-looking. A decent guy who’d risen to the rank of major in the military, commanding a squadron of elite soldiers. And now ran a well thought of security company.

Unlike Stuart, who aside from turning out to be a nutjob, had always seemed a bit of a tosser, Charles had everything. Including Ben's respect.

The truck had barely come to stop outside his flat before Ben flung the door open and climbed out. Jealousy, anger and a wretched despair raged a war inside him, needing a release. In a haze he climbed the stairs, unlocked his door and made straight for the kitchen, seeking out the whiskey bottle. Unscrewing the top, he took a giant swig, waiting for the burn as it slipped down his throat.

Of course it wasn't the first time he'd faced such bitter loss. Past experience told him he just had to ride out the pain and get on with his life. He put the bottle to his lips and took another gulp. And another.

Then threw it back on the breakfast bar in disgust. Harnessing his rage, he strode to the bedroom and pulled on his shorts and trainers. Moments later he set off down the road.

Running was a better solution than drink. Running kept him fit, which kept him in the job he loved.

Provided Charles didn't kick him out. And as he'd just slammed the door on him, that was a distinct possibility.

Especially when he considered he'd also slammed the door in the face of Charles's girlfriend.

Ben's stomach churned violently, and he heaved gracelessly onto the verge.

Chapter Thirty-Three

‘He’s going to kill himself.’ Kelly’s heart was in her mouth as she watched Ben’s truck hurtle down the road at a terrifying speed.

‘No, he won’t. He’s too good a driver for that.’ Charles clasped her hand and tried to pull her back towards the stairs.

She shrugged it away. ‘No. I’ve got to go after him.’ Manically she began to search the car park for her car, before realising she didn’t have the key on her.

A pair of hands grabbed at her shoulders and gave her a small shake. ‘Snap out of it,’ Charles told her sharply. ‘Take a few deep breaths and calm down.’

Shocked by his tone, Kelly itched to slap him. He must have sensed her intention though, because his hand snapped down on her wrist, locking it in place by her side. She wriggled in his grip several times before realising he was right. She was acting like a crazy woman.

‘Sorry.’ She stilled, taking several gulps of air in an effort to claw back her control. ‘Ben thinks we’re having an affair. He came in, took one look at us and automatically assumed the worst.’

‘Because deep down, that’s what he was expecting. For you to find someone else.’

Bleakly Kelly remembered Ben’s words. How he’d insisted what she felt hadn’t been real. *Tomorrow you’ll find a better catch.*

Pig-headed, stubborn fool.

‘I’ve got to go and talk to him,’ she muttered as they made their way back up the stairs. ‘Make him see his stupid prediction was way off target.’

‘Give him a while to calm down first.’ Charles put his arm round her shoulders and guided her back into her apartment. ‘And give yourself some time, too. I’ll give you his address but I don’t want you driving while you’re like this.’ When they were back inside he went to the kitchen and filled a glass of water. ‘Here, take a drink. Once you’ve stopped shaking, I’ll let you go.’ His eyes ran over her face and his expression turned sympathetic. ‘I’m sure, when his anger has had a chance to cool, he’ll be very happy to hear your side of things.’

‘I hope so.’ Kelly knew she was looking as fragile as she felt. All this

time she'd been longing to see Ben, to talk to him, but now she had a chance to do that, she was plagued with doubts. Not about her own feelings, but about his. He'd called in on her, which had to count for something. But had what he'd witnessed simply reinforced his already blinkered view that they had no future together? Was it jealousy that had made him flee, or humiliation? Anger not at his belief that she'd replaced him, but that she'd replaced him with his boss?

There was only one way to find out.

* * *

Kelly parked outside the purpose-built block of flats and climbed the stairs to the first floor. Her heart was pounding as she rang the bell on the number Charles had given her. No reply. She tried again, her hands trembling so much it took her several attempts to press the button. When there was still no answer she peered through the window, looking for any sign of movement.

Nothing.

In fact *nothing* was a pretty accurate picture of what she could see. There were no pictures on the wall, no ornaments. No touches of home. It was sparse, bare and functional, not too dissimilar from the safe houses they'd stayed in. Was this . . . shell, this soulless space, really where he lived?

Memories of conversations with him flashed back to her; his mother abandoning him, how he'd bounced from foster parents to foster parents before joining the army. Perhaps it was no wonder he didn't know how to make a home. He'd never really had one.

Her heart aching for him, she sat on the step outside his flat and prepared to wait.

She'd been there ten minutes when she heard footsteps bounding up the stairs. A few seconds later Ben appeared, taut muscles flexing beneath his sweat soaked running vest.

'Well, that's a sight I don't see every day. A sexy blonde on my doorstep.'

She hated the flatness in his eyes. The twisted expression on his face.

'Whatever you think you saw, you didn't,' she told him quickly, leaping to her feet.

'No worries, Blondie. You're a free woman,' he drawled, avoiding

looking at her. 'You're entitled to see any guy you want to.' Deliberately he strode past her and opened his front door.

'Are you going to invite me in?'

He wiped at the sweat beading on his face. 'I guess it would be rude not to.'

So, he wasn't going to make this easy for her. She squared up to him. 'I want to explain what Charles was doing at my flat.'

His lips twisted in a sardonic smile. 'I'm not sure explanations are necessary.'

'They are.'

He heaved out a sigh. 'I think I can work it out, but if you're going to insist on a blow by blow account, I need a shower first.' He nodded over to the kitchen. 'Help yourself to a drink.'

For a fraction of a second his eyes held hers and as she glimpsed his pain, she automatically reached out to him, her hand touching his arm. He recoiled, jerking his arm away, his cool, indifferent mask slotting firmly back in place.

Then he swung round and disappeared down the corridor, leaving her to curse at an empty room.

God, he made her angry, she thought as she filled the kettle and slammed it down on the worktop. She was so close to telling him to stuff his drink. If he wanted to play hardball, he could go ahead. She'd come back another day.

But the pain she'd glimpsed had been real. He was hurting. Maybe even as much as she was. So she curbed her anger, made herself a cup of black tea — his fridge was astonishingly empty — and went to sit on the one piece of furniture he had in his front room. A beaten leather sofa.

He emerged a few minutes later dressed in a scruffy pair of jeans and a blue polo shirt, his hair dishevelled, as if he'd rubbed it vigorously with a towel.

'Why did you come round to see me?' she asked, the moment he stepped into the room.

He hesitated for a beat before continuing his journey to the kitchen. 'I can't remember,' he replied casually, pouring himself a glass of water. 'So how long have you and the good major been an item?'

Again he carefully avoided her eyes. Kelly rose to her feet and stood next to him, putting herself in his personal space, forcing him to look at her. 'We. Are. Not. An. Item,' she enunciated slowly. 'He came round to tell me you

were back in the country.’

His eyes flickered her way and she knew she’d surprised him.

‘I’ve been speaking to Charles a lot over the last few months,’ she continued, keeping her body right up close to his. ‘At first I think he was hoping it might lead to something.’

‘I don’t need a degree to figure that one out.’ Clearly uncomfortable with her standing so close he moved away, plonking himself down on the sofa. ‘He’s always had an eye for the ladies.’

‘Maybe, but this lady isn’t interested in him.’ She went to join him, noticing how tightly he held the glass of water. ‘When are you going to get it into your thick skull—’

He flinched, and she almost screamed in frustration.

‘For God’s sake, that’s just a phrase. The only thing thick about you is that you can’t see how much I love you.’

He let out an anguished breath and lurched back against the sofa. ‘Kelly.’

It wasn’t the reaction she’d been hoping for, but she’d come too far to back away now. If he didn’t feel the same way, so be it. She could live with knowing he didn’t love her — it would be bleak, but she could bury herself in her work, as she’d always done. She couldn’t live with him thinking he’d never been loved. Screwing up her courage, she knelt before him and looked deep into his guarded green eyes. ‘I’ve missed you. So much. You were wrong when you said I’d forget all about you. I haven’t. I *can’t*. The only reason I kept in touch with Charles was to hear what you were up to. I needed to know what you were doing. That you were safe.’ Was she getting through to him? She couldn’t tell, his expression was still so shuttered. ‘Charles came over to see me only because he knew I wanted to know the moment you were back. He knew I was done with hanging around, waiting for you to come to your senses. Knew I was planning on doing exactly what I’m doing now. Telling you I love you.’ She paused, heaving some air into her tight chest. ‘I loved you four months ago,’ she told him quietly, looking directly into those gorgeous eyes. ‘I love you now and I will continue to love you until the day I die.’

His eyes began to glisten and her heart flew into her mouth. As he rubbed furiously at them, she touched his cheek. ‘Now tell me why you came round to see me.’

* * *

Ben couldn't breathe. His heart felt like a boulder, pulling painfully in his chest. Had he really got this all wrong? She *wasn't* interested in Charles?

Hope, so wild, so unfettered it was terrifying, rose inside him and he clutched at her hand, holding it to his face. 'When I was away.' Hell, he sounded like he'd swallowed a bag of razors. Clearing his throat, he started again. 'When I was away, I realised there was a chance I could die and I'd never told you how much you meant to me.'

'Oh, Ben.' Her arms wrapped around him and she squeezed him. How could such puny things feel so solid? Grip him so tightly? One of his bruised ribs complained, but he relished the pain. As long as she held him, as long as she continued to gaze at him like he'd just told her something vitally important, his ribs could ache all they liked. 'Will you tell me now?'

Unbelievably, he felt a smile tug at his lips. God, he'd thought he'd never smile again. 'I might.' Her hand twitched and he immediately grabbed hold of it. 'Whoa, hold off, Tiger. My ribs aren't up to one of your prods at the moment.'

'You're hurt?' she exclaimed, immediately moving away. 'Why didn't you say?'

'Because with your arms round me, I didn't notice.' And yes, he felt like a right sappy twit saying it, but it was worth the dent to his masculinity when her eyes softened.

'If that's your way of telling me how you feel, I'll gladly take it.'

'No. You deserve more than that.' He drew in a breath and blurted out the words in his heart. 'I love you, Blondie.'

As tears filled her eyes he hauled her onto his lap. Ribs be damned.

'Was that really so hard to admit?' she asked once he'd finished smothering her face with kisses. 'I know you've been hurt in the past, but I'm not your mum. And I'm certainly not that cold-hearted bitch you fell for.'

A laugh rumbled out of him. 'I love it when you talk dirty.'

'And just in case you didn't hear me the first time, I'll tell you again. I love you. And I'm not going anywhere.'

Love blazed from her eyes, making them larger and bluer than ever. 'I love you, Dr Kelly Blondie Bridge. So damn much,' he croaked. Months of holding back, and now he couldn't seem to stop saying it. 'I tried to stay

away, but I couldn't.'

Cradling her in his arms, he buried his nose in her soft blonde hair and, for a few blessed moments, found peace. It wasn't long before his insecurities reared up again though, intruding on his joy. 'It doesn't mean I'm convinced this can really work between us. I'm scared shitless that it won't.'

'If you're going to give me any more bollocks about you being a dumb ex-soldier and me being a super clever scientist, I'll break off your balls.' To emphasise her point, she placed her hand over the parts in question.

He smothered a laugh. 'I'd rather keep them, if you don't mind. They're pretty important to me.' He covered her hand with his own, keeping it in place, letting her feel the affect she was having on him. 'I plan to put them to good use in a little while.'

That made her smile, but she was still looking at him earnestly. 'I know you don't know the details of what I do in the lab, Ben, but I won't know the details of what you do either, so we're even.' Her hot lips descended on his and she kissed him. What with that, the heat in her eyes, and the feel of her hand on his rapidly expanding fly, she was slowly driving him crazy. But still she was talking. 'I don't want someone who can talk science to me. I have enough of that at work. I want someone who can make me feel alive. Who makes me happy just by staring at me the way you're doing now.'

'I can certainly manage that,' he muttered, seizing the initiative and kissing her back, hungrily, passionately, putting all his feelings into it. He was pushing her down on the sofa, his hand undoing the buttons of her blouse, when he suddenly stopped. 'What about my job? I'll be away for chunks of time. Some women can't handle that.'

'Will you be able to handle my obsession with work? There'll be times it will feel like I'm at the lab more than I'm at home.'

'Guess we'll both have some adjusting to do.' Considering the alternative, not having her in his life at all, he'd take what was offered and be forever grateful. Slowly his eyes drank her in, this extraordinary woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. 'Tell me you'll marry me,' he blurted. 'Not now, but in a few months. A few years. I don't care. Just tell me that's where we're heading. That those three coins in Rome are going to work out.'

Bright eyed and flush faced, she smiled up at him. 'You love giving orders, don't you?'

‘I mean it,’ he said, his voice now carrying a desperate edge. ‘You don’t need to take my name. I understand Dr Bridge has a reputation as this top-notch, vaccine adju doodah expert, but you’re going to take my ring. Please,’ he added, clearly just in time because she laughed.

‘Number one, I’ll marry you tomorrow, if that’s what you want.’ Her fingers trailed a path slowly, sensuously, through his hair. ‘Number two, I’d be honoured to take your name. Number three, what ring?’

‘The ring I’m going to buy you tomorrow.’ He caught her hand so she couldn’t distract him. ‘You’ll wear it so all those other men will know you’re mine. Only mine.’

‘Seems fair,’ she agreed, taking back her hand and moving it over his lips. ‘And your heart? Do I get that as well?’

‘You know you do. You’ve had it since the day I watched you deliver that lecture in Rome, and the only words I understood were good afternoon.’

She gave him a soft, sweet smile. One loaded with amusement, and love. ‘Are you really trying to tell me I had you at good afternoon?’

He laughed, utterly slayed by her. ‘No way. I’m not that corny. You had me at adju doodah.’

THE END

Thank You

I get so much pleasure out of writing a book — spending months in a fantasy world with my perfect hero, what's not to love?! The greatest pleasure though, comes from hearing that others have enjoyed the fantasy I've created. I'm not alone in that. Authors love feedback — it can inspire, motivate, help us improve. It can also help spread the word. So if you feel inclined to leave a review on the platform you purchased this book on or on Goodreads, I would be really grateful. And if you'd like to contact me (details are under my author profile) I'd be delighted to hear from you.

Kathryn x

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This has been the hardest book I've written to date. I can't blame Ben and Kelly — I enjoyed every moment of their blossoming romance. I especially enjoyed wise-cracking tough guy Ben and seeing how he coped with protecting — or as he'd once blithely assumed babysitting — the brilliant Dr Kelly Bridge.

But there were times I asked myself why I'd thought it was a good idea for Kelly to be a world renowned vaccine expert, working to develop a way to beat weaponised smallpox. I mean, what do I know about viruses, vaccines and bioterrorism?! My previous life in the pharmaceutical industry had clearly lulled me into believing this would be easy to write about.

It wasn't.

So I hope you'll forgive any inaccuracies, and understand this is clearly a work of fiction; developing vaccines is a lot more complicated than this.

I did have help with some of the details though. A sincere thank you to Jane Wynen-Zeller who, when I was floundering around trying to find information on vaccine development, provided me with a brilliant textbook to help me on my way. And huge thanks to Janet Ditchfield, a great friend who was kind enough to read through the more 'scientific' text and make sure even though the concept of a vaccine against all smallpox strains is pure fiction, Kelly's explanation of the science behind it wasn't too far off the mark.

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My fabulous editor. If you'd read the version of *Crikey a Bodyguard* that my editor first read — thank heavens you can't — but if you could, you'd know how good she is.

Book Bloggers. Their enthusiasm for reading, and amazing support of writers, is humbling. Special thanks to Rachel Gilbey (Rachel's Random Reads), Kaisha (The Writing Garnet), Hayley (Hayleyreviews10), Joanne (Portobello book blog) and Anne Williams (BeingAnne) who've been there from the start of my writing journey.

My husband. He bravely reads and critiques every one of my manuscripts, including this one. He calls this the 'shower book' because in the version he read, he reckons that was all they did. I don't like admitting he's right too often, but I did delete a few shower scenes . . .

My mum. She wouldn't choose to read a book about a bodyguard. But I know she'll read it because I wrote it.

Finally, but most importantly of all, thank you for buying and reading *Crikey a Bodyguard*. I hope you enjoy the story of Ben and Kelly and that their time on the run leaves you saying silently to yourself, just once. 'Crikey.'

About the Author



Kathryn was born in Wallingford, England but has spent most of her life living in a village near Windsor. After studying pharmacy in Brighton she began her working life as a retail pharmacist. She quickly realised that trying to decipher doctors' handwriting wasn't for her and left to join the pharmaceutical industry where she spent twenty happy years working in medical communications. In 2011, backed by her family, she left the world of pharmaceutical science to begin life as a self-employed writer, juggling the two disciplines of medical writing and romance. Some days a racing heart is a medical condition, others it's the reaction to a hunky hero. . .

With two teenage boys and a husband who asks every Valentine's Day whether he has to bother buying a card again this year (yes, he does) the romance in her life is all in her head. Then again, her husband's unstinting support of her career change goes to prove that love isn't always about hearts and flowers — and heroes can come in many disguises.

For more information on Kathryn:

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Also by Kathryn Freeman

CHRISTMAS WISHES

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TOO CHARMING

SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

BEFORE YOU

TOO DAMN NICE

OH CRUMBS

CRIKEY A BODYGUARD

A Selection of Books You May Enjoy

SUMMER IN SAN REMO BY EVONNE WAREHAM



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C6R32M6L

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6R32M6L

Anything could happen when you spend summer in San Remo . . .

Running her busy concierge service usually keeps Cassie Travers fully occupied. But when a new client offers her the strangest commission she's ever handled she suddenly finds herself on the cusp of an Italian adventure, with a man she thought she would never see again.

Jake McQuire has returned from the States to his family-run detective agency. When old flame Cassie appears in need of help with her mysterious client, who better than Jake to step in?

Events take the pair across Europe to a luxurious villa on the Italian Riviera.

There, Cassie finds that the mystery she pursues pales into insignificance, when compared to another discovery made along the way . . .

SPRING ON RENDEZVOUS LANE
BY ANGELA BRITNELL



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C4YTG7B4

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C4YTG7B4

Recently widowed mom Sandy Warner and her young son Chip are ready for a fresh start.

It's just what they need after the death of Chip's dad. Somewhere new where there are no painful questions about the past.

They're soon taken under the wing of lovely Beth, the elderly Grandma living next door.

When Beth suddenly gets sick, her grandson Taran arrives to look after her. He just happens to be gorgeous — and has an irresistible British accent. Sparks fly, but Sandy and Taran both have their baggage.

Taran's a food blogger with a taste for adventure, not suburbia. And Sandy's

priority is being a good mom to Chip. The last thing she's looking for is romance . . . isn't it?

This heart-warming story is perfect for fans of Meghann Quinn, Portia Macintosh, C.J. Connolly and Beth Moran.

SUMMER AT SERENITY BAY
BY HELEN BRIDGETT



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C5RQYVNS

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C5RQYVNS

What happens when you send a city girl to a tiny seaside village?

Career girl Chloe Walsh is in need of some TLC. Her boyfriend was unfaithful and her job was at a dead end.

She's leaving London to get away from it all and visiting her best friend Roisin in Serenity Bay.

But little does she know that her kooky friend has a master plan to breathe some life into the sleepy seaside village through a new wellness retreat. And she needs Chloe's expertise.

Sparks fly with hunky Andy from the Surf Shack when he offers a helping hand. But Chloe swears not to be distracted by his sparkling eyes and perfect

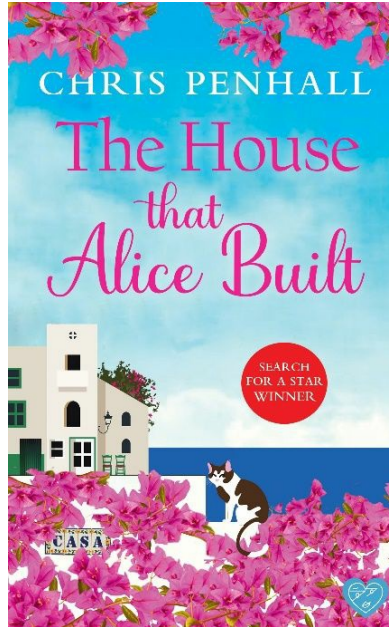
abs . . .

Then she attracts the attention of a major TV company, and before she knows it a clique of celebrities descend on Serenity Bay to film a new reality TV show.

Will the scandalous flings be left to the celebs, or could Chloe find some romance of her own?

This fun and flirty rom-com is perfect for fans of Emily Henry, Phoebe MacLeod, Jo Thomas, Emma Bennet and Shari Low.

THE HOUSE THAT ALICE BUILT
BY CHRIS PENHALL



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0C6FJWLQR

US www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6FJWLQR

She was renovating her house, but maybe now she can renovate her whole life . . .

Alice Dorothy Matthews is nothing if not sensible. She leaves the adventures to other people, in particular, her best friend Kathy, who's living it up in Portugal. Alice is renovating her house in London while her insufferable ex, Adam, travels the world.

Alice tells herself she's fine just the way things are. But then a postcard from Buenos Aires turns her life upside down . . . Her ex wants to sell the house that they bought together.

So Alice does something spontaneous for the first time in many, many years. She joins Kathy in sunny Portugal.

Alice feels alive for the first time in forever. She remembers how she used to be carefree and adventurous. Can she find her way back to the person she used to be?

Then her newfound sense of self begins to attract the attention of gorgeous — and arrogant — Luis . . .

Will Alice realize that you don't always need a house to find a home?