

# THE PLAYBOY FIREFIGHTER'S PROPOSAL

Emily Forbes



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# **The Playboy Firefighter's Proposal**

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From playboy to bridegroom  
Dr Sarah Richardson has never thought of herself as beautiful after a childhood heart transplant left its scar. She's always kept her mind firmly on work – until firefighter Ned Kellaway arrives on the scene...

Charismatic, courageous and irresistibly sexy, Ned has always been the centre of female attention – and loves every minute of it! But something in Sarah's innocent grey eyes mesmerises him, and for the first time in his life Ned realises he wants far more than a fling! Now it's up to this too-hot-to-handle firefighter to show Sarah that her beauty, inside and out, has melted away his playboy streak and he wants to give her his heart – for good!

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**‘Come here and I’ll show you again just how perfect you are.’**

He pulled her into his arms, sliding his hands under her T-shirt as he kissed her, leaving her head spinning. He hadn’t rejected her. He’d called her perfect. In wonder, she kissed him back while her body melted beneath his touch. Thoughts twirled in her mind until, out of the kaleidoscope of images and words, one truth emerged and flashed behind her closed lids: she was in love with Ned. She was in love with this gorgeous, thoughtful daredevil of a sweet-talking firefighter.

And although she was still scared, although it had been years since a man—or anyone except her sister—had seen her naked, the shock of her realisation was enough to jolt her into action as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He hadn’t rejected her—and from the way he was talking would it be so very foolish to start hoping this might be more than a one-night stand?

**Emily Forbes** is the pseudonym of two sisters who share both a passion for writing and a life-long love of reading. Beyond books and their families, their interests include cooking (food is a recurring theme in their books!), learning languages, playing the piano and netball, as well as an addiction to travel—armchair is fine, but anything involving a plane ticket is better. Home for both is South Australia, where they live three minutes apart with their husbands and four young children. With backgrounds in business administration, law, arts, clinical psychology and physiotherapy, they have worked in many areas. This past professional experience adds to their writing in many ways: legal dilemmas, psychological ordeals and business scandals are all intermeshed with the medical settings of their stories. And, since nothing could ever be as delicious as spending their days telling the stories of gorgeous heroes and spirited heroines, they are eternally grateful their mutual dream of writing for a living came true.

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A MOTHER IN THE MAKING

EMERGENCY AT PELICAN BEACH

**Dear Reader**

Life is full of competing wants, needs and desires: having designs on that chocolate versus knowing we’ve vowed to resist temptation; wanting to stay home on the couch in our slippers when we’ve already accepted an invitation.

So it’s vital that sometimes life makes things easy, with no debate about what we should do. No internal struggle. No guilt. Just pleasure.

It’s in whole-hearted support of this Pleasure Principle that I give you Ned Kellaway, the charismatic firefighting hero of THE PLAYBOY FIREFIGHTER’S PROPOSAL.

If you’ve read my last book, EMERGENCY: WIFE NEEDED, you’ve already made Ned’s acquaintance. Ned is a shameless playboy with a life-is-for-the-living attitude, and—I admit it—I was his from the first. I just had to spend more time with him.

Ned was born with a thirst for all things action. He’s the team leader for the Fire Service’s Emergency Response team. Built to make any girl feel protected, he’s also scorching in the looks department. And, although no woman has been able to get inside his head, none are complaining about getting inside his bed. It’s going to take a pretty special woman to make him question his playboy lifestyle and get him to face his own past. Is Sarah Richardson, emergency consultant, the woman to do it?

So grab some chocolate, find somewhere cosy, turn the page and meet Ned Kellaway. And when you’re interrupted, as you surely will be, ignore all demands and put your nose back in the book! Trust me, the right to indulge in a book is definitely enshrined as a Pleasure Principle.

Love

*Emily Forbes*

# THE PLAYBOY FIREFIGHTER'S PROPOSAL

BY  
EMILY FORBES



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**My darling littlest daughter, you came into our lives just as this book was being finished, so it's only right this one is for you. We waited a long time for you, and the moment we saw you it all made sense: we were meant to be together. You have enriched our world in so many ways already, daily bringing us joy and sunshine and laughter. May the future shower you with every blessing and may you always know how very dear you are to all of us and how greatly you are loved.**

**From my heart to yours and back again,**

**Your loving Mummy**

CHAPTER ONE

NED KELLAWAY scanned the racecourse from his vantage point in the grandstand, absorbing the impact as the disarray grew before his eyes. It was chaos, utter chaos, and far worse than he'd anticipated.

He was loving every minute of it.

He'd love it even more if he could get down there into the thick of things. Instead, when the emergency services and medical response teams arrived on site, he'd have to sit back and watch as they responded to the crisis. 'Sit back and watch' were not words in his vocabulary.

His gaze swept the area again as he marvelled at how all his planning had successfully brought this to fruition. Littering the ground in front of him were dozens and dozens of prostrate bodies, some immobile, many struggling to their feet, most bloodied. Voices carried up to him on the breeze as people called out in pain. Just as many were lying silently.

The adrenalin coursing through his body made it an almost impossible feat to simply stand and observe. The mass casualties would require medical attention and there were fatalities, too, requiring a response of a different sort. He mentally checked off the list of things that needed to happen, including the task of overseeing the rollout of all the emergency response teams, a role that would normally be his since his skills in this area were second to none. Today, his expertise was exactly the reason why he wasn't down there, taking control. He was needed for another task. But that didn't mean he was finding it easy, sitting here, excluded from the action, prevented from taking control and restoring order, watching someone else do his job.

In the midst of the chaos was a fifty-seater bus, now containing considerably fewer than fifty seats, and this drew his focus. The bus's left-hand side had been ripped open by the force of the explosion, the metal casing peeled back like a tin can, its interior exposed. Above the back wheels, where there should have been a row of seats, was a gaping hole. Luggage was strewn on the ground around the bus and lying amongst the bags were the injured passengers.

In the time Ned had taken to process the scene a few passengers had gathered their wits and were now moving between the prone figures. It wasn't clear if they were trying to offer assistance, staggering about in shock or simply searching for people lost in the confusion.

To his right, a second bomb had detonated inside the bus terminal and more people were pouring out of the building, further congesting the space around the damaged bus. Visibility was compromised by smoke, a fact that would create another set of problems for the emergency teams.

The noise was increasing now as people realised what had happened. Voices rang out, yelling over the top of one another in an effort to be heard, growing louder and more desperate as the seconds ticked on.

Ned took a deep breath, anticipation of the imminent arrival of the emergency service vehicles sending more adrenalin through his system. He rubbed his hands over his head, leaving his short hair sticking up at all angles, as he cast his gaze across the scene once more.

And then he heard sirens. The bomb victims heard them too and ceased their yelling momentarily as they listened to confirm the sound.

The emergency personnel were on their way.

The first crews to arrive would be from the fire department. He glanced at the stopwatch in his hand, timing the response. Getting here quickly was the easy part—the real tests were all in front of the men and women hurtling towards the racecourse, with scant knowledge as to what they'd be facing on arrival.

But from where he was standing, having to watch was a hundred times harder than dealing with disaster hands on.

Sarah stood a couple of rows behind the others. She needed the extra height and it was the only way to get it since stiletto heels weren't an option in her line of work. If ever she was keen for a view, it was today, to watch the planned event unfold. With her clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other, she stood rocking on her heels on the top step, clicking the pen on and off as she watched the scene below. Most of the bomb victims were milling around in a dazed manner. It wasn't easy for her as a trained emergency doctor to sit back and observe but today that's what her job was. As part of the team who'd put this training exercise together, it was her role to instruct the medical members of the first responder unit, those men and women who were the first emergency personnel on the scene at any disasters classed as CBR—chemical, biological or radiological—incidents.

And there was no use pretending she wasn't just as aware of Ned Kellaway. It didn't escape her notice that he, like her, had tilted his head a touch to the side as the sirens became audible. It didn't escape her notice that he was as focused, professional and in control as she'd have expected from the man she'd come to know a little over these last weeks as they'd worked together to bring today to fruition. And it didn't escape her notice that, despite all this, he was as breathtakingly charismatic as ever. If anything, these surroundings only added to his many attractions. It must be the whole men-in-uniform thing, she told herself, so as not to be too badly distracted from the training simulation.

It was what they were here for, after all. The moment of truth. After weeks of planning, they were about to see how the teams performed. The sense of excitement was mixed with tense anxiety in case any of them fell below standard, a guaranteed result of the day. Which team would prove to be the weakest link? Glancing along the rows below her at the people she'd worked with intensively she saw Lucas, from the police force, and Neill, from the State Emergency Services, were deep in discussion. Angie, the liaison officer for the ambulance service, was standing slightly apart, seemingly focused on scanning the arena below. They all had to be taut with expectation but she could see no outward signs. Hopefully her own tumult of feelings was similarly veiled.

A few policemen were already on site but larger numbers of police and paramedics would follow the fire department. If the disaster was on a large enough scale doctors would be called to the scene from the city hospitals' emergency departments. That would happen here. Soon.

Today's disaster was large-scale. It had been planned that way.

The fire department would be responsible for controlling the situation and her team would be under their command.



Thinking of the fire department inevitably bought her attention back to the man who, in a real-life situation, would most likely be the incident controller.

Ned Kellaway. A station officer with the Metropolitan Fire Service, he was currently the man in charge of the first responder unit, which included all the emergency service departments as well as the medicos.

Since he was sitting below her, a few seats to her right, she could observe him without him knowing. Of all the members of the team, he'd made the biggest impression on her. And on every other female whose path he'd crossed. The man had universal appeal. She'd seen his charm in action as he'd bantered with the females on the team, herself included. And there was no denying she'd found herself enjoying it when it had been directed her way.

Now he was sitting on the edge of his chair, leaning forwards as though the seat was too small to contain his big frame. His elbows propped on his knees and his chin resting on his hands, he appeared to be concentrating hard.

His fireman's casual uniform, a short-sleeved navy T-shirt, stencilled with 'MFS' across the back, showed off tanned, muscular arms and hugged his torso. His broad shoulders were nicely square and his back tapered to a narrow waist. She knew he worked out as there wasn't an ounce of excess weight on him. His short brown hair was spiking up. He had a habit of running his fingers through it, leaving it standing on end. Did he know he did that?

Then again, more importantly, why did *she* know it was a habit? Had she really been paying him that much attention? She scanned his rear view again, noting the turbulence in her belly that had little to do with the drama unfolding below them and everything to do with finding Ned ridiculously attractive. No use denying it, she'd mastered paying him attention.

The sirens were at earsplitting levels now, indicating the pace below was about to pick up. Ned made a move to stand and she ran hungry eyes over the stretch of his T-shirt across his back as he eased himself from his chair. He turned to the group at large and suggested they all join him so they could discuss the event as it progressed.

The day was about to spin to a whole new level and there'd be no more opportunities for meaningless fantasies. She may be new to this side of emergency medicine, her CBR training may only be recent and largely untested, but she'd worked for several years in the emergency department of Adelaide's biggest hospital and she knew when craziness was about to happen.

She'd save her mental images of the man in the dark blue T-shirt for later.

There was no risk of her fantasies coming to anything, but that didn't mean she couldn't indulge in a harmless bit of daydreaming later on. When the team was disbanded and she and Ned Kellaway no longer crossed paths, she'd be glad of the daydream material. She shelved her vague feeling of unease that she'd be diving into her store of memories the first chance she got. Tonight, maybe.

Sarah Richardson was in control.

Sarah Richardson was not looking for a relationship. Or casual sex. Or anything that involved taking her clothes off, for that matter.

Which, she told herself as she followed the others down the stairs to gather in the aisle with Ned, was exactly why it was about time she had a store of knee-weakening, butterfly-inducing images to keep her company.

Men were not an option.

The group came together, forming a cluster along the balcony railing, awaiting the imminent swarm of emergency crews.

Of all the group, only one held Ned's personal interest.

Sarah.

He watched her as she made her way to where he stood. She had a determined expression in her grey eyes, eyes that gave her petite features a gravity and depth that was intriguing. He was finding out that he liked intriguing. Very much.

In the numerous hours this team had spent together over the last weeks, he'd got a handle on most of the group, with the notable exception of Dr Sarah Richardson, who was still proving a bit of a mystery. She commanded respect and had been on top of her game in the hours of meetings, despite the fact she was relatively new to CBR work. On those few occasions when they'd gone for a drink at the end of the day or taken a coffee-break, he'd liked her tendency to sit back and observe, then add a droll remark that neatly summed up the matter under discussion or had him in stitches. Hers was an intellect quietly on show but not paraded to make others feel inferior.

Considerate, respectful of others' views. There were plenty of words he'd come up with to describe her. And yet he was still grappling with a very real sense of knowing nothing about her, a sense she was holding back something of herself. She was definitely more reserved than the rest, and several times he'd sensed she'd started to let her guard down but the next time they'd met the barriers would be up again. She seemed almost wary of him. Who knew why that was? But he had a feeling that if he could discover her secret it would be worth the effort.

Sarah came quietly to his side, the group now complete. What would she do if she knew he was interested? Most women made their attraction to him quite obvious, yet Sarah seemed immune to him. The thrill of the unknown coursed through him. Combined with the challenges of today, the feeling of being on the brink of uncharted territory was heady stuff.

Suppressing a secret half-grin, he crouched to pick up the whiteboard at his feet, straightening as the leading fire appliance pulled up and the firefighters emerged from the cabin, wearing full protective gear, ready to deal with this emergency. His team. The knowledge sent yet another rush of excitement flooding through his veins.

He glanced at the whiteboard on which he'd written the duties and responsibilities of the first responders so each task could be checked off and comments added as the observing team thought of them.

The police and paramedics arrived hot on the heels of the fire department. Ned turned to Lucas and Angie, the police and ambulance liaison officers, who were standing on his right, and angled his whiteboard so everyone could see the list as he read out the next item and they each concentrated on checking off their team's roles. Conversation had stopped when the fire crews had appeared, their white-suited bulk intimidating even to this group of experts.

'Isolate the incident and secure perimeter,' said Ned, quoting from the whiteboard the procedure he knew by heart.

'Easier said than done,' Lucas commented. 'Now I can actually see it, it's almost impossible for my people to secure the area.' The injured commuters were actors, hired for the day to play specific roles—walking wounded, unconscious, seriously injured, unharmed and dead—and they were all giving award-winning performances.

'Securing the area was always going to be a challenge,' Ned replied. 'An open arena like this is the hardest to contain. That's what makes it the perfect test scenario. And as for the actors, it's probably a career highlight for most of them. No surprise they're playing it to the hilt but they seem to be following directions.'

'I imagine that's proving hard,' said Sarah, and Ned

found himself giving her his full attention, much more so than to Lucas, 'for those actors told to be mortally wounded and lie still. Can you imagine lying motionless while everyone around you is getting their big break, running amok, covered in fake blood and screaming?'

Ned laughed. 'You think we might have real need for the medicos when the bad blood spills? Hope you're ready for action.' She had no idea how much he hoped she was ready for some action.

He turned his attention back to the racecourse, adjusting his earpiece to listen in on the fire department's frequency. Each of the exercise-writing team observing had an earpiece to listen to their own team's conversations without interfering with each other. The others in the group peeled

off nearby to discuss and watch, leaving Ned pleased with how things had worked out: he had Sarah to himself, for the next little while at least.

‘Ned, I’ve never seen a simulation like this and I’ll never get to see this stage if there’s a real situation,’ Sarah said. ‘Medicos wouldn’t be on the scene yet. Can you explain what everyone’s doing, if it won’t interrupt your assessment?’

Things were getting better and better. Now she was seeking out his time, thinking it might be an inconvenience when it was nothing but a pleasure.

‘Sure. And as for finding it hard to make sense of it down there, remember none of us has organised something on this scale before. This is a first for Adelaide and it’s a lot easier to follow on paper. I was part of simulations in my CBR training in Canada last year but never from this angle. I was in the thick of the action. Today is just as much about giving this team...’ he indicated their group ‘...training in overall management as it is about getting the specialists down there ready...’ he nodded at the racecourse ‘...if there’s ever such an event.’ Ned located his IC as he spoke. ‘You see Tony down there?’ He pointed to where a man was standing about ten feet east of the bus. ‘He’s the acting incident controller. He’s doing my job today. First, he’s trying to establish control, making sure everyone is doing what he’s asked them to or knows their role. He’s got to know what’s going on at all times. He’ll get the “warm zone” set up around him, sealing off the bus and the terminal. You’d deal with him once you arrived at the scene, as you know.’

She nodded, totally absorbed in the scene below them and his descriptions. If he moved just a few inches to his right, they’d be touching. The thought was delicious.

‘Triage happens inside the “warm zone” before victims are moved through into the “cold zone” for treatment, evacuation or assembly,’ she quoted from the procedure they knew so well, presumably oblivious to the effect she was having on him. ‘How do you think the police are managing with making sure people don’t leave the scene?’

‘I won’t trespass on Lucas’s turf by commenting, but I can tell you the bomb squad is getting warm on their search for other explosive devices.’ He touched her arm to show her where he was looking.

‘So there are more out there.’ She flicked him a sideways glance, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. ‘Not just the two we’ve already seen?’

‘Let’s see what they find.’ Ned grinned. ‘The whole point of this exercise is to test everyone’s skills—may as well go the whole hog.’

She laughed. ‘Somehow I think going for broke comes naturally to you,’ she said before turning away again quickly, like she’d said too much and unintentionally strayed into personal territory. ‘And the firemen going into the betting ring, what are they doing?’ Her change of topic was swift but he stored the information away with relish: he had to have been on her mind for her to make a personal comment about him.

‘They’ll be taking readings to check for any radioactive signals. They’ll also check for flammable gases and check oxygen levels. The site is pretty open so that shouldn’t be a problem but we don’t want people leaving the scene if there’s been any contamination.’

Sarah held her hand up to her ear as information came through her earpiece. ‘The call’s gone out for more medical support. Let’s see how long it takes the hospital team to get here.’

‘How long do you reckon?’

‘Fifteen minutes from either the city or down south.’

‘Though they’re expecting this callout, so in a real event you’d have to add on an extra ten minutes to give them time to get ready to go.’

‘So the paramedics will do their thing for about half an hour before we’d even get here?’

‘That’s it, but in a situation like this there’ll still be plenty of work for your team.’

People were starting to gather at the assembly point now. Victims who were mobile were being directed to the police officers who would take statements in case anyone had any pertinent

information. They would also keep a list of names to help with enquiries. Those people who were hurt but didn't need treatment on site would be transported to the nearest hospitals but only once it had been determined if there was any contamination. It was imperative the site be contained until that was confirmed or ruled out. Ned noticed a line of ambulances coming onto the racecourse, arriving in an almost constant stream now, closely followed by the media.

'Take a look at that,' Ned said to Sarah as he jotted times and notes on his whiteboard. 'The newshounds arrived before your guys.'

'How did they know to come?'

'They monitor 000 calls.'

'But there haven't been any emergency calls. This is a training exercise.'

'I might have had something to do with that. Call it a dose of reality for the crews down there. Having to deal with television cameras trying to get the perfect shot for the evening news will test most of us. Tony will have to release a statement and the reporters will be after interviews with the section chiefs.'

'You've thought of everything.' He was pretty sure that was appreciation in her voice.

'We'll soon find out.'

'What happens now?'

'My guys will let your lot through to areas that have been declared safe and the paramedics will direct you to the most critically injured. Basically, triage continues with more hands on deck. Now all the teams have arrived, it's time we went down into the thick of things. It's far easier to find out what problems they're experiencing while it's happening, rather than waiting for feedback later.'

Without waiting for an answer he reached over the seat in front of him and grabbed a handful of fluorescent jackets marked 'Fire Department'. 'We'd better put these on inside out. We don't want to be given jobs to do,' he said with a grin. 'We just want to blend into the crowd.' He shrugged into the orange jacket and picked up his two-way radio.

Together, they ducked and weaved through the crowds. In the thick of the chaos it was difficult to get a good grasp of the scenario, and difficult to sort the high noise levels into anything meaningful. The wail of sirens split the air periodically as emergency vehicles continued to arrive. Closer to the centre of the scene, the moans of the injured competed with the shouted instructions and directions from the emergency teams, who were trying to restore some semblance of order.

The noises, particularly those of the victims, were manufactured but it gave an accurate sense of how difficult it would be in a real scenario to determine who needed priority attention. Everywhere, injured people lay, sat and stumbled, making progress through the throng slow.

'How hard is it to be among all these potential patients and not be able to roll up your sleeves?'

She thought for a moment. 'Disconcerting. But that might be more to do with the fact that the more enthusiastic actors among them are coming up with sounds I've never heard in any emergency department. We've covered all bases on making this seem realistic,' she added. 'Adelaide will be fresh out of fake blood and sheets after today.' She indicated the sheets covering the 'deceased' around them. 'It's hard to remember this is a set-up.' She nodded discreetly towards an elderly gentleman walking by them, a dazed expression on his face and blood running down the side of his head from a gash over his temple.

A few paces further on Ned stopped, his hand to his ear again. 'My guys have found something suspicious inside the terminal. I'm going to go and see how they deal with it. I'll catch up with you at tomorrow's review session, if not later today.'

He left her on that note, putting it out there that he wanted to see her again but giving nothing away. He might have said the same thing to a mate. Instinctively, he knew not to rush this one. If mysteries lurked behind those grey eyes, as he suspected, rushing her was not the way to play this. The one sure thing he wanted was to give himself his best chance at uncovering Sarah's secrets.

He loved a challenge.

Max, one of his best mates, had once said all it took for Ned to show an interest in someone was for them to possess two X chromosomes. He liked to think he was a little more discerning, although Max had been closer to the truth than was comfortable.

Applying Max's theory to Sarah, there was no denying she possessed many of the attributes that attracted Ned—a sense of humour, long hair and definitely the right chromosomes. Basically she was a woman and that made her attractive to Ned. But she was different from the women who normally caught his eye, the type who were usually after a good time and nothing more. Ned didn't do 'something more'.

So it was all the more intriguing to wonder why Sarah had caught his eye. She was brunette, not blonde. She was slim where his usual type was curvy. She was too slim to be called sexy. Sensual? He intended to find out.

He reached the betting ring, which had been set up as the pseudo-bus terminal. Time to put Sarah out of his mind. It was essential as he had precious little room to indulge in fantasies today.

Besides, the degree to which she intrigued him could only be about the challenge. It was all about the chase.

And there was plenty of time for that tomorrow.

## CHAPTER TWO

HER urge to fidget was nearing the point of compulsion. Being cooped up in the meeting room at police headquarters to review the simulated exercise of the preceding day was wearing thin. Luckily, Ned was there to provide some distraction.

She figured they had at least another hour to go before they'd be finished and right now the matter under discussion didn't involve her. It was between the police and ambulance teams and Lucas and Angie had it covered so she was free to steal glances at Ned.

He'd been very much on her mind since yesterday. Images of a seriously attractive fireman with mischievous green eyes, a cheeky grin and a physique that was hard in all the right places and shaped just as nature intended had kept popping into her head. So much so she found it a bit unsettling now he was back in front of her again. It was impossible to ignore him.

He was lounging in his chair and even that posture seemed to work in his favour. He looked easy in his skin. And easy on the eyes. His dark blue uniform was spotless, the trousers were pressed, T-shirt tucked in and fitted to his body, leaving no unsightly creases. As usual, he'd been running his fingers through his hair, leaving it sticking up in tufts. The dishevelled look enhanced his larrikin air.

Was it any wonder she was finding it hard to focus?

Sighing over a man wouldn't keep her where she needed to be, which was in the safe place she'd made for herself since she'd got Alistair out of her life, or rather since Alistair had ditched her unceremoniously. She'd perfected the art of self-protection when it came to men—why sigh with longing over a guy who was a threat to that security? She should be troubled to find she had diminishing control over her thoughts when it came to Ned. Losing control meant being vulnerable.

Vulnerable was a state she'd sworn never to be in again.

*Alistair.* The name swam into mind, her old mantra, the one that never failed to remind her why self-protection was essential and messing about with men was for fools.

Yet there was something about Ned that was making it increasingly difficult to remember any of those hard-learned lessons.

That was four times now he'd sprung her stealing glances at him. By the time the team review had finished he was almost bursting to get to her side and make the most of her apparent interest. There wouldn't be many more meetings like this and when they were finished he'd have to be more obvious about wanting to spend time with her. Maximising his opportunities was the way to go.

'You might have the others fooled, but I know where your mind was just now,' he said in a quiet voice, for her alone. 'You can't look that serene if you're thinking about work.'

Maybe she hadn't been thinking about him. Maybe she'd been daydreaming and oblivious to the fact she'd simply been staring at him, but, judging by the faint bloom of pink dusting her cheeks at his comment, perhaps it wasn't a vain hope. Perhaps she wasn't as immune to him as she'd seemed.

She didn't answer straight away, continuing to gather her papers, a slight smile on her lips, her perfect white teeth worrying at her full bottom lip as she snapped each rubber band and attached each bulldog clip exactly so on each bundle of papers with long fingers before sliding each highlighter pen neatly into its plastic case.

He'd never been the slightest bit interested in unravelling the mysteries of women's apparently universal love affair with stationery. But now? Watching Sarah sort her pens in an obvious order, not just one after the other, but some at this end of that packet, another there, it occurred to him that if there was a woman in the world who could make stationery fascinating, he was looking at her.

'If I was looking serene...' Her tone was light and cheery without any trace of the embarrassment or confusion he'd glimpsed initially. 'Then I must have been thinking about the shoe sale I'm ducking out to at lunch.'

'Not buying it,' he said good-naturedly. 'But I am buying coffee. And since we all planned on being here for at least another hour, you can't say you're needed back at work.'

Sarah had finished gathering her things and he held the door open for her as they walked to the lifts.

'I wasn't going to,' she said as she glanced up at him before entering the lift. 'But at last count I've had three cups of coffee this morning.'

Bending his head close to hers, he said softly, 'You're not answering my question.'

'I'm not?'

'Telling me how much caffeine you've had doesn't tell me whether you want more. With me.'

'Ah.' She smiled as the lift doors opened at the ground floor and his spirits rose anew. She glanced at a giant metal clock suspended on the rear wall of the foyer and apparently discerned the time from the bare face and the single razor-sharp hand before he'd even been sure it was a clock. 'I have half an hour but, really, if I have any more coffee I'll be flying back to work. As it is, I'd better walk back to get rid of some of these caffeine jitters.'

She was definitely looking agitated but the pink in her cheeks and the way she wasn't quite meeting his eyes suggested any jitters weren't from the caffeine. Did he make her nervous or was she as aware of the energy between them as he was?

'You have to walk past the fire station. I'll walk with you.'

'You don't want a coffee?'

'I'm trying to cut down,' he said, laughing, letting her know that wasn't the slightest bit true, and the coffee had only been a reason to be with her. Walking would do just as well.

They turned right onto the street and headed up through the city. He automatically shortened his long strides so she could keep pace as he chatted to her about her work and answered her questions about the simulated exercise.

And all the while, he was working towards one thing: eroding whatever notion she'd got into her very appealing mind that she should keep her distance. Sure, she'd come along every time he'd suggested coffee or a drink but only once she'd been sure the others were going to be there, too. Why was that? He wanted her; he was confident now the interest was mutual. So why the hesitation to explore it?

There was a lot more to Sarah Richardson than looks and brains. If he didn't figure out why he couldn't get her out of his head, he was going to go crazy.

'What does the rest of the day hold for you?' Sarah asked as they came into sight of the station.

'More paperwork for the CBR training and when that's done I practise looking busy.'

'How do you do that exactly?' Sarah looked at him, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. Her question gave him the flash of inspiration he was waiting for. Genius!

‘Come in and I’ll show you. There’s a knack to it.’

They’d reached the station and were standing before the massive glass doors that were tall enough to allow the biggest of the engines to exit and enter. A row of shiny red fire engines was visible through the glass. ‘Can I?’

He did a mental punch of the air. He should have invited her for a private tour of the station weeks ago.

‘You can and you shall.’ He placed a hand on the small of her back, relishing the body warmth coming through her shirt, telling himself the desire kicking up and down his spine wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

It was all about the challenge.

Why, then, was he filled with a sudden urge to show her how good he was at his job and a rush of excitement that he was about to get the opportunity?

The equation was simple: if she wanted him and he wanted her, chemistry would take care of all the little details. He could sit back and enjoy letting the attraction unfold.

The niggling sense of pressure to make a good impression didn’t mean anything.

It was craziness, pure and simple, but she could have clapped her hands with glee when he’d asked her to see the station. She resisted giving such a physical demonstration of her pleasure. Just. She didn’t manage to disguise it completely, though. The cool, calm and collected woman she’d intended to present herself as wouldn’t have said quite so excitedly, ‘What can I see first?’

‘Enthusiastic tour groups, that’s the sort we like.’ He led her through one of the open doors, between two huge fire engines, until they were standing in the central area of the station, looking past the vehicles out to the city street.

‘The fire trucks are all different,’ she said, waving a hand along the row of vehicles while mentally giving her fears about men a swift kick into submission. It was just a visit to the fire station, something she’d be keen to do with or without Ned playing tour guide, she tried to convince herself.

‘Appliances,’ Ned said.

She must have looked confused. For a moment she had almost looked around for a white-goods section.

‘They’re called appliances, not trucks.’

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded.

‘You’re not going to make a crack about us driving around in toasters and washing machines?’

‘The thought never crossed my mind,’ she lied, as she smiled innocently at him.

‘In that case, it’s settled. You get the extra-special tour reserved for extra-special people who don’t make cracks about firemen. The burden we bear for the good of the city,’ he added on a dramatic note.

‘A thespian in a fireman’s pants?’

‘You’d be surprised what you’d find inside a fireman’s pants.’ The sparkle in his eyes told her he was fully aware of the innuendo in his comment.

Who could blame her if her cheeks flamed to match the appliances?

‘Get your mind out of the gutter,’ he teased. ‘I’m speaking figuratively.’

‘Like I should know that. But you can’t stop now. Titillate me with tales of firemen’s pants.’

‘There you go again,’ he said, shaking his head at her as they walked to the largest of the engines and he leant against it with a casual air, perfectly in his element and posing more danger by the minute to her already wobbly equilibrium. ‘But since you really want to know, I’ll let you inside just a few of the pairs of pants around this joint. We have an artist, a nurse...’ he held up a hand and counted them off on his fingers ‘...a carpenter, several professional footballers...’ He started the count again with his right hand. ‘A builder and a chef.’

‘So I shouldn’t be surprised at what I find? Even a thespian?’

‘Sure, why not?’ He straightened up and pulled open the door of the vehicle as if it was made of paper, not the huge, heavy thing she knew it was. ‘And if I ever come across one, I’ll be sure to introduce you.’

He sent her a wink that turned her insides to jelly and then motioned her over. She floated across as if under a spell. That was some wink. And now, between his bulk, all broad shoulders and long, lean height, and the huge vehicle rising up beside them, she felt delightfully feminine.

Was this why firefighters were so attractive? They made women feel small and delicate and safe? Even a woman who prided herself on never needing to rely on a man for protection? She shrugged off the thought as being the crazy bit of fluff it was. Since when had feeling like a guy could, and would if the need arose, protect her become a turn-on?

‘Climb aboard. Your magical mystery tour is about to begin.’ Once again he placed his hand on the small of her back as she started to climb up into the cab. The feel of his large hand through the cotton of her shirt was delicious and far too distracting. So much so she could mentally outline exactly where the tip of each finger was resting.

But the familiar anxiety was there, too, that always came with a man’s touch. The anxiety wasn’t as powerful as she would have expected, though, not as powerful as the attraction she was feeling. Normally her anxiety would increase proportionately, but strangely it wasn’t happening. Yes, the niggle of self-consciousness was there, but here she was, experiencing an attraction more intense than she could ever remember feeling, and she wasn’t feeling totally overwhelmed.

On the contrary, he was so close his scent was filling her head and making it spin in a way that left no doubt she was drawn to him. Each time she took a breath, the rush of desire was strong and coursed through her body. He smelt of woods and the outdoors, the blend heady and original. She just knew it hadn’t come out of a bottle, or, if it had, it had mixed with his own natural scent so that it was now his own. If a company could package it, they’d be on to a sure hit. Women would buy it simply to put on their pillows and go to sleep dreaming of a man like Ned.

She lost the smell of him when he closed the cab door behind her, but in seconds he had come around the other side of the truck—oops, the appliance—and was springing into the driver’s seat beside her. She edged closer to take another breath. If scent could be addictive, she was already there and it was a struggle to get her mouth to work and form any words to break the silence.

‘You didn’t tell me which one of those descriptions fits you.’ When he looked at her, she added, ‘Are you the poet? The footballer? The chef?’

‘None of the above,’ he said as he flicked switches and brought the appliance to life, buttons and lights flashing on the console and across a bewildering array of levers and headsets and gadgets. ‘Since I’ve taken on the role of training co-ordinator for the first response unit I’m one of the few without a second job beyond the service. I’m very much full-time here now.’

‘And before?’

He laughed. ‘I was addicted to extreme sports. Still am, in fact, just don’t get quite the same time for it now.’

‘Extreme sports?’ She looked at him to check if he was serious. He didn’t look like he was joking. He was still reading dials, not waiting for her reaction. ‘Like free-climbing and base-jumping?’

‘Very much like that.’

The emergency doctor in her was horrified. The woman in her was undeniably impressed. Impressed and begging for more images to add to her fantasy bank.

‘I thought base-jumping was illegal in Australia?’

‘In some states it is but I haven’t done that yet. But if it’s legal and not just downright stupid, I’ll give it a go.’

‘Were you born an adrenalin junkie?’



He laughed and the sound wrapped around her like a familiar blanket. His dimple flashed in his cheek and his green eyes sparkled. He had one of the most contagious laughs she'd ever heard, a laugh that said life was fun and full of interesting things.

'I started off slow—Mum took me to swimming lessons when I was six and I absolutely loved the water. That led to triathlons and once I'd done the Hawaiian Ironman the next challenge was extreme sports.'

'The Hawaiian Ironman—that's the one with a ten-kilometre swim and finishes with a marathon?'

'It's only a three-and-a-bit-kilometre swim.' He grinned at her. 'But don't forget the one-hundred-and-eighty-k bike ride.'

'And you completed it?'

'Yep. A long way behind the leaders, I must admit.'

'That's still pretty amazing. No wonder you need to jump off buildings now.'

'Well, I haven't actually done that yet. Perhaps you should come with me some time?'

'Sure.' He turned to her, his expression a mix of pleasure and surprise, probably more like astonishment. Yep, she was pretty sure it would be astonishment as she was gob-smacked at her reply, too.

'What exactly did you just agree to?'

She did a quick mental back-flip and came up with a save. 'To watching you do something crazy.'

He tipped his head back and laughed again. 'Touché.'

'Isn't it more fun being a hero with an audience?'

'Hero? My mum would argue that point with you.' He sent her a sidelong grin that had her gripping the seat cover with her fingernails. 'But I never say no to an appreciative audience.'

'I don't think it's in a mum's job description to encourage risk-taking.' The words came out in a burbled rush. She was still reeling from that grin. 'What does your dad think? Or did you get your daredevil side from him?'

'My dad died when I was little, but I think he was similarly inclined, at least before he had children. He was a fireman too—I think lots of us have that need for an adrenalin rush.'

His voice hadn't changed when he'd answered her, he'd taken her question in his stride and his tone had dismissed the possibility of giving him any sympathy. He'd had an enormous loss as a little boy but it was quite clear he didn't want her sympathy. She knew how that felt, so she wasn't sure there was anything to read into it. They hardly knew each other, and she wasn't rushing to confide her own losses and fears to him. For now, she'd leave it at that.

She followed his descriptions and asked myriad questions as he showed her through one appliance before explaining the other, different types. The station would have been intriguing no matter who was showing her around, but as it was Ned, it was that much better. He kept his commentary up with behind-the-scenes stories until she was enjoying herself so immensely she forgot about the anxiety pooled low in her belly.

He showed her through the whole station, including the gym, kitchen and sleeping quarters, before they ended the tour back where they had started over an hour before. He took that as a good sign. He hadn't seen her look at her watch once, and she'd said she only had thirty minutes. This was not a woman keen to get away and if he knew anything, he'd swear she'd enjoyed herself with him. She'd relaxed and her laughter had come easily as he'd regaled her with his funniest stories of station life.

When had he last enjoyed a woman's company so much, beyond the bedroom or in it? If it was about the chase, the signs were pointing towards a good outcome. But the signal that it was something more was still emitting a low-grade bleep somewhere in the back of his mind. Sarah was nothing like the usual women who sauntered up to him at the pub. Maybe that's all it was.

‘Now, it doesn’t seem right that you know all there is to know about me but I still don’t know the first thing about what you do in your spare time.’

‘What I do? Spare time?’ She said the words like they were foreign to her.

Perhaps they were.

He gave her a little push in the direction he was really after. Subtlety wasn’t his middle name. According to his fellow firies, that honour went to charm. ‘Downtime for Sarah. You go out to dinner with your boyfriend. You paint. You go for long, romantic walks on the beach at sunset with your boyfriend. You enjoy cooking. You prefer spending cosy evenings at home on the couch, watching old black and white movies...’

‘With my boyfriend,’ she volunteered.

‘So you have a boyfriend?’ His voice sounded normal but he didn’t think he’d been quick enough to disguise his reaction to her words.

‘No, I don’t, but you seemed so keen on the idea I didn’t want to disappoint you.’ She was laughing openly at him, enjoying herself at his expense, and he didn’t mind a bit. Not now he knew he was free to pursue her as much as his heart desired.

‘You haven’t.’ He left her to figure that one out and charged ahead. ‘Back to the point—spare time and you don’t go together. You’re not knocking me over with your list of extra-curricular activities. I can’t know where to take you on our first date if I don’t know what you like.’

‘You want to take me out? On a date?’

For a moment he thought he’d jumped the gun. Perhaps she wasn’t as interested as he was. He wasn’t used to women hesitating but then she smiled. That didn’t help.

‘Are you smiling a “Yes, I’ll go out with you” or “I’m going to really enjoy turning him down” sort of smile?’

‘Neither.’ She met his eyes now. ‘But it’s a yes.’

The lines of concentration running across his forehead disappeared as his green eyes crinkled upwards with the smile—no, grin—that spread across his face. What a way to make a girl feel special. Ned had that talent down pat. She hadn’t intended to accept a date but he was hard to resist.

‘What about this weekend?’ They’d walked back to the door they’d first entered through, and he was leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

‘No good. I’m shopping for wedding shoes with my sister.’

‘More shoes! You can’t possibly shop all weekend for shoes and I hope it’s for her wedding and not yours as you just told me you don’t have a boyfriend.’

‘Shoe-shopping is only part of the weekend and, yes, it is my sister’s wedding. Saturday night I’m going to a charity dinner.’

‘A hospital fundraiser?’

‘No, it’s the dinner to kick off National Organ Donor Awareness Week. I’m often a guest speaker for them.’

‘Intriguing. And admirable.’

For a brief moment Sarah wondered about asking Ned to accompany her. She was always offered the option of bringing a guest, but she’d never taken a proper date. How would it feel to walk in on Ned’s arm dressed in her evening dress and him in black tie? For once she wouldn’t feel like the only partnerless person in the room, the one everyone wondered about.

How would it feel to walk in with him and know that every woman there, young or old, single or taken, would be sneaking glances, wishing she could trade places with her?

The undisguised interest in his eyes was clear. ‘You seem to have a fascinatingly rich internal life.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. By the expressions skittering across your face, it was a more interesting conversation than many I’ve actually been part of. I enjoyed putting thoughts to your expressions.’

‘What did you come up with?’

‘That you were debating whether to invite me to your dinner on Saturday night.’

She nearly choked and wanted to tell him he’d got it wrong but they both knew he’d read her exactly right. It was disconcerting. It felt dangerous, that with him she might be an open book when she’d spent so many years cultivating an impenetrable veneer of calm, capable self-sufficiency.

It was also strangely exhilarating, the feeling that here was a man who could get into her head with such ease. The desire winding down her spine increased another degree, further outweighing the anxiety in her belly.

‘Which voice won? The devil urging you, telling you it’s just dinner, or the angel warning you against it?’

And suddenly dangerous and exhilarating were ever so much more appealing than safe and capable. The devil she could cope with. It was when Ned’s voice, with its deep, treacled tones, rich with entreaty, was added into the equation that she thought, To hell with it. It would only be one date, the devil whispered, as the angel all but gave up on her.

A date with the devil?

Her gaze met his with magnet-like force and the area around them seemed to shrink in contrast to the power of his presence. And in that moment, she knew that so long as the devil had green eyes like Ned’s, there was not a woman alive whose angelic tendencies had any hope of shouting down that other, darker voice.

Her angel gave it one last shot. ‘I only have one ticket.’

‘Do you always play by the rules?’

‘I guess so.’ A brief, thrilling flare lit inside her. Safe Sarah aimed the extinguisher at it and said instead, ‘Besides, you’d probably find it very dull and dry.’

‘I think there’d be ways of livening the evening up. Women in evening gowns, all trying to outshine one another, a bit of dancing. There’s always fun to be had.’

Spurred on by the gleam in his eyes, she teetered very close to ignoring the rules. Her rules.

And she might have done it except that, at that moment, lights began flashing, bells started ringing and an announcement came over the PA system ending all chance at having a conversation without yelling. Five seconds earlier she and Ned had had the place to themselves, or so it had seemed, but now there were firemen pouring into the area from all directions, running for the appliances. Before she’d had a chance to really process what was going on Ned had already bent to her side, pressed a feather-light kiss on her cheek and said, ‘Gotta go, that’s my crew being called. I’ll be in touch.’

She stood still, transfixed, marvelling at the feel of Ned’s lips on her skin. As light as the touch had been, it had held the promise of much, much more. She needed a moment to savour it and, besides, she wasn’t leaving now, not when there was a full-scale response happening in front of her. She watched Ned kick off his shoes and in one movement step into a pair of overalls and boots. He pulled the overalls up over his dark pants, hoisting the straps over his shoulders. Seconds later, he was swinging up into the front passenger seat, his biceps bulging as he pulled his weight up. In less than a minute the appliance was pulling out of the station.

It took less time than that to burn a fabulous image of Ned the firefighter into her visual cortex, an image she just knew would be replayed over and over until she saw him again. Although she had a strong suspicion she’d spend as much time regretting that she’d also missed her chance to thumb her nose at convention and take him to the dinner after all.

As it was, once again she went to a five-star event on her own. And as she entered the foyer of the hotel, all dressed up but all alone, she knew what she really wanted was to walk in on the arm of a man with a twinkle in his eye and lips as soft as velvet.

CHAPTER THREE

SARAH stood to one side of the stage as the master of ceremonies gave his introductory spiel. Straightening her dress, she wished again she'd worn her fail-safe LBD instead of this uncharacteristic purchase. But somehow, when she'd gone shopping for shoes with her sister, she'd ended up buying the very bright ruby-red dress she was now wearing. Not for her sister's wedding, not for anything in particular and not even with this evening in mind.

Tori had convinced her to buy it. The task had been easy once Sarah had started to imagine what Ned would think if he ever saw her in this dress. A ridiculous reason and now she was paying the price.

Shot through with gold, the red silk shone in the lights, placing it in a different league to the sedate dresses she usually wore on such nights. From the audience's perspective she looked demure; the dress had long sleeves and a high, rounded neckline, but it was virtually backless and she was now feeling exposed. She had no problem being in the spotlight for her work or for her public speaking skills—it was what she did all day, every day and it came as naturally as breathing after all these years. But in this dress she suddenly felt like she would be stepping onto the stage as a woman with desires and sensuality, a woman who just happened to be a doctor, as opposed to a respected professional who just happened to be a woman.

It was only as a woman that she ever felt vulnerable.

She was the second of three speakers at the gala dinner for National Organ Donor Awareness Week. Representatives from two families were speaking. A donor family had preceded her and a recipient family was to follow. Her speech was from a medical perspective and she was intent on keeping any personal twist out of it. She had different speeches depending on the basis on which she'd been invited. Tonight she was here as a doctor, not as someone with a personal story.

She was here to deliver the facts and her speech was being videotaped and snippets would be shown on TV news programmes for the rest of the week. A less than perfect delivery was not an option.

With the MC's introduction over, Sarah stepped up to the microphone, checking the autocue was showing her speech and not somebody else's. She knew her speech by heart but wanted the autocue to hand, just in case.

She scanned the room, picking out a few spots in the crowd where she could focus her attention. The audience was attentive, watching her with anticipation. It was a group of the converted faithful after all, here because they were interested. There were some high-profile sports stars and media personalities in the audience who'd given their time and presence to promote awareness of the need for organ donations. Silently clearing her throat, she took a deep breath, found a few friendly faces and began, finding her natural rhythm as she progressed through her speech.

'This year alone there are over 1700 people waiting for donated organs. Without transplants, these people will continue to live restricted lives, lives ruled by medical appointments, medications and machines. That's assuming they are able to stay alive, because the harsh reality is, without organ donation, a number of these people won't make it at all. Every day is critical.

'There are over five million registered donors in Australia, almost a quarter of our population, but our current donor rate is point-zero-zero-one per cent.' She paused to let the figures register. 'So only *one* out of every *one hundred thousand* Australians actually becomes an organ donor. We have one of the lowest donor rates in the Western world.

'I know you are here tonight either because organ donation has affected you personally or because it is a cause you believe in. But our message this year is, please, do more than believe, make sure you register as a donor. And, please, encourage your family members to register too, talk about it together. If you can't bring yourself to register, discuss your feelings with your family so they are aware of your wishes.'

She went on to talk about a few specific, anonymous cases and saw plenty of people, men and women, with tears in their eyes. She'd managed to move them with her words and now hopefully, if they weren't donors already, they'd seriously consider registering.

'Confronting your own mortality is not easy and most of us do anything to avoid it. But we never know what is waiting for us around the corner. Take a moment now to look at the people around you.' Again, she waited while the room buzzed briefly, wondering where she was going.

'In a moment, in the not-too-distant future, one of you could find yourself depending for your very life on the incredible and brave gift of a perfect stranger. Or it might be your child's life that hangs in the balance as you watch the clock ticking inexorably on, praying and hoping against time for a miracle. The reverse side of that is that every one of you *also* has the power, through registering yourself as an organ donor, to be the maker of miracles.

'In this room tonight I know there are a number of people who wouldn't be alive if not for a successful transplant. You might well be sitting next to someone whose life has been saved in this way.' The room was perfectly still and quiet, but people were flicking glances about them, wondering if they were, in fact, sitting next to a transplant recipient. She knew she was bordering on being sensationalist, but getting the audience to commit emotionally to her topic was the very best guarantee they would change their behaviour once they left here tonight. She leant towards the microphone a touch. 'Those people are most likely only with us now because of the gift of a perfect stranger. Because of that gift, they have a whole life to live. And each time this happens, that gift gives entire families their lives back to them whole, too.'

Wrapping up her speech with an entreaty to take the information that had been placed on their tables and take action to register, Sarah left the stage to resounding applause, wishing her sister Tori was with her tonight. Sometimes they came together, sometimes Tori spoke instead of Sarah, sometimes they both did, but Tori was better at delivering the personal story and Sarah the medical perspective. Either way, it was always nice to have a familiar face to share the adrenalin rush of public speaking with afterwards.

Hovering out of sight at the side of the stage, Sarah stood in the shadows to watch the next speaker, not yet ready to slip back to her seat.

As her heart rate settled she became aware she was under scrutiny. Shrugging off the idea as nothing more than some guy ogling her because of her skin-tight red dress, she stayed focused on the speaker, choosing to ignore the sensation and hoping they'd grow tired of the view. But when the speaker had finished Sarah could still feel someone's eyes on her.

She turned. The 'gentleman' in question was seated at a nearby table and, judging by the stains on his teeth, it looked as though he had a few too many glasses of red wine under his belt. Sarah watched, horrified, as their gazes met and the man lurched from his chair and began to weave a path towards her.

Once he reached her she'd be trapped between the stage stairs and the back wall and, while she was well able to get rid of unwanted attention, she'd really rather not have to deal with it. He was intruding on her high, the high she got from delivering a good speech, the high she got when she was reminded that, thanks to organ donation, her family was intact.

Could she dash up the steps and across the stage? It only took a glance to see that wasn't an option—the band was returning to their instruments and she'd be in their way.

She swept her gaze back across the tables.

And then she saw him.

Leaning against the bar at the side of the room, impeccable in a perfectly tailored dark suit, was Ned.

Correction. Leaning against the bar, looking immaculate *and* watching her with an appreciative look in his green eyes. Was that a sparkle of amusement as well as he watched her predicament?

She sent a half-smile his way before checking on the lecherous diner's progress—how much time did she have left to escape? Her chances of avoiding him were increasing as more people were moving about, heading for the dance floor. Perhaps she'd be able to melt into the crowd. Perhaps she'd be able to reappear by Ned's side.

Mr Lecherous had been waylaid but he was still looking her way.

She glanced back at Ned.

He was gone.

Enough was enough.

He'd watched her being targeted by the old drunk guy. OK, not that old, and maybe not even that drunk, but definitely undesirable. Initially he'd found it interesting, curious to see how Sarah would handle it. She wasn't in any danger and he didn't imagine she'd lack the confidence to tell the bloke to take a hike. In fact, he was looking forward to witnessing that. He'd derive great satisfaction from watching another guy crash and burn before he tested his own style of charm on her.

But now she'd seen him.

She'd seen him and smiled.

Now he didn't want to sit back and wait. He wanted to get what he'd come for, and that was her.

He wanted to get to know her better.

He wanted to see what she was like away from work.

And if his luck was in, he wanted to see if she tasted as good as she looked in that red dress.

A dress like that should be illegal. A dress like that was just asking to be taken off. By him.

He made short work of the distance between them. Then he was by her side, a second before the competition arrived at a stumble. Satisfaction swelled through him when Sarah didn't even appear to notice his competitor's unsteady arrival. As soon as she saw Ned, her face lit up with a smile that was all for him.

And when he held out his hand, she didn't hesitate before stepping into the circle of his arm. She was tucked against him as she asked, 'What are you doing here?'

'You wanted to know what was under this fireman's uniform.' He bent his head to speak softly in her ear, and was rewarded as a small sigh escaped her full lips, painted to match her dress. 'I thought it best to show you.'

She looked down the length of him, slowly, almost like a caress, and the movement caused an involuntary clenching in his groin before she brought her gaze back to meet his. 'A tuxedo?' There was amusement in her eyes but there was also appreciation. It was appreciation that he returned in full.

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