ANNIE O'NEIL

The Surgeon's Christmas Wish

MEDICAL ROMANCE™

Annie O'Neil

The Surgeon's Christmas Wish

«HarperCollins»

O'Neil A.

The Surgeon's Christmas Wish / A. O'Neil — «HarperCollins»,

Not just for Christmas…Lone wolf Dr Tara Braxton is finally back on track. Running a ski injury clinic is a world away from her old life… and her research-stealing ex-fiancé. But her peaceful existence ends when she hires Dr Fraser MacKenzie. With his haunted sapphire eyes he simultaneously weakens her knees and presses all the wrong buttons! And when an unexpected kiss leaves them both reeling their frozen hearts begin to melt.Can Fraser overcome the secrets of his devastating past in time to make Tara’s Christmas wish come true?

© O'Neil A.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Dear Reader 6
The Surgeon’s Christmas Wish 7
Table of Contents 8
CHAPTER ONE 9
CHAPTER TWO 18
CHAPTER THREE 27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 28

Tara felt her knees actually go weak.

If she'd had any sort of grip on her senses she would have pulled away, but the way Fraser moved his lips across hers, teased his tongue between them, nibbling, taunting—it was everything in a kiss she had imagined possible but never experienced until now.

Her arms reached impulsively around Fraser's neck. The movement drew her in even closer to him and the proximity could not have felt more natural. She felt his knees grip her hips, her breasts brush against his chest, sending a deep physical ache wending through to the tips of her toes and shooting back up through her like flames. Everything about the way her body was responding to him was new. Intoxicating. Absolutely not on the agenda.

She felt powerless to do the sensible thing—to push away. Her senses were overwhelmed with the incredible maleness of him. Time took on an added dimension as she took in Fraser's scent, the movement of the well-defined muscles in his neck. Sensations flew through her in heated rushes as he slid a finger along her jawline, cupped her chin in his hand and drew from her the deepest, most life-affirming kisses she'd ever experienced.

Dear Reader

THE SURGEON'S CHRISTMAS WISH isn't just about my hero's and heroine's dreams coming true (although that's a pretty big part of it!). My dreams are coming true, too! This is my first book for Mills & Boon® and I have to say I can still hardly believe it's all real. From my editor through to all of the other Medical Romance™ writers, my welcome has been top-notch. Turns out not taking down last year's Christmas lights wasn't such bad luck after all!

While writing THE SURGEON'S CHRISTMAS WISH I actually woke up earlier and earlier every morning, because I couldn't wait to get back to the computer and spend time with my heroine-on-a-mission Dr Tara Braxton. She is funny, smart, and determined not to let men get in the way of her plans to run the Deer Creek medical ski clinic. Our gorgeous-as-they-come hero, Dr Fraser MacKenzie, definitely betrays my weakness for a man with a sexy accent, and he is a blue-eyed, broad-shouldered spanner in the works for Tara's number one rule: no men.

I hope you enjoy the wintry Christmas magic of falling in love in Deer Creek as much as I did creating it. Please feel free to visit my website if you want to chat or have any questions at www.annieoneilbooks.com or find me on Twitter at **@AnnieONeilBooks**.

All the best—and enjoy!

Annie O'Neil

ANNIE O'NEIL spent most of her childhood with a leg draped over the family rocking chair and a book in her hand. Novels, baking, and writing too much teenage angst poetry ate up most of her youth. Now, quite a few years on from those fevered daydreams of being a poet, Annie splits her time between corralling her husband (and real-life Scottish hero) into helping her with their cows or scratching the backs of their rare breed pigs, and spending some very happy hours at her computer, writing. Find out more about Annie at her website: www.annieoneilbooks.com

THE SURGEON'S CHRISTMAS WISH is Annie O'Neil's debut title for Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™!

The Surgeon’s Christmas Wish
Annie O’Neil

www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book, without any hesitation, is dedicated to my friend Lucy, who dared me to try my hand at writing romances with the unerring belief that one day I would get published. With great thanks, my friend, this one’s for you—Annie.

Table of Contents

Cover
Excerpt
Dear Reader
About the Author
Title Page
Dedication
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
Copyright

CHAPTER ONE

A FREE LIFT pass was definitely Tara's favorite job perk.

Just for fun, she wove her skis in and out of the morning's first tendrils of sunlight. A fresh snowfall gave an added whoosh to the fluid switchbacks she was cutting across the black diamond slope.

Sure, she was thirty-four years old, but it was all she could do not to tip back her head and scream, *Yippppeeeee!*

A year in Deer Creek had done wonders for her psyche, not to mention her emergency medical skills. She now ran her own ski injury clinic. Well, almost her own. Just a bit more scrimping and a few more paychecks to go … More importantly, she ran her own life. It was about time.

Tara felt a smile forming on her lips as she scanned the mountainside. Only the hardcore skiers were out this early. Early enough to see dawn's blush spill over the Rockies. And with just enough time to get to Marian's bakery before all of the specials were scooped up by seasonal visitors.

Hearing a couple of exhilarated whoops behind her, Tara pulled over to a small knoll on the edge of the slope. A pair of freewheeling snowboarders wearing Santa hats hurtled past, throwing a "Thanks for moving" in their wake. As they flashed down the steep terrain, she let the silent beauty of the mountain settle around her. Who needed a Christmas tree in their living room when there was an entire mountainside riddled with evergreens?

Me. That's who. She smiled, knowing full well she was as much of a sucker for the traditional trappings of the upcoming holiday as anyone. Only five more weeks!

Even so, spending it on your own was—

Stop it, she silently cautioned herself. Spending Christmas on her own in Deer Creek was exactly what she wanted. She had everything she needed in the small mountain village. A good job, a local shop with everything from pretzels to antifreeze, a Wi-Fi connection to die for and a bakery that specialized in threatening to expand her waistline.

Besides, how many doctors saw a variation of the North Pole from their office every morning? The view from up here was insane. There was nothing claustrophobic about Deer Creek. No one stealing your research or trying to shoehorn you into a career path you never wanted. Just an honest, simple life. A life absolutely, perfectly on her own.

Tara scrutinized the scarcely populated slopes. Fingers crossed, there wouldn't be too many injuries arriving at the clinic today. Not that she minded the work. Medicine was definitely her calling. It was just that every time the doors to the clinic opened, or her radio crackled to life, it meant someone else was having a very bad day.

She knelt to readjust the clips on her boots. Another five minutes or so to the clinic and—

"Heads!"

Tara flattened herself to the small knoll as a snowboarder whistled overhead. She felt her mouth go dry and her heart rate soar. Shivers shot across her shoulders and her scalp tingled in a combination of fear and adrenaline.

What a first-class idiot!

Just a few inches in the wrong direction and she would've been the one entering the clinic. Not only was the snowboarder thoughtless—he was plain dangerous.

Heart pounding, Tara bolted upright and sped after the tall figure in racing blue as he shot down the slope at lightning speed. The broad reach of his shoulders indicated he was definitely a grown man. A very athletic man from the looks of things. Long legs, trim hips, an assured strength behind his movements. There was no doubt he knew how to command the slope.

Her brow crinkled. This was hardly the time to be admiring someone's build and athletic panache.

"Stop!" Tara knew her voice didn't carry far on the slopes—but she didn't care. Good looking or not, the snowboarder could have killed her. "Stop, you—you mountainside menace!"

Tara felt heat roil in her belly. *How dare he endanger someone's life?*

The man seemed blissfully unaware of Tara's increasingly irate attempts to get his attention. As she watched him disappear around the next bend, she felt her fury double. His type was exactly the reason Deer Creek needed doctors on constant duty.

It was just the sort of thoughtless behavior her ex would've—

Stop. Stop. Not going to go there. I am not going to go there. Something positive. Just think of something positive.

The new surgeon.

Thank goodness he was starting in a few days. Tara had been running the clinic on her own throughout the summer with the ad hoc help of the local search and rescue crew. Summer saw a steady trickle of hikers, river rafters and the occasional rock climber, but it was not as busy as the ski season. Not by a long shot.

Over the summer and fall, the relative solitude of the mountain retreat suited her. Neither did she mind the twenty-four-seven nature of the job, but having another colleague to throw ideas at was always useful when it came to sports-related injuries. Plus, with freshly opened slopes and the start of the Thanksgiving vacation, five patients a day had the potential to become twenty.

Dr. Fraser MacKenzie's résumé had genuinely impressed her. He had done ski seasons all over the world, following a five-year stint as a British military surgeon in the Royal Marines. She wasn't surprised to see that after seasons in France, Italy and New Zealand he'd wanted to add the American Rockies to his list.

Tara normally didn't hire unknown seasonal staff, but the colleague she had been relying on from last year had called just two weeks earlier to say he was very sorry but he'd just accepted a tenured position at a hospital in Banff. She could hardly begrudge him such an enviable post. The chief of sports medicine in a prime resort hospital? He would've been a fool to turn it down.

Can I trust this one to last the whole season?

She'd seen other resort clinics suffer from multiple cases of doctors jumping ship early. The call of higher mountains, steeper slopes, a fresh start in a new hemisphere.

Tara frowned discerningly as she took in the majesty of the mountains around her. The Rockies were enough for her. Heck, Deer Creek was enough for her. She shook her head, knowing full well she was hardly one to cast aspersions. Just as the season-hoppers might be fleeing their pasts, she too was in her own form of escape. Deer Creek was where she had been hiding for well over a year. And being a lone wolf suited her down to a T.

Fraser pulled up to the clinic with a professional swish. He'd done higher-level Alpine training in the military, but skiing had always been something he'd enjoyed for pleasure as well. Snowboarding was a welcome adrenaline rush to add to his repertoire.

Slipping off his boots, Fraser popped his snowboard onto the clinic's purpose-built stand and jogged, sockfooted, into the wood-shingled building. He couldn't stop a smile from slipping onto his full lips. *Mountainside menace.* That was a good one.

He felt a quick stab of guilt about his near collision on the piste with the black-haired beauty—but it was his first day of work and an emergency was an emergency. Besides, wearing a white ski suit was hardly an advertisement to your presence on the slopes. Even if it looked as though someone had poured Giselle Bundschen's body into the woman's form-fitting all-in-one. He'd been lucky he'd seen the red bobble on her hat.

Fraser was relieved to note that the building's old-fashioned exterior hid an incredibly modern clinic. The Deer Creek website had shown photos of first-aid and examination rooms kitted out with everything a doctor needed up here. Well, everything but a full operating theatre and accompanying staff. Mind you, those were close enough, down at the Valley Hospital. Just a scenic trip down to

the proper town on the gondola, or in an ambulance if the weather suited, and, *voilà*—everything a surgeon could dream of.

A petite redhead with a pixie cut leaned through a pair of swinging double doors, "Dr. MacKenzie? That was fast."

What was the nurse's name again? They'd only had a quick phone conversation and he'd been paying more attention to the details of the patient. Lisa? Lise? Liesel! Liesel the nurse and Tara the doctor. He'd better get those right.

Liesel's voice sounded definitively Antipodean, despite her Germanic name. Australian, he would've guessed. If looks were anything to go by, she seemed a cheery sort. They'd work well together. Cheerful and easygoing. Just the sort of relationship he liked.

Fraser's knowledge of his new boss was pretty limited, too. Taking the job had been a last-minute move, just like the decision to leave his previous post. And the one before that.

Never mind. He was good at his job. Emergency medicine was second nature to him after his time in the forces. He had no concerns in that department.

If his employers didn't think seeing the world was a good enough reason to move on after a season on their hills, then—well—it was time to move on. Hopefully, the new boss wouldn't come loaded with it's-time-to-put-down-your-roots advice.

At the very least, he was hoping to learn something new from her. A quick internet search at the airport for Dr. Tara Braxton's background showed an impressive tenure at one of America's best orthopedic research hospitals. Then—poof—nothing until he found her in the clinic here at Deer Creek. The picture-perfect mountain resort was a far cry from the lofty heights of New York City's medical elite if ever there was one.

"Dr. MacKenzie, the little boy and his mother are in Exam One." The nurse's warm Australian voice brought him back into the room.

"Yes, sorry, love. Excuse the lack of shoes. I was just—"

A fresh blast of piney mountain air flooded into the waiting room, along with a familiar-looking woman. She didn't look pleased. Miraculously, her mood didn't detract from her take-your-breath-away beauty. Tall and slender, clearly a regular on the slopes and without a speck of make-up. Enhancing that level of natural beauty wasn't necessary. Apple-red lips, glossy black hair and creamy skin with his particular favorite, a smattering of freckles across the nose. Did those eyes of hers sparkle like starlit ebony when she was in a good mood? Fraser had seen his share of beauties in his time, but this woman hit every mark. Too bad relationships were off limits for him. The impact she'd had on him in this handful of seconds was like a fully weighted sucker punch. If ever someone had presented a need to re-examine the rulebook, this woman was it. In spades.

"I am going to have to have a word with the snow patrol. They need to start at dawn," the woman growled in Liesel's direction, oblivious of Fraser and his approving gaze. "Someone's got to crack down on these hillside hooligans!" He watched with amusement as her eyes moved from Liesel's bewildered face to himself. Here it comes, here … it … comes! The not-so-slow dawn of recognition.

"You?"

"If 'hillside hooligans' or 'mountain menaces' are to whom you are referring, then you've got me." Fraser grinned broadly. He watched as she physically recoiled from him. *That was a new one.*

He pulled himself up to his full height as she fixed him with a potent glare. *Wow.* Usually a smile won the ladies over. This one clearly had her own set of hurdles to jump. He dropped the smile and jokey tone. He was a doctor and a patients' needs came first. Posturing was a bunch of nonsense. She was going to have to get a grip and act like a grown-up.

"I am sorry for having distressed you, but I'm afraid I've got an emergency here at the clinic. So, if you'll excuse me?" He turned towards the examination room Liesel had indicated held the patient.

"What? Wait a minute!" The woman's voice hardened. "This is *my* clinic, so I think you'll find any patients waiting here will be for me. Me or a Dr. MacKenzie, who's meant to appear later in the—"

Tara felt her mouth go dry for the second time in less than five minutes.

"Wait a minute. *You're* Dr. MacKenzie."

"Nice to meet you." Fraser instinctively glanced at the exam room, hoping this interrogation would end fairly quickly. Then again, this wasn't strictly the best way to meet your new boss. "Dr. Braxton, I presume?"

Fraser offered her another smile, this time secretly enjoying the pretty flush of scarlet creeping into Tara's cheeks as he extended a hand towards her. *Good.* He did have an effect on her.

Tara curtly took his proffered hand and offered a quick one-two, business-only shake. *Was she always this spirited or was it exclusive to nearly being run over by a new colleague?* He suspected the former.

"Excuse me, doctors." Liesel's voice broke through the tension-thick air. "We've got a little boy in here with a black eye, a potential concussion, sore wrist and a very worried mother."

Tara wished she could scrub away the flush of heat from her cheeks. Unlikely, as Liesel's comment only caused it to deepen. Fraser MacKenzie had actually taken her breath away and she wasn't happy about it. Not in the slightest. Particularly as she had worked so hard to separate work and emotions. The last thing she wanted to compromise was her professional duty. And she was most certainly not going to let a gallivanting snow jockey get the upper hand.

"Of course. Sorry, Liesel. Why didn't you radio me?"

"I tried, but you didn't respond." Liesel glanced at the clipboard she held in the crook of her arm. "The little boy's mum, a Mrs. Carroll, was so anxious I rang Dr. MacKenzie on the off chance he was nearby and he said he'd race over."

"He raced over all right," Tara muttered under her breath, as she moved her hand down to her belt to check her radio. The little green light wasn't shining.

"Dead batteries?" His smile was friendly but Tara was sure she could hear a patronizing tone in Dr. MacKenzie's voice. "Could've happened to anyone."

"Batteries often freeze at high altitude, as I'm sure you know." Tara quirked an eyebrow at him and forced the corners of her lips to turn upwards into a bright smile.

Why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut? Tara felt like kicking herself—and kicking Fraser MacKenzie. Did his eyes really need to twinkle with delight when he rubbed in what a schoolgirl error she had made? This was hardly a competition for who could be the better doctor.

Batteries frequently froze up here at high elevation. Fact.

Even so, it was a stupid mistake. What if she hadn't been near the clinic and a patient required critical care? She'd have to renew the vigor of her checks every morning and stick a spare pair of batteries into the insulated pocket of her ski suit before she went out. More importantly, even if Fraser did make Braveheart look like a wimpy nerd, she needed to make sure this encounter ended with her new employee understanding who ran things here. And it certainly wasn't him. She began to unzip her ski jacket and put on her best charm-school voice.

"Dr. MacKenzie, since you haven't had a chance to settle in, I'll take this patient." Before he could protest, she slipped past him and opened the door, forcing herself to look up into those blue-as-a-lake eyes before she disappeared into the exam room.

"Are you happy to show us what you're made of later in the day?"

"Perfectly." Fraser flashed her a dazzling smile, put his hand up in a mock salute and clicked his heels together.

Tara's hand clenched the door handle, nerves jangling with—what, exactly? Embarrassment? Anger? Definitely embarrassment. *Show us what you're made of?* Sweet heavens above. It was more

than clear the man was made of one part gorgeous to one part devil-may-care. She might have to rejig the ratios a bit but …

Unwilling to let him see her falter, Tara dropped her gaze to the floor. Despite herself, her ire disintegrated in an instant. Fraser's socks had little cartoon snowmen dappled all over them. It was all she could do not to burst into giggles. Not that she was going to let him know he wasn't the only one with a closet affection for the holidays.

C'mon Tara. Be fair. Give the guy a chance to explain himself.

To buy herself time, Tara allowed herself a cautious visual journey back up those long legs and well-muscled torso, landing straight on those perfectly blue eyes. It shocked her to realize she'd just ogled him. At close range. *You're a doctor, for heaven's sake! Get a grip!*

"I'll tell you what." Tara did her best to let the words trip out lightly. "Let's meet for coffee at the café next door in an hour and I'll talk you through how the clinic works." Unable to resist a bit of a barb, she turned to face her nurse, "Liesel, can you let Dr. MacKenzie know where the outdoor shop is, please? He might find it a bit chilly to work out the season in his snowmen socks."

Tara quickly entered the exam room before letting the full impact of Fraser MacKenzie's tall, dark and ridiculously handsome looks sink in. Chestnut-brown hair with the perfect amount of salt and pepper at the temples. A pair of blue eyes that seemed backlit they were so bright. And the cheekbones. Knock-your-knees-out-from-under-you cheekbones. Her personal weakness.

For heaven's sake! She felt jittery enough after their high-speed run-in on the slopes. Having to absorb the fact she'd somehow hired the living, breathing image of her fantasy man—complete with a sexy Scottish accent—was too much.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

A young woman stood up from the exam-room chair and reached out an arm to Tara as if to steady her.

"That's my line!" Tara tried to quip, hoping to retain the smallest modicum of professionalism. Patients first. Heart doing a wild jitterbug? Not an option. Not any more.

"Now, who's this?"

"I'm Henry and this is my Mom." The blond boy sitting on Tara's exam table piped up. He seemed in good enough spirits despite the worried expression on his mother's face and the large pack of frozen vegetables he held over his eye.

"May I have a look?" She took the packet from him and placed it on the exam table.

"Wow! That's one heck of a panda eye you have there, young man." Wincing with sympathy, she continued, "I'm glad to see your mother was smart enough to bring out the frozen peas!"

"We told him to wait until we were up to put on his ski boots, but you just couldn't hold on, could you, Henry?" Mrs. Carroll smiled lovingly at her boy, but Tara could see how concerned she was.

He did have a small cut above his eye, but it wasn't bleeding. What concerned Tara more was how gingerly he was holding his wrist.

"Henry, it's nice to meet you. I am Dr. Braxton." She gave him the most relaxed smile she could muster despite the flock or herd or whatever it was of butterflies still careering round her stomach. *Thanks a heap, Dr. MacKenzie.*

"Would you like to tell me what happened?"

"Sure!" Henry smiled up at her after getting a reassuring nod from his mother. "Mom and Dad told me not to put on my boots until we went skiing. So this morning I knew we were going skiing and no one was up yet, but I was excited, so I brought my boots upstairs to try them on outside Mom and Dad's room and they fit so I started to walk downstairs to get some juice because I was thirsty and …" Here he stopped and shot an anxious look at his mother.

"Go on, you silly little thing." His mother couldn't help laughing at her son's pell-mell style of story. "Tell the doctor what happened next."

"Well … it turns out it was harder to go down the stairs than I thought and I tripped and fell and bumped all the way to the bottom." Henry gave Tara a triumphant grin.

"Looks like you showed those stairs who was boss." Tara smiled at his bravery.

"If this isn't proof my husband should've booked a cabin instead of the townhouse, I don't know what is!" Mrs. Carroll was trying to keep her voice light, but a slight waver betrayed her anxiety.

Tara smiled reassuringly. "Believe me, accidents can happen anywhere. I'm sure this was nothing you could have foreseen. Henry, do you mind if I take a look at your wrist?"

The little boy automatically pulled his arm towards his stomach.

"It's okay, Henry. I know it must hurt." Tara reached into a drawer behind her and pulled out a child's instant cold compress. Giving the packet an experienced twist and shake, she handed it to the boy. "Why don't you hold this on your wrist for a minute?" Once he had the pack resting on his arm, Tara continued, "I'd better do a check to make sure you didn't conk your head too hard when you landed." She bent her knees so she was level with his eye line. "Can you just follow my finger?"

A few tests and a soft splint later, Tara felt satisfied that Henry had no permanent damage.

"Looks like you have a resilient son here, Mrs. Carroll, but I'm afraid his wrist is sprained. I think we can safely rule out a break as he has a full range of movement despite the swelling. Forty-eight hours of rest, elevation and cold compresses should help ease the pain."

Tara couldn't stop herself from ruffling Henry's curly blond hair. She'd always imagined she'd have a little boy. A couple of them. Not that she was too bothered if they were boys or girls. Just healthy kids, part of a happy family. Ah, well. Dreams were just that. Fanciful flights of your imagination. No room for those any more.

Clearing her throat, Tara wiggled a playful finger at Henry. "Be sure to listen to your mom, now. We'll get you back out on those slopes lickety-split." Henry grinned with relief.

Turning, Tara addressed Henry's mother, "Make sure you call me if he complains of any dizziness, nausea or starts to have any balance problems. Here's a sheet listing concussion symptoms to look out for, but I'm pretty certain you're in the clear."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Braxton. This will certainly make our Thanksgiving vacation more interesting! I hope you and your family have a great holiday."

Tara's brow cinched into a furrow, her thumb moving mechanically to the finger that had once held a diamond solitaire. She was here on her own. And that's how she liked it.

"Just me and my stethoscope, I'm afraid!" Tara shook the stethoscope in what she hoped looked like a carefree manner.

"I'm so sorry, I just assumed …" The poor woman looked mortified.

"Not to worry. An easy mistake to make."

Tara held her smile until the mother and son walked out of her exam room.

Just the mountains and me. *Just the way I like it.*

Fraser grinned as the cowbell rang out when he entered the log cabin-style café next to the clinic. He'd spent seasons in all types of ski resorts, but there was something different about Deer Creek. His staff condo didn't have the usual temporary feeling hanging about it and the resort village itself, just a small main street with a smattering of specialized shops and a fire department, was … welcoming. That was it. Welcoming. The place made him feel like he'd come home. Which was rich coming from someone who'd been born several thousand miles away and had actively avoided having a permanent address for the past four years.

He felt his smile fade. Four years. Four years that would never bring his brother back, no matter how many times he went over his options that day. He'd survived. His kid brother hadn't. It was as simple as that.

Fraser shook the thoughts away and stepped up to the counter heaving with scones, fruity muffins, oversized brownies, and to-die-for cookies. He didn't usually go in for baked goods so early, but he had just snowboarded for a good hour.

"What can I do you for?" A cheerful woman behind the counter with a thick braid running down her back smiled up at him.

"What would you recommend for a man who is about to start his first day of work?"

"Ooh! New job, eh? First impressions are very important."

Fraser winced at the memory of the first impression he'd made on Tara. Definitely not a winning one, that was for sure. Ah, well. It's not strictly as if his new colleague had skied straight off the slopes of the Deer Creek charm academy.

"You will want to have just the right breakfast if you're going to cut it up here in Deer Creek." Her eyes twinkled as she put on a mock expression of gravity and scanned his options.

"If I were you, and bear in mind I made everything you see here before you, I would start with a caffe latte and a blueberry muffin because I picked the berries myself and powered up the dough with a bit of protein powder."

"That sounds good. I will need all the strength I can get today."

"And why is that exactly?" The woman leant forward conspiratorially. "Is the new boss a bit of an ogre?"

"Exactly! Wait, no. Hmm …" Fraser reconsidered, enjoying the playful tête-à-tête with the café owner, "More like a drill sergeant in a sexy ski suit. Nothing I can't handle. Particularly if I bribe her with a few of these treats you have here."

"So your boss is a bit of a push-over, is she?"

The sound of Tara's voice hit Fraser's nerve endings before he saw her. Great. Just great. If she was going to be this sensitive about everything that came out of his mouth it was going to be a long season.

"Morning, Tara! So this is the new doc you hired?"

"You guessed right, Marian. I'm afraid I am to blame." Tara offered a hundred-watt smile to Marian and a cool half-glance in Fraser's direction. *Is that all you've got? C'mon, Dr. Braxton. You'll have to play harder than that if you want to stick in the daggers.* This could be fun.

"Oh, I wouldn't blame you for hiring this one." The café owner gave Tara a naughty grin, not even attempting to hide her approval of Fraser's looks. *And we can chalk another point up for MacKenzie!*

Tara leant forward conspiratorially, a smile playing on her lips and her eyes trained on Fraser as she addressed her friend. "Trust me, Marian, if I'd realized I'd hired a speed freak who has problems with his superiors I would've gone straight back to the drawing board."

Fraser flinched, unable to staunch the memory of his commanding officer ordering him to return from the combat zone. *So it's time for hardball, is it?* If Tara wanted to play this game, it was fine with him. He didn't have anything to lose. Not any more.

"The ink's hardly dry on my contract …"

"I don't think we're quite at that point." Tara met his gaze, the merest hint of a question in her eyes. "Are we?" It was a statement. Not a question.

No. Perhaps not just yet. *He was the one who chose when to leave. Not the other way around.* Besides, just a couple of mini-encounters with this woman and he knew instinctively she was more substance than style. And she had buckets of style.

"Will you have the regular, dear?" Marian interjected, seemingly oblivious to the verbal sparring match being played out in front of her muffin display.

"Yes, please, Marian, and could you also add on whatever Dr. MacKenzie would like as well? We wouldn't want him thinking we are bereft of manners out here in the wilds of Deer Creek."

There was that fiery glint in Tara's eyes again. How playfully or not it shone was up in the air.

She sure was a live wire. Even so, the last thing Fraser wanted was for Tara to think he was a sexist pig. Women were paramount in his life. His mother had almost single-handedly raised him and his brother, with their father's military career consuming most of his time. And his brother's

wife? Well, he had met few people who could hold a candle to the strength and determination she had shown the past few years. He closed his eyes for a moment, willing the images of his family to stay behind the door he'd had to shut four years ago. They were better off without him.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

"And why is that, exactly?" Tara's dark eyes held his gaze, genuinely curious.

"Because we are professionals and while you may run the clinic, I am quite able to fend for myself."

"No one's doubting your ability to buy a blueberry muffin, Dr. MacKenzie. What I *am* doubting, is your ability to accept some Deer Creek hospitality."

Fraser was a master at keeping his cool and he was damned if he was going to blow his top over who was or wasn't going to buy a blueberry muffin. This whole palaver would be a lot easier if Tara didn't make a glaring expression and firmly crossed arms look so attractive. Fraser was no chauvinist, but he certainly was about as red-blooded a male as they came.

He took a level breath and continued, "Where I come from, manners are paramount." He saw her eyes narrow dubiously. "It is not unusual for a new employee to greet their boss with a purely professional, no-strings-attached latte and a …" he glanced at the counter as Marian brought out a huge plate of pancakes and a steaming pitcher of syrup "… very impressive plate of pancakes."

Marian leaned in before Tara could respond. "Keep this one on, honey. I think we'll like having him around the place."

Tara shot her friend an I-love-you-but-you're-not-really-helping look.

Okay. He definitely had charming and suave covered. Not so sure about the "professional" part.

Good grief. *Chill out, Tara!* Fraser seemed sincere enough. And her last comment had clearly hit a nerve. Not entirely sure which nerve, but there was definitely more going on than met the eye with this man. Anyhow, she hadn't heard the entire conversation with Marian so it wasn't entirely fair to judge. *Eat your pancakes and let it go!* Besides, staring into those startlingly azure eyes of his wasn't exactly helping her focus. Neither was the fact that he had called her a drill sergeant. Maybe she'd pushed the cool and reserved boss thing a bit too far.

This wasn't fair! She had worked hard to get herself back to the fun-loving person she had always been before New York and now she was coming across all grouchy and horrible.

"I'll throw in one of Marian's salted caramel brownies for later if that will seal the deal." Fraser tipped his head in the direction of her absolutely favorite indulgence and gave her a knowing wink.

"Now, let's not go overboard." It was difficult to keep a smile from creeping onto her lips. The man was good. No doubt about it. "A plate of pancakes will suffice to give us a clean slate." Tara knew she sounded churlish but she didn't want Fraser to think his charming smile was actually making her go weak at the knees. *Which it was.* Or that his long-lashed wink had unleashed a reel of goose-bumps up her arms. *Which it had.* But she had to ignore that now and act like his boss. *Which she was.*

Arghhhh! Why didn't she ask for photos of her applicants?

"For heaven's sake, honey." She felt Marian poking her arm playfully. "Let the man buy you a brownie. You know they're your favorite and they were freshly baked this morning!" Marian adorned her sales pitch with a musical trill as Fraser put on what she imagined was his best contrite expression.

"Thank you. I gratefully accept." Tara quickly whisked her pancakes off the counter and made her way to a window table before she made a bigger fool of herself. Any more deep and meaningful eye contact with Dr. Fraser MacKenzie would be a swan dive into a danger zone she didn't want to enter. Not in a million years.

Tara took advantage of his turned back to lean her head against the cool window for a moment before pulling her fingers through her hat-head hair. She could hear Fraser laugh quietly with Marian as he settled the bill. Even across the room that sexy voice of his put her senses on high alert. Who was she kidding? Every single thing about the man had her feeling more alive than she'd ever felt

and she'd only known him for a New York second. New York. The place that had taught her how important it was to be careful—guarded. To look after number one.

Sighing, she picked up her fork and stabbed at a pancake. Maybe she was a bit uptight. But that was hardly her fault. Life had taught her to be wary and Fraser was setting off all of her alarm bells. Besides, she primly reminded herself, he had nearly had a serious collision with her this morning so she had a right to be cross with him. And another thing! Did he have to be so—so *accurate* in assessing her character when they'd known each other less than five minutes? She would have to be tough. Cool. Professional.

"One gingerbread latte for the good doctor."

Uh-oh. Was that Scottish accent of his going to get her every time?

CHAPTER TWO

"HOW DID YOU know to get me a gingerbread latte?"

"I had some help." Fraser nodded towards Marian, who threw a coy beauty-queen wave in their direction.

Tara couldn't help but give him a smile of thanks as he pushed the steaming mug of cinnamon-scented coffee across the table. Poor sap didn't know he was being used. Marian had been trying to set her up with just about every male with a pulse she'd met since she'd arrived in Deer Creek just over a year ago. Heartbroken. No. Heart shut. Heart shut for good. Which was exactly why she and ol' Dr. MacKenzie here needed to get things off to a more professional start.

"How's the little boy doing?"

Tick! Top marks for starting off with a work question, Fraser.

"He'll be fine, thank goodness. His wrist was sprained, which was the worst of it. He had a small cut on his forehead, but no concussion."

"I suppose you get your fair share of sprains up here."

Tara sat back in the worn leather chair and laughed, relieved to be back on familiar terrain: doctor talk. "Not to mention broken clavicles, arms, legs. The regular business is in ligaments. I'm sure you'll agree it's the same in every ski resort, but by the end of the season you'll be examining medial collateral and anterior cruciate ligament injuries in your sleep!"

He liked how her eyes crinkled when she laughed. In fact, Fraser liked how Tara's whole face lit up when she spoke about medicine. It clearly fuelled her.

"Oh, and I forgot to say, I do a couple of voluntary shifts every couple of weeks at the local hospital in the ER. I'm sure Valley Hospital would welcome it if you followed suit but it's by no means required."

"To see patients from the clinic?" Fraser was impressed. Tara really seemed to see things through with her patients.

"No, not really. I mean, if they're there, obviously I'd see them, but it helps me keep all of my skills up to speed and, more importantly, I don't want the locals thinking we are a bunch of elite medics who swan in and out with the good snow. It's mostly about giving a bit back to the community. Proving we're here for the long haul."

Fraser's grip tightened on his coffee mug. *Ouch.* That one had hit a bullseye.

"How about altitude sickness? Much of a problem with that?"

Tara pushed her lips forward in a let-me-think-about-it-for-a-second expression. She was clearly unaware of the fact that her thinking pout was about as close an invitation to give her lips a languorous après-ski kiss as you could get. Fraser shifted in his chair. Lasting this season bachelor-style was definitely going to be a bit tougher than he'd thought.

"Not too much," she continued, oblivious to the not-necessarily-unpleasant sensations Fraser was experiencing. "I've only been here a year or so, but the only altitude sickness case I've come across was a couple who went heli-skiing who hadn't been before. The chopper crew got to them before any of their symptoms became too severe and we were able to get them home safely."

Helicopters. Fraser felt his lips twitch involuntarily. He hadn't been behind the controls of a helicopter since … Well, long enough that he shouldn't be having a physical reaction at the mention of a helicopter. Maybe he should've talked to someone about it when he'd had the chance. Someone in the forces.

Who was he kidding? It had only been recently he'd felt anywhere near being able to speak about that day. But not to just anyone. If he were to open up, which was unlikely, he would need to speak to someone who could understand precisely how scarred he felt. The chances of finding

someone else who could understand what it was like to be responsible for their own brother's death, leaving his wife a widow and two children fatherless—well—they were pretty small.

"Many deaths?" It slipped out. Sounded too keen. He felt a scowl form.

"No. Sorry to disappoint you." Tara's dark eyes turned quizzical, obviously wondering why a lack of extreme trauma would upset someone who'd taken the Hippocratic oath to care and protect.

"We do get the odd spinal injury, and the rescue crews have seen their share of fatalities over the years. To be honest, I try not to dwell on the extreme cases, because it just means someone's life has gotten a whole lot harder."

Fraser sighed heavily, nodding in agreement. He could relate to that. "It's part of the job. Seeing people's lives, their dreams, come to an abrupt halt."

Tara felt herself examining Fraser more closely. The cavalier guy who'd been trying to win her over with her favorite coffee seemed to have been spirited away. There was something he wasn't telling her. Something dark. Was he lost in the same black hole she'd been pushed into after her ex had betrayed her? She scanned his face. Maybe she'd been too quick to judge.

Don't go there, Tara. He's male. Emotions only run skin deep. No loyalty.

"Listen." She stabbed her fork into a final triangle of pancake. "I'd bet none of the injuries we have here are different from what you've seen at any other ski resort. Probably the biggest difference up here in Deer Creek are the bears."

"Bears?" Fraser felt his eyebrows raise a little too high. Had his voice risen too? Unlikely.

Tara laughed and clapped her hands, "You should see yourself! A big strong man like you getting all nervy over a little grizzly bear."

So she thought he was big and strong, eh? That was a plus. *Little grizzly bear?* Yeah, right. Fraser cleared his throat, trying to regain some professional composure.

"What do you do in the cases of a severe injury on the slopes?"

"The ski patrol up here is really good," Tara enthused. "The boys work on the same radio frequency as we do and they are all trained to a high level of first aid. In fact, a couple of them are the local ambulance medics during the summer, so they know their stuff."

Fraser felt himself nodding along with Tara's breakdown of how the ski support staff all worked together in Deer Creek. Sounded like a smooth operation. Good blueberry muffins as well. He could definitely do with one of these every morning.

As if on cue, Tara's radio began to crackle to life with the ski patrol radio tag. She pulled it off her belt and set it between the two of them on the table.

"Morning, team." They heard the male voice continue, "Afraid we've got a fifty-three-year-old male presenting with a cardiac arrest. Ski Patrol Unit One is administering CPR. They are about five minutes out from the clinic on the Starlight Slope. Tara, do you read? Switch to Channel Two. Over."

Tara simultaneously picked up the radio and rose from her chair. Speaking into the radio, she gestured for Fraser to follow her and gave Marian a quick wave goodbye. "We're on our way to the clinic now. Do you need an AED on site? Over."

"Negative. Patrol has a defibrillator on the skidoo. Prepare for arrival of patient. Over."

Tara pulled on her jacket, giving Fraser a concerned glance. "Are you sure you're up to starting now? You're not scheduled yet."

"You bet your woolen socks I'll help." Fraser was all too aware that the first few minutes after a person suffered from cardiac arrest were critical in terms of maintaining an oxygen-rich blood flow to the body's vital organs. Compromising those precious opportunities just because he wasn't on a roster? Not a chance.

As they jogged the few yards to the clinic, Tara looked up at slopes at the sound of the approaching skidoo. The ski patrollers were highly visible in their bright red jackets with white crosses on the back. She saw one of them administering CPR whilst riding on the rescue stretcher with the patient.

Not a good sign.

Tara ran into the clinic, calling out to Liesel about the incoming patient.

“Already on it!” replied the nurse, pulling open the double doors to the trauma room housing all the necessary equipment.

Tara did a quick scrub at the sink and turned round to see Fraser carrying in the stretchered patient along with one of the patrollers. Good to see he wasn’t afraid to lend a hand. On Fraser’s quick count, they shifted the man to the exam table.

“How long has he been out?” His voice was all business.

“Two to three minutes max. The patient is suffering pulseless ventricular tachycardia,” came the reply. It was Brian, an EMT based in the Valley. Tara had worked with him on a couple of river rescues over the summer. Reliable. He would’ve been doing all he could. “You guys need me in the room?”

Tara looked up quickly at Fraser, “I think Dr. MacKenzie and I have this one?” He nodded a quick assent, simultaneously unzipping the man’s jacket to reveal a skintight ski shirt.

“Scissors?”

Tara quickly pulled a pair out from a drawer and handed them to him, while steering the heart-rate monitor to the head of the gurney.

“Update before you go, Brian?” Tara worked as she spoke, reaching for the defibrillator.

Brian spoke from the doorway, giving the doctors room around the patient, “We administered on-site CPR for three minutes and confirmed chest rises, but no pulse. We administered one shock from the defibrillator, and received a weak pulse and heart rate. We then lost the pulse after loading the patient onto the rescue stretcher so I continued to administer CPR until now.”

Tara thanked Brian, who slipped out of the room as Fraser efficiently cut away the clothing surrounding the man’s chest, applied lubricant and stood clear in order for her to apply the shock from the defibrillator.

They both stood completely still for a moment, waiting for the tell-tale beeps on the heart-rate monitor. Silence. Silence.

They repeated their motions—each working wordlessly—only looking to one another for confirmation of the other’s movement. Eighty percent of patients could survive a heart attack with prompt defibrillation.

Tara increased the charge. “Clear!”

Fraser stepped back.

They waited again, listening, watching the patient for signs of a response.

Silence.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Tara heaved a sigh of relief. They’d done it. She looked up at Fraser and received a broad smile of confirmation. A shot of heat poured straight into her stomach. Espresso hot and just as stimulating. *Uh-oh.* She hadn’t experienced girly flutterings like this for some time. A long time. And that was just the way she liked it. Clean and simple. No feelings. Just medicine.

She tried to shrug away the growing suspicion that working with Fraser would be much more than “just medicine.” They’d saved this man’s life. With medicine. And now just one lovely, warm smile and her knees were going all wobbly. Terrific.

“Arthur Jones.”

“What?” Tara was jolted back into the room at the sound of Fraser’s voice.

“That’s his name,” Fraser was looking at her with an odd expression as he held up a driver’s license he’d retrieved from the man’s wallet. “Arthur Jones.”

“Yes, right, of course.” Of course. *Really proving your worth in the doctor department, aren’t you, Tara?* “Mr. Jones?” Tara rested a hand gently on the man’s shoulder. “Mr. Jones?”

The gray-haired gentleman's eyes fluttered open with a look of bewilderment, "Where—where …?"

"It's all right, Mr. Jones. I'm Dr. Braxton and this is Dr. MacKenzie." Tara didn't afford herself a glance in Fraser's direction. "I'm afraid you've had a heart attack. Are you here with any family?"

"Yes, all my family." Arthur's voice was weak but audible.

"Can you tell us how to get in touch with them?"

"We're staying in one of the lodge's chalets. The Pine … The—"

"It's all right, Mr. Jones." Tara laid a reassuring hand on his arm. "We'll call the lodge and find your family for you. Right now, your job is to rest and we'll get everything organized for you."

Fraser leant back against the counter, enjoying watching Tara interact with the patient. She had a soothing nature—a good bedside manner they called it in med school. He'd reluctantly inherited the moniker Smooth Operator by his medical peers, teased for the warm responses he seemed to elicit from the female patients in particular. Any smooth operations he might've pulled off in the past few years had passed him by. He wasn't one for one-night stands and dating someone for the fleeting duration of a ski season just seemed cruel when he knew he had no intention of hanging around. He was going to have to watch himself around Tara Braxton because everything about the last few hours at Deer Creek was teasing at his psyche, asking the unthinkable, *Why not stay awhile?*

One thing Fraser knew he couldn't handle was settling down. Long term just wasn't for him.

"Dr. MacKenzie, would you mind getting Liesel to call the Valley Hospital, please? We're going to need to transfer Mr. Jones for further tests."

"What about Thanksgiving?" Arthur tried pushing himself upright on the medical trolley. Gently pressing him back down to his pillow, Tara replied with a regretful smile, "I'm afraid you will definitely have to go to the hospital. I suspect they will want to keep you overnight for observation just in case you need to have an operation." Arthur closed his eyes and let out a quiet moan. "Ginny's gone to so much work! All those pies …"

"I'm afraid pie might be off the menu for a while." Tara chuckled, gesturing to Fraser to help her raise the patient's bed so he could sit a bit more upright. "We're just going to move you into a seated position, Arthur, all right?"

After helping Tara, Fraser slipped out of the room to hunt down Liesel. Once he was happy the ambulance had been organized and family members had been contacted at the lodge, he decided to take a little nosy around the facility. Of course, he wouldn't be staying in Deer Creek forever, but he may as well be familiar with his immediate surroundings for the next few months.

Behind the reception area there was a break room kitted out with the requisite coffee-maker, refrigerator, table covered with a smattering of local newspapers and a halffinished Sudoku puzzle. The refrigerator wore the usual array of amusing medical and skiing cartoons that usually found their way into any ski clinic. A strip of coupons and flyers for local attractions were held in place by a magnet advertising a local real-estate agent. The bowling alley looked fun. The art house cinema? Maybe. House buying? He put the magnet back in place over the clipping. House buying was the last thing on his agenda.

A corridor off the room led to one other examination room with X-ray facilities. He nodded approvingly. It was a good set-up. They had everything they needed to deal with the bread-and-butter cases a mountain clinic dealt with and just enough to see patients through to a fully equipped hospital for the more extreme cases. He worked his way back to the reception area of the clinic, where he found Tara and Liesel bent over the counter, sorting out some paperwork.

"Having a look around our humble clinic?" Tara offered a tentative smile.

"Yes." He tried to put on a hokey Southern accent. "Looks like you folk know what you're doing round these parts."

Despite herself, Tara let out a peal of laughter. Hearing a hillbilly accent was one thing, but hearing a hillbilly Scottish accent was hilarious. "You'd better watch how you use that lingo of yours,

mister, or you're going to find yourself lost up some holler or another, drinking hooch with the local yokels."

Fraser laughed with her, a twist of bewilderment washing across his face, "I have no idea what you're saying, but I'll be sure to try and take your advice." Pointing at the medical paperwork, he moved back to more familiar terrain. "How's Mr. Jones faring?"

"He's doing well. Ambulance will be here in ten," Liesel answered easily. Efficiently. Tara didn't know how the nurse did it but she was clearly unaffected by Fraser's lilting brogue. And his lovely midnight-blue eyes, and his broad chest … *Stop. It. Now.*

"Once he's been picked up by the EMTs, how about you take me on a quick spin around the village so I can get my bearings?" Fraser flashed Tara one of his full-mouthed smiles, oblivious to the incredibly unprofessional thoughts swirling round her head.

"Sure, yes. That's fine. Liesel, we'll be on the radios if you're all right manning the fort for a bit. I'll be back for the afternoon shift."

"Yes, ma'am." Liesel gave her boss a comedy salute.

Tara winced at the memory of Fraser doing exactly the same thing. Was she really such a taskmaster? Her concerns weren't allayed when Liesel crinkled her brow and chewed on her lip for a moment before asking, "You're still all right covering Thanksgiving on your own tomorrow so I can have dinner with Eric's family?"

"Yes, of course! You must! Don't be silly!" *Aha!* That was it! Now she remembered why Liesel hadn't fallen under the same spell she seemed to have been smitten with. The local ski patroller had already taken Liesel's heart. Tara had promised her she would cover the clinic over the holiday as she had no plans to celebrate it herself. Thanksgiving was definitely a family holiday—something you celebrated with loved ones. Right now, Tara's family consisted of herself. She was okay with that. But having Fraser watch her exchange with Liesel was making her behave like an over-cheery spinster. Not a winning look. Not that she cared. *Oh, mercy …*

"I'll be sure to bring you some pie if I can weasel it out of Eric's mum. I'm sure she'll make loads. Your favorite is pumpkin, right?"

"Oh, don't worry about that." Tara waved off Liesel's concern. "I'll pick up something from Marian today before she closes. I'll be just fine."

"What about me?" Fraser interrupted, putting on a forlorn expression. "What's a poor Scotsman to do with himself all alone on America's biggest holiday?"

"I—I'm going to be running the clinic," Tara faltered. She hadn't been expecting Fraser to be working for a few more days. Her plan had been a simple one. Block out the fact she didn't have her own family to celebrate her second-favorite holiday with and work in the clinic. There would probably be a few of the usual bumps and bruises that came along with skiing, but hopefully the worst thing that would happen to any of the visitors to Deer Creek was a bit of indigestion. "Besides—" she tried to cover her dismay with false cheer "—there's always Christmas!"

"Not a problem, Tara." Fraser waved off her concerned expression. "I'm sure there will be some lonely ski bunny I can lure off the slopes for a bit of hot toddy and some pumpkin pie. Don't you worry about little ol' me."

Any trace of Tara's smile vanished. "Right. Well, that's everyone's Thanksgiving plans taken care of, then."

She'd been a fool to think she could trust Fraser MacKenzie to be anything other than a typical ski-season Dr. Don Juan. What an idiot to have been so weak-willed as to even entertain the tiniest bit of pleasure at his James Bond looks. Her conscience gave her a sound rap on the knuckles. No more eyeing up Fraser as if he were a delicious piece of Christmas candy! She was here to work, to save lives, to settle down. Alone. *Stick to the mission, Tara.*

Suppressing the volley of emotions she was experiencing, Tara knew her only option was to go to her usual hiding place—her work. "Liesel, I think I'm going to man the clinic for a bit. Mr.

Jones deserves a bit more attention before he's off to the hospital and I'd like to catch up on some paperwork. Would you be so kind as to acquaint Dr. MacKenzie with the wonders of Deer Creek?"

After hearing the expected "Sure thing!" in response, Tara riffled through the papers on the desk, not daring to look Fraser in the eye. *Talk about taking the express lane to getting under my skin.*

"Surely you know a joke when you hear one, Tara."

The frustration in Fraser's voice forced her to meet his gaze, his eyes snapping with something deeper than irritation. "I don't know what you expected from me—but I'm here to work. That's it. It would be nice if the work environment was a bit more 'user-friendly'."

Tara tried to smile at his comment, but knew she hadn't fooled him. "The environment was perfectly delightful before you blew in off the slopes, Dr. MacKenzie. Just bear in mind Deer Creek is a community. This isn't a love-'em-and-leave-'em sort of town. We take care of each other here."

Uh-oh. Too much information again. Why hadn't she just let the whole thing go? Perhaps there truly was more to his suave veneer than she was giving him credit for.

"I'll be sure to remember that, Dr. Braxton. Thanks for the social etiquette tips."

Stinging from the exchange, Tara watched as the pair quietly left the clinic after a minute or so of silent coat gathering and boot lacing. Her terse tone had affected everyone's mood. Not to mention the fact she'd betrayed her golden rule: keep your game face.

She'd done everything but break down in tears in front of the man. How mortifying. No doubt the whole of Deer Creek would know how she felt by sundown. Which was what, exactly? Like a giddy princess who thought she'd just met her Prince Charming, only to discover he was a frog?

Tara rested her head on the reception counter and closed her eyes. She felt like such a fool. Not to mention a poor loser. How could she have thought, even for a moment, that a man in the exquisitely gorgeous form of Fraser MacKenzie would be anything less than a ski-season Lothario? She was usually smart enough to see through that.

All the signs had been there. Never stayed anywhere longer than a season, flirty banter with Marian, with her. And she'd fallen for it! Hook, line and sinker. At least her body had. Now her head was in a tailspin, not knowing if she was in the right or wrong. Tara scrubbed her fingernails along the counter. *What a nightmare.*

It was so frustrating to feel this vulnerable to Fraser's charms after all the hard work she'd put in at building herself back up from nothing. Finally allowing herself to become the woman she'd always known she was. Strong. Fun-loving. In charge of her own destiny.

It was a far cry from the year-long relationship with her ex. Tara had done everything he had wanted. It made her fingers curl to think of it now, but she'd been young and so bewitched by his status at the university. Her parents had both recently passed away in a horrific car accident. It had always just been just the three of them and suddenly, whoosh, she had been all alone in the world. Their deaths had fuelled her to work even harder in medical school, where her persistence and drive had won her the best grades in her course. Then suddenly the Great and Mighty Professor, renowned orthopedist and research maverick, had not only wanted Tara to be his intern but also had wanted to be with her romantically. From chief bookworm to object of affection. Tara had been completely overwhelmed. And naïve.

At his behest, she'd attended all the research conferences alongside New York's medical elite, put in ridiculous hours and stayed in the lab well into the night, week after week. A fat lot of good it had done her.

Her trust in him had been so true, so blind, she had been oblivious to the fact all her hard work had only been so that he could steal her groundbreaking research.

Being single, she didn't mind. Having had her ex take the credit for all of the advances she'd made in orthopedic surgery? That had been the deal-breaker. And the end of her ability to trust anyone fully with romantic intentions.

After working at a couple of other labs, Tara had thrown caution to the wind and taken the job here at Deer Creek. She'd entered the community cautiously at first, but had then realized, as long as she kept her wits about her, this was the perfect place to heal. To grow. To close the doors on romance and fill all the voids with her passion for medicine.

And look at her now.

All wobbly-kneed and hot under the collar after less than a full workday with Fraser MacKenzie. Great. Just great.

Tara scanned the empty clinic and huffed out a sigh as she sank into an office chair. Blocking out the fact that tomorrow was Thanksgiving wasn't the only thing on her new to-do list. She also faced a day of sitting alone in the ski clinic with little more than a mug of lukewarm coffee and a stale packet of mint cookies, figuring out a way to clean the slate with Fraser and start again. *What fun!* If time travel were an option, she'd fast-forward to spring. If she stuck to her plan she'd own the clinic outright by April, Fraser would be gone and she'd be back in control again.

Tara opened up the packet of cookies, took a tentative sniff then pushed them to the far end of the counter. This was ridiculous. She shook her head and marched herself into her office.

Snap out of it, Tara! She had worked too hard to let herself wallow in self-pity. Mr. Jones and all the other patients she had seen and would see over the season were her priority—they were where her heart lay. If Thanksgiving came in the form of a microwave turkey dinner and a couple of old cookies, then so be it. And if Fraser MacKenzie couldn't take it as much as he dished it, too bad.

"I seem to rub Dr. Braxton the wrong way." Fraser put the comment out into the crisp, wintry air, wondering if Liesel would confirm his assessment of the situation.

Liesel gave Fraser a sidelong glance and let out a good-natured laugh. "Well, I haven't worked with Tara that long. Just a few months. Let's just say I haven't seen her dander rise up quite so quickly before. You seem to have made quite an impression on her."

"Not really the impression I was hoping to make." He tried to put on a goofy grin but it felt strained. Sucking up wasn't his modus operandi. Problem-solving was. He had signed a contract so, for better or for worse, he was going to be here for the next few months. The last thing he wanted was to spend his days squabbling with Tara. Life was too short.

"From what I do know about her, she's pretty private. She's probably a bit stressed because she only has a few months left to pay off the rest of her loan to buy the clinic from the lodge. If I were you, I'd stick to medical issues. That's what seems to keep her happy."

Quite a commitment from someone who had to be in her early thirties at most.

"Does she have family out here?" Fraser took a stab at the only thing he could think of that would get someone to unpack their suitcases and stay put.

"Not that I know of. She's never mentioned any family at all but, as I said, she keeps herself to herself."

He knew that feeling. He hadn't mentioned his family since the day after his brother's funeral. His past he kept locked firmly away, where it belonged. Out of sight. Everyone was better off that way.

Fraser turned to face Liesel, his hands firmly squaring her shoulders to his, suddenly fuelled with the need to put things right. Whether or not he stuck around was a different issue, but he was not in the business of making other people's lives a misery. Not any more. "Let's not make this a tour of Deer Creek. Let's make this a tour of Tara's Deer Creek and see what we can discover about why she loves this place so much."

Liesel crinkled her nose in confusion, "I'm not sure I follow you. I don't think Tara would be so keen if we starting poking around her—"

"No, no," Fraser enthused, "this is to help us—help me—survive the season. It'll be like a treasure hunt, only … I'm not sure what the treasure is just yet."

The nurse laughed again, infected by his energy. “I’m still not entirely sure I know what you’re talking about, Dr. MacKenzie, but I’m more than happy to join in. Although the chances are pretty high that everything you’re looking for is behind the doors of the clinic.”

Fraser linked arms with the redhead. “I’m quite sure there’s more to Dr. Tara Braxton than the clinic.” He turned towards Marian’s bakery on the small main street. “Come along, Liesel, I think I know the perfect place to start.”

Tara gave a short wave to the EMTs as they drove off with Mr. Jones safely secured in the back of the ambulance. His pulse and heart rate were stabilized. For now. But further extensive tests were required to ensure he didn’t need bypass surgery, and they were more complex than she could carry out here at the clinic. Luckily, the Valley Hospital was equipped to do most major surgeries. Denver wasn’t too far along the road if something truly complicated came their way. She had seen a couple of rescues that had involved airlifting the patients to Denver but, fingers crossed, nothing so far this season.

Refocusing her energies into her work had proved to be good medicine. Patient care was something she valued and the last thing she was going to allow her new hire to do was compromise her career. It had happened once, and it most certainly wouldn’t happen again.

As the morning wore on and the steady stream of patients ebbed away, Tara felt back on her game. Composed. In control. The morning’s cases had been fairly easy—a fractured wrist, a severe nosebleed and an early case of stomach upset from over-indulgence. Just enough busy work for Tara to almost squeeze images of the dark-haired Scot from her mind.

Almost.

Sending Fraser out on a tour of Deer Creek, a small resort village compromising a lodge, a few ski chalets and a tiny town center was hardly going to keep him out of the clinic for long. She could feel herself return to her old habit of chewing on her lower lip. This man was not bringing out the best in her.

Technically, Fraser hadn’t been contracted to start work until the following Monday. It hadn’t even occurred to her to hire someone to start work over the holiday. When she’d found out at the last minute that Tom Brady was heading to Banff, instead of renewing his contract in Deer Creek, she’d made a few phone calls. Soon enough she’d felt she had covered all her bases for the holiday weekend. There were plenty of locals who helped out with search and rescue teams if required, and the team at the fire station were all trained in first aid, not to mention the ski patrollers, who were always rostered on. Bar anything truly horrible happening—she gave a quick subconscious knock on the wooden doorframe—everything would be okay.

“Anybody home?” Liesel quipped as she entered to Tara’s knock.

“Just little old me!” Tara smiled at the nurse, whom she now counted as a good friend. “Sorry about earlier.” She winced apologetically. “I must’ve woken up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

“Mmm … could be that,” Liesel mused. She leant forward and teasingly poked Tara in the arm. “Or it could be that someone has a crush on the handsome new Highland doctor.”

Tara playfully slapped away Liesel’s hand. At least she hoped it seemed playful.

“Do not. I don’t have time for silly crushes.” *How humiliating.*

“Are you saying my crush on Eric is silly?” Liesel persisted in taunting her boss.

“I would hardly call dating someone for several months and being invited to their family home for Thanksgiving as having a silly crush.”

“True.” Liesel dropped her backpack on the floor behind the reception counter and flopped into the wheeled chair, lazily swinging herself from side to side.

“Where did you leave Dr. MacKenzie, anyway?” Tara wished she could’ve bitten back the words as soon as they’d left her mouth. She was pretty sure they betrayed a bit too much interest as to his irritatingly magnetic whereabouts. Too much interest for her own liking anyway.

Seemingly not having heard her, Liesel turned to Tara with a big grin. “This will be my first Thanksgiving, you know.”

Tara smiled warmly at her pixie-haired friend. She deserved all of the happiness she received. From the sound of it, Liesel’s heart had been picked up at the beginning of a number of ski seasons and soundly dropped at the last ski lift run at the first sign of spring. She was a kind, trusting woman and, from the sound of it, was reaching a point where traveling from resort to resort had lost its luster. “It’s homey here, isn’t it?”

“Where, the clinic?” Tara laughed. The clinic was nice, but not nearly as welcoming as one of those little craftsman houses with all-weather porches tucked away on the hillside. Too bad her finances didn’t stretch far enough to include a house.

“No, silly. Deer Creek. I could really see me staying here a while.” She let out a wistful sigh.

Tara slipped into the chair next to her, joining in the rhythmic swinging of chairs from side to side.

It *was* nice here. Especially when there was someone to share it all with.

CHAPTER THREE

COULD THE RECEPTION area stand up to a third run with the mop?

Tara scanned the immaculate room.

It was Thanksgiving morning and so far she had helped a whopping single visitor on a quest for a handful of cotton balls. Full marks for keeping everyone fit and healthy on the holiday, zero for keeping her mind occupied.

She felt her shoulders slump a bit as she scanned the empty room. She wondered what Liesel was doing. No. She didn't. She knew exactly what Liesel was doing. Enjoying the early phases of the holiday with Eric and his family. An involuntary sigh escaped her lips.

It wasn't the lack of patients that was sapping her good spirits. It was the absence of a certain Scottish doctor. No. That wasn't quite right.

Tara pulled on a dark curl and chewed her lower lip. It had been a long time—if ever—that someone had made such a full-force impact on her. Talk about setting your senses on fire! She stifled a yawn, knowing full well she'd kept herself up all night doing little re-runs of the previous day. Taking a little memory-lane trip along those well-defined cheekbones, stopping for a moment to enjoy the salt and pepper temples before making a quick turn towards those eyes of his. Mother Nature had come up trumps when it came to Fraser MacKenzie.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.