



JENNIFER TAYLOR

Miracle Under
the Mistletoe



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Jennifer Taylor

Miracle Under The Mistletoe

«HarperCollins»

Taylor J.

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'Tis the season for second chances? Two years ago A&E Consultant Sean Fitzgerald left Molly Daniels broken-hearted. Now he's back, and the reception she gives him is frostier than the weather! But he's determined to reveal the truth about his past... Walking away from Molly was the hardest thing Sean's ever done, but now she's within his reach once more he never wants to let her go. Could one magical mistletoe kiss be all he needs to melt her heart and finally show Molly he's here to stay?

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Praise for Jennifer Taylor

‘A superbly written tale of hope, redemption and forgiveness, *The Son that Changed His Life* is a first-class contemporary romance that plumbs deep into the heart of the human spirit and touches the soul.’

—CataRomance

‘Powerful, compassionate and poignant, *The Son that Changed His Life* is a brilliant read from an outstanding writer who always delivers!’

—CataRomance

‘I’m sorry, Molly. I never meant to upset you like this.’

Sean drew her to him once more, planting a gentle kiss on her cheek. It was meant to be no more than a token—a simple expression of gratitude for her support—and it might have remained that way too if she hadn’t chosen that precise moment to turn her head.

Molly froze when she felt his lips glide from her cheek and come to rest at the corner of her mouth. She knew that she should do something to stop what was happening, but it was as though her body was suddenly refusing to obey her. When his lips started to move again, deliberately this time, she could only stand there ... motionless.

His mouth found hers and she heard him sigh, felt the warm expulsion of his breath on her lips, and it was that which broke the spell. However, if she’d hoped that it would bring her to her senses she was mistaken. Her lips seemed to possess a will of their own as they clung to his, eagerly inviting him to continue. And he did ...

Dear Reader,

Once again I have returned to Dalverston General Hospital and used it as the setting for this book. Although the town of Dalverston is purely a figment of my imagination, the area it is based on is one of my favourite parts of the world—the beautiful English Lake District. I always experience a little thrill of pleasure whenever I set a book there.

Molly is shocked when she discovers that Sean Fitzgerald is to be the new locum registrar, covering the busy Christmas and New Year period in Dalverston General's A&E department. When Sean worked there before they had an affair, and it has taken Molly a long time to get over it. To have Sean reappear in her life is the last thing she needs.

Sean knows that he hurt Molly and regrets it deeply—but he had no choice. He's made a solemn vow never to get involved with any woman and he has to keep it. However, seeing Molly again arouses all kinds of emotions and he struggles to remain detached. Can he break his vow and win Molly back, as he yearns to do? Or will he always regret it? Read on to find out!

If you would like to learn more about the background to my Dalverston series then do visit my blog at jennifertaylorauthor.wordpress.com.

Love,

Jennifer

JENNIFER TAYLOR lives in the north-west of England, in a small village surrounded by some really beautiful countryside. She has written for several different Mills & Boon series in the past, but it wasn't until she read her first Medical Romance that she truly found her niche. When she's not writing, or doing research for her latest book, Jennifer's hobbies include reading, gardening, travel, and chatting to friends both on and offline. She is always delighted to hear from readers, so do visit her website at jennifertaylorauthor.wordpress.com.

Miracle Under the Mistletoe

Jennifer Taylor



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CHAPTER ONE

‘LEFT A BIT ... a bit more. No, that’s too far now.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Suzy, make up your mind. I’m starting to get vertigo from balancing on the top of this ladder!’

Molly Daniels rolled her eyes as she looked down at her friend, Suzy Walters. It was the start of her Friday night shift and from the amount of noise issuing from the waiting room things were already hotting up. With just three weeks to go until Christmas, the A&E unit at Dalverston General Hospital was coming under increasing pressure as people set about enjoying the festivities. She really needed to get down to some work so, tossing back her strawberry blonde curls, which as per usual had come loose from their clip, Molly held up the bunch of mistletoe once more.

‘How about here? Maybe it’s not the exact centre of the room but I doubt if anyone except you will notice that.’

‘I suppose it will have to do,’ Suzy conceded grudgingly. She grimaced as Molly pinned the rather wilted bunch of foliage to the ceiling above the coffee table. ‘Although, according to custom, you are supposed to be standing *under* the mistletoe before anyone can kiss you and you can’t do that with the table being there, can you?’

‘Well, that’s fine by me.’ Molly made sure the drawing pin was securely anchored then climbed down from the ladder. ‘I’ve had it with men calling the shots, so if anyone gets any idea about kissing me without my express permission they can forget it!’

‘Oh, come on, Molly. You don’t really mean that.’

Suzy followed Molly out of the staffroom, a frown furrowing her brow. They had met at university while they had been studying for their nursing degrees and had remained firm friends ever since. Molly knew that Suzy only wanted her to be happy; however, her friend’s idea of happiness —i.e. finding the right man to settle down and have a family with, as Suzy herself had done—was no longer hers.

She had tried that and she had the scars to prove it too! Her dream had always been to find her ideal mate so that she could enjoy the kind of loving and supportive relationship her parents had. She had set out her stall accordingly, opting to date men who had possessed the right credentials. They had to be reliable and trustworthy, caring and kind. The problem was that although they had appeared to tick all the right boxes, they had turned out to be far from perfect. One was too bossy, another too needy, a third too *boring*—and so it had gone on.

The one and only time she had veered off course and dated someone who hadn’t fitted her brief had been an even bigger disaster, though. She had had her heart well and truly crushed then and from now on she intended to take a very different approach when it came to relationships. There would be no more wondering if this or that man was Mr Right. And definitely no more sitting by the phone, waiting for him to call. The days of her being a lovelorn victim were well and truly over!

‘I do.’ Molly held up her hand when Suzy opened her mouth to protest. ‘Save your breath, Suzy. I’ve heard it all before: one day I’ll meet the man of my dreams and ride off into the sunset with him.’ Molly snorted in disgust, her emerald-green eyes filled with cynicism. ‘I may have believed in the fairy tale at one time, but I don’t believe it now. The man doesn’t exist who can make me change my mind about that, either!’

Molly spun round and headed to the nurses’ station. Fond as she was of Suzy, she didn’t intend to waste any more time debating the issue. She did the hand-over, listening closely while Joyce Summers, her opposite number on the day shift, updated her as to the status of the patients currently in the unit. As senior sister, Molly needed to know what stage they were up to in their treatment. She nodded when Joyce had finished.

‘Not too bad, from the sound of it.’

‘It’s early days yet,’ Joyce replied with all the weary wisdom gained from twenty-odd years spent working on the unit. She was due to retire after Christmas and was looking forward to it immensely.

‘It is,’ Molly agreed, laughing. ‘So how are your plans coming on? Have you booked that cruise you were telling me about?’

‘I have indeed. Three weeks in the Caribbean. I can’t wait!’ Joyce picked up her cardigan and started to leave then paused. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you that we’ve got a locum covering over Christmas and the New Year. He’s starting tonight ... Oh, talk of the devil—here he is! At least we know he’s up to the job, unlike some I could mention.’

Molly glanced round to see who had come in through the main doors and felt her heart grind to a halt. It couldn’t be him, she told herself sickly. Not now, after she had finally sorted out her life. It must be her imagination playing tricks, trying to test her newfound resolve after what she had told Suzy, but it wasn’t going to work. Closing her eyes, Molly counted to ten, convinced that when she opened them again the apparition would have disappeared ...

‘Hello, Molly. Long time, no see, as the saying goes.’

Molly’s eyes flew open as she stared at the man standing in front of her. A wave of panic washed over her as she drank in all the familiar details, from the jet-black hair falling over his forehead to the deep blue eyes that were studying her with undisguised amusement. This man had been her one and only aberration. Even though she had known from the outset that he was far from being her ideal life partner, she had had an affair with him. He had possessed none of the qualities she had always deemed essential in a relationship. On the contrary, he wasn’t reliable or trustworthy, and he definitely wasn’t looking for commitment, but she had gone ahead anyway and slept with him. Now, as she saw the smile that curved his lips, Molly realised that any hopes she may have harboured about him being a figment of her imagination had been way off beam. Sean Fitzgerald wasn’t some kind of hallucination. He wasn’t even a memory dredged up from her past. He was completely and utterly real!

Sean managed to hold his smile but it wasn’t easy. Although he had guessed that Molly might not be exactly overjoyed to see him again, he hadn’t envisaged *this* reaction. As he took stock of the pallor of her skin, he was overcome by a feeling of shame he had never experienced before. It didn’t matter that he had made his intentions perfectly clear from their very first date, or that he had frequently reiterated the fact that he didn’t intend to commit himself to *anyone*. He had hurt her. Badly.

Sean’s heart sank as that thought hit home. He had thought long and hard when the agency had phoned and offered him this post as locum senior registrar on Dalverston’s A&E unit. He had been very aware that working with Molly could turn out to be challenging to say the least. His initial reaction had been to turn it down but in the end he had decided to accept it. He needed to work over the Christmas period, needed to be kept busy so that he wouldn’t dwell on the past. He couldn’t bear to leave it to chance that another post would come up, so he had set aside his qualms and accepted the offer. Now, however, he couldn’t help wondering if it had been selfish to put his own needs first.

‘I wasn’t sure who would be working tonight,’ he said lightly, struggling to behave as normally as possible. That was the key to handling this situation, he assured himself. After all, it wasn’t the first time that he had found himself working with a woman he had dated and subsequently dumped and he had learned from experience that the best way to defuse matters was by acting normally. All he could do was hope that it would work this time too, although something warned him that he was being overly optimistic.

‘No? You should have asked for a copy of the roster. Then you could have opted to work a different shift and avoided me, as I’m sure we both would have preferred.’

Molly’s voice sounded harsh and so unlike the tone he remembered that Sean frowned. However, before he could say anything, she picked up a file from the desk and headed towards the waiting room. He watched her go, feeling a whole host of emotions hit him one after the other—slam, bang, wallop: regret, sadness, an unfamiliar sense of loss ...

Sean blanked them all out, knowing how pointless it was to go down that route. He had done what he had had to do: ended their relationship when he had realised that Molly was getting far too attached to him. He had, in effect, done the honourable thing, he assured himself as he headed to the staffroom to deposit his coat. He had called a halt before things had gone too far—although how far was *too* far? he wondered suddenly as he keyed in the security code and unlocked the door. Should he have stopped after their first kiss? Or before they had slept together? And surely he should have called a halt before it had happened a second and a third time, even if making love with Molly had been the most wonderful experience of his life?

The door closed behind him with a noisy thud but he didn't even notice. Making love with Molly had been mind-blowing and there was no point denying it. He had felt things when they had made love that he had never felt before, not even with Claire, and the thought was so painful that he winced. Was that why he had been so brusque when he had ended his relationship with Molly? Because he had felt guilty? Had it seemed like the ultimate betrayal of the woman he had been going to marry to feel all those things for Molly?

Sean knew it was true and it didn't make him feel any better to admit it. For the past ten years he had remained faithful to his dead fiancée. Oh, admittedly, he had slept with many women during that time but he had never become emotionally involved with any of them, and that was what counted. However, it had been different with Molly. She had touched him on so many levels; their affair hadn't been purely physical, as he had wanted it to be.

It made him see that he would need to be very careful while he was working at Dalverston. It would be only too easy to break the vow he had made after Claire had died.

It was a busy night, as Molly had predicted. By the time she was due for her break, the unit was overflowing with people waiting to be seen. She shook her head when Jason Roberts, the newest addition to their staff, asked her if she was going to the canteen.

'I'll wait till things calm down a bit,' she explained then sighed as the doors opened to admit another group of injured revellers. One of them was bleeding copiously from a gash on his forehead. That he was also extremely drunk as well was evident from the way he was staggering about. Molly beckoned to Jason to follow her as she headed straight over to him. In her experience it was better to get the drunks safely corralled so they couldn't upset the rest of their patients.

'Right, let's get you sat down for starters.' She guided the man to a chair and bent down to examine the cut on his head. Although there was a great deal of blood, it was only a superficial injury and would need just butterfly stitches to close it. 'Get him checked in at Reception, will you?' she told Jason. 'Then you can clean this up and apply a few butterfly stitches to hold it together.'

It was a simple enough task and one the young nurse was more than capable of performing; however, it appeared the patient had other ideas. Grabbing hold of Molly's arm, he pulled her back when she went to leave.

'I want you to do it, not him.' He looked at Jason and sneered. 'I don't want some young kid messing around with me.'

'Jason is a fully qualified nurse. He is more than capable of dealing with this,' Molly explained levelly. She tried to withdraw her arm from the man's grasp but he wouldn't let her go. His fingers tightened around her wrist, making her wince with pain.

'I said that I want you to do it.' He hauled her down so that their faces were mere inches apart and she had to stop herself gagging at the sour smell of alcohol coming off his breath. 'I pay my taxes, love, and if I say I want *you* to treat me then that's how it's going to be.'

'I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, sir. *We* decide who gets to treat you and *we* also decide who we won't treat, either. I have to say that you're number one on that list at this precise moment.'

Molly looked round when she recognised Sean's voice. Although he hadn't raised his voice, there was no disguising the anger on his face. It obviously had an effect on the drunk because he immediately let her go. Molly stepped back, her legs trembling a little as she hastily put some space

between them. Although it wasn't the first time that she'd had to deal with an unpleasant situation, it was upsetting, nevertheless.

'Are you all right?'

Sean's voice was low, filled with something that brought an unexpected lump to her throat. He sounded genuinely concerned but that couldn't be right, not after the way he had ended their affair two years ago. He had been almost brutal as he had told her bluntly that he didn't want to see her any more. Although Molly had asked him why, *pleaded* with him to tell her what had made him reach such a decision, he had refused to explain. He had merely reminded her that he had made it clear right from the beginning that he wasn't looking for commitment, and that had been that. He had left Dalverston shortly afterwards to take up another post in a different part of the country and had never made any attempt to contact her since.

Sean had written her out of his life and it would be foolish to imagine that he cared, even more foolish to wish that he did. Even though Molly knew all that, she couldn't stop herself. Foolish or not, she wanted him to care about her and the thought was like the proverbial red rag. As Jason led the drunk away, she rounded on Sean, pain and anger warring inside her. The last thing she wanted was to feel anything for him ever again!

'I would appreciate it if you didn't interfere in future,' she told him furiously. 'I am more than capable of dealing with a situation like that.'

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly. 'I just thought maybe you needed some backup.'

'Well, you thought wrong,' Molly snapped. She glared at him. 'I don't need your help, Dr Fitzgerald, and I would prefer it if you didn't butt in.'

'Then all I can do is apologise and assure you that it won't happen again.'

He gave her a thin smile then walked away, leaving Molly fuming. She knew she had overreacted and it was frustrating to think that she had allowed Sean to get to her like that. The only way she would cope in the coming weeks while they had to work together was by remaining calm, indifferent even. Allowing her emotions to come to the fore, whether it was anger or anything else, certainly wouldn't help. No, she needed to remain detached, aloof, distant, and that way she would get through this. However, as she went to collect her next patient, Molly was bitterly aware that it wasn't going to be easy to be any of those things. Working with Sean was going to test her self-control to its absolute limit.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A busy night, although not busy enough for Sean's liking. As one patient succeeded another, he found himself wishing for more—some kind of major incident that would mean he didn't have time to think about anything apart from the lives he was saving. It wasn't that he wanted people to get hurt—far from it. However, anything that would stop him thinking about Molly and the way he had reacted when that drunk had grabbed hold of her would be a relief.

'Lily should be fine, but don't hesitate to bring her back if you're at all concerned about her.' He dragged his thoughts back to the present and smiled at the anxious parents of seventeen-year-old Lily Morris. They had brought their daughter into the unit after she had woken during the night with an angry red rash all over her body. They had been worried that she had contracted meningitis but Sean had been able to allay their fears. It turned out that Lily had reacted adversely to some new shower gel she had bought off a market stall; she would be absolutely fine as long as she didn't use it again.

'Thank you so much, Doctor.' Mr Morris sighed as he shook Sean's hand. 'If it's not one thing, it's another when you have children. Lily gave us a right old scare when we saw the state of her, I can tell you.'

'I'm sure she did but, as I said, Lily should be fine so long as she sticks to her usual shower gel.'

Sean saw the family out then went to the desk and emailed the local Trading Standards office. The gel Lily had purchased had been purportedly a leading brand but he seriously doubted it was genuine. Hopefully, Trading Standards would be able to investigate and stop anyone else purchasing it and ending up in the same state as Lily.

Once that was done, he checked the whiteboard to make sure that nobody had been waiting longer than they should. Government guidelines stated that patients should be seen, treated and either transferred to a ward or sent home within a set number of hours. There was just one patient nearing that limit, so he made his way to Cubicles to check what was happening. The curtains were drawn and he pushed them aside, feeling his heart sink when he found Molly standing beside the bed.

Although they had spoken a couple of times since that incident involving the drunk, Sean had tried his best to stay out of Molly's way. Not only did he want to avoid another confrontation with her, but he wasn't comfortable with all the emotions she seemed to have stirred up inside him. He wanted to be indifferent to her but he knew deep down that it was beyond him. Maybe he had succeeded in dismissing all the other women he had dated from his mind but he couldn't rid himself of Molly, it seemed.

'How's it going in here, Sister?' he asked, falling back on professional courtesy seeing as everything else seemed way too difficult at the moment.

'Mr Forster was complaining of feeling sick,' she replied in the coolest possible tone.

Quite frankly, Sean wouldn't have thought her capable of sounding so frosty and blinked in surprise. Molly had always been known for her warmth, for her kindness, for her sheer *joie de vivre*. Her earlier anger had been upsetting enough but to hear her sounding so frigid was even worse. It sent a shiver straight through his heart. Had he done this to her? Had he turned her from the warm, loving woman he remembered to this ... this chilly replica of herself? Even though he hated the idea, he couldn't dismiss it.

'I imagine it's the morphine,' he said evenly, clamping down on the guilt that threatened to swamp him as he lifted the patient's notes out of their holder. Frank Forster had been admitted after complaining of severe pain in his lower back. Apparently, he had been lifting a large Christmas tree off the roof of his car when it had happened. A subsequent scan had shown that one of the discs in his lumbar spine had prolapsed and was pressing on a nerve. The poor man was in a great deal of pain, which was why he had been given morphine while they waited for a bed to become vacant in the spinal unit. Now Sean frowned as he looked up.

‘Why didn’t Dr Collins prescribe an anti-emetic with the morphine?’

‘I have no idea,’ Molly replied coldly. She finished straightening the blanket and patted the middle-aged man’s hand. ‘I’ll be back in a moment with something to stop you feeling so sick, Frank. Just hang in there.’

She treated the man to a warm smile and Sean felt some of his guilt ooze away. So the old Molly hadn’t disappeared completely, as he had feared. It was just with him that she was so frosty; she was perfectly fine with everyone else. That thought might have set off another round of soul-searching if he had let it, only he refused to do so. As he followed her out of the cubicle, he ruthlessly shoved all those pesky feelings back into their box and slammed the lid. He had to focus on the fact that he had done what he had needed to do to protect her, and that he would do exactly the same thing all over again too if it became necessary ...

Wouldn’t he?

Sean felt his vision blur, the sterile white walls that surrounded him turning a fuzzy shade of grey. He would finish with Molly again if he had to—of course he would! However, no matter how many times he told himself that, he didn’t quite believe it. Maybe he was ninety-nine per cent certain but there was that one per cent of doubt lurking in his mind. One tiny but highly dangerous percentage of uncertainty that sent a chill rippling down his spine. Until he could erase it completely then he couldn’t be sure exactly how he would react, so help him!

Molly made her way to the desk, trying to ignore the fact that Sean was following her. That was the best way to handle this situation, she reminded herself—she would ignore him and concentrate on doing her job. It shouldn’t be that difficult. They were always so busy that there was little time to think about anything of a personal nature; however, she had to admit that several times she had found her thoughts wandering. Sean had had a major impact on her life and it wasn’t easy to forget that when they had been thrust together again like this.

Molly’s generous mouth tightened as she set about making the adjustment to Frank Forster’s meds. Although she knew exactly what was needed to make the man comfortable, it required a doctor’s signature on the prescription. She glanced round, hoping to catch sight of Steph Collins, their F1 student, but there was no sign of her. Although everything was calming down now, there were still a few patients in the unit. Undoubtedly, Steph was dealing with one of them.

‘Here. I’ll sign that.’

A large tanned hand reached over her shoulder and took the script from her and Molly jumped. She hadn’t realised that Sean was standing quite so close to her and she couldn’t stop herself reacting. There was a tiny pause and she held her breath as she willed him not to say anything. She didn’t want him to suspect how nervous she felt around him, didn’t want to admit it to herself even. She just wanted to be indifferent to his presence, as he was undoubtedly indifferent to hers.

The soft rustle of paper as he scrawled his name at the bottom of the script broke the spell. Molly nodded as he handed it back to her without comment, relieved that she had got off so lightly. She would be wary of that happening again, she thought as she took the keys to the drugs cupboard out of her pocket. The last thing she wanted was to appear vulnerable when Sean was around.

‘Thanks. I’ll get Mr Forster sorted out and then check if there’s a bed available yet. He may have to be transferred to Men’s Surgical if the Spinal Unit can’t come up with anything soon.’

‘Hardly ideal, is it, to shunt seriously injured patients about?’ Sean observed.

‘No. It isn’t.’ She shrugged, causing another wayward curl to spring out of its clip. ‘However, needs must. We either move him to Men’s Surgical or get a rocket off the powers-that-be for overrunning the time limit. I sometimes wish that they all had to do a stint down here. Then they might appreciate just how difficult it is to get a patient seen and treated within such a ridiculously short space of time.’

‘Amen to that,’ Sean murmured. Leaning forward, he carefully tucked the unruly curl behind her ear and nodded. ‘There you go. All nice and tidy again.’

‘I ... erm ... I’ll get that anti-emetic.’

Molly turned and fled, uncaring what he thought as she hurried into the office. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, rapid little flurries that sent the blood gushing through her veins in a red-hot torrent, and bit her lip. She didn’t want to react this way, but she couldn’t seem to help it. The moment Sean had touched her, it had been as though a fire had reignited inside her and the thought filled her with dismay.

She couldn’t go through what she had been through two years ago all over again. Sean had meant the world to her back then; she had honestly thought that she had found her Mr Right, but she had been mistaken. Sean wasn’t interested in making a commitment to her or to any woman.

‘About what happened before, Molly, well, I’d hate to think that it might create a problem between us.’

Molly spun round so fast when she heard Sean’s voice that the room started to whirl around her and she grabbed hold of the desk to steady herself. ‘What happened before,’ she repeated uncertainly. Her heart suddenly leapt into her throat. Was Sean talking about their affair? Was he attempting to explain why he had ended it so abruptly? Even though it shouldn’t have made a scrap of difference now, she found herself holding her breath.

‘Yes. That incident with the drunk, I mean.’ He grimaced. ‘You were quite right to take me to task because I should never have interfered. I’ve always had the greatest respect for the way you handle even the most difficult patients and I should have left it to you to sort things out.’

‘I ...’ Molly found herself floundering and desperately tried to collect herself. Of course Sean wasn’t talking about their affair! That was over and done with so far as he was concerned. In fact, he probably hadn’t given her another thought after he had left Dalverston. The idea was so painful that it cut through the muddle in her head as nothing else could have done.

‘No, you shouldn’t have intervened,’ she said flatly, afraid that he would guess how hurt she felt. She drew herself up, forcing all the injured feelings to the deepest, darkest corner of her mind. Letting herself get upset at this stage was pointless. It wouldn’t change what had happened; neither would she want it to. ‘I was perfectly capable of handling it myself. However, there seems little point going on and on about it. It’s all over and done with now.’

‘Of course. I just wouldn’t want it to cause any ... well, friction between us. I realise that working together isn’t exactly ideal but I’m hoping that we can call a truce. Do you think that’s possible, Molly? Can we put what happened two years ago behind us?’

‘It isn’t an issue,’ she said quickly and then flushed when she saw the scepticism in his eyes. ‘Don’t flatter yourself, Sean. Oh, I may have been upset at the time—I’ll admit it. However, I soon got over it, I assure you.’

‘Good. I’m pleased to hear it.’ He grinned at her, apparently relieved to have got everything settled so successfully. ‘Right, I’d better get back before we have a mutiny on our hands. The rest of the team will think we’ve gone AWOL!’

Molly filled in the sheet to say that she had taken the prescribed drugs after he had left then took a deep breath before she made her way back to the unit. From this point on she would follow Sean’s example and treat him as nothing more than a colleague. It was only what he was, in all honesty, so it shouldn’t be that difficult, especially after what he had said to her just now.

A tiny stab of pain speared through her heart but she steadfastly ignored it. Obviously, Sean didn’t view her as anything more than someone he worked with and she was glad about that too!

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS WELL after seven a.m. before Sean finally left the unit. Although he had been due to leave at six there had been a last-minute rush which had held everyone up, not that he minded. As he made his way to the staff car park, he deliberately set about erasing the night's events from his mind. There was no point dwelling on what Molly had said about how quickly she had got over him. And definitely no point wondering why he had felt so hurt when he had heard it. He had learned through experience that it was best not to examine his feelings in too much depth. No, they had called a truce and that was it. End of story.

Sean sighed as he unlocked his car and got in, all too aware how shallow it made him appear to take such a view. However, as he couldn't think of a better approach, he had to go along with it. There was a film of ice covering the windscreen and he switched on the engine to clear it. There were a lot of night staff leaving at the same time and he recognised several people from the last time he had worked at Dalverston.

He had enjoyed his stint here, he mused as he waited for the ice to melt. There was a strong community feel about the hospital, plus it was situated in such a glorious part of the country. He knew that they were desperately in need of a permanent registrar to fill the vacancy in A&E and was seriously tempted to apply for the post himself. He would enjoy living and working here full-time.

The thought shocked him, mainly because it was the first time that he had seriously considered taking a permanent post. After Claire had died so tragically in that road accident, he had found it impossible to settle. He had signed on with a leading medical agency and taken only short-term contracts ever since. Two months here, six months there; it had been exactly what he had wanted. To suddenly discover that his peripatetic lifestyle had started to pall was a shock and not a pleasant one either, especially when it was the thought of working here that had triggered it. It would be asking for trouble if he remained in Dalverston. Working with Molly, day in and day out, would be far too much for him to handle.

As though thinking about her had somehow conjured her up, Molly suddenly appeared. Sean felt his heart and what felt like the rest of his vital organs scrunch up inside him as he watched her walk over to her car. She had parked in the row behind him and he studied her reflection in his rear-view mirror. She looked weary, only to be expected after the busy night they'd had, but was that the only reason for the defeated slump to her shoulders? Or had it anything to do with him? Had she found it a strain to work with him after what had happened between them in the past? Even though there was little he could do about it, he hated to think that *he* was the cause of her unhappiness. Out of all the women he had dated since Claire had died, Molly was the only one he had truly cared about.

Molly slid the key into the lock and opened the car door. Picking up the can of de-icer, she squirted a generous dollop onto the frosty windscreen. She hated winter, hated the fact that she couldn't just get in her car and drive away. There was no point pretending—working with Sean had been an ordeal, one she wished with every scrap of her being that she wouldn't have to repeat, but there was no hope of that, was there? He was covering the entire Christmas and New Year period which meant he would be around for at least six weeks and probably longer if the management team could persuade him to stay on. Finding cover over the festive period was always difficult as most locums wanted to be with their families at this time of the year. There were very few with Sean's skills and experience willing to relocate.

Molly tucked the can under the passenger seat, trying not to think about the problems it could cause if she had to see Sean on a daily basis. Slipping the key into the ignition, she attempted to start the engine, only to be rewarded by a nasty grunting noise. She tried again with the same result. The battery, always dodgy, was completely flat. Brilliant! Now she would have to catch the bus, which was just what she needed after the night she'd had.

‘Problems?’

Molly almost jumped out of her skin when her car door opened. She had no idea where Sean had appeared from and found it impossible to reply. He gave her a quick smile as leant into the car to try starting the engine himself.

‘Sounds like a flat battery to me,’ he declared when he received the same response. Resting his forearm against the roof of the car, he grinned down at her. ‘They always go at the worst possible moment, don’t they?’

It was the sort of comment anyone might have made in such circumstances, so Molly had no idea why she reacted as she did. ‘Thank you, but I did manage to work that out for myself! Now, if you’ll move aside ...’

She gave the door a hefty push to fully open it, not even flinching when it caught him a glancing blow on his hip. It was his own fault for poking his nose in again where it wasn’t wanted, she assured herself as she lifted her bag off the passenger seat. She didn’t need his help. She didn’t want anything to do with him. Quite frankly, if he disappeared in a puff of smoke it would make her day!

Slamming the car door, she started walking towards the gate, wondering how long it would be before a bus came along. She lived on the other side of the town and it took forever by bus, which was why she had saved up for a car.

She was just nearing the gate when she saw her bus coming along the road and started to run, but it was difficult to make much progress thanks to the frosty conditions underfoot. She groaned as she was forced to watch it drive away. She would have to wait at least half an hour before another came along.

‘Hop in. I’ll give you a lift.’ Sean drew up beside her but Molly shook her head.

‘No, thank you. I prefer to wait for the next bus,’ she said snippily.

‘Are you sure?’ He shrugged, his broad shoulders moving lightly beneath his heavy quilted jacket, and Molly gulped. Sean had always possessed the most wonderful physique and it seemed little had changed in that respect. He had gone running when they had been seeing each other, setting off early each morning so he could fit in a run before work.

How many times had he come back from one of those runs and persuaded her to take a shower with him? she wondered suddenly. She had no idea but the memory of those times seemed to flood her mind. They had made love in the shower, their desire heightened by the sensuous feel of the hot water cascading over their naked bodies, and then followed it up by making love all over again in her bed. She had never realised that lovemaking could feel like that, had never experienced desire on such a level before. It was Sean who had taught her what it could be like. Only Sean who could make her feel that way again too.

The thought was too much. It made a mockery of all the plans she had made about how she intended to live her life in the future. What hope did she have of sticking to her decision to be in charge of her own destiny when one night working with Sean had had this effect? She had to rid herself of all these foolish memories, finally put an end to that episode in her life. Until she did so she would be always looking back, constantly comparing how she felt now to how she had felt then.

It was the way she should set about it that was the big question—how to totally and completely erase Sean Fitzgerald from her consciousness. Oh, she had tried her best over the past couple of years and thought she had succeeded too, but obviously not. He was still there in her head, a spectre from her past who refused to budge, and until she rid herself of him then she would never be free to move on. Maybe it had been a mistake to try to blot him out of her mind, to try and forget the heartache he had caused her. Maybe she needed to face up to it, to face up to *him*?

It was Sean who had called the shots in the past, Sean who had ended their affair too, but maybe she needed to take charge this time—instigate another affair with him and bring it to a conclusion when *she* decided the time was right. One of the worst things about the whole unhappy experience was the effect it had had on her self-confidence. She’d been left feeling used, feeling like a victim,

and she wasn't prepared to put up with feeling that way any more. This time neither her life nor her heart would be left in tatters. This time she would make sure of that!

'So what's it to be then? Are you going to wait for the next bus—a long and undoubtedly chilly wait—or are you going to accept my offer of a lift? I mean we did agree to call a truce, so what's the problem?'

Sean dredged up a deliberately taunting smile although it wasn't easy, he had to admit. There was just something about the expression on Molly's face that had set all his internal alarm bells ringing. He had seen that kind of expression before on other women's faces and had learned to tread warily until he discovered its cause. Whilst he had no idea what Molly was planning, instinct warned him that he wasn't going to like it.

'There isn't a problem. Why not, if you're going my way?'

Molly walked round to the passenger's side and got in, leaving Sean suddenly wishing that he had never made the offer in the first place. The less time he spent with Molly, the better, quite frankly, but he could hardly renege on his offer now. He slid the car into gear and drove out of the gates, his mind racing this way and that. Was Molly plotting something, some sort of payback perhaps for the way he had treated her? It wouldn't be the first time it had happened, although fortunately he had managed to deflect the woman's ire before it had caused too much damage. However, if that was what Molly was planning then it might not be as easy to resolve the problem this time. The difference was that he *cared* about Molly and would hate to do anything that might hurt her even more.

They drove through the centre of the town in silence. Sean was so caught up in wondering what Molly might be planning to do that he found it impossible to make small-talk as he normally would have done. She lived in a tiny terraced cottage close to the river and he drew up outside with a feeling of relief. If she really was looking to pay him back then the best solution was to steer well clear of her. Fair enough, they would still have to work together, but outside of work he would make sure he kept his distance. It was only what he had intended to do after all—stay away from her—so it was surprising how much the idea stung.

'Right. Here you are. I bet you're looking forward to getting to bed. I know I am.'

It was meant to be an off-the-cuff remark, a throwaway comment free from any significance. However, the second the words were out of his mouth, Sean regretted them. Why in heaven's name had he mentioned *bed*? Stirring up those kinds of memories was the *last* thing he should be doing!

'Hmm. It's always good to snuggle down in a nice warm bed after working nights, isn't it?' Molly replied in a tone he had never heard her use before.

Sean felt the hair all over his body spring to attention and then salute. Felt other bits of him follow suit and almost groaned out loud in dismay. When had Molly perfected the art of sounding so ... so *seductive*? Two years ago he would have described her as the girl-next-door: sweet, warm, loving and giving. Now she sounded more like a siren and, worst of all, he was responding to her call! Panic overwhelmed him at that point. It made no difference that he was highly experienced in the ways of women; it still took a massive effort of will to control his baser urges.

'It is.' He dredged up a smile, not wanting her to guess how he really felt in case it gave her an advantage. Quite frankly, it seemed to him that she was already holding all the aces. If he didn't want to end up with the losing hand, then he needed to be extremely careful how he played this game. 'Right, I'd better be off then. I hope you manage to get your car sorted out.'

'I hope so too.' She leant towards him as she unfastened her seat belt and he inwardly shuddered when he felt the warmth of her breath caress his cheek. 'Thanks for the lift, Sean. I really appreciate it. Can I tempt you to come in for a cup of coffee as a thank you, perhaps?'

Her green eyes stared straight into his and Sean felt his resolve start to crumble away when he saw the invitation they held. It was obvious that coffee wasn't the only thing on her mind.

‘Thanks but I’d better get straight off home,’ he mumbled, praying that he would manage to hold out long enough to make his excuses and leave, as the tabloid journalists were so fond of saying. ‘There’s a couple of things I need to do this afternoon, so the sooner I get to sleep the better.’

‘Pity. Still, there’s always another time.’ She gave him a lingering smile then opened the car door.

Sean gripped tight hold of the steering wheel as she climbed out, knowing that if he let go he would regret it. He wouldn’t follow her inside the house, he told himself sternly, not on any pretext. Not when he felt this way. He made himself sit there and wait while she unlocked the front door, even managed to wave before he drove away, but his heart was going nineteen to the dozen. He had a very good idea what Molly was plotting, what form her retribution would take. She was planning to seduce him and, once he was under her spell, then undoubtedly she would ditch him exactly as he had done to her. Quite frankly, he wasn’t sure what shocked him most, the fact that sweet, *gentle* Molly should come up with such a plan, or how much the idea terrified him.

After all, now he knew what was afoot, he could take steps to prevent it happening, couldn’t he? He could resist her overtures and stick to being a colleague and nothing more. It should be easy-peasy but he knew in his heart that it wouldn’t be. The problem was that he wasn’t sure if he could resist if Molly tried to lure him back into her bed. Even though he might know why she was doing it, would it be enough to put him off? Or would the thought of holding her in his arms and experiencing everything he had felt two years ago prove too much?

Sean groaned as he drew up at the traffic lights when they changed to red. Logically, the fact that Molly was simply trying to pay him back for what he had done to her should have been enough to guarantee that he would refuse to get involved with her again. However, it wasn’t his head that was dictating his actions this time but his heart, and his heart was playing by its own rules. There was no guarantee that he could hold out if Molly was determined to get her own way. Absolutely no guarantee at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

MOLLY COULD SCARCELY believe what she had just done. As she made her way into the kitchen and flopped down onto a chair, she could feel her heart thumping. She had just—quite blatantly too—tried to seduce Sean!

She took a deep breath and made herself hold it for the count of ten, but it didn't help. Her nerves were fizzing, her heart racing, and other bits of her—well, she couldn't begin to describe what they were doing. Never in all of her twenty-seven years had she done such a thing. All right, so maybe she had decided to be more proactive in her approach to any future relationships, but it was one thing to think about it and another entirely to put it into practice. If Sean had come in for coffee then would she have gone through with it and invited him into her bed as well?

She shot to her feet, unable to deal with the thought or the one that followed it. Had Sean guessed what she was planning and was that why he had been so eager to leave? After all, it wasn't the first time he had rejected her, was it? Sean had made it perfectly clear two years ago that he wasn't interested in her and yet she had still gone ahead with her crazy scheme. He was probably laughing his head off at her pathetic attempt to seduce him!

Molly groaned out loud, feeling completely humiliated. How could she face him again after this? She would have to try to change her shifts and avoid working with him, although it wouldn't be easy to do so. The Christmas and New Year rosters had been prepared weeks ago and making changes at this late stage would create far too many problems. No, she couldn't see it happening, which meant she would just have to grit her teeth and get on with it. All she could do was pray that he wouldn't mention what had happened that morning. She honestly didn't think she could cope with being subjected to any of his teasing remarks or, worse still, becoming the object of his pity.

It was all very depressing. Molly's spirits were at an all-time low as she heated some milk in the microwave and made herself a cup of hot chocolate, hoping it would soothe her rattled nerves enough so that she could sleep. However, after an hour spent tossing and turning in her bed, she gave up. How could she sleep with all these thoughts milling around inside her head?

She went into the sitting room and curled up on the sofa, telling herself that it was silly to panic. After all, nothing had happened, had it? Even if Sean had guessed what she had been planning to do, there was still time to change her mind. Quite honestly, it wasn't worth it if it caused this kind of upset; she would be stupid to go ahead ... And yet there was still that niggling little thought at the back of her mind that she would never be entirely free of him until she had brought their relationship to a conclusion in her own time and in her own way too.

Molly closed her eyes, trying to imagine how she would feel afterwards. Elated, possibly? Relieved, hopefully? People continually trotted out that well-worn phrase about finding closure, so was that what would happen? Would it bring things to a nice tidy finale if she slept with Sean and subsequently dumped him?

She tried her best to imagine how she would feel but it was impossible to see into the future. She could only go by how she was feeling at this very moment—confused, embarrassed, scared. What if she followed through with her plan and it backfired on her? What if she slept with Sean only to find that she had fallen under his spell once again? That would only make matters even worse.

Her thoughts spun round and round in circles until she felt positively giddy. She knew that it was pointless going back to bed as she would never be able to sleep. She showered and dressed then left the house, hoping that a walk would help to calm her. She took the path leading to the river, carefully picking her way around the icy puddles. The river looked sluggish this morning, a skin of ice coating its surface. There were some ducks slipping and sliding their way across the ice and she stopped to watch them for a moment before the biting cold drove her on. When she came to the path leading up to the town centre, she hesitated, wondering if she should treat herself to coffee and a

croissant before she went home. She hadn't had anything to eat since she'd got back from work and her stomach was rumbling.

Molly followed the path and soon arrived at the market square. The council had erected a huge Christmas tree in the centre of it and she stopped to admire it. There was a group of carol singers from one of the local churches gathered around it and she listened as they sang several well-known carols. It was all very festive and so very normal that she started to relax. There was no point getting het up. The choice was hers. She could either put her plan into action or forget about it.

'All very Christmassy, isn't it? I love hearing Christmas carols at this time of the year, don't you?'

Molly spun round, feeling her heart leap into her throat when she found Sean standing beside her. 'What are you doing here?' she snapped, unable to hide her dismay. That he should turn up just when she was starting to get her thoughts together was too much.

'Same as you, I imagine. Enjoying the singing.'

He gave her a quick smile then dug into his pocket and dropped a handful of change into the bucket when a child approached them, looking for donations, and the fact that he didn't even bother to check how much he had given struck a chord in Molly's memory. Sean had always been incredibly generous, the first to donate whenever anyone was raising money for a good cause. It was one of the things she had admired most about him, in fact, his unstinting generosity.

It was such a small thing yet it had a profound effect on her. Somewhere along the way, she had forgotten all the things she had liked about him. The pain of his leaving had negated everything else yet all of a sudden it all came rushing back: his generosity, his kindness, his compassion for those less fortunate than himself. Sean had possessed so many good qualities, so many things to commend him that she found herself wondering all of a sudden why he had behaved so out of character towards her. Sean cared about people, genuinely cared, so why had he been so cruel when he had ended their relationship?

'How about that cup of coffee you mentioned earlier?'

Molly jumped when he touched her lightly on the arm. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she had no idea what he had said. 'Pardon?'

'Coffee.' He smiled down at her, his blue eyes filled with laughter and another emotion that she had never expected to see again. Did he really care about her, or was he merely a highly accomplished actor? She had no idea and before she could attempt to work it out he slid his hand under her elbow. 'I fancy a coffee and a croissant so will you join me, Molly? I think we deserve a treat after the busy night we had, don't you?'

He briskly led her across the pavement to the café before she had a chance to reply, opening the café door with a flourish that set the brass bell jingling. Molly took a deep breath as she stepped inside, drinking in the scent of coffee and warm pastries. Her senses seemed to be ridiculously heightened all of a sudden so that the familiar aromas seemed richer and more enticing than ever. Even the colours of the checked tablecloths seemed brighter, the reds and blues and greens dazzling her eyes. It was as though she had stepped out of the gloom into full, glorious daylight and it was the strangest experience.

'Oh, look. That couple's leaving. Go and grab their table while I order our coffee.'

Sean gave her a little push towards the newly vacant table and Molly obediently headed in that direction. She sat down, automatically unwinding her scarf and removing her woolly hat. What was going on? Why did she feel this way, as though she had suddenly woken from a deep sleep?

'Here we go. They'll fetch our coffee over in a moment. I ordered you a latte. I hope that was OK. It used to be your favourite, if I remember correctly.'

Sean had reappeared with a tray heaped with warm croissants and miniature pots of jam and Molly jumped. She could feel her pulse popping as she watched him unload everything onto the table, croissants and jam, napkins and knives. He was quick and deft, his hands soon setting everything to rights, but that was his way. Whatever Sean did, he did it well. From work to something as mundane as

setting a table, he gave it his all. That was why it had been such a pleasure to be with him. Everything appeared more interesting, more *vibrant* when Sean was around.

Even her.

Molly took a croissant off the plate and bit into it, savouring its buttery richness. It had been ages since anything had tasted so good, two years in fact. Two long years, during which time she had lived her life in the shadows. Now Sean was back, everything had changed. Now she felt completely and fully alive. And it simply proved just how desperately she needed to break his hold over her.

‘Thanks.’

Sean smiled as the waitress placed their coffees on the table. He saw the interest in the girl’s eyes as she smiled back at him but he ignored it. At any other time he might have been tempted to follow up on it and ask her out on a date. It was something he had done more times than he could count over the years, but he wasn’t even tempted. Not when he was with Molly. He simply wasn’t interested in other women when he was with her. He never had been.

It was a sobering thought, doubly so when it was the first time he had admitted it. When he and Molly had been seeing one another, he hadn’t looked at another woman. She had filled his thoughts to the exclusion of anyone else. Was that why he had ended their affair so abruptly? he wondered. Because he had realised on some inner level that he was getting far too involved with her? At the time he had told himself that he was doing it for her sake, that he was taking steps to protect her, but had his decision been less altruistic than he had thought? Had he been trying to protect himself as much as her?

It was an unsettling thought and one that Sean knew he was going to have to think about. He couldn’t just brush it under the carpet as he normally would do—that wouldn’t work. He needed to examine his feelings, face up to how he had felt two years ago, and take whatever action was necessary to ensure it didn’t happen again. The problem was that he had put Molly on a bit of a pedestal, painted her in his mind as the ideal woman, and it was time he stopped doing that. Maybe Molly’s plan wasn’t so way off-beam as he had thought. If they resumed their affair, it could help *him* put things into perspective.

It was something else that Sean knew he needed to think about, but not right now. He helped himself to a croissant, murmuring appreciatively as he bit into it. ‘This is delicious! No wonder the place is packed, although I don’t remember the food being this good when I ate here before.’

‘The café changed hands last year and, apparently, the new owner is French and only uses French milled flour for his croissants and pastries,’ Molly informed him, wiping her buttery fingers on a paper napkin.

‘Really? Well, good for him. It’s obviously paying dividends.’

Sean grinned at her, thinking how pretty she looked that day. She was wearing a pale pink sweater and jeans and she looked so young and so fresh as she sat there, enjoying her breakfast, that it was little wonder that he had always loved being with her. And it was that thought which helped to unleash all sorts of memories he had thought he had buried.

‘Remember those croissants we used to buy from the supermarket?’ he said reminiscently. ‘We used to heat them in the microwave so they were always slightly soggy yet we still ate them.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ Molly said quietly, wishing that he hadn’t brought up the subject. It had become a sort of ritual for them—if their days off had coincided then Sean would make coffee for them while she warmed up the croissants and then they would take everything back to bed. More often than not the coffee would grow cold because once they were under the covers the inevitable would happen ...

‘We didn’t always get to eat them, though, did we, Molly?’

His tone was brooding and she knew that he was remembering what had happened, how their desire for each other had overruled everything else. Sean had wanted her just as much as she had wanted him, which made his subsequent actions all the more difficult to understand. All of a sudden,

Molly realised that she needed to know what had gone wrong, why he had ended their affair so abruptly and with so little warning.

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