Scarlet Wilson

Resisting the SINGLE DAD

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MEDICAL

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Resisting The Single Dad

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A doctor looking to cure his son…Does his own heart need fixing, too?Dr Gene Du Bois arrives at Geneva airport with more baggage than Cordelia Greenway expected – his adorable young son! She usually avoids reminders of the family she'll never have, but there's no escaping this devoted dad when they're working and living together. Gene's sexy Texas drawl soon weakens her defences, leaving Cordelia wondering – could this little family be her future after all?

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SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. She's worked in the health service for twenty years, having trained as a nurse and a health visitor. Scarlet now works in public health and lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons. Writing medical romances and contemporary romances is a dream come true for her.

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Resisting the Single Dad

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MILLS & BOON

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RESISTING THE SINGLE DAD

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This book is dedicated to my editor, Sheila Hodgson.

Thank you for looking after me so well in the past year, and for being such a brilliant advocate for the Medical Romance line.

Love you, Sheila!

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CHAPTER ONE

CORDELIA GREENWAY RELAXED back into the chair as she tried to ignore the palpitations and light-headedness that had started. She breathed deeply and put her fingers to the side of her neck, massaging gently and closing her eyes as she waited for the manoeuvre to take effect.

Sweat started to run between her shoulder blades—another symptom. People were chatting all around her—no one seemed to have noticed her little ‘turn’. And that was just the way she liked it. She hated fuss. She hated being under the spotlight.

So she stayed quiet, gently continuing to massage, and willing her heartbeat to steady. She probably should have glanced at her watch to time this—but she was so used to dealing with it, so used to keeping it under the radar, that it hadn’t even entered her brain until now. She’d just gone into self-protect mode.

Her other hand lifted the hair off the back of her neck, where it was sticking. Ugh. But things were finally starting to work. She could almost hear out loud the beat of her heart starting to slow. Thank goodness.

After a few minutes she took a deep breath and rested her head on the cool desk for a second. Better. She tugged at her shirt, pulling it away from her body to let the air circulate. First thing she’d do when she got back home was jump in the shower.

There was a noise to her left. She stuck her head up above her cubby hole. Several of the other researchers were doing the same—they looked like a family of meerkats.

Professor Helier was pacing with his phone. The noise had come from his office. His voice squeaky. She didn’t hesitate. She was at the glass door in seconds. ‘Franc?’

Now he was nodding, scribbling things frantically on a piece of paper. He looked so pale. He swayed a little. She walked inside and held out her hands protectively behind him, in case he fell over. Professor Helier was the whole reason she was here.

When she'd found out that he was heading up the cardiac research at this lab, she *had* to be here. She would have done just about anything to work with this famed researcher.

But in the end all it had taken had been a few phone calls. She'd been head of the zebrafish research in the UK—leading the pioneering work into discovering their ability to regenerate heart muscle and how that could be transferred to humans. Professor Helier had embraced her interest instantly, inviting her to come and meet him, and asking if she wanted to lead one of his teams. She hadn't hesitated for a second.

The chance to work in Switzerland. The rich, clean air, snow-topped mountains, and a whole host of chocolates she should never touch. When she'd explained her reasons for working in cardiac research he'd just given her a beaming smile, and patted her hand. 'Cordelia, we all have our reasons for being here. That's what makes us all special.' He'd winked. 'That's what gives us all heart.' And the bad jokes had continued for the last three years.

He swayed a little again as he replaced the phone. She felt instantly protective. Franc must be approaching seventy and time hadn't been too kind to him. He always had a kind of frazzled appearance about him, along with his sometimes white coat and mass of grey hair. 'Franc, what is it? What can I do?'

No one knew exactly how old Franc Helier was. Even doing an internet search didn't help. He'd had the same mad grey hair and slim frame for the last forty years. Some of the junior staff joked that he looked like a mixture of Albert Einstein and a mad professor from a time travel movie. But for Cordelia it didn't matter. He was her friend. And she was his. That was all that mattered.

Franc put both hands on the desk. 'It's Emily,' he said a little breathlessly.

'Your sister?' He nodded, his expression a bit glazed. 'That was the hospital in Marseille. Apparently she collapsed at home and needs emergency surgery.'

Cordelia didn't hesitate. She lifted Franc's hat and coat from the hook behind her, thrusting them towards him. 'Go. Go now.' As he took them with slightly shaking hands she walked around his desk and opened his second drawer. She really did know him like family. 'Here. Your passport. Do you want me to book you a flight and arrange a pick-up? I can book a hotel for you too.' She glanced at the name of the hospital written in scrawled script on the note. 'I'll find one near there.'

He blinked. And she reached out and touched his cheek. Franc had no other family. His wife had died ten years ago and all he had left was his sister. 'Go, Franc. Go be with your sister. Everything will be fine here. You know it will.'

He nodded nervously. 'Of course. I trust you, Cordelia. You know I do.'

She pulled up the collar of his jacket. 'I'll email you the details of the flight, transport and hotel. Just go home and pack a few things.'

He still looked a little stunned. Just what had they told him on the phone?

'Is there anything else I can do for you, Franc?'

It was almost as if she'd flicked a switch in his brain. 'The Japanese investors are coming on Tuesday. Drug trials AZ14 and CF10 need to be monitored, with all data recorded by midweek. There are clinics to cover.'

She smiled and touched his arm. 'I've got them. You know I've got them.'

His gaze met hers and it was the first time he'd looked a little more assured. Her illness had led her away from the traditional role of doctor. She'd spent years on wards dealing with her own symptoms, along with patients'. Long shifts and nights and nights of being on call had made her symptoms worse. When she'd finally realised she couldn't do the job she loved, she'd picked the next best thing. Her role here was fifty-fifty. Fifty per cent researcher and fifty per cent doctor in a well-

supported, controlled environment. It suited her. It let her be involved in research that could make a difference for millions of patients around the world—herself included.

Franc gave a little jolt. He waved his hand at the chaos that was his desk. 'Oh, and we have a new doctor arriving. I'm supposed to pick them up at the airport.'

Cordelia winced and grabbed her notebook from her pocket. 'Is it Geneva?'

He nodded. She had to check. They had staff flying in from all around the world, and they didn't always arrive at the closest airport. 'What's the name?'

'Jeanne DuBois. It sounds French but it's American.' Something must have flashed into his brain. 'Oh.'

It was just the way he said it. 'What?' she questioned. 'What's "oh"?'

He pulled a face. 'They're supposed to stay with me. They were kind of a last-minute addition and hadn't managed to sort out accommodation yet.'

Cordelia swallowed, then nodded her head appropriately. She gave a smile. 'You're turning into an old cat lady, Franc. Taking in every waif and stray.'

She shook her head. Her own apartment's ceiling had collapsed last week after a neighbour upstairs had suffered a burst pipe. Franc had been gracious enough to let her stay in his own rambling mansion on the outskirts of Geneva. He often put up visiting researchers. Cordelia waved her hand. 'Leave it with me. That probably makes things easier anyway. It means when I pick them up, I get to drive back home. Oops.' She put her hand up to her mouth as she realised what she'd said.

But Franc just shook his head and gave her shoulder a squeeze. 'My home is your home, Cordelia. It always will be. Here's hoping they take more than a month to fix your ceiling.' He closed his eyes for a second. 'It could be that soon you'll be the only family I have left.'

Her stomach flipped. This was serious. Part of her wished she'd heard that phone call. She reached over and gave Franc a bear hug. He felt so frail. So thin. Had he lost more weight and she hadn't noticed?

She whispered in his ear. 'I think of you as family too, Franc. Always remember that. You need something—I'm here.'

Franc nodded. 'Thank you, Cordelia.' He pulled himself free from her embrace and put on his hat and tucked his passport into his jacket. 'I'll call you.'

She shook her head. 'No, I'll message you. Go home and pack, and I'll arrange the flights and transfers. Head straight to the airport and I'll have things sorted by the time you get there.'

Franc nodded as he headed to the door. 'What would I do without you?' He gave a shake of his head. 'Just glad I don't need to find out.'

Her heart gave a little twist as he headed to the elevators. She'd have to send out an email to let everyone know Franc had been called away for a few days. And she'd do that—just as soon as she'd organised the flights, hotel and transport. She spent the next twenty minutes online then messaged Franc.

A little pink sticky note was sitting in the debris on Franc's desk. She plucked it out and stared at it for a few seconds.

Geneva 20.00

She glanced at her watch. *Please tell me that isn't the flight for the visiting doctor.* She rummaged amongst the papers on the desk. Franc's desk had a notoriety all of its own. Some of the people who worked here thought that messages came to Franc's desk to die. It certainly seemed like that. It was extraordinary. In all his research studies he was fastidious. Meticulous. Cordelia always joked that Franc's desk was the one place he could leave his true mess behind.

Try as she might, she couldn't find any other notes that resembled airport pick-up times. Darn it. She grabbed her purse. She'd barely make it.

The last thing she wanted to do was leave this poor doctor stranded at the airport.

If she hurried, she might just get there in time...

* * *

The first flush of passengers exited through the gates to screams and yelps from people waiting. Cordelia always felt a little like a voyeur at these times—intruding on private family moments. The joy on some of the faces was beautiful. There were obviously a few more painful reunions. People embracing and bursting into sobs as they hugged each other. It made her heart ache.

She looked down at her hastily scrawled black letters. Jeanne Du Bois. She didn't even have any idea what age the doctor that was arriving from the US was. The only thing she was sure of was that they would be expecting Professor Helier, not a brunette in her thirties.

She people watched for a while. An elderly couple greeting adult children returning home. A woman dropping her bags and running towards a guy, almost knocking him flat with her embrace. A few tourists, walking out with maps in hand and heading to the taxi rank.

And a guy, complete with cowboy boots and Stetson, wearing jeans and a dark grey T-shirt. He travelled wearing a *Stetson*?

She watched in amusement as he glanced around arrivals. He was tall. He really didn't need the Stetson to emphasise his height. As for those well-fitting jeans... She pulled her eyes away and focused on the door again, waiting to see if Jeanne Du Bois would appear. What would she look like? Probably tired. Most researchers who came from the US had to take two or three flights to get to Geneva.

She leaned against the barrier and tried not to dream of coffee and takeout food. She hadn't had time to eat before she'd left the research centre. Her stomach gave a growl just as the click of the cowboy boots came towards her.

A pair of deep brown eyes fixed on hers as he tipped his hat at her. He gestured towards the sign. 'I think you might be waiting for me.'

She blinked and looked down at her sign as if it might have changed while she wasn't looking.

He was close enough that she could smell his woody aftershave and see his sun-kissed skin. But it was the accent that threw her.

It was a thick American drawl. Like treacle. Or maple syrup. Something that smothered you in gorgeousness and just made you go...whoa.

She frowned as she tried not to let her herself be distracted by those very chocolaty eyes. Why was she associating everything with food? She was obviously hungrier than she'd thought.

'I'm waiting for a woman.' She looked down at her sign again, checking she hadn't been secretly pranked. Nope. It was still her writing. 'Jeanne Du Bois.'

The guy gave a lazy kind of smile and put his hand on his chest. 'I'm Jeanne Du Bois. Except it's GENE. You know? Like Gene Kelly? Or Gene Hackman?'

She blinked. She still couldn't get over that accent. She wrinkled her nose. It reminded her of her favourite US TV series. 'Are you from Texas?'

He tipped his hat again. 'My mother was French, but I'm a Texan through and through.' He held out his hand towards her. 'Pleased to meet you, ma'am. You've obviously dyed your hair, Professor Helier. And had a sex change,' he added with a wink.

Her brain sparked back into gear. 'Oh, yes. I'm sorry.' She shook his hand swiftly, the warm touch sending a little pulse up her arm. 'I'm Dr Cordelia Greenway, Professor Helier's second in command. I'm so sorry. He's had a family emergency, literally in the last few hours. I asked him who I was collecting at the airport and when he told me Jeanne Du Bois. I just assumed it was a woman.'

The guy shrugged. 'You're in Switzerland. I guess I can live with being mistaken for a woman.'

She wanted to laugh out loud. There was no chance of this guy being mistaken for a woman. Not when he looked, smelled and sounded like that.

She gestured around him. 'Where's your luggage? My car is in the car park just a few minutes from here. I can take you back to Professor Helier's house. I'm staying there too.'

For the briefest of seconds something flashed across his face. 'Oh.' He looked her up and down. 'Right. Yes...that's great.'

She felt heat rush into her cheeks. He was making assumptions. She shook her head frantically. 'Oh, no. No. Professor Helier and I are...friends. He's helping me out too. The ceiling in my apartment collapsed last week.'

Gene's eyebrows rose. 'Oh, no. What a nightmare.'

She nodded and smiled. 'Yip. And my upstairs neighbour is off on a round-the-world cruise for a month. And still doesn't know about her leaking pipe, or the fact the factor had to break down her door to get in and switch her water off.'

Gene glanced over his shoulder, then looked back at her. 'So where does that leave you?'

'Homeless. Wet. With water pouring down my walls and ruining my carpets and electrics.' She raised her hand and shook her head. 'No, really, the water might have been turned off, but until my neighbour is back and our insurance companies can battle it out together...' She let her words trail off.

He nodded. 'You're kind of stuck?' He took off his cowboy hat to reveal short brown hair that he ran his hand through. 'I guess that means that Professor Helier doesn't really have a lot of room.'

She held up her hands. 'It's fine. Really it is. Honestly, his house isn't a house—it's a kind of rambling mansion. It's the kind of place they read you fairy stories about when you're a kid. He has plenty of space.' She wiggled her hand. 'Not all of it habitable. But there are rooms next to mine that are comfortable. You'll be fine.' She looked back at the doors. 'Do you want to collect your luggage and we'll go?'

He gave her a nod and stuck his hat back on his head. 'Are you okay to help me with the cases?'

She was a little surprised. 'Just how many did you bring?'

He smiled. 'Just one each.'

She blinked and looked behind him. 'One each? There's someone else with you?'

A wave of concern swept his face. 'You mean Professor Helier didn't tell you?'

She felt her stomach flip over. She was so looking forward to getting home, eating something takeout and climbing into her pyjamas. She didn't need any more unexpected turns right now. Not when she needed to be up at six a.m. to prepare for the patients attending clinic tomorrow. She almost didn't want to say the words out loud. 'Tell me what?'

'That I wasn't coming alone?' He sounded nervous.

She half expected some beauty queen to emerge from the arrivals hall with a stunning full-length gown, silver heels and blonde hair tumbling down her back. After all, he looked like a guy who would inevitably be dating some kind of beauty queen.

She swallowed. Wine. Maybe she'd have some wine instead of coffee when she got back.

'No.' She tried to sound friendly. 'He didn't mention it.' She looked around him again. 'Is your wife just freshening up?'

He gave her a quizzical glance. 'Oh, he really didn't tell you. It's not my wife. I don't have a wife. It's my son, Rory. He's sleeping. One of the airline staff is minding him while I checked to see if our pick-up was here. I guess that's you.'

'Your son?'

She couldn't help it. She hadn't meant it to sound like that. Of course some of the visiting doctors brought their partners or families when they came to stay. It just wasn't like Professor Helier to miss such an important detail. It just let her know how distracted he'd actually been.

Gene gave her a little frown. 'Is that going to be a problem? I'm happy to call a cab and check into a local hotel. I don't want to put you to any trouble.'

It was the tone of his voice. He was annoyed. And no wonder. He'd been travelling for hours to a strange city, a new job—and she wasn't exactly being welcoming.

She held up her hand. 'It's no problem. If you want to get your son, I can manage the cases.'

For a few seconds he just stared at her, almost as if he was trying to decide whether to believe her or not. But she could see the fatigue on his face. She had a cheek to feel tired when he'd just crossed the Atlantic to get here. No wonder his son was sleeping. Gene Du Bois probably wanted to be sleeping too.

He gave a nod and headed back to the doors. A perfectly groomed stewardess met him with the child in her arms. Gene took the sleeping little figure easily, letting him snuggle into his shoulder, with one arm under his legs. He grabbed a large navy blue case with one hand as the stewardess brought out another—bright green with a lion on front.

Cordelia smiled as she felt a little pang. Kids. She normally managed to circumvent them. Having an ongoing cardiac condition wasn't exactly conducive to having kids, and the older she got, the more she thought about it.

She'd learned to distance herself. It was easier that way. There was less chance of seeing what she'd miss out on. Less chance of becoming bitter about what could never be hers.

But she couldn't exactly circumvent a kid in the same house as her.

She hurried over and grabbed the bright green suitcase, trundling it behind her, and tried to keep up with Gene Du Bois's long strides.

'Dr Du Bois, Professor Helier didn't let me know what programme you'll be contributing to. I'll need to make some introductions and ensure everything has been put in place for you. Can you let me know what research you're involved in?'

Gene gave her a sideways glance and slowed his steps. 'I'm beginning to wonder if this was a good idea. I came here because the Reuben Institute is supposed to be at the forefront of cardiac research. I'm here for a month, to take the lead on the cardiomyopathy studies.'

She couldn't help but pull a face. 'Listen, I know this might seem chaotic, but the only thing that's normally chaotic at the Reuben Institute is Professor Helier's desk. Everything else is ruthlessly efficient, I assure you.'

They crossed the road towards the car park. 'What project do you lead on?'

She winced as her stomach grumbled loudly. 'The zebrafish studies.' She opened the car door. 'How about we put aside cardiac studies for this evening? I have to confess to not being much of a cook. Would the little guy eat pizza if I picked some up for us on the way back to the house?'

Gene settled the little boy into the car and strapped him in, with barely a murmur from his son. He ruffled his son's hair. 'Rory happens to be a big fan of pizza. After nearly twenty hours' travelling, I'm willing to do takeout.'

Cordelia gave a thankful nod and climbed into the car. 'Great. We should be home in twenty minutes. Settle in. The scenery is outstanding.'

She paused for a second and couldn't help but ask the question that had been swimming around her head since she'd first seen him. 'So, Dr Du Bois, do you always do full cowboy when you travel?'

He took off his hat as he climbed into the car and gave her a wink. 'What can I say? I'm from Texas.'

* * *

Gene wasn't quite sure what to think. He was beginning to regret dragging his little guy halfway across the planet to be involved in this research project. Professor Helier had guaranteed everything would be in place—including a suitable day-care arrangement for Rory.

Gene leaned back in the comfortable seat and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Maybe he should be watching the gorgeous scenery, but twenty hours of jet-lag was rapidly catching up with him. It had already made him more than a little short with his hostess. His momma would be spinning in her grave and slapping the back of his head right now.

No one could believe when his French scientist mother had fallen for a Texas cowboy—least of all her. Moving from Paris to Houston, Texas had been a culture shock for her. And after ten years and still no wedding ring, she'd finally bailed.

So Gene had spent his life between two continents. And he'd considered himself lucky. Flitting between a ranch in Texas and the city of Paris hadn't exactly been hard. As a child he'd excelled in living on two continents. And even though his father had been disappointed his son wanted to study medicine instead of ranching, he knew his dad had still been secretly proud.

The only thing that had really swept the feet from under him had been the message three years ago from the fellow doctor he'd had a fling with at a cardiac conference. Mindy had suffered from congenital hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Pregnancy should never have been on her life plan. But when she'd found herself pregnant with Rory after a few passionate nights together in Istanbul, she'd chosen to go ahead with the pregnancy.

She'd only contacted Gene when things had got desperate. Everyone had advised her not to go ahead, knowing exactly what the strain of a pregnancy would do to her. Sure enough, soon after Rory had been born, she'd ended up on the heart transplant list.

And when she'd gone into complete heart failure, she'd finally contacted Gene to let him know about his son.

He'd been angry. He'd been furious. But how furious could a guy be at someone who was clearly dying?

His life had turned upside down in an instant. One look at the nine-month-old cheeky little blond baby, pulling himself up on wobbly legs to the side of his mother's bed, had been all the time he'd needed to make a decision.

It didn't help that in the interim since the conference he'd actually met someone. Karen. An anaesthetist at Boston General where he was working. They'd moved in together. Had had tentative talks about the future. He'd even considered buying a ring.

But the unexpected son had been a bolt out of the blue that Karen could never have expected. She'd been shocked—and then walked away. And he couldn't blame her. They'd discussed the fact they might like a family in the future—but Karen wasn't ready to deal with one that had been thrust on her. So after a year of being in a settled relationship he'd found himself alone.

Mindy had died three weeks later. And Gene had immediately set about turning his life around.

A single dad working in a hospital environment wasn't exactly conducive to good parenting.

He'd never considered working in research up until that point. But knowing that his son carried the gene for cardiomyopathy was enough to put his priorities in order. He'd spent the last three years with his dad joking about Gene looking at genes.

But that was fine, because he'd spend the rest of his life looking at genes if it could help his son and any future grandkids.

He smiled to himself. Rory had just turned four. Four. And he was thinking about grandkids. But he was a doctor, he had to plan ahead. And every plan in his life now included Rory.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the woman driving the car. Cordelia Greenway. He was sure he'd seen her name on some of the research papers published by the Reuben Institute. She'd said she was Professor Helier's second in command.

Gene had learned to take things in his stride. He'd had to. Life frequently threw curve balls. He didn't mind curve balls. What he did mind was feeling as if his son was an unwanted extra. Maybe he was just being too sensitive? Or maybe he was being overprotective. But he was sure there had been a look of...something flash across Cordelia's face when he'd mentioned his son.

It could just be that she'd been taken unawares. But his gut told him something else. His gut could almost sense her take about ten steps back. And he didn't like that. He didn't like that at all.

He wasn't crazy. He didn't expect the whole world to love his son the way he did. Some folks just didn't do kids. He got that. But he would never tolerate anyone making his four-year-old feel unwelcome. Long journey or not, if he had to, he'd jump on the next flight back to Texas. Getting a job was never a problem. Getting the *right* job was more important than anything.

He gave himself a shake as she pulled the car up outside a pizza parlour. She turned around and gave him a nervous kind of smile. 'What's your poison?' she asked. 'This place is great. Everything's fresh and their pizzas are to die for.'

He drew in a deep breath. She was making an effort, and it was clear he made her a bit nervous. He dug into his pocket for his wallet, but she shook her head and waved her hand. 'Don't be silly. You just got here. This is on me.' She bit her bottom lip and nodded towards the sleeping figure in the back seat. 'What about Rory?'

Gene glanced at his son again and felt his heart swell. This little guy was his life. One look of that cheeky little face could brighten the darkest day.

'Just cheese and ham for him. I'll have whatever the Swiss equivalent of a meat feast is.'

Cordelia gave him a nod and ducked out of the car. 'No problem. Give me five minutes.'

She walked into the pizza parlour and he leaned back in the seat again, watching as she interacted with the servers. She seemed at home here—it was obvious that they knew her. She leaned on the counter, giving him a prime view of her curves visible in her pink fitted shirt and black trousers. He gave a small smile. She'd probably look great in a pair of jeans.

Her fingers toyed with a strand of chestnut-brown hair as she chatted. For the first time he looked at her left hand. No ring. Nothing. She'd said they would all be staying in Professor Helier's mansion. Did she have a partner already there? Or would she be there alone with him and Rory?

His stomach gave a little clench. Maybe that was part of her discomfort. She'd clearly expected a woman to arrive at Geneva airport. Maybe being alone with a strange guy and kid had completely thrown her.

After another five minutes she slid back into the car with the pizza boxes. 'Do you mind holding these until we reach the house? It will only be another five minutes.'

He nodded and started to pay attention to the scenery as they drove through the outskirts of Geneva. The buildings and architecture were stunning, a mixture of Gothic spires and brand-new glass towers. All this with a backdrop of snow-topped mountains against a darkening sky.

The road gradually became a little more rural and Cordelia indicated and turned through a pair of elaborate iron gates and continued on down a long driveway. Thick green trees lined the driveway, with extensive grounds all around them. After a few minutes a dark house seemed to emerge out of nowhere.

Gene couldn't help but smile. It was like a real Gothic-style mansion—straight out of a Dracula-style movie. Gargoyles adorned some of the dark grey stonework around the myriad thin windows lining the front of the house. A huge, imposing double door, painted black with a large knocker, was right in front of them.

Cordelia pulled up directly outside and turned to face him. It was the first time she'd looked a little more relaxed since they'd met.

She held out her hand towards the house. 'Here it is. And I'll say it before you do. Dracula's mansion. The inside is much more welcoming than the outside. You'll love it.' She glanced nervously over her shoulder towards Rory again. 'And I'm sure he will too.' She shot him a big smile. It only seemed a little forced. 'Welcome to Switzerland, Dr Du Bois.'

CHAPTER TWO

SHE WAS BABBLING AGAIN. It was ridiculous. She was a thirty-one-year-old experienced doctor. She had absolutely no reason to be nervous. But somehow the cowboy from Texas with the blond kid had totally knocked her sideways.

She unlocked the front door and switched off the alarm. Rory was tucked up on his dad's shoulder again. 'Do you want to put him straight to bed?' she asked, praying that the beds in the guest quarters were made up.

Gene shook his head. 'No. I want to wake him up and feed him before letting him sleep right through. I always find it's best to try and acclimatise as soon as possible.'

She blinked. ‘You move about a lot?’

He shrugged as he glanced around the wide entranceway and huge staircase leading to the upper floors. ‘I have done. Rory will be going to school next year, so I’ll need to have a rethink. But so far he’s been in nursery in the US, the UK and France. He seems to have loved them all.’

She gave a careful nod of her head. ‘Wow. That’s a lot.’ She hesitated then pointed towards the rooms to the right. ‘The formal kind of sitting rooms are that way. But how about we grab the pizzas and go through to the kitchen? The bedrooms are all upstairs, I’ll show you them soon.’

Gene glanced back out to the car. She waved her hand. ‘I can grab the cases.’

‘No way.’ His Texas drawl almost stopped her in her tracks. ‘There’s no way I’m letting you get them. Let me sit Rory down at the table. He’s waking up anyway. Can you get him a drink of water while I grab the cases?’

She nodded quickly and showed him through to the extensive black and white kitchen, with old-fashioned wooden table in the middle, pulling out the high-backed chairs for him to settle Rory.

The little boy watched her with suspicious eyes as she opened the cupboard and nearly pulled out a glass, before changing her mind at the last moment and swapping the glass for a mug. She grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge then filled the mug and sat down next to him. She couldn’t help but feel nervous. What did you talk to a four-year-old about? And the truth was she was a little curious about this little kid. Would he have an accent like his father? ‘Hi, Rory, I’m Cordelia. I’m going to be working with your daddy.’

She flipped open the lid of the smallest pizza box. ‘We got you ham and cheese pizza. Your dad said you’d like that. Would you like some?’ She pulled a slice of the pizza free and left it for him to grab himself.

Rory watched her with dark eyes for a few moments. It was unnerving what the gaze of a four-year-old could do to her. She didn’t blame him. He’d literally just woken up, and was in completely strange surroundings. And she’d seen those big brown eyes before. Rory definitely had his father’s eyes.

She could hear Gene rolling the suitcases inside then closing the main door behind him. He strode through to the kitchen and sat down next to Rory, ruffling his hair again as he looked at the pizza boxes. ‘Which one is mine? Come on. Eat up, little guy. You must be starving.’

Rory stared at him. ‘Where’s the French fries?’

Cordelia almost laughed out loud—there was a definite hint of a Texan accent, but there was also a little bit more. Gene said they’d stayed in France and the UK too. It seemed the little boy had picked up a little of everything. She stood up and flicked the switch on the kettle and glanced over at Gene. ‘Do you want a cup of tea or coffee?’

Gene shook his head. ‘I’ll stick to water, thanks. I want to try and sleep a little tonight.’

Rory stopped staring at her suspiciously now his dad was back and picked up a slice of pizza. He leaned his head on one hand. ‘Where’s my bed?’

Gene glanced at her and Cordelia answered quickly. ‘It’s upstairs. There are two rooms, so you can either go in a room on your own or you can go in with your dad.’

Her stomach gave a little flip. She still didn’t know if the rooms were ready or not. Franc had a housekeeper who kept the place tidy. If he’d told her in advance she would have the rooms ready.

‘Give me five minutes,’ she said, bolting down a bite of pizza and running up the stairs.

She flicked on all the lights as she ran down the corridor, past her own rooms and on to the other guest bedrooms. The door were already open—always a good sign. She checked the first. The bed had been made up in pale blue, with a pile of white towels, some soap and a toothbrush and toothpaste in the bathroom next door.

The second room had been made up in pale green. There was a teddy sitting on the bed next to the pillow. It was slightly threadbare, but it was something. She sighed in relief. At some point

Franc must have remembered—even if he hadn't this afternoon. At least the rooms were ready. She could sort out everything else tomorrow.

By the time she got back down the stairs, Rory was back in his father's arms, a half-eaten slice of pizza on the table.

'Is he out for the count again?'

Gene nodded. 'Everything okay upstairs?' he asked warily.

She nodded. 'Yes, just checking the rooms. Everything is perfect. I was just worried in case Franc hadn't mentioned to the housekeeper about your arrival. But he must have remembered. The rooms are fine.'

Gene followed her up the stairs and laid Rory down on the green bed. He sat for a few seconds, stroking his blond hair and just watching him.

It felt like she was intruding. Watching a moment that should be shared just between a parent and child.

He turned to face her. 'What time are we going to the institute tomorrow? I need to know so I can get us up and ready in time.'

Her brain automatically revised her usual plans. If she told them she was usually there from six a.m. until seven at night they would think she was crazy. Or sad. Or both. 'I normally go in around eight a.m. I like to be available to check on any of the patients involved in the trials before they get started for the day. Would you be okay if we had breakfast just after seven?'

He nodded. 'That's fine. We'll probably be up early anyway. Your morning will be our afternoon.'

She felt a wave of panic. 'Rory—what does he eat for breakfast?'

Gene shrugged. 'Whatever you've got. Cereal, toast, eggs. He's happy with just about anything.'

'If you write a list tomorrow, the housekeeper will get you whatever you need for him. I'm not sure just how many child-friendly foods we'll have in the house right now.'

Gene looked over at her in the dim light. She could see the shadows under his eyes. He must be just as tired as Rory was.

A million questions were burning in her brain. Where was Rory's mother? Why hadn't he mentioned her at all?

There was a hint of bristle along his jawline. She watched as he leaned over Rory and kissed him gently on the head, the muscles on his chest and arms visible beneath the thin soft cotton T-shirt.

Her skin prickled. It wasn't like her to notice things like that. Of course she wasn't blind. Of course she'd had a few relationships in the past. But she'd never been the kind of girl to really notice a guy. To look at his eyes. To look at his build. To notice the way he looked at his son.

She gave herself a shake. She was being ridiculous.

It looked like Gene could be a while, so she backed out of the door into the corridor.

She had work to do. Plenty to distract her in the meantime. Cardiac research could easily stop her thinking about the man with the accent as thick as syrup and his equally cute young son.

She gave herself a shake and hurried back to the kitchen, pulling a stack of paperwork from her bag.

Work. That's where she was always safest. She should concentrate on that.

* * *

Rory had snored peacefully all night while Gene had slept fitfully. It always took him a few days to be comfortable enough in his surroundings to sleep well. It didn't help that his mind had kept drifting to the chestnut-haired woman with the bright green eyes.

He still wasn't sure about her. If Professor Helier wasn't going to be around he'd give her a day, then decide if he was staying or not. He'd learned not to waste time in this life.

Rory got ready eagerly, jumping into a pair of bright green shorts and his favourite baseball shirt and hat while Gene showered. He generally liked to dress a little more informally at work, but

first impressions always lasted, so he left his Stetson on the dresser and pulled on work clothes more fitting for a cardiac physician.

By the time they reached the kitchen, Cordelia was already there, humming to herself as the coffee percolated and she popped some bread in the toaster. The kitchen table was set with cutlery, some cereals, a jug of milk and some butter, jam and marmalade. She even had a little pad and pen with 'Shopping list' written across the top.

She smiled as they appeared. 'Good morning. Hi, Rory, did you sleep well last night?'

Rory started. It was almost as if he'd forgotten that he'd met her last night. Gene pulled out a chair for him. Cordelia had the sides of her hair pulled back in a clip and she was wearing a red dress and black suit jacket. The dress ended just on her knees and he blinked in surprise at her red baseball boots.

She laughed at his expression. 'I know. I know. I had a problem with my feet a few years ago. I find baseball boots comfiest.' She pointed to a pair of medium-heeled black shoes at the side of the kitchen, 'But I promise I'll change before we leave.'

'What happened to your feet?' Rory asked immediately, while Gene cringed.

There was the briefest uncomfortable blink from Cordelia then she gave a small shrug. 'A very long time ago I was a ballet dancer. And when you're a ballet dancer you go right up on your tippy-toes.' She opened one palm and put the tips of the fingers of her other hand in the centre. 'But when you do that when you're still young it does damage to your toes.' She pulled a face. 'So my feet are quite ugly. But...' she waved down at her shoes '...it gives me a chance to wear my favourite baseball boots.'

Gene felt a bit warmer. She seemed a little more relaxed this morning. More amenable. Maybe she'd got her head around sharing this house with a stranger and his kid.

Rory stared at her. 'I like them,' he said as he shot a glance at his dad. Gene almost laughed out loud. He knew exactly what was coming.

'I wanted red baseball boots, but my dad wouldn't get me any.'

Cordelia grabbed the toast as it popped and put it on a plate, carrying it over to the table with the coffee pot. She raised her eyebrows and gave Rory a conspiratorial glance. 'He wouldn't? Why ever not?'

She sounded easy. She sounded comfortable around them, but Gene noticed a tiny twitch at the side of her eye. She might be acting as if everything was fine, but she was still a little nervous. Why?

He picked up a piece of toast for Rory and started buttering it for him, smiling at his son the whole time. 'I didn't buy him a pair of red baseball boots because we already have a pair of blue and a pair of green.'

'You have?' Cordelia ducked her head under the table.

She frowned as she sat up. 'But those aren't baseball boots.'

Rory smiled as he picked up his toast. 'Yeah. I put on my runners today. I decided I might need to be real quick.'

Gene poured some of the coffee into the mugs on the table. 'Why would you need to be quick, Rory?'

Rory bit his toast and chewed for a few seconds before he answered in a whisper. 'Because there might be...girls.'

Cordelia choked at the other side of the table, putting her hand over her mouth, her cheeks getting pinker and pinker. Gene watched in amusement. 'Okay?'

She nodded and jumped up, grabbing a glass for some water. 'Yes. Sorry.' She smiled as she looked back at Rory. 'I just wasn't expecting that one.'

Gene leaned forward on the table, looking between his son and Cordelia. He ruffled Rory's hair again. 'Dad,' said Rory, trying to shake him off, 'stop that.'

Gene pulled his hand back and shrugged at Cordelia. 'Apparently, it doesn't matter what nursery or day care Rory goes to—his blond hair makes all the girls say he is cute.'

‘I’m not cute. I’m four,’ said Rory quickly.

Cordelia grinned as she sat down again. ‘I think four is kind of cute.’

Rory rolled his eyes. ‘Oh, not you too.’

Gene pulled a face at her and bent down to whisper in Rory’s ear. ‘Watch out, Rory. She might be like those other girls. She might want to kiss you.’

Rory gave a shudder and Cordelia laughed out loud. It was almost as if he could see the knot in her shoulders start to loosen.

They finished breakfast quickly and Gene scribbled a list for the housekeeper. ‘Remember red apples, Dad. And ’nanas.’ Gene added bananas to the list as Rory stuck his arms into his jacket. He was proud at how articulate his little boy was, but there were still some words that seemed like tongue-twisters to a four-year-old.

He swung Rory up into his arms. ‘Ready?’

Rory held up his fist and Gene bumped his against it. It was their move. Their superhero move.

Cordelia’s brow was wrinkled as she watched them. She had kind of a bewildered smile on her face as she stood next to the alarm, ready to punch in the code. ‘Let’s go then, guys.’

* * *

For the last week she’d breakfasted with Franc. It had been a much more genteel and sedate experience. This morning had been entirely different.

And it made her feel...odd.

She was getting to the stage in life where most of her friends had kids. Those who knew her best had enough awareness to realise that she occasionally found things tough. It wasn’t that she completely avoided kids. Of course she couldn’t. She just didn’t generally have them under her nose.

So this was different.

And even though part of her stomach twisted and turned, it was also nice. And that was unexpected.

This morning’s breakfast had been noisy, chaotic and maybe even a little fun.

They travelled the distance to the institute easily. It was close enough to the city centre for public transport but far enough away to be spacious and have adequate parking.

The institute employed more than three hundred staff. Physicians, nurses, researchers and admin staff. There was also a small day-care centre, which she prayed that Franc had remembered to book Rory into.

Helene, the woman in charge, gave the briefest of pauses when they entered, before putting a beaming smile on her face. ‘Ah, yes. Professor Helier mentioned that we might be getting a new recruit.’ She gave Gene a questioning smile. ‘I think he said for a month?’

Gene nodded. ‘Yes, my contract is just for a month.’

It was odd. Cordelia could tell he was a little nervous—but Rory clearly wasn’t. He might say he didn’t want to play with girls, but he wandered off straight away to go and join a group of kids. Helene walked quickly over to a desk and pulled out some paperwork and a pager. Gene smiled as he took it. ‘Haven’t had one of these since I was a hospital physician.’

Helene gave him a nod. ‘It’s just for the first few days. It means I can get hold of you quickly if Rory doesn’t settle.’ She ran through the paperwork, requesting medical history, allergies, immunisations and any special requirements. Rory was already babbling away in French to his counterparts. The kids in Switzerland spoke a whole variety of languages. It was fortunate that Rory had already spent some time in France.

Cordelia put her hand on Gene’s shoulder. ‘You okay?’

His eyes were fixed on Rory. He gave a nervous laugh as his dark brown eyes met hers. ‘Sure I am. The little guy never seems to have any problems fitting in. I just worry.’

Cordelia was curious. ‘Rory never stays with his mum?’

The look he gave her made her want to pull back the inquisitive words. What was it with her and this guy? He bit his bottom lip and put his head down, completing the paperwork, checking his pager was working and finishing with Helene.

Her skin prickled at the awkwardness of it all. He was new. They had visiting fellows at the Rueben Institute all the time. The institute was renowned. Their last Professor had won a special prize for his research. They had many joint projects with university hospitals across the globe. People wanted to work here. She counted herself lucky that she'd managed to secure a permanent position. If Gene Du Bois was going to be here for a month he'd have to lose a little of his prickliness.

She walked him out across the granite-floored, glass-fronted foyer. Above them was a glass atrium, showing the four floors of the institute.

She ignored the earlier hiccup and held out her hands. 'Okay, Dr Du Bois, welcome to the Rueben Institute. Now that Rory is settled, let me show you around.'

* * *

Darn it. For some reason his tongue had stuck to the roof of his mouth and he'd been unable to answer her question. Last time he'd been tongue-tied he'd been around fourteen. This was ridiculous.

But what was even more ridiculous was the thought that had shot into his head when she'd asked about Rory's mother.

He literally had the story off pat. He'd been asked on numerous occasions where Rory's mom was. It was a sad story. But lots of kids all over the world had only one parent. It wasn't the biggest deal in the world.

But this time, when he'd been asked, he'd just frozen. Maybe it was those green eyes. Maybe it was the shiny brown hair and the way it looked so good with her red dress. Maybe it was those darned curves in that red dress that seemed to make a swishy kind of noise every time she took a step—daring him to look at the swing of her hips.

Or maybe it was the tiny freckles running across the bridge of her nose.

Whatever it was, it was something.

He was tired. That was all. Probably jet-lagged too. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to start straight away. Perhaps he should have given them a few days to settle in. But, then again, Rory looked like he'd settled already. And Gene couldn't help but be proud of the way his son had naturally babbled away in French to the other kids.

He pulled his eyes away from the swinging hips in front of him and looked up at the impressive foyer. He'd seen pictures of the institute before. But he hadn't really expected this.

Cordelia had walked over to the back of the institute—or what should be the back wall of the institute. Instead of brick, there was a wall entirely of glass, letting the bright morning light stream in and giving a picture-perfect view of the Alps in the distance. It was like capturing a holiday snap. Or picking up a picture postcard.

The view was breathtaking. And unexpected. She gave him a nod as she stood alongside him. She sucked in a deep breath. 'Whenever I get exasperated at work, or fed up, I always like to remember how lucky I am to work here.'

He stood for a few minutes, his eyes scanning the horizon. It was like taking a chill pill. He'd been on edge, agitated about the arrangements and worried about how they might affect Rory. But standing here, watching this, it was almost as if someone had just put his head on a lavender pillow and told him to relax and calm down.

He'd wanted to come here. He'd wanted to work with Professor Helier. And even if Professor Helier wasn't here, the rest of his team was.

He glanced sideways at Cordelia. She was smiling, drinking in the scenery that she obviously saw every day. 'It never gets old,' she said quietly. 'Every day is a new day, with a world of possibilities.'

He pressed his lips together and asked the question that was burning in his mind. 'You said you're Professor Helier's second in command. What's your background?'

She turned to face him with an amused expression. 'What is this? An interview?'

She gestured towards the glass staircase leading up to the next floor.

'Maybe.' He shrugged.

She nodded her head thoughtfully. 'Okay, then. But it works both ways. Deal?'

He held his hand out towards her. 'Deal.' The warmth from her fingers almost made him shudder, especially as they brushed against the inside of his wrist.

Cordelia walked up the stairs ahead of him. He had to tell himself not to focus on her legs. Or her hips. Or her...

She started talking and broke into his wayward thoughts. 'I'm a physician. I trained in the UK.'

'I take it your speciality was cardiology.'

She nodded. 'Of course. And yours?'

He gave the briefest of smiles. 'The same.'

She hesitated for a second. 'I always had a special interest in cardiology.' She gave a nonchalant wave of her hand. 'Family stuff. So I decided to get into research.' She hesitated once again and he was instantly curious as her eyes went up to the left for a second. Wasn't that supposed to be a sign of thinking or processing?

They reached the top of the stairs and she took them down a different wing of the building. 'This is the research labs.' She gave a little smile. 'This is where I get lost in the wonder of zebrafish and what incredible creatures they are.' She gave a little sigh. 'If only us humans had the power of healing and regeneration like they do.'

He stopped at the front doors of the lab and looked inside. As expected, it was white and pristine. There were several rooms. Laboratories where clinical scientists were processing blood tests. A vast room filled with computers where information was obviously being processed and analysed. In the middle of the room was an unusual spiral-shaped fish tank. Even from here he could see the tiny zebrafish swimming around.

He tilted his head to the side and looked at Cordelia curiously. It was almost as if she expected the question. 'They teach us so much. And they give us hope. Professor Helier thought it was important that people didn't just watch them in a lab. He wanted us all to appreciate them. That's why he commissioned the special tank for right in the middle of the room.'

Gene nodded thoughtfully. 'So many people are against research involving animals.'

'And so many people would be right. Here, we don't harm the zebrafish in any way. But we watch them. We learn from them and their DNA. And we try to replicate what they can do in a lab environment.'

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms. 'I like the ethics here. I knew that before I came. It was one of the things that made me want to be part of the team—even if it is just for a short spell.'

Her phone pinged and she pulled it from her pocket, frowning.

'What's wrong?' Her skin had paled and when she looked up her eyes were kind of watery.

She pressed her lips together. He could tell she was trying to keep it together. 'Professor Helier's sister has terminal cancer. She's his only living family. He's going to stay with her. He's going to look after her.'

Gene felt his heart clench. It was selfish—he knew it. But part of the reason he'd come here had been to work with this man—to learn from him.

'What does that mean?'

She blinked back the obvious tears as she tucked her phone back into her pocket. 'It means that I'll have to email everyone in the institute. Franc—he wants to call you tonight.' Her bright green eyes met his. There was something in them. A wariness, but also a tiny hint of desperation. 'The monitoring of the cardiomyopathy patients is at a really crucial stage. I suspect he's going to ask if you'll take over as head of the trial.' Her voice was a little shaky.

He reached over and touched her arm. 'Cordelia? Are you okay?'

She nodded and brushed the side of her eye. 'Of course I am. I'm just being silly. I'm worried about Franc and how he'll cope with nursing his sister.' She held out her hands. 'This place is virtually his life.' She gave her head a shake. 'I just don't want to let him down in his absence. The work here is so important to so many people.'

It was the way she said the words. Everyone who worked here would be passionate about what they did. But there seemed to be a real emphasis on her words. As if there was something that he was missing.

And he got it. He got it better than anyone. Because the work on cardiomyopathy could end up being a lifeline for his son.

He watched her carefully. He could almost see her shaking off the overspill of emotions, tidying them back up and putting them in a box. His stomach roiled a little. It was the weirdest thing, but it was almost the same expression she'd had on her face at one point last night. He just couldn't understand why.

And he definitely couldn't understand why he was so curious.

She licked her lips and looked at him again. 'My turn to ask the questions. I'm sure that Franc knew all this back to front. But I don't. What's your background?'

For a second he felt himself move into self-protect mode. The bit where he only gave the edited version of his life.

But he turned around as she led him back from the research wing and he was faced with the picture-postcard landscape again. The world was so vast out there. He was only a tiny bit of it. Why on earth did he feel he had something to hide?

He stopped walking and his fingers brushed against her elbow. She turned to face him. He almost laughed.

Yip. He was currently in a movie of his life. Cordelia was the heroine in this movie and she was standing in front of a green screen. Because this background was just too perfect to be real.

And as he stood a little longer, she began to look too perfect too. She was sharply in focus. Now he could appreciate the long, dark lashes. Now he could appreciate the smudge of red lipstick still on her lips.

Now...he was definitely losing his mind.

It was almost like hovering above and watching, instead of really taking part.

He shook his head. 'I trained as a physician in Texas but lived my life between France and Texas. My mom—*ma mère*—was a French scientist. Somehow she managed to meet my rancher father and I lived between two continents.'

She tilted her head to the side. 'Wow. That's some childhood.'

He nodded. 'I was lucky. I had barrel loads of love on both sides of the Atlantic. I had friends in Houston and in Paris.'

'So what made you become a doctor?'

They walked along the corridor towards the other wing. 'Oh, I always wanted to be a doctor. Right from when I was a little kid. My dad wanted me to take over the ranch and while I love it, my heart was never in it. Thankfully I've got a stepbrother who has ranch blood running in his veins.'

'Oh, okay.' He could see the obvious question running around in her head. He could avoid it—or ignore it—like he had before. But he had a reason for being here. He was invested in this research. And there was almost an ethical responsibility to say why.

He stopped walking. 'Rory's mom was a fellow doctor I met at a conference. We had a few nights together and then didn't keep in touch. I met Rory when he was nine months old. Mindy had hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. She was already in a degree of heart failure when she became pregnant and was advised not to continue with the pregnancy. I had no idea she was unwell and she didn't listen. And she only contacted me when she'd been on the heart transplant list for a few months.'

Cordelia's eyes were wide. He just kept going. It was easier to have it out there. 'Three weeks later Mindy died. And it's been just me and Rory ever since.' He slowed down as the edges of his lips turned upwards. 'My world.'

She didn't speak for a few seconds, just stared at him. 'That's how you came into research?'

He nodded. 'I was already in cardiology. But, you'll understand, the clinical side is tough.' He hadn't asked her for her reasons for leaving her clinical role, but he'd understood the implication. People who'd spent years training to be a doctor didn't walk away unless they had no real choice.

'It didn't work for me with no real help at home, covering emergencies and on calls with a baby. Research was the natural place. Find out what I needed to know, while still keeping a clinical role —in more manageable hours.'

She nodded as he continued. 'And with the potential for Rory...' He let his voice tail off.

The realisation didn't take long to hit her. She worked in research. She knew exactly what he was getting at. Cardiomyopathy was a hereditary condition.

'Rory has the gene?'

'Rory has the gene,' he repeated.

She didn't hesitate. She reached over and squeezed his hand. 'Oh, Gene. I'm so sorry.'

He drew in a deep breath. 'So am I. But that's life. You'll know the odds. He had a fifty per cent chance of inheriting the gene—and he has. But so far there are no symptoms. No indication that there's anything to worry about. That's what I need to keep inside my head. But it doesn't stop me making this my life's work.'

He didn't need to say any more. She'd know the potential. She'd know that hypertrophic cardiomyopathy was the condition frequently undetected then associated with young sportsmen suddenly dying.

That was why the 'no symptoms' was so important to keep in his head. Because late at night, when he looked at that gorgeous little mop of blond hair, every worst-case scenario in the world wound its way through his head.

Her voice had a sympathetic tone and he could see the understanding her eyes as she looked at him. 'So you're committed. You want to be here. You want to do the work.'

He could tell she was almost relieved. If he'd turned and walked out today because Professor Helier wasn't going to be around, it could have potentially brought the research to a halt. But he'd never do that. He repeated those words. 'I want to do the work. It's important to me. It's important to Rory. And it's important to a whole host of other people all around the world affected by this disease.' He didn't have a single doubt about what he was saying.

She gave a nod of approval and held her hand out towards the next wing. 'Well, in that case, Dr Du Bois, come and meet your fabulous team. And your fabulous patients.'

* * *

Her head was swimming as she pasted a smile on her face. Her heart ached for him—literally.

Now she understood—probably a whole lot better than he expected her to.

The thought that his gorgeous little son could have a ticking time bomb in his chest—similar to her own—was heart-wrenching. How must it feel to look at that little guy every day and wonder if at some point he would develop symptoms or become unwell? As a medic, one thing was crystal clear in her head. Parents shouldn't outlive their kids. They just shouldn't. There was something so wrong about that. Unbearable. And she wasn't even a mother.

She'd worked with families who'd lost kids due to cardiac defects and anomalies and there was something so wrong about it all.

They walked down to the east wing—where all the patients were seen and monitored. The Rueben Institute was like many other cardiac research centres. They monitored patients with certain conditions, seeing if small lifestyle changes could have impacts on their lives, along with dietary changes and alternative therapies. They also monitored certain new medicines, making sure that

patients didn't have any side effects and comparing the differences between them and the existing medicines. There was no point introducing a new medicine to the world if it didn't really make any improvements for patients.

There were similar institutes all over the world, but in the land of cardiac conditions, with or without any trials, patients' conditions could change in an instant. The staff here were highly trained and the institute well equipped to deal with any emergency. Cordelia showed him from room to room.

'We have twenty monitoring bays for the clinical trials. We also have overnight beds available with monitoring, too, for anyone feeling unwell.'

'Who covers that?'

Cordelia dabbed an electronic tablet next to one of the doors and grabbed hold of one his hands. She pulled up a page and pressed his forefinger to the pad, shooting him a smile. 'As quick as that—your fingerprint will open any of these. It gives a complete list of all patient details, contacts and staff on duty. At any time we have two doctors on—day and night—along with four nursing staff. We never fall under that ratio and are frequently above it.'

He frowned a little. 'Do those numbers include you and me?'

She shook her head. 'Oh, no. We're supernumerary—along with all the research staff. Around fifty per cent of our researchers have a clinical background. And working here helps them maintain their clinical registrations. You'll frequently see our researchers doing the clinical monitoring of patients.' She tried to choose her words carefully. 'Quite often, our clinicians have had to go into research because of health conditions of their own. Working here helps them still have the patient contact that they love, as well as contributing to improving things for patients.'

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