Sharon
KENDRICK
writing as Sharon Wirdnam
SURGEON OF THE
HEART

Шэрон Кендрик

Surgeon Of The Heart

«HarperCollins»

Кендрик Ш.

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Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick's novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing 100th book! Many of these books are available as e books for the first time.One night in Rome…Theatre sister Catriona Bellman couldn't have known that when she stole away from her colleagues in Rome and found her way to a quiet restaurant her life was about to change. Over the course of one meal Nico Rossi melted the barriers around her cautious, innocent heart and Catriona gave into a moment of reckless abandon.Determined to return to work in Leeds warmed only by the memories of that one stolen night, Catriona is totally unprepared when the new visiting professor arrives in theatre is none other than Nico! Working side by side it's not long before the professional becomes something far more personal…

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‘Do you want to dance some more?’

Cat’s voice sounded heavy, drowsy. ‘No.’

‘A drink, then? Some more grappa?’

‘No.’

‘What, then? This. . .?’ And Nico bent his head and started to kiss her. ‘Is this what you wanted all the time, my little Cat?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she breathed, against his parted lips. ‘Yes. *Yes.’*

Dear Reader,

One hundred. Doesn’t matter how many times I say it, I still can’t believe that’s how many books I’ve written. It’s a fabulous feeling but more fabulous still is the news that Mills & Boon are issuing *every single one* of my backlist as digital titles. Wow. I can’t wait to share all my stories with you - which are as vivid to me now as when I wrote them.

There’s BOUGHT FOR HER HUSBAND, with its outrageously macho Greek hero and A SCANDAL, A SECRET AND A BABY featuring a very sexy Tuscan. THE SHEIKH’S HEIR proved so popular with readers that it spent two weeks on the *USA Today* charts and…well, I could go on, but I’ll leave you to discover them for yourselves.

I remember the first line of my very first book: “So you’ve come to Australia looking for a husband?” Actually, the heroine had gone to Australia to escape men, but guess what? She found a husband all the same! The man who inspired that book rang me up recently and when I told him I was beginning my 100th story and couldn’t decide what to write, he said, “Why don’t you go back to where it all started?”

So I did. And that’s how A ROYAL VOW OF CONVENIENCE was born. It opens in beautiful Queensland and moves to England and New York. It’s about a runaway princess and the enigmatic billionaire who is infuriated by her, yet who winds up rescuing her. But then, she goes and rescues him… Wouldn’t you know it?

I’ll end by saying how very grateful I am to have a career I love, and to thank each and every one of you who has supported me along the way. You really are very dear readers.

Love,

Sharon xxx

Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick’s novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing and awesome 100th book! Sharon is known worldwide for her likeable, spirited heroines and her gorgeous, utterly masculine heroes.

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition, describing her ideal date: being flown to an exotic island by a gorgeous and powerful man. Little did she realise that she’d just wandered into her dream job! Today she writes for Mills & Boon, featuring her often stubborn but always to-die-for heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She believes that the best books are those you never want to end. Just like life…

Surgeon of the Heart
Sharon Kendrick
writing as Sharon Wirdnam

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CHAPTER ONE

'CAT! Hey, Cat! Over here!'

Catriona, who had been trying very hard to slip out of the marbled foyer of the hotel unnoticed, turned reluctantly to face the speaker, a beefily built fellow nurse called Beth, who had scarcely left her side since the conference had begun. As she turned, the heavy red-gold hair swung in a deliciously shimmering bell, causing more than one appreciative Italian eye to linger on her slender figure.

'There you are, Cat!' said Beth, her voice sounding distinctly accusing. 'I thought you were going to meet us down here for a drink. You've been ages! What on earth have you been doing?'

'Sorry,' said Catriona automatically, slightly surprised herself by her unusual lack of punctuality. 'But the view from my room is so—so glorious that I sat for ages just gazing out—I must have got a bit carried away.'

Appreciation of Roman landscapes obviously came very low down on Beth's list of priorities, for her aggrieved expression remained unchanged. 'Well, it's too late for a drink now. Guess what?' It was a question that clearly required no answer, for she babbled on eagerly. 'Glenn and David have said they'll join us for dinner. Isn't that great?'

'Oh——' Catriona had been about to say 'oh, dear', but she amended it hastily. The two red-blooded registrars from Cardiff had been in hot pursuit for the three days since she'd been in Rome. Frankly, she was sick of the sight of them. They just couldn't seem to get the message that she was simply *not* interested. After all, they were doctors, weren't they? And didn't every doctor know that there was one reason, and one reason alone, why any girl should enter the nursing profession, and that was to carry off the ultimate prize—a doctor husband?

'And we've found the most fantastic restaurant,' rattled on Beth excitedly, flashing her eyes at Glenn, not noticing that his attention was totally taken up with the green-eyed girl with the shiny red-gold hair who stood before him. 'It isn't far from here, Cat—and you'll never guess what.'

'What?' asked Cat, wondering how she instinctively knew what was about to follow.

'They only serve *English* food! After days of oily muck, we've finally found one! What do you think about that?'

Catriona thought that it was about time she asserted herself.

Rome. The eternal city. She had been here for three days and she might as well have been in Blackpool. The days themselves were taken up with attending the prestigious cardio-thoracic conference—and that had been OK, more than OK, in fact, with detailed, slick lectures showing the latest developments in the exciting and exacting speciality of cardio-thoracic surgery. The fly in the ointment had been that the organisers had taken it upon themselves to organise every spare second of the delegates' free time. Consequently they had been herded on to buses, day after day, with a hostess deafening them with her well-learned patter as they went on yet another guided tour.

Oh, yes, they had seen many of the magnificent sights that abounded in this remarkable city—the Vatican; the Coliseum; the building that so resembled a wedding-cake—and which had caused David to wink at Catriona so repeatedly that she'd been forced in the end to ask him if he didn't have something the matter with his eye! But the real Rome, the ordinary Rome, the city that was enjoyed by the people who actually lived there, Catriona felt they hadn't touched on at all. She longed to stroll unhurriedly through the streets, to find a little restaurant where the *Italians* actually ate! They hadn't had one meal since their arrival that couldn't have been replicated in her local Italian restaurant in Leeds. She was sick to death of the ubiquitous *pollo sopresa* and the stodgy lasagne that was no better than that which was served in her hospital canteen! The Italians were world-famous for their cuisine—she'd just like to get a chance to sample some!

She gave the three faces a polite smile. 'Thanks very much, but I'm afraid that I won't be joining you.'

'Won't?' queried Glenn, scowling. 'Why not?'

She resented the proprietorial tone he had adopted, but, after all, she wouldn't be seeing him again after breakfast tomorrow, so what was the point of telling him to mind his own business? 'Because I want to see a bit of this city before I go home tomorrow, and because the last thing I want to do is eat English food,' she said. 'After all, don't they say—when in Rome. . .?' Her corny joke was met with a cold-eyed glare.

'You don't mean to tell me you're planning to go out on your *own?'* He asked the question so indignantly that his voice rose to the level of a pre-pubescent schoolboy.

'Yes,' said Catriona, bemused. 'Is there a problem with that?'

'A problem?' he expostulated. 'I should think so! You simply won't be safe. You know what they say about Italian men!'

Biting back the urge to tell him that so far she'd encountered far more problems with Welsh men than she'd ever done with Italian men, she gave him a smile, which, if he'd known her a little better, he'd have been wary of! 'Well, I appreciate your concern, but I'm not planning to frequent ill-lit alleys. So. . .' She tucked her cream leather clutch-bag under her arm, and made to turn away, but Glenn had not yet finished.

'Well, I don't think you ought to go,' he blustered, but she halted him in his tracks with a chilly stare.

She could just imagine how he would be on the wards, a little tin god! 'I am over the age of consent,' she said coolly. 'And when I decide I need a guardian I'll let you know. Goodnight.' And, so saying, she walked away, ignoring his snort of anger, feeling as though she had just been relieved of an extremely heavy and uncomfortable burden.

Outside, the sensation of freedom became even stronger. The warm June evening seemed to beckon her with the promise of untold pleasure. People were sitting outside cafés, sipping their aperitifs, their mood relaxed. Laughing and chattering, all the time in the romantically lilting tone of the Italian language.

As she walked along the wide streets Catriona reflected that it was a world away from her usual life as a busy staff nurse in a huge Leeds hospital.

Born in the south of England, she had nevertheless eschewed London for her general nursing training, preferring instead the wild beauty of the north, together with that part of the country's reputation for good, solid and gritty common sense. Leeds Northern General Hospital, too, was not simply famous throughout Great Britain for its standards of care, but throughout the whole world. And in particular it had one of the best equipped cardio-thoracic units anywhere.

Surgery was carried out by the General's own fine surgeons, but such were its prestige and teaching facilities that visiting surgeons from all around the globe vied for places there.

Catriona had known quite early on in her career that the exacting role of theatre nurse was her preferred speciality. She loved the order that theatre work demanded, coupled with the excitement of participating in an operation. It suited her cool, quick-thinking temperament. The ward nurses were often scornful about their colleagues in Theatre, saying that they weren't *proper* nurses, since they had nothing to do with patients, but Catriona thought this a load of baloney. The strictness and discipline needed to get you through a nursing training were exactly what were needed to equip you with the skills to assist a surgeon.

In search of a suitable restaurant, she walked along, sniffing at the air appreciatively, not feeling a bit like Catriona Bellman, the staff nurse widely tipped for early promotion—the coolly efficient creature the juniors liked, yet feared, so exacting were her standards. The theatre nurse who was respected by the surgeons, yet so immune to their frequent passes that she had earned herself the nickname 'Ice-Queen'. She smiled to herself. If they could see her now, soaking up the heady warmth of the summer evening, strolling along without a care in the world. She wasn't remotely recognisable as the 'Ice-Queen' tonight!

She didn't, she reflected, even look much like the usual Catriona Bellman. The usual chic, understated garments that had become her trademark had proved hopelessly hot and too confining for the blazing furnace of the sticky Roman summer, which she had badly underestimated. The clothes she had brought were totally unsuitable, so what better excuse for spending some of her hard-earned wages than to splash out on some new ones?

She was wearing a floaty dress of green she had bought in a small boutique. It drew attention to the unusual green of her long-lashed eyes, in whose depths could occasionally be seen flecks of a darker green, and of gold. The tiny shoulder-straps lay over skin tanned to a pale brown, a tan that was unexpected, considering that her hair was a cross between blonde and red, a colour that defied description. Thick, but hopelessly straight, the superbly cut bell shape of the bob made the best advantage of it.

She eventually found a restaurant that satisfied all her criteria for eating out on her last evening. It was *full* of Italians, it wasn't too expensive, and the food was superb. She ordered green lentils cooked with oyster mushrooms and bacon, followed by slivers of duck in fresh pasta, and a home-made lemon ice-cream. Much to her surprise, she managed to eat the lot! Feeling pleasantly replete after a cup of strong and delicious coffee, she took her time and meandered slowly back towards the hotel, vowing that one day she would return to this beautiful city. And hadn't she thrown her coins into the Trevi Fountain on the previous day? That meant she would *definitely* come back!

It was still early, and she hesitated outside a café not far from where she was staying. It was such a beautiful evening. Why go back just yet? Knowing her luck, the dogged Glenn would probably be lying in wait for her, wanting to interrogate her about her evening out. Why cut the evening short? She'd be back home in Leeds tomorrow, and—much though she loved the place—it would be bound to be raining!

She found herself a table with a good view of the busy street, and sat down to wait to be served. She was so engrossed in watching an enormous woman dressed in black, berating a man tall enough to tower over her, who none the less looked petrified, that she didn't notice the man standing over her until he spoke.

'Excuse me?'

She looked up quickly, slightly unsure. 'Are you the waiter?' she asked tentatively.

He gave a laugh at this, a deep throaty laugh, and she knew immediately that her question had been utterly ridiculous, for this man was no waiter.

'No,' he smiled. 'I am not the waiter. But I can order you a drink, if you like. I could even join you for one—if you would not object?' The dark eyebrows were raised quizzically.

She looked at him carefully. Very tall. Far too good-looking. Hair the colour of a raven's wing. Olive skin. Deep brown eyes fringed by lashes any woman would kill for. Obviously Italian, but with English that was faintly accented, but unusual. He was dressed in a superbly cut dinner suit, with a shirt so white that it could have been featured in a soap-powder commercial! Waiter, indeed! Anyone less like a waiter she'd never seen!

He seemed to find her hesitation amusing, and spread his hands out in the very expansive way that was so curiously continental. 'You are worried, yes, that you will not be safe with me? But let me tell you, English rose, that you would be far safer with me than on your own. To your left I see a group of young men who are eyeing you shamelessly. To your right is a gentleman, no longer in the first flushes of youth, but who still, it is easy to see, fancies himself as something of a ladies' man.'

Catriona looked both ways, unable to stop herself from smiling. He was perfectly right.

'So, you see, you would do far better to have me as your protector, wouldn't you?' The brown eyes twinkled disarmingly.

Ironically, it was the very role that Glenn had been offering her earlier, and which she had so disdained. That same offer from *this* man was quite a different kettle of fish. Sensible Catriona

Bellman in cold and rainy Leeds would probably have told him just where to go, but the sun-warmed and relaxed Catriona Bellman found herself charmed, flattered, and more than a little intrigued.

She looked up at him. 'Please do sit down. I'd be delighted for you to join me.'

'Thank you.' He pulled the chair further back to accommodate very long legs, and sat down. A waiter appeared immediately. 'Now what will you have to drink?' the dark man queried.

She had already had half a bottle of wine at dinner, and was feeling quite mellow. The most prudent thing to have would be another of those small black coffees. Such a pity that she wasn't feeling in the least bit prudent!

'You choose,' she declared impetuously.

He smiled, and inclined his dark head graciously. 'Of course! Now let me see. All the English come here and they drink sambuca—which does not have a particularly wonderful bouquet, in my opinion. In fact, the only things to commend it are the flaming coffee beans floating on the top, which always produce a gasp of surprise—so predictable, and far too predictable for you, I think. No, you shall have something very special indeed.' And with this he spoke in a torrent of Italian, of which Catriona understood not one word.

The waiter scurried off, and the man surveyed her, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. 'Now we must introduce ourselves, since I cannot call you English rose all night. What is your name?'

'It's Cat.' She saw the dark eyebrows raised in surprise, and hastened to explain. 'Well, I was christened Catriona, but everyone calls me Cat.'

'Cat!' He eyed her speculatively. 'Yes, Cat is good. You have eyes like a cat.' He lowered his voice. 'Do you purr like a cat when you're happy? Do you scratch like a cat when you're mad?'

His words brought faint colour to her cheeks. There was nothing too wayward or shocking in what he'd said, but the deep, soft, faintly accented voice was having a remarkable effect on her pulse-rate. She knew that he'd noticed her blushing, and, feeling unusually gauche, she strove to give her voice its normal cool assurance. 'And you are?'

'Nico,' he smiled, looking as if he was about to say more, when the waiter appeared with the drinks.

It was hard to define what the drink tasted of. It was cool, but it warmed her. Tangy, yet at the same time sweet, and smooth. It slid down her throat with velvet ease, and she gave a small sigh of satisfaction.

'Do you like it?' he asked.

'I love it,' she replied fervently.

'Do you, now?' he murmured. 'And what else do you love?'

She met his eyes. Green stared into fathomless darkness. I could love you, she thought. Quite easily. 'I love Italy,' she told him.

'I know you do. Tell me what you love about it.'

She felt as though he'd put a spell on her, enchanted her. Words seemed to spill from her lips as never before. He asked her questions, but not about her life—about her thoughts, her fears, her dreams. She felt as if he could read her very mind itself, and then thanked goodness that he couldn't, for then he would have known how much she was wondering what it would be like to be kissed by him.

'There is music inside.' He inclined his head towards the direction of the interior of the café. 'Would you like to dance?'

This was crazy, she thought. Sheer madness. Even as she thought it, she found herself nodding, allowing him to pull her chair back and lead her through.

There was, indeed, music. To Cat it sounded like a heavenly choir. He took her into his arms, and she felt as though she'd come home after a long, long journey.

She didn't know how long they danced for, she only knew that there had never been a dance like it. She seemed to fit so perfectly into his arms, her head gently resting against the broadness of his chest. She was floating, dreaming—she must be. Things like this just didn't happen to girls like her.

She didn't remember at which point he suggested they leave. She didn't say anything as they walked through now deserted streets to his car. There was an air of magic surrounding them. He drove her through unfamiliar streets, which became more imposing and more tree-lined with each moment, drawing up at last outside a white house, where the scent of some shrub filled her senses with its fragrance.

He led her inside. She was aware of opulence and faded splendour. He didn't put any lights on, but instead took her through to a room whose uncurtained windows let in the bright silvery light of the moon. The moonlight, with its surreal glow, only added to her feeling of unreality. Somehow she was in his arms, where she belonged, and he was whispering to her.

'Do you want to dance some more?'

Her voice sounded heavy, drowsy. 'No.'

'A drink, then? Some more grappa?'

'No.'

'What, then? This. . .?' And he bent his head and started to kiss her. 'Is that what you wanted all the time, my little Cat?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed against his parted lips. 'Yes. *Yes.'*

The sweetness of his breath was more intoxicating than the grappa she had drunk. Cat had been kissed before, naturally, but this might just as well have been the first time, for it made every other kiss fade into insignificance.

His mouth was firm, hard, insistent yet gentle. She felt his tongue begin to explore first the warm outline of her lips, investigating every tiny pore, so that when eventually it moved inside her mouth it seemed like the most wantonly exciting invasion imaginable. She found herself wanting to run her hands through the rich, glorious thickness of his hair. He pulled her closer, so that she could feel the frantic racing of his heart through the flimsy fabric of her dress.

She was scarcely aware of how or when he took her up a long flight of stairs, to a room where there was a large bed, but she remembered feeling relief when she saw the bed, relief and a slow, relentless build-up of longing. She saw his eyes alight with a wondering fire as he lifted a hand up and began to slide the thin shoulder-straps down, one by one.

'Cat,' he murmured. 'My little Cat. You're so very beautiful.' He made it sound like a sonnet.

'Nico.' She could barely gasp the word out through swollen lips, lips that longed to feel the heady pressure of his kiss once more.

He pulled the bodice of the dress down, so that her breasts in their insubstantial bra lay revealed, and she heard him catch his breath. *'Cara,'* he whispered. *'Mia cara.'* He kissed the hollow between them, and she shuddered as she felt his tongue trail a path to one hardened rosy nub of nipple.

Head flung back, totally uninhibited, she heard herself gasp, 'Take it off,' in a kind of frenzied whisper.

The wisp of bra floated its way to the floor, and he cupped each breast in almost reverential fashion, bending his head slowly to kiss each one in turn.

Driven by instinct, and a power as old as time itself, she found herself unbuttoning the fine linen of his shirt, until his chest too was bare, and she heard him give a groan of sheer delight as she kissed him there. He pulled her to him fiercely then, and she knew a sensation of both wonderment and gratification as, for the first time ever, she felt bare skin touching bare skin in the act of love.

She was aware of his shrugging off his jacket, of his other clothes being flung off his body, straight on to the floor.

That beautiful suit, she thought with lazy amusement, and then she was in his arms again, and he was laying her on the bed, pulling her dress off completely, then the filmy half-slip, and finally he hooked his fingers into the tiny lace panties and slid them off her, leaving her naked before his eyes.

He lay above her, just watching her, a mixture of awe and desire and something else on his face, something she couldn't recognise. He lifted a hand and touched her face quite gently. 'Are you sure you want this, my Cat? Quite sure, *mia cara?*'

She gave him an enchanting smile, loving him all the more because he would have stopped. Some primitive instinct told her that with absolute clarity. Yes, he wanted her very badly, she could see that, but one word and he would have stopped. One word. She put her hand up to trace the outline of his lips, and he imprisoned it there, kissing the palm with breathtaking homage. He was waiting for her answer. One word.

'Yes,' she told him. She scarcely recognised the voice as her own; it sounded almost slurred with the blood-stirring response he was eliciting from her.

He moved over her then, to shower her with kisses, light, butterfly kisses at first, gradually becoming deeper and more insistent.

She had never seen anything so beautiful as the physical perfection of this naked man. Each limb brown and strong, all muscle and sinew. But there was softness behind the steely strength. Tenderness, too, in the way he spoke her name, over and over again. She kissed him back, with a fervour and a passion that matched his. She was flying, like a bird newly out of the nest. The wings she had never used before were unexpectedly simple to use. She matched each stroke, each caress, each seeking gesture with movements of her own. She had never been to bed with a man before, but she felt no fear, no hesitation, no embarrassment. It was as though the instinctive way she responded to him was being guided by some force stronger than she, stronger indeed than both of them. She knew a moment of sheer pleasure as she saw his face just before he moved in to possess her utterly. A primitive joy at the sensation of his fullness, dominating her completely, before the sharp and totally unexpected spasm of pain. She had forgotten, she had actually forgotten that it might hurt. She heard him exclaim, saw his face. . .not pleasure there now, puzzlement, yes, and—surely not?—anger. His movements became fierce and strong, tinged with a kind of desperation. He moved one last time with a sudden ferocity, and then she heard him groan, before withdrawing completely, and falling on to the bed beside her.

There was a brief silence, if you could count it as silence, when the raggedness of his breathing seemed almost to deafen her. She turned to him miserably, knowing that it should not have ended like this, feeling his mental as well as physical withdrawal, knowing, just from the forbidding set of his newly tense shoulders that he was very angry, but not knowing why.

When he turned over to look at her she almost recoiled from the pure fury that lit the dark eyes with a angry glow.

'Dio!' he swore. 'You little idiot—how could you? How *could* you?'

She felt suddenly cold. 'How could I what? Nico—what is it? What have I done?'

He moved as far away from her as he could, as though he could taint himself by mere proximity. He sat up, the rumpled sheet at his waist, still breathing heavily. 'What a waste!' he exploded. 'Why in God's name didn't you tell me that you were a virgin?'

Why? Why indeed? If she told him the reason she would be able to add scorn to the contempt on his face. Tell him that she had never felt anything like that in her life before? That she had felt lifted almost on to a higher plane? That their lovemaking had had, for her, a spiritual quality that had ruled her response to him? Tell him that she had foolishly mistaken lust for love? 'Was it—I mean, did you not. . .enjoy it?'

He swore violently under his breath; the words were foreign to her, but their meaning plain enough.

'Enjoy it?' he asked scornfully. 'How could I enjoy it, knowing that?' he spat out, then, seeing her look of puzzlement, he relented. 'Oh, I achieved—satisfaction.' His mouth curled in distaste as he spoke the word. 'I should have stopped. . . I would have stopped, but——'

'But?'

'It was too late by then,' he said bitterly. 'Nothing could have stopped me.'

She knew one last surge of triumph, that the tide had been strong enough to sweep him, too, out of control, and then she sat up, hugging a sheet around her nakedness, willing herself to stem the tears, for now at least. 'Well, at least you can be sure of not catching any disease—as you were the first!' she cried.

She saw him glance at her quickly, as if recognising the vulnerability behind the attempt at bravado.

'It shouldn't be like that, you know,' he said, quite softly. 'Your first time. It should be special.'

It *was* special, she wanted to scream at him. For me, anyway! But she turned her head away.

'I would have been more. . .less. . .more gentle. . .' His words tailed off into an embarrassed silence.

And all at once she knew that she could not tolerate one second more of this humiliating post-mortem. With a shuddering sense of realisation she remembered that she was in a strange country and a strange house, with a man who was now as far away from her as a complete stranger, ever though he lay just feet away, even though he knew her body intimately. A vestige of the Ice-Queen returned as her pride's saviour.

'I'd like you to take me back now, please.'

To her shame, he didn't even try to argue. He merely nodded and stood up, and she closed her eyes to blot out the sight of the body. She still, even now, longed for him to take her in his arms again, to make everything all right, as sweetly perfect as before. . .

They dressed in silence. This time round she noticed the car; she made herself obsessively observe details. The smell of fine leather, the dazzling array of instruments. Anything that would keep her tortured thoughts away from the subject of the man who had so summarily thrust her away from him.

'Where are you staying?' he asked at last.

Some last scrap of self-preservation made her lie to him. She mentioned the name of a hotel she had noticed in the adjoining street to her own hotel. The drive there seemed to take forever, and when he stopped the car he turned to her, his troubled eyes betraying that he wasn't feeling as calm as his exterior suggested.

'Catriona. . .' he began.

So she was Catriona now. Not Cat. His Cat. The use of her proper name became the final straw, and she wrenched the door open. 'Thanks for the memory!' she said on a sob, before running away down the road, as if demons were on her heel, away, far away, where he could never find her.

CHAPTER TWO

‘ARE you all right, Cat?’

Cat turned from the mirror, where she had been adjusting her green theatre gown, her lacklustre eyes regarding Josey Betts, her fellow staff nurse, and a good friend. ‘Sure, I’m all right,’ she answered unconvincingly. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

Josey hesitated. ‘It’s just that you’ve been so—well, so *strange* since you’ve got back.’

‘Strange?’ echoed Cat dully. Perhaps it was true, then, perhaps sexual awakening could be seen in a woman’s eyes. Except that it hadn’t been much of an awakening in her case, more like an ongoing nightmare.

‘I mean, I know you were ill when you came back from Italy——’

‘Yes,’ agreed Cat calmly. III? It had been no disease that her doctor had heard of, that was for sure, but she had been unable to function normally. She had stopped eating and sleeping and laughing —as the stark reality of what she had done came home to her. She had lost her virginity to a total stranger. Her doctor had diagnosed depression, and she hadn’t had the energy to argue with him, and, besides, what would he say if she told him the truth? He would be disbelieving at first, and then, if she managed to convince him of the veracity of her statement, she could imagine the disbelief changing to distaste, disgust. Knowing that the Ice-Queen was no better than a slut.

Physically, the pills had made her feel better. Soon she had stopped taking them, and now she was functioning ‘normally’, except that there was a huge gap where her heart used to be. Mentally, she just didn’t know. How on earth did she go about coming to terms with doing something so completely out of character—and doing something which felt as though it had devastated not only her heart and soul, but her whole future?

She pushed one narrow foot into the white theatre clog. ‘I don’t suppose you know which list I’m down for today?’ she queried.

‘You mean, you haven’t looked?’ Josey gave an amused smile. ‘Well, this will really cheer you up—you’ve hit the jackpot this time, Cat!’

‘Jackpot?’

Josey clicked impatiently. ‘Will you stop repeating everything I say? It makes you sound all dopey, and you’re going to need all your wits about you. You’ve landed the new visiting prof!’

Cat wondered why Josey was doing an excellent imitition of a Cheshire cat. ‘So?’

‘So?’ Josey exclaimed, hitting her hand dramatically on to her forehead. ‘So, he’s a walking dreamboat. *Sensational*! I tell you, Cat—this one is the business!’

‘Really?’ Cat asked absently. ‘Well, then you’ll have to get to work on him, won’t you?’

Josey crinkled up her freckled nose. ‘Oh, sure,’ she said resignedly. ‘He’s bound to fancy you —they all do.’

Cat shuddered, feeling as though she’d been offered a poisoned chalice. ‘Well, he’s safe from me. I am off men completely.’ Natural curiosity got the better of her. ‘What’s he like?’

‘Italian——’ started Josey, and then stopped when she saw her friend’s white face. ‘Cat, what’s the matter?’

Cat shook her head. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’ No point in saying that even the gods seemed intent on compounding her misery. Everywhere she went she seemed to be invaded by images of all things Italian. Or was it simply that she couldn’t get Rome, and that dark, beautiful, cruel stranger out of her mind?

‘You can’t *believe* how good-looking he is,’ prattled on Josey excitedly. ‘Sister Henderson even said that he should have been a film star—and that, coming from her, well. . .’

Cat knew what she meant. Sister Henderson, only two years off retirement, had once been jilted by her fiancé, and had decided that the rest of the male sex should pay. Cat had always thought

her a slightly ridiculous figure. Ironic that after what had happened to her in Rome she now felt she had more in common with the older woman than any of her peers. 'Is he a good surgeon—that's the question?'

'He's a *professor*—for heaven's sake!'

Cat looked at her patiently. 'You know as well as I do that people often get promoted because they're brilliant fund-raisers and medical politicians. Some of them can't operate their way out of a paper bag!'

'Well, this one can,' retorted Josey smugly. 'Sister Henderson says she's never seen such a wonderful technique. . .neat, yet fast—the ultimate combination!'

'Good grief,' said Cat sarcastically. 'Has the idol got feet of clay, I wonder? Does he come complete with a halo?'

Josey's eyes glinted. 'The *last* thing he looks like is a saint, I can assure you.'

'Sister Henderson isn't seriously besotted, is she, Jo?'

This produced a fit of the giggles. 'Probably. But it won't do her the least bit of good—he's decades younger!'

'I'm surprised she's put me in with him, if he's that grand.'

'Ah, well—you are the blue-eyed girl, aren't you?' asked Josey a touch bitterly. 'Everyone knows they'll make you sister soon.'

Was that true? wondered Cat as she made her way slowly towards Theatre One. Ironic that once she could think of nothing she'd wanted more, yet now the thought of promotion filled her with only a kind of mild curiosity. She shook her head very slightly, knowing that she was going to have to snap out of this mood very quickly indeed. Soon she would be on hand to use her skill as a scrub nurse in some of the most exacting operations known to medical science.

As she set about preparing her trolley she reflected that cardio-thoracic surgery—or heart surgery, as it was more popularly known—excited a very passionate response from the general public. All doctors and nurses knew that getting funds for this particular speciality was almost as easy as raising funds for the children's ward. Perhaps the fact that the heart was seen as the very nub of human life was what made the public response to it so gratifying. And the heart was, of course, seen as the centre of the emotions, something which she had only recently discovered. For the first time in her life she found herself wishing that she worked on a ward, or in Out-patients, or in something, *anything* other than a job where the word 'heart' was spoken day after day, reminding her of all those terms that now seemed to accurately reflect her life, and her feelings. Heartbroken. Absolutely.

The theatre began to become a hive of humming activity. Cat had gloved and gowned up, and was placing the myriad fine instruments on to the sterile trolley. Her 'runner' scurried around, fetching more sutures and extra instruments. She was a student working three months in theatres, and had been dreading assisting Staff Nurse Bellman. Everyone knew that she didn't suffer fools gladly—her high standards were the talk of the student nurses' canteen. What she hadn't been expecting had been someone quite so young as Catriona Bellman, or so lovely, either.

Systematically, in a routine which was now as familiar to her as washing her face, or brushing her teeth, Cat began to lay the instruments out in neat lines, in the order that they would most probably be called for. She glanced up at her runner.

'Student Nurse Lloyd, could you find out if the professor favours any special instruments?'

'Yes, Staff.'

She returned a couple of minutes later, bearing a set of Hanwright forceps, and opened the packets so that the contents fell out on to the sterile trolley.

'Thanks,' said Cat, and, seeing the girl's keen expression, began to question her. 'Have you done much theatre work?' she queried. 'I haven't seen you before.'

'I came while you were off sick,' explained the student.

'I see.' Colour crept into Cat's cheeks. She felt such a fraud for having been off with a sickness that was so patently self-induced—but she could never have worked in the state she'd been in, and it was only the second break for sickness she'd had in her entire career. 'What's your name?'

'Melissa,' answered the girl.

'Well, Melissa, I'm pleased to have you on board. Have you done much running so far?'

'This is my third time. The first two I was just observing, then today Sister Henderson said that I could help you, as we're short-staffed.'

Cat nodded. They seemed constantly short-staffed, but she smiled encouragingly at the younger girl, recognising some of the same eagerness to learn that had first characterised her own ambition to work in Theatre. Theatre nurses were born, she had long ago decided, not made. 'Well, Sister Henderson must be very pleased with your progress if she's letting you run for a major operation at this stage. Well done!'

'Why, thank you, Staff!' Student Nurse Lloyd flushed pink with pride, thinking that this kind interest didn't tie in with Staff Bellman's reputation.

Cat knew immediately what the girl was thinking, her theatre mask hiding her wry expression, for yes, she *had* changed. She knew that she had. Work no longer seemed the prime motivating force in her life. She had tasted both pleasure and pain, and a newer, softer Cat had emerged. The question was whether or not she would ever be able to forget the man who had effected that change, or—more important still—would she ever be able to experience that fierce and overwhelming reaction with someone else?

'Have you worked in Anaesthetics yet, Melissa?'

'Not yet, Staff.'

'Then I'll tell you a little about it before the patient arrives, as we're ready. At this moment the patient is being anaesthetised, and the anaesthetist is inserting lots of different lines into him, which will enable him to monitor his progress during the operation. What lines do you think he might use?'

'A CVP line.'

'Correct. The full name being?'

Melissa cleared her throat. 'The central venous pressure line.'

'Good. And do you know what that shows?'

'Not *really,* Staff.'

'Well, it gives us a clear indication of the state of the volume of fluids within the body. It would tell us, for example, if the heart was overloaded—by being raised. It is, as you can imagine, of vital importance, particularly as we're operating on the heart itself. It will be removed when the patient is ready to leave the intensive care unit.' She smiled at the student's rapt expression. 'And what other lines might we expect to find?'

'A venous line?'

'At least one,' answered Cat. 'Dr Crone prefers to use four, although he isn't typical—as you might have already heard, Dr Crone is a law unto himself!'

'Yes, Staff,' smiled Melissa.

Further discussion was halted by the appearance of two surgeons—Phil Bennett and Morgan Crossland—Cat knew them well. These were the surgeons who would prepare for the arrival of the professor himself. The operation being performed was a coronary artery bypass graft—an inspirational procedure to any member of the profession. The coronary arteries—vital for supplying the heart with its own blood supply—having become furred and clogged up with arteroma, would be removed, then replaced with veins taken from the lower leg. Thus one surgeon would open up the leg to remove the leg veins, while the other opened up the chest wall, ready for the professor to carry out the swop itself.

Both men grinned when they saw Cat, Morgan, an out-and-out ladies' man, frowning very slightly.

'Been on a diet, Cat?'

'No.' She knew that her uniform was hanging in voluminous folds around her waist. The plain green theatre dress hid a multiple of sins, but even it couldn't disguise the fact that ten pounds had fallen off her since her return from Italy.

'You're too thin,' said Morgan critically. 'It doesn't suit you.'

Cat could see Melissa Lloyd listening to the interchange with interest, and decided to nip any speculation in the bud. 'Nice of you to be so concerned, Morgan,' she said sweetly. 'But, speaking of diets—couldn't you do with losing a little yourself?'

Morgan laughed easily, finding something other than total female capitulation quite refreshing. He knew perfectly well that Cat was the last person to fall for his well-worn chat-up lines, but that didn't stop him trying!

Both men began to scrub as the patient was wheeled in, a man in his late fifties. Dr Crone and his scrub nurse accompanied him, the nurse compressing the ambi-bag, which was feeding oxygen into the patient's lungs, until he could be connected to the ventilator in Theatre.

Also in the room was the theatre technician, who was responsible for working the bypass machine. The patient's body needed to be cooled right down, and this was done by putting a cannula in the heart itself, running the patient's blood through the bypass machine, which cooled it, to have it returned to the patient by an artery in the groin.

Phil started opening the leg, while Morgan began opening the chest, both chatting away, quizzing Cat about her time in Rome. The atmosphere seemed relaxed, but they all worked like clockwork, and the moment that any one of the team in the whole theatre expressed any degree of concern about the proceedings then a tight tension would grip the air.

In reality, Cat would be working for all three surgeons, so she would need to be right on the ball. It was a prospect that daunted a lot of theatre nurses.

'So how was Rome?' asked Morgan.

'The conference was great,' she said, her voice only slightly unsteady. 'I learnt a lot. There were two people from the States who——'

'Wouldn't you just know it?' exclaimed Morgan as she slapped a forcep into his gloved hand. 'Only Cat could go to a country like Italy in the height of summer and come away talking about cardiology! What else did you do apart from the conference? Didn't some dashing Italian sweep you off your feet?' he teased, not noticing that she had blanched. 'And, speaking of dashing Italians,' he continued cheerfully, 'I don't suppose you've met our newest maestro?'

'Morgan's had his nose put out of joint,' interjected Phil mischievously. 'His position as number-one hospital heart-throb has gone. He's finally been usurped.'

Cat didn't trust herself to answer, just carried on, slapping instruments between the two, handing over swabs, and making sure that Melissa Lloyd kept a swab tally on the board at the back of the theatre.

She was aware when the professor came in, even though she had her back to him. A good scrub nurse was aware of every single thing that went on in her theatre, and there was always an imperceptible change in the atmosphere when the top man arrived. Jokes stopped. No words were exchanged. They took their lead from him. If the chief surgeon liked to operate while having Sibelius piped over the loudspeakers then that was fine. If his tastes ran to the Rolling Stones then that was fine too! Cat had often thought that it must be a bit like being minor royalty—the top surgeon was in such an awesomely responsible position. Scarce wonder that so many chiefs of surgery had phenomenally huge egos!

She could hear him washing his hands in the corner, and Melissa Lloyd went scurrying over to tie his gown for him. He moved towards the operating table. Out of the corner of her eye she noted that he was exceptionally tall.

'Good morning, everyone,' he said in a faintly accented Italian that sounded just a little unusual.

Unusual? Cat started. Now she was going crazy! It was because she had Nico on the mind.

The surgeon moved round the table to face her. ‘Ah, a new nurse?’ he queried softly.

Cat lifted her face, the smile frozen there into a ghastly grimace. Please no, she thought. Dear God, no.

Dark brown long-lashed eyes looked into gold-flecked green. She saw incredulous recognition become a tight anger, and with a resounding clatter she dropped the forcep she was holding on to the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

THERE was confusion for approximately three seconds. Morgan stared at her in stupefaction. ‘Are you OK, Cat?’ he queried.

She could understand his surprise. After all, why should someone who was famous for her sleight of hand and her unflappability suddenly behave like the most nervous and inadequate junior?

‘Cat?’ repeated Morgan anxiously.

At the repeated sounding of her name she heard Nico’s sharp intake of breath, and she met his eyes steadily. There was denial there, a question, and then they looked just exactly like cold chips of ice.

Morgan was speaking again. ‘Professor Rossi—this is Catriona—absolutely our best scrub nurse.’

The dark brows were raised imperiously, the voice was chilly. ‘Indeed? I’m afraid that I must beg to differ—or perhaps standards are different over here. In my experience good scrub nurses are not those who drop the instruments, and then stand there shaking, obviously not in *control* of themselves.’

With a sinking feeling of regret she knew that his words had a deeper, more insidious meaning. She had not been in control *then,* either. In Rome.

‘Perhaps you’d like someone to relieve you, as you’re obviously not up to it?’ he suggested.

She drew her shoulders up. ‘I’m fine,’ she said with a surprising firmness in her voice that she was eternally grateful for. ‘Are you ready to commence the operation—sir?’

‘Indeed.’

Things went on automatic pilot then. She forced herself to put every thought of him out of her mind—she had to. He was just a surgeon. Any surgeon. And she was assisting him. She watched as the long fingers gradually exposed the heart. Watched as he performed the breath-takingly dramatic act of stopping the heart with ice-cold water.

She did her best, but it was not her best. She was adequate, and that was about all that could be said. The qualities that separated her from the run-of-the-mill theatre nurses were sadly missing today. Oh, she didn’t commit another sin so grave as dropping an instrument, or anything so inept as forgetting to register a newly opened packet of swabs. She handed him every instrument that he needed, but that extra dimension was missing. Even though it was the first time she had worked for him, she normally would have anticipated his needs, rather than having to wait to be asked. Watching the motion between a good surgeon—and she could see that he was a *very* good surgeon, there was no doubt about that—and a good scrub nurse was like watching a perfectly choreographed ballet—the whole painstakingly intricate operation looking absolutely effortless. Today she felt worse than useless, and she was miserably aware that his barely concealed impatience with her performance had affected everyone around them. Even Morgan looked slightly miffed.

At the end he defibrillated the heart to get it started, and contemptuously peeled off his gloves to throw them in the bin by her feet. As a gesture of utter disdain, it could hardly have been bettered.

He marched out of the theatre without another word, leaving the rest of the team to finish up, Morgan and Phil both looking disgruntled.

‘What the hell’s eating him?’ demanded Phil. ‘He was fairly reasonable yesterday. Well,’ gloomily, ‘as reasonable as any of these flaming experts are.’

‘There, but for the grace of God, go you!’ said Morgan.

Dr Crone regarded Cat speculatively. ‘Something tells me that our Cat might just responsible for his temper,’ he mused.

Every pair of eyes was turned in her direction, but she set her face in its most glacial Ice-Queen expression, and no one dared speak to her, save when necessary, for the rest of the operation.

She was longing to just escape, to be alone with her thoughts, to try to make sense of this nightmare situation. *Why the hell was he here?* But there was to be no escape. As soon as she walked through the swing doors she saw Sister Henderson, a serious expression on her face, and knew exactly what had happend.

'Sister——' she began, but the older woman uncharacteristically interrupted her.

'Would you please come into my office?'

Miserably Cat followed her, and once there the older woman turned to her, an anxious look on her face. 'Catriona—if you're not fit to come back to work then you simply shouldn't be *here.'*

'But I am fit, Sister, honestly I am.'

Sister Henderson shook her head. 'I have just had Professor Rossi in my office. To say he was angry would be a mild understatement. He was absolutely *furious.* He said that you were incompetent and substandard. He said that your performance today was not what he expected at all—he called it an insult to provide him with a nurse who was simply not up to scratch. Do you deny that what he said is true?'

Cat bit her bottom lip. 'No, Sister.'

'I explained to him that you'd been ill recently, but he soon gave me short shrift. I told him that you were the best nurse I had, but he didn't seem to be listening.' The older woman's eyes were creased with anxiety. 'Don't you see, my dear, that if we subject visiting and very eminent professors to situations like that it makes us all look very foolish. It whittles away at our reputation. We are the finest cardio-thoracic centre in the country. Surgeons come here, knowing that. They expect—and they have a *right* to expect—the very best, and today Professor Rossi did not get it. I'd like to know whether you can offer me a satisfactory explanation for what happened in Theatre today.'

Cat hung her head, shame staining her cheeks. She had never received such a blunt dressing-down in all the time she'd been nursing. It was justified, she knew that, but it didn't make it any easier to bear.

'He wants to see you in his office, Catriona. I shouldn't dawdle, if I were you.'

Cat felt as though she were going to the gallows, and not just because she was about to get a professional scorching—she would have withstood a million of those, anything rather than have to face him, to have to stand alone in the same room with him.

She tapped on the door of his room. The visiting professor was awarded a room that reflected his status, and consequently was very large, well-appointed, and right to the back of theatres. Cat had only been in there once before, when a very amiable American professor had invited them all for drinks on the eve of his departure. An enjoyable occasion, and anything less like the encounter she now anticipated she couldn't imagine.

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