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Romance*<sup>™</sup>

**CAROLINE ANDERSON**

The Surgeon's Miracle



Caroline Anderson

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# **The Surgeon's Miracle**

## **Caroline Anderson**



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**Caroline Anderson** has the mind of a butterfly. She's been a nurse, a secretary, a teacher, run her own soft-furnishing business, and now she's settled on writing. She says, 'I was looking for that elusive something. I finally realised it was variety, and now I have it in abundance. Every book brings new horizons and new friends, and in between books I have learned to be a juggler. My teacher husband John and I have two beautiful and talented daughters, Sarah and Hannah, umpteen pets, and several acres of Suffolk that nature tries to reclaim every time we turn our backs!' Caroline also writes for the Mills & Boon® Romance series.

## CHAPTER ONE

‘GOT a minute, Libby?’

‘Sure—’ She looked up and flashed him a harassed smile, but it faded as soon as she caught sight of him. ‘Wow, you look rough. I heard you were busy—sounds like a grim night.’

He grunted. If he looked half as rough as he felt, he must look like hell, because grim wasn’t the word. ‘It was pretty dire. There were three of us in there—someone removing a blood clot from his brain while I stabilised his fractures and someone else sorted out his spleen. It was pretty touch and go for a while,’ he agreed. ‘We were in Theatre for hours. The kid’s only seven—it was a hit and run.’

Libby winced sympathetically. ‘Poor little mite. How could anybody do that?’

‘Search me. I have no idea.’

‘How’s he doing?’

He lifted his shoulders—in truth, there wasn’t much he could add. ‘He’s stable—sort of.’ That was enough. The bare bones—all he had the energy to explain.

Libby nodded, then bit her lip. ‘Can you give me a sec, Andrew? I won’t be long, I just need to finish this off.’

‘That’s fine, you carry on, I’m not in a hurry,’ he murmured.

He wasn’t. He’d given little Jacob the full focus of his energy and concentration, and it was time to step back and centre himself again. The neuro had got the clot out, the GS had glued the liver and removed the spleen and he’d restored the circulation to his feet and stabilised his legs and pelvis with external fixators, and somehow Jacob had turned the corner and was now in the paediatric intensive care unit, heavily sedated and hopefully on the road to recovery.

He’d just checked on the little boy again, and he was improving slightly, and although it was far too soon to be overconfident, for now, at least, Andrew could relax.

Goodness knows, he needed to. He was exhausted, in sore need of a break, and there was nothing more he could do anyway, for now, except watch Libby, and that was fine. He was more than happy to lounge against the doorjamb and watch the pretty young ward sister finish her task while his mind free-wheeled.

Ideally he’d be at home in bed after a night like that, but life wasn’t ideal, and although it was only seven-thirty he’d already spent half an hour with Jacob’s parents this morning, to fill them in on his part in the proceedings—and in thirty-six hours, after another full day at work, he’d have to go home and face the weekend from hell—another excuse for his mother to trot out a whole load of single girls in the vain hope that he’d find one to settle down with and secure the future of the family line.

It didn’t make any difference that his brother’s wife was pregnant. If anything it made it worse, because it just made his single status all the more obvious—and his mother, ever the fixer, wanted him to be as happy as Will. So the girls would all be there, and he’d have to deal with them all, from his hopelessly infatuated cousin Charlotte to the predatory gold-diggers, via the perfectly nice girls that he just wasn’t interested in, and watching it all unfold would be his beloved mother with that hopeful look on her face.

Oh, hell. He was too tired for this, sick of warding them off, sick of making excuses to his mother, and the last thing—absolutely the *last* thing—he needed was this party. Correction—parties. Two of them.

With a muffled groan, he shifted his shoulders against the doorframe and watched Libby thoughtfully as she entered notes onto the computer at her desk. Nice girl, he thought. Really nice girl. If things were different, he might be tempted, but they weren’t. More’s the pity, because she really was lovely in every way.

Her lip was caught between even, perfect white teeth, her long lashes dark crescents against her creamy cheeks as she looked down at the keyboard. A lock of rich brown hair slid down out of her

ponytail and she tucked it absently behind her ear. It looked soft, glossy, as if she'd just washed it this morning—in which case it would smell of apples. It always smelled of apples when she'd washed it...

How had he registered that? Goodness knows. Not deliberately, any more than he'd deliberately noticed the freckles scattered over her nose, or the curve of her bottom as she bent over a child, or the fact that even the hideously unflattering tunic couldn't disguise her perfectly proportioned breasts.

He wondered what she was doing this weekend. Something normal, he'd bet. The washing, or going to the cinema with friends. Curling up with a good book on the sofa next to her boyfriend.

He frowned. Scrub that last image. Although he'd never heard her talk about a boyfriend, he thought, his mind ticking over. And if all she *was* going to be doing was pottering about at home—

'Doing anything exciting this weekend?' he found himself saying before he could stop himself, and then held his breath for her reply.

Libby looked up from the notes she was finishing off and leant back in her chair, finally allowing herself the luxury of looking at him again. He looked exhausted—exhausted and ruffled and sexy, even more so than usual, so she took her time, enjoying the view.

'Now, then, let me think,' she said with a teasing smile. 'Flying to Paris, dinner in a fabulous restaurant, then going to the top of the Eiffel Tower to see the lights, strolling along the Seine by moonlight—or then again, maybe I'll just stay at home and tackle my laundry basket before it suffers a fatal rupture, and then get the duster out of retirement.'

He chuckled and shrugged away from the doorframe, with a lazy, economical gesture that did odd things to her pulse rate, and sauntered over, propping his taut, firm buttocks on the edge of her desk, folding his arms and staring down at her thoughtfully, long legs crossed at the ankle.

He'd had a hellish night, but he still managed to look drop-dead gorgeous. He was wearing theatre scrubs, drab and sexless and unrevealing, but on him they just looked amazing. He was so close she could feel his warmth, smell the subtle, masculine fragrance of his skin. If she moved her hand just a fraction to the right—

'Just your own laundry?'

'Well, I don't take in washing to supplement my income, if that's what you're implying!' she joked, convinced that it couldn't possibly be a corny chat-up line. Not from Andrew.

He grinned wearily. 'God forbid! Actually, I was trying in my rather clumsy and unsubtle way to find out if you live alone.'

Good heavens. So it *was* a chat-up line? Surely not. She didn't get that lucky—did she? She felt her mouth go dry and her heart hitch in her chest before she talked herself out of believing it, and then she couldn't resist the urge to poke a little fun at herself. 'Actually, no,' she said, pausing, then went on, 'but the cat doesn't generate a lot of washing—and before you say it,' she added quickly as he started to chuckle, 'I know that makes me a sad old spinster, but I love my cat and she's good company—even if she does shed all over my clothes and wake me up in the night for food. And—no, there's nobody else if that's what you were asking, either live-in or otherwise.'

One side of his mouth kicked up a fraction more. 'In which case, if the cat doesn't mind, I don't suppose I can persuade you to put the laundry on hold and come away with me to the country for the weekend? I can't promise you the Eiffel Tower, but we can certainly stroll by a river and I can guarantee the food will be good.'

Her heart lurched again and she sucked in a quiet breath and saved the file on the computer, then swivelled the chair round and made herself look calmly up at him, convinced she'd misheard. Either that or gone mad. But he'd wanted to talk to her, so maybe—

'Run that by me again? Did I imagine it, or did I just hear what sounded like an invitation for a dirty weekend?'

He gave another soft chuckle, then pulled a face and rubbed his jaw with his hand. Goodness knows when he'd shaved. Not that morning, anyway, and she heard the tantalising rasp of stubble against his fingers and nearly whimpered.

‘Tempting thought,’ he said, ‘but no. I have—’ He broke off and let out his breath on a gusty laugh that was half-sigh. ‘It’s my mother’s sixtieth birthday party, and I can’t get out of it. She’s having a house party and a ball and the whole shebang, and I just know that all the single women she knows of childbearing age and the seventh cousin eight times removed will be dragged out of the woodwork and paraded in front of me—again. And there’s nothing wrong with any of them, but—you know, if I wanted to have a relationship with any of them, I would have done it by now, but I don’t, and I’m too tired for it, Libby,’ he said with a sigh, scrubbing his hand round the back of his neck. ‘I’ve been up all night, I’m going to have damn all time to take it easy before tomorrow night when it all kicks off and I really can’t be bothered with making endless small talk and then because I haven’t been downright rude, having to find excuses for not meeting up for coffee or going for drinks or having dinner or going to the races.’

‘So,’ she said slowly, torn between pity because he was so tired, wondering how big his ego really was, and trying not to drool too badly as he flexed his shoulders again, ‘you want me as—let me get this right—some kind of deflector to shield you from this rampant horde of women that most men would give their eye teeth for a crack at?’

He chuckled softly, the sound rippling through her and turning her to jelly. ‘Hardly a rampant horde, but, yes, if you like,’ he said with a grin. ‘But mostly I need someone to deflect my mother’s attention from my single status—which incidentally I have no intention of changing in a hurry, much to her great disappointment.’

He was single? Amazing. How? And more to the point, why? What a tragic waste!

He tipped his head on one side, rolling his shoulders again as if he was easing out the kinks. ‘So—will you?’

‘Will I—?’ she asked, distracted by those shoulders, her fingers itching to dig into the taut muscles and ease away the tension she knew she’d find there.

‘Be my deflector? Let me drag you away from the laundry basket and the duster and take you away with me to the country for a strictly no-strings weekend?’

Her heart hiccuped at the thought, and she sat back and looked up into his eyes. His piercing, ice-blue eyes with the navy rims round the irises and the fetching, sexy little crinkles in the outer corners. Eyes that even bloodshot with exhaustion could turn her legs to spaghetti and her brains to mush with a single glance.

‘So what’s in it for me?’ she asked bluntly, knowing in advance what her answer would be and how with the best will in the world she didn’t have it in her to turn down an invitation from the most gorgeous man she’d ever met in her life—even if she didn’t stand a chance, even if she was beating her head against a brick wall and getting that close to a work colleague ever again was top of her list of taboos.

He shrugged, wondering how he could sell it to her, suddenly desperate for her company, for her to say yes. ‘A fabulous dinner tomorrow night, a lazy weekend in the beautiful Suffolk countryside, peaceful walks by the river with the dogs, a glittering formal ball on Saturday night.’

‘Good food, you said?’

She was hooked. Andrew smiled and felt his heart thud with what had to be relief. ‘Good food, good wine—good company...’

‘Yours, I take it—not that you’re vain or anything,’ she said, her voice rich with mockery, and he chuckled and straightened up, refusing to be insulted. Actually he was refreshed by her blunt straightforwardness and teasing good-humour, and, oddly, incredibly fascinated by the tiny spangles of gold in the depths of her extraordinary sea-green eyes.

‘Absolutely not. But I have it on good authority that I can be a charming companion, I can dance without treading on your toes—and unlike your cat, I won’t moult on your clothes or demand food in the middle of the night. I’m even housetrained.’

She smiled, but her eyes were searching. ‘No strings, you said?’

He felt a tug of disappointment and dismissed it. 'With the great and the good of Suffolk chaperoning us? Not a chance. Just you, me, and every single woman in a hundred miles.'

'And good food.'

'And good food. Excellent food. Mum uses a brilliant caterer for these functions.'

She nodded thoughtfully. 'So—this weekend. How dressy is it?'

He thought of the women who'd inevitably be there in their designer originals, and pulled a face. Libby probably didn't have anything like that, not on a nurse's salary. 'Dressy. Black tie tomorrow for dinner, white tie on Saturday for the ball.'

Libby's eyes widened. 'Wow. That's pretty formal. Tailcoats and floor-length gowns, isn't it?'

He nodded, studying her thoughtfully, hoping she wouldn't use it as an excuse to turn him down—or that she'd come and be embarrassed by the other women. He'd hate that for her.

'Right,' she said, after a short, considering pause.

Right, what? Right, she'd come, or right, it sounded like a nightmare and she wouldn't be seen dead near the place? 'Is that a problem? Do you have anything suitable?'

'I'm sure I can dredge up the odd rag,' she said drily, and he felt some of the tension ease out of him as she went on, 'So where will we stay?'

'At the house,' he said without hesitation. 'I'll tell my mother I'm bringing you. She'll be delighted.' Ridiculously delighted.

'Does she even know who I am?'

He felt his mouth twitch. 'No. I've never mentioned you. Or anyone else, come to that, so you're safe. You can be as inventive as you like, so long as you let me in on it.'

Libby sighed and rolled her eyes. 'Don't you go spinning your mother porkies, now, Andrew, or I won't come. We work together, you've asked me up for the weekend. End of. No inventiveness. I don't want to spend the entire weekend like a moonstruck teenager pretending to be in love with you.'

He was tempted to ask if it would be such a hardship, but thought better of it at the last second and smiled reassuringly. 'Of course not. I'll just tell her I'm bringing a plus one. I'll let her make any further leaps herself. Don't worry, you won't have to pretend to smile while I grope you for effect.'

Pity, she thought, but managed what she hoped was a normal smile. 'So—what time does this extravaganza start?'

'Seven for seven-thirty. I'd like to leave at six, but Murphy's Law says it's unlikely. Is that OK?'

'Fine,' she said, not sure if she'd lost her marbles or won the lottery.

'Great. I'll see you later.'

Lottery, she decided, watching him walk away. Good food, good wine—and definitely good company. And it might answer some of her abundant questions about the most enigmatic and attractive man she'd met in her entire twenty-seven years...

'You're doing *what*?'

'Going home with him for the weekend. It's his mother's sixtieth birthday party and there's a ball.'

'Good God,' Amy said weakly, and stared at her open-mouthed.

'What?'

'What? *What*? You stun me. You must be the only single woman in Suffolk who wouldn't kill for an invitation like that.'

She shook her head quickly, resisting the urge to tell Amy that according to Andrew all the single women in Suffolk had already been invited. 'No. It's not an invitation *like that*. It's strictly no strings.'

Amy laughed till the tears ran down her face. 'Yeah, right! You're going home for the weekend with *that man* and you're saying it's no strings? Are you both dead, or what? And what on earth are you going to wear?'

She felt a flicker of unease. 'I don't know. Clothes?' she said helpfully, and the physio rolled her eyes.

'Dear heaven. You do realise who'll be there, don't you? I mean, this isn't your ordinary, everyday birthday party for a little old lady.'

'She's only sixty!'

'She's only *Lady Ashenden!*' Amy said, imitating her voice, and Libby felt her own jaw drop. She snatched it back up and tried not to hyperventilate.

'Lady Ashenden—as in, Ashenden Place? The one that's open to the public? No! No, his name's not Ashenden, don't be silly!'

'No, he's the Hon. Andrew Langham-Jones, first son of Lord and Lady Ashenden, heir to the Ashenden estate, which as you rightly say is open to the public and only one of the most beautiful country piles in Suffolk—not to mention the family coffers and the flipping title! He's one of the most eligible bachelors around—good grief, Libby, I can't believe you didn't know about him!'

'Maybe because I don't gossip?' she suggested mildly, wondering if she ought to take it up if she was going to accept random invitations from gorgeous men without realising what she was letting herself in for. And of course, if he was the future Lord Ashenden, no wonder all the dowagers were trotting their daughters out! He wasn't being vain or egotistical at all, he was just being realistic, and she couldn't believe she'd been so stupid—but Amy could. Oh, yes. And Amy said so. Bluntly.

'You don't need to gossip, you just need to be alive! You just—you live in a cocoon, do you know that? You go home every night to your little house and your little cat and you snuggle down in front of the television and *you have no idea what's going on right under your nose!* No wonder you're still single!'

'I'm happy being single,' she lied, trying not to think about the lonely nights and the long weekends and the ridiculous farce of speed dating and internet dating and blind dates that she'd given up on ages ago.

'Rubbish,' Amy said briskly, and eyed her up and down. 'So—what are you wearing for this event?'

'Two events,' she corrected, wincing inwardly when she thought about it. *Lady Ashenden?* Oh, rats. 'A black-tie dinner tomorrow night and a white-tie formal ball the following night.'

Amy's eyes widened, then narrowed critically as she studied her friend, making Libby feel like an insect skewered on a pin. 'It's a pity your boobs are so lush,' Amy said candidly. 'I've got a fabulous ballgown—that smoky bluey-green one. But you'll probably fall out of it. Still, you can try it. It's the only long one I've got that's suitable and it's cut on the cross so it'll drape nicely and it'll be brilliant with your eyes. And you've got your classic LBD for tomorrow, haven't you?'

'If it doesn't need cleaning. I expect the cat's been sleeping on it—joke!' she added hastily, as Amy opened her mouth to tell her off again. 'It'll be fine. I had it cleaned after Christmas. And I've got a fairly decent pair of heels that do nice things to my legs.'

'They don't need to. You've got fabulous legs—well, you did have, the last time you let them out into the fresh air, which was ages ago, but I don't suppose they've changed. What time does your shift finish?'

'Three, but I've got to go home and feed the cat and put the washing on or I won't have anything at all to wear for the weekend.'

'Right, I'm off at five, so that gives you two hours and then I want you round at mine and we'll go through my wardrobe and see what I've got, because I know you haven't got anything unless you've got a secret life I don't know about. I can't remember the last time you told me about a date, and apart from this dreadful uniform the only other thing I ever see you in is jeans. Never mind, we'll find something even if I have to send you out shopping tomorrow. Actually, on second thoughts *I'll* go shopping. I can't trust you to buy anything sensible.'

Sensible? Libby nearly laughed out loud. She couldn't imagine that what Amy had in mind for her was in any way *sensible*, but she didn't have many options and she had even less time. 'I'm sure the bluey-green one will be fine,' she said with more confidence than she felt. 'I'll wear a minimiser bra.'

Amy laughed again as if she'd said something hysterically funny. 'Yeah, right. Just try the dress first and then we'll worry about the underwear. OK, I'm done here on the ward, I'm going back down to the gym to do my outpatients' list, and in between I'll be thinking about your outfits for the weekend. I might have another dress that would do if that one doesn't fit. I'll see you later—and don't forget to come round. I'll feed you. Half-five—and not a minute later. And bring your shoes and the LBD. Oh, and your jewellery and some bras.'

'Yeah, yeah—you are the most atrocious nag.'

'You'll love me this weekend when you don't look silly.'

'I hope so,' she muttered under her breath, and tugging her quote, dreadful, unquote uniform straight, she went to find Lucas, a fourteen-year-old who'd nearly lost his foot a week ago after a stupid stunt on his bike had gone horribly wrong. Andrew had realigned all the bones using an external fixator, but the surgery had been complicated, his recovery was going to be slow and Lucas was impatient.

He'd just gone for a walk with his mother, using his crutches, and he'd been gone longer than she liked. It was his first excursion from the ward, the first time he'd been off without supervision from a member of staff; Amy had thought the exercise would do him good, but he'd missed his lunch now and Libby was getting concerned.

She found him in the corridor, propped up on a window sill and looking pale and shaky, and she smiled and perched next to him, wondering where his mother was. Poor woman. She was trying to juggle the family and be there for Lucas, but it wasn't easy for any of the mothers, and sometimes something had to give.

'Hi, Lucas. You've been gone a while—everything OK?'

The lanky teenager shrugged. 'S'pose. Mum had to take Kyle to the doctor. My nan rang—he's sick.'

'Oh, dear, that's a shame. Look, your lunch is waiting. Why don't I fetch a chair and you can ride back to the ward? You've probably done enough for the first time.'

'I can do it myself,' he insisted, shrugging up off the window sill and wobbling slightly on the crutches. Libby frowned. He had to learn how to use them, but the last thing he needed was to go over and damage the leg again, and he was strictly non-weight-bearing at the moment.

She fell into step beside him. 'OK, if you're sure. I'll walk back with you—it's a good excuse to have a break, and I could do with some time out. You guys are wearing me down!'

He grinned and took a few steps, but he had to pause again on the way, leaning over on the crutches and getting his breath, and Libby heard a quiet footfall behind her.

'How's it going, Lucas?'

She didn't need to turn to know who it was, and her pulse picked up as she turned to him with a smile. 'He's doing really well.'

Andrew grinned at him. 'Good man.'

Lucas straightened up again, Andrew's praise having a visible effect on his mood. He was tall—a good head taller than Libby, but for all his youth he could look Andrew in the eye already, and he had a way to go before he finished growing.

'I think this is the first time I've seen you standing up—you're going to be seriously tall, aren't you?' Andrew said, eyeing him thoughtfully, and Lucas shrugged.

'Always was. I'm going to be a basketball player.' His words tailed off, his face crumpling, but Andrew wouldn't let it go.

'Give it time,' he said softly. 'You can still do that. Your leg will heal.'

‘Are you sure?’ Cos it doesn’t feel any better yet. It’s gonna take for *ever* and I feel like about a hundred.’

‘Lucas, it’s only been just over a week,’ he said gently. ‘It’ll take a while, but I’ve fixed all the bones together, and once they’ve all knitted back into place and we can get the hardware off your ankle, you’ll soon be up and running. Just be patient. You’ll get there and you’ll soon get your fitness back.’ He looked around. ‘So where’s Mum today?’

‘At the doctor’s with my brother. He’s got tonsillitis. He gets it all the time.’

‘Poor kid. I used to get tonsillitis. It’s nasty.’

‘Better than smashing your leg up.’

Andrew grinned wryly. ‘Yeah, it probably is.’ His eyes flicked to Libby’s. ‘I’m on my way down to A and E—lad with a classic fib fracture, apparently. I’m probably going to have to take him to Theatre, so you’ll need to find room for him, but I’ll be back up after I’ve seen him to check last night’s admissions. And maybe we can find time for a coffee—I was hoping to get one earlier while we went through the notes together, but we got a little sidetracked,’ he added softly, and she felt colour brush her cheeks.

So that was what he’d wanted. Not to ask her to go away for the weekend at all, but to talk through the notes. So why had he? ‘I’ll make you one when you get back,’ she suggested, but he shook his head.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll get them and grab some sandwiches and we can eat while we talk—unless you have plans for lunch?’

She shook her head, a wry smile tugging at her mouth. ‘No. I hardly ever have time to eat, never mind plan it!’

He tutted. ‘I’ll get some for you, too, then, and I’ll see you in a bit. It looks like you’ve got your hands pretty full with this young man for a minute.’ He turned back to him and gave the boy’s shoulder an encouraging squeeze. ‘Chin up, Lucas. You’ll get there.’

And with a smile at him and a slow, lazy wink at Libby, he strode off down the corridor, leaving her wondering how she was going to get through the weekend without melting into a puddle of mush.

‘Right—let’s get you back on the ward,’ she said to Lucas, dragging her thoughts back in line, ‘and you can start planning your return to basketball.’

He set off again, but by the time they got back to the ward he was exhausted, and once back at his bed she brought him his lunch and settled the rest of the boys in his bay down for a rest until the visitors arrived at three.

It took bribery and a little coercion, but finally by onethirty they were all quiet and she headed back to the office where the endless paperwork was still waiting for her.

The paperwork, and Andrew, with sandwiches and coffee. ‘I was about to start without you. Egg and cress or chicken salad?’

‘Either,’ she said, wondering why her office suddenly seemed so small and airless. Andrew was ripping open the packets, handing her one of each with a raised eyebrow, and she took them with a smile and tried to remember how to breathe. ‘Thanks. So how’s the kid with the fib fracture?’

‘Sore and feeling a bit silly. Apparently the idea was to jump off his trampoline onto his skateboard, only he fell off the edge of the board when he landed.’

‘Idiot! Of course he did! What *is* it with boys?’

Andrew winced. ‘Don’t. I can’t tell you how many close shaves I had as a child. The kid’s father was funny, though—reminded me of mine. He described it as an ill-conceived idea, poorly executed,’ he said with a chuckle.

‘Oh, dear. So no sympathy from that quarter, then,’ she said, joining in his laughter while she studied the smudges under his eyes and wondered how he kept going.

‘Not much. He’s managed to snap the fibula but it’s a nice clean break and it’ll screw back easily—better than a ligament injury long term anyway. He’ll be up on the ward in a minute, but he’d just

had something to eat so I can't take him to Theatre till later. His name's Michael Warner,' he added, sinking his teeth into his sandwich and nearly making her whimper again.

Good grief, he was so physical! If watching him eat was going to do this to her, how on earth was she going to get through two formal dinners without disgracing herself? She dragged her eyes away and tried to be practical. 'Right. Where do you want him? On the ward with the other boys?'

'Oh, yes, put him with the lads. He's twelve, he'll fit right in—and a bit more company might stop Lucas feeling sorry for himself.'

He attacked the sandwich again, and she gave a slightly strained laugh. 'I doubt it. He's sore and cross with himself and until he's running around again like before, he'll be wallowing in self-pity and grumpy as a grumpy thing.'

They shared a smile, and her lungs stopped working for a moment, a warm, fuzzy feeling spreading through her and leaving her weak. He'd shaved at some point, and changed into trousers with a cut to die for and a shirt so soft she just ached to touch it. Or was it the man inside?

'Damn—may I?' he asked, glancing at his squalling pager, and she nodded. He spoke briefly, then sighed and put the phone down.

'Right, I have to get on. Jacob needs a look,' he said, draining his coffee and putting the paper cup in the bin. 'I've checked my patients, they all seem fine unless you know different?' She shook her head and he nodded briskly. 'OK. I'll see you later. Tell young Michael I'll come. I'll stick him on the end of my afternoon list, but I'll be round before then to have a chat with him.'

'OK. Thanks for the lunch. What do I owe you?'

He gave her a lazy smile. 'Nothing. You can get them next time.'

Next time?

He headed off to PICU, and she followed him out of the office, pulling herself together and trying not to think about next time. She was having enough trouble dealing with this time!

She went into the boys' bay to sort the bed out, and stood there for a moment considering the situation. There were six of them—Lucas, and Rajesh, another boy of the same age who'd had an open fracture of his right forearm which had been fixed and plated that morning. He wouldn't be there long. Then there was Joel, a boy of fifteen who'd fallen through the roof of the conservatory climbing out of the window above when he'd been grounded; he'd suffered multiple fractures and so was now well and truly grounded until the casts on both arms and the halo frame stabilising his neck could be removed.

Then there were Christopher and Jonathan, twin brothers who'd fallen out of a tree when a branch had snapped, and broken three legs and one arm between them. She'd like to keep them together for company. And Nico, with repaired ligaments in his ankle. He'd been cleared for discharge and was waiting to go, so she moved him into a chair to wait for his parents, and as she and the health care assistant finished remaking the bed, Michael arrived in a wheelchair with his long-suffering and patient father.

'Hi, there,' she said, going out and introducing herself with a smile. 'I'm Libby Tate, the ward sister, and you must be Michael. We're expecting you. Come on through, I'll show you to your bed.'

She'd put him between Lucas and Joel, the boy who'd fallen through the conservatory roof, and by the time he was settled against the pillows the banter had started. Good. He'd be fine, and a welcome distraction for Lucas and Joel.

She put the clipboard with his charts on the end of the bed and smiled at the boy and his father. 'Right, I'm off duty now, Michael, but the anaesthetist will be round to see you soon and Mr Langham-Jones is taking you down to Theatre in a while—he'll be up to see you afterwards to tell you how it went, and I'll be on in the morning so I'll catch up with you then. The others will look after you, won't you, boys?' she said to them all with a smile, and as soon as she'd handed over, she grabbed her coat and went out to her car, wondering if it was her imagination or if there was a spring in her step that hadn't been there earlier.

Yup. Definite spring, and she felt ridiculously lighthearted. Silly. It was a no-strings, pretend date. Not really a date at all. Her heart really shouldn't be getting excited.  
But it was...

## CHAPTER TWO

THE dress was gorgeous, shot with navy and olive green so it looked like the sea on a stormy day, the colours changing as the light caught it, and by the time Amy had poured her into the dress, hitched up the front a little for decency and scooped her hair into a knot and put a necklace round her throat, no amount of reasoning with her pulse was going to make a blind bit of difference.

Amy stood back and stared at her, and shook her head slowly. 'Wow.'

'D'you think?' Libby hitched the front up again and had her hand slapped for her pains.

'Leave it. You've got gorgeous boobs, be proud of them. Stick them out and hold your head up—that's better. Fabulous. You'll knock them all dead.'

'Knock them out, more like,' she said, shuffling her bra—clearly no room for a minimiser in there with that neckline!—and biting her lip. 'Are you sure it's all right?'

But Amy just rolled her eyes and draped an exquisite oyster-pink silk and cashmere pashmina around her shoulders. 'There. You can always cover your cleavage with this if it worries you. Don't lose it, it cost a fortune and it's my only real extravagance. And you can wear it tomorrow with the black. Let me see you in it?'

So Libby changed into her dearly loved and classic little black dress, the high scoop neck and on-the-knee hemline much more demure and discreet. The back dipped to a V just above her bra strap, and there was a tiny kick-pleat at the back to allow for movement, and she loved it. It was elegant, sophisticated and timeless—which was just as well because she'd had it for three years now and by her reckoning it still owed her a substantial amount of money. It was, however, a little more snug than it had been before Christmas, and she sucked in her stomach and sighed.

'You've given me too much to eat,' she said. 'Or I have, for weeks and weeks. It's too tight.'

'It's lovely,' Amy said, standing back and eyeing her critically. 'Very demure. Very sexy.'

'It's not meant to be sexy,' she said, her eyes widening. 'It's meant to be respectable!'

'It's perfectly respectable.'

She gave up, not entirely reassured, but her time and her options were dwindling by the minute. 'Good. Can I go now? I've got to get my jeans dry somehow so I can pack them in the morning. Apparently we're leaving at six and I don't finish work till five tomorrow, so I've got to wash my hair and pack tonight—all except for the things still in the washing machine. Oh, why aren't I better organised? I really wanted my nice cream jumper but it won't be dry, it takes ages.'

'I've got a jumper you can borrow,' Amy said, rummaging in her chest of drawers and pulling out a couple of clingy little scraps.

'It's only just April! I meant a *jumper*, Amy, not a second skin!'

'You'll be fine. Here. Take them anyway, they'll suit you. You can always wear your coat if you're cold.'

'In the house?'

'They're bound to have heating, you'll be fine. Go on, scoot. You've got things to do and you need a good night's sleep or you'll have bags under your eyes.'

Not a chance, she thought. There was no way she'd sleep. She was getting ridiculously excited, and when she walked onto the ward the next morning Andrew was there, lounging against the nursing station and chatting to Lucas's parents. He looked up and met her eyes and smiled, and her heart turned over in her chest.

*Ridiculously* excited, she told herself, trying not to grin like an idiot, and she went to find the staff nurse to do handover and made a futile attempt to ignore his presence.

Andrew watched her turn away and busy herself, and resisted the temptation to cut the conversation short. Despite their encouragement and constant support of Lucas, his parents were

naturally worried about their son, and he took the time to reassure them yet again before he gave in to the need to speak to Libby.

She was at the nurses' station in the middle, talking to the staff nurse who'd been on since seven, and as he excused himself and crossed over to her she looked up, her smile lighting up her face and warming him like sunshine. He propped his arms on the counter and smiled back at her, glad it was between them because he was having trouble resisting the unexpected urge to drag her into his arms and kiss her.

Not a good move. He cleared his throat slightly.

'Hi, there.'

'Hi. How's things?' she asked, her voice music to his ears. 'I hear Jacob's improving. How did you get on with Michael?'

'OK. It was absolutely straightforward. He can go home today once the physio's got him up on crutches. I'll see him in the fracture clinic next week for follow-up, but he should be fine. He was lucky.'

'He was an idiot,' she reminded him drily, and he chuckled.

'True. And Jacob's looking good, considering, so I should be able to get away reasonably promptly tonight. Are you all set?' he added softly as the staff nurse turned away to answer the phone.

'I am. All packed and ready. I washed my hair last night so I should be OK for six. Well, except that I haven't got your mother a birthday present yet.'

'You don't have to do that! Just give her a card. She'll be overwhelmed with presents and it's the last thing she'd expect.'

'Sure?'

'I'm sure. Anyway, we need to head off as soon as we can. Will you have time to get ready?'

'I should. Do you want me to change before we go, then, or are we changing there?'

'Change before we go,' he advised, trying not to sniff for the scent of apples in her hair. 'The place'll be in chaos and it'll be easier. Tell me your address and I'll pick you up as soon after six as I can get to you.'

'Fourteen Elm Grove,' she said. 'It's off Wood Farm Drive, but it's sort of buried. I can give you directions.'

'No, I'll find it. Postcode?' he asked, keying the information into his BlackBerry, and she gave him the code. 'OK. The sat-nav should do it, but you'd better give me your phone number in case it fails. It has been known.'

'Surely not,' she said with a teasing smile, and he felt a kick in his gut.

No strings? Who was he kidding?

It was going to be an interesting weekend...

The day was chaos.

After she'd seen Michael and his parents to discuss his discharge, there were several other post-op patients who needed her attention, and of course there was Lucas. He was desperate to show off his new-found skills with the crutches, and as Amy had been up to the ward to equip Michael with his own set and show him how to use them, they were busy competing, the accident clearly not having slowed Michael down at all.

She stopped them before there was another accident, threatened to confiscate the crutches from Lucas, saw Michael off with his paperwork, then had to deal with an IV crisis in a tearful, wriggling three-year-old, and by the time she'd handed over and got away, it was nearly five-thirty. So much for her plans to slip off early!

She raced home, ripped off her uniform and had the quickest shower on record, skimmed the lightest of make-up onto her face, brushed her hair and pulled on her dress as the doorbell rang just after six. She wriggled the zip up and then, grabbing her shoes and evening bag, she ran downstairs

and threw open the door, hardly pausing to greet him as she ran back into the living room, hopping on one foot as she put her shoes on on the move.

'Sorry, I'm on the drag, I couldn't get away,' she said breathlessly over her shoulder, then turned and stopped talking, because he was standing there behind her, looking utterly, devastatingly gorgeous in his DJ, the dress shirt with its immaculate black bow-tie blinding white against his skin, his jaw freshly shaved, his hair—damp?

'Either you have far too much gel in your hair or it's still wet,' she pointed out unnecessarily, and he gave a soft grunt of laughter.

'I showered and changed at the hospital or I wouldn't be here now,' he said wryly. 'I was hoping to get away early, but you know what it's like. Are you all packed and ready?'

She laughed with him. 'Sort of. Hang on.' She rummaged in her case, came up with the perfume and spritzed herself lightly, then threw it back into the case and zipped the lid. 'Now I'm ready,' she said with a slightly nervous grin. 'Will I do, or will I disgrace you?'

She gave a self-conscious twirl, and he ran his eyes over her. 'No, you won't disgrace me,' he said softly with an odd note in his voice. 'Turn around, your zip's not quite up.' And she felt his fingers cool against her heated skin as he pulled the zip up the last half-inch and fastened the hook, then smoothed it with his hand and stepped back.

'All done,' he said, and she tugged it straight and turned to pick up her coat.

'Oh, Kitty!' she wailed. 'You rascal—you can see why I wear black,' she added drily to Andrew, and he chuckled, eased the black cat off her coat, gave it a shake to remove the hair and held it out for her, settling it solicitously on her shoulders, and she wondered if she'd imagined his hands lingering for the tiniest moment.

Her shoulders tingling, she reached for her case, but he was there first, leaving her to scoop up her handbag and keys, then she followed him out of the door.

'So who feeds the cat while you're away?' he asked, opening the car door for her and tucking her coat in.

'Oh, I've got an automatic thingie. I've set it.'

'In which minute?' he asked with a chuckle, then slid behind the wheel and threw her a smile. 'You look lovely, by the way,' he added softly, making her heart hiccup and her insides tighten with anticipation. 'Much better than the uniform.'

'Well, that wouldn't be hard. It's a bit tight, though. I haven't worn it since before Christmas—I must have been staving off the cold a bit too enthusiastically,' she said with a rueful smile, but he shook his head.

'It's perfect. You look very convincing.'

Convincing. Of course. That was what this was all about, and she'd better not forget it. He'd only invited her as an afterthought, and she needed to keep that in mind. This was not, repeat not, a date. She was there to be convincing, and so convincing she'd be. End of. She flashed him a bright smile. 'Well, that's a relief! I won't be pitched out on my ear as a fraud, at least.'

They shared the smile as he started the engine and headed out into the countryside. She had no idea where they were going. Somewhere near Southwold? She'd meant to look it up on the internet to see if she could find the address of the Ashenden pile, as Amy called it, but she simply hadn't had time. She hadn't had time to draw breath, really, since yesterday morning, and as she sank back into the soft but supportive leather seat, she realised just how tired she was.

'All right?'

'Yes—it's just been a busy day. Well, busy week, really. I'm glad it's a sit-down formal dinner, because I don't think my feet would cope with standing up all evening in these ridiculous heels after a day like today.'

He peered across at the footwell in the dark. 'Are they ridiculous? I thought they looked rather good.'

He did? ‘Thank you—but looking good and feeling good aren’t the same thing,’ she explained ruefully, and his lips twitched.

‘No, I can imagine. I’ve only worn high heels once, and it was excruciating.’

She shifted in the seat, turning to face him, struggling to hold down her incredulous laughter. ‘You’ve worn high heels?’

He grinned. ‘And a dress. It’s amazing what my brother can persuade me to do for charity,’ he said drily.

That piqued her interest—that and the thought of Andrew in a dress and heels. ‘Any particular one?’

‘Meningococcal disease. He had it as a teenager and could have lost his limbs, but he was lucky and he’s very aware of that, so now he fundraises for research—well, the whole family do, he makes sure of it. The house and gardens are open to the public alternate weekends during the summer and they hold events in the park and split the proceeds between the charities and the estate.’

‘Gosh, that sounds like a lot of hard work.’

‘It is. Will’s the estate manager, so he just incorporates it into his workload, and Mum oversees the garden and the house, but it’s pretty much a full-time job for them keeping the place ticking over. And one day it’ll be my job.’

She detected a note of resignation in his voice and tipped her head on one side enquiringly. ‘You don’t sound thrilled.’

He laughed. ‘I’m not. I have a job, in case you haven’t noticed, but I’m the oldest, so I get the short straw. Not for a while, though. Dad’s only sixty-three and he’s as fit as a flea, so between them hopefully they’ll struggle on for a good few years yet.’

‘I take it your brother will be there this weekend?’

‘Will? Oh, yes. And his wife Sally. She’s their events manager at the moment, but she’ll be off for the summer on maternity leave, which should make life interesting.’

‘I’m sure. Will they cope without her?’

He chuckled. ‘I have no idea, but I’m not volunteering, I can assure you. I have quite enough to do.’

‘I imagine you do. Does your brother know you’re bringing me, by the way?’

He turned towards her, and in the dim light she could see his eyebrow twitch. ‘As in, did I tell him I’m bringing a girl? Yes. Did I mention why? No.’

She smiled at that. ‘Won’t he think it’s odd?’

‘That I have a social life? No. Should he?’

‘No, of course not, but I didn’t mean that.’ She shrugged. ‘I meant—I don’t know—that none of them have ever heard of me. Won’t there be a lot of speculation? Most people wouldn’t turn up for their mother’s sixtieth birthday with a total stranger in tow.’

‘They would if they had my mother,’ he said drily, making her laugh. ‘And anyway, speculation is the general idea, isn’t it?’

‘Probably.’ She rested her head back and looked across at him. ‘Tell me about your mother, I’m sure she can’t be that bad,’ she said, and listened to him talking about his parents and his childhood with great affection. They were obviously a close-knit and loving family, and she envied them that. Her father was dead, her mother was remarried and lived in blissful penury in Ireland with her artist husband, and she and her married elder sister hardly ever spoke. It wasn’t that they didn’t like each other, but with seven years and several hundred miles between them, they had little in common, and the last time she’d seen her had been at a great-aunt’s funeral a few months ago—a gathering that had opened a potentially devastating can of worms.

‘So that’s us. My father, my mother, me, my brother and his wife and a whole horde of cats and dogs and horses and cattle and deer—I take it you’re all right with dogs, by the way? We have quite a few.’

She pulled herself back to the present and put the troubling thoughts aside. 'I'm fine with dogs. I'd have one if I wasn't at work all day.'

'Ditto. Not to mention half the night.'

'Mmm. So tell me about Jacob. I know you're happier with him now but did you get last night off?'

He laughed and scrubbed his hand around the back of his neck. 'Sort of. His left leg was swelling a bit yesterday—that was why they paged me. They thought he might be getting compartment syndrome, but nothing came of it, and I popped in before I went home last night and I went in again early this morning and it seems to have settled. He's OK—well, orthopaedic-wise, anyway, for the moment. The head injury's still a bit of a worry and he might need further surgery later on his legs and pelvis if he makes it, but at least that's looking increasingly likely, thank goodness.'

'So will you have to go back over the weekend?' she asked, wondering whether he would abandon her to the mercy of his mother and the dowagers, or take her back to Audley with him, but he was shaking his head.

'No, I hope not. This leg is the only critical issue I can see that might involve me, so I might take a quick run back tomorrow to check him, but the team are pretty good and he was looking stable when I left.'

He turned his head and she caught the flash of teeth as he smiled. 'Don't worry, I won't abandon you. I'll leave you with Will, if I have to dash off. He'll look after you.'

'I'll look forward to meeting him. He sounds interesting.'

'He is, but I hope you're tough. He's got a wicked sense of humour and he's a bit of a tease, and I don't suppose for a moment he'll be subtle. Stand by to be quizzed.'

'I'm sure I'll cope,' she said drily. 'I manage the boys on the ward.'

That made him laugh, and as they turned off the road and rattled over a cattle grid, he threw her a grin. 'Ready for this?'

'As I'll ever be,' she said, although she wasn't really sure. Not now she knew a little more about them and the scale of the estate. It was sounding grander by the minute. 'What do I call your mother?' she asked as an afterthought.

'Jane—and my father's Tony.'

Or Lord Ashenden. Or should it be Sir Tony? Sir Anthony? She had no idea. Was he a lord? An earl? A baron? A marquis?

The titles were confusing, the whole aristocratic hierarchy a mystery to her, and she resolved to find out more about it. Not that it would be necessary to know, after this weekend, of course, because it would never affect her again. She reminded herself of that as they pulled up in what looked like the courtyard of an old stable block and he cut the engine. So far, so good, she thought, looking around in the gloom. It didn't look too outrageously grand—except of course this was the back. The front was probably altogether different.

By the time she'd fumbled with the catch on her seat belt, the door was open and he was helping her out. 'Watch where you walk, it can be a bit uneven on the cobbles and you don't want to fall off your stilts and wring your ankle.'

'What about our cases?'

'I'll get them later, unless you want anything from yours now?' he said, and when she shook her head, he ushered her towards a well-lit doorway with a firm, steady hand on her back.

'We'll see if Will and Sally are still here—they've got the east wing,' he said, and she just about stopped her jaw dropping. The east wing? Good grief! Well, she'd known it was big, but for some reason it was only just starting to sink in *how* big, and she realised her whole house would probably fit into one of the stables!

'Shop!' he yelled, banging on the door, and it swung in to reveal a younger version of him, slightly taller, identical ice-blue eyes mocking as he scanned his brother's face.

'You're cutting it a bit fine, aren't you?'

'Yeah, well, some of us have to go to work. And it's not as if you're in there already.'

'I have been. I came back to check the dog and ring you. Ma was starting to panic. Hi, you must be Libby,' he said, turning the full force of his charm on her. 'Come on in. I'm Will,' he said, and shook her hand firmly. He was looking intrigued and curious and welcoming all at once, and she smiled back, relishing the strength of his grip and utterly charmed by his smile and frank, assessing eyes—eyes just like his brother's.

'Hello, Will. It's good to meet you. Andrew's just been telling me a bit about you.'

'It'll all be lies,' he said with a grin. 'So—how come my brother's failed to mention you? Is he keeping you a deep, dark secret from Ma?'

She chuckled. 'I couldn't possibly comment,' she said lightly, and he laughed.

'You don't need to. Discreet isn't the word—getting information out of him is like getting blood out of a stone,' he said with a grin, and then stepped aside to let a great, shaggy grey dog through. 'This is Lara. Are you all right with dogs?'

'I'm fine with dogs. Hello, Lara. Aren't you gorgeous?'

'No, she's a pain,' Will said affectionately as the lurcher thrashed her long, skinny tail against his leg and slurped Libby's hand. 'She's a terrible thief, so I've cleverly trained her to steal my father's newspapers every morning, but the downside is if we leave anything on the worktop, she eats it.'

Libby laughed and rubbed the dog's head. 'Oh, darling, are you a naughty girl?' she murmured, and Lara slurped her again with her tongue.

'You'd better believe it,' Andrew said drily, then sighed. 'Come on, then, I suppose we ought to go and get this over with. Where's Sally?'

'In the kitchen trying to stop Ma interfering with the caterers. Come on, let's go and find them and then the birthday girl can make her grand entrance.'

Leaving the mournful Lara on the other side of a door, Will ushered them down a corridor into what was obviously the main part of the house, and then Andrew took her coat, putting it on a hook beside his as they went through into a huge and beautifully equipped kitchen and a scene of organised pandemonium.

'Andrew, darling! At last—I thought you were going to make some weak excuse about work like you usually do!'

'I don't know what you mean,' he teased. He bent his head and kissed his mother's cheek, hugging her gently, and then turned and drew Libby forward.

'Mum, this is Libby Tate. Libby, my mother, Jane.'

Lady Ashenden was elegant, beautifully groomed and she looked a little flustered. Her dark hair was threaded with silver, swept up into a smooth pleat—unlike Libby's own which was twisted up and skewered more or less in place with faux-ivory pins—and she realised that Andrew and Will both had her eyes.

Piercing eyes, searching, which turned on her and seemed, to Libby's relief, to like what they saw, because she embraced her warmly and kissed her cheeks. 'Libby, welcome to Ashenden. This is Sally, my daughter-in-law.'

Sally was small, obviously pregnant and had the same friendly openness as Will. She buzzed Libby's cheek and grinned. 'Hi, there. Welcome to the madhouse. I'll look forward to catching up with you later, but in the meantime, Jane, isn't it time we went up?'

'I'm sure it is. They don't need us in here fussing and you've done enough, darling. Let's leave them to it, I'm sure they can cope without us.'

And Jane turned away from her, missing the eyerolling and laughter that passed between her and Will, and the intimate smile which followed as Will drew the pregnant woman up against his side and hugged her tenderly. They were obviously very much in love, Libby thought, and felt a wash of

restless longing. If only there was someone in her life who felt like that about her, but even if there was, there would be no guarantee they'd have Will and Sally's happy ending.

The question-mark hanging over her future loomed again, but there wasn't time to dwell on it, and as they left the kitchen and walked along a magnificent curved hallway with tall, elegant windows overlooking the floodlit front of the house, she was brought firmly back to the here and now as the scale of the house began to register.

Amy hadn't been exaggerating, Libby thought. It really was a stately home—a vast, magnificent, Palladian country house, the centre part built in a crescent around a carriage-sweep at the front of the house, and as they reached the entrance hall, bracketed by broad, sweeping stairs that led up towards an ornate domed ceiling soaring far above them, Jane led them across a rug that would no doubt have been priceless if it hadn't been worn thin by the passage of generations, and through an open doorway.

As soon as they entered the drawing room—jaw-dropping in its proportions and dripping with antiques and old masters—they were swept into a round of introductions and fleeting, meaningless conversations. They lost Sally and Will somewhere along the way, and then Andrew grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, steered her into a quiet corner and gave her a rueful smile.

'Sorry, it's a bit full on if you're not used to it.'

Full on? She was utterly out of her depth! 'I thought it was just dinner?' she murmured, and he laughed.

'It is dinner, but there's nothing just about it. Dinner will be about forty people, and tomorrow will be a couple of hundred, I expect. Possibly more. And she'll know every last one of them and the names of all their children and dogs and horses—she's a legend.'

'And she wants to see you married.'

'Mmm. All ready to take over this crumbling old heap of dry rot.'

'Are you whingeing about the ancestral home again, bro?'' Will murmured from behind them, and he gave a soft snort and turned to him.

'Would I? Thankfully they're both looking well, so I don't have to worry about it for donkey's years. Have you got a drink?'

'No, but I'll have champagne, if you're offering, and I expect Sally'll have some elderflower cordial. Don't worry about Libby, I'll entertain her while you're gone.'

Libby met Will's twinkling eyes as Andrew walked away to get the drinks. 'So, tell me about this crumbling old heap of dry rot. Does he really hate it?' she said to him, and he chuckled.

'Oh, he loves it to bits, really, but he thinks it should be mine, since I run it. The law of primogeniture offends his sense of right and wrong.'

'And yours?'

He shrugged casually. 'It's just one of those things, isn't it? If you split the estate with every generation, you end up with nothing left—and if you ask him about it, he'll tell you we're just caretakers, which is right. Glorified janitors. But he's welcome to the title—and frankly he's welcome to the house. The east wing is much nicer—I still get to enjoy the grounds, but it's cosier than the house, and the heating bills aren't quite as stratospheric, and I can walk to work. And whatever he's told you, I only run the estate because I'm too lazy to do anything else!'

They were laughing as Andrew returned, a ripple of interest following him as the single girls monitored his progress. Or was it Will they were interested in? She couldn't blame them. Both men were strikingly good-looking and she felt completely overshadowed in the glittering crowd of slender, elegant women with their bright, witty banter and designer dresses.

Until Sally came over a moment later, short and round and utterly charming, and smiled at her and gave her a hug.

'Finally I get to meet you properly! This is such fun, I didn't know my brother-in-law had a deep, dark secret.'

Andrew rolled his eyes. 'Just because I don't gossip.'

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Sally said, and took her by the arm mischievously. ‘So—tell all. I gather you’re colleagues. That must be tricky. What’s he like to work with, because his brother’s a nightmare—’

‘I am not!’

‘You are. You’re hopelessly disorganised.’

Will grinned. ‘That’s why I employed you.’

‘No, it’s why you married me. You were terrified I’d leg it and you wouldn’t find anyone else who could cope with your filing system.’

‘It’s a good system!’

‘It’s a collection of piles on the floor, William!’ she corrected with a grin, and Libby laughed.

‘Sounds rather like my desk,’ she said with a smile at Will, then turned back to Sally. ‘So what do you actually do? Andrew said something about being events manager.’

‘Oh, that’s just a fancy title for doing anything and everything. I’m just a dogsbody,’ she grumbled cheerfully, but Will shook his head.

‘She’s actually my PA as well, and she helps me run the charity side of things, too,’ Will said. ‘We’d be lost without her—will be lost when she has the baby, but it’s not why I married her. I married her because I struggle to boil water and she’s a darned good cook.’

And rather more than that, Libby wouldn’t mind guessing, hearing the pride in his voice and seeing the warmth in his eyes as he smiled at Sally, and yet again, she felt a twinge of envy.

If only Andrew would look at her like that—would ever, in the future, look at her like that—but he wouldn’t. Why would he? Their worlds were light-years apart. He’d only invited her here this weekend as an afterthought. He’d never noticed her before, never singled her out, never been anything but the perfect colleague. She was only here because he needed a shield, and he’d made that perfectly clear.

Not that she needed to worry. She wasn’t in the market for a relationship either at the moment, with him or with anybody else, and she’d do well to remember that fact.

## CHAPTER THREE

HER thoughts were interrupted as they all filed through to the dining room, and she found herself seated at a long table between a jovial, middle-aged man who looked like a farmer, and Will.

Andrew was opposite her, and as she looked up and caught his eye he sent her a slow wink and she felt his foot slide against hers.

Playing footsie? Playing 'let's pretend'? Or giving her moral support?

The latter, she realised as he withdrew his foot and started talking to Sally, and she suppressed a little pang of disappointment as she turned to the man on her right with a smile. 'Hello, I'm Libby Tate,' she said.

'Ah, yes, Andrew's girl. You're breaking hearts all round this table, I hope you realise?' he said softly, and held out his hand. 'Chris Turner. We're neighbours and old friends of the family. It's nice to meet you, Libby—very nice. I always knew he'd settle down in his own time, and it's good to see him looking happy.'

Oh, good grief. What on earth was she supposed to say to that? Nothing, apparently. Chris just winked and sat back with a kindly smile. 'So, tell me, what do you do?'

'I'm a ward sister on Paediatrics. I work alongside Andrew at the Audley Memorial Hospital.'

'Ah. A *real* person. That explains it all.'

She frowned in confusion, and Chris chuckled.

'My wife Louise and I have watched the boys grow up, and we always knew they'd go their own way. Why Andrew's taken so long I can't imagine, but I expect he was just waiting for the right woman.'

'Are you stirring, Turner?' Andrew said from across the table where he'd clearly been watching and lipreading, and Chris chuckled again.

'Of course not. Would I?'

'Probably. It's all lies, Libby. You don't want to listen to anything he says.'

She did, though, because he was telling her all sorts of fascinating things about Andrew, and she was hanging on his every word. It emerged that far from being a farmer, Chris was a GP, the Ashendens' family doctor, his wife the local vicar, and he told her hilarious stories of Andrew's childhood, the humour fading at one point as he talked about Will's illness, and how much it had affected Andrew, who'd been at medical school at the time.

'He changed then. He used to be a bit of a wild child, but then suddenly, it was as if the joy went out of him.'

'Because of Will?' she asked, her voice hushed.

Chris shrugged. 'Who knows? But he's a good man,' he said softly. 'If Will hadn't recovered so well I'm sure he would have chucked in his career to come home and help care for him if it had been necessary. It's the sort of thing he'd do without a second thought, but he never talks about it. He just gets on with it, no matter what it costs him in terms of time and effort, and when Will recovered so well, he threw himself back into medicine and he's been focussed on it ever since, to the exclusion of everything else. He's a fantastically dedicated doctor—but you already know that. I'm preaching to the converted.'

'Oh, you are. He's amazing,' she agreed thoughtfully. She'd seen him at work, seen how dedicated he was, and it made sense now—the close way he followed up his young patients, the passionate zeal with which he directed their treatment, the dedicated focus on his career. No wonder he didn't have a wife and family. He simply didn't have time.

But Chris was right, she'd seen him smile more in the last day or two than she had in all the previous months she'd known him. Was that down to her? No, surely not. He was just showing her another side of himself, a side that Chris had maybe not seen recently.

She glanced up at Andrew and caught his eye, and he winked at her, then turned back to Will. That he had a very close bond with his younger brother was blindingly obvious from the banter that was taking place between them now across the table. The teasing affection between them brought a lump to her throat and she wanted to talk to Will, to hear more from him about Andrew, and when Chris's attention was taken by the lady on his other side, Will turned towards her and gave her a rueful grin.

'Sorry, I've been neglecting you,' he said.

'Don't worry,' she said, smiling back. 'Chris has been looking after me. You can pay me back in a minute, though, I'm struggling to work out which knife and fork I need next,' she added in an undertone, and he laughed out loud, making Andrew frown curiously at them.

'Frightful, isn't it?' he said with a playful wince. 'Starting at the outside and working inwards is usually a good plan, but if you want to be sure, watch Andrew, not me. He's pretty good on the old protocol, but I don't care. Frankly I don't have a lot of time for it. I'm much more interested in the people.' His eyes flicked over her, the curiosity in them undisguised. 'On the subject of which, how long have you known my brother?' he murmured, and she felt her heart lurch a little.

Here we go, she thought, determined not to lie and hoping he wouldn't put her in the position where she had to. 'Six months,' she told him, 'since he started at the hospital.'

'Good grief, the dark horse,' he said slowly, shooting a glance in Andrew's direction. 'Still, I can see why he'd want to keep you to himself, but it's too late now, he's rumbled. You can save me a dance tomorrow night. Rumour has it I'm better than him.'

'I wonder who started that rumour?' she teased, but then confessed, 'I wouldn't know what he's like. We haven't danced together yet.' Or anything else apart from work, come to that, she thought with another hitch in her pulse, but Will didn't need to know that.

'Well, here's your chance. You can dance with us both and judge for yourself. Not that you'd be disloyal and unkind enough to tell either of us the truth,' he said with gentle mockery. 'So—tell me about yourself, Libby Tate. What makes you tick?'

'Oh, there's nothing to tell,' she said lightly, wondering what Andrew would have told him and how much of it she was going to contradict if she said anything, but Will just smiled.

'I'll just bet there is,' he said, his voice still low. 'I think you're probably a complex and fascinating woman, but I get the feeling he doesn't know much about you, either. Curious.'

Suddenly she couldn't do this—couldn't lie to his brother, pretend they were together when they weren't. Not like that, anyway—and not when he'd already worked it out.

'We haven't been going out together long,' she admitted, for Andrew's sake not revealing just how brief their non-relationship was, but Will just nodded and smiled slightly.

'No. I thought not. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've got a sneaking suspicion you're only here as a smokescreen to disguise the fact that he doesn't have a social life—or am I mistaken?'

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