



*Medical
Romance™*

MELANIE MILBURNE

Their Most
.....
Forbidden Fling
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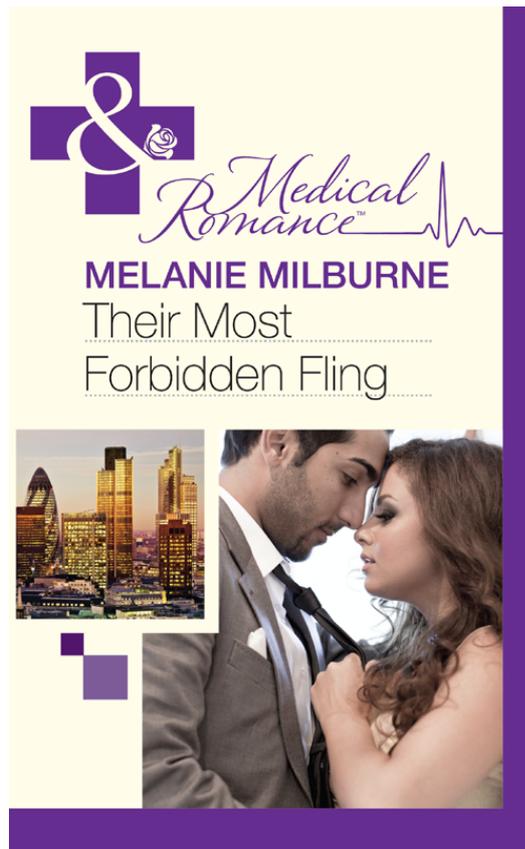
Forbidden but not forgotten...As Molly Drummond's new boss, Lucas Banning poses a challenge – he's brooding, demanding, and far too good-looking. He's also a living, breathing reminder of the greatest tragedy in Molly's life – so what does it mean that her heart skips a beat every time she sees him? Before long these star-crossed lovers are caught up in a whirlwind fling that is as scorching as it is forbidden. But can their passion burn brightly enough to forge a new future... together?

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*His eyes moved over her face, as if he
was committing her features to memory.*

The silence throbbed with a backbeat of electric tension. She felt it echoing in her blood and wondered if he could feel it too. His eyes dropped to her mouth, pausing there for an infinitesimal moment.

‘In another life I would’ve kissed you the other night,’ he said in a gravel-rough tone. ‘I probably would’ve taken you to bed as well.’

Molly looked at his mouth. She could see the tiny vertical lines of his lower lip and the slight dryness that she knew would cling to her softer one like sandpaper on silk. ‘Why not in this life?’ she asked softly.

He reached out and brushed her lower lip with the pad of his index finger. His touch was as light as a moth’s wing but it set off a thousand bubbly, tingly sensations beneath her skin.

‘I think you know why not,’ he said, and stepped back from her.

Molly felt as if the floor of her stomach had dropped right out of her as he turned and left the room. She put her hand to her mouth, touching where his finger had so briefly been ...

Dear Reader

Every day the news is full of stories of tragic events—bad things happening to good people. I often wonder what happens to those *other* victims. The ones left behind to cope in whatever way they can with what happened.

That is the essence of Lucas and Molly’s story. Lucas is a man in need of redemption. He has spent seventeen years paying for the accidental death of Matt Drummond, Molly’s older brother and his best mate since childhood. A workaholic who has virtually no private life, Lucas is locked down emotionally and deeply lonely and isolated—although he would never admit that to anyone!

When Molly turns up at his London hospital for a short-term appointment he is determined to keep her at arm’s length. But when Molly’s landlord threatens to evict her after she rescues a stray cat, Lucas steps in and offers to share his big old empty house with her. While Lucas is confident he can remain professional and distant with her at work, living under the same roof as Molly soon stirs up a blistering passion between them!

But the past is a wound that has never quite healed. Lucas is still struggling to come to terms with his role in the accident that took his best friend’s life. How can he be with Molly when he is the person responsible for causing her and her family such heartache?

Lucas and Molly are two of my favourite characters. Yes, I know—I say that about every hero and heroine. Molly is caring and kind, compassionate and giving—the perfect partner for a man who has taught himself not to love.

Their story is one of redemption and the healing power of love. I hope you enjoy following them on their journey to the happy-ever-after they both deserve so much.

Warmest wishes

Melanie Milburne

About the Author

From as soon as **MELANIE MILBURNE** could pick up a pen she knew she wanted to write. It was when she picked up her first Harlequin Mills & Boon at seventeen that she realised she wanted to write romance. Distracted for a few years by meeting and marrying her own handsome hero, surgeon husband Steve, and having their two boys, plus completing a Masters of Education and becoming a nationally ranked athlete (masters swimming) she decided to write. Five submissions later she sold her first book and is now a multi-published, award-winning *USA TODAY* bestselling author. In 2008 she won the Australian Readers Association's most popular category/series romance, and in 2011 she won the prestigious Romance Writers of Australia R*BY award.

Melanie loves to hear from her readers via her website, www.melaniemilburne.com.au, or on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Melanie-Milburne/351594482609>

Recent titles by Melanie Milburne:

DR CHANDLER'S SLEEPING BEAUTY
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THE MAN WITH THE LOCKED AWAY HEART
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These books are also available in eBook format from www.millsandboon.co.uk

Their Most Forbidden Fling

Melanie Milburne



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Tony and Jacqui Patiniotis and their sons, Lucien, Julius and Raphael, for their generous support to the National Heart Foundation in Hobart. This one is for you!

CHAPTER ONE

MOLLY SAW HIM first. He was coming out of a convenience store half a block from her newly rented bedsit. He had his head down against the sleeting rain, his forehead knotted in a frown of concentration. Her heart gave a dislocated stumble as he strode towards her. The memories came rushing back, tumbling over themselves like clothes spinning in a dryer. She didn't even realise she had spoken his name out loud until she heard the thready sound of her voice. 'Lucas?'

He stopped like a puppet suddenly pulled back on its strings. The jolt of recognition on his face was painful to watch. She saw the way his hazel eyes flinched; saw too the way his jaw worked in that immeasurable pause before he spoke her name. 'Molly ...'

It had been ten years since she had heard his voice. A decade of living in London had softened his Australian outback drawl to a mellifluous baritone that for some reason sent an involuntary shiver over her skin. She looked at his face, drinking in his features one by one as if ticking off a checklist inside her head to make sure it really was him.

The landscape of his face—the brooding brow, the determined jaw and the aquiline nose—was achingly familiar and yet different. He was older around the eyes and mouth, and his dark brown hair, though thick and glossy, had a few streaks of silver in it around his temples. His skin wasn't quite as weathered and tanned as his father's or brothers' back on the farm at home, but it still had a deep olive tone.

He was still imposingly tall and whipcord lean and fit, as if strenuous exercise was far more important to him than rest and relaxation. She looked at his hazel eyes. The same shadows were there—long, dark shadows that anchored him to the past.

'I was wondering when I'd run into you,' Molly said to fill the bruised silence. 'I suppose Neil or Ian told you I was coming over to work at St Patrick's for three months?'

His expression became inscrutable and closed. 'They mentioned something about you following a boyfriend across,' he said.

Molly felt a blush steal over her cheeks. She still wasn't quite sure how to describe her relationship with Simon Westbury. For years they had been just friends, but ever since Simon had broken up with his long-term girlfriend Serena, they had drifted into an informal arrangement that was convenient but perhaps not as emotionally satisfying as Molly would have wished. 'Simon and I have been out a couple of times but nothing serious,' she said. 'He's doing a plastics registrar year over here. I thought it'd be good to have someone to travel with since it's my first time overseas.'

'Where are you staying?' Lucas asked.

'In that house over there,' Molly said, pointing to a seen-better-days Victorian mansion that was divided into small flats and bedsits. 'I wanted somewhere within walking distance of the hospital. Apparently lots of staff from abroad set up camp there.'

He acknowledged that with a slight nod.

Another silence chugged past.

Molly shifted her weight from foot to foot, the fingers of her right hand fiddling with the strap of her handbag where it was slung over her shoulder. 'Um ... Mum said to say hello ...'

His brows gave a micro-lift above his green and brown-flecked eyes but whether it was because of cynicism, doubt or wariness, she couldn't quite tell. 'Did she?' he asked.

Molly looked away for a moment, her gaze taking in the gloomy clouds that were suspended above the rooftops of the row of grey stone buildings. It was so different from the expansive skies and blindingly bright sunshine of the outback back home. 'I guess you heard my father's remarried ...' She brought her gaze back up when he didn't respond. 'His new wife Crystal is pregnant. The baby's due in a couple of months.'

His eyes studied her for a beat or two. 'How do you feel about having a half-sibling?'

Molly pasted on a bright smile. 'I'm thrilled for them ... It will be good to have someone to spoil. I love babies. I'll probably babysit now and then for them when I get back ...'

He continued to look at her in that measured way of his. Could he see how deeply hurt she was that her father was trying to replace Matt? Could he see how guilty she felt about *feeling* hurt? Matt had been the golden child, the firstborn and heir. Molly had lived in his shadow for as long as she could remember—never feeling good enough, bright enough.

Loved enough.

With a new child to replace the one he had lost, her father would have no need of her now.

'You're a long way from home,' Lucas said.

Did he think she wasn't up to the task? Did he still see her as that gangly, freckle-faced kid who had followed him about like a devoted puppy? 'I'm sure I'll cope with it,' she said with the tiniest elevation of her chin. 'I'm not a little kid any longer. I'm all grown up now in case you hadn't noticed.'

His gaze moved over her in a thoroughly male appraisal that made Molly's spine suddenly feel hot and tingly. As his eyes re-engaged with hers the air tightened, as if a light but unmistakable current of electricity was pulsing through it. 'Indeed you are,' he said.

Molly glanced at his mouth. He had a beautiful mouth, one that implied sensuality in its every line and contour. The shadow of dark stubble surrounding it gave him an intensely male look that she found captivating. She wondered when that mouth had last smiled. She wondered when it had last kissed someone.

She wondered what it would feel like to be kissed by him.

Molly forced her gaze to reconnect with his. She needed to get her professional cap on and keep it on. They would be working together in the same unit. No one over here needed to know about the tragic tie that bound them so closely. 'Well, then,' she said, shuffling her feet again. 'I guess I'll see you at the hospital.'

'Yes.'

She gave him another tight, formal smile and made to move past but she had only gone a couple of paces when he said her name again. 'Molly?'

Molly slowly turned and looked at him. The lines about his mouth seemed to have deepened in the short time she had been talking to him. 'Yes?' she said.

'You might not have been informed as yet, but as of yesterday I'm the new head of ICU,' he said. 'Brian Yates had to suddenly resign due to ill health.'

She gripped the edges of her coat closer across her chest. *Lucas Banning was her boss?* It put an entirely new spin on things. This first foray of hers into working abroad could be seriously compromised if he decided he didn't want her working with him. And why would he want her here?

She was a living, breathing reminder of the worst mistake he had ever made.

'No,' Molly said. 'I hadn't been informed.'

'Is it going to be a problem?' he asked with a direct look she found a little intimidating.

'Why would it be a problem?' she asked.

'It's a busy and stretched-to-the-limit department,' he said. 'I don't want any personal issues between staff members to compromise patient outcomes.'

Molly felt affronted that he thought her so unprofessional as to bring their past into the workplace. She rarely spoke of Matt these days. Even though she had lived with her grief longer than she had lived without it, speaking of him brought it all back as if it had happened yesterday—the gut-wrenching pain, the aching sense of loss. *The guilt.* Most of her friends from medical school didn't even know she had once had an older brother. 'I do *not* bring personal issues to work,' she said.

His hazel eyes held hers for a beat or two of silence. 'Fine,' he said. 'I'll see you in the morning. Don't be late.'

Molly pursed her lips as he strode off down the street. She would make sure she was there before he was.

Lucas glanced pointedly at the clock on the wall as Molly Drummond rushed into the glassed-in office of ICU. ‘Your shift started an hour ago,’ he said as he slapped a patient’s file on the desk.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I tried to call but I didn’t have the correct code in my phone. I’m still with my Australian network so I couldn’t call direct.’

‘So what’s your excuse?’ he asked, taking in her pink face and the disarray of her light brown hair. ‘Boyfriend keep you up late last night, or did he make you late by serving you breakfast in bed?’

Her face went bright red and her grey-blue eyes flashed with annoyance. ‘Neither,’ she said. ‘I was on my way to work when I came across a cat that had been hit by a car. I couldn’t just leave it there. It had a broken leg and was in pain. I had to take it to the nearest vet clinic. It took me ages to find one, and then I had to wait until the vet got there.’

Lucas knew he should apologise for jumping to conclusions but he wanted to keep a professional distance. Out of all the hospitals in London, or the whole of England for that matter, why did she have to come to his? He had put as much distance as he could between his past and the present. For the last ten years he had tried to put it behind him, not to forget—he could never, would *never* do that—but to move on with his life as best he could, making a difference where he could.

Saving lives, not destroying them.

Molly Drummond turning up in his world was not what he needed right now. He had only recently found out she was coming to work here, but he had assured himself that he wouldn’t have to have too much to do with her directly. He had planned to become director at the end of next year when Brian Yates formally retired. But Brian being diagnosed with a terminal illness had meant he’d had to take over the reins a little ahead of schedule. Now he would have to interact with Molly on a daily basis, which would have been fine if she was just like any other young doctor who came and went in the department.

But Molly was not just any other doctor.

She wasn’t that cute little freckle-faced kid any more either. She had grown into a beautiful young woman with the sort of understated looks that took you by surprise in unguarded moments. Like yesterday, when he’d run into her on the street.

Looking up and seeing her there had made his breath catch in his throat. He had been taken aback by the way her grey-blue eyes darkened or softened with her mood. How her creamy skin took on a rosy tinge when she felt cornered or embarrassed. How her high cheekbones gave her a haughty regal air, and yet her perfect nose with its tiny dusting of freckles had an innocent girl-next-door appeal that was totally beguiling. How her figure still had a coltish look about it with those long legs and slim arms.

He had not been able to stop himself imagining how it would feel to have those slim arms wrap around his body and to feel that soft, full mouth press against his. He had his share of sexual encounters, probably not as many as some of his peers, but he wasn’t all that comfortable with letting people get too close.

And getting too close to Molly Drummond was something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

‘I haven’t got time to give you a grand tour,’ Lucas said, forcing his wayward thoughts back where they belonged. ‘But you’ll find your way around soon enough. We have twenty beds, all of them full at the present time. Jacqui Hunter is the ward clerk. She’ll fill you in on where the staff facilities are. Su Ling and Aleem Pashar are the registrars. They’ll run through the patients with you.’ He gave her a brisk nod before he left the office. ‘Enjoy your stay.’

‘Dr Drummond?’

Molly turned to see a middle-aged woman coming towards her. ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you,’ the woman said with a friendly smile. ‘Things have been a bit topsy-turvy, I’m afraid.’ She offered her hand. ‘I’m Jacqui Hunter.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ Molly said.

‘This has been such a crazy couple of days,’ Jacqui said. ‘Did Dr Banning tell you about Brian Yates?’ She didn’t wait for Molly to respond. ‘Such a terrible shame. He was planning to retire next year. Now he’s been sent home to get his affairs in order.’

‘I’m very sorry,’ Molly said.

‘He and Olivia just had their first grandchild too,’ Jacqui said shaking her head. ‘Life’s not fair, is it?’

‘No, it’s not.’

Jacqui popped the patient’s file, which Lucas had left on the desk, in the appropriate drawer. ‘Now, then,’ she said, turning to face Molly again. ‘Let’s get you familiarised with the place. You’re from Australia, aren’t you? Sydney, right?’

‘Yes,’ Molly said. ‘But I grew up in the bush.’

‘Like our Lucas, huh?’

‘Yes, we actually grew up in the same country town in New South Wales.’

Jacqui’s eyebrows shot up underneath her blunt fringe. ‘Really? What a coincidence. So you know each other?’

Molly wondered if she should have mentioned anything about her connection with Lucas. ‘Not really. It’s been years since I’ve seen him,’ she said. ‘He moved to London when I was seventeen. It’s not like we’ve stayed in touch or anything.’

‘He’s a bit of a dark horse is our Lucas,’ Jacqui said, giving Molly a conspiratorial look. ‘Keeps himself to himself, if you know what I mean.’

Molly wasn’t sure if the ward clerk was expecting a response from her or not. ‘Um ... yes ...’

‘No one knows a whisper about his private life,’ Jacqui said. ‘He keeps work and play very separate.’

‘Probably a good idea,’ Molly said.

Jacqui grunted as she led the way to the staff change room. ‘There’s plenty of women around here who would give their eye teeth for a night out with him,’ she said. ‘It should be a crime to be so good looking, don’t you think?’

‘Um ...’

‘He’s got kind, intelligent eyes,’ Jacqui said. ‘The patients love him—and so do the relatives. He takes his time with them. He treats them like he would his own family. That’s rare these days, let me tell you. Everyone is so busy climbing up the career ladder. Lucas Banning was born to be a doctor. You can just tell.’

‘Actually, I think he always planned on being a wheat and sheep farmer, like his father and grandfather before him,’ Molly said.

Jacqui looked at her quizzically. ‘Are we talking about the same person?’ she asked.

‘As I said, I don’t know him all that well,’ Molly quickly backtracked.

Jacqui indicated the female change room door on her right. ‘Bathroom is through there and lockers here,’ she said. ‘The staff tea room is further down on the left.’ She led the way back to the office. ‘You’re staying three months with us, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Molly said. ‘I haven’t been overseas before. The job came up and I took it before I could talk myself out of it.’

‘Well, you’re certainly at the right time of life to do it, aren’t you?’ Jacqui said. ‘Get the travel bug out of the way before you settle down. God knows, you’ll never be able to afford it once the kids come along. Take it from me. They bleed you dry.’

‘How many children do you have?’

‘Four boys,’ Jacqui said, and with a little roll of her eyes added, ‘Five if you count my husband.’ She led the way back to the sterilising bay outside ICU. ‘One of the registrars will go through the patients with you. I’d better get back to the desk.’

‘Thanks for showing me around.’

Molly spent an hour with the registrars, going through each patient's history. Lucas joined them as they came to the last patient. Claire Mitchell was a young woman of twenty-two with a spinal-cord injury as well as a serious head injury after falling off a horse at an equestrian competition. She had been in an induced coma for the past month. Each time they tried to wean her off the sedatives her brain pressure skyrocketed. The scans showed a resolving intracerebral haematoma and persistent cerebral oedema.

Molly watched as Lucas went through the latest scans with the parents. He explained the images and answered their questions in a calm reassuring manner.

'I keep thinking she's going to die,' the mother said in a choked voice.

'She's come this far,' Lucas said. 'These new scans show positive signs of improvement. It's a bit of a waiting game, I'm afraid. Just keep talking to her.'

'We don't know how to thank you,' the father said. 'When I think of how bad she was just a week ago ...'

'She's definitely turned a corner in the last few days,' Lucas said. 'Just try and stay positive. We'll call you as soon as there's any change.'

Molly met his gaze once the parents had returned to their daughter's bedside. 'Can I have a quick word, Dr Banning?' she asked. 'In private?'

His brows came together as if he found the notion of meeting with her in private an interruption he could well do without. 'My office is last on the left down the corridor. I'll meet you there in ten minutes. I just have to write up some meds for David Hyland in bed four.'

Molly stood outside the office marked with Lucas's name. The door was ajar and she peered around it to see if he was there, but the office was empty so she gently pushed the door open and went inside.

It was furnished like any other underfunded hospital office: a tired-looking desk dominated the small space with a battered chair that had an L-shaped rip in the vinyl on the back. A dented and scratched metal filing cabinet was tucked between the window and a waist-high bookcase that was jammed with publications and textbooks. A humming computer was in the middle of the desk and papers and medical journals were strewn either side. Organised chaos was the term that came to Molly's mind. There was a digital photo frame on the filing cabinet near the tiny window that overlooked the bleak grey world outside. She pressed the button that set the images rolling. The splashes of the vivid outback colour of Bannington homestead took her breath away. The tall, scraggy gum trees, the cerulean blue skies, the endless paddocks, the prolific wildflowers after last season's rain, the colourful bird life on the dams and the waters of Carboola Creek, which ran through the property, took her home in a heartbeat. She could almost hear the *arck arck* sound of the crows and the warbling of the magpies.

Her parents had run the neighbouring property Drummond Downs up until their bitter divorce seven years ago. It had been in her family for six generations, gearing up for a seventh, but Matthew's death had changed everything.

Her father had not handled his grief at losing his only son. Her mother had not handled her husband's anger and emotional distancing. The homestead had gradually run into the red and then, after a couple of bad seasons, more and more parcels of land had had to be sold off to keep the bank happy. With less land to recycle and regenerate crops and stock, the property had been pushed to the limit. Crippling debts had brought her parents to the point of bankruptcy.

Offers of help from neighbours, including Lucas's parents, Bill and Jane Banning, had been rejected. Molly's father had been too proud to accept help, especially from the parents of the boy who had been responsible for the death of their only son. Drummond Downs had been sold to a foreign investor, and her parents had divorced within a year of leaving the homestead.

Molly sighed as she pressed the stop button, her hand falling back to her side. The sound of a footfall behind her made her turn around, and her heart gave a jerky little movement behind her

ribcage as she met Lucas's hazel gaze. 'I was just ...' she lifted a hand and then dropped it '... looking at your photos ...'

He closed the door with a soft click but he didn't move towards the desk. It was hard to read his expression, but it seemed to Molly as if he was controlling every nuance of his features behind that blank, impersonal mask. 'Neil emails me photos from time to time,' he said.

'They're very good,' Molly said. 'Very professional.'

Something moved like a fleeting shadow through his eyes. 'He toyed with the idea of being a professional photographer,' he said. 'But as you know ... things didn't work out.'

Molly chewed at the inside of her mouth as she thought about Neil working back at Bannington Homestead when he might have travelled the world, doing what he loved best. So many people had been damaged by the death of her brother. The stone of grief thrown into the pond of life had cast wide circles in the community of Carboola Creek. When Lucas had left Bannington to study medicine, his younger brother Neil had taken over his role on the property alongside their father. Any hopes or aspirations of a different life Neil might have envisaged for himself had had to be put aside. The oldest son and heir had not stepped up to the plate as expected. Various factions of the small-minded community had made it impossible for Lucas to stay and work the land as his father and grandfather had done before him.

'It wasn't your fault,' Molly said, not even realising how firmly she believed it until she had spoken it out loud. She had never blamed him but she had grown up surrounded by people who did. But her training as a doctor had made her realise that sometimes accidents just happened. No one was to blame. If Matt had been driving, as he had only minutes before they'd hit that kangaroo that had jumped out in front of them on the road, it would have been him that had been exiled.

Lucas hooked a brow upwards as he pushed away from the door. 'Wasn't it?'

Molly turned as he strode past her to go behind his desk. She caught a faint whiff of his aftershave, an intricately layered mix of citrus and spice and something else she couldn't name—perhaps his own male scent. His broad shoulders were so tense she could see the bunching of his muscles beneath his shirt. 'It was an accident, Lucas,' she said. 'You know it was. That's what the coroner's verdict was. Anyway, Matt could easily have been driving instead of you. Would you have wanted him to be blamed for the rest of his life?'

His eyes met hers, his formal back-to-business look locking her out of the world of his pain. 'What did you want to speak to me about?' he asked.

Molly's shoulders went down on an exhaled breath. 'I sort of let slip to Jacqui Hunter that we knew each other from ... back home ...'

A muscle in his cheek moved in and out. 'I see.'

'I didn't say anything about the accident,' she said. 'I just said we grew up in the same country town.'

His expression was hard as stone, his eyes even harder. 'Why did you come here?' he asked. 'Why this hospital?'

Molly wasn't sure she could really answer that, even to herself. Why had she felt drawn to where he had worked for all these years? Why had she ignored the other longer-term job offers to come to St Patrick's and work alongside him for just three months? It had just seemed the right thing to do. Even her mother had agreed when Molly had told her. Her mother had said it was time they all moved on and put the past—and Matthew—finally to rest. 'I wanted to work overseas but most of the other posts were for a year or longer,' she said. 'I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay away from home quite that long. St Patrick's seemed like a good place to start. It's got a great reputation.'

He barricaded himself behind his desk, his hands on his lean hips in a keep-back-from-me posture. 'I've spent the last decade trying to put what happened behind me,' he said. 'This is my life now. I don't want to destroy what little peace I've been able to scratch together.'

'I'm not here to ruin your peace or your life or career or whatever,' Molly said. 'I just wanted some space from my family. Things have been difficult between my parents, especially since Crystal got pregnant. I'm tired of being the meat in the sandwich. I wanted some time out.'

'So you came right to the lion's den,' he said with an embittered look. 'Aren't your parents worried I might destroy your life too?'

Molly pressed her lips together for a moment. Her father had said those very words in each and every one of their heated exchanges when she'd broached the subject of coming to London. 'Do you want me to resign?' she asked.

His forehead wrinkled in a heavy frown and one of his hands reached up and scored a rough pathway through his hair before dropping back down by his side. 'No,' he said, sighing heavily. 'We're already short-staffed. It might take weeks to find a replacement.'

'I can work different shifts from you if—'

He gave her a dark look. 'That won't be necessary,' he said. 'People will start to ask questions if we make an issue out of it.'

'I'm not here to make trouble for you, Lucas.'

He held her gaze for an infinitesimal moment, but the screen had come back up on his face. 'I'll see you on the ward,' he said, and pulled out his chair and sat down. 'I have to call a patient's family.'

Molly walked to the door, but as she pulled it closed on her exit she saw that he was frowning heavily as he reached for the phone ...

CHAPTER TWO

LUCAS WAS GOING through some blood results with Kate Harrison, one of the nurses, when Molly came into the ICU office the following day. Her perfume drifted towards him, wrapping around his senses, reminding him of summer, sweet peas and innocence. How she managed to look so gorgeous this early in the morning in ballet flats and plain black leggings and a long grey cardigan over a white top amazed him. She wasn't wearing any make-up to speak of and her shoulder-length hair was pulled back in a ponytail, giving her a fresh-faced, youthful look that was totally captivating.

'Good morning,' she said, her tentative smile encompassing Kate as well as him.

'Morning,' he said, turning back to the blood results. 'Kate, I want you to keep an eye on Mr Taylor's white-cell count and CRP. Let me know if there's any change.'

'I'll ring you with the results when they come in,' Kate said. She turned to Molly. 'Hi, I'm Kate Harrison. I heard on the grapevine you're from Dr Banning's neck of the woods.'

Molly's gaze flicked uncertainly to Lucas's. 'Um ... yes ...'

'I looked it up on an internet map,' Kate said. 'It's a pretty small country town. Were you neighbours or something?'

'Sort of,' Molly said. 'Lucas's family ran the property next door but it was ten kilometres away.'

'I wish my neighbours were ten kilometres away,' Kate said with a grin, 'especially when they play their loud music and party all night. Nice to have you with us, Dr Drummond.'

'Please call me Molly.'

'We have a social club you might be interested in joining,' Kate said. 'A group of us hang out after hours. It's a good way to meet people from other departments. Nobody admits it out loud but it's sort of turned into a hospital dating service. We've had two marriages, one engagement and one and a half babies so far.'

'Dr Drummond already has a boyfriend,' Lucas said as he opened the file drawer.

'Actually, I would be interested,' Molly said, sending him a hard little look. 'Apart from Simon, I don't have any friends over here.'

'Great,' Kate said. 'I'll send you an invite by email. We're meeting for a movie next week.'

Lucas waited until Kate had left before he spoke. 'I'd be careful hanging out with Kate's social group. Not all the men who go have the right motives.'

She gave him a haughty look. 'I can take care of myself.'

'From what I've heard so far about your plastics guy, he doesn't seem your type.'

Her brows came up. 'And you're some sort of authority on who my type is, are you?'

He gave a loose shrug of his shoulders. 'Just an observation.'

'Then I suggest you keep your observations to yourself,' she said, her eyes flashing like sheet lightning. 'I'm perfectly capable of managing my own private life. At least I have one.'

'Just because I keep my private life out of the hospital corridors doesn't mean I don't have one,' Lucas clipped back.

Jacqui came into the office behind them. 'Whoa, is this pistols at three paces or what?' she said. 'What's going on?'

'Nothing,' they said in unison.

Jacqui's brows lifted speculatively. 'I thought you guys were old friends from back home?'

'Excuse me,' Molly said, and brushed past to leave.

'What's going on between you two?' Jacqui asked Lucas.

'Nothing,' he said with a glower.

'Could've fooled me,' Jacqui said. 'I saw the way she was glaring at you. It's not like you to be the big bad boss. What did you say to upset her?'

'Nothing.'

Jacqui folded her arms and gave him a look. ‘That’s two nothings from you, which in my book means there’s something. I might be speaking out of turn, but you don’t seem too happy to have her here.’

The last thing Lucas wanted was anyone digging into his past connection with Molly. It was a part of his life he wanted to keep separate. The turmoil of emotions he felt over Matt’s death was something he dealt with in the privacy of his home. He didn’t want it at work, where he needed a clear head. He didn’t like his ghosts or his guilt hanging around.

‘Dr Drummond is well qualified and will no doubt be a valuable asset to the team at St Patrick’s,’ he said. ‘All new staff members take time to settle in. It’s a big change moving from one hospital to another, let alone across the globe.’

‘She’s very beautiful in a girl-next-door sort of way, isn’t she?’

He gave a noncommittal shrug as he leafed through a patient’s notes. ‘She’s OK, I guess.’

Jacqui’s mouth tilted in a knowing smile. ‘She’s the sort of girl most mothers wish their sons would bring home, don’t you think?’

Lucas put the file back in the drawer and then pushed it shut. ‘Not my mother,’ he said, and walked out.

Lucas was walking home from the hospital a couple of days later when he saw Molly coming up the street, carrying a cardboard box with holes punched in it. He had managed to avoid her over the last day or two, other than during ward rounds where he had kept things tightly professional. But as she came closer he could see she looked flustered and upset.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked as she stopped right in front of him.

Her grey-blue eyes were shiny and moist with tears. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ she said. ‘My landlord has flatly refused to allow me to have Mittens in my flat. He’s threatening to have me evicted if I don’t get rid of him immediately.’

‘Mittens?’

She indicated the box she was carrying. ‘Mittens the cat,’ she said, ‘the one that got hit by a car on my first day? I had to take him otherwise the vet would’ve sent him to the cat shelter and he might’ve been put down if no one wanted him.’

‘Didn’t the owner come and claim him?’ Lucas asked.

‘It turns out he doesn’t have an owner, or none we can track down,’ she said. ‘He hasn’t got a collar or a microchip. He’s only about seven months old.’

He angled his head, his gaze narrowing slightly. ‘What were you planning to do with him?’

Her expression became beseeching. ‘One of the nurses mentioned you lived in a big house all by yourself. She said you had a garden that would be perfect for a cat. She said you’d—’

Lucas held up his hands like stop signs. ‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘No way. I’m not having some flea-bitten cat sharpening its claws on my rugs or furniture.’

‘It’s only for a few days,’ she said, appealing to him with those big wide eyes of hers. ‘I’ll find another flat, one that will allow me to have a cat. *Please?*’

Lucas could feel his resolve slipping. How was he supposed to resist her when she was so darned cute standing there like a little lost waif? ‘I hate cats,’ he said. ‘They make me sneeze.’

‘But this one is a non-allergenic cat,’ she said. ‘He was probably hideously expensive and now we have him for free. Well ... not free exactly ...’ She momentarily tugged at her lower lip with her teeth. ‘The vet’s bill was astronomical.’

‘I do *not* want a cat,’ he said through tight lips.

‘You’re not getting a cat,’ she said. ‘You’re *babysitting* one.’

Lucas rolled his eyes and took the box from her. His fingers brushed against hers and a lightning strike of electricity shot through his body. Her eyes flared as if she had felt it too, and two little spots of colour pooled high in her cheeks. She stood back from him and tucked a strand of hair back behind her ear, her gaze slipping from his. ‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ she said.

‘My place is just along here,’ he said gruffly, and led the way.

Molly stepped into the huge foyer of the four-storey mansion Lucas owned. The house was tastefully decorated with an eclectic mix of modern, art deco and antique pieces. Room after room led off the foyer and a grand staircase to the floors above. There was even a ballroom, which overlooked the garden, and a conservatory. It was such a big house for one person. It would have housed three generations of a family with room to spare. ‘You don’t find it a little cramped?’ she asked dryly as she turned and faced him.

The corner of his mouth twitched, which was about the closest he ever got to a smile. ‘I like my space,’ he said as he shrugged off his coat and hung it on the brass coat rack. ‘I guess it comes from growing up in the outback.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Molly said with feeling. ‘I’m starting to feel quite claustrophobic at that bedsit and I’ve barely been there a week. I don’t know why Simon suggested it.’

‘Does he live there with you?’ he asked.

‘No, he’s renting a place in Bloomsbury,’ she said. ‘He offered me a room but I wanted to keep my independence.’

‘Are you sleeping with him?’

Molly frowned to cover her embarrassment. She had only slept with Simon once and she had instantly regretted it. She couldn’t help feeling he had only slept with her as a sort of payback to his ex Serena because he’d been so hurt by her leaving him. Molly had mistaken his friendliness as attraction, but now she wasn’t sure how to get out of the relationship without causing him further hurt. ‘I can’t see how that is any of your business,’ she said.

His eyes remained steady on hers, quietly assessing. ‘You don’t seem the casual sleep around type.’

She felt her cheeks heat up a little more. ‘I’m not a virgin, if that’s what you’re suggesting. And there’s nothing wrong with casual sex as long as it’s safe.’

His gaze slowly tracked down to her mouth.

Something shifted in the air—an invisible current that connected her to him in a way Molly had never felt quite before. She felt her lips start to tingle as if he had bent his head and pressed his mouth to hers. She could almost feel the warm, firm dryness of his lips against her own. Her mind ran wild with the thought of his tongue slipping through the shield of her lips to find hers and call it into erotic play. Her insides flickered with hot little tongues of lust, sending arrows of awareness to the very heart of her. She ran the tip of her tongue out over the surface of her lips and watched as his hooded gaze followed its journey.

The mewling cry of Mittens from inside the box broke the spell.

Lucas frowned as if he had completely forgotten what he was carrying. ‘Er ... aren’t we supposed to rub butter on its paws or something?’ he asked.

‘I think that’s just an old wives’ tale,’ Molly said. ‘I’m sure if we show him around first he’ll soon work out his territory. I don’t suppose you happen to have a pet door?’

He gave her a speaking look. ‘No.’

‘Oh, well, he’ll soon let you know when he wants to go in or out. Maybe you could leave a window open.’

‘No.’

Molly pursed her lips in thought. ‘How about a kitty litter box? Then you wouldn’t have to worry about him getting locked inside while you’re at work.’

‘Read my lips,’ he said, eyeballing her over the top of the box. ‘I am *not* keeping this cat. This is an interim thing until you find a pet-friendly place to stay.’

‘Fine.’ She opened the folded over lid of the box. Mittens immediately popped his head up and mewed at her. ‘Isn’t he cute?’

‘Adorable.’

Molly glanced up at him but he wasn't looking at the cat. 'Um ... I brought some food with me,' she said, and rummaged in her handbag for the sample packs the vet had given her.

Mittens wound himself around Lucas's ankles, purring like an engine as his little cast bumped along the floor.

'I think he likes you,' Molly said.

Lucas glowered at her. 'If he puts one paw out of place, it will be off to the cat shelter.'

She scooped the cat up into her arms, stroking his soft, velvety little head as she looked up into Lucas's stern features. 'I'll just feed him and give him his medication and get out of your hair,' she said.

'The kitchen is this way,' he said, and led the way.

Molly stood back to watch as Mittens tucked into the saucer of food she had placed on the floor. 'He's been wormed and vaccinated,' she said.

'Desexed?'

'That too,' she said. 'He might still be a bit tender down there.'

'My heart bleeds.'

Molly picked up her handbag and slung it across her shoulder. 'He'll need to use the bathroom once he's finished eating. Do you know you can actually train a cat to use a human toilet? I saw it on the internet.'

He didn't look in the least impressed. 'How fascinating.'

'Right, well, then,' she said, and made a move for the door. 'I'll leave you to it.'

'What are you doing for dinner?' Lucas suddenly asked.

Molly blinked. 'Pardon?'

His mouth twisted self-deprecatingly. 'Am I that out of practice?'

'What do you mean?'

'I haven't asked anyone to stay to dinner in a while,' he said. 'I like to keep myself to myself once I get home. But since you're here you might as well stay and share a meal with me. That is if you've got nothing better to do.'

'You're not worried what people will think about us socialising out of hours?' she asked.

'Who's going to know?' he said. 'My private life is private.'

Molly felt tempted to stay, more than tempted. She told herself it was to make sure Mittens was settled in, but if she was honest, it had far more to do with her craving a little more of Lucas's company. It wasn't just that he was from back home either. She felt drawn to his aloofness; his don't-come-too-close-I-might-bite aura was strangely attractive. His accidental touch earlier had awoken her senses. She could still feel the tingling of her skin where his fingers had brushed against hers.

'I haven't got anything planned,' she said. 'Simon's going to the theatre with his friend. There wasn't a spare ticket.' She saw his brows lift cynically and hastily added, 'I didn't want to see it anyway.'

Lucas moved across the room to open the French doors that led out to the garden. He turned on the outside light, which cast a glow over the neatly clipped hedges that made up the formal part of the garden. A fountain trickled in the middle of a pebbled area and a wrought-iron French provincial setting was against one wall where a row of espaliered ornamental trees was growing. Mittens bumped his way over and went out to explore his new domain. He stopped to play with a moth that had fluttered around the light Lucas had switched on.

'It's a lovely garden,' Molly said. 'Was it like that when you bought it?'

'It had been a bit neglected,' he said. 'I've done a bit of work on the house too.'

'You always were good with your hands,' she said, and then blushed. 'I mean, with doing things about the farm.'

His lips gave a vague sort of movement that could not on anyone's terms be described as a smile. 'Would you like a glass of wine?' he asked.

'Sure, why not?' Molly said. *Anything to make her relax and stop making a fool of herself*, she thought.

He placed a glass of white wine in front of her. 'I have red if you prefer.'

'No, white is fine,' she said. 'Red always gives me a headache.'

Lucas went about preparing the meal. Molly watched as he deftly chopped vegetables and meat for the stir-fry he was making. He worked as if on autopilot but she could see he was frowning slightly. Was he regretting asking her to stay for dinner? He wasn't exactly full of conversation. But, then, she was feeling a little tongue-tied herself.

'So why an intensivist?' he asked after a long silence. 'I thought you always wanted to be a teacher.'

'My teacher stage only lasted until I was ten,' Molly said. 'I've wanted to be lots of things since then. I decided on medicine in my final year at school. And I chose intensive care because I liked the idea of helping to save lives.'

'Yeah, well, it sure beats the hell out of destroying them.'

Molly met his gaze over the island bench. 'How long are you going to keep punishing yourself? It's not going to bring him back.'

His eyes hardened. 'You think I don't know that?'

Molly watched him slice some celery as if it was a mortal enemy. His jaw was pulsing with tension as he worked. She let out an uneven sigh and put her wine down. 'Maybe it wasn't such a good idea for me to stay and have dinner,' she said as she slid off the stool she had perched on. 'You don't seem in the mood for company. I'll see myself out.'

He caught her at the door. His long, strong fingers met around her wrist, sending sparks of awareness right up to her armpit and beyond. She looked into his eyes and felt her heart slip sideways. Pain was etched in those green and brown depths—pain and something else that made her blood kick-start in her veins like a shot of pure adrenalin. 'Don't go,' he said in a low, gruff tone.

Molly's gaze drifted to his mouth. She felt her insides shift, a little clench of longing that was slowly but surely moving through her body.

His body was closer than it had ever been. She felt the warmth of it, the bone-melting temptation of it. She sensed the stirring of his response to her. She couldn't feel it but she could see it in his eyes as they held hers. It sent an arrow of lust through her. She wanted to feel him against her, to feel his blood surging in response to her closeness. She took a half a step to close the gap between their bodies but he dropped her wrist as if it had suddenly caught fire.

'I'm sorry,' he said, raking that same hand through his thick hair, leaving crooked finger-width pathways in its wake.

'It's fine,' Molly said, aiming for light and airy but falling miserably short. 'No harm done.'

'I don't want you to get the wrong idea, Molly,' he said, frowning heavily. 'Any ... connection between us is inadvisable.'

'Because you don't mix work with play?'

His eyes were hard and intractable as they clashed with hers. 'Because I don't mix emotion with sex.'

'Who said anything about sex?' Molly asked.

His worldly look said it all.

'Right, well ... I'm not very good at this, as you can probably tell,' she said, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. 'I try to be sophisticated and modern about it all but I guess deep down inside I'm just an old-fashioned girl who wants the fairy-tale.'

'You're no different from most women—and most men, for that matter,' he said. 'It's not wrong to want to be happy.'

'Are *you* happy, Lucas?' Molly asked, searching his tightly set features.

His eyes moved away from hers as he moved back to the kitchen. 'I need to put on the rice,' he said. 'You'd better keep an eye on your cat.'

Molly went outside to find Mittens. He wasn't too happy about being brought back inside, but she lured him back in with a thread she found hanging off her coat. She closed the door once he was inside and went back to where Lucas was washing the rice for the rice cooker. 'What can I do to help?' she said. 'Shall I set the table in the dining room?'

'I don't use the dining room,' he said. 'I usually eat in here.'

'Seems a shame to have such a lovely dining room and never use it,' Molly said. 'Don't you ever have friends over for dinner parties?'

He gave a shrug and pressed the start button on the cooker. 'Not my scene, I'm afraid.'

'Do you have a housekeeper?'

'A woman comes once a week to clean,' he said. 'I don't make much mess, or at least I try not to. I wouldn't have bothered getting anyone but Gina needed the work. Her husband left her to bring up a couple of kids on her own. She's reliable and trustworthy.'

Molly cradled her wine in her hands. 'Do you have a current girlfriend?'

He was silent for a moment. 'I'm between appointments, so to speak.'

She angled her head at him. 'What sort of women do you usually date?'

His eyes collided with hers. 'Why do you ask?'

Molly gave a little shrug. 'Just wondering.'

'I'm not a prize date, by any means,' he said after another long moment. 'I hate socialising. I hate parties. I don't drink more than one glass of alcohol.'

'Not every woman wants to party hard,' she pointed out.

He studied her unwaveringly for a moment. 'Not very many women just want to have sex and leave it at that.'

Molly felt a wave of heat rise up in her body. 'Is that all you want from a partner?' she asked. 'Just sex and nothing else?'

Had she imagined his eyes looking hungrily at her mouth for a microsecond? Desire clenched tight in her core as his gaze tethered hers in a sensually charged lock. 'It's a primal need like food and shelter,' he said. 'It's programmed into our genes.'

Molly was more aware of her primal needs than she had ever been. Her body was screaming with them, and had been from the moment she had laid eyes on him on the street the other day. It still was a shock to her that she was reacting so intensely to him. She had never thought herself a particularly passionate person. But when she was around him she felt stirrings and longings that were so fervent they felt like they would override any other consideration.

'We're surely far more evolved and civilised than to respond solely to our basest needs?' she said.

His eyes grazed her mouth. 'Some of us, perhaps.'

The atmosphere tightened another notch.

'So how do you get your primal needs met?' Molly asked with a brazen daring she could hardly believe she possessed. 'Do you drag women back here by the hair and have your wicked way with them?'

This time his gaze went to her hair. She felt every strand of it lift away from her scalp like a Mexican wave. Hot tingles of longing raced along her backbone. She felt a stirring in her breasts; a subtle tightening that made her aware of the lace that supported them. Her heart picked up its pace, a tippity-tap-tap beat that reverberated in her feminine core.

His eyes came back to hers, holding them, searing them, penetrating them. 'I'm not going to have my wicked way with you, Molly,' he said.

'But you want to.' *Oh, dear God, had she really just said that?* Molly thought.

'I'd have to be comatose not to want you,' he said. 'But I'm not going to act on it. Not in this lifetime.'

Molly felt an acute sense of disappointment but tried to cover it by playing it light. 'Glad we got that out of the way,' she said, and picked up her wine. 'You're not really my type in any case.'

A short silence passed.

‘Aren’t you going to ask what my type is?’ she asked. ‘Oh, no, wait. I remember. You already have an opinion on that, don’t you?’

‘You want someone strong and dependable, loyal and faithful,’ he said. ‘Someone who’ll stick by you no matter what. Someone who’ll want kids and has good moral values in order to raise them.’

Molly raised her brows in mock surprise. ‘Not such a bad guess. I didn’t know you knew me so well.’

‘You’re like an open book, Molly.’

She dropped her gaze from his. He was seeing far too much as it was. ‘I need to use the bathroom,’ she said.

‘The guest bathroom is just along from the library.’

As Molly came back from the bathroom she took a quick peek at the library. It was a reader’s dream of a room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stacked with old editions of the classics with a good selection of modern titles. The scent of books and furniture polish gave the room a homely, comfortable feel. She ran her fingers along the leather-bound spines as if reacquainting herself with old friends.

She thought of Lucas in his big private home with only books for company. Did he miss his family? Did he miss the wide, open spaces of the outback? Did he ever long to go home and breathe in the scent of eucalyptus and that wonderful fresh smell of the dusty earth soaking up a shower of rain?

Molly turned from the bookshelves and her gaze came upon a collection of photographs in traditional frames on the leather-topped antique desk. She picked up the first one—it was one of Lucas with his family at Christmas when he’d been a boy of about fifteen. His parents stood proudly either side of their boys. Lucas stood between his brothers, a hand on each young shoulder as if keeping them in place. All of them were smiling; their tanned young faces were so full of life and promise.

Within two years it would be a very different family that faced the camera. The local press had hounded the Bannings after the accident. And then the coroner’s inquiry a few months later had brought the national press to their door. Sensation-hungry journalists had conducted tell-all interviews with the locals. Even though the coroner had finally concluded it had been an accident and Lucas was not in any way to blame for Matt’s death, the press had painted a very different picture from the gossip and hearsay they had gleaned locally. They had portrayed Lucas as a wild boy from the bush who had taken his parents’ farm vehicle without permission and taken his best friend for a joyride that had ended in his friend’s death. Jane and Bill Banning had visibly aged overnight, Lucas even more so. He had gone from a fresh-faced teenager of seventeen to a man twice that age, who looked like the world had just landed on his shoulders.

Molly reached for the other photo on the desk. Her heart gave a tight spasm as she saw Matt’s freckled face grinning widely as he sat astride his motocross bike, his blue eyes glinting with his usual mischief.

The last time she had seen her brother he hadn’t been smiling. He had been furious with her for going into his room and finding his stash of contraband cigarettes. She had told their parents and as a result he had been grounded.

For every one of the seventeen years since that terrible day Molly had wished she had never told their parents. If Matt hadn’t been grounded he might not have slipped out with Lucas that night behind their parents’ backs. Matt had hated being confined. He’d got claustrophobic and antsy when restrictions had been placed on him. It was one of the reasons he had been thrown from the vehicle. He hadn’t been wearing a seat belt.

‘I thought you might be in here,’ Lucas said from the doorway.

Molly put the photo back down on the desk. ‘I hadn’t seen that picture before,’ she said, and picked up another one of Ian and Neil with their current partners. ‘Neil’s been going out with Hannah Pritchard for quite a while now, hasn’t he? Are they planning on getting married?’

‘I think it’s been discussed once or twice,’ he said.

She put the photo down and looked at him. ‘Would you go home for the wedding?’

His expression visibly tightened. ‘Dinner’s ready,’ he said. ‘We’ll have to make it short. I have to go back to the hospital to check on a patient.’

Molly followed him back to the kitchen, where he had set up two places, one at each end of the long table. He seemed distracted as they ate. He barely spoke and he didn’t touch his wine. She got the feeling he had only eaten because his body needed food. He seemed relieved when she pushed her plate away and said she was full.

‘I’ll walk you home on the way,’ he said, and reached for his coat.

‘You’re not going to drive?’

His eyes shifted away from hers as he slipped his hospital lanyard over his neck. ‘It’s only a few blocks,’ he said. ‘I like the exercise.’

They walked in silence until they came to the front door of Molly’s bedsit. ‘I’ll let you know as soon as I find another place to rent,’ she said. ‘I hope it won’t be more than a few days.’

‘Fine.’

‘Thanks for dinner,’ she said after a tight little silence. ‘I’ll have to return the favour some time.’

‘You’re not obliged to,’ he said, and glanced impatiently at his watch. ‘I’d better get going.’

‘Bye.’ Molly lifted her hand in a little wave but he had already turned his back and left.

CHAPTER THREE

LUCAS DIDN'T LEAVE the hospital until close to three a.m. and the streets were deserted as he trudged home. The chilly wind drove ice-pick holes through his chest in spite of his thick woollen coat and scarf. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and wondered what it was like back home at Carboola Creek. He loathed February in London. It was so bleak and miserable. If the sun did manage to break through the thick wad of clouds it was usually weak and watery, and while the snow was beautiful when it first fell, it all too soon turned to slippery brown slush.

He thought longingly of Bannington Homestead. If he closed his eyes he could almost smell the rain-soaked red dust of the plains. It seemed a lifetime ago since he had felt the bright hot sun on his face.

He opened the door of his house and a piteous meow sounded. 'Damn you, Molly,' he muttered as the little cat came limping towards him with its big possum-like eyes shining in welcome. 'Don't get too comfortable,' he addressed it in a gruff tone. 'You're not staying long.'

The cat meowed again and ribboned itself around his ankles before moving way to play with the fringe of the Persian carpet. Lucas caught a faint whiff of Molly's perfume in the air as he moved through the house. It was strongest in the library, or maybe that was just his imagination. He breathed in deeply. The hint of jasmine and sweet peas teased his nostrils, reminding him of hot summer evenings sitting out on the veranda at the homestead.

He let out a long weary sigh and picked up the photograph of his family. His parents were in their sixties now. They were still working the land alongside Neil. Ian was the other side of town on another property. His parents had come over to London for visits a few times. He had loved having them here but it made it so much harder when they left. His mother always cried. Even his stoic father had a catch in his voice and moisture in his eyes. Lucas had come to dread the airport goodbyes. He hated seeing them so distraught. He had not encouraged them to return and always made some excuse about being too busy to entertain visitors.

Lucas wondered if they missed him even half as much as he missed them. But it was the price he had to pay. He put the photo back down and looked at Matt's photo. He saw echoes of his mate's face in the pretty features of Molly. That dusting of freckles, the same uptilted nose, the same light brown hair with its sun-bleached highlights.

Was that why he felt so drawn to her?

Not entirely.

She was all woman now, a beautiful young woman with the whole world at her feet. He saw the way the male staff and patients looked at her. It was the same way *he* looked at her. He had been so close to pulling her into his arms and kissing her. He had wanted to press his mouth to the soft bow of hers to see if it felt as soft and sweet as it looked.

But he could just imagine how her parents would react if he laid a finger on their precious daughter. He thought of what *his* parents would feel. They wouldn't say anything out loud, but he knew they would find it hard to accept Molly. It wasn't her fault, but any involvement with her would make moving on from the past that much more difficult for them and for him. Did he want her so badly because he knew he couldn't have her? Or was it just that she was everything he had always wanted for himself but didn't feel he deserved?

When Molly got to work the next morning Su Ling, one of the registrars, pulled her over and said in an undertone, 'Keep away from the boss. He's in a foul mood. We had a death overnight—David Hyland in Bed Four. He went into organ failure and Lucas was here until the wee hours with him and the family.'

Molly glanced at the empty bed and felt a sinking feeling assail her. David Hyland had only been forty-two with a wife and two young children. He'd developed complications after routine gall-

bladder surgery and Molly had only spoken to his wife the day before about how hopeful they were that he would pull through.

Deaths in ICU were part of the job. Not everyone made it. It was a fact of life. Miracles happened occasionally but there was only so much medicine and critical care could do. She wondered if every death on the unit brought home to Lucas the death that haunted him most.

‘Don’t you have anything better to do than to stand there staring into space?’ Lucas barked from behind her.

Molly swung around to face him. ‘I was just—’

‘There are two families waiting in the counselling rooms for updates on their loved ones,’ he said in a clipped, businesslike tone. ‘I would appreciate it if you got your mind on the job.’

‘My mind is on the job,’ she said. ‘I was on my way to speak to the Mitchell family now. Do you have any further updates on Claire that I should make them aware of?’

His eyes looked bloodshot as if he hadn’t slept the night before. ‘Claire is stable,’ he said. ‘I can’t give them anything other than that. We’ll try and wean her off the sedation again tomorrow. We’ll repeat the scans then as well.’

Molly watched as he strode away, barking out orders as he went. Megan, one of the nurses, caught her eye and raised her brows meaningfully as she walked past with a catheter bag. ‘He obviously didn’t get laid last night.’

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