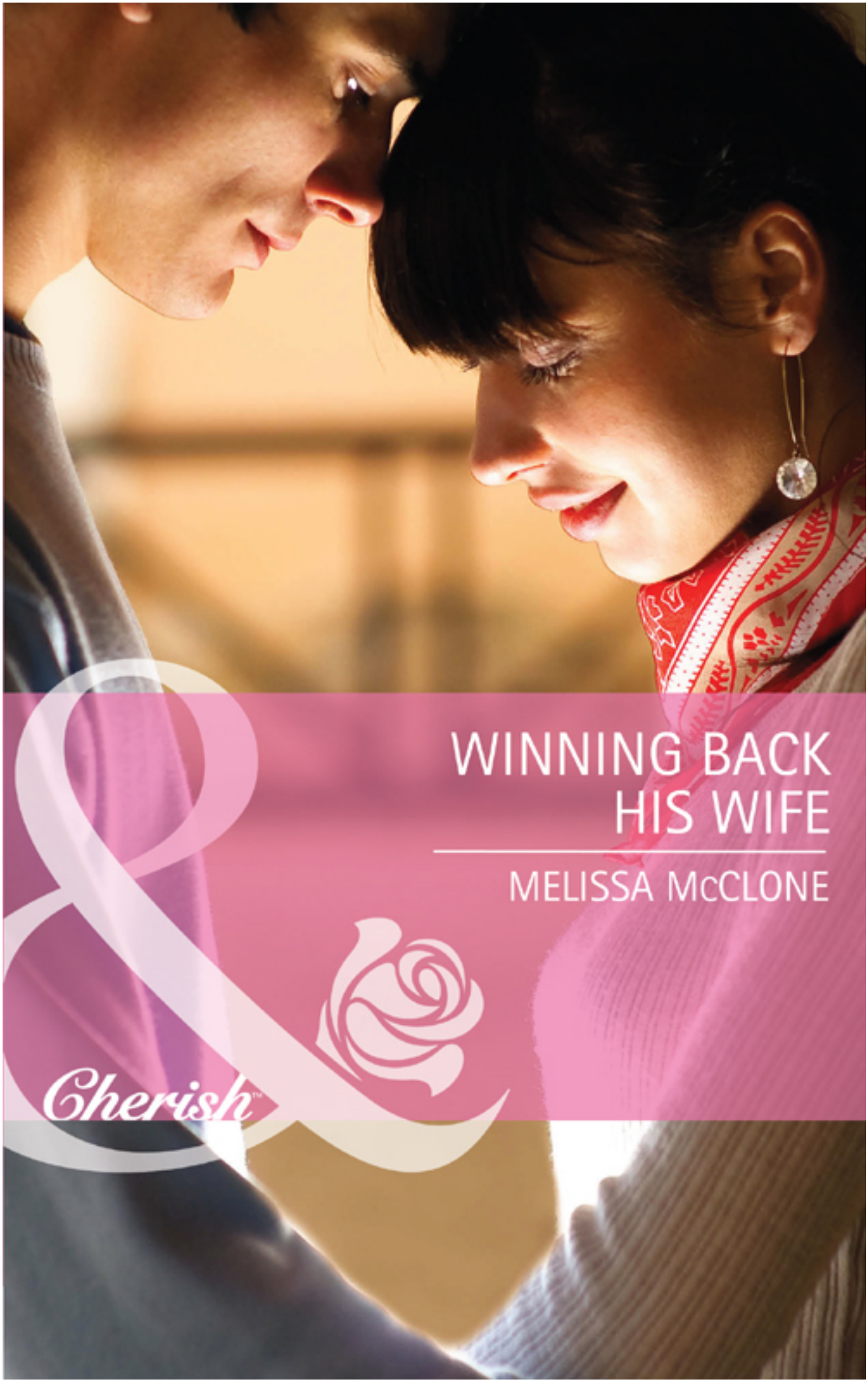
WINNING BACK
HIS WIFE
MELISSA McCLONE
Cherish

Melissa McClone

Winning Back His Wife

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When Sarah Purcell ends up in hospital, her soon-to-be-ex husband, Dr Cullen Gray, rushes to her bedside. Caring for his wife 24/7, this time Cullen won't bury his feelings. As their old attraction begins to simmer once more, he has only one thing on his mind: to bring his wife back by his side.

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Promise.

The word echoed through her fuzzy brain.

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They’d promised to love, honor and cherish each other until death do them part. But none of that had mattered in the end. She couldn’t believe Cullen was promising to stay now. Maybe not today, but tomorrow or the next day or the day after, he would be gone, leaving her with only memories and a gold wedding band. The knowledge hurt, a deep, heart-wrenching pain, worse than any physical pain she’d endured.

I’m not going anywhere.

A part of her wished Cullen would remain at her side. A part of her wished marriage vows were more than words exchanged in front of an Elvis impersonator. A part of her wished love…lasted.

Dear Reader,

I never realized when I set a book on Mount Hood that I would fall in love with the fictional town of Hood Hamlet and its residents, particularly a group of brave mountain rescue heroes with Oregon Mountain Search and Rescue (OMSAR). But I did, and I haven’t looked back. But with this story, I wanted to change things up a little.

I added another glacier-covered peak, Mount Baker, the second most active volcano in the Cascades, near Bellingham, Washington. The engineer in me really had fun researching volcanoes in the Pacific Northwest!

Instead of a November-to-January time frame, I used May to June. Not exactly when you’d expect to find Christmas magic at work, but spring is the perfect time for love to bloom. Or, in the case of mountain rescue volunteer Dr Cullen Gray and volcanologist Sarah Purcell, rebloom.

Their romance had been calling to me ever since Cullen made an oh-so-brief appearance in my book *Firefighter Under the Mistletoe*. I kept wondering why he was so serious and didn't smile much. When I finally figured it out, I knew I had to tell his story next.

I hope you enjoy reading about Cullen and Sarah as well as Hood Hamlet. Christmas magic in June? You never know!

Enjoy!

Melissa

About the Author

With a degree in mechanical engineering from Stanford University, the last thing **MELISSA McCLONE** ever thought she would be doing was writing romance novels. But analyzing engines for a major US airline just couldn't compete with her happily-ever-afters. When she isn't writing, caring for her three young children or doing laundry, Melissa loves to curl up on the couch with a cup of tea, her cats and a good book. She enjoys watching home decorating shows to get ideas for her house —a 1939 cottage that is *slowly* being renovated. Melissa lives in Lake Oswego, Oregon, with her own real-life hero husband, two daughters, a son, two lovable but oh-so-spoiled indoor cats and a no-longer-stray outdoor kitty who has decided to call the garage home.

Melissa loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at PO Box 63, Lake Oswego, OR 97034, USA, or contact her via her website, www.melissamcclone.com.

Winning Back His Wife

Melissa McClone

www.millsandboon.co.uk
Special thanks to Dave Tucker, John Scurlock,
Terri Reed and Jennifer Shirk.

CHAPTER ONE

DR. CULLEN GRAY trudged through the Wy'East Day Lodge, his sore feet entombed in climbing boots he couldn't wait to remove. His muscles ached after two grueling days on Mount Hood. But whatever he'd been through was worth it.

A climber had been rescued.

That trumped a night spent in a warm, comfy bed, a hot shower in the morning and a homemade breakfast complete with scrambled eggs, chicken-apple sausage and buttermilk pancakes with huckleberry syrup.

The smell of coffee wafted in the air, the aroma tickling Cullen's cold nose and teasing his hungry, grumbling stomach. A jolt of caffeine would keep him going long enough to survive the rescue debriefing and the short drive home to Hood Hamlet.

Twenty feet in front of him, members of Oregon Mountain Search and Rescue, OMSAR, sat at a long cafeteria table with coffee cups in front of them. Backpacks, helmets and jackets were scattered on the floor.

Almost there.

Cullen was looking forward to taking off his backpack and sitting, if only for the length of the debriefing.

He passed a group of teenagers, students at the Hood Hamlet Snowboarding Academy, who laughed while they took a break from riding. A little girl, around six years old and dressed in pink from her helmet to her ski boots, wobbled away from the hot-chocolate machine holding a cup with both hands.

A few hours ago, a life had hung in the balance, cocooned inside a rescue litter attached by cables to a hovering helicopter. But down here, lower on the mountain, everything had continued as usual, as if what run to take on the slopes was the most important decision of the day. He much preferred being up there, though not because of any element of danger or adrenaline rush. He took only calculated risks to help others and save lives.

Cullen lived simply in the quaint, Alpine-inspired village of Hood Hamlet. Work and the mountain comprised his life. Sometimes it was enough, other times not even close. But days like today reminded him why he did what he did, both as a doctor and as a volunteer mountain rescuer. Satisfaction flowed through his veins.

A successful mission.

It didn't get much better than that. Well, unless the climber hadn't fallen into the Bergschrund crevasse to begin with. But given the distance of the fall, the climber's serious injuries and the technical nature of the rescue, Cullen thought Christmas magic—something Hood Hamlet was famous for—had been in play even though it was May, not December.

Either that or plain old dumb luck.

Cullen preferred thinking Christmas magic had been involved. Luck seemed too…random. He might be a doctor, but living here for almost a year had opened his mind. Not everything could be explained and proven scientifically. Sometimes patients defied their diagnosis and survived with no logical explanation.

As soon as he reached the table, he shrugged off his backpack. Gear rattled inside. Carabiners clinked on the outside. When the straps left his shoulders, relief shot straight to his toes.

The pack thudded against the floor. The sound echoed through the cafeteria and drew a few glances from the skiers, riders and tourists.

Let them look. Complain even. Nothing, not even his tight muscles or tiredness, could ruin this day.

He removed his black parka with the white block letters spelling RESCUE on the sleeve, tucked it under one of the outside straps of his pack, then sat. His feet felt as if they were sighing in delight at not having to support any weight.

"Nice work up there, Doc." Bill Paulson, another volunteer with OMSAR, sat on the opposite side of the table. He passed Cullen a cup of coffee from the extras sitting between them. "What you did in the Bergschrund to save that guy's life…"

Cullen bent over to loosen his boots. He didn't like anyone fussing over what he did, let alone another mountain rescuer. He didn't want the praise. The result—a life saved—was payback enough. "All in a day's work."

"Maybe in the emergency department, but not down inside a crevasse." Paulson raised his cup. "I'm buying the first round at the brewpub tonight."

A beer was in order after this mission. "You're on."

Zoe Hughes, the pretty wife of OMSAR team leader Sean Hughes and an associate member herself, stood behind Cullen. "Want anything?"

Heat from the coffee cup warmed his cold fingers. "This is all I need right now."

"Let me know when you want a refill." Her wide smile reached all the way to her blue eyes. "Rumor has it you were a real hero up there today."

He shifted in his seat. Some considered mountain rescue a reckless pursuit, but nothing could be further from the truth. Rescuer safety was the priority, no matter what the mission. "Just doing my job."

She touched his shoulder. "Sean doesn't think he's a hero, either. But you're all heroes. What you guys do, who you are, is the very definition of the word."

"Damn straight. That's why we always get the girls." Paul-son winked. "You're going to be my wingman tonight, Gray. We're going to get so many numbers we'll need more memory for our cell phones."

Paulson, a firefighter with Hood Hamlet Fire and Rescue, had a reputation of being a player. No one would accuse Cullen of being one. He had never expected to be living like a monk, but he had a good reason. One that would end soon enough. Until then…

He stared into his coffee, black and strong, fighting memories and resentment.

Going out and doing anything other than drinking a beer and eating a burger didn't appeal to Cullen in the slightest. The one woman he wanted didn't want him. Time to move on. He understood that. He'd come to terms with it. But he saw no reason to frustrate or tempt himself with something he couldn't have right now. He lifted his cup. "You'll get those phone numbers whether I'm there or not."

"True that," Paulson agreed. "But think of the fun we'll have together. Just so you know, I'm partial to blondes. Though I don't mind brunettes or redheads."

Zoe shook her head, her long hair swaying back and forth. "One of these days you're going to have to grow up and realize women weren't put on this planet solely for your enjoyment."

Paulson flashed her a charming grin. "Not going to happen."

Zoe grimaced. "Too bad, because love does conquer all."

"Love sucks," Paulson countered before Cullen could echo the sentiment.

"Sometimes." A sigh seemed poised to float away from her lips at any moment. "But other times it's pure magic."

Yeah, right. Cullen sipped his coffee. Love caused nothing but heartache and pain. He'd stick with Christmas magic.

Zoe went to refill someone else's cup. The din of conversation increased, and so did the number of people in the cafeteria. More rescue-team members arrived. A photographer snapped pictures. Someone placed a plate of cookies on the table. It had to be getting closer to briefing time.

He checked his watch. "What's taking so long?"

Paulson grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the plate. “Hughes must still be outside talking to reporters.”

Cullen wasn’t a big fan of the media when it came to the way they covered and dramatized rescue missions on Mount Hood. Whenever anything went down on the mountain, reporters and news trucks raced to the rescue operation’s base at Timberline Lodge, eager to capitalize on some poor soul’s misfortune to increase ratings, web-page hits or circulation.

His stomach growled. He reached for an oatmeal raisin cookie. “Better Hughes than me. I want no part of that feeding frenzy.”

Paulson snickered. “Once the press finds out who was lowered into the Bergschrund…”

“How about we say it was you?” Cullen bit into his cookie.

“I’m game,” Paulson said. “Especially if the hot blond reporter from Channel Nine wants to talk to me again.”

Cullen took another bite. Tasted like one of Carly Porter’s cookies. Her husband had been on the mission, too. Jake owned the local brewing company and brewpub. A pint of Porter’s Wy’East Lager, with Paulson buying, would hit the spot tonight.

Sheriff’s Deputy Will Townsend approached the table with Sean Hughes at his side. Concern clouded their gazes. Worry was etched in their features.

Cullen wrapped his hands around his coffee cup. He hoped the climber hadn’t taken a turn for the worse on the helicopter ride or at the hospital. The guy was married with two young kids.

“Hey, Doc.” Will tipped his deputy’s hat. “Cell phone turned off?”

“Battery died.” Cullen wondered what his cell phone had to do with anything. He placed his cup on the table. “Not a lot of places to recharge up there.”

Will’s eyes darkened. “We’ve been trying to reach you.”

The deputy’s words tightened Cullen’s throat. He recognized the serious tone and steady cadence. He’d used both when delivering bad news at the hospital. “What’s going on?”

“You’re listed as Sarah Purcell’s emergency contact.”

Hearing the name startled Cullen. His coffee spilled, spreading across the table. “Damn.”

Paulson grabbed napkins. “No worries, Doc. I’ve got it.”

Cullen stood and faced the deputy. “What about Sarah?”

The deputy’s prominent Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

“There was an accident on Mount Baker.”

“Accident?” Cullen asked.

A muscle twitched at Will’s jaw. “The details are sketchy, but it appears Sarah was at the crater rim when a steam blast occurred. She was hit by rock and fell a significant distance.”

Shock reverberated through Cullen’s body. His vision blurred. The world tilted sideways.

A hand tightened around his arm. “Steady, Doc.”

Hughes.

“Deep breaths,” another voice said.

Paulson.

Cullen felt himself being seated.

Sarah. Please, God, not her.

His emotions swirled like a whirlpool. Fear and dread spiraled, one on top of the other. Nightmares from another time joined in. Images of his twin brother, Blaine, flashed with strobe-light intensity until Cullen thought his head would explode. He forced himself to breathe. “Is she…?”

What was happening? He was a doctor. Death was something he saw almost every time he worked a shift at the hospital. But he couldn’t bring himself to say the word.

Will leaned forward. “Sarah’s at a hospital in Seattle.”

Not dead. A hundred pounds of anxiety melted away from each of Cullen's bone-weary shoulders. Tears of relief pricked his eyes. He hadn't seen Sarah in months. Cullen had wanted her out of his life, but he hadn't wanted anything bad to happen to her.

Will named one of the top trauma centers in the Pacific Northwest.

Cullen blinked, gaining control in an instant. He'd done his residency there. Sarah would receive top-notch treatment, but he needed to make sure it was the right care. A good thing Seattle was only a four-hour drive away.

He stood, nearly toppling over before he could catch his balance. Tired. He was tired from the mission. "I've got to go."

Hughes steadied him. "Not so fast."

"We've been getting updates," Will explained. "Sarah is in surgery again."

Again. Not good. Cullen's hands fisted. Surgery could mean anything from pinning a fracture to relieving pressure on the brain. Volcanoes weren't safe places. Being a volcanologist had put Sarah in danger, but no serious injuries had resulted. Bumps, bruises, a few stitches. But this…

Cullen dragged his hand through his hair. He was a doctor. He could handle this. "Any prognosis yet?"

Hughes touched Cullen's shoulder with the strength of a rescue leader and the compassion of a friend. "She's in critical condition."

A snowball-size lump burned in his throat. While he'd been on the mountain saving a life, Sarah had been fighting for hers. Bitter-tasting regret coated his mouth. Oh-so-familiar guilt, too. He hadn't been able to help Blaine. Cullen had to help Sarah.

He couldn't waste any more time. Sarah needed someone with her, and he was all she had.

Cullen grabbed his pack. "I've got to get to Seattle."

Hughes touched his shoulder again. "Johnny Gearhart has a plane. Porter's making arrangements. I'm going to drive you home in your truck so you can change and pack a bag, then we'll get you there. ASAP. I promise."

A protest sat on the tip of Cullen's tongue. He hadn't lived in Hood Hamlet long, unlike several of these guys who'd grown up on the mountain. He'd climbed and drunk beer and watched sports on television with them, but he relied on himself and didn't ask for help. He didn't need help. But Sarah did. He swallowed the words he normally would have said and tried a new one instead. "Thanks."

"That's what friends are for," Hughes said. "Let's go."

Cullen nodded once.

"I'm in." Paulson, carrying his gear, fell into step with them. "So Sarah…Is she family? Your sister?"

"No," Cullen said. "Sarah's my wife."

Where am I?

Sarah Purcell wanted to open her eyes, but her eyelids felt as if they'd been glued shut. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't open them.

What was going on?

Something pounded. It took her a minute—maybe longer—to realize the pounding was coming from her head. Maybe she shouldn't try opening her eyes again.

Her head wasn't the only thing hurting. Even her toenails throbbed. But the pain was a dull ache as if it were far off in the distance. Much better than being up close and personal like a battering ram of pain pummeling her.

She'd been hurting more. A whole lot more. This was…better.

White. She'd been surrounded by white.

Cold. She'd been so cold, but now she was warm. And dry. Hadn't she been wet? And the air… It smelled different.

Strange, but it felt as if something were sticking out of her nose.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

She didn't recognize the noise, the frequency of the tone or the rhythm. But the consistent beat made her think of counting sheep. No reason to try opening her eyes again. Not when she could drift off to sleep.

"Sarah."

The man's voice sliced through the thick fog clouding her brain. His voice sounded familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. Not surprising, given she had no idea where she was or why it was so dark or what the beeping might be.

So many questions.

She parted her lips to speak, to ask what was going on, but no words came out. Only a strangled, unnatural sound escaped her sandpaper-dry throat.

Water. She needed water.

"It's okay, Sarah," he said in a reassuring tone. "You're going to be okay."

Glad he thought so. Whoever he might be.

She wasn't sure of anything. Something told her she should care more than she did, but her brain seemed to be taking a sabbatical.

What had happened?

Clouds had been moving in. A horrible noise had filled the air. Swooshing. Exploding. Cracking. The memory of the teethgrinding sound, worse than two cars colliding on the freeway, sent a shudder through her.

A large hand covered hers. The warmth of the calloused, rough skin felt as familiar to Sarah as the voice had sounded. Was it the same person? She had no idea, but the touch comforted and soothed. Maybe now she could go back to sleep.

"Her pulse increased." Concern filled his voice. He seemed to be talking to someone else. "Her lips parted. She's waking up."

Not her. He couldn't mean her.

Sarah wanted to sleep, not wake up.

Someone touched her forehead. Not the same person still holding her hand. This one had smooth, cold skin. Clammy skin.

"I don't see a change," another man said, a voice she didn't recognize. "You've been here a long time. Take a break. Eat a decent meal. Sleep in a real bed. We'll call if her condition changes."

The warm hand remained on hers. Squeezed. "I'm not leaving my wife."

Wife.

The word seeped through her foggy mind until an image formed and sharpened. His eyes, as blue as the sky over Glacier Peak on a clear day, had made her feel like the only woman in the world. His smile, rare to appear but generous when it did, had warmed her heart and made her want to believe happy endings might be possible, even if she'd known deep in her heart of hearts they didn't exist. His handsome face, with its high forehead, sculpted cheekbones, straight nose and dimpled chin, had haunted her dreams for the past year.

Memories rushed forward, colliding and overlapping with each other, until one came into focus.

Cullen.

He was here.

Warmth flowed through her like butter melting on a fresh-from-the-oven biscuit.

He'd come for her. Finally.

Urgency gripped Sarah. She wanted—no, needed—to see him to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

But the heavy curtain, aka her eyelids, didn't want to open. She struggled to move her fingers beneath his hand. It had to be Cullen's hand, right? Nothing happened.

A different machine beeped at a lower frequency. Another machine buzzed.

Cullen.

Sarah tried to speak again, but couldn't. Whatever was stuck in her nose seemed to be down her throat, too. No matter. She was so thankful he was with her. She needed to tell him that. She wanted him to know how much…

Wait a minute.

Common sense sliced through the cotton clogging her brain.

Cullen shouldn't be here. He'd agreed divorce was the best option. He no longer lived in the same town, the same state as she did.

So why was he here?

Sarah forced her lips apart to ask, but no sound emerged. Her frustration grew.

"See," Cullen said. "Something's going on."

"I stand corrected, Dr. Gray," the other person said. "This is a very good sign."

"Sarah."

The anxiety in Cullen's voice surprised her as much as the concern. She tried to reconcile what she was hearing. Tried and failed. She wanted to believe he cared about her and that even if they'd both given up on marriage, their time together hadn't been so bad he'd wanted to forget about everything.

Maybe if she could open her eyes a little she could let him know that.

Sarah used every bit of strength she could muster.

A slit of light appeared. So bright. Too bright. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The light disappeared as darkness reclaimed her, but the pounding in her head increased. No longer far away, the pain was in her face, as if someone were playing Whac-A-Mole on her forehead.

She gritted her teeth, unsure if the awful growling sound she'd heard came from her. Everything felt surreal, as if she were a part of some avant-garde indie film. She wanted out. Now.

"It's okay, Sarah. I'm right here." Cullen's rich, warm voice covered her like one of his grandmother's hand-sewn quilts. "I'm not leaving you."

Not true. He had left her.

As soon as she'd mentioned divorce, he'd moved out of their apartment in Seattle, taking everything of his except the bed. After completing his residency, he'd taken off to Hood Hamlet, Oregon. She'd finished her PhD at the University of Washington, then accepted a postdoctorate position with MBVI—Mount Baker Volcano Institute—in Bellingham, a town in northwest Washington.

Another memory crystalized.

Sarah had been developing a program to deploy additional seismometers on Mount Baker. She'd been trying to determine if magma was moving upward. She'd needed more data. Proof one way or the other. Getting the information meant climbing the volcano and digging out seismometers to retrieve data. Putting in expensive probes that provided telemetered data didn't make sense with their limited funding and the volatile conditions near the crater.

The crater.

She'd been at the crater rim to download data to a laptop and rebury the seismometer. She'd done that. At least, she thought so. Everything was sort of fuzzy.

Apprehension rose. Anxiety escalated.

The rotten-egg scent of sulfur had been thick and heavy in the air. Had she retrieved the data or not? Why couldn't she remember?

Machines beeped, the noise coming faster with each passing second.

She tried to recall what had happened to her, but her mind was blank. Pain intensified, as if someone had turned up the volume to full blast on a television set, then hidden the remote control.

"Sarah." His voice, sharp-edged like fractured obsidian, cut through the hurting. "Try to relax."

If only she could. Questions rammed into her brain. The jack-hammering in her head increased tenfold.

"You're in pain," Cullen said.

She nodded.

The slight movement sent a jagged pain ripping through her.

Her throat burned. Her eyes stung. The air in her lungs disappeared when she exhaled. Inhaling, she could hardly take a breath. A giant boulder seemed to be pressing down on her chest.

"Dr. Marshall."

Cullen's harsh tone added to her discomfort, to her fear. Air, she needed air.

"On it, Dr. Gray."

Something buzzed. Footsteps sounded. Running. Wheels clattered against the floor. More voices. She couldn't hear what they were saying, nor did she care.

She gasped for a breath, sucking in a minuscule amount of air. The oxygen helped. Too bad the hurting more than doubled.

Make it stop. Please, Cullen. Make it…

The fear dissipated. The pain dulled. The boulder was lifted off her. By Cullen? He used to take such good care of her, whether she wanted him to or not. If only he could have loved her… .

Floating. Sarah felt as if she were a helium-filled balloon let loose and allowed to float away in the sky. Up, up toward the fluffy white clouds. But she didn't want to go yet. Not until…"Cull…"

"I'm right here, Sarah." His warm breath fanned her cheek. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

Promise.

The word echoed through her fuzzy brain.

Promise.

They'd promised to love, honor and cherish each other until death do them part. But Cullen had withdrawn from her, putting his heart into his all-consuming work and nothing into her. He'd seemed so stable and supportive, but he wasn't as open as she'd originally thought, and he'd held back emotionally. Still, they'd shared some wonderful times and adventures together. A year living in Seattle. Climbing, laughing, loving.

But none of that had mattered in the end. She'd brought up divorce, expecting at least to discuss their marriage. Instead, he'd said okay to a divorce, confirming her fear that he regretted his hasty decision to marry her. Not only had he been willing to let her go without a fight, but he'd been the first one to leave.

That was why she couldn't believe Cullen was promising to stay now. Maybe not today, but tomorrow or the next day or the day after he would be gone, leaving her with only memories and a gold wedding band.

The knowledge hurt, a deep, heart-wrenching pain, worse than any physical pain she'd endured.

I'm not going anywhere.

A part of her wished Cullen would remain at her side. A part of her wished marriage vows were more than words exchanged in front of an Elvis impersonator. A part of her wished love…lasted.

But Sarah knew better. She knew the truth.

Nothing ever lasted. No one ever stayed. Even when they promised they would.

CHAPTER TWO

CULLEN LOST TRACK of time sitting in Sarah's hospital room. His friends returned to Hood Hamlet after driving his truck to Seattle so he'd have transportation. They supported him via text and phone calls. His family offered to come, but he told them no. They didn't need more grief in their lives, and that was all they would find here, in spite of Sarah's progress.

This small room, four walls with an attached bathroom, had become his world except for trips to the cafeteria and a few hours spent each night at a hotel. And his world revolved around the woman asleep in the hospital bed.

He rubbed his chin. Stubble raked his fingertips.

Maybe that was why this felt so strange. He was married to Sarah, but she'd stopped being his wife nearly a year ago. In Hood Hamlet she hadn't existed. At least not to anyone he knew. Not until her accident.

He rose from his chair, wishing he could be anywhere but here. Not even the familiar artificial lighting and antiseptic smells brought him comfort. He'd spent more time at hospitals than anywhere else the past six years—longer if he counted his four years at medical school. But nothing could quiet the unease tying his stomach in figure-eight knots.

His anxiety made no sense.

Sarah's condition wasn't as serious as her initial prognosis had indicated. Antibiotics had cured an unexpected infection and fever. The nasogastric tube had been removed from her nose. Her cuts had scabbed over. The incisions from her surgeries were healing. Even her closed-head injury had been relatively minor, with no swelling or bleeding.

Surely that had to mean…something. Time to settle matters between them? Cullen wanted to close this chapter in his life.

The woman lying in the hospital bed looked nothing like the beautiful, vibrant climber he'd met at the Red Rock Rendezvous—an annual rock-climbing festival near Las Vegas—and married two days later. He wanted this injured Sarah to replace the image he carried in his heart—make that his head. Her long chestnut-colored hair, clear green eyes, dazzling smile and infectious laughter had been imprinted on his brain along with memories of hot kisses and passionate nights. She was like one of those adrenaline-rushing, stomach-in-your-throat, let-me-off-now carnival rides. The kind of ride that looked exciting and fun from a distance, but once on, made you wonder what you'd been thinking when you handed over your ticket.

That had been his problem with Sarah. He hadn't been thinking. She'd overwhelmed him. Too bad he couldn't blame eloping on being drunk. Oh, he'd been intoxicated at the time—by her, not alcohol.

Cullen crossed the room to the side of her bed.

He'd been trying to forget Sarah. He wanted to forget her. But thoughts of her entered his mind at the strangest of times—on the mountain, at the hospital, in bed. But he knew what would stop that from happening—divorce.

After the divorce things will be better.

These past months the words had become his mantra when he was frustrated or lonely.

Sarah's left hand slipped off the edge of the bed. That didn't look comfortable. He placed her arm back on the mattress. Her skin felt cold.

Cullen didn't want her to catch a chill. He pulled up the blanket and tucked it under her chin.

Sarah didn't stir. So peaceful and quiet. Words he would never have used in the past to describe her. She'd been fiery and passionate, driven and always up for a challenge or adventure. Nothing, not even the flu, had slowed her down much.

The silence in the room prodded him into action. Staring at Sarah wasn't what the doctor ordered. Her doctor, that was. Dr. Marshall hadn't wanted her to sleep the day away—not that Sarah could with nurses coming in and out. But she hadn't been too coherent when she woke up, and then she'd drifted back to sleep like a newborn kitten.

Might as well get on with it, Cullen thought. If she followed the same pattern, she wouldn't be awake for long. "Rise and shine, Lavagirl."

Saying her nickname jolted him. He used to tease her about being a volcanologist until he realized she loved the piles of molten rocks more than she loved him.

He would try again. "Wake up."

Sarah didn't move. Not surprising, given her medications. If he kept talking she would wake up.

"So I…" Cullen had tried hard not to miss her. After what she'd done to him, he shouldn't miss her. He'd missed the sex, though. A lot. But he was only human—emphasis on the *man* part of the word. "I've been thinking about you."

He'd told families that talking to patients was important. Now the advice sounded stupid. But when it came to Sarah, he'd never been very smart.

Keep talking, Doc.

He struggled for something to say. His resentment toward her ran deep. Maybe if he started at the beginning of their relationship when things had been better this wouldn't feel so awkward. "Remember that first night in Las Vegas, you wanted our picture taken in front of the slot machines? We got the photo, but we also got thrown out of the casino."

The two of them had stood on the sidewalk laughing, unsure of the time because of the neon lights. Her laughter had rejuvenated his soul. She was so full of light and love he couldn't get enough of her.

"You looked up at me. Mischief gleamed in your pretty green eyes."

He'd been enchanted, transported back to the time when freedom and fun reigned supreme, when he and Blaine had been impulsive and reckless, goading each other into daredevil challenges and stunts, believing they were untouchable.

"Then you kissed me."

Changing all the plans he'd had for his life in an instant. He hadn't been able to think straight from that moment on. He hadn't cared. Being with her was a total rush. An adventure. Perfect. Nothing else mattered.

"The next night we strolled past the Happily Ever After Wedding Chapel on the strip. You joked about going inside and making things official."

She'd said if they eloped now he couldn't forget about her when they returned to Seattle or leave her standing at the altar after she wasted years of dating him and planning their big wedding. He'd promised he would never leave her like that.

The affection in her eyes had wiped out whatever brain cells remained in his head. For the first time since Blaine's descent into drugs, Cullen had felt whole, as if the missing piece of him that had died with his twin brother had been found in Sarah.

"I couldn't let you get away."

Cullen had pulled her through the chapel's double glass doors. Forgetting about his vow to take only calculated risks in the future, he'd dived in headfirst without doing his due diligence and performing a cost-benefit analysis. He hadn't weighed the odds or considered the consequences of marrying a woman he knew nothing about.

Common sense couldn't override his heart. She'd made him feel complete in a way he'd never thought he'd feel again. He'd been downright giddy when she'd accepted his impromptu proposal. Thirty minutes and $99 later, they walked out wearing matching plain gold bands and holding a marriage certificate.

A whim? A mistake?

More like a regret.

He'd remembered back in December, when everyone was kissing under the mistletoe in Hood Hamlet and he was alone. That was when it hit him. He'd wished he'd never been introduced to Sarah Purcell.

But Cullen had. He'd married her. That was why he was here now. They were husband and wife until a judge declared otherwise. But he couldn't wait to be free, to get his life in order and put his plan back in place. He was scratching one thing off the list, though. He sure as hell wasn't getting married again. Been there, done that—no need to repeat that particular disaster.

At least he would have Paulson to hang with. The guy was a confirmed bachelor, if there ever was one.

But until Cullen's divorce was final he was stuck with a wife who'd wanted to talk, to fight, to slice open one of his veins and have him bleed out every single thought and feeling he'd ever had.

After the divorce things will be better.

Cullen sat on the edge of Sarah's bed. He wanted to hate her, but seeing her like this, he couldn't. "Your lips are dry."

He picked up a tube from the bed tray, removed the cap and ran the balm over Sarah's chapped lips. She didn't stir. "Better now?"

As he returned the tube to the table, a movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention. The blanket had slipped. She'd moved her left arm again. "Sarah."

She blinked. Once. Twice. Her eyes opened, looking clear and focused. Her mouth formed a perfect O. "You're still here."

Sarah sounded surprised, but relieved. Her reaction offended him. "I told you I wasn't going anywhere."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed. "You did."

Heat emanated from the point of contact, shooting out to the tips of his fingernails and sparking up his arm. He expected her to let go. Instead she stared at him with wide eyes. The corners of her lips curved upward in a hesitant smile.

O-kay. It was a simple touch. Out of gratitude for his being here. No big deal. Except the heat tingled. It felt good. Too good. Cullen pulled his arm away. "Thirsty?"

She nodded. "Water, please."

He pushed a button on the control device that raised the head of her bed, reached for the cup sitting on the bed tray and then brought the glass to her mouth. He positioned the straw against her lower lip. Even after the balm, her lips were dry and peeling. He remembered how they used to be so soft and moist and taste so sweet.

Don't think about that. There weren't going to be any more kisses, no matter how much he'd enjoyed them in the past.

"Sip slowly," he cautioned.

Sarah did. She released the straw. "Where am I? What happened?"

The roughness in her voice scratched his heart. He held on to the glass of water. That would keep at bay the temptation to brush the hair off her face. "You're at a hospital in Seattle. There was a steam blast on Baker. You got hit by falling rock and fell."

Her mouth quirked. "Did the steam blast continue?"

"No," he said. "But Tucker Samson—he introduced himself as your boss and the head of MBVI—said this could be a sign of an impending event."

Her eyebrows slanted. Beneath the bandage on her forehead, lines formed as if she were deep in thought. "I…don't remember much."

Sarah had a mind like a steel trap and never forgot anything. He didn't blame her for sounding worried. "It's okay. You have a concussion, but it's a closed-head injury. No traumatic brain injury."

His words didn't ease her concern. Panic flickered in her eyes. "I wasn't up there by myself."

"Two others were injured, but they've been released from the hospital. You took the brunt of it. Fell quite a distance."

The words were easy to say now, but the image of Sarah when he'd first arrived at the hospital haunted him. His uselessness then reminded him of trying to help Blaine—who had wanted only to blame Cullen for his drug addiction—and of trying to revive his brother later, after he'd overdosed. Being forced to watch from the sidelines as others took care of Sarah was like having his heart ripped from his chest. He'd felt the same after being pushed away from his unconscious brother when the paramedics had arrived at their parents' house. But Sarah didn't need to know any of that.

A corner of her mouth rose into a more certain smile. "Guess that's why I feel like I've gone nine rounds in a boxing match."

"Mixed Martial Arts seems more your style."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, this does feel more like MMA than a few punches, hooks and jabs."

She hadn't lost her sense of humor. That and her intelligence had been two of Sarah's most appealing traits. She'd had a hot body, too. The hospital gown and blanket covered much of her, but she'd lost weight. Her cheekbones appeared more prominent and she looked smaller, almost fragile, a word he would never have associated with her before.

He pushed the straw toward her lips again. "Drink more." Sarah took another sip. "I've had enough. Thanks."

"Ice chips will soothe your throat. It has to be sore from the tube." He placed the cup on the bed tray. "Hungry?"

"No." A question formed in her eyes. "Should I be?"

She sounded nothing like the strong, independent woman he'd married. The vulnerability in her gaze and voice tugged at his heart, twisting him inside out. He wanted to hold her until she felt better and her uncertainty disappeared. But touching her, even out of compassion, wasn't a smart idea. "Your appetite will return soon enough."

"Maybe my appetite doesn't want hospital food."

That was more like his Sarah. Not his, he corrected. "Then your appetite is one smart cookie."

She smiled.

He smiled back.

This conversation was going better than he'd imagined. Maybe the bump on her head had shaken some sense into Sarah. Not that it changed anything between them. "I'll sneak in some decent food."

"I should eat even if I don't feel like it. I need to get back to the institute to look at data."

Her words made him bristle. Sarah was a scientist, first and foremost. Studying volcanoes wasn't a job for her, but a passion. The need to be where the action was happening was as natural an instinct as breathing to Sarah. Her work was for the greater good of science and mankind. If only she cared to put as much effort into her personal relationships.

Into him.

"Other scientists can analyze the data," he said. "You need to recover first."

"I'm the institute's specialist. They need me. Those are my seismometers up there."

"Yours?"

Her lips pursed, but not in the kiss-me-now way she had perfected. "A grant paid for them, but the data…Was the equipment damaged?"

"Tucker said the equipment was recovered. The data from the laptop is being analyzed."

"Thank goodness." She glanced around the room until her gaze landed on the door. "How soon until I can get out of here?"

He held up his hands, palms facing her. "Not so fast."

"We may be able to use the data to figure out what's going to happen on Baker. If we predict an eruption successfully, we can use the same process with other volcanoes and save lives."

Her passion cascaded out. Cullen understood why she was so adamant about her work. He felt the same about his. But he had to play devil's advocate, even if he wanted nothing more than to send her on her merry way to Bellingham. "A concussion is only one of your injuries."

Sarah looked down at herself, as if finally realizing she was more than a talking head. Her eyes narrowed at the cast on her arm. "I can slog up Baker with a sling."

As ridiculous as the image of her doing that was, he could see her attempting it. She would hurt herself more, given the pain medication she was on, if she even survived another fall. "How will you self-arrest if you slip? It's hard enough to dig in an ice ax to stop yourself with two usable hands and arms."

She moistened her lips and lifted her chin with a look of defiance. "I won't need to stop myself if I don't slip."

A smile threatened to appear at her bravado. He pressed his lips together. The last thing he wanted to do was encourage her. "You suffered internal injuries, a collapsed lung, broken ribs and an arm fracture. Not to mention you've had two surgeries."

"Surgeries?"

"You have a pin in your right arm, and you no longer have a spleen. Due to the trauma and bleeding, they had to remove it with an open procedure rather than using laparoscopic techniques."

"Oh." Sarah looked as if he'd told her she'd overslept her alarm, not had an internal organ removed through a four-inch incision. "You don't really need a spleen, right?"

A groan of frustration welled up inside him. Why couldn't she be one of those ivory-tower-type scientists who worked in a lab and never cared if they breathed fresh air or saw sunlight? Then again, he wouldn't have been attracted to someone like that. "You can survive without one."

"That's a relief." She touched her cast. "How soon before I can get back to the institute? Next week?"

Try four to six weeks, if everything went well with her recovery. Most likely six to eight with the surgery. But he reminded himself he wasn't in charge of her medical care. "You'll have to ask your doctor."

Her gaze pinned him. "You're a doctor."

"I'm not *your* doctor."

"You have to have some idea."

Cullen had more than an idea. But he wasn't here as a medical professional. He was here to support her, even if he wasn't part of her life anymore.

He'd been surprised to find out he was her only emergency contact. She'd mentioned her parents to him once, saying they were no longer a part of her life. He supposed the blank line on the employment form had needed a name, any name. No one ever thought the person listed would be contacted. "More than a couple of weeks."

She rubbed her lips together. "Guess I'd better talk to my doctor and find out."

"Once you know—"

"You'll go home," she finished for him.

She wanted him out of her life. He would be happy to accommodate her. "Yes, but not until you're out of the hospital."

Leaving her alone until then wouldn't be right.

"Thank you." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "Thanks for being here. This had to have messed up your schedule."

Sarah's unexpected sincerity curled around his heart and squeezed tight, like a hug. He shifted his weight between his feet. "My schedule doesn't matter."

Her gaze met his with an intensity he knew well. She might look bruised and battered, even broken, but intelligence and strength shone in the depths of her eyes. Her eyes were what he'd noticed

first about her when they'd met over morning coffee at a campfire. He wanted to look away, but couldn't.

"Your schedule matters," she countered. "It always has before."

"I don't want you to be alone." That much was true. "You're still my wife."

Her face paled. "My fault. I've been so busy at the institute I never followed through on my end with the divorce. I'm sorry. I'll have to get on that."

After bringing up a divorce, she'd been too busy slogging up and down Mount Baker in the name of research to file the marriage-dissolution paperwork. He'd contacted an attorney. He rubbed the back of his neck. "No need."

Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. "What do you mean?"

A part of him wanted to get back at Sarah, to hurt her the way she'd hurt him.

You're a great guy. You'll make some woman a fantastic husband. But our eloping was impulsive. I acted rashly and didn't think about what I was doing. Or what would be best for you. I'm not it. You deserve a wife who can give you the things you want. Things I can't give you.

Correction. Things she didn't want to give him.

Regret rose like bile in his throat. "I knew you were busy, so once I established residency in Oregon I got things started there."

"Oh." Her gaze never wavered from his. "Okay."

It felt anything but okay to him. The knots in his stomach tightened. His throat constricted. He'd had their entire future planned out. A house, pets, kids. And now…

Putting Mount Rainier, Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams and Mount Hood between Sarah and him had never appealed to Cullen more. "I'll go see if your doctor is around so we…you…can find out when you might be discharged."

He strode toward the door without waiting for her reply.

"Is it okay to get out of bed and use the bathroom?" Sarah asked.

Cullen stopped, cursing under his breath. He needed to help Sarah. But the last thing he wanted was to touch her, to hold her. What if he didn't want to let go?

With a calming breath, he glanced over his shoulder. "Yes, but not on your own. I'll grab a nurse and be right back."

Cullen exited the room. He could have hit the button to call the nurse, but he needed some distance, if only for as long as it took him to reach the nurses' station.

He would let the nurse determine the best way to get Sarah on her feet. If he was pressed into service, so be it. But he hoped the nurse was one of the practical types who would handle things herself.

The less he had to do with Sarah until her release, the better.

Sarah washed her hands in the bathroom sink.

A blond nurse named Natalie hovered nearby. The woman wore blue scrubs, and never stopped talking or smiling. "After surgery and pain meds, it takes a while for your system to get back to normal. But you're doing great already!"

Heat rose in Sarah's cheeks. She wasn't used to being congratulated for using the toilet. Maybe when she was a kid, but knowing her parents, she doubted it. At least Natalie had given her *some* privacy. And it sure beat having Cullen help her, even though he was stationed outside the door.

Don't think about him.

She dried her hands, wishing every movement didn't take so much effort or hurt so much. "Um, thanks. I'm not used to going to the bathroom being a community event."

"Don't be embarrassed. This is nothing compared to labor and delivery," Natalie said. "There's no room for modesty there."

Sarah couldn't imagine. Nor did she want to. Given she had no desire to marry again, she doubted she would ever set foot into labor and delivery. Unlike Cullen. If ever a man was meant to be a father…

An ache deep in her belly grabbed hold of her, like a red-tailed hawk's talons around his prey, and wouldn't let go. She struggled to breathe.

Her incision. Maybe her ribs. She leaned against the sink to allow the pain to pass.

Natalie placed a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Sit on the toilet."

A knock sounded. "Need help?"

Cullen's voice stopped whatever had been hurting. Sarah straightened. "I'm fine."

Natalie adjusted the back of the gown. "Let's get you back before Dr. Gray gets on me for keeping you away too long. Doctor hubbies are the worst, since they're sure they know what's best for their wives."

Maybe some doctors, not Cullen. He'd looked as if he wanted to bolt earlier. She didn't blame him. This was the height of awkwardness for both of them.

Natalie opened the bathroom door. "Here she is, Dr. Gray."

Sarah shuffled out of the bathroom. She felt each step. An ache. A pain. A squeezing sensation. Nausea, too.

Cullen held his arms out slightly, but he wasn't spotting her as closely as before. Dark circles under his eyes and stubble on his face made her wonder how much sleep he'd been getting. Not much, by the looks of it. But he was still the most handsome man she'd ever seen. That bothered her. She shouldn't be thinking about her future ex-husband that way. Maybe it was the pain medication.

"You're walking better." He sounded pleased.

A burst of pride shot through her. "Just needed to find my legs."

"It's awful when they go missing," Natalie joked. "The two of you should take a short walk down the hall and back. Sarah needs exercise."

Excitement spurted through Sarah. She would love to get out of this room.

Cullen's lips narrowed. He didn't look as if he wanted to go anywhere with her.

Disappointment shot straight to the tips of her toes, even though she knew he had every right to feel that way. Why would he want to spend more time with her than he absolutely had to? She'd hurt his pride by bringing up a divorce. As if shutting her out of every part of his life outside the bedroom hadn't hurt her. But she'd had to do something. It was only a matter of time before he left her. She'd saved them from suffering more hurt in the future.

"You should be walking a few times each day," Cullen said.

Of course he had to say that. He was a doctor. But he'd done enough. She wasn't about to force him into escorting her.

Sarah padded toward the window. "I'll parade around the room. This gown isn't made for walking in public unless I want to flash the entire floor."

"I doubt anyone would complain." Cullen's lighthearted tone surprised her. "Especially not Elmer, the eighty-four-year-old patient two doors down."

Natalie laughed. "Elmer would appreciate it. He's such a dirty old man. But I'm sure you wouldn't mind too much yourself, Dr. Gray."

Cullen winked at the nurse. "Well, Sarah *is* my wife."

Sarah stared at him dumbfounded. Legally she was his wife. But he wanted the divorce as much as she did. Why was he joking around as though they were still together?

He strode to the cupboard resembling a built-in armoire with a drawer on the bottom. "And since I'd rather not have any men leering at her, it's a good thing I bought this."

Sarah had no idea what he was talking about. "What?"

Cullen opened one of the cupboard doors and pulled out something orange and fuzzy. "This is for you."

She stared in disbelief at a robe. “I…”

“I hope orange is still your favorite color,” he said.

She was touched he remembered. “It is.”

Natalie clapped her hands together. “How sweet!”

His gesture sent a burst of warmth rushing through Sarah. This was so…unexpected. She cleared her throat. “Th-thanks.”

“Now your backside will be covered, and I won’t have to get into any territorial pissing matches.” He held up the robe so she could stick her left arm through the sleeve. “Let’s drape this over your right shoulder and not bother your cast.”

Sarah nodded, not trusting her voice. She appreciated Cullen staying with her at the hospital, but his company was enough. She didn’t want him buying her anything, especially something as lovely and as thoughtful as this robe.

He tied the belt around her waist. “Now you’re set.”

She didn’t feel set. She felt light-headed. Chills ran up and down her arms. Neither had anything to do with her injuries, but everything to do with the man standing next to her.

“Ready?” he asked.

No, she wasn’t.

“Go on,” Natalie encouraged. “You can do this.”

No, Sarah didn’t think she could.

Cullen extended his arm toward her. She reached for his hand, unsure if touching him would hurt or not.

He laced his fingers with hers, sending tingles shooting up her arm. “It’ll be okay.”

Chills and tingles were not okay.

“I won’t let you fall,” he said confidently.

Sarah had no doubt he would catch her if her body gave out and gravity took over. But who would stop her heart from falling for him? Or catch her if it did?

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAST THING Cullen had expected to become was Sarah's walking buddy, but that was what happened over the next three days. His reluctance gave way to anticipation for the after-meal strolls through the hospital corridors. He'd wanted to be here and help her. This offered him the perfect opportunity to do both.

They didn't discuss the past. They barely mentioned the future unless it related to her recovery. Sometimes they didn't say much at all. It was enough to be with her, supporting her. Enough, he realized, for now.

As they walked through the hospital's atrium full of tall trees and flowering plants, Cullen held Sarah's hand. A satisfied smile settled on his lips. "You did have the energy to make it down here."

"Told you so. This is much better than walking the hallways upstairs." Sarah glanced up at the skylights. The ends of her long chestnut hair swung like a pendulum. Her bruises were fading, more yellow and brown than blue. "I can't wait until I can go outside."

"It won't be long." Sarah looked better, healthier. He squeezed her hand. "You're getting stronger every day."

Her green eyes sparkled. "It's all this exercise."

He wished it was because of him.

Yeah, right. He wasn't foolish enough to think this time together meant anything. These walks were about her health, nothing else. "Exercise can be as important as medication in a patient's recovery. So can laughter."

She grinned wryly. "That's why you wanted to watch the comedy show last night."

"You laughed."

"I did. And I'm smiling now."

"You have a very nice smile."

"Thanks." She glanced at their linked hands. "Do you think I could try walking on my own?"

Cullen had gotten so used to being her living, breathing walker, holding her hand had become second nature. But it wasn't something he should get used to, even if it was…nice. He released her hand. "Go ahead."

Sarah took a careful, measured step. And another.

He flexed his fingers, missing the feel of her warm skin against his. "Tomorrow you'll want to hop on a bike instead."

Her lips curved downward in a half frown, half pout. "I like our walks."

"Me, too."

Her smile, as bright as a summer day at Smith Rock, took his breath away. He rubbed his face. Stubble pricked his hand. He'd been in a rush to get to the hospital and forgotten to shave again.

"But I have to be honest." She looked around, as if seeing who might be listening. "I'm ready to escape this joint."

"I don't blame you." Except once she left, everything would go back to the way it had been. They would live separate lives, in separate states. The realization unsettled him. "You should be released soon."

"Has Dr. Marshall mentioned a discharge date?"

The anticipation in her voice made Cullen feel foolish for enjoying this time together. She wanted a divorce. He wanted one, too. "No. But given your progress, Dr. Marshall might have one in mind. Ask him when he makes his rounds."

Hope danced in her eyes. "I will."

Sarah took another step, swaying. She stumbled forward.

"Whoa." Cullen wrapped his right arm around her waist and grabbed her left hand. "Careful."

She clutched his hand. “I lost my balance.”

If that was the case, why was she leaning against him with her fingers digging into his hand? But he liked the way she clung to him. “This is the longest walk we’ve taken. Let’s head back to your room.”

He expected an argument. Instead she nodded.

Sarah loosened her grip and flexed her hand. “I can make it on my own.”

He laced his fingers with hers. “I know, but humor me anyway.”

She held on to his hand. “I suppose that’s the least I can do after all you’ve done for me.”

A list of what he’d done for her the past two years scrolled through his mind. “I suppose it is.”

Sarah owed him, and he would gladly take this as payback. He wasn’t about to let go of her. And that had nothing to do with how good having her close felt. He caught a whiff of her floral-scented shampoo. Or how good she smelled. Nothing at all.

That afternoon, Sarah gripped the edge of the hospital blanket. She stared at Dr. Marshall, wondering if she’d misunderstood him. She sure hoped so. “Don’t you mean an independent discharge?”

“An independent discharge is not going to happen.” Dr. Marshall looked like a grandfather, rather than one of Seattle’s top surgeons, with his silver-wire-frame glasses and thinning gray hair, but the man was turning out to be the devil in disguise. “You are unable to care for yourself. Your discharge planner and orthopedist agree.”

She hadn’t been waiting all afternoon full of hope only to hear this. “That’s…silly.”

Cullen, who leaned against the far wall near the window, gave a blink-and-you’d-miss-it shake of his head.

Her fingers tightened on the fabric, nearly poking through the thin material. She didn’t like being so aware of Cullen’s every movement. Her senses had become heightened where he was concerned. She’d wondered if he felt the same way. Now she knew.

No!

Frustration tensed her muscles, making her abdomen hurt more. Disappointment ping-ponged through her. They’d shared lovely walks though the hospital, holding hands like high-school sweethearts. She’d assumed Cullen would support her independent-discharge request, but he hadn’t. He didn’t want her returning to her apartment in Bellingham to stay by herself.

“Nothing about this is silly,” Dr. Marshall said. “You are lucky to be alive.”

“Damn lucky,” Cullen murmured.

She didn’t feel that way. Nothing but bad luck could have put her at the crater rim when a steam blast occurred, something that hadn’t happened on Mount Baker in nearly four decades. Now she was stuck in the hospital with only her soon-to-be ex-husband for company when she needed to be at the institute figuring out if the event was a precursor to an eruption or just the volcano letting off steam as it had done in 1975. *“Silly* was the wrong word to use, but I’m not an invalid. I’m getting around better.”

Dr. Marshall gave her the once-over. “There’s a big difference between walking the hallways and being capable of caring for yourself.”

“You overdid it this morning,” Cullen added, as if dumping a carton of salt onto her wounds helped matters.

“I know I have a way to go in my recovery.” She would be doing fine once the pain of her incision and ribs lessened. The throbbing in her head, too. “But I don’t need a nursemaid.”

A knowing glance passed between Dr. Marshall and Cullen.

Sarah bit the inside of her cheek.

“No one is suggesting a nursemaid. But I agree with Dr. Marshall. You’re right-handed.” Cullen’s gaze dropped to her cast. “Dressing yourself, doing anything with your left hand, is going

to take some adjustment. Not to mention your sutures and ribs. You'll need assistance doing most everyday things. There will also be limitations on lifting and driving."

Maybe she shouldn't have expected Cullen to take her side. But even with his lack of support now, she had no regrets. Bringing up a divorce was better than waiting around for him to do it. And he would have. People always walked away. He would walk away from her once she was out of the hospital, leaving her alone. Again.

The sinking feeling in her stomach turned into a black hole, sucking her hope down into it.

No, she couldn't give in and admit defeat. The institute relied upon her expertise. Others had been looking at the data since the steam blast, but volcanic seismology was her specialty. She couldn't let people down. It wasn't as if she had anything else in her life but her work. She glanced at Cullen, then looked away. "I don't care if it hurts. I'll figure out a way. I need to get back to the institute. I have a job to do."

"Is your current health and your long-term health outlook worth risking for your job?" Dr. Marshall asked.

Sarah raised her chin. "If it means determining how to predict a volcanic eruption, then yes. It's worth it."

A muscle ticked at Cullen's jaw. "If you return to the institute too soon, you won't be doing them or yourself any favors."

She saw his point, even if she didn't like it. "I'll be careful."

"What does your job entail, Sarah?" Dr. Marshall asked.

"Analyzing data."

"After she climbs Mount Baker to gather it," Cullen added. "Or am I wrong about that, Dr. Purcell?"

Of course he wasn't wrong. From his smug grin he knew it, too. That was why he'd used her title. "I can send a team up to download the data."

Maybe that would appease him—rather, Dr. Marshall.

"Are you able to work remotely from home?" Dr. Marshall asked.

Sarah would rather be at the institute, but she would take what she could get. "Telecommuting is an option. I have internet access in my apartment."

Dr. Marshall looked her straight in the eyes. "Is there someone who can stay at your apartment and care for you?"

Sarah's heart slammed against her chest so loudly she was sure the entire floor of the hospital could hear the boom-boom-boom. Even though she knew the answer to his question, she mentally ran through the list of coworkers at the institute. Most would be happy to drop off food or pick up her mail, but asking one to stay with her would be too much. She couldn't impose on any of them like that.

She'd never had a close friend, a bestie or BFF she could count on no matter what. Her life had been too transitory, shuttled between her parents and moving frequently, to develop that kind of bond with anyone. Not unless you counted Cullen. She couldn't. It wouldn't be fair to either one of them.

She chewed on her lower lip. "I could hire someone."

"Home care is a possibility," Dr. Marshall said.

Fantastic. Except her studio apartment was tiny. The floor was the only extra place to sleep, the bathroom the only privacy. She hated to admit it, but home care wouldn't work.

"If Sarah's in Bellingham, nothing will keep her from going to the institute or heading up the mountain if she feels it's necessary," Cullen said matter-of-factly.

She opened her mouth to contradict him, but stopped herself. What he said was true.

"You know I'm right," he said.

It annoyed her that he knew her so well.

"Is that true?" Dr. Marshall asked her.

She tried to shrug, but a pain shot through her. "Possibly."

Cullen laughed. The rich sound pierced her heart. One of Cupid's arrows had turned traitorous. "A one-hundred-percent possibility."

No sense denying it. He'd had her number a long time ago.

Dr. Marshall gave her a patronizing smile, as if she were a five-year-old patient who would appreciate princess stickers rather than a grown adult who wanted him to work out her discharge. "My first choice in cases involving a head injury, however minor, is home care by family members, but Dr. Gray has explained your situation."

Sarah assumed Dr. Marshall meant their marriage, since Cullen was the closest thing to family she had. She wasn't an orphan. Her parents were alive, but they'd chosen their spouses over her years ago. "I'm on my own."

"That leaves a sniff. A skilled nursing facility," Dr. Marshall explained. "We call them SNFs. There are several in the Seattle area."

Cullen's smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, making her heart dance a jig. So not the reaction she wanted to have when she was fighting for her freedom. Independence. Work.

"That sounds like a perfect solution," Cullen said.

Maybe for him. In Bellingham she had access to the institute and her own place to live. Down here in Seattle, she had…nothing. But what choice did she have? Sarah swallowed her disappointment. "I suppose. As long as I have my laptop and access to data."

Dr. Marshall adjusted his wire-framed glasses. "Many SNFs have Wi-Fi."

Might as well look on the bright side. "That's better than dial-up."

"Your concussion will make it difficult for you to concentrate for any length of time." Cullen sounded so doctorlike. Totally different from the man who had helped her back to her room this morning. "If you push too hard, you may experience vision problems and headaches."

"I'll use a timer to limit my computer usage," she offered.

"No symptom is a one-hundred-percent certainty, but Dr. Gray is correct. You don't want to do too much too soon," Dr. Marshall said.

Something about his tone and eye movement raised the hair on her arms. "What exactly am I going to be allowed to do?"

"Rest and recuperate," Dr. Marshall said, as if those two things would appeal to her.

R & R was something a person did when they were old. Not when the second-most-active volcano in the Cascades might erupt. "The SNF sounds like my only option, but you might as well put me out of my misery now, because—"

"You'll die of boredom," Cullen finished for her.

In their one-plus year of marriage—over two if you counted the time they'd been separated—he'd figured her out better than anyone else in her life. That unnerved Sarah.

Dr. Marshall adjusted his glasses. "A few weeks of boredom is a small price to pay."

Small price? The SNF sounded like an institutional cage. She'd be locked away and forced to sleep or "rest." She stared at the cast on her arm.

Lucky to be alive. Maybe if she kept repeating the words she would believe them. Because right now life pretty much sucked.

"There is another option," Cullen said.

Her gaze jerked to his. The room tilted to her left as if she were standing in a mirrored fun house. She closed her eyes. She must have walked too far earlier. When she opened them everything was back where it belonged, and Cullen was staring at her with his intense gaze.

She swallowed the lump of desperation lodged in her throat. Anything would be better than a nursing facility. "What other option?"

"Come home with me to Hood Hamlet."

Her mouth gaped. The air rushed from her lungs.

"I have Wi-Fi," Cullen continued, as if that made all the difference in the world. "I promise you won't be bored."

No, she wouldn't be bored. She would be struggling to survive and keep her heart safe.

Here at the hospital, people came in and out of her room. She and Cullen were never alone for long. He left each night to go to his hotel. What would it be like if it were only the two of them?

Dangerous.

Sarah tried to speak, but her tongue felt ten sizes too big for her mouth, as if she'd been given a shot of Novocain at the dentist's office. But she knew one thing… .

Going home with Cullen was a bad idea. So bad she would rather move into the SNF and die of boredom or stay in the hospital and die of starvation or go live in a cave somewhere with nothing but spiders and other creepy-crawly things for company.

Having him here made her feel warm and fuzzy. Taking walks reminded her of how comfortable they'd once been together. But she couldn't rely on him to be her caretaker. She'd been vulnerable before they'd separated. She would be totally at his mercy in his care. If she found herself getting attached to him, or worse, falling in love with him all over again…

He would have the power not only to break her heart, but shatter it. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Cullen wore a digital watch, but he swore he heard the seconds ticking by. He braced himself for Sarah's rejection. He'd offered her a place to recover, but she'd reacted with wide-eyed panic, as if she was about to be sentenced to life in prison.

Stupid. Cullen balled his hands with a mix of frustration and resentment. He should never have made the suggestion. But she'd looked so damn miserable over the idea of the SNF, he'd had to do something. A good attitude was important in a patient's recovery. He didn't want her to experience any setbacks. Skilled nursing facilities had their role in patient recovery, but Sarah was better off elsewhere. He knew that as a trained physician. He knew that in his gut.

But no one was going to step up and offer Sarah an alternative. No one except him.

And she hadn't even cared. At least not according to her anything-but-that reaction.

Might as well get the word *sucker* tattooed on him. He'd let their pleasant walks and hand-holding soften him up.

A buzzing sound disturbed the silence.

Dr. Marshall checked his pager. "I have to go. Tell the nurse your decision and have her relay it to me and the discharge planner."

The surgeon strode out of the room without a glance back.

The minute the door shut, the tension in the air quadrupled. Cullen had faced challenges working as a doctor and as a mountain rescuer, but he'd never felt more out of his element than standing here with his wife, a wife who didn't want him for a husband. Not that he wanted her, either, he reminded himself.

Sarah toyed with the edge of her blanket. Her hands worked fast and furiously, as if she were making origami out of cloth.

The silence intensified. Her gaze bounced from her cast to the colorful bouquet of wildflowers from MBVI to everything else in the room. Everything except him.

Hard to believe that at one time they were so crazy about one another they couldn't keep their hands or lips off each other. Now she couldn't bear to look at him.

He hated the way that gnawed at him. Time to face the music, even if a requiem played. "I'm only trying to help. Give you another choice."

"I'm surprised you'd want me around."

Her words cut through the tension with the precision of a scalpel. He was about to remind her she had been the one to ask for the divorce, but held his tongue because she was right. He didn't want her around because she messed with his thoughts and his emotions, but he had to do the right thing

here, whether he liked it or not. “I want you to recover. Get you feeling better and back on your feet in the shortest amount of time possible. That’s all.”

She studied him as if she were trying to determine what type of volcanic rock he might be. “That’s nice of you.”

Her wariness bugged him. “We’ve been getting along.”

Her lips parted. She pressed them together, then opened them again. “It’s just…”

He hated the hurt lying over his heart. “Would it be that awful for a few weeks?”

“No, not awful,” she admitted. “Not at all.”

Her words brought a rush of relief, but added to his confusion. “Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t want to be a burden.”

A burden was the last label he’d use for her. “You’re not.”

“You’ve put your life on hold this past week.”

“I won’t have to do that when I’m in Hood Hamlet. I can get back to work and my mountain-rescue unit.”

Sarah moistened her lips. “I didn’t think I was supposed to be alone.”

“Friends have offered to help.”

Her gaze narrowed. “So you won’t be around that much?”

“I work twelve-hour shifts at the hospital. The rescue unit keeps ready teams stationed on the mountain in May and June.”

“Oh.”

That single word didn’t tell him much. He rocked back on his heels. “So what do you think?”

“I appreciate the offer.”

“But—?”

Sarah squinted. “I…I don’t know.”

Her uncertainty sounded genuine. He had expected to hear a flat-out *no*.

She sank into her pillow. “Is it something I need to decide right now?”

“Dr. Marshall wants you to tell the nurse your decision. Arrangements have to be made if you choose a SNF.”

She rubbed her thumb against her fingertips.

“Attitude plays a role in healing,” he continued. “Hood Hamlet will be better for you in that regard.”

“Give me a minute to think about it.”

Cullen didn’t know why she needed more time or why he was trying so hard to convince her. Yes, he wanted to do the right thing, but her decision changed nothing. If she refused his offer, the next time they saw each other…They wouldn’t be seeing each other unless she challenged the divorce terms. The way it would have been if she hadn’t had her accident.

The bed dwarfed her body, making her look small and helpless. Strange, given she was the strongest women he knew next to Leanne Thomas, a paramedic and member of OMSAR.

Sarah grimaced.

Two long strides put him at the side of her bed. “Your head.”

She gave an almost imperceptible nod. “I may have overdone the walking today.”

His concern ratcheted. “Does anything else hurt?”

“Not any more than usual.”

Using the back of his hand, he touched her face. She wasn’t flushed, but a temperature could mean another infection. “You don’t feel warm.”

She closed her eyes. “My brain might be rebelling from having to work again. Think I probably need another nap.”

“Probably.”

But Cullen preferred to err on the side of caution. He checked the circulation of each finger sticking out from her cast. He wanted to blame his anxiousness on the Hippocratic oath, but he knew there was more to it than that. The *more* part revolved around Sarah. He wished it weren't so. In time he hoped—expected—not to care or to be so concerned about her. Time healed all wounds, right?

She opened her eyes. "You always had a nice bedside manner."

He didn't want her words to mean anything. He hated that they did. "It's easier with some patients."

"With me?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

"Yes."

Sarah's lips curved into a slight, almost shy smile. "Thanks."

He brushed hair off her face. "You're welcome."

Her eyelids fluttered like a pair of butterfly wings.

He remembered when she'd slept against him and her eyelashes had brushed his cheek. The urge to scoop her up in his arms and hold her close was strong, but he couldn't give in to temptation. This woman had trounced his heart once. Whatever else he did, he couldn't let himself fall in love with her again.

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