



*Medical
Romance™*

JANICE LYNN

The Doctor's
Damsel in Distress



Janice Lynn

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Dear Reader

While I was driving home one night, the opening scene to Levi and Madison's story hit me and demanded to be written. Of course I was in the middle of another story, and had to finish

that one prior to writing Levi and Madison's, but I had to get that scene down and found myself smiling with each word written.

Levi stole my heart from the very beginning—a modern-day white knight who rescues the heroine from her misguided thoughts on how to protect her heart. Madison is an old-fashioned girl, but due to having had her heart trampled on has decided she wants to be the ultimate modern girl, to be a playgirl. She chooses Levi as her first walk on the wild side and sparks fly.

Oftentimes in life, love rescues us from our own selves—helps us to be more than who we thought we were or were capable of being. Levi and Madison learn this together as they rescue each other in *THE DOCTOR'S DAMSEL IN DISTRESS*. I hope you enjoy their romance.

I love to hear from my readers, and can be contacted at Janice@janicelynn.net

Happy reading!

Janice

About the Author

JANICE LYNN has a Masters in Nursing from Vanderbilt University, and works as a nurse practitioner in a family practice. She lives in the southern United States with her husband, their four children, their Jack Russell—appropriately named Trouble—and a lot of unnamed dust bunnies that have moved in since she started her writing career. To find out more about Janice and her writing visit www.janicelynn.com

Dedication

To Methuselah. Just one more “always and forever”.

CHAPTER ONE

DR. LEVI FIELDING wrapped his arms around Nurse Madison Swanson, positioned himself just right, and gave a hard thrust. Then another.

Nothing.

The food that had lodged in her throat didn't budge.

In the universal choking signal, she grasped at her neck, her rising panic emanating off her tiny body.

She couldn't breathe.

Knowing the hot July sun wasn't the cause of the sweat forming on his brow, Levi's own fear whipped through him. His heart jackhammered against his ribcage, interfering with *his* ability to breathe. He gave a hearty heave, hoping he was dislodging whatever she'd choked on and didn't break her in half in the process.

"Oh, Dr. Fielding," one of the hospital picnic attendees implored, fanning her pudgy red face with all the theatrics of a true Southern belle from more than a century before. "Save her."

He was trying. Ignoring the small crowd gathering around where he'd rushed to Madison's rescue, his every cell tuned into the woman he held. He performed the Heimlich maneuver yet again, knowing that if this didn't work he'd be opening her airway via an emergency tracheotomy.

At a picnic at the local park in downtown Angel Creek, North

Carolina.

Which meant he'd be using something rudimentary to jab into her airway. Probably the barrel of an ink pen. Or if he couldn't find one, he'd have to make an incision with, what? A plastic knife? What he wouldn't give to have his doctor's bag. His brain raced ahead, planning to do whatever was necessary to get life-giving air into Madison's lungs. Somehow, he would save her. He had to.

At his powerful thrust, she sputtered, whatever had been in her throat flying from her mouth.

Levi said a prayer of thanks. For numerous reasons. The foremost being he preferred pretty little Madison Swanson alive and breathing. She was a great nurse. The best. But even if she hadn't been, a nurse choking to death at a hospital picnic while surrounded by medical professionals—what kind of message would that send to the community where they worked?

Gasping and coughing at the same time, her hand went in front of her mouth. He turned her, assessing that she was indeed taking in air, that she was going to be okay. Tears streaming down her heart-shaped face, she lifted her heavily lashed green eyes to his.

The ground shifted beneath Levi's feet.

Her expression gutted him, left him feeling as if something had lodged in his throat. Something hard, full of emotion, and unrelenting, something that would require more than the Heimlich to rescue him from.

Damn. That was exactly the same *varoom* that had hit him

when he'd first met her. When he'd thought he'd met someone worthy of settling into a relationship with.

Then she'd come at him like a heavy truck, which hadn't been at all what he'd been looking for. The last thing he wanted was to get involved with an overly forceful woman. Been there, done that, liked it, but the time had come to grow up.

After his last encounter with his father, he'd turned over a new leaf, decided he was ready to quit playing games, that he wasn't "a chip off the ole block", and would settle into a relationship, see where that took him.

He'd initially thought Madison would be that woman, but he'd overheard her telling another nurse that she played the game as well as any man, that she wasn't looking for commitment, just a good time.

He'd known right then and there that no matter how attracted he was to her, he needed to keep his distance. But that hadn't dulled his reaction to her. Not one bit.

So he'd avoided her as much as possible.

Today, there'd been no avoiding.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," he began, wondering at how his knees wobbled like a newborn foal's and why he wanted to wrap his arms back around her. This time to hold her close and assure her she was going to be okay, that he'd never let anything happen to her.

Totally insane. Outside of work, he barely knew her.

Only a few weeks before he'd have thought Madison's

enlightened outlook regarding sex exactly what he wanted. But his father had cured him of that attitude. He'd actually wondered if his reaction to Madison might partly be because he'd decided he was ready for a new phase in life. A more settled phase than his former playboy ways. Not marriage or happily-ever-after, but something more permanent than he'd been willing to commit to in the past.

If the thought of falling into old habits, his father's habits, didn't disgust him, he'd have been all over Madison Swanson. Figuratively and otherwise.

Drawing his attention, her chest expanded and relaxed in jerky breaths. Her fingers trembled as she swatted at the moisture on her cheeks. She looked in shock. As if she might pass out at any given moment. Or burst into full-fledged sobs.

An odd spasm tightened his chest.

"We should run to my office and shoot a few X-rays to make sure I didn't crack anything. That last thrust was a bone-crusher."

"No." She shook her head back and forth, still greedily sucking in air. "I'm fine."

She didn't look fine. Her smooth skin had lost its usual healthy glow and blanched a pale gray, contrasting eerily with the vivid green of her almond-shaped eyes. Barely coming up to his shoulders, she looked more like a child than a woman in her mid-twenties. A child who needed looking after. Who needed him.

"I insist," he said, studying her ragged breaths, her shaky hands, the quiver to her plump lower lip. *Those lips.*

He averted his gaze before he gave in to the urge to lean in and give her a breath or two. In the name of medicine, of course. *Right.*

“I just want to sit down for a few minutes.” Closing her eyes, she lowered her head, but didn’t move from the spot where she stood. “And crawl under a picnic table and die from total humiliation.”

Levi blinked. She could have died, and she was embarrassed? Not in a million years would he understand women, but after holding Madison in his arms, he fully understood that he wanted to get to know her better even if he shouldn’t. Lots better. Enough better that now he’d acknowledged that truth, he also admitted Little Miss Madison might be responsible for the fact he hadn’t been on a date since she’d come onto the scene.

He’d blamed his father’s pat on the shoulder and condemning words of praise, but perhaps Madison played just as strong a role in his change of pace. Maybe the two really did go hand-in-hand.

Not quite understanding why his realization didn’t upset him, he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Choking can happen to anyone.”

She didn’t look up, just took a step back. Letting his hand fall away, she dropped onto the wooden slat seat of a picnic table. She looked so miserable that another protective wave hit him and he fought to keep his arms to himself.

Sure, he wanted to get to know her better, but it wasn’t as if he planned to start sweeping women off their feet at company

functions where they were surrounded by co-workers, friends and family. The last thing she would want was for him to hold her like she really was a small child needing comfort.

He wanted to hold her and kiss away the tears that fell faster than she could wipe them away.

“Hey,” he bent, cupped her face. His fingers pressed firmly against the silky skin of her jaw, forcing her to look at him. His fingertips burned with hot awareness. “You okay?”

“Just Jim Dandy,” she mumbled, wincing at the crowd moving in, offering her a drink, a wet cloth, a word of commiseration.

Willing away his physical responsiveness to touching her, Levi couldn’t decide if she was really okay and embarrassed or if she was hurt and trying to hide it. She looked as if she really would like to crawl under the picnic table. As if she desperately needed someone to rescue her again. This time from the crowd.

Still, she kept a wobbly smile on her face and nodded her well-being to the many well-wishers surrounding her. She might have only worked at Angel Creek hospital for a month or two, but she’d won many a heart.

No wonder. Madison Swanson was cute.

Cute? Nah, that word didn’t exactly fit the woman he’d heard say she ate men for breakfast. Not that he’d ever gotten the impression Madison was a man-eater, but she’d said the words herself.

Ignoring the reasons he shouldn’t, ignoring the well-wishers’ praise for his “heroic act”, Levi bent enough to slide his arm

beneath Madison's shaky legs. Straightening, he scooped her into his arms and ignored her protests and the crowd's whoops of delight.

Yeah, he was ignoring lots of things today.

How good Madison felt in his arms topped the list. He really shouldn't be noticing her apple-blossom scent, shouldn't be noticing how toned her petite body was. He definitely shouldn't be feeling twinges of lust at just how delectably female she was.

Twinges? More like earthquakes.

Get a grip, ole boy.

He wanted substance, not a quick fix. He wanted a long-distance haul, not a rush across the finish line. *He wasn't like his father.*

Willing his adrenaline-hyped body under control, he flashed a reassuring smile to the crowd. "Sorry, folks, but she's had a scare. I'm going to take her to my office and make sure I didn't crack her ribs."

A couple of co-workers, including the medical floor's charge nurse who he'd heard through the hospital grapevine was Madison's roommate, rushed along beside him, talking a mile a minute, mostly asking if she was okay and did she have any idea how much she'd scared them all?

"This is crazy," Madison protested, shooing her friends away with assurances that she was fine and for them to please go back to the picnic. "I can walk," she directed at him as her roommate left, casting a few curious glances over her shoulder.

“Yes, you can,” he agreed, but kept on toward the parking lot. When he reached his sports utility vehicle, he contemplated setting her down, but wasn’t quite ready to let her go. “Can you get my keys? They’re in the right pocket of my shorts. If you reach down, you should find them.”

Madison had wanted to get Dr. Levi Fielding’s arms around her since the first time she’d met him not quite two months ago, had fantasized about doing exactly what he was asking of her now, only keys hadn’t been involved.

The current circumstances hadn’t been anywhere close to what she’d had in mind, though.

Neither had her embarrassing choking episode where he’d had to Heimlich her into upchucking the piece of ice that had lodged in her throat.

Ice that had lodged because she’d been staring at him, lost in her private fantasy, and been caught.

Caught when he’d turned, his hot fudge-sundae eyes colliding with hers with heated awareness. Awareness that she’d been looking at him like she wanted to eat him up and lick the spoon clean. Hot fudge sundae, indeed!

She’d thought there had been a spark between them when they’d first met. She’d have sworn there was. But he’d ignored all her smiles, all her attempts at flirting, at showing him she was a player, the kind of woman he reportedly liked.

To see blatant interest in his unguarded eyes today had startled her. She’d decided she’d been wrong about the chemistry

between them when they'd first met, had decided she should find another carefree man to try out her new improved persona on, her new love 'em-and-leave-'em attitude, because she was never again falling in love for real.

Carefree because that was the only type of man she'd date after Simon. Because he'd hurt her so badly she'd never allow another man to worm his way into her heart, make her believe in happily-ever-after. Happily-ever-after didn't exist. A fairy-tale. A myth. Pure propaganda to make women long for what they'd never find. Just look at her. At her friend Susan. At so many women she knew who'd been taken for a ride emotionally, and often financially.

At least Simon hadn't abused her pocketbook. That was about the only thing he'd let alone, though.

If Levi had been interested in her, he'd lost it almost immediately and nothing she'd done had seemed to reignite that spark.

So, seeing his matching look when he'd brushed aside all her attempts to get to know him better had taken her by storm. Face burning, she'd taken a drink of her diet soda and gulped a half-melted piece of ice right into her trachea. Of all the stupid things to do!

First choking. Then, while he'd performed the Heimlich maneuver on her, having the absurd thought that at least if she died, she'd go happy, having his arms wrapped around her.

Yep, totally insane when men were nothing but trouble.

Hadn't she learned anything from her Simon experience? To be looking at Levi with such thoughts, obviously she hadn't. She was certifiable.

But could she really help it if she'd been gaga over him since the day she'd started working at Angel Creek Hospital?

Her and every other female who'd ever laid eyes on the gorgeous general practitioner. Which was the problem with men like Levi and Simon. Totally gorgeous, and they and the rest of the world knew it. They used their many charms to lure unsuspecting hearts into their lairs.

Now he was telling her to get in his pants? Um, well, not in his pants, just to put her hand in his pants. Well, his pants pocket. To get his keys. Same difference, right?

Clearly, she'd died from a freak ice cube in the throat choking accident and angel Levi was her heavenly reward for all those years of being a way, way too good girl and having her heart trampled on.

"Madison?"

She blinked up at Levi, still not quite believing that she was in his arms, that he'd carried her from the park's picnic area to the parking lot. No one would be talking about this at the hospital for weeks to come. *Right.*

But what did she care? She was in the afterlife in the arms of her fantasy man. A man she'd watched interact with his patients, watched smile and laugh with his co-workers, watched with longing deep in her gut because when she looked at him she saw

stars and rainbows and fireworks and things so marvelous she didn't even have a label, and for a few brief moments she could forget all the hell Simon had put her heart through.

Not that she'd fall for Levi. She wouldn't. She might think him the best thing since chocolate, but her heart was off limits.

Only today, when she'd needed him, he'd come to her rescue just like a proverbial white knight. Only, rather than having to wake her with a kiss, he'd had to Heimlich her.

She glanced up, met his eyes and melted.

That did it. If she'd had any doubt before, she no longer did. The ice really hadn't dislodged. She'd bitten the big one. Had to be true. Because she'd swear that was concern in Levi's eyes. Not indifferent concern, but real concern. For her. Why would he care?

And, oh, baby, if she didn't know better, she might think that was physical awareness in his eyes, too. Physical awareness as in he felt the same *bing-badaboom* at the contact of their bodies.

Thank goodness, she did know better, that she knew she was pushing up daisies.

Seeing a woman regurgitate a chunk of ice wasn't exactly the kind of event that made a man suddenly aware of what he'd been overlooking for almost two months.

"My keys?" he prompted when she continued to stare up at him, probably with stars in her eyes and drool on her chin. "If you'll grab them and hit the unlock button..."

"Oh, right." Embarrassed that she'd left him standing, holding

the bag so to speak, she reached down for his pocket.

That so wasn't his pocket, but my, oh, my, what a package.

He cleared his throat and Madison tried again, finally sliding her fingers into the pocket of his loose cargo shorts.

She pulled out his keys, pressed the unlock button twice, and sighed in relief at the resounding click of the lock.

“You can put me down now.” *Or hold me for ever, your choice.* No, not for ever, that didn't fit with her new never-have-her-heart-broken again persona. *Just for however long the fun lasted.* Yep, that was better.

“I know.”

But he didn't until he'd maneuvered the door open. And had that been her imagination or had Levi's voice sounded hoarse? As if maybe she wasn't the only one affected by his arms around her, by how close her entire body was to his.

Just how long had she gone without oxygen anyway? Maybe she'd suffered brain damage and just didn't know it.

“Feeling okay?” He gently settled her in the passenger seat. “No light-headedness or dizziness? Shortness of breath?”

Only from you holding me. She rolled her eyes, determined to get her thoughts under control, to focus on her promise to herself to never again be made a fool of, to never again feel as if her entire world had come crumbling down around her.

“I choked on an ice cube.” *Because she'd been ogling him.* “I'm fine. Really.”

He reached across her, secured her seat belt into place, his

arm grazing across her breasts, sending shockwaves of tingles through her.

“You’re a tiny little thing,” he pointed out, sounding a bit breathy himself, “and I did the Heimlich maneuver on you.”

She could think of a few other maneuvers he could do on her.

No. Thoughts like those were what had gotten her into this mess to begin with. Thoughts that had blasted off with his very buff body working up a sweat during the softball game earlier.

After the game, she’d still been distracted by his lean physique, by the sinewy calves on display. She’d never seen him in anything other than scrubs or dressed casually. She’d never seen his bare legs, that was for sure.

Oh, baby, she was a legs woman, if there was even such a thing. But surely if there could be legs men, there could be women with preferences for certain body parts. As of the moment she’d set eyes on Levi’s calves, she was most certainly a legs woman.

Or maybe she was a butt woman.

He certainly did it for her there, too. Nice, tight, squeezable. Oh, yeah, she was a nice tush and legs woman.

And eyes. Those dark chocolate eyes...she was certainly into those, too.

And pathetic.

Had she mentioned how pathetic she was?

She’d never reacted to the opposite sex this way. So physically. Not even to Simon. Maybe it was all the pep talks she’d given

herself about her new playgirl persona, all the books and tapes about becoming the modern woman. Wasn't that why she'd relocated? To start over? To not be goody-two-shoes Madison Swanson any more? So why was she mooning over the first guy she'd set her sights on? Why hadn't she flicked her fingers and said a resounding "Next"?

CHAPTER TWO

YEP, Madison was definitely pathetic where Levi was concerned and obviously hadn't learned a single thing from past mistakes.

And obviously was failing miserably at getting her thoughts under control. That much did seem to have morphed into playgirl persona. Because never ever had her hormones been so...so...omnipresent.

Levi slid into the driver's seat, closed the door, and started the engine.

Without glancing his way, Madison winced. What was wrong with her? Sure, she'd decided to be a playgirl, but that hadn't prepared her for her reaction to Levi. Not even during the peak of her relationship with Simon had she felt such inner need.

After years of wondering what all the fuss was about, she'd gotten a crash course when Levi had called her into a mutual patient's hospital room on her second day on the job. She'd rushed into the room, worried she'd done something wrong. Instead, Levi had smiled at her and short-circuited her internal networking.

From where he expertly steered the vehicle, he shot her a quick glance. "You okay over there? You're too quiet. Makes me wonder what's going on in that sharp mind of yours."

Ha, if he only knew what was racing around in her head he'd

run far, far away. Thank goodness he didn't know.

No, that probably wasn't true.

Levi probably knew every woman wanted him, had wanted him since he'd been old enough to crook his little finger at the opposite sex. He had that kind of personality, that kind of looks. No doubt he expected every woman to fall under the lethality of his smile and sinfully dark chocolate eyes.

What woman could resist chocolate?

No matter how much she'd tried, she'd not been able to put him out of her mind. Since moving to Angel Creek, Levi had monopolized her dreams, her thoughts.

Good thing she'd thrown so many barriers around her heart. Otherwise her cookie would really be in a crumble because she wanted Levi in ways she'd never wanted Simon.

And Simon had wanted her in return.

In the beginning, at any rate.

Leaning against the headrest, she stared out the windshield. "This isn't necessary, you know."

"You're not hurting anywhere?"

"Only my pride." Okay, so her chest hurt when she took a deep breath, but she'd live. What was a little pain in comparison to being alive? To having been in Levi's arms?

"Seriously." He cut his scrumptious eyes toward her again. "Choking isn't something to be embarrassed about."

"Easy for you to say," she scoffed. "Whereas I played the damsel in distress, you got to be the hero of the day." Despite the

ache in her chest—or maybe because of the much stronger ache pounding behind her ribcage—she smiled at him. “Lucky you.”

“That’s me. A regular knight in shining armor.”

“Right.” What was it about the man that turned her brain into such mush? Not to mention the rest of her ooey-gooey self?

“Well,” he intoned, his eyes straight ahead, “if it makes you feel any better, I wasn’t feeling heroic.”

“You weren’t?” That surprised her. She’d imagine a man like Levi often played the role of hero, saving lives and slaying dragons. “What were you feeling?”

“Scared witless,” he answered, so quickly that she knew he was telling the truth. He’d hidden it well. Or maybe she’d been too distracted by lack of oxygen and his arms around her to notice that she’d scared him.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she promised, thinking she’d keep her pleasure at his admission a secret, too.

“Good thing,” he mused, his expression deadpan. “Otherwise I’d have to kill you.”

“Kill me?” She tried to keep a solemn appearance, too, but her lips twitched. “Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of today’s efforts?”

He shrugged, continuing feigned sincerity. “You’re right. Best save my honor and keep my secret, fair maiden.”

White knight? Slaying dragons? Fair maiden?

Oh, this was fun. She fought another smile, enjoying this unexpected attention, this unexpected side of him. Okay, so she

enjoyed all sides of Levi, but still...

“Done,” she promised. She also liked the fact he’d not been as calm and collected as he’d appeared, that he’d felt some matching anxiety to what she’d experienced during her choking session. Somehow that made him seem more human, less Greek god fallen to earth to star in every woman’s fantasy.

Less like Simon, who never would have admitted to a flaw of any kind. He’d been perfect and had had no qualms telling her that over and over while reminding her how lucky she was to be in his life. Gag. She should have dumped his cheating butt months and months before things had ended.

So Levi’s admission softened her resolve, made her smile. And for a short while she wasn’t going to analyze every minute detail. She was just going to enjoy that she was with Levi.

He parked his SUV behind the medical complex where his office was located, right next to the hospital, and pulled the keys from the ignition.

“Need me to carry you?” His crooked grin dug a dimple into his left cheek. “Damsels in distress are my specialty.”

Yes, she almost rushed out just so she could feel his arms around her again. Oh, yes, yes, yes. But she didn’t. This damsel had taken advantage of him enough for one day. She had to bite back a happy sigh at his continued feeding of her castle-in-the-air fantasy.

“No, I don’t need you to carry me, not when God gave me two perfectly good legs. Thanks, though.” It struck her that she

couldn't recall if she'd thanked him for his Heimlich. "Thank you for coming to my rescue earlier, too."

"You're welcome." He flashed his straight white teeth in another grin, ratcheting up her heart rate and causing a reflexive Kegel contraction between her thighs. "You're too beautiful to meet such a tragic fate."

All righty, then. She didn't know how to respond to his flirting. But, really, he was probably just being nice, right? Just here because he was afraid he'd broken her ribs during his rescue efforts? He was an excellent doctor who went above and beyond for his patients. At the moment, she was his patient.

"I thought I was going to die," she admitted, hoping her smile looked appreciative and not too much like please-take-me-into-your-arms-and-kiss-me. "You saved me."

He cast her a mischievous look that both thrilled and reminded her he was way out of her league. It also reminded her that she really wanted to play in that bigboy league—with him.

"Yep," he continued, "I saved you and now you owe me."

"I guess I do." Was she imagining the gleam in his eyes? The spark zapping back and forth between them? The electricity in the air?

"I can tell you're excited about being indebted to me." He laughed, climbing out of his truck.

Oh, she was excited all right. From her head to the tips of her toes.

"Who likes being indebted?" she quipped when her door

swung open, eyeing him and wanting to lick him from his head to the tips of his toes.

“Good point,” he agreed, offering his hand to help her get out. “But I won’t ask for more than your complete and total devotion and servitude.”

Okay, so he was absolutely flirting back.

And she absolutely couldn’t breathe.

Help! Someone do the Heimlich again. Quick.

When she slid her hand into his, her breath gushed from her body in a rough swoosh. Oh, my. Now she needed mouth to mouth as well.

Seriously. She needed his mouth on hers.

She’d just been in his arms a few minutes ago when he’d carried her to his SUV, but already she’d forgotten what the warm contact of his skin against hers felt like, was shocked by the intensity.

Electrifying. All consuming.

The most wonderful feeling in the whole world.

Pathetic, Madison. Absolutely pathetic. Apparently you really suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen when you choked.

“You’re going to send a bill for this, right?” she asked, desperately trying to detract from his magnetic pull. Desperately trying to keep from launching herself at him in the hope he’d catch her and never let her fall. Of course he’d let her fall. Eventually he’d push her down and trample on her heart if given the chance. It’s what men did. It’s why she’d decided if she

couldn't beat them, to join them, so to speak.

"Nope." He snorted, not letting her pull her hand free as he led her toward the back entrance to his office.

"I have health insurance." I have quivers all over my body from your hand clasping mine.

"I wouldn't feel right about charging you to examine whether or not I broke your ribs."

Promise you won't break my heart.

Now, where had that come from? Of course he wouldn't break her heart. She wouldn't let him anywhere near her heart. Yes, she was physically attracted to him, but that didn't mean she'd let him or any other man near her heart ever again. But she could be like men, enjoy the physical side of life without letting her heart become involved. All fun, no pain.

"My ribs are fine. Just a little sore." *Very sore.* "But even if you'd broken each and every one of them, I'm glad you saved me, Dr. Fielding." She flashed him what she hoped was her most appreciative—and alluring—smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, and the name is Levi." Another crooked thigh-melting grin. "I want you to call me Levi."

Madison sat on the exam table, waiting for Levi to rejoin her and trying not to let her imagination run away from her. Just because she kept having lust-induced fantasies about Levi, it did not mean he wanted to push her back on the exam table and do a thorough hands-on investigation of all that ailed her.

Mainly him.

From the moment they'd stepped into his office he had been the consummate professional. He'd shot the X-ray films of her ribs, not balking when she'd insisted on keeping on her T-shirt. She'd taken off her bra to avoid the underwires and hooks from showing on the film, but no way had she been going to take off her shirt.

Levi might be a doctor, but if and when he ever saw her bare-breasted she didn't want the blessed event to be when she was about to be blasted with radiation.

She put her B-cup push-up bra back on the minute he'd finished shooting the film. He probably thought her a prude and that was why his flirting had come to a quick halt.

"Good news," he said, coming back into the room. "The X-rays don't show any breaks."

"I told you I was fine." Thank goodness she'd been right. There had been small niggles of doubt when she moved certain ways and sharp pain had stabbed her chest wall. "Just sore."

"If that soreness doesn't ease in a few days, I should order a CT scan. Sometimes rib fractures don't show as well on X-ray, especially non-displaced ones."

"We both know that even if my ribs had been broken all you'd do is bind my chest and tell me to give it time." She gave him a bright smile. "I'll be fine."

"I suspect you will." He studied her, his expression serious and not a hundred percent convinced. "You want me to write something for pain?"

"I wouldn't take it even if you did." She couldn't imagine many circumstances in which she'd take pain medications. She'd seen one colleague too many end up with addiction problems.

"You might regret that decision later tonight."

"I won't." Feeling the pain would remind her that she was alive, that Levi had come to her rescue, saved her life.

"You're one tough cookie, Madison."

Her insides melted at her name rolling off his lips. "I try, Dr. Fielding."

"I asked you to call me Levi." His gaze lingered on her mouth long enough to make the pit of her stomach dip to her toes and boomerang back like an overstretched rubber band.

"That you did." She tried not to read too much into his look, but failed miserably. How could she not when he looked as if he was wondering what kissing her would be like? When she really wanted him to kiss her? She lowered her gaze to his lips, hoped she conveyed that she wanted him to lean in, to touch his mouth to hers. "Levi."

Not leaning in or touching his lips to hers, he cleared his throat and glanced at his watch. "There's still another hour at the picnic if you want to go back."

"No, thanks." She shook her head. "Going back to work tomorrow and dealing with all the embarrassing commotion of having choked will be soon enough."

"Did you get to eat?" he surprised her by asking, his gaze flicking to hers.

“No.” She’d poured a drink, taken that fateful gulp that had gone down the wrong pipe, and had never made it to prepare a plate of food. “I’ll grab something later.” She gave a self-derisive smile as her gaze met his, held. “Maybe this time I won’t get choked.”

“I didn’t finish and I’m starved.” He rubbed his belly, emphasizing his point. Or was it those flat abs she wanted to lick he was emphasizing? She had to stop looking at Levi like human eye candy. She had to. Or did she? Maybe that was how playgirls saw the opposite sex? After all, he was delicious on the eyes, sugary sweet and made her want to go into a Levi-induced diabetic coma.

“You want to grab a pizza before I drop you off?”

She wanted to grab a lot more than pizza.

“You’d miss the rest of the picnic.” Now, why had she pointed that out? Why hadn’t she just said, “Yes, take me now, I’m yours, but don’t go messing with my heart because it’s off limits”?

“Oh, no, not that,” he teased.

A hot flush spread across her cheeks.

“Pizza sounds wonderful.” Reminding herself that him asking her to eat meant nothing, absolutely nothing except that he probably wanted to make sure she didn’t choke on her food again. Madison managed not to melt at his feet, managed to keep her hands to herself. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind, Madison,” he said in an all-too-serious voice, then blew it by adding, “Just ask anyone who knows me. They’ll

tell you what a naughty boy I am.”

There he went with that flirty tone again. And with the eyes. Those eyes screamed with pure male naughtiness.

Dr. Levi Fielding was definitely flirting with her. Question was why hadn't he all along when she hadn't hidden her interest? Currently, he was looking at her as if they'd been typed and crossed and were a perfect match.

Based on his supposed history with women, his interest wouldn't last long. She'd wanted his attention from the moment they'd met. Why not soak up every morsel and enjoy whatever the day brought? Just so long as she remembered she was a player, too, one who kept her heart locked away, what could spending time with Levi hurt? Wasn't that what she wanted, after all?

And, really, it wasn't as if she had the strength to say no. Not with her oxygen-depleted brain and all.

When they left his office, Levi drove to his favorite local pizza parlor.

Why had he asked Madison to dinner? Sure, he really was hungry, but spending time with her was a bad idea. He wanted a woman who wanted the same things he did, a committed relationship to each other based on more than just sex.

Not that sexual attraction wasn't important. Certainly he and Madison had that in spades. But after overhearing her conversation with Karen, he knew she wasn't what he wanted in a woman. So why was he here? And why did he want her so much when she epitomized the type of woman he'd sworn never to get

involved with again?

They ordered their food, got drinks, and settled in where they could both see the wide-screen television.

Although Madison made a pretense of watching the sporting show, he could tell she wasn't really into the program by the nervous way she kept glancing around the restaurant and toying with her drink straw.

Watching Madison with her straw interested Levi more than any sporting event that had ever been broadcast. After the first few minutes he quit pretending to watch the show and watched her instead, grinning when her big green eyes met his and widened. She didn't look away, although he got the impression she'd like to. No, she held his gaze, only allowing her eyes to lower enough to glance at his mouth for a few brief seconds.

As if she was thinking about kissing him.

Levi swallowed. There would be no kissing Madison Swanson. How could he when kissing her would definitely lead to other things? If he gave in to urges, well, that proved his father right, didn't it?

"What made you decide to move to Angel Creek?" he asked, to steer his mind away from those other things.

"I went to nursing school with Karen and we stayed in touch. She's tried to get me to relocate several times over the years, but there were reasons why I stayed in Winston-Salem."

Reasons? Levi was sure he'd like to know what those reasons were.

Madison toyed with her straw again, placing her fingertips over one end and raising the other to her perfectly shaped lips in a purely seductive move that she almost seemed unaware of. *Almost.* Levi bit back a groan.

When she lifted her gaze, pleasure registered at what he obviously failed to hide. He wanted her.

“When Karen’s roommate moved out a few months ago,” she continued, watching him with those mesmerizing green eyes, “I took her up on the offer.”

“What made you change your mind?”

Her eyes darkened, lowered. Staring at her drink for several long seconds, she finally shrugged. “She needed a roommate and I needed a change of everything.”

Which probably meant she had been involved with someone and the relationship had gone sour. His abdominal muscles contracted defensively, rejecting the thought of Madison with another man, the thought of flashing her pretty smile, her wide, seductive eyes in another’s direction. What was up with that? He wasn’t the jealous type and this certainly wasn’t a date. Just two hungry colleagues sharing a meal and each other’s company.

Still, he’d known from the beginning there was something different about her. She was different. Made him feel different. Made him not quite certain about things he’d taken for granted.

Probably just because she was the first woman to interest him after his revelation about his father, about the man he refused to be like. Probably.

He asked more about where she'd come from. He jumped from one topic to another, watching her facial expressions run the gamut of closed to open and inviting as she relaxed.

She had a quick wit, which unfortunately she used to deprecate herself a bit too often, almost as if she had no clue what a knockout she was. But since she was an admitted player, she had to know, had probably been using that aura of innocence to lure men into her web for years.

She was a knockout and had tangled his thoughts up in her web, that was for sure.

He remembered the exact moment he'd met her. He'd felt a physical punch deep in his gut even then. One that had caused the same reflexive tightening he'd experienced moments ago at the thought of her involved with another man.

He'd looked at her and been hooked, had gone to find her after he'd finished rounds on his patients.

That was when he'd overheard her telling Karen how she was going to use and abuse him and spit him out when she was done.

Not what a man looking for a committed relationship wanted to hear. Which should have been enough to kill his attraction to her, but hadn't.

So he'd avoided her.

Today, he hadn't been able to avoid her. Not when she'd been choking. Now that he'd had her in his arms, he worried that avoiding her wasn't going to be a viable option ever again.

Which meant what? That he was willing to be used and abused

and spat out when she finished with him?

Hell, no.

But he did want her. More than he recalled wanting any woman. Maybe he should just drive her back to his place, spend the night exorcising her from his mind, and then be done with her.

If he believed one night would exorcise Madison, he'd do just that. But he didn't.

He had taken one look at her and wanted to share things with her he'd never shared with any woman. Had to be because of what had happened with his father. Had to be that he'd been in the process of rewiring how he operated when they met.

Levi leaned back in his chair, eyed the woman sitting across from him and contemplated his options.

He wanted her. She wanted him. Only he was looking for a relationship and she was looking for a conquest.

What if he kept their relationship non-physical?

Kept her wanting him physically while making her fall for him, the man, not the means to sexual release?

What if he made Madison see how good a real relationship could be between them?

CHAPTER THREE

SMILING at the man sitting across from her, Madison decided being a player had its perks.

On a scale of one to ten, dinner with Levi rated at least an eleven. Higher.

Although he'd started out glancing at a televised baseball game that had only lasted about a minute before he'd only had eyes for her.

Sigh. Who knew a playboy would be such a great listener? Simon never had been. Come to think of it, the only time Simon had really paid much attention to what she'd say had been when he'd been trying to get her into bed. Since she was the one trying to get Levi into bed, having him focus completely on what she said was an entirely new experience.

Who knew he'd have her spilling her guts about Karen and her rooming together while in nursing school? She'd even recounted tales of Nursing Student Mishaps 101.

When she glanced at her watch, they'd been at the restaurant almost three hours. Three hours! The time had flown by and she'd completely forgotten she was supposed to be seducing him, supposed to be flirting and alluring. Instead, she'd just been... herself.

And he'd listened.

Okay, so occasionally the conversation had been flirtatious,

but lightly so, fun, not in a way that made her feel out of her element.

“Guess we should head out.” Levi paid their bill, refusing to let her pay despite her protests that she owed him for saving her life. “Since you saved me from dining alone, we’ll call it even.”

She snorted. “As if you ever dine alone.”

“Everyone dines alone occasionally. Even me. Although, admittedly, not often since I’m such great company.” He wagged his brows, then grinned. “Regardless, I’m paying so just say thank you, Madison.”

“Thank you, Madison,” she repeated with feigned obedience, loving the way his gaze lit on her, on the way his lips curved upwards, on the way her insides felt so alive. Who’d known she could feel this way? And why the heck hadn’t she ever felt this way in the past? Her love life would have been a lot more exciting if either of her two serious relationships had been able to elicit half as many tingles and sparks.

Maybe it was the whole playgirl attitude that had freed her inner spirit.

Maybe it was because she wasn’t going into this thinking wedding bells and white picket fences.

Maybe it was because she only wanted one thing from Levi.

The way he was looking at her at this moment, well, she might just get it before the night ended.

That made her both happy and extremely nervous. Was she really ready to fully embrace her new persona?

He laughed, shaking his head. "You always this full of sass?"

"Not usually." She hadn't felt comfortable enough to relax enough to be herself. Not even Simon. Which was a sobering thought, but not one she'd permit to encroach on her evening with Levi. She deserved one night of fun. One night because anything more than a single night and her heart might get attached.

"Must be something about you." Which was the truth of the matter. There was something about Levi that got to her and reminded her of happier times. Times before life had got so complicated. Times when she'd smiled and laughed freely and often. Times before she'd let Simon use her heart for target practice.

"Must be."

Madison bit the inside of her cheek when Levi opened the passenger door of his SUV, waited for her to get inside, then closed the door. Simon had never opened doors for her.

"What's your street address?"

Absently, Madison told him, still contemplating Levi's many charms. The man was a charmer, pure and simple. She'd do good to remember that. He went through women the way a smoker went through cigarettes. A pack at a time.

Men like Levi and Simon should come with warning labels that they were hazardous to a woman's heart.

Or would be if she hadn't decided to join their ranks. Thank goodness she'd become a player herself.

He started his SUV and backed out of the parking place.

“We’re practically neighbors. That’s only a few streets over from where I live.”

“Really?” That surprised her. She’d figured he lived in some fancy neighborhood for doctors and lawyers. Then again, that stereotypical image didn’t fit. Levi didn’t fit into any box.

“You ever run at the park?”

She nodded. Running was her stress relief. She’d never excelled at sports, but running didn’t require any special skills or co-ordination. Running was just her and the wind and her thoughts. Since moving to Angel Creek, running had involved her, her motivational downloads on her iPod, and her overactive imagination as she’d fantasized about Levi.

She told him about her early morning runs—excluding her downloads and fantasies, of course—and how she’d walk the greenway sometimes at night after getting off work to unwind.

“Sounds like we miss each other by about thirty minutes each morning,” Levi mused, scratching his lightly stubbled chin.

“Sounds like.” If only she’d known, she’d have crawled out of bed earlier just to get a glimpse of those legs of his each and every day. Who needed sleep? She’d sleep when she was old.

“Well, if you ever make it out earlier, you’ll have to look for me. We could run together.”

Exactly. She’d be looking for him. His legs. His narrow hips. His—She turned and looked out her window, willing her thoughts away from his body yet again. How could she keep relegating him to the physical when he’d been interesting and

gallant and the perfect date?

Except this wasn't a date. Not really.

He'd saved her life, X-rayed her ribs, taken her to dinner, and was now driving her home. Not a date. Except...except when he looked at her, she felt like she was on a date. Or on the set of a movie where the two characters were on fire for each other and could barely keep their hands to themselves, where just one tiny spark would send them up in flames. *Poof.*

She wanted to burn.

To smolder.

To go up in smoke.

"This the right place?"

Blinking, Madison glanced at the pretty little white frame house with its navy shutters. "Yep, this is me and Karen. You know Karen. She's the charge nurse on the medical floor."

Lord, she was babbling like an idiot. Of course he knew Karen. They'd talked about Karen and her at nursing school quite a bit that evening. *Doh!*

Be smooth, cool, sexy, Madison. Not a dork.

He just smiled though. "Nice."

The park and close proximity to the hospital had been major selling points Karen had used in her arguments to get Madison to relocate. Madison liked the house well enough, too.

"Thanks for dinner and for driving me home..." Madison's mouth dropped open and she shook her head in dismay. The man really messed with her mind. "Only I'd appreciate it if you drove

me back to the park so I can pick up my car.” She looked him square in the eyes, willed herself to be strong, to be a modern woman and go for what she wanted. “Unless you’re planning on staying the night and dropping me off at my car in the morning?”

Levi pulled his car into the parking spot next to Madison’s powder-blue convertible VW beetle. He’d thought the car an odd choice for her the first time he’d noticed her driving it. Now, after spending the evening with her, he’d reconsidered. The convertible was the perfect combination of practical and impractical.

A car that would last and get great gas mileage, but that had a bit of whimsy and a generous helping of spunk.

A car that said, Put my top down and take me for a ride.

Just like Madison.

He shook the thought away just as she turned to him and smiled so brightly that he was certain she’d outshine the sun.

“I’ll have to try that pizza place again some time. Everything was delicious.” She licked her lower lip.

Nervously or in a seductive move? Either way, he swallowed, wondering if something had lodged in his throat that Madison was going to have to rescue him from.

“The food was good.” He managed to sound normal. “But, then, that pizza place is one of my favorites.”

He ran his palms over the steering-wheel, counted to ten. He wanted to lean across the distance between the driver and passenger seat, to pull her into his arms and taste those full pink

lips.

But what would that accomplish? That is, other than him completely losing his head and taking her up on that offer to spend the night?

How he'd managed to put the SUV into reverse and drive to the park rather than bust her front door down in a rush to get her into bed he had no idea. Definitely he deserved applause, because he'd shown more restraint than he'd known he possessed. Still, he was a man who could see the big picture.

The big picture was that he wanted more with Madison than a one-night sex fest in her bed.

Much more.

Even now he could feel her gaze gliding over him, conveying invitation, conveying that she'd like him to let back her seat and crawl on top of her for a hot and heavy make-out session.

He tightened his grip on the steering-wheel, started counting again.

"I should go," she said hesitantly, placing her hand on the passenger door handle, but she didn't get out of the car. Just sat in the seat of his sports utility vehicle. Waiting.

"You should." But he didn't want her to get out of his truck. Not really. No more than she really wanted to get out. They sat in silence, staring at each other, the tension mounting, thumping through his head. *Kiss her. Kiss her. Kiss Madison. Kiss her now. Kiss her until she's clinging breathlessly to you.*

No, not kiss her. He was going to make her want him long

term.

Which required patience.

Which required willpower.

Which required sainthood.

Knowing he was no saint and in serious danger if he didn't put some distance between them, Levi sucked in a deep breath and jumped out of the Ford. He rounded the front of the truck to open Madison's door.

"Out you go."

Looking a little stunned and very disappointed, she climbed out of the SUV with her hand tucked into his for assistance.

Knowing his limitations, he practically pushed her to the driver's side of her car, waited for her to unlock and open the door.

"Thanks again." She smiled at him, a mixture of confusion and invitation shining in her eyes. "I had a lovely time."

Yes, so had he, which was why he ignored the enticement of her lips and high-tailed it into his SUV.

Despite the fact he was heading home to a cold shower, he had to admit he had enjoyed the evening with Madison. He looked forward to savoring her like a fine wine meant to be sipped slowly, enjoying each drop to its fullest.

See, nothing like his old man. Nothing. Jonathan Fielding would never have walked away from Madison. Never.

But Levi didn't plan to walk away for ever. No, he'd bide his time, ensconce himself in every aspect of her life so she couldn't

imagine him not being there.

He'd have his steady, stable relationship, prove he wasn't a damned thing like his father, and he'd have Madison, too.

She might think she just wanted hot sex with him, but before he was through she'd need him over and over, always needing just one more time.

Always needing him just once more.

Madison crawled in between her sheets, taking little pleasure in the smooth Egyptian cotton caressing her bare skin.

Had her breath been bad?

Had she had pizza sauce on her face?

Had she had a big "L" tattooed on her forehead?

Nope, none of those things, but Levi had rejected her. And he wasn't the kind of man who rejected a willing woman he was attracted to. So what did that mean? That he'd just been friendly, had realized she'd taken things all wrong, and he'd scampered backwards as quickly as he possibly could?

Maybe. Maybe not.

She just didn't know.

What she did know was that Levi's rejection left her feeling way too much like Simon had on numerous occasions. Left her feeling raw and achy on the inside. Left her resolved to make sure that barrier always stayed up around her heart.

Especially where Dr. Levi Fielding was concerned.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON MONDAY morning, Levi spotted the petite blonde stepping out of room 217. The very beautiful petite blonde he'd looked for at the park Sunday morning and again this morning to no avail when he'd gone for his run. Despite how he'd lingered much longer than his usual run time, he hadn't bumped into Madison either morning.

She wore bright pink scrubs with cartoon characters on them. Her short blonde hair was fluffed slightly and tapered in at her chin as if the strands wanted to cup her face.

When she glanced up and spotted him watching her, a shade of pink similar to her scrubs spread across her high cheekbones.

Did women who ate men for breakfast blush so readily?

She was too far away to touch, or even to speak to, really, but not so far away that he didn't recognize the uncertainty in her eyes, that he couldn't tell she was trying to figure out exactly where their dinner on Saturday had left them.

Pacing himself was one thing, but seeing the uncertainty in her eyes made him think he should have done something besides tell her to call him if she had problems with her ribs or throat. And here he thought he'd deserved a medal for the restraint he'd displayed as he'd scribbled his cell number on the back of a business card. She didn't look like she wanted to give him a medal. Or even the time of day.

Well, hell. He made his way toward where she stood in the hospital hallway.

Gaze narrowing, her expression changed, became defiant. She lifted her chin and turned away from him as if to send that proverbial “take a hike” message.

“Madison?”

She ignored him, continuing with what she was doing as if she hadn’t heard him behind her.

“Nurse Swanson?” he tried again, his tone harsher than it should have been, but he didn’t like being ignored. What man did?

“Dr. Fielding?” She turned to face him. Her eyes sparkled like big green jewels glittering in sunlight. Her voice sounded breathy, a little like she’d run a sprint.

“Levi,” he corrected, despite the fact he’d just called her Nurse Swanson, reminding himself that they were at work and of his no-touching-Madison-yet policy. Maybe the combination of reminders would cause him to keep his hands off. Because he’d really like to pull her to him and kiss that pert mouth until she melted against him, until that look of annoyance fled her face and was replaced by wanton need.

“How are you feeling?” His gaze raked downward, taking in the fine lines of her body, lingering at her ribs. “Ribs okay?”

“They’re fine.” Rose stained her cheeks, contradicting so vividly with the woman she’d claimed to be. Was that part of her allure? That contradiction between good girl and bad girl? She

glanced away, pulled her look of annoyance back into place. “I was a little sore yesterday, but nothing too bad.”

“I started to call to check on you.” True. He’d picked up the phone a dozen times, but had decided not to push too much too soon.

She shifted her feet. “There wasn’t a need. Thanks, though.”

She took a step back, putting more distance between them.

Apparently he’d royally ticked her off when he’d hightailed it on Saturday night.

Which meant he needed to do some backpedaling of his own.

“How late are you working?”

“Shift change is at seven.” She gave him an odd look and added, “Same as always.”

Yeah, he’d known that, but obviously wasn’t thinking clearly. “You want to go to dinner?”

“With you?” Her eyes widened, big green gems beckoning to him with the power of an enchantress.

“I’m not asking for anyone else, if that’s what you’re wondering.” He chuckled wryly, ignoring that looking at Madison had him feeling a little crazy. Had him wondering if she was going to say no. Had him wondering what it would feel like to kiss her.

Her mouth bowed, her lips almost pouty. How could he ignore how full and lush they were? How downright kissable? How downright nibble-able? He wanted to sink his teeth in and.

“Okay,” she agreed, her irritation melting away and her smile

illuminating her pretty face, making his ribs tighten around his lungs to the point he could barely catch his breath. “Thanks for asking. That would be nice.”

Nice. There was that word again. A word that had guilt dredging up deep in his soul.

Yes, he wanted a more settled relationship with Madison, a committed relationship, but what if that didn’t work out? Then what? He should be upfront and warn her just in case?

If what he’d overheard was true, would she even care if he was more like Jonathan Fielding than he would have ever thought possible? And if she were that woman, then why had he chosen her as the woman he wanted a more serious relationship with?

Because Madison felt different.

Everything about her felt different from any woman he’d ever known.

Maybe he’d heard wrong that day. Maybe she really was the innocent he sometimes thought he caught a glimpse of.

Maybe he should give her the opportunity to come clean, to tell him once and for all what type of person she was.

“Madison?”

Her gaze lifted to his, all soft and expectant, making him hopeful that she’d tell him to go to hell, that he couldn’t have her without giving her his heart first. “I should warn you...” he leaned in closer to her. “...I’m not a nice guy. Not when it comes to women, and particularly not when it comes to you. Think you can handle that?”

Madison stared at Levi, trying to figure out why she felt like he was saying one thing and asking another. Wondering at his hot/cold attitude. Was he trying to scare her off? Or was he truly just warning her not to expect anything of him? Not to think that she was any different from other women?

That was the great thing about being a player. Madison no longer thought she was different from any other woman. Just as he wouldn't be different from any other man, only he sort of was.

But that was probably just because she wanted him so much physically. Because he was the first guy she'd chosen to try out her new persona.

"I've heard that about you." Even to her ears, her tone was hardly condemning, more of an acceptance of who he was. Did he think his way with women a secret? Hardly. She'd heard tell of the irresistible Dr. Fielding from Karen prior to even starting at Angel Creek.

"Normally, I'd say you shouldn't believe everything you hear," he drawled lazily, his to-die-for-hot-fudge-sundae eyes not leaving hers, "but in my case, maybe you should."

Madison gulped down the baseball wedged in her throat. "Because you're not nice to women?"

A startled look passed over his face. One that held a hint of darkness that surprised her, but almost as fast as the look appeared it disappeared and his gaze took on one of possession.

"Oh, I'm nice." His eyes defined nice in a way that made her inner thighs clench. "It's just that in the past, women have always

wanted more than I was prepared to give.”

Which said it all.

What woman could be with Levi and not want more? More of everything him? Was she a fool to think she could really be a player with someone like Levi? Was she a fool to have ever thought she could move to a different town and start over as someone new? Someone who was impervious to having her heart broken? Would she end up just wanting more from Levi, too? Recalling how badly she'd wanted him to kiss her on Saturday night, she admitted she already wanted more from Levi than he was prepared to give.

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