JANICE LYNN

The Doctor's Secret Son

MEDICAL ROMANCE™

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Аннотация

The truth about that night…Nurse Chrissie Tomberlain never thought she'd see the unforgettable Dr Trace Stevens, father of her little boy, again. She hasn't heard from him in four years, but then he shows up at a charity event, and offers her another night of unbridled, no-strings passion!Driven by his own demons, nomadic Trace has been saving lives in the world's most war-torn places. He's never wanted to put down roots, but then beautiful Chrissie turns his whole life upside down with one incredible revelation…he's a father!

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Dear Reader,

While writing my last Medical Romance I became more and more intrigued by my heroine's best friend. By the end of that book I knew I had to know what her story was and give her a happy ending.

Chrissie Tomberlain has a secret she's kept for the four years since she last saw Trace Stevens—a beautiful three-year-old son. Providing medical care to impoverished and war-torn countries is Trace's life mission, but he's back in Atlanta for a few weeks and discovers the attraction between him and Chrissie has only grown with time. Trace knows he won't stay, and Chrissie isn't looking to have an affair. But when he learns her reasons why he's confronted with a past he'd rather forget.

I hope you enjoy Trace and Chrissie's book as much as I enjoyed researching and writing their story. Drop me an email at Janice@janicelynn.net to share your thoughts about their

romance, about Chattanooga, or just to say hello.

Happy reading!

Janice

The Doctor's Secret Son

Janice Lynn

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Visit the Author Profile page at millsandboon.co.uk for more titles.

Janice won The National Readers' Choice Award for her first book The Doctor's Pregnancy Bombshell

To my editor, Kathryn Cheshire.

Thanks for all your fabulous insight and hard work

to make my stories shine.

Contents

Cover
Back Cover Text
Dear Reader
Title Page
Booklist
Dedication
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
EPILOGUE
Extract
Copyright

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS HER.

Her hair was longer and her body a bit curvier, but the wide

smile on her full lips was the same, as was the sparkle in her bright green gaze.

Not for a single second did Dr. Trace Stevens doubt the perky little blonde nurse's identity. How could he? No woman had ever caused such an intense sexual reaction in him as Chrissie Tomberlain.

Trace's lips curved.

This weekend had definitely just taken a turn for the better. A big turn. Four years ago she'd made his last weekend in the States unforgettable. He still had a few weeks before leaving again, but he welcomed the distraction.

Chrissie had been the best distraction he'd ever known.

So much so that even now, from time to time, he'd awaken drenched in sweat, with an ache in his gut that hadn't been satisfied in years.

Four years, to be exact.

Ironic to run into her because more than once he'd considered looking her up, seeing if she was single, seeing if she'd be interested in spending time with him while he was home.

Then again, this event was where they'd met, so maybe not so ironic. Still, this weekend was exactly what he needed in so many ways.

A few weeks from now, he'd go back to doing what he was meant to do in life. There were places in the world that needed him a lot more than he was needed in Atlanta, Georgia, even if his friends and family thought otherwise.

* * *

Chrissie Tomberlain hadn't spent a night away from her three-year-old son since he'd been born. So why had she let her best friend convince her that staying away from him for a whole weekend would be a good idea?

Okay, Savannah was right that Chrissie never did anything but work and take care of Joss. But there wasn't anything she'd rather do than spend time with her son, so she hadn't seen it as a problem. Spending time with Joss was a blessing she cherished each and every time she looked into his precious face, heard his sweet voice, felt his little hands pat her cheek.

Prior to Joss's birth, she had enjoyed volunteering at various charity fund-raisers around her hometown of Chattanooga. She'd done so at the huge children's cancer prevention event in Atlanta several times in the past.

But not since she'd gotten pregnant with Joss.

At the event.

By a man she hadn't seen since.

Until now.

Trace Stevens hadn't changed much from four years ago.

He was still sexy as hell and made her body do crazy, previously unexperienced things.

Made her mind go back to the night of passion of four years ago that had led to her becoming a single mother by a man she'd just met.

A man who had no idea he'd fathered a son.

Her son. Her sweet, wonderful Joss.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and prepared herself for what she hadn't really thought would ever happen.

She wasn't supposed to see Trace again.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

Yet, if she was honest with herself, wouldn't she admit that from the moment she'd gotten into her car in Chattanooga she'd had a nervous energy inside, wondering "what if' the entire two-hour drive?

What if Trace was there?

What if their paths really did cross again?

What if he still lit her body on fire with a mere glance, something no one else had ever done before or since?

There he was, standing in a tent not so unlike the one they'd met in four years ago. For all she knew it might be the exact same one if Children's Cancer Prevention Organization owned their commercial tents, rather than rented them.

A big sexy grin climbed up Trace's face as his gaze collided with hers and recognition hit.

He remembered her.

Of course he remembered her.

They'd spent an entire weekend together. A lot of it together together. Four years wasn't so long ago that he'd forget a weekend that hot and heavy.

Then again, maybe he had hot and heavy weekends like that routinely.

She knew nothing about the man except that he was amazing in bed and had been a fellow volunteer at the CCPO. That year, the event had done a three-day walk. This year, the organization was sponsoring a weekend of family fun. On Friday evening, they were having a welcome event and a bubble-a-thon dance party open to all participants and their families. On Saturday morning, they were having a marathon, with various levels of participation. Some committing to a five K, some to the full marathon. Others committing to various distances in between. Then, in the evening, they were having sponsored Olympic-style games for the kids.

Now, as then, Chrissie had signed up to work the medical tent all weekend. Full of nervous energy, she'd dropped Joss off to Savannah early that morning, then made the drive so she could help organize the medical station and volunteer to assist with anything else needed prior to the families and fund-raiser participants starting to arrive.

Imagine running into Trace within minutes of her arrival.

Imagine, she had.

For four years she'd imagined this moment, coming face to face with the man who'd haunted her dreams and her reality.

Yet it wasn't really as intense as it should have been. The sun hadn't stood still in the sky. The earth hadn't quaked. Lightning hadn't streaked its way to the ground. Nothing. They were just standing in a tent, looking at each other, a man and a woman with a past while the rest of the world went on as usual.

No big deal. But her heart pounded like crazy and her chest

wanted to heave from lack of air.

Probably had something to do with the look in Trace's eyes when he'd spotted her that said he'd figured out exactly what he'd be doing this weekend, other than working the medical tent.

Or more like who.

Why, oh, why was everything in her screaming yes?

Other than her brain, that was. Her brain warned she'd best stay far, far away because to have anything to do with him would be risking everything.

He wasn't that good in bed.

She skimmed her gaze over his body, noting on closer inspection that he was slightly leaner than she remembered, more tan, too. His loose CCPO event T-shirt and khaki cargo shorts did little to hide his broad shoulders and narrow hips. His left hand was still bare of jewelry and had no telltale tan line to hint at deception. Lifting her gaze back to his face, she took in his sandy-colored hair, strong aquiline nose, cleft chin, and toffee-colored eyes that were staring straight into hers with obvious interest. His smile widened and her thighs clenched in immediate response.

He had been that good, but she still wasn't risking it.

She had too much at stake to play sexual escapades with Trace all weekend.

But boy, oh, boy, did the man tempt everything in her.

* * *

"It's been a while," Trace said by way of greeting when he

closed the distance between them.

"Four years."

Four years. Four long years where he'd seen things he'd like to forget, and she was just the woman who might accomplish that for him, even if only for a short while.

A short while sounded like heaven after the hell he'd seen, that he'd no doubt see more of when he returned to wherever they sent him this time.

"How have you been?" he asked, studying her. Other than the change of hairstyle and the few extra pounds she carried, she looked the same as he recalled. Better even. He liked the fullness to her breasts and hips that hadn't been there four years ago.

His groin tightened.

Yeah, he liked her curves a lot.

His body's instant reaction to her nearness made him feel like a Neanderthal. It hadn't been that long since he'd been with a woman. But when he tried to think back to the last time he'd had sex, he struggled to recall exactly how long it had been.

A problem he intended to rectify, assuming Chrissie still felt the strong attraction they'd shared. Time certainly hadn't faded a thing for him.

Sex just hadn't been a priority recently. Life—life had been the top priority where he'd been. Helping those who desperately needed help and doing what he could with significantly limited resources had been a priority. Surviving tragedy, and healing, had been a priority.

“I’m great,” she answered, shifting her weight as if she was nervous.

She had nothing to be nervous about. They’d ended on good terms, or so he’d thought, after their weekend. He’d thought about her often enough that had there been anything negative he would have remembered. He’d swear he recalled every detail of that weekend in vivid color.

“That’s good to hear. How’s life been treating you?”

Her gaze cut to beyond him, and, ignoring his question, she said, “Sorry, but if you’ll excuse me, I see someone I need to talk to.” She paused, briefly met his gaze with a steely expression in her green eyes. “Good to see you again, Travis.”

Travis? Ouch.

He watched her walk away, greet Agnes Coulson, a bear of a woman and the Children’s Cancer Prevention Organization founder. True to how he’d just thought of her, Agnes wrapped Chrissie into a big hug, causing her to laugh as she hugged the woman back, then wiggled free.

“It’s so good to see you,” she exclaimed to the woman, showing the excitement Trace would like to have seen when she’d greeted him. He wouldn’t have minded one of those hugs, either.

Instead, he’d effectively been put in his place.

Not that he was buying that she’d forgotten his name.

He wasn’t.

She hadn’t forgotten. But she wanted him to think she had. That was her way of letting him know she wasn’t interested.

Which wasn't what her eyes had conveyed when she'd first seen him. He'd have bet anything she'd felt the same excitement he had.

He knew she had.

Maybe she'd taken that closer look, seen the harshness that almost suffocated him these days, and known the best thing she could do was stay away.

He wasn't the same man he'd been four years ago. Not by far. In some ways, he was better. In some, not so much.

"You two had something a few years back, didn't you? Right before you left for Sudan?"

Trace turned to Bud Coulson, Agnes's husband. They headed up the event each year. They'd done so for the past twenty years. Their only child had been diagnosed with, and died from, a rare type of brain cancer, and they'd dedicated their lives to raising awareness and funds to fight pediatric cancers. Trace's family regularly donated to their organization. Four years ago, before he'd left for his Doctors Around the World stint overseas, Trace had done more than pull out his hefty checkbook. He'd volunteered as an extra helper, something he'd done numerous times over the years in different capacities with CCPO.

Even before Doctors Around the World he'd wanted to do more to help others than just practice medicine. Thank goodness for Bud and Agnes's influence over the years that had planted that seed that drove him to help others.

How could he not support the foundation when it was a way

of keeping Kerry alive to the couple he loved so much?

"I was quite taken with her the weekend we met," he admitted, not letting his mind go to little Kerry and the guilt he always felt when he thought of her.

Instead, he let memories of Chrissie flood through his mind. He'd always wondered if the intensity of that weekend had been because he'd known he was heading into the unknown. Which he'd wanted. He still wanted even if his parents had begged him to come home to stay. He understood their concern.

Especially after the incident at the Shiara MSF hospital in Yemen.

Automatically, he placed his hand over his right lower abdomen. That one had been a bit too close for comfort, but at least he'd walked away with his life, which he couldn't say of all his colleagues.

Damn cowardly terrorists attacking a hospital. Damn that he'd walked away when so many good people had died.

"Your dad told me about what happened." Bud gestured to where Trace touched. "You should have come home to let us take care of you."

Trace rammed his hand into his pocket.

"There was nothing anyone could do." There hadn't been. He'd been one of the lucky ones. "Besides, I lived."

"I was surprised you didn't opt to come home after that," Bud mused, then shook his head. "I take that back. That you opted to stay didn't really surprise me."

“Coming home wasn’t an option.” Not one that he’d ever considered at any rate. He planned to live his life doing mission work. Settling down wasn’t for him. A wife and kids wasn’t his lot in life and he never wanted it to be.

His gaze cut to the woman still smiling and chatting with Agnes. Her hands waved animatedly as she described something. Both women burst into laughter and a deep ache pierced Trace.

“Your father would move heaven and earth to convince you to come back,” Bud mused, watching Trace rather than his wife and Chrissie. “He’s hoping you’re home to stay.”

Trace frowned. “We both know I’ll be leaving as soon as I’m given my next assignment. My father doesn’t understand.”

Bud shook his head. “You’re right. He doesn’t. Not many do.”

Trace’s eyes shifted toward the older man. “You saying you don’t? Because I wouldn’t believe you. You of all people understand the need to do more than just accept things for the way they are. This organization is testament to that.”

“Agnes and CCPO are my life.” One side of Bud’s mouth tugged upward. “Then again, at one time the Marine Corps was my life, too. I served time overseas and wouldn’t trade those memories and the brothers I gained for anything. I think we accomplished a lot of good things, but that doesn’t mean I’d go back. Sometimes we have to let go of one thing we care about to make room for another.” He glanced lovingly at his wife.

Trace cocked his brow at the older man. “You trying to tell me you don’t think I should go?”

Bud shrugged. “Only you know the answer to whether or not you should go back.” He nodded toward where Chrissie and Agnes still talked, obviously catching up. “Maybe it’s time you find a reason to want to stay home rather than go as far away as possible.”

“Those people need help every bit as much as the kids you’re raising money for,” Trace pointed out, not acknowledging Bud’s claim that he might have been running from something when he’d signed on to Doctors Around the World. “They’re innocent victims of governments and wars they have no control over.”

“Civilians are always the innocent victims of war,” Bud agreed. “You do what you feel is right for you, son. All I’m saying is that there is a lot of good you can do here, too. I just think you need to keep that in mind, because I’m not convinced going back is the right choice for you.”

Trace eyed the older man suspiciously. “You’re sure Dad didn’t put you up to trying to talk me into staying?”

Bud laughed. “I won’t say he’s never mentioned hoping you’d stay to me, but I’m speaking for myself.”

Trace nodded. He’d figured as much. His successful businessman father would probably fund Bud’s charity for the next fifty years if he could convince Trace to stay in Atlanta.

Which would be a good reason to stay, if it didn’t mean having to deal with his father on a regular basis.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Blondie is looking your way.”

Trace had noticed. Hard not to notice those intense emerald

eyes studying him. He could feel her interest, could feel her body's reaction to him.

The same interest and reaction he was having to her.

Obviously, the chemistry they'd shared still burned hot.

So, why had she given him the cold shoulder?

* * *

Chrissie ordered her gaze to remove itself from Trace. Unfortunately, her eyes didn't seem connected to her brain.

Why did he have to be so hot? Those amazing eyes just sucked her in. Rich, warm toffee that made her want to melt.

She was melting.

No wonder she'd lost her mind four years ago. Trace was hot. Scorching, melt-a-woman-all-the-way-to-her-toes hot.

Chrissie's toes were ooey-gooey puddles in her shoes.

"It's good to have Trace back with us, too, isn't it?"

Oops. Obviously, Agnes noticed her distraction and had no compunction on commenting.

Chrissie dragged her gaze away from Trace and focused on the older woman, who was watching her curiously. Something told her the woman wouldn't buy it if she pretended not to know what she referred to. After all, Chrissie and Trace had only had eyes for each other four years ago. No doubt every volunteer there had picked up on their attraction.

"Where's he been?" she asked.

Agnes's concerned gaze went to Trace. "For the past couple of years? Yemen."

Surprise hit Chrissie. “Yemen?”

“He works with Doctors Around the World.” A troubled look came over Agnes’s face, making her appear every one of her sixty plus years. “He’ll be leaving again soon. Unfortunately. He’s home because his only cousin had a baby and the timing fell right at the end of his contract.”

Chrissie’s gaze went back to Trace. Yemen. She knew that was in the Middle East, but she wasn’t sure exactly where. She probably should have paid better attention in geography class.

“I wondered if you two had stayed in touch while he was there and that it wasn’t a coincidence you were both volunteering again at the same time.” Agnes looked disappointed. “Obviously not.”

Chrissie shook her head. “No, meeting Trace four years ago was nice.” Nice? Ha, that was so not the right word to describe that meeting. More like naughty. “But neither of us fooled each other that our meeting was anything more. I didn’t know he’d be here.”

“Too bad,” Agnes countered. “That boy needs someone in his life.”

“You sound as if you know him well,” Chrissie mused, trying not to look overly interested.

“All his life. His father and Bud go back a long way. Well,” she clarified with a low laugh, “all the way back to elementary school. They were best friends. Trace was a few months older than our daughter. We’d always hoped they’d grow up, fall in love, and connect our families in yet another way.” Pain momentarily

aged her face. “Instead, Kerry died and Trace spends his time overseas.”

“Are you gossiping about me, Agnes?”

Agnes quickly recovered, her cheeks turning a rosy pink. “Every chance I get to extol your virtues.”

“My virtues don’t deserve extolling.”

There was more to what he was saying than what appeared. But Chrissie’s own cheeks were burning too much with embarrassment at getting caught discussing him for her to over-analyze his comment.

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Agnes countered. “So, where are we going to put our Chrissie to work this year?”

Chrissie frowned. She wasn’t their Chrissie. At least, not his Chrissie. But Agnes was smiling and chatting on about the medical tent and making sure everything was ready for the event kick-off.

“I’d like to do triage if that’s okay,” Chrissie spoke up. “It’s what I did last time.”

“You’ve been back?” Trace asked, studying her.

Agnes nodded. “Not for a few years, but our Chrissie is an angel from heaven, for sure.”

Yeah, Chrissie was pretty sure with the way her insides were burning that she was from somewhere way more south.

And Agnes knew that it had been four years. Why had she left the date a little vague?

“Maybe you could take her to the triage area and show her

how things are set up this year?" Agnes's question was directed at Trace.

"Yes, ma'am." His gaze locked with Chrissie's and he grinned as if she hadn't cut him off earlier. "Follow me."

His facial expression was so similar to one she often saw on her son's face that her breath caught. Her feet refused to move. Her head spun.

"Chrissie?"

Shaking her head to stop the spinning, she stepped toward him.

Three days. Three days and then she'd change charities to volunteer at ones in Chattanooga so she'd never have to see Trace Stevens again.

CHAPTER TWO

"YOU'VE CHANGED."

Chrissie's gaze shot to Trace's. Of course she had changed. She was a mother now. Not that she was going to tell him that.

Although they hadn't done a lot of talking four years ago, he had told her that he was a bachelor for life and had no plans to reproduce ever. Because of his words, and the trauma from her parents' custody battle when she was seven, Chrissie had convinced herself that Joss belonged to her because she'd just been a weekend fling for Trace.

Guilt pinched at her conscience, but she shoved it aside.

Now was not the time to feel guilty. They'd shared a wild weekend of sex that had never been meant to be anything more.

He hadn't wanted it to be anything more.

Only she'd ended up pregnant.

Pregnant, and she hadn't known how to get in touch with him.

She could have contacted Bud and Agnes, could have asked for Trace's information. Perhaps they would have given it to her.

Only, she hadn't.

She and Trace had parted ways with no plans to stay in touch or ever see each other again. He'd known the city where she lived because she'd told him. Just as he'd told her he lived in Atlanta. He hadn't bothered to get in touch with her or continue their relationship in any way.

If he'd left the country, who knew if he'd even had a way of staying in touch? Then again, if he'd wanted to, he would have found a way. Chattanooga wasn't that big and tracking down a nurse with her name couldn't have been that difficult.

He hadn't, and because of that she'd never felt the need to attempt to track him down. Well, twinges from time to time, but overall she knew she'd done the right thing for her son and had even given Trace what he'd said he wanted by keeping her secret.

How Joss had come into existence didn't matter these days. What mattered was her precious little boy who was the center of her world, and that she'd do anything to protect him from the hell she'd gone through as a child. She would give him the best life possible, and that was that.

But then, she hadn't thought she'd see Trace again. Not really.

She stared into his eyes, wondering at the emotions she saw

flickering there.

She hadn't known he was leaving the country, hadn't known he was with Doctors Around the World. He'd never mentioned anything of the sort to her. Something like leaving the country for an extended period of time was a big deal.

"When did you leave for Doctors Around the World?"

His pupils dilated and for the briefest moment darkness replaced the interest in his eyes. "I see Agnes really was gossiping about me."

He hadn't answered her question. Interesting. Most of the guys she knew would have made sure everyone knew they were a doctor, that they'd signed up selflessly to help others, and they'd have played that angle to the max. Four years ago Trace hadn't told her he was a doctor or that he was with DAW.

Fifteen minutes and she already knew things about him she hadn't known then.

Was that why he'd told her he wasn't interested in anything more than a weekend fling and never would be? Because he'd been about to leave?

"When?" she repeated, needing to know, although she wasn't sure why it even mattered. That he hadn't told her such pertinent details about his life just reinforced what she already knew. It hadn't mattered that she hadn't known the details of his life. She was not someone who mattered.

"The week after we met." His lips twisted as if the words triggered unpleasant memories. "I'd purposely put off my leave

date until after the event so I could help Bud and Agnes and to spend a little time with them before I took off. That's why I didn't sign on to work as a physician at the event, but just as extra help where needed."

The week after... He'd left the country the week after they'd met.

"I haven't been back in the United States since. Not until a week ago."

Four years had passed and he'd not come home. For all of Joss's life, Trace had been out of the country, serving others.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh." He reached out, brushed his fingertip over her cheek then down her jawline. "Not sure how much help I was that weekend. All I remember about those three days is you."

Her insides perked up at his admission and it was all she could do not to ask "It is?" with a silly school girl expression plastered to her face. Instead, she bit her tongue.

He'd been out of the country for four years. How many times while she'd been pregnant had she thought about him living it up in Atlanta's night life? Wining and dining some slim beauty queen while she grew rounder and rounder with his child? The glimpse of darkness in his eyes said that he hadn't been wining or dining anyone, that he'd seen things he'd like to forget, that the past four years hadn't been a bed of roses.

"Have you thought about me, Chrissie?"

She winced. Had he read her mind?

Still, she didn't want to answer his question any more than he'd wanted to answer hers. She didn't want to tell him that not a day went by that he didn't cross her mind.

How could it when Joss was a constant reminder?

When she went home, it would be even worse now that she'd seen Trace again and realized just how much her son truly resembled his handsome father. The facial expressions. The eyes. Joss was Trace's mini-me.

"Or did you forget me the minute you left Atlanta?"

His question made her sound as if she had flings all the time, as if what she'd done with him had been no big deal. Other than a college boyfriend she'd hung around with long enough for him to take her virginity and introduce her to a mediocre sex life, she'd had no other lovers. Only Trace.

There had been nothing mediocre about Trace.

But she wasn't telling him that, either.

Because he'd been so good he must have had many lovers over the years.

Had probably had many since, despite his being out of the country. Chrissie couldn't suppress her grimace.

"You know as well as I do that you aren't exactly the kind of man a woman forgets," she admitted as if it were no big deal. "Nor was that weekend the kind I'd just forget."

"Good to know." He smiled at her admission. "It was a phenomenal weekend, wasn't it?"

She crossed her arms and kept her mouth shut. She'd answered

enough questions.

"But not one you want to repeat?"

Yeah, she didn't want to answer that either. Mainly because her body was like, "Yes, sign me up for an encore performance!" but her brain knew the best thing she could do was keep as much distance between her and Trace as possible.

He was the father to her son. A son he didn't know about. She needed to stay far, far away before she slipped up and said something she shouldn't. What if she said something and he pulled a stunt like the one her father had pulled?

She couldn't bear the thought of Trace disappearing with her son. Not that he would likely even want anything to do with Joss, but, still, her own father had practically ignored her the first seven years of her life and that hadn't stopped him.

Her gaze lifted to his and rather than saying, No, I don't want a repeat, as a good, smart girl would do, she asked, "Why do you say that?"

His expression brightened. "Then you do want a repeat?"

Ugh. She'd walked right into that one.

She studied his toffee-colored gaze, his smooth tanned skin, the obvious sexual interest in his eyes. "You do?"

"What sane man wouldn't want a repeat of what you and I had?"

There was that.

"Sex without strings?"

His gaze narrowed. "Not exactly how I'd have worded it."

She didn't let her gaze waver. "Which doesn't make it any less true."

His forehead furrowed and he did some studying of his own. She refused to look away, refused to shift her weight or show any sign of weakness.

Even if her insides quaked at the power this man had over her.

"Did you want strings, Chrissie?"

Heat rushed into her face. She was going to have to be careful of what she said. Which was why she needed to stay away. Nothing good could come from spending time with Trace.

"No, of course not." She hadn't. She'd known what they shared was just a man and a woman thrown together by circumstances and sexual attraction. "You told me you weren't the marrying kind. I didn't expect anything to come of our weekend together." She sure hadn't expected to become a mother. "No strings was fine."

A tired look came over his face and he raked his fingers through his hair. "I was leaving the country in three days. I couldn't have done strings if I'd wanted to."

Something in his tone had her insides fluttering with a bundle of nervous energy.

"Did you want to?"

* * *

Good question, and one that Trace had asked himself a thousand times in the years that had passed since he'd last seen this woman. What would he have done differently had he not

been committed?

"I didn't allow myself to consider strings as a possibility." Which was what he always came back to when his mind got to wondering. Not that he would ever have settled down, but he would have liked more time with Chrissie, to have been able to let the fire between them burn out naturally.

Her pretty face pinched and her gaze averted. "Which explains why you never asked for a phone number."

Although he was sure she didn't want them to, her words conveyed that she'd been hurt. That he'd hurt her stung.

"There was no point in my asking."

"I see." Her lower lip disappeared again.

"I don't think you do." He lifted her chin and stared into the greenest eyes he'd ever looked into. "I was leaving the country, had volunteered for a crazy assignment. Putting you or any woman through the stress of a relationship when I was over there, especially when nothing would ever have come from that relationship anyway—it wouldn't have been fair."

Her chin trembled beneath his fingertips and Trace wanted to kiss her so badly his insides ached. They were alone in the medical tent, but someone could walk in. Which didn't overly concern him. He'd seen and done too much to let something as irrelevant as someone seeing him kiss Chrissie get to him. But Chrissie was still sending mixed signals.

One minute hot, the next cold.

When he kissed her next, he wanted her to want it as much as

he did, not to be second-guessing herself.

He would kiss her again. Soon. She might not want to admit it, but she wanted the kiss as much as he did. Everything in her expression, her stance, her eyes, said so.

"Well, I guess you're a damn saint, then, eh?"

There went the cold again. And the hurt.

"Far from it."

Looking away, she shrugged. "Not to hear Agnes tell it."

"Agnes is biased. She's my godmother."

Chrissie's eyes widened. Obviously Agnes hadn't told her that part.

"Her husband, Bud, and my father grew up in the same neighborhood and were best friends. Somehow, that friendship survived my father's personality all these years."

"Something wrong with your father's personality?"

Ha, now there was a tricky question if ever there was one.

"Most people would say he's near perfect."

Her eyebrow arched. "But not you?"

Not a subject he wanted to discuss any more than he wanted to discuss Sudan or Yemen or Kerry. Maybe less so.

"So, about those Braves..."

He watched emotions play across her face, but she let any further questions she had go. How many times had he closed his eyes and recalled her face? How many times when the whole world seemed to have gone crazy had he closed his eyes and just remembered everything about her?

“Yeah, well, apparently you don’t recall, or maybe you never knew—” her chin tilted upward “—but I’m not a fan of baseball.”

Well, no one was perfect even if in his mind she was close.

“That’s un-American,” he teased.

She shrugged. “Overpaid bunch of men who never grew up as far as I’m concerned.”

His lips twitched. “I’ll have you know those guys work hard.”

She gave him an accusing look. “You sound as if you’re one of them. Former player or just a wannabe?”

He laughed and it felt good. Foreign, but good. He’d not had many reasons to laugh over the past four years. It hadn’t all been bad. Some parts had been wonderful. He’d been helping people who desperately needed help. But overall there hadn’t been nearly enough laughter.

For all the craziness, he’d felt as if he was doing something positive in the world, had felt alive and needed.

“Nope, never been much of a baseball player,” he admitted. “But I have a few friends on the team.”

“On the Atlanta Braves baseball team?” She sounded incredulous.

He nodded. His father handled more than one of the players’ finances, was a real-estate mogul, and prior to Trace leaving the country they’d moved in the same social circles. These days, all the parties and hoopla seemed pointless when there were people starving and being killed for their beliefs or place of birth.

Shaking off the memory, he focused on the petite blonde

staring up at him and drank her in like a breath of fresh air.

Chrissie's brows pinched. "Just who are you, anyway?"

Determined that he was going to keep the past four years at bay, not think about pending decisions that needed making about his future, Trace grinned. "That's right. You forgot my name."

For the first time, a smile toyed on her lips.

A guilty smile.

That she'd pretended not to remember him was as telling as her comment about his not asking for her phone number.

He stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Trace Stevens. I'm a volunteer in the medical tent. I'll be working closely with you over the next couple of days."

"Not that closely."

It occurred to him that just because his life hadn't moved forward, a lot could have changed in hers.

He'd just assumed she was single, available.

His gaze dropped to her left hand and specifically to her empty third finger.

"No wedding ring," he mused out loud. "Boyfriend?"

"I'm not married." Her lower lip disappeared between her teeth. "But I date from time to time."

He let her answer digest, not liking the green sludge making its way through his veins. He had no claims on her. He never had. When he'd spotted her across the tent he hadn't even considered that she might be involved with someone else. He'd just seen her and wanted her.

Four years had come and gone. It wasn't as if he'd have expected anyone to have waited on him.

And to wait for what? A weekend fling every few years when he came home?

He had nothing to offer beyond that and never would.

CHAPTER THREE

CHRISSIE NEEDED TO get away from Trace. Quickly. Being around him made her insides mush.

"So," she said as a way of moving the conversation away from anything personal. "What can I do to help get things set up?"

"Bud and Agnes are so organized they have most everything taken care of. The bins of donated supplies are over here and are labeled. We can set the area up along the lines of what we did four years ago."

Chrissie's face heated, which told her way too much about her state of mind.

"A triage area and a treatment area?" Had her voice been several octaves higher or was that just her imagination?

"Yes." How dared he sound so calm? "We'll set one treatment area up to be a bit more private, just in case."

No. No. No. There went her naughty imagination again to places it shouldn't go. To memories of a former private treatment area where her body had been quite ravished.

She couldn't prevent her blush.

Hoping he didn't notice, or that he'd think it the result of the Georgia heat, she nodded. "That works for me. How many

volunteers do we have in the medical area this year?"

The more the better. She hoped they were so over-staffed that being alone was impossible.

"Around a dozen, I think." He pulled out a list and began reading it. "We have a couple of doctors, a couple of nurses, a paramedic, a few nurse practitioners, and a few techs, and then some med and nursing students. It should run smoothly."

"Trace Stevens, is that you?" a female voice with a light accent called out from the other side of the tent.

Trace and Chrissie both turned. A pretty brunette with long sleek hair pulled into a ponytail headed their direction. A huge smile was on her face and Chrissie wouldn't have been surprised if she'd broken into a run to close the gap between her and Trace quicker.

"Alexis," he greeted the woman, who wrapped her arms around him and gave him a big hug. "I just saw your name on the list."

Chrissie was beginning to think she was going to have to peel the woman off to get her to let go of Trace, but eventually, and with obvious reluctance, she stepped back and brushed her hands down her white shorts and turquoise top.

"I heard you were back in town—" Alexis's smile was so big and bright she could be a toothpaste ad "—and would be here this weekend, but thought it too good to be true."

"You heard right." Trace grinned easily at the beautiful woman.

No wonder. She was a Greek goddess, had a husky voice that held a light accent and was downright sexy, and she was looking at Trace with obvious interest in her dark eyes.

She was looking at him the way Chrissie had, no doubt, looked at him four years ago.

Thank goodness she wasn't looking at him that way now. Okay, maybe a little.

I am not jealous, she told herself over and over. It does not matter that another woman is batting her lashes at him as if he is coated in chocolate and she's just come off a strict diet.

It didn't matter. He meant nothing to Chrissie. Just a stranger she'd had an amazing weekend with years ago.

A stranger who she'd made a child with.

She grimaced. Yeah, there was that. Which explained why she couldn't bear to watch their interaction a moment longer. It had nothing to do with anything other than a natural instinct because of Joss.

"Um...I'll go unpack bins while you two catch up," she offered, not even sure if either of them remembered she was there as the woman caught him up on a few mutual acquaintances and their recent activities.

At Chrissie's words, the woman gave a horrified look. "Did I interrupt? I'm sorry. I saw Trace and had to immediately say hello and then, as always with this man, I got carried away." She winked at Chrissie as if they shared a secret. "He has that effect on women, so be careful."

Chrissie didn't need Alexis to point out the effect Trace had on women. She knew. She forced a smile, tight though it was, to her lips.

"I'll take note."

"Chrissie's immune to whatever effect I have," he told Alexis, although Chrissie had no idea why.

The woman's perfectly shaped eyebrow arched.

Chrissie frowned, but didn't respond to his comment.

Trace's gaze darted back and forth between the gorgeous brunette and Chrissie. No doubt he saw the stark contrast. It was hard to miss.

"Chrissie, this is Dr. Alexis Gianakos," Trace introduced the woman. "One of the best cardiologists I've ever had the pleasure of working with."

A doctor? Beautiful and smart it would seem.

"As you may have figured out from our conversation, she and I worked at the same hospital prior to when I joined DAW," Trace continued. "She's volunteering this weekend."

Will you be working closely with her, too? Chrissie wanted to ask, but somehow managed to keep her tongue in place.

Ugh. She hated feeling jealous. Hated it.

But she was. Denial didn't make reality any less true.

"Nice to meet you," she greeted, holding out her hand and forcing the corners of her mouth upward.

The woman took her hand. Hers was smooth, strong, feminine. Well-manicured.

Chrissie couldn't help but look down at her own as she pulled away from the woman's. A bit rough, nails cropped short and unpainted, and no jewelry.

None on the horizon, either.

She'd dated, but found she quickly tired of the men who had come into her life. They either thought because she was a single mom that that meant she was easy for the taking or they didn't understand that Joss came first and always would. None had lasted beyond a couple of dates.

Her best friend, Savannah, was always pushing her to date, especially now that Savannah was so over the moon, happily married to cardiologist Dr. Charlie Keele. Just because Savannah had found the right man for her it didn't mean Chrissie had to do the same. Or that she even wanted to. She was quite happy with just her and Joss. Fabulously so.

"You're also an old friend of Trace's?" Alexis's accent came out a bit thicker than previously.

"We aren't old friends, just acquaintances who met here a few years ago."

"Ah," Alexis said as if gaining insight. This time it was her dark gaze going back and forth between Chrissie and Trace.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll get started," Chrissie said, feeling more and more awkward.

She walked away before either could say anything. She didn't want to listen to the beautiful woman chat up Trace and she sure didn't want to listen to whatever response he made to the

woman's obvious interest.

Had they been an item when Trace worked with her? The woman was so beautiful that no doubt they'd made an attractive couple.

He was free to do whatever he wanted. Whomever he wanted. But she didn't want to know about it. Or see it.

What she'd really like to do was block it completely from her mind. Forever. She began organizing supplies and forcing a smile to stay on her face.

Attitude was everything and she was going to have a good attitude this weekend even if it killed her.

* * *

Chrissie was jealous.

She had no reason to be jealous, but the fact that she was made Trace happier than it should have.

Alexis was still chatting about the hospital and his former coworkers, but Trace's attention followed Chrissie to where she began opening bins with a vengeance and a smile that didn't fit. He'd already helped volunteers set up tables and chairs in their tent, so, other than however they opted to organize their supplies, there wasn't a lot more to do. Many of their items would stay boxed up until needed.

"Who is she?"

Alexis's question didn't surprise him. Right or wrong, he hadn't attempted to hide his interest in Chrissie.

"I met her here four years ago."

"You stayed in touch?"

Still watching Chrissie work, he shook his head. "I've not seen or spoken to her since until today."

Surprise registered on Alexis's face. "That must have been some meeting four years ago."

"Must have been," was all he said, then, "I'm going to help her set up. You coming?"

* * *

Chrissie was one of those people who liked event-opening ceremonies. She liked knowing the history of whatever was taking place, of who the funds were going to help, of who they had already helped. Tonight's was no exception.

Listening to Bud and Agnes talk about their daughter who'd died with cancer at such a young age, of the heartbreaking prevalence of childhood cancers, listening to how they had formed the Children's Cancer Prevention Organization and how the charity had grown, and their hope it would expand further into more cities, filled her heart with warm emotion.

She simply could not imagine something happening to Joss or how she would react if it did. Like Bud and Agnes, she'd like to think she'd deal with her grief in a way that would make the world a better place for others.

She wasn't sure she'd be able to function at all.

"What are you thinking?"

Chrissie jumped at Trace's question. "I didn't see you."

"Obviously." His gaze was on her rather than the stage where

Agnes spoke. “You were lost in your thoughts.”

“I was marveling at how Bud and Agnes turned something so personally tragic into something so positive.”

“They are good people who live to give to others.”

“Some would say a man who gave up four years of his life to help others was a good person, too.”

His expression tightened. “On my best day I don’t measure up to the man and woman on that stage.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t say I meant you,” Chrissie assured him, grateful when his serious expression lightened at her comment, as she’d intended.

There was something darker about him than she remembered. No doubt the things he’d seen over the past four years had changed him.

Was there anyone in Trace’s life that made it better? Someone who helped him deal with the no doubt tragic situations he’d encountered while working overseas?

“Is Alexis an old girlfriend?” That wasn’t what she’d meant to ask when she’d opened her mouth.

“We went out a few times.”

His smile was quick and too cocky for her liking. He knew she was jealous of the woman. Great.

“Which is more than you can say about me, so I guess that answers my question.” Which probably only made her sound jealous and bitter and judgmental. Ugh. She should keep her mouth shut.

“What question would that be?”

“Whether or not you’d slept with her.” She fought to keep the image of him with the woman from her mind. An image she’d fought for four years. She’d just never had a face to put with her thoughts of what he’d been doing while she’d been raising their son.

“I haven’t.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“I said she and I went out a few times. I didn’t say we had ‘stayed in’ a few times.” At her continued doubt, he added, “I have no reason to lie to you.”

He had a point. He owed her nothing, least of all a defense of whether or not he’d had sex with someone.

“No, I guess you don’t,” she admitted, trying to hide the fact that she was happy he hadn’t slept with the beautiful Alexis.

“Would it matter if I had?”

Good grief. Could he see inside her head or what?

“No.” But she was lying. It would have mattered. Maybe it shouldn’t, but it would have. Because of Joss, she told herself. That was why she cared who he’d slept with and who he hadn’t. Because she’d given birth to his child that made her more possessive, more concerned. At least, that was what she was going to keep telling herself, as she conveniently ignored the fact he’d been out of the country for four years.

Hoping he hadn’t realized she’d lied and that if he had, he wouldn’t call her on it, Chrissie focused on the stage.

Agnes was still speaking and Chrissie did her best to take in each word. With Trace standing so close, she couldn't focus on the woman on stage. She was surrounded by people. How was it possible to be so physically aware of one man that she could smell his spicy scent, hear the call of his body?

"I don't believe you," Trace whispered close to her ear, further sensitizing her nerve-endings.

His breath tickled her skin. She could feel his heat and would swear he'd just nuzzled her hair.

"It really doesn't matter what you believe," she said, stepping back. "I'll see you in medical."

With that she pushed through the crowd to get away from him.

But mainly to get away from her unwanted reaction to everything about him.

* * *

Later that evening in the medical tent, Trace lifted the fifty-year-old woman's foot and examined her swollen ankle.

"Yep." He glanced at her name tag on the lanyard around her neck. "Ms. Perez, you have definitely done a number on your ankle."

"I shouldn't have been quite so vigorous dancing in the bubbles, eh?"

"Apparently not." He had her turn and rest on her knees while he squeezed her calf, watching carefully as it triggered the appropriate movement in her foot. "There's no evidence that you've torn your Achilles' tendon, but you're definitely out of

commission for the rest of the weekend."

The woman's face fell. "I was afraid you were going to say that. Can't you give me a quick-fix pill?"

"It's not that easy, Ms. Perez. Some things take time and rest, not a pill. I'm sorry."

She heaved her chest in frustration. "Me, too."

"Sit here with ice for about twenty minutes with your foot elevated. Later, one of the guys will drive you on a gator to your tent. Is there someone we can call for you?"

Ms. Perez shook her head. "My daughter is out of town with work and my son lives in Chicago with his wife and kids. I'm by myself."

He gestured to her leg. "You need to stay off that ankle."

"I was looking forward to volunteering in the food tent. I've not missed a year there since CCPO started these events."

"There's no way I can okay for you to serve food."

The woman perked up. "Maybe I could volunteer in a different way? One where I could still keep my foot up?"

Trace didn't want to burst the woman's bubble, but she was going to be in quite a bit of pain and wouldn't be able to put any weight on her ankle for several days. Not with the amount she'd injured the tissue.

Stepping back into the exam area, Chrissie assisted the woman in propping up her foot and then put the woman's ice pack back on her ankle. "Is there anything I can get you? We have a few magazines if you'd like, and I brought a stack of books I've

finished if you want to take one."

The woman shook her head and held up her cellular phone. "I have books on this thing to keep my mind occupied for times such as these."

Patting the woman's hand, Chrissie smiled. "That's good."

The medical tent had been slow most of the evening.

Trace liked being busy, and felt restless. He was used to having more to do than time to do it.

Alexis was seeing a gentleman who had come into the tent with some indigestion. The other volunteers were not quite twiddling their thumbs but none of them were busy, either.

Trace compared it to where he'd been not so long ago, in the midst of mayhem and a war-torn country where there had been more ill and injured than hands to care for them, with problems much worse than a sprained ankle.

He closed his eyes. There were other assignments he could take with Doctors Around the World. Less dangerous places. He didn't have to go back to the places he'd gone before, but he chose to.

"You okay?"

He opened his eyes, surprised Chrissie had initiated a conversation with him that didn't have something to do with a patient or the event. For the most part she'd ignored him or given him the cold shoulder when he'd attempted conversation.

"Fine."

Appearing torn, she eyed him. "You didn't look fine. You

looked like you didn't feel well."

"Had a flashback," he admitted, shocking himself that he'd said the words out loud. He hadn't talked to anyone here about the things he'd seen or done. DAW had required he go through psychological evaluation. He'd passed with flying colors, but that wasn't to say that the things he'd lived through and seen hadn't affected him. He'd never be quite the same. "No big deal."

It wasn't a big deal. Nothing he couldn't cope with.

"What kind of flashback?"

"Not one of you," he teased, unwilling to tell her the nitty-gritty details, "so it wasn't good."

She smirked. "Ha-ha. Too funny. Seriously, you turned a bit green there for a few seconds."

Maybe he'd been green at how stand-offish she was around him. He wanted to go back to the way she was four years ago.

He suddenly longed for at least a glimpse of more carefree times. Even if just a short one.

"You want to go play in the bubbles?"

Her jaw dropped at the same time her brow rose. "What?"

He gestured around the medical tent. "We're not busy and might not get another chance to catch more of the events. The bubbles are new this year. Agnes was excited about them."

The more he said, the more he wanted her to say yes. He wanted to play, to let loose and have fun. With Chrissie.

"But...we can't leave. Ms. Perez," she reminded him, looking a little panicked.

“You should go,” the woman called from a few feet away, obviously listening to their conversation. “Don’t mind me. I’m fine and can have one of these other folk help me out of here.”

First mouthing “thank you,” Trace grinned at the woman. “See, Ms. Perez wants us to go check out the bubbles. We’ll share a dance in her honor.”

“That would be absolutely lovely!” the woman exclaimed, clapping her hands together and obviously playing cupid. “I insist you go.”

Chrissie still looked hesitant.

“Hey, Gianakos?” he called to Alexis, who had just finished with the only other patient in the tent and sent him on his way with an antacid and instructions to cut back on spicy foods. “Will you check on Ms. Perez’s ankle in a few? She’s got about another ten minutes of icing, then have one of the guys take her to wherever she wants to go. Chrissie and I are going to the main area for a while.”

Alexis shot an envious glance toward Chrissie, then nodded. “No problem.”

“Perfect. See, I’ll be fine.” Ms. Perez shooed them away. “You two go have a little fun.”

Before she could find another excuse, Trace grabbed Chrissie’s hand and led her out of Medical. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Not kicking and screaming the whole way. I needed to get out of there for a few.”

She looked as if she still might kick and scream, then her expression morphed into one of confusion. “Trace, what were you thinking about back there?”

He shook his head. “Nothing important now. Let’s go check out the bubbles.”

Her hand was still inside his. He didn’t want to let go so he held on tightly as he led them toward the bubbles. Her hand felt warm and comfortable in his.

As if it belonged there.

Without thought he lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the top. Because that felt warm and comfortable, as if it belonged in that moment in time.

“Trace, I...” Chrissie’s voice trailed off as she came to an abrupt stop and stared up at him. “You shouldn’t.”

She was right. He shouldn’t, but he was glad he had. They stood behind the medical tent on the path leading toward the main event area. They were alone, but someone could come up the path at any time.

“Probably not.” He was only home for a short while, had nothing to offer her beyond the weekend. Which was too bad, because from the time he’d seen her he’d known what he wanted, what he needed. Chrissie.

“Yes.”

But her eyes said something different and that fueled him forward to say what had already been in the back of his mind, tempting his conscious thought and actions.

"We were good together. We could be good together again."

Her expression tightened.

And then he'd take off for parts unknown, for who knew how long, before he'd be home for another few weeks' hiatus from his reality? Maybe he should let the attraction go but, for whatever reason, he pushed. Whatever it was about Chrissie seemed to be dictating his every move from the moment he'd laid eyes on her that afternoon.

"I can tell you're still attracted to me," he pointed out, as if that were breaking news.

"Doesn't matter." Her exasperation was palpable, and yet she still didn't pull her hand away from his, just kept staring at where their fingers intertwined.

"Sure, it does." To prove his point, he bent and pressed his lips to hers. Gentle, to where she could push him away with ease if she wanted to.

He hoped she didn't. Her lips were so sweet.

She didn't stop him or push him away, but he felt the struggle within her and that gave him pause.

He pulled back, stared down into her wide eyes.

Her wide, slightly dazed eyes.

Her eyes that were filled with desire so sweet it punched him in the gut.

This was why he hadn't been able to resist kissing her.

Because her kisses were addictive and powerful. He craved what being with her promised.

"You taste good, like the sweetest wine, making me want to drink until I'm intoxicated," he admitted. "Let me, Chrissie. We both know you want to."

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISSIE STARED UP at the man who had haunted her dreams for four years. Who needed more? One kiss and she already felt drunk.

Because his kiss drugged her and made her forget reason.

She wanted to drag him back to her, to kiss him all over until they were both satiated, until the whole world subsided and it was just the two of them.

As it had felt four years ago.

"What a marvelous event," a woman's voice interrupted as she and a group of women rounded the path.

Tugging her hand free from his, Chrissie stepped back to the side of a tent.

"Absolutely. CCPO fund-raisers are always the best fun," another chimed in.

"The first day and we're already sneaking around in the shadows."

"Which should tell you something."

She sighed. "That I'm crazy?"

"That there's something between us."

More than he knew.

"That doesn't mean we should act on that something," she tried to reason, reminding herself that she had to think of Joss, not her

crazy body's reaction to him.

"Should I apologize that I want you still, Chrissie? Do you want me to pretend I don't find you attractive?"

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. "If I said yes, would you?"

He studied her a moment, then took on a slight look of remorse. "If you said yes."

Say no. Say no. Say no.

Chrissie wasn't sure where the inner voice was coming from, but the phrase beat in perfect rhythm with her racing heart.

"I know you're struggling with this, Chrissie. I see it in your eyes when you look at me. I felt it in your kiss. You wanted to let go and just feel, but wouldn't allow yourself."

He certainly had her pegged.

"My question is why?"

"Been there, done that," she reminded him.

"Was our time together so bad?"

"No, but I'd like to think I've learned a thing or two over the last four years."

"Such as?"

"Such as I shouldn't get mixed up with sexy strangers."

"I'm not a stranger."

"Sure, you are."

His brow inched upward. "You believe that?"

"Yes."

"Then we should get to know each other this weekend."

She narrowed her gaze suspiciously. “To what purpose?”

“To know each other. There doesn’t have to be a purpose beyond that.”

In the flickering light of the shadows, Chrissie stared at him. Get to know Trace? Why?

What about when Joss asked about his father years down the road?

Simple things like what was his favorite color and had he played sports or had any major childhood illnesses? Shouldn’t she know how to answer her son? Wouldn’t it be horrible to have to say she didn’t know anything beyond the fact that Trace had seemed a likable, good person, and had made her laugh and feel as if she was sexy?

He still made her feel sexy.

Every time his eyes lit on her, they shifted as if molten gold had been poured in their depths. Trace wanted her. Whatever the attraction between them was, it was powerful. The way he looked at her made her feel beautiful, desirable. It was a heady sensation.

“You’re talking get to know each other as in not biblically know each other, right?” she clarified.

He chuckled. “Make no mistake, my ultimate goal is to physically ‘know you’ again. But for the moment, I am talking get to know each other as in not biblically.”

She wanted to say yes, but knew she’d be toying with dynamite. “I’m not sure.”

“It’s obvious you’re attracted to me,” he pointed out.

“Okay, fine, you’re an attractive man and I’m not blind.” If not for Joss, would she even be hesitating?

“You’re saying any attractive man would do?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then that makes me special?”

More so than he knew.

His look of triumph made her nervous. “Are you fishing for compliments, Trace? Because, if so, you grabbed the wrong woman from the medical tent. Dr. Gianakos would be more than happy to be your fluffer.”

At her comment, he grinned and shook his head. “I got the right girl and want her complimenting me. Come on, no more serious talk. Let’s go have fun for a few minutes then we’ll get back to work.”

“Okay.” This time she met his hand halfway when he reached for hers and tried not to overanalyze how amazing it felt to simply hold his hand.

* * *

Chrissie had never seen such a huge area of bubbles before.

Agnes had set up a special non-slip floor and then had machines create mountains of bubbles. Currently, hundreds, maybe thousands, of children and adults alike danced and played in the bubbles to the directions of the emcee in a bubble-a-thon fund-raiser.

“Put your right hand in. Put your right hand out,” he instructed.

"You have extra clothes?"

Her head jerked toward Trace. "What?"

"Did you bring extra clothes?" he repeated, taking off his tennis shoes and raising her feet one at a time to do the same to hers.

"I'm a prepared kind of girl, but stop that," she demanded, attempting to pull her foot free and instead just helping him accomplish his goal. "I'm not going into—"

But he wasn't listening. He'd tugged her to the outskirts of the bubble floor and she was mid-chest-high in bubbles.

"Oh, my," she exclaimed, unable to resist lifting a handful of the foamy white stuff to her mouth and blowing it.

Joss would love this, she couldn't help but think.

"Put your left hand in. Put your left hand out," the emcee continued.

She wiggled her toes, letting the bubbles tickle her feet and bare legs beneath her shorts. A giggle escaped. A happy giggle. Oh, my. She didn't want to feel happy.

Chrissie frowned. What was she thinking? Of course, she wanted to feel happy. Besides, when was she going to have the opportunity to play in bubbles with hundreds of other people ever again?

Probably never.

This was fun. She was allowed to have fun.

"If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right," she informed Trace, holding her left hand out and shaking it.

“That was the plan.” His grin was lethal and gave her more giddiness than the bubbles.

“I know what your plan is,” she accused, trying to “splash” him, but the bubbles didn’t cooperate, sticking to her hand instead and plopping back onto the sea surrounding them.

He laughed. With a wicked gleam in his eyes, he scooped up an armful of bubbles. “I’m not denying it.”

“Which doesn’t make it any better.” Instinctively knowing what he was about to do, she took a few steps back, but only managed to plop down in the midst of the bubbles.

Laughing, he held out a hand and pulled her to her feet. She sputtered, clearing the bubbles from her face.

“You look good covered in bubbles.” His eyes glittered with all sorts of mischief.

“Trace.”

“What?” He gave her an innocent look. “You do. I like it.”

Truthfully, she liked how he looked waist deep in bubbles, too. There were too many people around for her mind to go to romantic bubble baths, but seeing Trace laughing out loud had cracked something inside her.

Something that had been vital in protecting her from how she felt about him. How dared he break down her defenses with bubbles and laughter and talk of getting to know each other? Who did that?

Then again, nothing about Trace had ever been typical, so of course he’d use bubbles to knock down the barriers she’d erected

between them. Bubbles.

No one could be standoffish when surrounded by bubbles.

"Shake your leg and be quiet," she ordered, but was unable to keep the smile from her face.

Maybe it was her inner child coming out. Maybe it was all the happy laughter around her. Maybe it was the happy gleam in Trace's eyes as he stood in bubbles. Maybe it was feeling alive and desirable and amazing because she was his focus. Maybe it was all of the above.

Regardless, she laughed and played along with whatever the emcee had going. They hokey-pokeyed through the rest of the song, then participated in a couple of the other bubble games.

When the emcee announced a bubble-snowman-building contest for kids ten and under, they made their way out.

"Admit it, you had fun."

"I had fun." No point in denying it. She was still smiling.

A teenaged boy came up and handed Trace two towels. Chrissie glanced around, amazed by the boy's appearance since towels weren't provided and they should have brought their own.

"Why did he bring us these?"

He waggled his brows. "I'm a resourceful man."

"Apparently," she agreed, taking the towel from him, and wiping off the bubbles clinging to her skin and clothes. "We weren't dressed for this."

"We were fine," he countered. "Most everyone is wearing T-shirts and shorts, except for the kids."

"Thank you."

His smile was amazing. Brilliant. Beautiful.

"You're welcome, Chrissie. Making you smile is my pleasure."

* * *

There were a dozen or so people on the medical crew. More than they'd needed tonight, but that would change with sun-up.

There were a few two-man tents at the back of the medical area so there would be medical staff close in case middle-of-the-night care was needed. Chrissie was rooming with one of the nurse-practitioner volunteers, a pretty woman in her late forties who worked with a local children's hospital and said she'd been volunteering with CCPO for the past couple of years, after one of her patients' family had mentioned how the organization had helped with expenses.

Chrissie liked hearing how the organization was making a difference out in the real world, rather than just through the testimonies given on stage at the event. Somehow, hearing Bernadette say CCPO had helped one of her patients made it all so much more real.

She and Trace had checked to make sure the medical area was still slow, then she'd slipped off to her tent to grab her toiletries where she bumped into her roommate.

"I'm headed to the shower truck to wash the bubbles off myself," she told the smiling woman.

"I'll be heading that way before the rush, too," Bernadette said, from where she sat on her sleeping bag, holding her phone.

“I’m going to call home and check on my husband and kids since there’s not a need in the medical tent right now.”

Chrissie nodded, then left their tent to give the woman a semblance of privacy. In reality, there was very little. Yet, four years ago, she and Trace had found ways to be alone, especially at night when they’d been the two manning the slow, midnight hours.

Trace.

She’d essentially agreed to get to know him.

Ha. What did that even mean? She wasn’t sure.

At least he’d been upfront that his main goal was to sleep with her again.

What a goal.

What a man.

She hung her head and took a deep breath. Why was she even fighting him?

He was right. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Probably more.

But she was four years older, four years wiser, four years more mature. She didn’t have wild sexual flings.

Especially premeditated ones.

Then again, trying to convince herself of greater maturity right after playing in a sea of bubbles probably wasn’t the most effective argument she’d ever waged.

But, oh, how she’d had fun playing with Trace.

Who’d have ever thought she’d be surrounded by bubbles,

dancing and acting goofy with Trace Stevens?

She'd have bet against those odds every time.

But she didn't regret it. How could she when she'd laughed more than she recalled laughing in months? Years?

No, that wasn't true. She laughed with Joss. Lots and lots. Goodness, but that kid made her happy.

And Savannah. Spending time with her best friend and her baby daughter made Chrissie happy, too. Prior to Savannah's wedding, her friend had stayed the night and they'd giggled the night away while Joss slept.

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