

*Rachel Brimble*

GETTING IT  
*Right*  
THIS TIME



## Back Cover Copy

*She's back, but this time she's a mother...intent on protecting her young.*

Two years after her husband's death, Kate Marshall returns home seeking security and stability for her three-year-old daughter. But when her path crosses with 'the one who got away'... her husband's best friend, she has to fight the desire to be with him for the sake of further heartbreak for her and her daughter.

A tough, straight talking theatrical agent, Mark Johnston is dangerously handsome, exceedingly rich, irresistibly charming--and branded by the tabloids as one of the UK's most eligible bachelors. So even though Mark lost the girl of his dreams to his best friend, he finds no hardship in being single. Or so he thought.

Determined not to lose her a second time, Mark has to find a way to convince her they can work. But can Kate cope with the media interest and ruthless, money-hungry clients surrounding him, being anywhere near her daughter? Or accept that Mark Johnston is really the family man he claims to be?

Content Warning: Mild language, sexual situations

## Highlight

The sadness in the depths of her eyes twisted a painful knot in his gut.

“Talk to me.”

“You don’t know me anymore,” she whispered. “You don’t know anything.”

“Then tell me. I want to know. I need to know.” He moved his hand to the smooth curve of her neck.

“Mark...” Her gaze dropped from his eyes to his mouth and he took the gesture as an invitation, felt her longing whether she wanted it to be there or not. Every instinct in his body screamed she wanted his lips on hers as much as he wanted them to be welded there too. He inched forward and touched his lips to hers.

She tasted of wine and femininity, a heady combination which filled his entire body and catapulted him back to a place he’d thought he never experience again. Her brief moment of resistance caused his hand to tighten before she curved her arms around his neck. Mark’s heart picked up speed at her unexpected surrender. He increased the ferocity of the kiss, taking it, owning it, knowing it might be a one chance encounter--something that might never happen again.

# Getting It Right This Time

by

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## Dedication

*To Mum and Dad--You make me feel more special with each book I write, I love you xxx*



# Chapter 1

“How are you feeling?”

Taking the glass of wine from her best friend’s hand, Kate Marshall smiled. “Good.” She paused. “No. Better than good. This is it, new beginnings.”

They clinked glasses.

“Glad to hear it,” Lucy said, taking a hefty gulp of Chardonnay. “Coming back home was the right thing to do. I just wish it hadn’t taken you over twelve months after James died to realize it.”

“I needed to come back when it felt right for me, Luce. I could’ve easily come straight back and let Mum and Dad take care of everything. But what would that have shown Jessica?”

“I know. I know. Showing Jessica her mum doesn’t need anyone to take care of her is a good lesson,” Lucy said, her words dripping with sarcasm. “What child wants their mother to be looked after and loved? The whole idea is nauseating.”

Kate frowned. “Luce?”

She grinned. “What?”

“Shut up.”

Laughing, the two friends walked across the plush carpeted bar area of The Theatre Royal to a corner less besieged with suited gents and ball-gowned ladies. Casting a surreptitious glance down at her simple black pencil skirt and wrap-over top, Kate felt as though she was gate crashing a wedding rather than waiting to watch a play.

“So,” she said, putting her drink down on a small table and flicking through the glossy program. “What’s the star’s name again?”

“Marcia Langton,” Lucy said. “You are going to be blown away by her. She’ll be an international superstar before long, mark my words.”

Shaking her head at her friend’s endless enthusiasm for all things and all people, Kate took another long drink as she gazed around the room at the multi-colored wonderment surrounding them. She was contemplating a particularly unusual fuchsia-pink chiffon on turquoise taffeta number, when her eyes were drawn to a man talking to a couple sitting at one of the many tables scattered around the room.

“It can’t be,” she whispered.

His face was in profile yet still unbelievably, undeniably familiar. Kate swallowed as heat flooded her face and rushed through her veins.

“Is that who I think it is?”

“What? Who?” Lucy thrust her head left and right like a disgruntled turkey, to see who Kate was looking at.

Kate gripped her friend's arm so tightly Lucy's pulse throbbed its indignation against her now clammy palm. "Over there," she said, between clenched teeth. "Talking to that couple. Is that Mark Johnston?"

"Ow, will you let go of me?" Lucy yanked her arm from Kate's grasp and followed the direction of her gaze. "Yes. That's Mark. What's the matter with you? Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm out of here." Kate snatched up her purse.

"What? Why?"

"Because...because..." Kate tried to find the words to justify her need to escape the increasingly suffocating walls of the theatre and the risk of Mark seeing her. How could she face the man who was once everything to her? The man who happened to be her dead husband's best friend. Her blood pumped faster and faster around her body.

Lucy put down her glass and fisted her hands on her hips. "Well?"

Kate continued to stare at him, her eyes narrowing as she swallowed. "Do you know he never once called James after we moved to Zante? Not once."

"So? Maybe they had a fight or something. What's the matter with you?"

"A fight?" She snapped her head around. "Don't you think James would have mentioned it to me? And even if they did, why didn't Mark call me? We were supposed to be friends too, remember?"

"Kate--"

"Mark bloody Johnston. Will you look at him? All flashing white teeth and carefree laughing and joking until the moment James and I starting dating and then nada." She sliced her hand through the air. "Not a damn thing. And now James is dead and he's...he's strutting around looking like... like..."

"What's gotten into you?" But then Lucy's frown abruptly smoothed and her mouth stretched to a full-blown grin. "Oh, I see. Yes, you're right. I couldn't agree more."

Kate looked at her. "What?"

"He looks like McSteamy on a plate, doesn't he?"

Kate swallowed. "Ha, I don't think so."

"Here--" Lucy laughed, picking up Kate's half finished drink and thrusting it at her. "Finish your wine. He hasn't even noticed you're here. Relax."

Kate grabbed her glass from Lucy's hand and took a huge gulp. "Yeah, and the chances are he's too hung up in his own selfish world to bother with us if he did."

Lucy shrugged. "Maybe you should cut him some slack. A lot can happen in five years." She pressed a quick kiss to Kate's cheek. "Unfortunately, you know that better than anyone."

Blinking against the sudden burning in her eyes, Kate snapped her head away from Lucy's concerned gaze but regrettably, her own gaze was automatically and frustratingly drawn back to Mark. He'd changed in the worst way possible way since she'd last seen him. Having lost the gangly look of puberty, Mark Johnston was now the epitome of masculine perfection. Dressed in



a black tuxedo, he'd, no doubt strategically, left his crisp white shirt open at the neck, the silk bow tie hanging carelessly undone beneath the collar. His thick, dark hair gleamed beneath the lights and his illegally wide shoulders shook with laughter as he continued his seemingly hilarious conversation with a doe-eyed blond woman and her equally bewitched husband.

Kate took another mouthful of wine and slammed the glass down on the table beside her. "Who cares?"

Lucy jumped. "What now?"

"Who cares if he looks like that...I mean, you know, without a care in the world." Kate gave an inelegant sniff. "If he talks to me, I'll tell him what an idiot he is and how much he hurt James by ignoring his phone calls, emails and texts for all those months." She paused, as a wave of unwelcome guilt shot through her chest. Not once had she picked up the phone to try to tell Mark about James's death. And the reason? Fear. Fear of what emotions hearing his voice might evoke in her, especially after how rocky her marriage had been right before James died.

She exhaled through pursed lips. "Do you think he even knows James is dead?"

"I certainly didn't tell him."

Kate pulled back her shoulders as she watched Mark stroll toward the bar and take a microphone from the giggling, blushing barmaid who appeared to be having trouble even looking him straight in the eyes.

"Oh, save me," she muttered. "What does he expect us to do? Stand to attention while the master of the entire universe speaks?"

Lucy giggled. "You're great when you're angry."

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Theatre Royal," Mark said, throwing his arms open wide. "I hope you are ready for the opening show starring my special client, Marcia Langton." A nod to acknowledge the appreciative whoops and cheers. "If not..." A flash of white teeth and a wink. "There's hip hop and warm beer available in the club down the road."

Laughter erupted all around her. Kate grimaced.

Yet still a jolt slammed against her diaphragm and hitched against her uterus. His voice hadn't changed at all. The deep, smooth and ludicrously confident tones swept over her skin and despite her distaste, she felt the undeniable spark of something waking up deep inside her. His easy smile and mischievous eyes were just as she remembered--and she hated him for it.

She leaned toward Lucy. "I'm out of here."

Lucy turned. "Kate, come on..."

"Are you coming or not?"

"Stay. I dare you."

"What?" Kate stared at her in disbelief.

"Stay."

"That's not fair."

Lucy smiled and turned away, leaving Kate fighting the hopeless battle of not accepting her friend's challenge. She looked at Mark again as he regaled the audience with his opinions of the good, the bad and the ugly in the theatre world--jokes and impressions of the latest acts, hints and teasers about the country's "next big thing." Everyone hung on his every word. Kate narrowed her eyes. Clearly his long held belief he would one day make it big as a hot-shot theatrical agent had come to fruition.

With a decisive nod of her head, Kate turned and snatched up her purse a second time. "Sorry, Luce. You're on your own. It's too soon for me to risk facing one of James's closest friends. Even an ex-friend."

"Look," she said, grabbing Kate's hand. "Anyone who knew James will want to tell you how sorry they are. This was bound to happen sooner or later."

Kate turned away, tears blurring her vision. "But Mark Johnston is not anyone, he's..."

And then, as though sensing her gaze on him, Mark looked directly at her. "Kate?"

She froze.

With the microphone forgotten in his hand, her name echoed around the room. The scraping of chairs and the shifting of bodies sounded harsh in the subdued atmosphere as all around her people turned and stared.

Her mind raced as Kate stood completely immobile. She didn't move, even as she watched him put the microphone down on the bar and walk toward her. After a long moment, the onlookers hesitantly struck up conversation or picked up their drinks.

Finally, Kate's paralysis lifted as panic threatened to engulf her. She looked at Lucy. "God, I'm not ready for this. Do something."

"What can I do? I..."

Nausea rose in Kate's throat and her stomach clenched tightly around her fear like a closing fist.

"Kate?"

She turned, her feet as heavy as lead. The laughter shining in his eyes when he'd been talking a moment before had been replaced with shock and confusion.

Kate swallowed. "Hello, Mark."

He squeezed his eyes shut before opening them again. "What are you doing here?" He pressed his thumb and finger to his forehead. "I mean...how did you...when did you..." He stopped. "Are you back?"

His voice shook with what sounded like anger. How dare he be angry with her? Drawing on every ounce of strength, she tilted her chin. "Yes, Mark, I'm back."

He opened his mouth but then closed it again, glaring at her accusingly instead. Forcing herself to stay strong, Kate nonchalantly turned her back on him and picked up her glass with a trembling hand. She drained the last of her wine, almost choking on the angry words cutting and burning her tongue.

She heard his muffled cough behind her. "I missed you," he said, softly.

Those three words cut the first slit through her wavering composure like a sword through flesh. She struggled to find the words to respond--and found none. She concentrated her gaze on her watery reflection, faintly showing amongst the rivulets of rain zigzagging down the window in front of her.

The moment stretched.

"Where's James?" The question was direct, painful and completely like Mark Johnston.

She stared straight ahead for another long moment, her reflection shining back at her in the glass. Her long red hair was pulled tightly back into a ponytail, and her green eyes glinted beneath the lights making her look downright deranged. The look was perfect.

She turned. "He's dead."

His clear, hazel eyes widened before he staggered back a step. "What?" He looked at Lucy. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hey." Kate grabbed his arm without thinking. "How is it Lucy's fault you didn't know your friend died over a year ago? If you would have kept in contact with him...or me..."

The way he stared at her abruptly cooled the rage on her lips. He looked shocked to his core, terrified. Her hand slipped from his arm as shame tiptoed over the surface of her skin. "Look, maybe I shouldn't have just blurted it out. I'm..."

His gaze raked over every inch of her face, lingering for the longest time at her lips, before he turned and walked away.

"Go after him," Lucy said.

"No."

"Go after him. He looked so..."

"Scared," murmured Kate. "Why would he look scared?"

"He looked shocked. Not scared."

Kate vehemently shook her head. "He looked scared. I know scared when I see it, Luce."

Brushing past her friend, Kate strode purposefully toward the bar and once there, lifted her hand to get the barman's attention. "Two Chardonnays, please."

Lucy came up beside her. "What are you doing? If you're not going after him, shouldn't we leave? What if he comes back?"

Kate looked at her. "Wasn't it you who said I should face people? If Mark comes back, I'll deal with whatever he has to say."

Their drinks were placed on coasters in front of them. Kate quickly picked up hers and took a hefty mouthful to ease her arid throat. If she was honest, the knowledge Mark could reappear at any moment veered the jangling in her nerves to fever pitch.

Lucy touched her forearm. "Are you okay?"

Kate laughed. "Of course I am. It will take more than the likes of Mark Johnston to upset me."

A request came over the loud speaker asking the audience to be seated in anticipation of the performance starting in ten minutes. Grateful for the escape, Kate picked up her drink and the two of them walked toward the exit.

Lucy's tut beside her made Kate turn sharply. "Now what?"

Lucy smiled. "Nothing. I was just thinking it didn't take long for you and Mark to get back to normal, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, whenever the two of you were together, I always pitied anyone unfortunate enough to be within six feet of you. It was always fireworks of sexual tension or a ridiculous battle of wills."

Kate felt an inexplicable flare of burning hot heat at her center. "How can you say that? I was with James, remember?"

Lucy waved a dismissive hand. "I'm talking about before James. Come on, you can't deny it. You and Mark were an absolutely riot to watch."

Kate glared at her. "Really? Well, there's no need to worry about the sexual tension part anytime soon. He clearly can't handle being in the same room as me, and that, my friend, is perfectly fine with me. I was married to one egomaniac, I don't need another in my life."

"Mark is not an egomaniac, Kate."

"No? Then why is his name splashed across every paper in the country?"

Lucy smiled. "You've been reading up on him, huh?"

Heat scorched Kate's cheeks. "Stop smiling at me like that. It's pretty hard to ignore it when it's shoved down your throat."

"Sure it is."

Glaring at her, Kate led the way as they searched for their seats in silence. They had just sat down and the lights lowered. Kate smiled with relief as it brought an end to further conversation. The truth was Mark's notoriety was clearly paparazzi propaganda judging by the lack of frontal shots they'd managed to capture. Often it was only his profile or back the press published--whereas James's coverage had always been strategic and more often than not, provoked.

The ruby red curtain rose, and Kate turned her attention to the stage. She was there to enjoy herself, and that's exactly what she would do.

"Prepare to be blown away," Lucy whispered excitedly.

Kate rolled her eyes. "You'd think Liza Minnelli was about to walk on stage the way you're carrying on."

And then she caught her first sight of the woman she knew made a serious contribution to Mark's excessively wealthy status. Marcia Langton bore the effortless poise of a runway model. She looked like a living, breathing goddess in the sleek, silver dress falling to her ankles in folds of soft silk and four-inch strappy black sandals. Kate self-consciously touched her hair when she saw the way Marcia's thick, ebony waves cascaded down her bare back, to her waist.

“Amazing, huh?” whispered Lucy.

“She’s beautiful,” Kate murmured, unable to pull her gaze from the stage.

“Wait until you see how well the woman can act.”

An unwelcome lurch shifted in Kate’s stomach. “I suppose I can safely assume Miss Sex-On-Legs shares Mark’s bed as well as his representation?”

Lucy shook her head, her eyes fixed straight ahead. “Nope. If they were an item, it would be all over the gossip magazines. Sort of makes you wonder who Mark Johnston’s waiting for, doesn’t it?”

\* \* \* \*

Mark tossed the last of his brandy to the back of his throat and put the glass down on the table in front of him. Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes. Kate was back. He’d repeated those three words over and over a million times since he’d left her standing in the bar, and they still hadn’t sunk in.

And she looked even more spectacular than he remembered.

Her huge, green eyes didn’t look at him in the same delighted, carefree way they had a few years before, but then again why would they after he cut her and James off the way he did? Now her gaze seemed wiser...and infinitely more guarded. Yet, their mesmerizing beauty, their way of drawing him in until he couldn’t look anywhere else hadn’t altered at all--even if he’d desperately wanted to when he’d been standing in front of her stammering and stuttering his way through their first conversation in five years.

Opening his eyes, he groaned into the silence of the backstage room. James dead? Kate’s delivery of the bombshell had been acute and sharp and without a doubt, purposely cutting.

“I am so sorry, James,” he whispered, as a knot wound itself tight in his stomach until he felt his lungs would explode. “So bloody sorry.”

Visions of the two of them as friends, the laughter and tomfoolery, drunken antics and late-night games formed a kaleidoscope of color and nostalgia in his mind. Years of laughter, tears and confessions at school and university. Even when Mark moved to Foxton and James stayed in Devon, they met up every few weeks or so.

And all the while Mark’s feelings for Kate grew. The months passed, the years passed, with Mark thinking he had all the time in the world to make her his--but then James followed him to Foxton and the day he’d set eyes on Kate, James refused to run such a stupid risk as Mark. Wooing her with gifts and flowers, time and attention, James proposed within eighteen months of Mark introducing them--and Kate accepted.

Winning against the sudden rush of blood in his head, Mark reached into his inside pocket and pulled out his wallet. From behind the credit cards, he extracted a photograph so old a crease of age marred its center. Kate laughed into the camera with her hair tied back into its habitual ponytail, revealing her long, tapered neck. The thin strap of her dress fell enticingly from her shoulder as she provocatively peeped out from beneath lowered lashes. Mark loved her then, and he loved her now.

What was the use in denying it? Kate was “The One.”

And she would’ve have been his, if he’d been the person he was today, five years before. But what chance did Mark, the hesitant thinker, have against the charismatic risk-taker James, who’d burst into their lives like a grand matador amid a Spanish bullring? He’d completely swept Kate off her feet.

“Yet he never would have...” Mark paused as he felt the rare sting of tears. “He never would’ve taken her if he’d known I loved her. Never.”

Stuffing the photograph into his wallet, Mark put it back in his pocket and stood up.

“And now he’s dead and Kate’s downstairs.” He rubbed his hand over his eyes. And she was no doubt angry, confused and downright resentful that James’s best friend was oblivious to all the pain she’d been through over the last twelve months.

He tugged at the cuffs of his jacket, guilt stabbing at his chest. This was his chance to put things right. To look after the woman both he and James had fallen in love with. She wouldn’t be alone through her grief anymore. Mark would make her understand he was there for her from now on as he should have been from the start.

Striding purposefully from the room, he pulled the door firmly closed behind him. But just as he reached the bottom of the staircase, muted applause came from behind the auditorium doors. The curtain was being dropped for the intermission.

“Damn it.”

He always made sure he was there when his clients came backstage to their dressing rooms. Made himself as available as he could whenever possible. And Marcia would most certainly need him now--on the debut night of the most anticipated performance of her career. Cursing again, Mark knew he couldn’t abandon her--even if he desperately longed to look into Kate’s eyes again.

Heat flared in his face and more intimate places. He had to get a grip. She was a widow for crying out loud. The widow of his best friend.

He forced his focus onto Marcia and retraced his steps back to the dressing rooms. He walked into her room and double-checked that the bouquets of flowers he’d ordered were on display, and the champagne chilling on ice. Everything was as it should be. Shifting impatiently from one foot to the other, Mark looked at his watch. He really wanted to speak to Kate before the second half. What if he missed her after the show? He couldn’t let her leave the theatre without at least offering his condolences, and finding out how James had died--although she likely already had him down as a cold, heartless bastard and likely wouldn’t tell him a damn thing.

The door swung open, and Marcia marched in. Mark pulled back his shoulders and forced the biggest grin he could muster onto his face. He threw open his arms.

“Here she is. You were fantastic.”

Marcia’s dark blue eyes locked with his and her mouth drew into such a thin line, her lips completely disappeared.

He glanced over her shoulder toward the door. His entire body hummed with the need to get out of the room. To find Kate. To see her, speak to her. His smile wavered as he propelled himself forward and enclosed Marcia in an embrace.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with a laugh. “Can’t you hear them out there? You’re bringing the house down.”

She shot from his arms, her eyes burning with anger. “Who was the woman at the bar, Mark?”

“What?”

“The woman you were so busy with you didn’t have time to come and see me before I went onstage.”

“Marcia, I was in the bar promoting you. I can’t be everywhere at once.” Mark’s heart picked up speed. It took all of his self-control not to push past her and literally sprint out the door. And it didn’t go beyond his realization this was the first time he’d worried about someone else more than one of his clients.

She glared at him, but Mark kept his gaze steady. She looked away. “I assume she’s the absent Kate Marshall returned from the wilderness?” she huffed.

He tightened his jaw. “What makes you say that?”

She snapped her head up. “Because Mark, she’s the only woman anyone in Foxton can ever remember you spending any amount of time with. Plus the fact you practically panted her name over the microphone like an awe-struck groupie when you saw her.”

Guilty heat seared his cheeks. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’ve been told what happened. And then, after a few shared words, you fled backstage looking like she’d up and smacked you in the face.”

“I did not *flee* anywhere, Marcia,” he said, struggling to curb his growing temper. “And I don’t see what Kate has to do with your career and my job in managing it. She has nothing to do with your part in this play, the audience or critics reactions. So if I were you, I’d be more concerned with that.”

“Is that so? And what do you think the press will make of your lack of interest in my debut performance?”

“Nothing. They won’t have noticed whether or not I was there, it’s you they’ll be watching. Not me.”

“They’ll speculate, Mark,” she cried. “They’ll say you’re preparing to drop me!”

Her bosom heaved up and down above the neckline of her dress as an angry flash of red rose from her neck to her cheeks. He’d seen this side of Marcia half a dozen times in the two years they’d worked together, and those times were enough for Mark to know he didn’t like them. When she was like that, he felt as though he should prepare himself for a strike--brace himself against the unpredictable tongue of a viper.



Mark took her gently by the elbows, knowing if he wanted any chance of catching Kate before the next act, he must swallow his irritation. He looked directly into Marcia's troubled eyes. "I am here for you every step of the way. I want you to succeed in your dreams as much as you do. I will always be here for you. Okay?"

A long moment passed until at last, her features softened and a smile broke through like a disconcerting, yet undeniably beautiful, ray of sunshine. "You're right," she said. "Of course you're right."

He smiled. "We're in this together. To the end."

Her smile stretched to a grin. "Let's forget Kate Marshall and have a glass of champagne."

She slipped from his grasp and pulled the chilled bottle from the ice bucket on her dressing table. Mark edged toward the door--and Kate.

"I can't. Not right now."

Her smile dissolved. "You're going after her, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yes. But I won't be long."

"For crying out loud..."

Ignoring her, Mark left the room and ran through an endless sea of people as they spilled toward him on their way back from the bar to the auditorium. His frantic gaze darted over their heads, looking for one redhead in particular. He cursed inwardly when he caught no sight of her. He could only hope she and Lucy were lingering over their drinks in the bar. He sprinted back along the corridor and burst through the swinging double doors.

He almost laughed when he saw Kate sitting on a bar stool, casually talking to the barman. And then his smile abruptly dissolved. Did the guy seriously think he had a chance with her? Jeez, he looked as though all his Christmases had come at once.

With no idea what to say to her, much less how to approach her, Mark marched across the room and surprised himself by gripping the back of her swivel stool and spinning her around. She gasped and pressed her hands against his chest to steady herself.

"Hello again," he said, arching a cocky eyebrow even though his heart beat out of control.

She snatched her hands from his chest and curled them around the edge of her stool. "Don't you know any form of subtlety, Mark Johnston?" she snapped. "Or is every single thing you do carried out in the same rough, domineering manner?"

Something painful hitched in his chest. He leaned in close enough the soft, musky scent of her perfume wafted below his nostrils. "No, not everything I do," he murmured. "Well, not unless I'm specifically asked for it that way."

She crossed her arms. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

He stared at her for a moment longer before pulling back. The last thing he wanted was to frighten her off. Although it did occur to him "Kate" and "frightened" didn't go together in the same sentence. He held up his hands in surrender.

“Look, work with me here, okay? I’m still getting my head around the fact you’re back... without James, and it’s hard, Kate. It’s hard just seeing you, let alone find out James is dead.”

She closed her eyes, and Mark hesitated, wondering if it was right to push her this way. But he had to know what happened--had to know how his best friend ended up dead. He took her hand and she opened her eyes.

Mark could not ignore the pain and doubt in her gaze. He rubbed his thumb over the silky soft skin of her wrist. “What happened, Kate?”

“He was killed in a snowboarding accident.”

He flinched. “But James was the best. How could he...”

“There was a more inexperienced boarder with him and he went off course. James went after him...and things went wrong. He was thrown up in the air and...” She stopped. “His neck was broken, Mark. He’s dead. What else do you need to know?”

Their eyes locked and Mark’s heart shifted--her gaze told him seeing and talking to him was more of a struggle than she wanted to deal with right then. He dropped her hand and pushed his own through his hair.

“Are you back for good?”

Another moment...and then she nodded.

“Forever?” Mark pressed.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

A flash of color darkened her cheeks. “Who knows what forever is, Mark? James certainly didn’t.”

She jumped down from the stool and stormed toward the door. He stared after her, not noticing Lucy now stood beside him, her hand on his arm.

“She’s not going anywhere, Mark,” she said, quietly.

He turned, his face hot.

Lucy smiled sympathetically. “It’s taken her a long time to get to a place where she will even accept help from her family.” She glanced toward the door. “When James died, she withdrew from the outside world, and it has taken a year for her to take a risk and edge back out again.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t know.” Mark looked to the ceiling before glancing at her again. “She must hate me.”

Lucy gave a small smile. “She doesn’t hate you.”

“I’ve got to persuade her to at least talk to me, Luce. Kate is...she’s...” The words died on his lips.

Lucy picked up her bag and hitched it onto her shoulder. “Look, have you ever known Kate to stay angry with anyone? Take my advice, leave her alone for a while.”

He clenched his jaw. “I don’t think I can.”

She looked at him. “I know how you felt about her, but please, give her time.”

And then Lucy walked out after Kate, leaving Mark standing alone and knowing there was absolutely no chance of him adhering to her advice.

## Chapter 2

Kate stared at the bedroom ceiling in her new house and pulled her daughter closer. Jessica's soft murmur of breath as she slept peacefully against Kate's bosom caused yet another tear to follow the thousands Kate had cried since the previous night. Why had she come back to Foxton expecting to lead the same life she'd led before? And more importantly, why did she trust her mother when she said everything would be fine? Fine? Absolutely nothing was fine!

Slowly, through every means possible, Kate had pulled herself up from a shocked and numb widow and mother to a confused and scared little girl to a woman with her own business, her own home and mother to a shy, yet rapidly buoyant and confident daughter. But now?

Now she felt like a fraud. A fraud who'd not stopped lying to herself or her baby for the last two months...

She still had feelings for Mark bloody Johnston.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Kate tried and failed to push images of his ludicrously handsome face from her mind. But it wasn't the good looks or the undeniable presence of him preventing her from sleeping--it was the way he'd looked at her. From the first moment he stormed across the breadth of the bar and stopped in front of her, those heavy-lidded, lingering hazel eyes drank in her entire body from the root of her hair to the tips of her toes.

And she'd been catapulted back to a time she'd forgotten existed. A time when she'd hung on his every word, laughed with him until she thought her sides would split and fantasized over and over again about how it would feel if he kissed her.

"Mummy?"

Kate started at the sound of Jessica's voice. Heat burned her face as she swallowed back the guilt threatening to choke her. "Hey, sleepy-head. Do you know what time it is?"

Jessica wriggled away from Kate's side and executed her morning wake-up routine of spreading her limbs out as far as she could until she resembled a miniature, female version of the *Vitruvian Man*. Kate smiled. What did Mark Johnston matter when everything she needed was right there in her beautiful three-year-old girl? Swiping both hands across her cheeks, Kate brushed away the remnants of her self-indulgence and flung herself whole-heartedly into the task of tickling her daughter fully awake.

Jessica's delighted screams filled the room. "Mummy! Mummy! Stop it! Stop it!"

"Grrraaahhh." Kate roared and snorted after Jessica as she scrambled off the bed and headed, giggling wildly, to the bedroom door.

Kate whipped Jessica off her feet at the top of the stairs. She swung the girl onto her hip after planting the biggest, sloppiest kiss she could onto her cheek, and carried Jessica laughing down the stairs.

And halted at the bottom step.

Kate's breath caught painfully in her throat as she stared wide-eyed at the scarlet envelope sitting on the doormat. Within seconds, Jessica spotted it too.

"Put me down, Mummy. Look, a card. Is it my birthday yet?" she asked, wriggling and struggling against Kate's side.

In slow motion, Kate lowered Jessica to the ground and watched in stunned silence as her little girl raced to pick it up.

"It's for you," Jessica said. "See? K-A-T-E."

Swallowing hard, Kate forced a smile and finally stepped off the stairs. She held out her hand and Jessica gave her the envelope.

"Open it, open it!"

"Why don't we have our breakfast first?" Kate gestured toward the kitchen, willing her daughter to take the hint. But Jessica didn't move.

Clear green eyes so similar to her own, stared straight back at Kate, filled with confusion. "No, Mummy. Open it now. It's pretty."

Intelligent beyond her years and unreasonably stubborn--also like her mother--Jessica continued to stare at her expectantly. Kate threw her hands up surrender, knowing she was being ridiculous, but also knowing, without doubt, the card was from Mark. "Fine, fine. I'll open it now."

She tore open the envelope with trembling fingers and scanned the familiar handwriting, her breath trapped in her lungs. Jessica tugged incessantly on the hem of Kate's pajama top.

"What does it say? What does it say?"

Kate snapped the card shut and brushed past Jessica to open the front door. The bright morning sunshine centered on her doorstep illuminated the single white rose in a golden spotlight. Kate's eyes stung with unshed tears as she bent to pick it up, the memories crashing in on her in a vibrant and almost blinding color.

"Oh, Mark." She breathed his name on her exhalation.

She'd been sixteen, Mark nineteen, and they'd spent the summer weeding the garden of The Landscape, the most beautiful house in Foxton, to earn extra money to add to their sparse student income. The Landscape was a huge sprawling estate where two young friends could disappear for hours. And one perfect afternoon, Mark snipped a flawless white rose from the owner's immaculate bushes and passed it to her saying the same words he'd written on the scarlet card today...

*For you--forever.*

"Mummy? What's wrong?"

Slowly shutting the door, Kate brought the rose to her nose and looked at Jessica over its petals. She inhaled deeply, nerves and fear and maybe even a little wistful excitement swirling in her abdomen.

"Nothing's wrong, darling. Nothing at all."

"Your cheeks are all pink."

Kate laughed. "Are they?"

But Jessica didn't laugh, she merely shook her head and walked toward the kitchen mumbling, "Flowers don't make me go pink."

Kate watched her go and swallowed hard, knowing full well Mark had silently managed to tip her deeper toward a very dangerous place.

\* \* \* \*

Kate pulled the door of treatment room number two gently closed, leaving her head-to-toe massaged client to sleep. At half past eleven, she had yet to taste her first cup of morning coffee. Wearily, she walked downstairs and into the kitchen of her newly opened beauty salon to find her only employee already pouring coffee into two mugs.

"Great minds think alike." Kate smiled, sinking onto a comfy settee.

Jo turned and smiled. "What a morning! One thing's for sure, you certainly know how to promote the business. We've been non-stop and the salon's barely been open three weeks. If the demand carries on like this, you're going to need bigger premises in six months."

Kate sighed and dropped her head back. "I know it's great but my God, I'm exhausted."

"Here." Jo passed her a steaming mug. "Drink and re-fuel."

Kate took the coffee. "The good thing is, we live in theatre land and as long as those actresses keep coming in and spending their money, I am a happy, happy lady."

Jo sat down beside her. "Exactly. And the free champagne and nibbles you so thoughtfully leave in the reception area don't hurt either, do they?"

Kate smiled. "Nope."

The two sat in companionable silence, and Kate's mind automatically returned to the night before and her morning present. Mark had yet to leave her thoughts for more than thirty minutes at a time. After she'd dropped Jessica off at Lucy's nursery for the day, she thought of nothing else but him until she arrived at work. It wasn't fair--and it was totally like Mark Johnston. The man had never been fair as far as her feelings were concerned.

Blinking, she shook her head and then noticed Jo looking at her from the corner of her eye. Kate forced a smile. "Are you okay?"

A flush of pink colored the younger girl's cheeks. "I'm not sure I should say anything."

Kate sat up. "Don't be silly. If there's anything worrying you, tell me. I want you to be happy working here."

"Oh, it's not me. I couldn't be happier."

Kate frowned. "Then what is it?" she asked, watching Jo glance into the chocolate brown depths of her mug for a second before raising her eyes to meet Kate's once more.

Her assistant grimaced. "Okay, tell me if I'm talking out of place...but you don't look too good today. In fact, you look as though it should be you on one of those beds upstairs, not the clients."

Kate knew Jo spoke the truth. When she'd seen her reflection in the mirror that morning Kate almost screamed out loud. The gray circles under her eyes looked as though she'd glued a couple of pigeon feathers there, and the storm of anxiety etched in the lines across her forehead were just plain scary.

She put her mug on the coffee table in front of them. "I'm fine. Just tired, I haven't been sleeping too well recently. Worrying about the business, Jessica, Mum and Dad. The move from Zante hasn't been easy and it's taking a bit more adjusting than I thought, that's all."

"Were you up crying all night?" Jo asked. "Because no amount of work is worth that."

Heat immediately singed Kate's cheeks, and she let out a laugh. "Of course not. It would take more than work pressure to--"

She stopped mid-sentence. The bell above the front door tinkled, announcing the arrival of a customer. Saved by the bell. She leapt to her feet, and Jo quickly followed. Coffee and chit-chat were forgotten in their joint commitment in getting Kate's fledgling business off the ground.

"If you deal with whoever that is," Kate said, feeling relief wash over her at such a timely escape, "I'll get back upstairs. No doubt Miss Kingston's woken up and wondering where I am."

Both women hurried down the corridor from the kitchen toward the reception. Smoothing the front of her uniform, Kate cleared her throat and plastered a huge welcoming smile on her face as a quick hello to the new client before getting back to Miss Kingston.

"Hi, welcome to Feed Your..." The words died on her lips as her heart catapulted into her throat and lodged there.

"Hi, Kate." Mark's mouth stretched to a grin, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

She swallowed. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." He took a step toward her.

Her hand immediately went up like a shield. "Go. Get out, Mark. Now."

His huge, wide and muscular six-feet-two-inch frame dwarfed the space around him. Kate always described the intimate reception area as light, airy and spacious but suddenly longed to brace her hands against the walls and push them farther apart until she didn't feel as though Mark crowded so close to her.

"I'm not leaving. Not until you at least agree to have lunch with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." She sneaked a quick glance at Jo.

Her assistant's eyes were glued to a spot somewhere on Mark's well-defined chest and she didn't seem about to look away in shameful embarrassment. Kate could hardly blame the poor girl. Dressed in faded blue jeans and a jet-black t-shirt and jacket, the pure sexy sight of him severely knocked Kate's aversion antenna off balance. As much as she tried not to, her gaze kept running up and down the entire length of his body.

Frazzled, Kate edged back.

Still smiling, he turned from Kate to Jo and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Mark. A friend of Kate's."



Jo giggled, her face flushing the color of a field of strawberries in summertime. “How...how do you do? Would like a cup of coffee, tea?”

Kate rolled her eyes and stepped fully into the room, knowing it was imperative she eject Mark from the building before her assistant crumpled into an extremely undignified heap on the terracotta tiled floor. She brushed past him and opened the front door.

“It’s okay, Jo. Mark won’t be staying. If you could go and check on Miss Kingston for me, I’ll see Mr. Johnston out.”

“But...”

“Now, Jo.”

Ignoring Jo’s sigh of regret and lingering goodbye to Mark, Kate swung her arm toward the open door. “Goodbye, Mark.”

But the minute Jo left the room, he strode toward her, grabbed the door and slammed it shut.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kate demanded. “How dare you!”

He stood barely inches away from her. So close she had to tilt her head to meet his angry, swirling, beautiful, bewitching gaze... and she blinked quickly as a rush of heat warmed her face. “Get out of my salon.”

His gaze wandered languidly over her hair, her eyes, her lips. “Say you’ll come out for lunch with me in a couple of hours and I will. Let me apologize for my behavior last night.”

She crossed her arms to hide the shaking. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because...”

He abruptly turned away from her and circled the room. “How is it you can walk past a building a million times and never notice its existence?” he murmured. “I never knew this place was even for lease.”

“It wasn’t. I bought it outright. I’m a rich widow, remember?”

He stared at her for a long moment before lowering his huge frame into one of the chairs lining the wall opposite her. He leaned his forearms on his thighs, still silently watching her. Kate’s blood pulsed inside her head as she waited, refusing to be the first one to break. He sighed deeply as he dropped his chin to his chest and stared at a spot on the floor. Kate tensed. He’d come there looking for her. If he hadn’t been prepared to deal with the subject of James that was his own fault.

“I need to talk to you, Kate,” he said quietly. “I need to talk about James.”

“What about him?”

He snapped his head up, his hazel eyes clouding. “He was my best friend.”

A raw pain shot through her chest as though he’d stabbed her. “No, he wasn’t, Mark. Best friends talk to each other, see each other, support each other. You have no idea the sort of man he was before he died.”

“What do you mean?”

“He changed, Mark. Changed beyond recognition.” She swallowed. “And you should have been there to tell him so.”

He frowned, his gaze boring questioningly into hers. “Didn’t you?” he asked softly.

Kate’s heart picked up speed and tears stung painfully at the back of her eyes. She held up her hand, not caring that he would see how badly it shook. “I don’t want to talk about this. Not with you. Just leave.”

The moment stretched between them like a gaping wound. Eventually, he pushed to his feet and slowly walked toward her.

“I don’t care whether it’s today, tomorrow, next week or next month,” he said, stopping in front of her, “we will talk about this, and I will explain why I cut you and James off. I refuse to let you live and work in Foxton without at least talking about it.”

Huffing out a laugh, Kate turned around and marched to the door. “You refuse? You refuse? My God, you really are up your own backside, Mark.” She yanked open the door. “Unfortunately for you, the young girl following you around like a little lamb, laughing at your jokes and massaging your ego is long gone. I am my own boss in every way, and I’ll do what the hell I want. And right now, I want you out of my salon.”

His eyes locked with hers for a long moment before he squeezed them shut. “Fine. I’ll leave, but we will talk.”

She glared at him. “Just go.”

Then he opened his eyes and walked out the door without looking back. Exhaling her held breath in a rush, Kate closed the door and rested her head against the paneled wood as the adrenalin left her body, leaving her bones limp and her brain nothing more than mush.

The sound of footsteps and muted conversation brought her upright, and Kate automatically planted a smile on her face. Jo led Miss Kingston into the reception area.

“Here we go. And how would you like to pay today?”

Kate stole a guilty look at the client she’d terribly neglected. The woman looked as though she’d been woken from a twenty-hour sleep. Mumbling a hurried apology and wishing her a nice day, Kate rushed into her office situated at the back of the salon.

Suddenly the urge to know Jessica was all right overwhelmed her. Kate needed to anchor and focus her attention on the only solid and trustworthy thing left in her life. She dialed Lucy’s mobile number.

“Hi, Luce, it’s me.”

“What’s wrong?”

Cursing her friend’s ability to detect even the slightest change in her voice, Kate laughed. “Nothing’s wrong. Just wanted to check Jess is okay.”

“Of course she is.”

“Good. That’s good.” And then before she could stop herself, she blurted, “Mark turned up.” Lucy let out a low whistle. “At the salon?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, dear. That’s not good. What did you do?”

“I sent him out the door with a rocket up his ass.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Kate pulled back her shoulders and tilted her chin. “How do you know? You weren’t here.”

Lucy sniffed. “Because nobody sends Mark Johnston away with a rocket up his ass. Not even you. The man is a fired-up, ambitious, determined robot of tenacity. If you threw him out, I guarantee he’ll be back.”

Pressing her hand to her stomach where a pocket of swirling panic began to build, Kate sniffed. “No, he won’t.”

“I’m telling you, Kate, he will. Mark never does as he’s told. It’s what attracted you to him in the first place.”

Heat surged over her face like Lucy’s words held a blow-torch to it. “Why are you talking about me being attracted to him?” she demanded. “Do I honestly need that right now?”

“All I’m saying is, if he wants to see you, it’s best you swallow your pride and listen to what he has to say, because he won’t take no for an answer. You know that as well as I do.”

“Well, for your information, it’s not pride stopping me from seeing him, it’s common sense.”

“Really? And what conclusion has your common sense led you to?”

Kate closed her eyes.

“Kate?”

Then inspiration struck like a bolt out of nowhere. “I don’t want to be seen with him, that’s why. I’ve got Jessica to think of.”

“What?”

“The media. They’ve got him up on a pedestal like he’s some sort of Greek god.”

“You can handle that. You did with James.”

“It was different with James.”

“What? Why? The man was a hell of a lot more self-involved than Mark.”

“James’s fame was specialized, Luce. Mark’s business is commercial, it appeals to everyone. He’s the hot thing right now as far as stage and screen is concerned whereas James was photographed for his skill on a bloody snowboard, the difference is huge.”

“Fine. But I know you, Kate and if you want this, you can handle the press.”

“Maybe I’ve had enough of that kind of life. I do not want the tabloids poking around me or my baby anymore. Mark Johnston is bad news all around.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Now what?”

“He’ll be back, so if I were you, I’d get in there first so you meet him on your terms.” Another phone rang in the background. “Oops, got to go, the nursery line’s ringing. I’ll see you at four.”

## Chapter 3

Mark left Kate's brand new and pretty fantastic looking salon and made his way down the bustling Friday morning High Street and into the center of town. He needed to find a way to get her to listen to him. His desire for her was ridiculous, he was man enough to admit that, but what mattered most to him was his need to tell her why he'd cut off contact with James.

The thought of her hating him burned and stabbed at his soul--a soul he thought unaffected by such trivialities as love and emotion. Work had been his excitement, his pleasure, his adrenaline rush for the last five years. But now? Now, nothing mattered but speaking to Kate, getting her to listen to him. Having her at least like him, look at him with a softer expression in her emerald eyes, would sate some of the roaring frustration swirling inside of him like a burrowing tornado.

Still as passionate and outspoken as she'd always been, yet there was a distinct wariness behind the veneer--an arms-length approach that hadn't been between them before. Kate had always been so happy and carefree, so trusting and full of boundless curiosity. James's death clearly devastated her, but Mark couldn't help thinking there was more to her guardedness with him than his failure to keep in contact with his friend.

He stared straight ahead, his brow creased in concentration and his hands balled into fists as they swung back and forth at his sides. With no idea where he was going or what he planned to do next, Mark drew in a long breath.

When he'd walked into the salon and she'd emerged from a backroom and into the reception area, he'd nearly keeled over. Dressed in a dark green oriental-style tunic over crisp white trousers, with her hair twisted up in a spiky knot sort of thing at the top of her head - nothing sexy or particularly alluring about such a get-up...but on Kate? Mark grinned. She'd looked bloody fantastic--and sexy.

Shaking his head, he strode purposefully down the street, his outwardly impression one of a successful man, fully in control of his future. Yet inside, the thoughts of a sex-mad youth resonated around his filthy mind like the bouncing balls of a pin-ball machine. Kate's body had blossomed into a curvaceous figure of perfection Mark couldn't erase from his mind. His own body reacted so vehemently to the remembered sensation of her skin beneath his fingertips, part of him was scared to pursue her any further.

He shook his head. He didn't have a choice.

The perpetual feeling of betraying his friend hung over him ever since learning of James's death--it had yet to lessen, and Mark doubted it ever would. But the panic soaring through his veins at the possibility of letting her go a second time nagged and clawed at his conscience. He wanted

to run his hands over every inch of her body, kiss her most intimate places until she screamed out his name in blatant sexual desire. He wanted to make her breakfast in the morning, dine in the moonlight at night. Mark swallowed. Yep, he was in cloud cuckoo land--for Kate.

Her confidence and understated sex appeal drew him like a bee to sweet and tempting nectar. She may have evolved into a capable, sexy woman with her own business, but she still possessed a smile which could floor him in a second and a face so exquisite he would die a happy man merely watching her. He groaned at such pathetic feebleness. He needed to work out his next move. Fast.

Swallowing the guilt clawing at his chest, piercing and scarring his heart, he stared up at the clear blue sky.

"I still love her, mate. I have to do this. I have to know."

With his mind reeling, Mark wandered to the recreational park in the center of town and sat down on a bench. In front of him a family played a game of soccer. They looked relaxed and happy. Once upon a time he'd thought Kate's dreams for the future consisted of the scene in front of him. Clearly he'd been wrong to think she'd want nothing more than to be with him, work with him toward his goal of his own agency one day while they brought up two or three kids together.

His jaw tightened. A chauvinistic assumption most people would think, but he seriously thought he'd known Kate and what mattered to her. Until she up and emigrated halfway around the world with James and his professional snowboarding dreams, leaving Mark with the stark realization he'd been miles off of her true wants and the maternal instincts he imagined lingering in her heart.

Ignoring the gnawing in his gut and the knife stabbing at his chest, Mark slowly shook his head. He found it hard to believe he'd been so colossally mistaken. But he must have been. Seeing her standing proud and tall, immaculately dressed and groomed, Mark guessed children were the furthest thing from her mind. And as her face emerged in his mind's eye again, he knew if push came to shove he could forgo his own wants and live without children, if that's what it took to share his life with the woman he'd always loved.

The ringing of his Blackberry interrupted his thoughts. He looked at the display and hesitated for a second before hitting the speak button.

"Marcia!" he said, with forced joviality. "What can I do for you?"

"Have you seen the reviews?" she asked with a squeal. "My God, Mark, I'm walking on air!"

Mark grimaced. He couldn't remember the last time he'd forgotten to pick up a copy of every newspaper after a client's opening performance. Kate was clearly taking over in his priorities. Less than twenty-four hours ago, the most important aspect of his life was work--and now his neglect had landed him in an awkward position with his star client.

He cleared his throat. "I--"

"Can you believe what Morton Shankin said about me? No, no, Lara Hawkins's review is even better." Marcia laughed. "Listen to me carrying on as though you haven't seen them. What do you think? Are you proud of me?"

Mark's eyes darted to the park entrance. He needed to get to a newsagent's pretty damn quick. "Proud of you?" he said, standing up and striding toward the huge iron double gates. "Of course, I'm proud of you. My phone has been going crazy this morning but I was about to ring you."

"Can you meet me for lunch? Why don't we go somewhere ultra expensive to celebrate?"

"I...um, the thing is..."

"My treat," she said. "How do you fancy a meal at The Tulip Garden?"

Mark's mind raced as he hurried along, trying to think of a viable excuse to get out of the lunch. Then he stopped, ignoring the curse of the man who smashed into Mark's back. What was he thinking? Why couldn't he go? Kate made it perfectly clear she didn't want to meet him. Why add the risk of upsetting Marcia into the bargain as well?

He forced a smile. "Sounds good to me. My treat, okay?"

"We'll fight it out over lunch. Shall we say one-thirty?"

"Great. See you then."

"Oh, and Mark?"

"Yes?"

"We need to come up with a way of averting the bad side of the press attention I'm getting," she said quietly. "I thought I could handle the paparazzi turning up everywhere despite your warnings, but *The Picture* is becoming particularly intrusive."

Mark ground his teeth together. *The Picture* was Britain's highest selling tabloid. A cheap eighty-pence rag that made money on featuring stars and B-list celebrities in compromising positions and writing damn near libelous claims.

"What are they insinuating now?" he said, walking into the newsagents.

"It's not the usual stuff saying we make the perfect couple," she said coyly. "That never bothers me, as you know..."

Ignoring the clear neon signal Marcia flashed him at a thousand volts, Mark cleared his throat. "So what are they saying?" She didn't answer right away so he tried again. "Marcia?"

"Kate."

A lump of heavy weight fell into his abdomen. "Kate?"

"Yes. And it's not remotely funny, Mark."

Mark's fury erupted. "Who the hell do they think they are snooping around asking about Kate?"

"Mark--"

"Bastards. Do they really think I'll let them get away with this? My God, how dare they as much as speak her name! They don't deserve to kiss the ground she walks on."

"Mark--"

"Who's the journalist? No, not journalist, asshole who wrote it? I bet it was Underwood. God damn it, he only does freelancing work if it involves messing something up for me."

"Mark!"

Marcia's sharp yell sliced through the mist of his red-hot anger. "What?"

"You seem a damn sight angrier they're more interested in Kate than you are with them hassling me."

He swiped a trembling hand over his face. Shit. She was right. The entirety of his anger was a defense reflex for Kate--for the first time since he'd started representing Marcia two years before, she was not at the forefront of his mind. He swallowed down his anger, struggled to get a hold on the violent need to punch something.

He looked round to find a young couple standing next to him. The man slowly slid a protective arm around his girlfriend's shoulder as he met Mark's gaze. Mark turned away. He needed to get a grip.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll deal with them. They've got no right knocking on your door."

"I want to be taken seriously as an actress, Mark, and having Underwood asking me about your love life is the same as him throwing dirt in my face."

"I know, I know. I'll deal with him. He's a weasel."

"A weasel who is clearly intent on aggravating you. If he wants to go after Kate, he will."

Mark opened his mouth to respond but something in the tone of Marcia's voice melted the words of retaliation on his tongue and changed them to something else. "You say that as though you admire the man."

"I don't admire him, far from it," she said. "All I'm saying is, he's ruthless and when you deal with people like him, there's no telling what he'll do."

Unease rippled along Mark's nerve endings as he pulled various newspapers off the shelves. "I can deal with the press, Marcia. You know I can."

"Mmm, I know."

Mark narrowed his eyes, his anger threatening to re-surface at her implied disbelief. "Pardon me?" he said.

"Oh, nothing," she said in a sing-song voice. "I just think you need to get re-focused."

He tightened his jaw. "Don't tell me how to do my job, Marcia."

Her laughter tinkled. "Don't be absurd, I would never do such a thing!"

"Good. I'll see you at one-thirty."

He snapped the phone shut and marched to the till armed with four broadsheet newspapers and the rag known as *The Picture*. He paid for them and quickly left the shop, intending to go straight to his office and read every review and piece of crap written about him so he was fully informed when he met Marcia.

But as he made his way back through the center of town, he passed the picture perfect window of an elegant patisserie. His frown instantly smoothed and a smile curved his lips. One short detour on the way back to his car wouldn't hurt.

\* \* \* \*



Kate got out of her Peugeot 307 and took a deep breath. Mark's unexpected visit had sent her already stretched nerves to overdrive, and when he'd left the salon, the extent of the state he'd left her in manifested in a number of ways. She walked straight upstairs and accidentally upset an entire vat of wax onto the laminate flooring in treatment room one, then she'd walked into the kitchen and eaten Jo's specially made Weightwatchers chicken and salad wrap, oblivious to the equal amounts of care and contempt Jo had put into making it at seven-thirty that morning.

The poor girl was edgy enough being on a diet without Kate eating every last morsel of her best intentions.

So, feeling incredibly guilty as well as astonishingly stupid, Kate had jumped into her car to go out and replace the wax and low-fat, low-calorie chicken wrap as fast as possible. But no, once more, the gods were against her and after sitting in a traffic hold up of laughable proportions, she'd missed a scheduled appointment and left Jo to hold the fort on her own for over an hour.

Kate pushed open the door on the salon and cursed the jingling bell announcing her arrival. No doubt Jo was ready to kill her. She took three steps inside when Jo shot out the back room, lunged forward with the panache of an Olympic gymnast and grabbed Kate's upper arms.

"He came back!" she cried.

"What? Who?" Kate stared at her, completely bewildered by the look of pure ecstasy on her assistant's face.

"Sexy Mark Johnston."

A rush of heat surged over Kate's body--only to be replaced with ice-cold perspiration bursting onto her upper lip. "What? Why?"

Jo squealed and clapped her hands together. "He brought you something."

"He..."

Kate's echo died on her lips when Jo dragged her over to the payment counter. "Look!"

Pale pink ribbons were tied around the handles of the biscuit-colored picnic basket and a wide pink and white gingham ribbon circled its center. Both of the dual lids were ajar, one revealing a dozen pink carnations, the other a bottle of white wine so chilled the perspiration slid in occasional rivulets down its neck.

"Why would he do this?" Kate whispered, taking another step closer as a smile tugged at her lips.

She smoothed her hand over the surface of one of the handles and inhaled the aroma of freshly baked bread seeping from inside. Her stolen Weightwatcher lunch groaned inside her stomach.

"Open it. Open it," Jo said, bouncing from one foot to the other.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Kate huffed, yet dismally failing to curb her stupidly insistent grin.

Sighing theatrically, she lifted one of the lids and her breath caught. He'd bought her favorite granary bread, along with delicate slices of Parma ham and a thick wedge of creamy brie. Tears stung at her eyes, and she swallowed the ball of emotion in her throat.

“Oh, Mark.” She said the words on an exhalation as she carefully lifted a crisp white napkin to reveal two of the most delectable mini strawberry and fresh cream tarts she’d ever seen. Her absolute weakness.

She slowly closed the lid and re-arranged her expression into what she hoped was careless nonchalance before turning around. “When did he leave?”

“About ten minutes ago,” Jo said breathlessly. “Can you believe this? Isn’t it lovely?”

“What did he say?”

Her assistant frowned. “Aren’t you happy? Don’t you think it’s romantic?”

“Jo, focus. What did he say?”

Her blue eyes clouded, clearly displaying her disapproval of Kate’s seemingly unappreciative response to such a thoughtful gesture. Kate smiled inwardly, knowing full well she’d be the topic of conversation between Jo and her friends at the wine bar later. Finally averting her gaze, Jo feigned interest in the bottles of lotion lining the shelves behind the counter.

“He said he was sorry he’d missed you and put that basket on the counter and then asked if he could borrow a pen and some paper.”

Kate stared at her turned back. “What for?”

She swiveled round. “To write you a note. The guy is obviously love-struck and you’re standing there as though he looks like Shrek after a mud-bath.”

Glaring at her, Kate fisted her hands on her hips. “Jo...”

“Fine, fine.” She whipped an envelope from the pocket of her tunic. “Here.”

Kate took the note and sat down. Squeezing her eyes shut, she counted to five and started to read.

Swiping at the tears slowly edging over her cheeks, Kate looked up at Jo who hovered above her with her hands clasped to her chest.

“He wants to have dinner with me tonight,” she said.

“Ooh, you’re going to go, aren’t you? You have to. You can’t say no to Mark Johnston.”

“Why? Because he’s some hot-shot agent now?” Kate pushed to her feet and brushed past her. “That doesn’t make a blind bit of difference to me.”

“But surely--”

Kate raised her hand. “And besides, I’ve got a three-year-old to think of.”

“Don’t you have someone you trust to watch her? Kate, listen to me. I know I’m being silly about how handsome, rich, successful, gorgeous, sexy--”

“Jo, for crying out loud--”

“Sorry, sorry. But he’s serious. He looked so...so absolutely gutted when you weren’t here. His entire face dropped like a young boy. He wasn’t hot-shot Mark Johnston, Kate. He was just a man who wanted to impress you.”

Kate stared as her heartbeat quickened and then sense rang supreme. She curtly shook her head. “Whatever he’s feeling is not important, Jessica is.”

“But--” The phone on the counter rang. “Damn it.”

Jo hurried to the phone and picked it up. Kate opened the note and re-read it. She needed to put an end to Mark’s desire to see her. Maybe she should meet him tonight and hear what he wanted to say and then tell him about Jessica--that would soon put an end to his interest, guaranteed. His reaction to her having a daughter with James would surely dampen what she’d seen lingering dangerously in his eyes every time he looked at her?

The irrational pull she felt toward him was dangerous, pointless and completely irresponsible. She needed to quash it--quickly. Jessica’s happiness was Kate’s entire world and purpose. Getting involved with Britain’s most eligible bachelor with a reputation of hard working and hard playing would be emotional suicide for both her and Jess. She would not risk Jess’s emotional well-being, not to mention the fear of her getting caught up in a media frenzy.

No, Mark needed to be stopped in his tracks. Tonight. Before it was too late for all of them.

## Chapter 4

Kate stood in front of her wardrobe, the doors flung wide open. What to wear? What to wear? Her insides were a mess. Her newly shaved and perfume-scented skin tingled with unleashed panic. She looked at her watch. She had one hour before she was due to meet Mark for dinner. She'd yet to pick an outfit and it was a twenty minute cab journey to the restaurant. She would have driven herself, but the need for dutch courage had overtaken common sense and she'd poured a glass of wine while taking a bath--and the night was still young.

"Pick something. Anything. It's only Mark. Mark, who you're going to cut all contact with in the next couple of hours."

Her mumbled words fell on deaf ears and numbed nerves. Kate fingered her reliable, sexy black dress which never failed to floor its intended target. Should she wear it tonight? Make Mark rue the day he decided it was all right to pursue his best friend's widow? A tingling of anticipation flickered through her body and died. Who said he was trying to seduce her? Maybe all he wanted to do was talk about the past, the memories they shared. James. A gnawing pain clawed at her throat and Kate squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Mark was never a bad person. What would she do if he gave her a plausible reason for his years of no contact? What would she say?

Swallowing hard, she opened her eyes and let the dress slip from her fingers. There couldn't be any plausible excuse. Mark had been James's best friend and her...what? Her...fantasy? The man she wanted, but he didn't want her? The man who'd let his best friend marry a girl he once knew?

And the fact of the matter was, she fell in love with James--to a point. It was never the all-consuming passion she'd felt for Mark, but she had loved James. He'd turned her head from the boy who never made a single attempt at taking their friendship further, and wooed her with his ideas of grandeur. He'd painted a romantic picture of living abroad where there would be constant sun, sea and sand.

But it turned out Kate spent the time under the sun alone while James spent his travelling up to the mountains every day where the snow never melted and the snowboarders always played.

She sank onto the bed. And once she'd become pregnant, Kate tumbled into the age-old delusion a baby would bring them closer. Jess was everything to both of them, but they only drifted further apart. Kate's vision blurred. She'd been planning to tell James she wanted a divorce the very day he died. And there hadn't been a day since when the guilt of carrying the secret around like a ball and chain didn't weigh heavy on her heart. Would Jessica ever understand her mum not wanting to be with a daddy who loved his little girl to the ends of the earth? Of course she wouldn't and Kate would ensure she never found out.

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, Kate stood up. She would do whatever it took to ensure Jess's happiness. And that was why she would not let Mark Johnston into her life. He was an ambitious and money-hungry man who would tire of a child quicker than he would a non-profit investment.

His face filled her mind's eye. If only she could believe Mark capable of not loving Jess-- everyone loved Jess. Even possibly, Foxton's very own heartthrob. Kate snorted with laughter as she remembered the gangly prepubescent boy with horn-rimmed glasses and the unattractive trait of collecting train numbers.

A smile played at her lips. And by God, she'd loved that boy.

And it wasn't helping her cause that he'd become a man whose hair was darker than a night sky and eyes so sexy and intense she felt as though he could see into her soul every time he looked at her. Feeling her heart swell and a distinct pull at more intimate parts, Kate defiantly tilted her chin. She would meet Mark and listen to what he had to say and then she would walk away. Forever.

She'd do it for her daughter. Jess didn't need Mark Johnston in her life and neither did she.

Yanking a pale pink, tight fitting top that was flattering yet not the obvious seduction weapon of the black dress, Kate felt the momentary weakness, the unexpected and guilt-ridden wave of desire, subside. The delicate criss-cross of straps revealed just a glimpse of her shoulders and fit smoothly over her torso to the upper curve of her hips. Teamed with a pair of smart black trousers, the look was sexy yet demure. Much more appropriate.

Yet once dressed and looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror, Kate could not ignore the sensation of wanting to look good for someone for the first time in years. She felt sexy and alive, and knew it was all because of Mark. He'd always made her feel this way, and even after all this time he could still do it. She shivered. She had to get a grip or tonight could go horribly against plan.

She quickly strode to the dressing table and sat down. To finish the look, she pushed onyx earrings through her ears and clasped a matching necklace around her neck. Her entire body hummed with electricity, making her wonder just how in control she was. She needed to curb this sudden and shameful desire for a stolen moment alone with him. It wasn't only her and Mark anymore...if it ever was.

Standing up, she slipped on a pair of black stiletto sandals and made her way downstairs. Lucy sat on the living room floor with Jessica nestled securely and happily within the circle of her legs. Their gazes were firmly glued to the TV screen where the latest craze of furry talking animals danced and played. Kate shook her head and smiled.

"Well, doesn't this look interesting?" she said, leaning against the doorjamb. "I wonder if the purple dinosaur will manage to get the pink rabbit out of the box."

Lucy turned, an expression of complete and utter scorn on her face. "Listen, missus, that pink rabbit has been stuck in there all day, and now nighttime is falling. This is not a laughing matter."

But Kate laughed anyway, held her hands up in mock surrender. "Sorry."

“So, you should be.” Lucy smiled, her eyes sparkled. “What time are you being picked up?”

Kate glanced at her watch. “The cab is due any minute. Are you sure you don’t mind babysitting? I can always cancel.”

Lucy’s smile dropped, and her eyes narrowed. “Don’t even think about it. You’re going. Anyway...” She wrapped her arms around Jessica. “I adore this little girl, and I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be than right here.” She paused, her eyes boring into Kate’s with her ‘tell me what you’re thinking’ stare. “Are you all right?”

Kate sighed. “Sure. I have to do this. You were right. Mark won’t give up until I hear him out. The sooner I see him, the sooner he’ll give up pestering me.” Stepping into the room, she pressed a kiss to Jess’s hair. “See you later, baby.”

Jessica looked away from the TV. “Oh, Mummy! You look pretty!”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

Jessica’s smiling face became a frown. “Are you going dancing? I want to come with you.”

Kate laughed. “No, Mummy isn’t going dancing, and she will be back before you know it. I’ll come and give you a kiss goodnight when I get in, okay?”

Jessica stared at her for a moment longer before giving a curt and satisfied nod. “Okay.”

Her gaze returned to the TV. Kate met Lucy’s eyes once more. “Right, I’ll grab my purse from the kitchen.”

Still grappling with a bad case of last-minute nerves, Kate hurried into the kitchen. She gripped the counter as she looked out on the twilit back garden. Mark had offered to pick her up at the house, but she’d insisted on meeting him at the restaurant. Her new home was a haven where no ghosts of hurt resided. A place where she and Jessica could start over. The first piece in a jigsaw she intended to put together hand in hand with her daughter. James’s death might have smashed the pieces of their lives apart but together, she and Jessica would build a new picture all of their own. A picture Kate knew Mark would never fit into--if any man was to come become part of their lives, he would be a man who wanted a family. Not a confirmed bachelor who thought his career was the guaranteed route to happiness.

The shrill ringing of the doorbell caused Kate’s breath to catch in her throat. She picked up her purse and walked back into the living room.

“Okay, I’m off,” she said with false joviality. She gathered Jessica into her arms and gave her a hefty squeeze whilst receiving lasers of encouragement from Lucy’s eyes above her head. “I’ll see you both later.”

For fear she might stay clinging to Jessica rather than leave, Kate quickly left the room and greeted the driver with a beaming smile.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

He touched his hand to his head. “No problem, miss.”

On the ride to the restaurant, Kate rehearsed what to say to Mark over and over again in her head. There was no right or wrong way to tell him about Jessica, so in the end she came to the conclusion she would simply blurt it out if necessary. Turning her gaze toward the window, Kate watched the streets lined with late-night shoppers and courting couples. *Life goes on*, she thought wryly. *As will mine and Jess's.*

The cab dropped her outside the steps to the Shriver restaurant, and Kate looked up at its cream-stone façade and felt a jolt of renewed nerves. But knowing Mark could quite easily be seated by a window watching her with that infuriating glint in his eyes, she quickly shoved her nerves away and tilted her chin. She would be cool personified. Yes. That's just what she would be.

Swallowing hard, Kate pasted her most nonchalant expression on her face and gracefully climbed the steps into the restaurant. She quickly scanned her surroundings. The place screamed of money and status. Everything from the crystal chandeliers to the bone china tableware was in perfect, and very expensive, order. It wasn't until the maitre d' politely cleared his throat Kate realized she stood directly in front of him.

She turned her smile up a notch. "Good evening, I'm here to meet Mark Johnston."

His English butler demeanor immediately softened with almost laughable speed. "Ah, yes, good evening. May I bid you a warm welcome to The Shriver Restaurant, madam," he said, stepping out from behind his rosewood podium. "Please come this way."

"Thank you."

As she followed, Kate tried not to stare at the beautiful interior. Decorated in tones of cream and off-white blended together to create an ambience of subtle 1940's glamour and sophistication, it was beautiful. As her gaze wandered, it fell on two or three celebrity faces and her already stretched nerves, tightened. These were A-list celebrities eating in a restaurant where they knew they wouldn't be bothered by the public or paparazzi. A place the rich and famous came for intimacy and ensured privacy. A celebrity like Mark Johnston.

She must be crazy agreeing to meet him like this. He was hardly the man she and James knew five years ago. He was known by everyone--admired by everyone. What the hell was she doing?

"Your table, madam."

Kate blinked at the sound of the maitre'd's voice and turned. Mark was on his feet, his eyes dancing with amusement, his full mouth curved into a delighted, happy smile. Kate snapped her gaze from his and smiled widely at the maitre'd as he pulled out her seat and gestured for her to sit down. She sat gratefully.

"Thank you."

He returned her smile with a curt nod. "Can I get you a drink? A cocktail maybe?"

Kate glanced at the table. "I'll have a glass of whatever Mark...I mean, Mr. Johnston is drinking, please."

"Bring the bottle, if you will, please, Peter," Mark said.

"Of course, sir."

And then they were alone.

“You came.”

She lifted her eyes to his. “Didn’t you think I would?”

“No.”

“Oh.” His gaze lingered over every inch of her face, and Kate’s cheeks warmed under the soft study in his eyes. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

He started as though remembering where he was. “You look beautiful.”

Her heart lurched in her chest as Kate forced herself to keep her eyes on the clear hazel of his. “Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself.”

He smiled and reached for the menu. Once he was sufficiently engrossed, Kate picked up her own menu and opened it like a shield. But she didn’t read the offerings, instead she used the advantage to surreptitiously check him out. Peering over the top of the leather-bound pages, her gaze wandered over the charcoal gray suit, the open neck collar of his snow-white shirt and the casual style of his newly washed hair. He looked up and she quickly looked at the menu.

“Do you know what you want?” she asked quickly.

“I knew exactly what I wanted years ago.”

She snapped her head up, the menu slipping from her hands. His unwavering gaze burned straight through her skin and flesh to her very center. An intense heat flared behind her breast bone and between her legs simultaneously. She opened her mouth but no words came, and the only sound stretching between them was her pathetically feminine struggling gasps of breath. She couldn’t take her eyes from his and knew he would recognize her shock, her confusion...and worst of all, her desire. His fingers lightly touched hers.

“Kate, I’ve wanted to see you for so long...”

“Yet you never contacted me for five years...James neither.”

He stared at her, the shaven skin of his neck shifting as he swallowed. “I owe you an explanation.”

Despite being aware of her burning hostility and its danger, she was unable to bury it under a gossamer covering of etiquette, so she said, “Yes, I think you do.”

“Here you go, sir.”

Kate sharply pulled her hands into her lap at the sudden appearance of the waiter. She looked at Mark beneath her lashes but his gaze never left her face as their glasses were filled. After what felt like half an hour, the waiter placed the bottle in a silver bucket beside them and walked away.

She picked up her glass, took a fortifying mouthful and said, “Well?”

He too, took a drink, carefully watching her over its rim. After a moment, he lowered it and his gaze never left hers. “I never contacted either of you once you left because it was too hard seeing you with James. I loved you, Kate--”

Her stomach lurched with something she didn’t want to contemplate...because it felt strangely like relief. “Don’t go there, Mark.”



“Why? Does it scare you?”

Her heart picked up speed. “Forget I asked. You don’t owe me anything. I didn’t agree to seeing you to bring up the past.”

His expression hardened. “I just want you to know--”

“And now I do. Let’s talk about something else.”

“I’m trying...” He shook his head and let the sentence drift off. His gaze bore into hers with the look of a man stranded on a treacherous river with no paddle. “You have to meet me halfway here, Kate.”

“What?”

His jaw tightened. “If you won’t let me even speak, why did you bother coming at all?”

She glared at him. Fear and guilt, confusion and anger burst into a flurry of colliding emotions inside her. He would not do this. He would not look at her and make her feel that pull toward him.

She’d looked after herself for a long, long time. Even when James was alive--she looked after herself, with absolutely no problem at all. If she’d had known then just what she was capable of and how strong she was, Kate would have escaped James’s temper tantrums and violent mood swings years ago. She always thought taking Jess from him would make him worse, so she’d stayed.

Cursing the stinging behind her eyes, Kate snatched her gaze back to her menu and drew on every ounce of her inner strength. She fought to stem the heat simmering and building momentum inside of her like a volcano waiting to erupt. To her utter humiliation she could feel the rise and fall of her breasts as she struggled to regulate her breathing and knew her pale skin would harbor, rather than disguise, the pinkness in her face belying her anger.

“Kate...”

“No, Mark.”

“No?”

She looked up as a surge of confidence finally flooded her veins. “No.”

For a long moment, their gazes locked. The momentary look of hopelessness she saw in his eyes vanished. Now he stared back at her with a nerve jumping and leaping in his jaw. The reappearance of something she remembered so well--his stubbornness. It kicked her confidence into overdrive. Mark was always a worthy opponent during a disagreement despite her....other feelings toward him.

“You’re not leading the conversation,” she said. “I am.”

He opened his hands, letting his menu slap to the table. “Fine.” He leaned back in his chair. “So why don’t you tell me what happens next?”

She couldn’t restrain her smugness at taking control and slowly smiled. “We order our food and then I’ll start the chosen topic of conversation. Okay?”

He lifted his eyebrows and stuck out his bottom lip. He appraised her for a second or two before casually lifting his shoulders. “Okay.”

With her heart beating a triumphant tattoo in her chest, she tipped her head toward his abandoned menu. "Shall we order?"

Finally, he dragged his eyes from hers and picked up his menu.

"Have you eaten here before?" she asked.

"Yes. Would you slap me if I was alpha-male enough to suggest ordering for both of us?"

She smiled and closed her menu. "No, that's fine. Food I can trust you with."

His mouth curved into a slow grin and then he gave a toe-curling wink before raising his hand for the waiter. "That's a start, I suppose."

The meal was fabulous. Although, he was less than subtle with his choice of oysters to start, followed by salmon with béarnaise sauce and blanched asparagus, their conversation of purposely orchestrated small talk about Mark's burgeoning career and Kate's new one filled the first courses. Kate fought with how to raise the subject of Jessica...and how to shield herself from the smoke that would undoubtedly erupt from Mark's rapidly retreating heels.

Drawing in a breath, she prepared for launch when his mobile phone rang inside the pocket of his discarded jacket.

"Damn. Sorry." He pulled out the phone and looked at the display. Kate didn't miss the clenching of his jaw or the way his color darkened. When he looked up, his smile was back in place. "I'll be right back," he said, before leaving the table.

Staring after him, Kate wondered if she should beat a hasty retreat while he was gone. Picking up her wine, she swallowed back her nerves. No, she would do this and she would do it tonight. Already her mind was far too preoccupied with Mark. It annoyed her that she wanted to know who had called to put such a look on his face. Putting down her glass before she was tempted to drain it, Kate leaned down and picked up her bag.

She checked her phone for any missed calls from Lucy but as she suspected there were none. Dropping it back inside, she took out her compact and checked her reflection. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled. She looked like a woman on the brink of desire. She snapped it shut. Not good.

Putting her bag on the floor, she shifted further into her seat and straightened her spine. As soon as Mark returned she would tell him about Jessica. No more delaying, no more small talk.

She jumped when his hand dropped onto her shoulder. She turned. His face was etched with anger.

"What's wrong?" she asked, unconsciously raising her hand to her throat. "You look as though you could throttle someone."

"I could." He reached across and whipped his jacket from the back of his chair. "We have to go. I'm sorry."

"What?"

He took her hand. "There's a problem with one of my clients. She's at my office in a state close to hysteria. I can't just leave her there."

“Fine, then go.” She moved to pull her hand from his.

His grip tightened. “You’re coming with me. We’ve said nothing important tonight. I want to talk to you and before the night is over, I will. Now grab your coat, we’re leaving.”

“Mark...” She clenched her teeth as she felt the curious gazes of other patrons turn in their direction. “I am not leaving with you.”

He stared at her. His eyes roaming over her face, lingering at her mouth. Kate’s stomach turned over with excitement or anger, she wasn’t sure. “Yes, you are,” he said quietly.

And then he tossed a few twenty pound notes on the table, and with his hand still firmly wrapped around hers, led an unusually speechless Kate through the crowded room. Her body hummed with suppressed emotion as she silently cursed the annoying fact she was turned on by Mark’s show of dominance. What was wrong with her? Did she think this was 1910? Tilting her chin and forcibly bringing her rightful anger to the forefront, she remained tight-lipped until they reached the car park and finally whipped her hand from his.

“I said, I am not going with you.”

He opened the passenger door. “Yes, you are.”

Enough was enough. Kate hitched her bag onto her shoulder and fisted her hands on her hips. “What’s the matter with you? Have you gotten the impression I’m the sort of woman you can push around?”

He stared at her for a long moment, before his shoulders slumped. He looked to the sky. “Of course not. Kate, please, I want to talk to you but I can’t leave Marcia to deal with the press. They’re God damn animals when they want to be.”

“Marcia? Marcia Langton?” Kate’s interest piqued.

Slowly, Mark smiled. “Yep, the one and only. Want to meet her?”

A smile tugged at her lips. Damn him for knowing her so well. She shrugged. “Not really but if she’s your client and you think...”

He ran around the car and opened his own door. “Get in the car.”

And despite the warning voice screaming *No!* inside her head, she slid into the leather seat, barely having time to buckle her seat belt before Mark pulled away with a screech of tires against asphalt.

## Chapter 5

Mark struggled to concentrate on the road as he drove toward his office. What the hell was Marcia thinking ringing him at this time on a Saturday night? He gripped the steering wheel. Who was he kidding? None of his clients hesitated to ring him, day or night, week or weekend, because they all knew the only thing Mark Johnston cared about was work. Until now. Until Kate.

He risked a glance in her direction and bit back a smile. Her stance hadn't shifted a millimeter since she'd gotten into the car. Her arms were still folded tightly across her chest, her jaw still set so firmly Mark could've sworn he could hear her teeth grinding. He stared ahead. Why did it suddenly feel as though it was taking hours to get to his office rather than the usual twenty minutes? He pressed down on the accelerator. Wasted moments, wasted seconds when he could be talking to her, finding out how she felt, what she'd been doing in the years she'd been away...if there was any chance she would one day consider him hers.

He swallowed. God, he was so damn angry Marcia called tonight of all nights. The atmosphere between him and Kate had been better than he could have hoped for...eventually. When she walked into the restaurant looking utterly breathtaking, his heart had stopped. Immediate possessiveness stole over him as he watched one guy after another turn to look at her as she passed them. But she'd been absolutely oblivious to her own sexual allure, instead her eyes scanning the room in her easy, controlled way. And when she'd seen him they widened for the briefest of seconds, before settling into cool indifference once more.

No longer the innocent, wide-eyed wonder he fell in love with over ten years before, Kate Marshall was now a self-assured, confident and ridiculously sexy woman. And he loved her, of that he was one hundred percent certain. But what could he do to ensure he didn't lose her a second time? Because even if it took every breath in his body, he intended to make her his.

"Oh, my God. You're kidding me."

The sound of her voice broke through his reverie. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking at her.

She waved a frantic finger toward the windshield. "Please tell me this is nowhere near your office."

He turned and peered through the darkness. "For crying out loud." Adrenaline spiked through his body making his hackles rise like a protective Doberman. He quickly turned to look at her. "Kate, it's all right. They--"

She held up her hand. "No, Mark. No way. Turn the car around. I am not getting out of this car with that lot--"

"I'll get rid of them," he said, pulling the car to a stop outside his building. "I can't leave Marcia to deal with them alone."

Her green eyes burned in the semi-darkness as she glared at him. “The press were not part of the deal, Mark. I agreed to a meal, not this.”

“I know. I know. Give me ten minutes, tops. Please. We’ll run straight past them and up to my office.”

“Run? Run?” Her eyes grew wide. “Have you seen the length of the heels I’m wearing?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Oh, yes.”

She scowled. “Not funny.”

His smile dissolved when he saw the dangerous glint in her eye. “Please. I have to do this for Marcia. She’s doesn’t deserve to be eaten alive, does she?”

She continued to look at him for a moment longer before turning her gaze back to the windshield. Her jaw clenched as she considered the scene in front of her. Mark watched her, silently praying quite a proportion of the old Kate remained. The Kate that wouldn’t leave anyone in need to their own devices, and Kate who wouldn’t let anyone, including a bunch of paparazzi orchestrate what she could and couldn’t do. She met his eyes.

“Fine, I’ll come in,” she said. “But for the record...I’m doing this for her, not you.”

Mark tried his best to hide his smile. “Thank you.”

She tilted her chin. “Let’s go.”

The paparazzi surrounded Marcia like flies around a candy cane. Mark stood on the pavement and his heart picked up speed. The sound of Kate’s passenger door slamming shut behind him moved him forward, his eyes firmly on the pack of vultures in front of him.

“I want the lot of you out of here, right now,” he shouted. “You’ve got five seconds before I call the police.”

They turned as one. A pack hunting its prey. They barely gave him a passing glance before they were looking straight past him to Kate. Marcia and Mark were forgotten as they moved toward her. Did they seriously think he would let them get within an inch of her? His rage exploded with a roar of blood in his ears and molten lava in his chest. He held up his hands, threw a glance over his shoulder.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Who’s this, Mark?”

“She’s a beauty.”

“Known Mark long, missus?”

The questions fired from their mouths like verbal diarrhea. Mark planted his feet firmly apart, ready to take them out one by one if necessary, but then Kate brushed past him, elbowing a path through the photographers, knocking them to the side like they were pins at a bowling alley. She headed straight for Marcia and clasped a firm hand to her elbow. Mark’s smile grew at the shocked look on Marcia’s face as Kate steered her toward his office block without as much as a backward glance.

The paparazzi turned to find the mass of Kate's auburn curls disappearing through the glass and chrome doors of Mark's office building. They charged forward but the two security guards were too quick and they were left standing on the pavement, cursing and swearing as the automatic door swished closed.

Shaking his head, his smile the width of the Grand Canyon, Mark followed Kate through the path of photographers, his hands casually stuffed into his pockets.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, as he passed them. "I have two beautiful women waiting for me."

The doors re-opened and he sauntered inside. His smile abruptly dissolved when he realized it was possible to actually feel yourself pale. Marcia and Kate stood side by side, their bodies rigid like sentries, their expressions entirely different. Marcia looked as though she barely held back tears whereas Kate wore a scowl akin to a Victorian school marm. The clutch bag she tapped against her palm may as well have been a cane across his bare ass.

He pulled back his shoulders and marched forward with the confidence of the reigning champion into a Roman amphitheatre.

"What a bunch of animals, eh?" he said, throwing his arms out wide. "Are you both all right?"

Mark stood tall beneath their unwavering stares even though he felt as though he was about to be speared in the eye by the force of venom shooting from Kate's. A long moment passed before she spoke.

"I'm absolutely fine," she said, pulling a mobile phone from her bag. "But I'll be even better when I call a taxi to take me home."

He stepped in front of her. "Kate..."

"What?" she snapped, glaring at him.

"Please, just wait."

"No. I'm going home. Now." She paused, tilted her head in Marcia's direction, her eyes softening. "Don't you think your client needs you right now?"

He held her gaze. "Of course. But we haven't finished our date yet."

Her eyes widened. "Date? Who said tonight was a date?"

Unwelcome heat seared his cheeks and deep in his chest. "Come on, you know as well as I do--"

She held up her hand. "I'm out of here."

She moved to brush past him. Without thinking, he reached out and wrapped his fingers deftly around her wrist. Their eyes locked, their breathing seeming to synchronize. He couldn't let her go. He willed her to understand by looking into his eyes. He hoped she saw something there that would make her give him at least another fifteen minutes. Her throat shifted, her face flushed, but she didn't speak.

Encouraged she hadn't slapped him so far, he turned to Marcia with his hand still holding Kate's wrist, albeit, gentler. "Are you okay?"

Marcia rushed forward and flung her arms around his neck with such force, Mark's hand slipped from Kate's wrist. He met her gaze over Marcia's shoulder and saw Kate's mouth drop open to form a wide "O," the phone seemingly forgotten in her hand. A burst of male pride shot through his veins. She looked astonished--no, peeved. As though Marcia had dug her stiletto into Kate's foot and trod all over her personal territory. Knowing if Kate caught even a whiff of his smugness, she'd cut his balls off with mere words alone, Mark stepped back and gently eased Marcia away.

"What are you even doing here?" he asked her. "More to the point, how the hell did the press know you'd be here?"

Dabbing at her moist cheeks, she threw a hasty glance in Kate's direction before turning back to face him. "Can we go upstairs?"

A wave of inexplicable foreboding swept over Mark's senses when he caught a glimmer of something far from the helplessness he'd seen in Marcia's eyes when she'd been standing outside. "It's Saturday night, Marcia," he said, carefully. "Why are you at my office?"

Her jaw tightened and a flash of something disconcerting showed in her eyes before they glazed with unshed tears. Mark cursed his inability to ignore female distress--even if it was Marcia's distress. The woman who was in real danger of being the reason for his ruined night.

He reached out and touched his hand gently to her elbow. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell, it's just you being here makes no sense."

"I'm so sorry to disturb your evening." She paused and swept her fingers under her eyes, offering Kate a small smile. Mark bit back a laugh when Kate gave back a grimace. "But I needed to see you," Marcia finished, oblivious.

"Why? What is so important you couldn't ring me on Monday?"

She fluttered her hand toward the door. "Well, them of course."

He threw a glance toward the now empty pavement outside. "The press? What about them?"

She dug into her bag and produced a tabloid paper with a flourish. "Here."

Mark took the paper, looked at the headline and photo--and promptly whipped it to his side. The picture of him and Kate told a thousand secrets. He was looking at her in the picture as though she was Venus, the goddess of love, and she looked at him with her eyes wide with what could only be described as terror.

"And this has worried you, why?" Mark demanded. "You're not in the picture."

Kate stepped forward, cleared her throat. "So who is?"

Ignoring her, Mark kept his gaze on Marcia's. He couldn't help but notice her tears had dried and an altogether different gleam shone in her eyes beneath the lobby's fluorescent lights.

"I asked you a question, Marcia," he pressed. "Why does this worry you?"

She reached forward and clutched his forearm. "Because they're saying things."

"The press? Well, of course they are. So what? You've dealt with them for the last two years. Enjoyed them even. What's changed?"

Another glance at Kate. “Couldn’t we talk privately?” she asked, looking at him beneath lowered lashes.

Mark looked at Kate. Her shoulders were pulled back and her chin tilted. Her glare bore into the back of Marcia’s head through narrowed eyes. She was fabulous. And there was no way in hell she was leaving.

“Kate?”

A moment passed before she dragged her eyes from Marcia to meet his. “What?”

“Would you wait for me upstairs?”

Her beautiful emerald eyes widened, and her eyebrows lifted. “Please tell me you’re joking?”

Mark felt his jaw tightened. “I’m serious. Come on, you and I both know we have things to talk about. Let’s talk. Five minutes, that’s all I’m asking.”

She looked down at the paper in his hand. “It’s me, isn’t it? I’m on the front of that paper, aren’t I?”

Heat seared his face. She didn’t ask for this, and he didn’t want her to experience what it was like being a tabloid plaything. “Yes.”

Another long moment passed as she looked first at him, then at Marcia and back again. She stuffed her phone back into her bag, her eyes never leaving his. “I’ll stay, Mark. I’ll stay because I’ve got a lot to say to you. So much, your ears will be ringing by the time I’ve finished.”

He managed a small smile. “Thank you.”

Affront flashed in her eyes, and her mouth opened to say something before she snapped it shut. Knowing he now had two pissed off women on his hands he thought it best if he separated them as soon as possible. He had a horrible feeling the night was going to go from bad to worse, the longer it went on. Placing his hand at the base of Kate’s spine, he steered her toward the lift. He punched in the ninth floor.

“The lift opens directly to my offices. Go along the corridor, mine’s at the end. I’ll be ten minutes max.”

Her eyes lingered on his and then moved slowly to his lips. “I’m doing this for me. Not you. I want whatever you think is going to happen between us to stop. The woman you knew five years ago is no longer here. And the new me is clearly more than you can handle.”

She brushed past him into the lift, her body humming with suppressed anger. When she turned around to face him, Mark’s eyes languidly took in every delicious, sexy inch of her. He met her eyes. “Believe me, Kate,” he said quietly, “I can handle anything, anything at all.”

She sniffed, opened her mouth to say more, but the doors swished closed. Mark squeezed his eyes shut and prayed this wasn’t the final curtain on any chance of a relationship with her. He couldn’t understand it. Why would the press turn up here, tonight of all nights? In the entire two years of representing Marcia and the five years of having his own agency, not once had the paparazzi turned up on his doorstep. Restaurants, openings, personal dates even, but never the



office because who wants a picture of a building? Or even Mark leaving a building. Not exactly the stuff of a scandal, was it? Something weird was going on and he was determined to find out what. He marched back through the tiled lobby.

Marcia sat perched on the edge of one of the sofas, her eyes locked on his as he sat down beside her. She immediately clutched his arm, her bright red nails pinching the flesh.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

Mark stared at her. “Why? Should I be?”

Her gaze darted over his face. “Well, your date...”

“Why did you bring the paps here, Marcia? What did you want them to see? You? Me? Kate? All of us?”

“You’re angry. Why are you looking at me like that? Do you think I--”

“I don’t know what to think.” He pulled his arm from her grip. “All I know is, they’ve never come here before, so why tonight?”

She swiveled toward the plate glass window beside them. The street was deserted. The paparazzi having either been sent on their way or more likely, come to the conclusion nothing of any substance was going to happen for the rest of the night. Mark waited. He refused to fill the silence. If Marcia brought the press to his office knowing full well he was spending the evening with Kate...

At last, she turned. Her eyes bored into his. This was the real Marcia. The tears were no more than a smokescreen; the real Marcia was staunchly determined and ferociously ambitious. It would take more than a few photographers to faze her, and Mark’s gut told him that tonight was a publicity endeavor, orchestrated by Marcia herself.

“They were here when I arrived. I received a phone call.”

He leaned back on the sofa, carefully watching her. “A phone call?”

She nodded. “They threw a load of questions at me. Asking what it felt like to be replaced so easily. How did I feel now you have a new number one client?”

“A new client? What are they talking about? Do they mean Kate?” He laughed. “They’re fishing, Marcia. Surely you knew that as soon as they started asking the questions. Tell me you didn’t fall for their crap after everything I’ve taught you about the press?”

Her gaze hardened. “Of course I didn’t.”

“Then why ring me asking me to come here instead of staying in your own apartment out of their way?”

“If you have to ask that question, they are absolutely right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Kate, Mark.”

“What about her? She doesn’t affect you.”

She shook her head, looked to the ceiling. "Of course she does. How much time have you spent with me since she turned up, huh? How many times have we been pictured together? You didn't even come to that restaurant opening with me last night."

Heat burned low in Mark's abdomen as he took in the set of her jaw, the cold determination in her eyes. "Maybe I've turned over a new leaf," he said slowly. "Maybe I've decided I want a bit of a personal life instead of running around after my clients twenty-four seven."

"But--"

Abruptly, he stood, flung his arm out toward the doors, cutting her off. "Go home, Marcia. I'll ring you in the morning."

She stared at him. In the back of his mind, Mark knew he risked upsetting a potential fortune in the making, but the woman waiting upstairs was worth more than any amount of money--there was zero competition between Kate and Marcia, and nothing Marcia could say or do would make him falter.

"Fine." She leapt to her feet and hitched her bag roughly onto her shoulder. "Let's hope when you've scratched whatever itch it is with Kate, you'll be better able to focus on your job."

"Good night, Marcia." He bowed toward the door once more.

"I'll leave, Mark, but I'm telling you right now, this is not the last you've heard from the press. They want to know who Kate is and why she's so important to you."

Mark kept his face impassive, even though the knowing way she said those words made the hairs at the back of his neck rise. "Do they?"

"Of course they do! Underwood was snapping his camera like a man possessed when Kate got out of the car. You know what he's like as far as you're concerned, he wants you dragged down. I'd put a fifty pound bet on it being him who took those pictures splashed all over the front of the paper."

Mark dropped his gaze to the paper in his hand. "You leave the likes of Underwood to me and concentrate on being the best actress you can. Everything else is my job, not yours."

She looked at him, her gaze softening. "He's obsessed, Mark. He'll ruin whatever you think is going to happen with Kate. It is worth it?"

Feeling the tension abating, he stepped forward and placed his hand on her elbow. They slowly walked toward the door. "Kate is important to me. I feel as though I've been given a second chance and I am determined nothing will mess it up." They stopped at the door. Mark looked at her as she stared up at him. He forced a smile. "Listen, whatever happens between Kate and me, you are my client, okay? Your career is important to me and always will be."

She stared at him before giving a wobbly smile. "Okay, fine. I believe you."

He grinned. "Good. I'll ring you tomorrow."

Lifting onto her toes, Marcia kissed him on the cheek before wrapping her coat tightly around her and heading out the door. She'd barely stepped more than four feet along the pavement before Mark turned and hurried toward the lift and Kate.

Outside his office door, Mark tugged at the cuffs of his shirt, and walked inside. She sat on the sofa with an opened bottle of wine in front of her and a half-filled glass in her hand. He bit back the smile threatening to erupt. Her leg was bouncing up and down on the carpet with gusto. Clearly, she'd found his mini-bar.

"Are you okay?" he asked, walking toward her.

Her green eyes darkened over the rim of her glass. She took a drink, swallowed. "What do you think?"

He stopped in front of her. "Marcia's gone. The paps have gone. Unfortunately, both of them are part of my job. I'm sorry it interrupted our dinner but--"

"But what? You say 'but' and it negates everything else," she said, her voice rising. "What about the picture on the front page? Aren't you sorry about that? Aren't you sorry it will no doubt be splashed all over the papers again tomorrow?"

Guilt twisted like a knife in her gut. "Kate..."

She raised her hand, took another hefty gulp of wine. "I should've known this would happen. How could I have been so stupid to agree to have dinner with you?"

Ignoring the heavy thump of his heart, he looked at her. "I'm not any happier they are here than you are. How was I to know interest would shift so quickly from Marcia to me? They don't usually give a rat's ass who I spend my time with."

"Now you're lying to me. Lucy told me how you're the tabloid's most eligible bachelor. Don't you dare insult me with pretend ignorance, Mark."

"It's just crap they come up with when they've nothing better to print."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure there have been a lot of women for them to talk about." Kate sniffed. "What I can't figure out is what makes me so different."

She drained her glass and immediately refilled it. Mark noticed how the liquid trembled in the glass when she brought the drink to her lips. She was furious. Yet his groin tightened. She was angry. Angry enough to slam him against a wall and...

He watched her. "You're right. There have been a few women in my life."

"What?" She looked up.

His heart swelled inside his chest. There it was. That something in her eyes again. The same something that appeared when Marcia practically elbowed her out the way in the lobby. Jealousy.

She gave an inelegant sniff. "Why should I care how many women have graced your bed, Mark? I couldn't give a damn. All I want to know is why the media is finding me so damn fascinating all of a sudden?"

Was he an idiot? That was pure anger, not jealousy. Feeling like a fool, he squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know but whatever it is, it won't last."

"Not good enough. Do they know I lived here before? That I was your friend?"

His eyes snapped open. "You were more than a friend."

Her cheeks turned pink and Mark struggled not to step forward, take her hand and pull her into his arms. Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly ajar. God, he wanted to kiss her. Brand her. Make her his. The clock on the wall counted out the seconds until he was forced to find himself a drink before he did something stupid. He walked to the mini-bar and splashed a measure of scotch into a glass. He downed half of it in one gulp before walking back and sitting down on the settee beside her. She immediately moved a few inches away as though he'd pinched her.

He looked at her, smiled. "Subtle, Kate. Real subtle."

She snapped her head around. "Don't you dare laugh at me. If my picture is all over any of those stupid magazines tomorrow, I'll never forgive you."

He studied her for a few seconds. "Can I ask you a question?"

She turned away. "No."

He asked anyway. "I know the press is a pain in the backside, but you can handle the likes of them and worse. Are you angry at the press or me?"

"Both."

"But one more than the other?"

Slowly, she turned to face him. "Too close to call."

"Kate, come on--"

"Don't pretend this is fair, Mark," she said, cutting him off as red-hot anger burned in her eyes. "I come back home after five years and the first blast from the past I have to face is you. Mark Johnston. The man who dropped two of his closest friends as quickly as he could..." She shook her head. "Newsflash, Mark. I have a life. A life which no longer includes a man. I have responsibilities, people to worry about, and I'm trying my damndest to ensure we get through the following years unscathed, so excuse me if I'm angry that after spending two evenings in the company of the infamous Mark Johnston, things are not going as planned."

"Who's we?" Mark asked the question, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer. She'd said she didn't have a man in her life but...

He watched the slender column of her throat shift as she swallowed. "What?"

"You said, 'we'. You are doing your best to ensure 'we' get through unscathed. Who's the we?"

Her gaze darted almost manically over his face before her eyes glazed with unshed tears that stabbed at his heart. He quickly took her hand. "Hey. What's going on? You're crying..."

Snatching her hand from his, she stood. "I have to go."

She hurried toward the door, and Mark raced after her. When she pulled the door open, he pushed it closed again with a firm hand. Her head bowed, her shoulders shook. His hand left the door and went to her chin. Gently, as though handling the most fragile of china, he lifted her face. The sadness in the depths of her eyes twisted a painful knot in his gut.

"Talk to me."

"You don't know me anymore," she whispered. "You don't know anything."

“Then tell me. I want to know. I need to know.” He moved his hand to the smooth curve of her neck.

“Mark...” Her gaze dropped from his eyes to his mouth and he took the gesture as an invitation, felt her longing whether she wanted it to be there or not. Every instinct in his body screamed she wanted his lips on hers as much as he wanted them to be welded there too. He inched forward and touched his lips to hers.

She tasted of wine and femininity, a heady combination which filled his entire body and catapulted him back to a place he'd thought he never experience again. Her brief moment of resistance caused his hand to tighten before she curved her arms around his neck. Mark's heart picked up speed at her unexpected surrender. He increased the ferocity of the kiss, taking it, owning it, knowing it might be a one chance encounter--something that might never happen again.

He ran his hand down the warm, smooth skin of her arms and when her lips drew away from his, he didn't step back like a gentleman should, he pulled her closer and pressed his nose and lips against the sweet-smelling curve of her neck. He gently trailed feather light kisses down to her collarbone and felt his erection twitch as she breathed a light gasp against his hair.

He hesitated with his fingers at the edge of her neckline, waiting for her to permit him further. She pulled him closer, her nails gently scraping over the back of his jacket. She murmured something incoherent, but Mark didn't stop to question her.

She trailed her fingers up the length of his back and scored them through his hair, causing his nerve endings to stand on a high alert. He moved up to repossess her lips.

“I've missed you so much,” he whispered.

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he knew he'd made a grave mistake. Whatever trance she'd been in was sliced in half by his words. With two hands firmly planted against his chest, she pushed him backward before lifting her fingers to her swollen lips. She was trembling and as Mark moved toward her, she shot out her hand.

“No. Stay there.”

“Kate, listen to me.”

Her eyes were wide with terror. An icy atmosphere descended over the room whereas a few minutes before her body was hot to the touch, their need for each other scorching the air around them. He had no idea what had happened to change that.

She pulled open the door.

“Kate, wait.” He dropped the hand he'd been tempted to touch her with.

She turned and faced him. “Bye, Mark.”

“Back at the restaurant before Marcia called, you said you had something to tell me,” he said quickly, clutching at anything to keep her there. A violent and sudden rush of color appeared at her neck. He swallowed. “Kate?”

“I...I wanted you to know nothing will ever happen between us.”

The heart kicked painfully in his chest, but he pulled back his shoulders anyway. "I don't believe you. There's something between us. There always has been. If James hadn't got there first..."

The color spread to her face, and her gaze hardened. "If James hadn't gotten to me first?" She tipped her head back, laughed. "You had plenty of time, Mark. I was always yours." She paused, pressed her hand to her forehead. "What I mean is, James didn't just take me, he loved me. You clearly didn't."

Something predatory surged into his chest. "You know I did. I was different then. I over-analyzed, I worried."

She met his gaze. "Yeah? Well, it's me who over-analyzes now, and I've already summed up you and I are bad news. It will end in heartbreak. And I will not...cannot let that happen. This is no longer about me and you. It's about more than you will ever be able to handle."

This time he did touch her. He reached out and gripped her hand tightly in his. "Try me."

Her huff of breath, the tears shining in her eyes belied a thousand thoughts swirling in her head. "I can't."

He tightened his grip, felt hot needles burning at the back of his own eyes. "I loved you then, and I love you now. Five years ago, I took what we had for granted. I assumed we had all the time in the world. And then James..." He paused when she shook her head and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "I was an idiot not to make you mine before James even came along. This isn't anyone's fault but my own but I want you, Kate. I want you so bloody much, I can't let you go again. I won't."

A soft smile tilted the corners of her mouth as she slowly pulled her hand from his. "You will. Quicker than you make your next hundred, you'll let me go."

"I won't."

"I'm a mother, Mark. James and I had a daughter. A girl who will always come first for me. Always. Even above the great Mark Johnston."

## Chapter 6

Kate wandered downstairs into the salon reception feeling as though she had a horse strapped to her back. Having left Mark's office the night before, she'd raced along the street and out of sight, before ordering a taxi on her mobile phone. The hiding part was a waste of time because in the ten minutes she waited for the taxi, Mark was nowhere to be seen. His words hadn't been worth the breath they'd been spoken with. Her gut instinct had been right. Learning about Jess had clearly paralyzed him beyond function. Well, good riddance to bad rubbish. Let him be happy with his life--alone.

Blinking, she ignored the ache in her chest and pulled back her shoulders. There was work to be done. She smiled at the customer Jo was saying goodbye to and when the doorbell tinkled behind her, Kate clapped her hands together.

"Okay then," she said, smiling. "I'm off to pick up Jess from the nursery. I promised her an afternoon in the park, and I can't wait."

Jo smiled. "I don't blame you. It's beautiful outside. The sun is shining, the birds are singing."

Kate arched an eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

"Sure." Jo grinned.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm going to the park, not a *rendezvous* with Brad Pitt."

Jo wiggled her eyebrows. "But maybe the next best thing?"

"What do you..." Kate rolled her eyes. "You think I'm meeting Mark, don't you?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"No!" Kate cried. "I'm taking Jess to the park--alone."

Pouting, Jo lifted her hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. I was only thinking--"

"Well, don't." Their eyes met and held for a moment before they burst out laughing. Kate caught her breath. "You are like a dog with a bone. Mark Johnston is no more."

Waving a dismissive hand, Jo smiled. "Okay, okay. Let's talk about Jess. When do I actually get to meet her? I adore kids."

Maternal pride swelled behind Kate's ribcage. She grinned. "I'll bring her in for the day next week, promise." She glanced at her watch. "Right then, I'd better get going or Jess will be wondering where I am."

She hurried out of the reception and into the kitchen area. She walked to the sink and washed up a couple of mugs and teaspoons, wiped down the counter tops and then, despite her protestations to Jo, Mark barged completely uninvited back into her thoughts.

Seeing and talking to him again had brought nothing but trouble to her door. She'd had three customers not so subtly mention her and Mark's picture in the gossip magazine from hell already that morning. One even congratulated her on bagging the sexy agent she'd 'like to teach a trick or two.'" Kate sniffed. Well, as far as she was concerned, said customer could teach him whatever the hell she wanted because Mark was the last man on earth Kate wanted to "bag."

She swallowed and ignored the pang in her chest. Mark Johnston. Mark Johnston. It seemed the whole world was obsessed with the man. Moving her head from left to right, Kate loosened the tension in her neck. The best thing she could do was push any thoughts of the future and whether or not Mark would feature in it, to the back of her mind for a few hours and just enjoy being alone with her daughter.

Glancing around the kitchen and satisfied with its appearance, she hung the dish cloth over the tap and dried her hands on a tea towel. She was finished for the day--and she couldn't have been more relieved. Grabbing her bag and jacket from the coat stand, she made her way back out to the reception. With a wave and a wink to Jo, who was busy looking after her next client, Kate headed out the door and into the street. She jumped into her car and headed for the nursery.

Two hours later, Kate lay on her back in the lush green grass of Foxton Park, lazily twirling the curls of Jessica's hair.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, sweetheart?" She looked into her daughter's green eyes as her beautiful three-year-old face hovered above her.

"Do you like living near Lucy and Nanna?" Jessica asked.

Kate frowned. "Of course. Don't you? Aren't you happy?"

Jessica nodded vehemently, sending sparks of sunlight bouncing from her soft brown tresses. "I am. You're not."

"What?" Kate laughed. "What do you mean?"

"You were crying in bed this morning. I heard you."

Kate stared as her brain scrambled for something to say. Anything to take the concern from her precious baby's eyes and replace it with the girlish glee that had only recently come back after she'd lost her father. She reached up and smoothed her finger down the length of Jessica's soft cheek.

"Just because I was crying, sweetheart, doesn't mean I'm not happy here," she said softly.

"Why were you crying then? Because of Daddy?"

Guilt shot like a bullet through Kate's gut. She hadn't been crying because of James--she hadn't cried over James for a long time and whenever Jessica mentioned him, it made her feel terrible for not still mourning her father. But as much as she wished he was alive and well, he wasn't and before he died, she and James were over in every sense of the word. Divorce would have come sooner rather than later.



Kate swallowed, forced a small smile as she brushed aside a tendril from Jessica's temple. "I was crying because I saw someone last night who knew Daddy and me a long time ago."

"A lady?"

Heat seared Kate's cheeks. "No, a man."

"And he made you cry?"

Kate smiled. "No, he brought back a lot of memories, that's all. It's hard to explain, sweetheart... it's difficult seeing certain people again. People you knew well but don't anymore. Do you understand?"

Jessica frowned and looked deep into her eyes. Kate focused on staring straight back, giving her daughter the reassurance that all was fine and normal in their lives. After a long moment, Jessica gave a curt nod.

"Like when Barney told the children about grown ups having disappointments just like us."

Kate smiled and blinked back her tears at the lisped adult word she'd used. "Exactly. Disappointments. But do you know something?"

Jessica tilted her head. "What?"

"Well," she said slowly. "Mummy is very happy right now because I'm here in the sunshine with you."

Jessica grinned. "Me too."

Kate enfolded Jessica into her arms and squeezed, inhaling her unique scent like a soothing balm. Nothing was as important as Jess, absolutely nothing. Closing her eyes, Kate sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for the blessed gift of her child. James's child. She and James may not have had the passion, the bond Kate thought she once had with Mark, but at the beginning of their relationship, he'd been a good and generous man. Maybe things slowly changed until he and Kate barely spent more than half an hour in the same room together but he did love Jess more than anything and Jess loved him.

When he died Kate vowed to do her best to fill the void in her baby girl's heart and she would continue to do so. So that meant above all, she must protect Jess from any further heartbreak--or disappointment.

\* \* \* \*

After an evening meal of pizza and heaps of ice-cream for both mother and daughter, it was nearing eight o'clock when Kate and Jessica arrived home.

"Bath, pajamas, bed," Kate murmured as she pulled the car to a stop outside their house and killed the engine. She looked into the back seat. Jess was fast asleep, her head tilted against the side of her car seat.

"Hmm, just me for the bath then," Kate murmured. "Straight to bed for someone else, I think."

Turning back around, she glanced through the windshield. And saw him.

"No," she whispered, shuffling down in the seat. "No, no."

It was useless. Kate knew he'd seen her. She stared at him. His eyes locked on hers by apparent tracker beam as he casually leaned against the lamppost outside her front gate. His smile was tentative yet distressingly sexy. Her toes curled inside her shoes. What was he doing here? His dark hair shone beneath the lamplight, and even though his eyes were in shadow she knew from the way his shoulders were bunched below his ears and his fists stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, Mark Johnston was nervous. Which equated to a potentially lethal blow to her defense of the man being an arrogant know-it-all.

Kate's heart picked up speed and her hands turned clammy. Why the hell didn't he follow the course of action she'd anticipated? Tell him about Jess and protect herself against the G force when he pummeled away from her at forty miles per hour. Yet there he was. Outside her house--looking unbelievably cute and sexy all at the same time.

"Bugger, bugger, bugger."

Sliding her bag from the dashboard, tension jangled along Kate's nerve endings. She reached for the door and he immediately straightened, walking toward the car.

Once she'd opened the door, she took his offered hand without meeting his eyes and attempted to exit the vehicle with as much grace as her trembling legs would allow. But as was typical in her life, elegance and poise failed to rear their heads and instead, her long auburn hair became entangled in the buckle of her discarded seat belt. Pulling her hand from his, she desperately tried to maintain an ounce of composure as she struggled to get free. A couple seconds of battle time ensued before Mark placed his hands over hers.

"Allow me."

Heat warmed her cheeks as she concentrated on a spot above his shoulder rather than having to look into his doubtlessly laughing eyes. If she knew Mark Johnston at all, he was biting down on his bottom lip in an attempt to stem a belly laugh of momentous proportions.

"There you go," he said, releasing her hair.

Kate immediately scrambled from the car as though the seat burned her backside. "Thank you." He turned around and she finally met his gaze. She crossed her arms. "Okay, Mark. You can laugh now."

And he did, they both did. They stood facing each other on the deserted street, laughing until tears shone in their eyes. After a long moment, Kate wiped at her cheeks and looked at him. His smile was charming, his eyes captivating, but she could not forget the promise she'd reinforced to herself. No more disappointment. No more heartbreak.

Taking a step back, she opened a safer gap between them. She didn't know how they came to be standing so close in the first place. So close she could make out the flecks of gold in his hazel gaze and smell the slightest hint of musk...

She cleared her throat. "Why are you here?"

His boyish smile slowly dissolved. "You know why. I told you last night. I still love you."

"Mark..."

He glanced over his shoulder toward the car. "Is your daughter in the car?"

Kate's panic struck quick and deep. She swayed back on her heels. "What?"

His gaze bore into hers. "I'd like to meet her."

She swallowed. "You can't."

"Why?"

Her mind raced, her palms turned clammy. "I...um...you..."

He lifted an eyebrow and a small smile twitched the corner of his mouth in the most devilish, infuriating and totally challenging way. He knew she could no sooner refuse to admit her fear anymore than he could. He was as terrified of seeing Jessica as Kate was of revealing her. She knew it and so did he. But at least he was there. At least he knew she had a child and if he wanted to be part of her life...

She tilted her chin. "Fine. You meet her and you go. If she's sleeping--"

"I'll meet her another time. I'll stay for one drink and then go. Promise."

She stared at him. "Who said anything about a drink?"

"Surely you're not afraid to let me in your house for half an hour when you've a sleeping child upstairs?"

Knowing that meant no ensured safety whatsoever, Kate found herself saying, "One drink and then you go."

She brushed past him, her fear beating a tattoo against her chest as she strolled toward the car purposely delaying the inevitable. Pausing with her hand on the door handle, she drew in a breath and opened the rear car door.

"Okay, baby," she whispered. "You stay asleep for mummy, and he'll be out of here before we know it."

Gently extracting Jessica from her seat, Kate lifted her into her arms. When she stood up straight, Jessica flopped her head down on her mother's shoulder, oblivious to the strange man watching her in stunned silence. Kate turned and her heart kicked painfully in her chest. Mark's gaze was glued to the top of Jessica's head as he leaned around Kate and pushed the door closed.

"Mark, meet Jessica." Kate smiled. "She's three years old and the most important person in my life."

Even in the semi-darkness, she saw the color drain from his olive complexion. Yet the expected horror wasn't in his eyes. Instead blatant fascination, protective concern and even tenderness shone there. Her breath caught and her arms tightened around Jess when he gently lifted the hair from her face. He stared for what felt like minutes before he dropped the strands and finally met Kate's eyes.

"She's beautiful."

Her mouth was so dry all she managed was, "Thank you."

He smiled. "We'd better get her in. It's getting cold."

Kate pointed the keys at her car and locked it before turning and heading toward her front door on legs trembling like lengths of jelly. With the expert flexibility of a mother, she put the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped inside without evoking as much as a murmur from Jessica.

She looked at Mark, who continued to concentrate his gaze on Jessica. "I'll take her up, there's a bottle of red in the rack in the kitchen. End of the hallway."

He blinked and looked up. "Right. Drink. Okay."

Kate watched him wander slowly down the hall, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the warmth spreading through her belly. Even though it jabbed at her heart to see him looking so out of control in his state of shock, Mark knew as much about children as she did about diva actresses. Nothing. And that spoke volumes about the differences between their lives. Giving her head a violent shake, she walked upstairs. With lightning efficiency, she changed Jessica into her pajamas and the little girl curled underneath her quilt, still fast asleep.

Sitting back on her heels, Kate watched her daughter sleep. A sudden attack of nerves overtook her as she thought of Mark sitting downstairs waiting for her. She'd left Foxton with his best friend. She had a baby with his best friend. What did he think would happen between them? And if he loved her, why the hell hadn't he told her years ago when nothing else mattered to her other than him? She squeezed her eyes shut as a tear escaped unchecked down her cheek.

She could not be pulled into the possibility of resurrecting the past--it never worked. People too often went back. Back to a place that didn't work out the first time round, yet expecting miracles to happen on the re-run. Jessica gave a contented sigh and Kate's heart ached. Mark was a workaholic who dated women as an occasional distraction--he didn't know about love and he most certainly didn't know about commitment. Kate refused to expose Jessica to a man a young girl could quite easily come to love. Everyone fell in love with him. Everyone--and Kate was one hundred percent sure it would be no different for Jessica.

Feeling her resistance to him settle around her shoulders like an armored pashmina, Kate pushed to her feet. Leaning over the bed, she kissed Jessica's cheek before quietly pulling the door half-closed and making her way downstairs.

When she reached the bottom of the staircase, Kate gave an uncertain look toward the open door of the living room. Her new home was a sanctuary she and Lucy secretly decorated over the last few weeks. Keeping her return to Foxton a clandestine affair had been the only way Kate could carry it through. She knew it would be hard to face people who'd known James, but the need to be back among the people who loved her eventually become stronger than any difficulties she faced.

The joy in her parents' voices when she'd told them of her imminent return had lessened the heavy burden of guilt of taking Jessica from the only home she'd ever known and gave her the strength to admit she'd settled for second best in her love life.

Blinking, Kate pulled back her shoulders. She'd face Mark head-on. She'd explain her relationship with James and explain how Mark had hurt them--her. She would lay everything she wanted to say to him out on the table and then maybe he would finally have the sense to leave her and Jessica alone. And understand she wasn't the woman she was five years ago and would never put a romantic relationship above Jessica's needs.

That Kate died right along with James.

She entered the living room to find him studying his surroundings. With a jolt, Kate realized she actually cared what he thought of her new home, of where she chose to live and how she decorated it. Not because she wanted him to approve it--she wanted him to know she was fine--living and alive.

"So..." She stepped further into the room. "What do you think?"

He turned and smiled. "It's great. I can't believe you've been here long enough to do this and I never had a clue."

She returned his smile. "Who says I've done this?"

He took a step toward her, his gaze softening as it darted over her face. "Because this is you. This is the Kate I know and love."

Heat burned at her cheeks. "I wish you wouldn't keep saying that."

"What? I love you?"

She nodded. "Yes, and the fact you think you know me. You don't."

Another step. She forced herself to stay at the same spot. His gaze lingered hungrily on her lips, and she immediately felt a sharp tug between her legs. The memory of the previous night came crashing into her mind, and she squeezed her thighs together to stem the throbbing there. The feel of his lips against hers, the sensation of a male hand at the base of her spine deepened the burn at her face. She tilted her chin, kept her gaze firmly on his.

He smiled. "I know you, Kate. You haven't changed."

"I've changed. You just haven't opened your eyes enough to realize it. People change constantly. Especially when they have children."

He hesitated and took a step back. Kate exhaled. The desire in his gaze immediately cooled, only to be replaced with hot indignation. "I know."

She picked up one of the two glasses of red wine sitting on the coffee table and took a sip. "Then will you stop acting like a man walking around in a timeless bubble," she said, looking at him. "You've changed and I accept that. So please, extend the same courtesy to me and stop acting like such an ass."

"An ass?"

She nodded, fought the smile on her lips. "An ass."

He nodded slowly, as though contemplating her succinct summary of him before walking to the coffee table and picking up the other glass. He drank. "Fine. So you've changed. But you'll have to excuse me because so far I have seen no evidence to discredit the fact you are still the loyal, passionate, sexy woman I knew and loved for practically my entire adult life."

She took another sip of wine. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Sit."

He grinned, a flash of teeth splitting his handsome face and making her resistance to him waver. Why did he have to look and smile like that? Why couldn't he get angry? Throw something? She swallowed and lowered onto the settee. Because Mark wasn't James, that's why.

The settee dipped under his weight as he sat down beside her. "Well? Tell me," he said, his hazel eyes never leaving hers. "Tell me how you've changed and what I don't understand. Tell me what it is you're going to throw out there as a reason I will not fit into your life, or more to the point, Jessica's life."

At the mention of Jessica's name, her heart picked up speed. Her mind scrambled for the excuse she needed to ask him to leave. To be able to tell herself and everybody else, Mark Johnston had become an ignorant, arrogant asshole over the five years she'd been away. With every inch of his success, he'd worsened. Surely it was rare for a man to gain such phenomenal success and still retain the consideration he had before?

Yet no matter how long she looked into his eyes, no mocking derision appeared--all his gaze told her was he wanted her. She snatched her gaze away and stared into the burgundy depths of her glass. "My life with James wasn't good, Mark."

A long silence ensued. He lifted his own glass to his lips and drank deeply. "Tell me," he eventually said. The tone of his voice lifted the hairs at the back of her neck.

Kate looked at him. "He was ambitious, you know that. I...we, me and Jess, became a problem for him. We didn't fit in with his image of what an international snowboarder should look like. Don't get me wrong, he wasn't abusive but he said enough to stop me loving him a long time before he died. Yet I couldn't leave. I couldn't take his child and fly halfway around the world. He loved her."

He leaned forward and placed his glass on the coffee table. She waited. He said nothing. Only locked his hands together between his knees, his eyes looking at a spot on the carpet as his jaw clenched and released over and over. A whisper of unease trickled into her bloodstream but she forced herself to continue. He must hear this.

"So when he died, my baby's heart shattered. Shattered into a million pieces that took me over a year to put together. And even now, I know those pieces are held together with the weakest glue, Mark. She grieved and I grieved. James wasn't a bad man and he gave me Jessica, but I didn't feel the devastation a young widow should. So I decided it would be best for both me and Jess to come home and be close to my family."

She paused, waiting for something from him. But he didn't speak, or even glance in her direction. Just the same eerie silence and the same regular clenching and unclenching of his jaw. She picked up her wine, eased her arid throat.

"So here I am." She sighed, glancing at him sideways. "I'm home, but the last thing I need is another relationship. Especially with a man who not only knew James but now emulates him."

He snapped his head up. "What?"

Trepidation skipped along her nerve endings as Kate wondered if her decision to provoke him this way was the right one. Of course it was. She must do something to deter him from pursuing her--it would end in heartbreak for everyone. How could someone like Mark have a family life? And a secure family life was what Kate desperately wanted for Jess. She didn't need this thing Mark had started the night of Marcia Langton's theatrical debut. The night he'd looked at her in a way no man had looked at her since she left the UK...and him.

"Kate?"

His voice broke through her reverie, and she clutched the glass tighter. She met his gaze, and her stomach lurched. The raw hot anger burning in his eyes pierced at her heart and sent flames of foreboding licking at her teetering strength.

"You're ambitious," she said, with more authority than her racing heart belied. "You're not the man I knew, anymore than I'm the woman you knew. You don't get a career like yours in five short years by being anything less than driven, money-hungry and maybe even ruthless. Success like yours comes to people who lead their lives with absolute single-mindedness." She paused and looked into her wineglass. "And I will not share my life with someone like that. Nor will Jessica."

He continued to glare at her. The silence bore down on her chest like a lead weight, but she didn't move and she didn't breathe. After a long moment, he put his glass down and met her eyes.

"If you truly think that, why have I come after you the way I have?"

She swallowed, the shaking in her legs traveled higher until it quivered inside her stomach and banged against her heart. "What do you mean?"

"I have money, I have power, I have success. Yet, for the last week I've barely spent any time with my clients, and no time at all striking up deals worth thousands of pounds. Instead I've been pursuing a woman I lost to my dead best friend five years ago. So you're right, I am single-minded. But unfortunately for you, that attribute is no longer focused on my career but on you and the little girl asleep upstairs."

Passion, anger, desire and fear mixed together and tore at her senses. She'd once loved Mark with every inch of her soul, and now he looked at her as though she'd taken a knife and stabbed it straight through his heart. The undeniable pain raging in his eyes could not be mistaken. She'd hurt him, and she'd really been trying to save him.

"I loved you too, Mark."

The fire in his gaze wavered. "What?"

"I loved you, but I needed what you couldn't give me. You were so easy, so carefree, you thought life would fall into place and it doesn't. I was getting older, wiser, I didn't want to spend anymore time hoping you'd understand how I felt about you. James gave me what I needed. He swept me off and made me his. I knew at last someone wanted me."

He turned away, ran his hand over his handsome face. "My God, Kate, you were all I wanted." He stared deep into her eyes. "You still are. As soon as I saw you standing in the bar at the theatre, I knew the way I feel about you will never go away." He gave a soft laugh. "I felt like an idiot walking toward you like a bloody zombie, but I couldn't stop myself. We've wasted so much time."

She touched his bicep. "It's not wasted time. You've made your fortune and I have Jessica. I wouldn't change that for the world. But I won't risk anymore heartbreak for either myself or her."

He took her hand. "Heartbreak? The last thing I will do is hurt either of you. Is that what this is all about? Trust?"

"You have to understand what it was like for Jess when James died. She loved him. One day he was there, the next gone. She didn't understand. She didn't have a chance to work through what happened." Kate's voice cracked. "All she knew was James was gone. I've explained, but she still asks me if he's coming back. Even now."

He leaned forward, pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "I won't leave you, Kate."

She pulled her hand from his, fisted the hair back from her face. "You don't know that. Nobody does. I can't get involved with you and risk it not working out between us. Jessica lost her father. I can't risk her coming to love you and then taking that away from her. Surely you understand?"

His jaw clenched as he watched her. Kate's heart ached. She could do this. She could make it clear to him--to herself--what they shared was nothing more than a memory which never became a reality and never would.

"No."

She swallowed. "Mark..."

He shook his head. "No. I don't want you or Jessica to ever feel pain again. And I will always be around to make sure that doesn't happen."

Tears burned her eyes. "You're not listening to me. Children are..."

"Are what I want of my own one day," he said firmly. "Children with you. Your children, including Jessica. I made a huge mistake standing by and watching you leave. I will not do it again."

Fear struck her heart like a sword through flesh. What was he thinking? Why mention more children? Future dreams? Yet her stomach clenched with undeniable excitement, her heart swelled with love for him. A painful, unfair feeling, but there all the same.

"Mark--"

"Do you love me?"

She pursed her lips together, trapping the declaration inside.



He took her hand. "Do you? You said you did then, do you think you could again?"

Her breath rasped in her throat. She knew he meant every word he'd said and doubted whether she was strong enough to resist him. Did she have any more strength than Mark to walk away a second time? Every possible circumstance was stacked against them. Their different lives, their incomparable responsibilities, the press interest...

The intensity of his gaze was preventing her from thinking straight. She closed her eyes.

"It doesn't matter if I could or if I couldn't," she finally said. "Look at what's happened since I've been back. The press are watching our every move, your star client is feeling neglected and dare I say it, threatened by the mere sight of me." She gave a short laugh. "What more can an over-protective mother of a three-year-old child contend with?"

"You can forget about Marcia for a start," he said gruffly.

Kate opened her eyes, looked at his stiffened profile. "She's part of this too. All your clients are. The last thing I want is to step on anyone's toes, or cause trouble in someone's career." She paused. "Especially Marcia's. The woman gives glares close to Hannibal Lecter's."

He tipped his head back and laughed. Kate's stomach did a wobbly loop-the-loop. She grinned and their eyes locked. He hadn't laughed since she'd seen him again. There was a time when Mark never stopped laughing, all those years ago, before this new man emerged. A new man, who knew his own mind, knew what he wanted and would take it without question. It suited him to laugh--it made her think that behind closed doors he was a million miles away from his public persona of theatrical agent cum ladies man extraordinaire.

Their laughter slowly dissolved and their smiles wavered. Mark cupped her jaw. "I love you. Nothing will happen to you, me or Jess. James died in a freak accident."

She covered his hand with her own. "I want her surrounded by people who love her. Who will never put their best interests above hers. Could you do that? Honestly?"

"Yes."

"I'm not pressuring you for an answer. I want you to understand what starting something with you means to me. It means I'm not just risking myself, I'm risking Jess, and I don't know if I can."

"I have never been more serious in my life, Kate. I mean it. We'll take things one step at a time if you want, but I want you more than anything else in the world. And now I want Jessica too."

Kate's blood pumped hard through her veins. She had not allowed herself to even think he might accept Jessica so quickly. Even if his heart was open to both her and her daughter, she knew he had no idea of the emotional strain a child could bring to a couple--or the joy.

She took his hand from her face and pushed back her hair. "I don't know..."

"Give us a chance, Kate. Please."

## Chapter 7

The sincerity in his eyes cut through her heart, slicing away the last trace of Kate's resistance and common sense. She wanted him. Emotionally, physically. It had always been Mark. Always. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'll never forgive you if Jess is hurt through this."

"Through this?"

She opened her eyes. "Through us."

His mouth curved into a slow, boyish smile. His eyes sparkled with excitement and dare she say it, love. "You mean..."

Fighting her own smile, Kate held up her hand. "We take things slow."

He edged along the sofa toward her. "Absolutely."

"I'm not ready for her to meet you yet."

Another inch. "Whenever you're ready, I'll be there."

She trembled with suppressed laughter. "Everything is still new to her in Foxton, she doesn't need the added confusion of meeting Mummy's new boyfriend."

His eyebrows wiggled, reminiscent of old black and white movie characters. "Boyfriend?"

Kate laughed and slapped his rock hard bicep. She shivered, wanting those arms around her. "You're an idiot."

"And all yours."

He slid his fingers up her legs to her waist. The feel of his hands gliding over the contours of her legs and hips sent a shudder of desire sweeping through her. She prayed her gaze wasn't reflecting the illicit focus of her body. But his eyes darkened and she knew damn well he'd seen it. She pulled back, opening the space between them even though his hands remained firmly clamped in place.

"You mess this up, Mark Johnston, and I'll kick you to the curb without a second thought," she said. His smile was wolverine. Her vagina twitched, her body heated. "I'm serious."

"So am I," he said, his gaze lingering hungrily at her lips. "Everything is going to be a hundred times better than you can imagine."

She opened her mouth to say more but his lips came down on hers, swallowing any futile protestations. Kate inwardly groaned and surrendered to the inevitable. Lifting her hands, she clung to his broad, hard shoulders.

She didn't know if she was doing the right thing. She had no idea if they would last a week, yet all she could think--no matter how disloyal it felt--was that James never made her feel the stomach-churning excitement Mark did. He never understood her like the man who was causing such a need in her she automatically tipped back her head, allowing him easier access to her neck.

James never made her center ache as he nipped, tasted and branded her skin, making him more hers with each passing second as Mark was then. And most of all, James wasn't there with her, or Jessica.

It was time to move on. Time to start building a future.

With Mark she felt young again, felt the exciting tremors of the unknown, the feeling they could conquer the world as long as they were together. And as he touched her now, discovered and awoke her, Kate fell beneath the delicate gossamer curtain and let herself believe a happily ever after was possible. That she, Mark and Jessica could make it. They could have it all...

He pressed his weight against her, steering her back against the sofa. His mouth caressed her collarbone within the open V of her shirt. If she could just lose herself for one blessed moment...

Her eyes snapped open. What was she doing? A bolt of guilt shot through her, sending her scrambling into a sitting position. The violence of her actions would have sent a lesser man hurtling to the floor, but Mark merely held his hands up in surrender and sat back.

"I thought you wanted..." He stopped, his tone changed. "Kate? What is it? What are you looking at?"

She stared toward the window. What if the press were watching them right now? What if the look she'd seen on Marcia's face never changed? What if...

Standing, she strode over to the window and snapped the curtains closed. She crossed her arms, suddenly feeling cold. "I'm scared, Mark."

He pushed to his feet with his gaze still locked on hers and walked across the room. He stopped so close to her, she had to tip her head back to meet his eyes. He brushed his thumb under her eye and she felt the cold echo of a tear she didn't know she'd cried.

"Everything will be all right." He pressed a firm kiss to her forehead. "I'll make sure of it. No one is going to step one foot toward ruining what we are starting here, okay?"

She wanted to believe him, but they were standing alone in the most fragile of bubbles and when the world woke wanting a new story, a new scandal to devour over their morning coffee--what then? Surely their story made perfect tabloid fodder? Kate squeezed her eyes shut. She could see the headline already. *Widow cavorting with her dead husband's friend.*

"Mark, listen to me. Marcia brought the press to your offices. She's serious. Her career means everything to her. And if she feels like that, you can bet more of your clients will feel the exact same way."

He shook his head. "Marcia is riding the wave right now. She's big news and doesn't want the slightest thing to jeopardize her position. She'll be fine. Once she understands what goes on between me and you has nothing to do with my managing her career--"

"Say she does. What about the others? What about the press? Who knows what they're capable of?" She paused, gnawed at her bottom lip. "They're going to come after me all guns blazing once they know I'm the new woman in your life. I can handle a lot, Mark, but the British press? I think that's even past my capabilities."

“Listen, I will deal with Marcia and I will deal with the press. You have to trust me.”

“But--”

His jaw tightened, his hazel eyes darkened. “Enough. We’re going to enjoy this. All of it. Starting right now.”

“Mark--”

His kiss swallowed her protest. His tongue, warm and soft, sought hers and she let him find it with a pathetically weak struggle. Resistance was futile. Her body melted against his as her muscles weakened. To deny her feelings for him was one battle she was sure to lose, and that fact did nothing toward lessening her fears regarding the press and Mark’s clients.

Yet one thing he was right about--now was now.

And suddenly Kate didn’t want him to move away from her for one tiny second. For now, they would enjoy this time alone to re-discover and love, to surrender and take. Lifting her hands to his shoulders, she pulled him closer, and when she did he slid his fingers firmly around her waist, drawing circles over her skin, heating her want and need. The fight of their tongues intensified and Kate reached into his hair, her nails scoring down lower over his neck and across muscular shoulders. The seconds grew more fervent, their hunger deepening until Mark pulled away. They looked into each other eyes, their breathing in total sync. Passion and need swirled in his green-brown gaze, and Kate knew the same desire would be evident in hers.

She’d been helpless in her endeavor to control her feelings for him and now, as he took her hand and led her from the sofa, her mind darted to Jessica asleep upstairs. He must have sensed her hesitation as he touched his finger gently to her chin.

“Do you want to stop?”

She licked her tender lips, stole a glance toward the ajar living room door. Did she? Could she? Shaking her head, she brushed past him and gently shut the door. He stood in the middle of the room and Kate glanced at his crotch. Her mouth curved into a smile to see the tented V there. She looked up and his self-satisfied smile popped the bubble of laughter at her throat.

“You actually look proud of yourself,” she said.

“Shouldn’t I be? You want me, don’t you?”

She tilted her chin, looked at him in as blasé a way as possible. “Oh? Who says?”

He nodded toward her breasts.

Frowning, Kate looked down and heat seared her cheeks. Her nipples strained against the thin cotton of her shirt--a pretty indicative state under the circumstances. Sink or swim. Swim every time. Arching her eyebrow, she strolled toward him. Once there was barely more than three inches between them, she pushed him hard in the chest.

“Sit.”

His grin widened. “Mmm, taking control, are we?” He paused. “Okay. Fine. I’ll let you this time. Just this once. Next time...” He left the sentence unfinished.

A rush of delight tickled over her skin. Mark never gave in, never relinquished control--this was a significant and clear sign. And she read him loud and clear. He wanted her. And not just for the heated and passionate minutes that were guaranteed, he wanted a future. Swallowing hard, she savored the warmth in her heart before pushing him back onto the cushions, feeling more alive than she'd felt in years. She wanted to own this moment, to bottle it and never let it go.

His gaze drifted over her face and body, making her feel every inch of her femininity. His eyes, full of fire and possession, caused the pulse between her legs. Slowly, purposefully, she pulled her t-shirt over her head to reveal the satin half-cup bra she wore underneath.

Mark gave a low whistle. "You're so bloody beautiful."

She leaned forward and gently brushed her lips over his. When he reached for her breast, she pulled away and stood up. Her skin yearned for his touch, her heart swelled with desire and need. She couldn't endure any further constraints. Neither physical nor emotional.

Unzipping her jeans, Kate shimmied them over her hips until they slid down her legs and pooled at her feet. Stepping out of them, she kicked them to the side. Dressed only in her bra and thong, she felt completely in control and sexy as hell. Smiling impishly, her gaze wandered back to his fly. The material strained against his erection.

"What shall we do now?" she murmured.

He swallowed. "How about this?"

Her breath left her lungs as Mark reached forward and pulled her roughly down beside him. Any chance of resisting him was impossible...even if she'd wanted to. His arms came around her, strong and unyielding. She trembled beneath his urgency as her own rose to meet it. Lifting her hands to his shirt, she ripped the cotton open, splaying her fingers across hard muscles. He groaned and shifted to banish the shirt completely, throwing it to the floor.

As his weight pressed down against her tender breasts, Kate desperately wanted more. All intentions of the controlled seductress abandoned. Her breathing shook. His body was finely tuned, the muscles hard, the stomach flat. His mouth covered her nipple as his fingers trailed beneath the lace of her thong.

She whimpered as he circled her rigid clitoris. He paused to dip into her wetness before slowly easing back to gently circle her again. Her heart pounded and her muscles weakened as he rhythmically built her closer and closer. She closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip to stop from crying out when he pushed his fingers back inside a second time. The years of worry and fear, apprehension and self-doubt, melted from her conscience as thoughts of their future churned Kate's need, her desire, her belief...

"Oh, God."

Her torrent exploded and she clung to him as her orgasm crashed through her body, taking her under and sealing her fate with the man she'd always known she should be with--yet never lain with, never touched. Slowly, as each second passed, the sensations ebbed away, leaving her entire body damp with perspiration. She couldn't open her eyes or even lift her arm.

“Kate?” His voice whispered softly over her skin.

“Mmm?”

“Open your eyes.”

She could hear the smile in his voice, and her heart swelled. She opened them and her breath caught. He stared at her with so much love. Adoration mixed with desire, love mixed with concern. She felt beautiful.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He smiled and dipped his head to kiss the curve of her neck. Using his tongue and teeth along her sensitive skin, he brushed his hand down the length of her body, under her breast, down the curve of her waist and over her hip. She let out a sigh, ready for round two. He left a trail of moist kisses from her collarbone to her navel as he inched further down the sofa.

With frightening precision, Mark pressed his mouth against her wetness and re-awoke every erotic sensation she’d forgotten. Her hands scored into his hair as she pushed against him. He responded eagerly to her blatant invitation, groaning a breath against her. Slowly edging high, he hovered above her until his lips found hers again, Kate inhaled her own intimate scent as they kissed. When he pulled away, she watched him watch her. He tenderly brushed the hair from her eyes.

“I want you, Kate. Here. Now. But Jessica. If she...”

She wanted to laugh out loud. Couldn’t he feel what he was doing to her? But she didn’t laugh and she didn’t smile. This was more serious, more real than anything she’d ever experienced. They needed to consummate their commitment now, tonight--otherwise she might wake tomorrow and forget the two of them were joined in whatever lay ahead. She cupped his jaw and he nipped her palm.

“I love you. So much,” he murmured.

“Then make love to me, Mark. Let’s not think past each other. Just for now.”

With his gaze still locked on hers, he stood and took off his trousers and boxers. He started toward her and then stopped. Kate’s stomach rolled with panic. If he...

But then he bent down to retrieve his discarded trousers and took his wallet from the pocket. The silver packet winked beneath the light and she grinned. He ripped open the packet and eased on the protection.

She beckoned him forward and the sofa dipped beneath their weight as he hovered above her. Without word or aid, he guided himself inside her. Kate moaned with pleasure.

His thrusts were slow, controlled and purposeful. Digging her nails into the smooth skin of his shoulders, she savored the sensation of his massive strength against her slender frame. She felt his urgency swell with her need and slid her hands down to his buttocks, pushing him deeper until neither of them could wait a moment longer. And when the explosion came, it took her breath away and Kate clung to it, humbling to its power and letting it bond her to the man she’d never stopped loving.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Mark stood staring from his office picture window at the bustling town below. It was mid-July and the sun shone high and hot in a perfect azure blue sky. His hands were laced behind his head and a mammoth grin covered his face. He would willingly bet one hundred thousand pounds he was the happiest guy in the country. Every person, every building, every bloody brick shone with renewed vitality. It felt as though God himself rejoiced in his internal metamorphosis.

Dropping his hands from his head, he stepped forward and spread them against the glass. His mind filled with the night before and his heart kicked. After their lovemaking and the paralyzing affects of being totally enamored and focused on each other melted away, they both jumped from the sofa like naughty school-children who'd been caught making out behind the bike sheds.

Their horror-struck gazes momentarily locked before they'd scrambled to their feet and frantically dressed while trying not to fall over their tangle of clothes in comical unison. True, he'd mentioned Jessica being upstairs, but Kate's eyes and his desire had been too strong to resist the fire raging between them. Afterward, he had no idea if their moans of pleasure and discovery were subdued and controlled or downright animalistic. One look into Kate's eyes told him she was thinking the same thing.

Her beautiful face etched with worry and guilt, she'd raced from the room and taken the stairs two at a time to get to her daughter. But soon she came back downstairs, the worry sated and her face flushed and happy. Jessica was fast asleep. They'd sat on the sofa talked into the early hours.

It was only when Kate realized Jess would wake in less than four hours that she'd shooed him toward the door and out onto the street. Full mother mode back in place, she blown him a hasty kiss before shutting the door unceremoniously in his face. But did he bang on the door demanding she kiss him like he'd never been kissed before? No. He laughed until his sides ached. Laughed until it hit him like a punch to the gut. For the first time in a long time, Mark Johnston hadn't been aware of the seconds ticking by where money wasn't being made and multi-million pound deals struck.

And it felt bloody fantastic.

Pushing away from the window, he strode to his desk and sat down in the high-backed leather chair. His desk resembled a river of broken pink post-it notes. Liam, his personal assistant mumbled something about Mark "being late" and "not knowing he'd had a personality transplant" when he'd arrived. And then Liam had not so subtly mentioned the office phone had been ringing since he'd arrived at eight o'clock, when Mark hadn't arrived until ten. Mark bit back a laugh. It felt great to ruffle a few feathers in such a different way than in the business ruthlessness he was used to.

Pulling back his shoulders, Mark forced his grin into submission and picked up the first post-it note. The words remained unread. With the note forgotten in his hands, he leaned back in his chair as his mind filled with thoughts of seeing Jessica for the first time. When Kate pulled her from the car seat, his heart shifted inside his chest. She had the same soft, auburn hair as her mother, the same high cheekbones and porcelain skin.

Throughout the time he'd thought about Kate and James, not once did he allow the possibility of them being parents to enter his mind. Tormenting visions of her in bed with his best friend was bad enough, the idea of her committing her entire life to James and their baby was a step too far for Mark to deal with. So he'd shut it out. Refused to acknowledge them as anything more than a dating couple.

But now? Now everything was different. With a curt shake of his head, he turned his attention back to the note, confident there would be a future with both Kate and Jessica. He knew things would have to be taken down a gear until Jessica was comfortable with a new man in her mother's life, but he was happy to do whatever was necessary. A satisfying warmth spread through his chest. All he wanted now was the two most beautiful girls in Foxton to become a permanent fixture in his previous solitary life.

A sharp rap on the door startled him from his daydream. Sitting up straight in the chair, Mark cleared his throat. His mind immediately focused and clear. The business day had begun.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Mark."

"Marcia." He smiled and pushed himself to his feet. "How are you?"

She didn't answer him as she turned to shut the door. Mark resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. Clearly, she wasn't here in a mode of joy and happiness. He walked around the desk to greet her as she came toward him. He held out his arms, and they briefly embraced before he gestured toward the visitor's chair.

"You look wonderful. I assume the debacle with the press the other night hasn't rattled you any further?"

"Of course not," she said, sitting down and smoothing her hand over her white Calvin Klein trousers. "Why would it affect me if it's your blood they're after?"

Mark narrowed his eyes as he studied the back of her perfectly coifed head. What was she up to? He knew Marcia possessed a deep and ingrained yearning for success. Hell, he wouldn't have taken her on as a client if she didn't--but this? This blatant resentment he'd not expected from her or any of his clients. He managed their careers--it didn't give them the right to condemn his personal life. Irritation simmered in his belly. Pulling his face into the most placating expression he could muster, Mark walked around the desk and sat down.

"Mmm, you mentioned something about that before, didn't you?" he said quietly.

She snapped her head up to look at him, her eyes wide. "Is that all you're going to say? Doesn't it bother you what Underwood is implying about you and Kate?" She paused, lowered her gaze. "How is she, by the way?"

His hackles rose unexpectedly. He didn't care for her tone. Clinging to his sliver of remaining patience, he sunk his fingers into his thighs, the hard muscles serving as a perfect resistance against his sudden need to hurt something.

"She's great, why?"



Marcia didn't look at him, only brushed another hand down her thigh. "I just wondered, that's all. She didn't look very pleased to have me interrupt your...date."

He noticed her hand trembled as it hovered at her thigh. "Kate's fine, Marcia. She completely understands why you called me after seeing the media mob for herself. She's a compassionate woman. She empathizes with a lot of people and a lot of situations, you have her sympathy."

She snapped her head up. "Sympathy? I don't want her sympathy."

"No? Then what do you want?"

A flash of color darkened her cheeks. "You, Mark. I want you."

His stomach rolled. "What?"

She met his eyes and grinned. "Look at your face! Not like that, silly. I want you to do what you take fifteen percent of my money to do."

Feeling nauseous, Mark leaned his elbows on his desk. "And you think I'm not?"

"No. Not anymore."

He closed his eyes and silently counted to three before opening them again. "Marcia, I am dedicated to you and all my clients. Tell me what it is you think I should have done? You know as well as I do, when you're up the press will try their damndest to bring you down. Which means when they're following you, you're up."

Her smile was colder than Antarctica. "And are you up, Mark, or me?"

He dropped his hands. "You and me. Is that so bad? Can't we both be happy? I'm your agent, a Marcia, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm doing a good job. You're debuting on a stage tread by some of the greatest names in theatre, you're opening every exclusive club, restaurant, and clothing boutique known to man. Your existing fans are staying faithful and new ones are discovering you every day. What else do you want?"

The long silence bore down on Mark's nerves, snapping the remainder of his patience. He refused to allow her to do this--to ruin the euphoria of being with Kate again. His life felt better than ever and now Marcia was doing her best diva impression. He pursed his lips together. She would answer his question.

She leapt to her feet, her blue eyes flashing fire. "Nothing, Mark. I don't want anything else from you. You're right, you are doing a great job but I thought if I appealed to your work ethic, you might see sense."

He glared at her. "About what?"

"Underwood," she snapped.

He laughed. "Underwood? God, I can handle him. What's he got to do with anything?"

She gave an inelegant sniff. "I don't see why I should tell you after the way you've spoken to me, do you?"

Mark got to his feet and pressed his curled fists against the desk top. He leaned his weight forward. "I'm not an idiot, and I don't appreciate being taken for one. Underwood and I have a history. So what? The guy has hated my guts ever since I turned him down for an exclusive with three clients in a row. Tough shit. What is making you come back and forth to my office like this, what are you so damn afraid of?"

Their gazes locked. Her breasts rose and fell with each ragged breath. "If you have to ask me that..."

"We are a team. We are building your career, and I will continue to work with you. As long as you trust me to do my job. If you haven't got the confidence I will do my best for you, then you're better off seeking alternative representation."

She flinched. "What?"

"You heard me. I won't have you doubting my capabilities."

"But Underwood..."

"Is a moron. I have no problem sleeping at night knowing I didn't hand him an easy hundred grand on a plate. If he wants to walk around with a camera like it's an extension of his dick, let him. If he wants to wave it in my face at every opportunity, let him."

"But don't you see what you're doing?" she cried. "They see us as a dynamic team, Mark. We're perfect together, and now Kate's come into your life..."

The anger in his belly flared to his chest. Kate. His Kate. His Jessica. He swallowed hard. "Listen to me. She is part of my life," he said, quietly. "Underwood better watch out that his dick isn't snapped clean off, because Kate was not born with my patience. She won't accept the paparazzi as part of her world. I do. You do. We bought into this way of life. So stop worrying about Kate, she can look after herself...but if it should turn out she needs help, I'll crush Underwood like the ant he is."

Another tense moment passed before Mark's shoulders relaxed when she finally waved her hand in defeat. "Fine. I'll trust you have it under control."

"Good. I don't ask for anything else," Mark said, carefully watching her, not confident he'd won quite yet. His experience held an encyclopedic weight, and stars of Marcia's caliber and conduct were rarely pacified so easily.

She slowly sat back down and flashed him a smile. "Good, because I want you to look over a few changes to the script I want incorporated. I cannot get the writer to understand what I am saying at all."

He sat and intertwined his fingers in front of him on the desk. Actors versus writers, the age-old battle. He held up his hands.

"Okay, well, I'll have a look over it, but in most cases the writer--"

"You will? Great," she said, sitting forward in her seat, her hands clasped together in her lap. "But I haven't brought them with me, damn. Would you be able to spare me an hour or two this evening? Maybe come to my apartment and we'll have a drink?"

He gauged the woman in front of him and wondered how long she had been planning this particular set-up. She was sadly mistaken if she thought she could play him like a puppet on a very short string.

He returned her smile. "I can--"

She clapped. "Perfect. If you come round at sevenish—"

"If you don't mind Kate coming along too?" Mark said. "I've already arranged to see her later, and that's exactly what I intend to do."

A moment of silence passed before Marcia smiled widely. "Of course not," she said, with a beaming smile. "It will give us a chance to get to know each other. Oh, and make sure she knows I'd love to meet Jessica if she'd like to come too."

Bam! There it was. Mark had instinctively known the other shoe would drop. Like a phantom looming overhead, he'd felt its eerie presence cloaked around Marcia's shoulders the minute she'd walked in the room.

"How did you know about Jessica?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

Her smile faltered. "I'm sorry. Aren't I supposed to know?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, finding it hard to keep looking at the client he'd liked so much just a few short days ago. Now it seemed Marcia was making it her business to destroy the modicum of a love life he finally had in his life.

"Don't apologize, Marcia. Just answer the question."

"Mike Underwood told me."

He snapped his eyes open. "He knows about Jessica? Shit!" He slammed his fist on the desk and shot to his feet. "And what exactly does he intend to do with that information? Has he told you?"

She stood up, her bottom lip trembling. "Why on earth would he, for goodness sake? You are beginning to worry me, Mark. You're like a different person since Kate Marshall turned up."

He stared at her, tried to slow his thundering heart. "I've changed? Maybe I have. But in a good way. A damn good way."

"Well, I disagree. If being with her is making you as volatile as this, maybe you should reconsider pursuing the relationship."

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Fine. I'm out of here. I need a drink."

She turned and marched toward the door.

Mark let her go.

Once the door slammed behind her, he paced the office floor like a caged animal. The thought of Underwood knowing about Jessica stabbed at his gut. He was encroaching on territory Mark hadn't had the opportunity to explore yet. The man was pond scum. And Mark would do anything and everything to keep him far away from Kate and her little girl. Anything.

Trepidation swirled like a gathering tornado in his head. If Kate felt Jessica was in any sort of danger, she would be out of his life before he had time to kiss her goodbye.

“Bastard.”

He pressed his thumb and forefinger into his forehead over and over. Damn it, damn it, damn it! He’d lied to Marcia--he wasn’t seeing Kate later, even though he’d wanted to. When he’d suggested they go out to dinner, she’d laughed and explained if he intended to be with her and Jess, there would be no more jetting off around the world at a moment’s notice, no more exclusive restaurants and movie premieres--instead nights sharing pizza in front of the TV, watching Disney DVDs or making models out of tissue paper and cardboard. Mark dropped his hand from his head and smiled. And that reality hadn’t felt suffocating, it felt liberating.

There was no way in hell Underwood, Marcia or anyone else was going to ruin what his future held--no way in hell.

Whipping his jacket from the back of the chair, he strode across the length of the office to the door. It suddenly occurred to him Underwood was around at every photo opportunity lately. A coincidence? Mark thought not. He marched through his office floor, oblivious to the concerned stares of his staff or the hailing of his personal assistant, Liam. He pressed the button for the ground floor when he reached the lift, his jaw clenching and unclenching. Underwood was clearly getting tip offs from a source close to home, and Mark had a horrible suspicion the person laying out the welcoming mat was the one and only Marcia Langton. And if his suspicions were confirmed....the pair of them better run for cover.

## Chapter 8

On the High Street, situated between a funeral parlor and a florist sat the offices of *The Foxton Gazette*. The place wasn't so much offices as a converted shop. The way Underwood carried on, you'd think he'd hit his journalistic pinnacle but the guy was nothing more than a two-bit local reporter with illusions of grandeur. Mark pulled the car into an available space right outside and cut the engine. He took a moment in the hope the throbbing at his temple might ease, and contemplated the convenience of the newspaper's neighbors.

"Just a one-stop shop once I've finished with Underwood," he murmured. "I can order his coffin and a nice bouquet of lilies in one fell swoop."

Taking the keys from the ignition, Mark got out of the car and strode toward the Gazette's front door. He walked in and the young girl sitting at the reception desk did a double take when she looked up.

"Mr. Johnston." It was more of a sigh than a greeting.

Mark's gaze wandered around the room housing not only the reception, but also the desks of four reporters and a trestle table bearing tea, coffee and healthy snacks of biscuits, doughnuts and chocolate bars. Even though he couldn't see Underwood, it didn't mean the bastard wasn't hiding out in the back somewhere.

"Mr. Johnston? Can I help you?"

Mark turned to face the receptionist. No older than twenty-one or two years old, her eyes were wide and her cheeks flushed. He forced himself to calm down, to at least soften the scowl he could feel etched on his face. He cleared his throat and smiled. "Good morning."

She matched his smile, her color deepening. "Good morning. Do you have an appointment?" She glanced toward the computer screen in front of her.

He splayed his hands on her desk, leaned forward and looked deep into her eyes. The flush spread from her face to her neck. "No, I'm looking for Mike Underwood. Would you happen to know where he is?"

The reddened skin of her neck shifted as she swallowed. "He's...he's..."

"Right behind you, Johnston."

Mark's heart picked up speed but he didn't immediately turn. He didn't act on the adrenaline that shot through his blood as though Underwood's voice was the match and his blood the wick of the dynamite. Instead, he winked at the receptionist and eased himself upright. Tugging on the hem of his suit jacket, he slowly turned around.

Tall and skinny with a goatee beard accentuating the chin of his pointed face, Underwood could easily play the part of the sly fox in *Pinocchio*. Mark's mouth curved into a soft smile. Maybe he could find him a spot in the pantomime at the Theatre Royal come Christmas. From the state of the man's stained jeans and frayed collar, he was clearly not making enough money through award-winning investigative journalism.

"What's so funny, Johnston?"

Mark met his gaze. "You."

The sounds of bums shifting on seats filled the room. Underwood's colleagues tried and failed to hide their excitement at an impending eruption--and possibly tomorrow's copy unfolding in front of them. The pretence of phones being picked up and papers filed only added to Mark's enjoyment.

Underwood's thin lips tightened until they were barely visible. Two or three seconds passed before he spoke again. "What do you want, Johnston? Your mystery woman boot you out early this morning, did she? Or didn't you make it to the sack in the first place?"

The hairs on the back of Mark's neck rose like the hackles of a Doberman and his hands curled into fists at his side as his smile remained frozen in place. "Why don't we go grab a coffee, Underwood? I've got an exclusive for you."

The darkening of Underwood's eyes and the clenching of his jaw told Mark he'd struck his intended target with superb accuracy. Underwood raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. "Now I know you're lying. You don't give me exclusives if my memory serves me right."

Mark grinned. "Well, you don't want to miss an opportunity like this then, do you? You'll kick yourself if you do."

Another few seconds passed. "Maybe you're right." Underwood stepped to the side and threw out his arm. "Why don't we go through to the interview room and you can tell me all about it."

More shuffling of papers and clearing of throats punctuated the atmosphere like pin-holes through the taut skin of a drum. Mark's smile widened. "Oh, no, not here. Let me treat you to a bit of lunch and a pint. What do you say?"

Underwood laughed. "Me and you sharing a pint and a sandwich? Christ, I wouldn't miss it for the world, Johnston. Not for the fucking world. I'll grab my coat."

Mark watched him walk to his desk and whip his jacket from the back of his chair. His colleagues' heads jerked from Underwood to Mark and back again like an audience at a tennis match. Mark concentrated on slowing his breathing, controlling the need to sprint across the office floor and slam his fist into Underwood's gut. The reporter cum photographer shrugged into his jacket and raised his hand in a theatrical wave.

"See you later, girls and boys. I'm off to a spot of lunch with the great Mark Johnston. Don't let tomorrow's paper be signed off until I know what the big man has to say, eh?"

With his cheekbones aching from the pressure of keeping his straining smile in place, Mark turned on his heel and walked outside, uncertain he wouldn't whack Underwood if he let him lead the way. Once outside, he walked a little way along the street before Underwood's voice cut the air.

"Hey! Where you going? Your car's right here."

Mark turned and smiled. "Thought we'd go to The Anchor Hotel. What do you say?"

Underwood stopped in front of him, his green eyes shining with glee. "Whoa, The Anchor? You're certainly pushing the boat out. What's your news, Johnston? You've won the lottery on top of every other lucky bastard thing that's landed in your lap over the last five years?"

Ignoring the stab twisting his gut, Mark continued to smile. "Not quite. You look as though you haven't eaten anything of quality since you left your mother's tit so I thought I'd treat you."

Underwood's smile slipped, his eyes darkened. "Fuck..." But Mark was already walking away down the street. He slowed his pace, waiting for Underwood to catch up and when he did, the timing could not have been more perfect. The alley would be missed by a casual observer--a blink and it would seemingly emerge like Diagon Alley in the Harry Potter novels.

Quick as the snap of a Venus flytrap, Mark clamped his hands on Underwood's scrawny shoulders and man-handled him into the alley. His curses and shouts were soon muffled when Mark shoved him beneath the crook of his arm in an effortless headlock. Writhing and squirming like a snake, Underwood struggled to escape Mark's iron-clad grasp. But Mark held fast and waited for Underwood to admit defeat, all the while whistling the theme tune to *I'm Getting Married in the Morning*.

At last the huffing and sweating halted and Underwood gave up. "All right, asshole," he panted. "You've got my attention, let me the fuck go."

Mark stopped whistling, his smile a distant memory as he cranked the crook of his elbow tighter around his nemesis's neck. "If you want to walk out of here in one piece, you need to listen to me, Underwood," he said, quietly.

The reporter fell silent for approximately two seconds before he let out an animalistic growl and attempted to fling his arms around Mark's waist and bring him down to the ground. Quicker than a fox in a hen house, Mark pulled Underwood upright, his forearm still firmly locked around his neck. Using his other arm, he punched Underwood full-force in the stomach. He hit the asphalt like a lead weight.

Mark squeezed his eyes shut and shook out his fingers. Now that he'd resorted to violence, he was more pissed than ever. "Let's start again, shall we?" he asked, opening his eyes and glaring at Underwood as he coughed and hacked against his forearm. "And for Christ's sake knock off the playacting before I stick you on the stage next week."

The coughing immediately stopped. Underwood glared at him as he pulled himself into a sitting position, his hand on his stomach. "I'll press charges."

Mark dropped to his haunches and Underwood flinched. "The hell you will."

For a long moment, the two of them locked gazes. Mark's heart beat a tattoo in his chest, and rage burned painfully behind his eyes. At last, Underwood turned away. "What do you want?"

Mark clamped his fingers to Underwood's chin, giving the weasel no choice but to look at him. "I want to know how you are managing to be wherever I am every time I step out the door with Kate Marshall?" He growled. "And I want to know why the bloody hell you can't leave me alone and move on to someone else for once in your damn life? And most of all, I want to know why, having rejoiced in my father's downfall, you are so bloody intent on instigating mine?" The reporter slapped at his hand and Mark released him. "Well?" he demanded.

Underwood sneered, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You are the reason I am still farting around in this small-time town, Johnston. And until I earn what I could have from the exclusive you promised me, I ain't going leave you or yours alone. Never."

Mark smiled, his blood pumping through his veins. "You think so, do you?"

Underwood matched his smile. "I know so."

"First of all, you slimy piece of shit, I promised you nothing. Every interview you've wanted with me and my clients has been demanded. I don't act on demands for anyone. I don't even take demands from the clients who earn me money, so why the hell would I from you? You're a bitter and twisted nobody who's afraid of the hard work it takes to get somewhere in life."

"You promised me Marcia Langton."

Mark shook his head. "The hell I did."

Another moment of silence. Mark looked directly into Underwood's cold stare. After a second, he gripped the lapels of Underwood's jacket and dragged him to his feet.

"Has Marcia got something to do with this? Something to do with you deciding you're going to make sure Kate Marshall gives up on a future with me before it's even started?"

The man paled beneath his eyes. His thin face became thinner when his skeletal jaw clenched. "What are you talking about?"

Mark shook him. "Is it Marcia telling you where I am all the damn time?"

The other man laughed. "No. My wanting to pin your ass to the wall has nothing to do with her. That would be all me. And you can rough me up, threaten me, whatever. I ain't gonna leave you alone until I hit the big time like you."

"You're lying."

"About Langton?" He grinned. "Bloody hell, you are one paranoid son of a bitch. If you think your biggest paycheck will stab you in the back, you must have one hell of a guilty conscience about something."

Doubt filtered into Mark's blood like liquid poison. What if Underwood was right and his instinct was completely wrong? Why would Marcia do that to him? She was ambitious, yes, but not vindictive. Was his need to be with Kate taking over every ounce of his rationale?



Blinking, he refocused on the vermin in hand. He tightened his grip on Underwood's jacket and gave him a final shove. "If I find out you're lying to me, I'll come after you. If you don't stay away from Kate, I'll kill you. Now get the fuck out of here."

He spun Underwood around and shoved him hard toward the entrance of the alley. Underwood stumbled, flung his hand against the wall to stop himself falling before turning around and grinning wolfishly. He brushed down his jacket like he wore Armani rather than catalogue.

"Like father, like son, eh, Johnston? Your dad was a spineless loser when push came to shove too. He barely held onto your mum either. No guesses for how this one's going to pan out."

Rage simmered and lit in Mark's stomach. "Get out of here. Now."

Underwood walked backward out of the alley, goading words continuing to spill from his lips. "You're going after your dead mate's widow, Johnston, and you've got the gall to call me an asshole. Don't think you can get more low and desperate than trying to stick your dick in your ex-mate's missus, do you?"

Mark took a step forward. Underwood turned on his heel and sprinted from the alley like his backside was on fire. Mark stared after him, his hands curling into fists at his sides as his eyes burned. He loved Kate. He'd always loved her.

"But she was James's. James loved her from the minute he saw her. Just as I did."

Mark's whispered words echoed around him, bounced from the walls and permeated the shield he'd built around his conscience he'd stupidly thought unshakeable. Tipping his head back, Mark closed his eyes and asked his friend for forgiveness.

\* \* \* \*

"Ah, God bless Sundays," Kate murmured as she stretched languorously over Egyptian cotton sheets.

Relieved she didn't have to get up and rush into work, she smiled. Being on her feet all day and serving customers had taken its toll this week after having to deal with the ever changing aspects of her personal life. Keeping her mind focused on her client's relaxation, especially after she and Mark had made love, was hard. No, not hard. Practically impossible. Mark, and more specifically what she done with him, bombarded her thoughts with the regularity of a hammer hitting a very stubborn nail. Guilt mixed with justification and fear mixed with determination had fought against each other for the last three days.

The conflicting emotions, the worry and ensuing joy had so unnerved her, Kate applied a Chamomile face mask to a client's leg instead of hot wax the day before. The memory of the poor woman having to endure a gel setting like concrete, being plied from her centimeter of hair growth without anesthetic....

Kate pulled the covers over her head. The shame was unbearable.

After five minutes of wondering whether or not she was capable of wooing the customer in question back to the salon, she decided to leave it up to the gods and grab a cup of coffee alone at the kitchen table before Jess woke up. After Jess got out of bed during the night, Kate didn't manage to settle her again until five AM so it was likely Kate had another half an hour before Jess re-emerged. Throwing back the covers, she quickly got out of bed and went downstairs.

Once in the kitchen, she filled the kettle as her mind wandered once more to Mark. When he'd left after their impromptu and rather fantastic lovemaking, she'd poured herself a glass of wine and settled onto the sofa in a dream-like state. Any chance of sleep completely demolished for the next hour or so at least. Her mind flitted from complete euphoria to one of utter panic. When she focused on her and Mark making love and feeling his arms around her, she knew there was no turning back. And then huge waves of guilt crashed through her veins at the thought of Jess sleeping upstairs while her mother indulged in a little 'me-time'.

Not good.

Sighing, Kate leaned against the counter top and looked out into the garden. Even though it was barely eight-thirty, the sun's rays filtered through the glass, warming her face and evoking notions of swimming and barbecues. Maybe she should pack up the car and head to the beach with Jessica today--forget Mark, forget her guilt, forget the fact James could be looking down on them with a look of total disdain...

Before she could ponder on it further, the *thump-thump* of Jessica's feet on the ceiling above her tore into Kate's thoughts and forced her to focus on the here and now. Within seconds the kitchen door flew back on its hinges and Jessica came in with her hair tousled and her huge eyes puffy from sleep. Kate grinned and held out her arms.

"Morning, baby. Sweet dreams?" she asked, picking her up and kissing her face.

"Hungry now."

Kate laughed. "Okay, don't I get a hug first?"

Jessica's arms came around her neck, and Kate inhaled her familiar scent like a soothing balm. Whatever happened next between her and Mark, she would not allow anything to hurt Jessica. Even though she'd been barely two years old when James died, Kate vowed Jessica would always know how much her father loved her. She swallowed. And also how good he'd been to her and others...maybe other things became more important to him than Kate over the years, but Jessica had been the light of his life from the minute he arrived at the hospital three hours after she was born.

Carrying her to the table, Kate put Jessica down on a chair so she could prepare their breakfast. She put a bowl of cereal in front of her and the telephone rang.

"Hello?"

"Morning, gorgeous. How are you today?"

Kate's stomach flipped over as she glanced at Jess. "And good morning to you too."

"What are you wearing?" Mark asked.

"Cheesy."

“So? I still want an answer.”

Heat surged into Kate’s face as she looked down at her old t-shirt and shorts combo. “Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

His laugh caused her heart to pick up speed. He’d rang her yesterday twice and now today before breakfast. To some women it would be overbearing so soon in a relationship, but Kate relished every minute of his pursuit. It felt like a million years since a man had paid her any amount of attention--or maybe more like five. The thought they’d made a mistake...

“So?” she said, turning her back to Jessica. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“What are your plans for today?” he asked.

“Nothing yet. We’re just sitting down to breakfast and then I was going to ask Jess what she wanted to do,” she said, gently reminding him of her priorities. “Why?”

He cleared his throat. “I wondered if you and Jess fancied an afternoon of swimming and eating home-grilled hamburgers?”

Her heart hitched in her chest. Hadn’t she been contemplating the exact same thing? She stole a glance at her baby girl as she spooned Rice Krispies haphazardly into her mouth. Kate lowered her voice. “I’d love too. But it’s too soon. I’m not ready to explain to Jess about us yet.”

At the mention of her name, Jess twisted in her seat. “Who is it, Mummy?”

“Um, just a friend, sweetheart. Finish your breakfast.”

Kate carried the cordless phone over to the back door and stepped outside. Watching Jess through the window, she asked, “You do understand, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Mark said. “I’ll do this how you want. I promised no pressure and I meant it.” He paused. “But can guy help wanting to see two of the prettiest girls in Foxton on a day like this?”

Her stomach tightened at the sound of the smile in his voice. He could always get to her with that damn smile, she thought as her defenses wobbled on a precarious precipice.

“Mark...”

“Yes?”

She stared at Jessica. She would love nothing more than a swim. To call Jess a water baby was like calling a Labrador hungry. “I can’t...not yet.”

A long moment stretched and Kate pressed her lips tightly closed, preventing any further words. He needed to accept the change in his life if he seriously wanted the three of them to be together.

He exhaled. “Look,” he said, softly. “I have this great big house with no one in it. As well as a completely prepared and treated swimming pool that hasn’t been swam in yet this year and a barbecue with a grill big enough to cater a wedding reception.”

She smiled. “I think you may be exaggerating a little, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “Maybe. But the fact is, cooking for one on the thing is sad and pathetic.”

Kate grinned. "Maybe it's you who's sad and pathetic? But then again, there's not a lot we can do about that, is there?"

"Ouch."

She laughed. "Sorry."

"Come on, Kate, please. I have to see you."

"Have to?"

"Have to. What if I invite Lucy as well? You can tell Jessica I'm a friend...like Lucy."

Kate watched Jessica as she lined up Rice Krispies with military precision around the table. Her daughter loved nothing more than spending time with Lucy. But how would she take to Mark? She drew in a breath. Her mind gave an abrupt about turn. She exhaled.

"Fine. You win. If Lucy will be there, we'll come."

His relief and without doubt, mile-wide smile came across the line. "Fantastic! You won't regret this. We're going to have a brilliant day. Jessica is going to love it so much she won't want to go home."

A weight dropped into the pit of Kate's stomach even though she knew he was oblivious to the way his comment sounded...or how much the notion scared her. "Mark..."

"She'll love it here, I know she will."

Walking back inside, Kate pushed her retort aside. Her indecision was not Mark's problem, but hers. "And where is here exactly?" she asked. "I have no idea where you live now. Unless you're stashing your cash away and still living with your mum?"

"Very funny."

"Well, I don't know. Lucy said you'd bought The Landscape but you know how she loves winding me up."

He didn't answer straight away and her heart accelerated. Surely not?

"Mark?"

"It's true. I bought it last year."

"What?" She clutched her throat. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. I'll see you around twelve-thirty."

He hung up the phone but Kate didn't move. The receiver stayed glued to her ear, the disconnected line humming in her ear seemingly repeating the words, "He's bought The Landscape. He's bought The Landscape."

"Mummy?"

She blinked at the sound of Jessica's voice. "Mmm?"

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Nothing, sweetheart." Kate pushed the receiver blindly toward the phone and replaced it in its cradle. He'd bought The Landscape? She walked over to Jessica and lifted her from her seat. Moving on automatic pilot, they left the kitchen and started up the stairs. Kate numbly

walked into the bathroom and turned on the taps without hearing Jess or even being aware the sink had been filled and her daughter stood butt-naked waiting to be washed. She dipped the flannel in the water and soaped it.

He'd bought The Landscape?

Situated at the highest point above the city, The Landscape's outstanding views were the inspiration behind its name. Unshed tears stung her eyes. She and Mark spent hours lying on their backs in the park that stood at the foot of the hill on which the house was built. Mark spoke of money and success, foreign holidays and fancy cars, while she teased him about his materialism, hoping one day he would understand she thought of nothing else other than making a future with him--a future with The Landscape as their home where their four or five kids could run around screaming and playing.

Kate forced a smile and looked deep into the clear, untroubled eyes of her beloved only child. "How do you fancy meeting a new friend of Mummy's today?"

## Chapter 9

“Why didn’t you make me listen?” Kate cried into the receiver.

Lucy laughed. “I remember telling you on three separate occasions Mark bought The Landscape. And each time you didn’t believe me. Why would I make it up?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Kate held her hair back from her face in a fist. “It’s such a shock. I never thought in a million years...”

“What? That Mark wouldn’t do something he said he would?” Lucy gave an inelegant snort. “Give me a break. The man has achieved everything he set out to do.”

A flutter of nerves whispered through Kate’s stomach as Mark’s determined face of a couple of nights ago came into her mind’s eye. He said he wanted her. He said he’d have her.

“Kate?”

She shook her head, squeezed her eyes shut. “You’re right. I should’ve known he wouldn’t be talking fantasy when he said The Landscape would be his one day. Mark is not a joking man. Well, not about material things anyway.”

“Or you. I can’t remember a single time he joked about you either.”

Kate snapped open her eyes. “Maybe. But he never said anything serious either, did he?”

A pregnant pause ensued. “Well, anyway, he is now,” said Lucy. “So the question is, what are you going to do? Do you think you two could have a future?”

Something bordering on shame scratched at Kate’s nerve endings. How was she supposed to tell Lucy she’d already engaged in oral sex, straight sex and everything else in between with Mark, yet felt nervous attending a barbecue at his house? The woman would slap her when she saw her.

“I...um...”

“What? The meal was a disaster with his client ringing up and ruining everything. But I wouldn’t write it off that you and Mark can’t enjoy a date some time in the future.” She paused. “It’s been over a year since James died, and I think it would be best for Jess in the long run if her mum let loose a bit--”

“I had sex with him.”

Silence. Kate held her breath with one eye closed. More silence.

“Say that again.” Lucy’s voice was barely above a whisper.

And despite knowing the entire conversation was about to blow up in her face, laughter bubbled at the back of Kate’s throat. She grinned. “I had sex with him. Here. On my sofa. With Jess upstairs.”

“Oh. My. God.”

Kate laughed. “Is that letting loose enough for you?”

“Loose? You’re a frigging slut!”

They both burst into a torrent of laughter. Tears tipped over Kate's lower lids and slid down her cheeks. "I know. What sort of example am I to Jess?"

"A bloody bad one."

Once their laughter and general exchange of insults were exhausted, Kate swiped her hand over her face. "This is so weird."

"Yeah, but fun."

"Believe me, this is not my idea of fun."

"Yeah, right. The most eligible bachelor in Foxton is desperate to be with you after a five year separation, despite having enough women hankering for his attention to fill a stadium, and you're not enjoying any part of it. Bullshit."

"Will you stop? I'm not denying how I feel about him, but this is crazy. I haven't even kissed another man since James, and now I've reached page fifty of the *Kama Sutra* with Mark in a single night."

"Really? Tell me more."

"Ha ha. The fact is, Mark comes with a notoriety I didn't expect and you didn't warn me about. It's scary, Luce."

Lucy sighed. "I know, I know. But you're forgetting I've watched you grieving and suffering over the last twelve months as well as handling everything Jess is going through. Coming back to Foxton was the best decision you've made. Enjoy this, don't think too far ahead."

"But the press..."

"Will get tired of you and Mark eventually."

"And in the meantime? What about Jess?"

"I'm concerned about her too, but you can't blow a second chance like this. She's a fantastic kid. Give it time. I bet five hundred pounds Jess will soon feel the same way about Mark as you do."

Kate wasn't sure. "Maybe. Look, we'd better get off of this phone and start getting ready. You're definitely going to be there, right?"

"Hey, I've cancelled a date with George Clooney for this. You bet I'll be there."

Less than two hours later, Kate pulled her Peugeot 307 to a stop in front of the black cast iron gates of The Landscape. The height of them looming above her made Kate feel as though she'd been shrunk by magic during the drive there. The engine purred and the seconds ticked by yet she didn't inch forward, but instead continued to grip the steering wheel and stare straight ahead.

"What am I doing?" she whispered. "I should go. Turn around and get out of here before he sees me."

But then the gates slowly opened automatically.

"Oh, poo."

Drawing in a strengthening breath, she put the car into first and drove forward. The tires crunched over the gravel driveway as Kate acknowledged her memories of The Landscape had somewhat blurred since leaving Foxton. She remembered the house being big. A mansion even. Now it seemed like a bloody estate!

“Oh, my good God.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed down on the accelerator. Standing before her in all its eighteenth century glory, The Landscape almost blotted the sun from the sky. She pulled in between Mark’s Mercedes and Lucy’s Ford Mondeo and cut the ignition. She was here. No going back.

A sudden and ear-splittingly excited screech from the back seat told Kate her daughter was equally in awe of the place and her next words confirmed it. “It’s a castle! A castle, Mummy!”

Kate smiled despite the nerves rattling around inside her like miniature kids at a trampoline party. “It looks like one, doesn’t it?”

“It is one.”

Still smiling, Kate got out of the car. Shielding her eyes, she gazed up at the numerous mullioned windows where the blazing sun shone on the glass, down to the intricately oak-carved door and its winking brass knocker. The front of the house was all that could be seen high above the parkland, and a rush of excitement swept through her veins at the prospect of discovering the back of the house where only a privileged few were invited. Both now and in centuries past. The Landscape. The Landscape belonged to Mark.

The sound of Jess cracking the eye of her teddy against the window of the car alerted Kate to the fact Jess was highly aggrieved at being ignored. Blinking against the burning in her eyes, Kate turned, opened the back door and lifted her out.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “So? What do you think? Big, huh?”

“I’m going to be a princess today,” said Jessica, her green eyes wide as she stared high above her at the façade of the house.

Kate squeezed her tight. “You’re a princess every day to me.”

The crunch of gravel behind her sent Kate’s heart leaping into her throat. She turned. Mark’s boyish grin was so wide it reminded her of the younger man she’d known so well. The younger man she’d wanted to be with and now was. Happiness seeped into her soul and she grinned back. Suspended in time for a brief moment, they exchanged a silent hello before Jess stole a timid arm around Kate’s neck.

Kate immediately turned her gaze to her. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

But before she could answer, Mark stood in front of them. “My goodness. Who is this beautiful little girl?” he asked, grinning at Jess.

Jess giggled, loosened her arm slightly from Kate’s neck and met Mark’s gaze. “I’m Jessica, and this is my new dress.”



Mark let out a low whistle. "And very beautiful it is too. My name's Mark. Pleased to meet you."

He held out his hand to her, and Kate's heart turned over as she watched her baby girl's tiny fingers disappear inside Mark's. She could barely stand to watch.

"You live in a castle," Jess said matter-of-factly.

"A castle with a swimming pool. Do you want to see it?"

Kate's gaze stuck nervously to the side of Jess's head. Both of them were yet to drop the other's hand. Did they realize? It seemed not. Suddenly Jess turned to look at her, and Kate purposely widened her smile.

"Do you want to see the pool?"

"Can I?"

"Sure," Kate said, squeezing her tighter. "Let's go and see, shall we?"

She lowered her to the ground, but Jess still kept a firm grip on Mark's hand. He winked at her above Jess's head and Kate watched helplessly as her daughter walked off with him through an iron gate at the side of the house. Once they disappeared from view, she pressed a trembling hand to her stomach.

"Oh, Lord, give me strength to do this. Give me the strength I need to protect her."

She reached into the car and pulled out her handbag and offering of tuna pasta before following them through the gate. The moment she stepped into the garden, Jess's squeals of excited laughter reached her ears at full hysterical volume. Kate passed beneath a hedged archway and her breath promptly left her lungs. She barely noticed when Lucy stepped forward and took the china dish from her hands.

Lucy laughed. "Fantastic, isn't it?"

"It's...it's unbelievable."

The lush emerald grass stretched for acres and acres. Hedges shaped like every bird imaginable edged the vast pebbled walkways, which all eventually came together at a huge green-blue lake. She clutched her hand to Lucy's elbow. "This can't possibly be Mark's. My brain can't cope."

"Sorry, every blade of grass is owned by your boyfriend. How fantastic is that?"

"I don't know what to say. He said it would be his one day and it is. Lucy, this place is unreal."

The two friends stood in silence. Mark had achieved everything he set out to do when he was barely out of his teens. And now he was adamant he wanted her and Jessica to be a part of it. Was he ready for a child to cover his perfect lawn with toys, bikes and sandpits? Kids brought a different kind of commitment Mark had yet to experience.

Yes, he'd proven he could go after any career or financial goal he set his mind to, but that merely meant money was a massive motivator to him. Kids brought financial hardship for the majority of people--even if they wouldn't swap parenthood for every last penny in the world, but

what would that mean to him? Would he regret becoming involved? Would he pull slowly away from them, leaving Jess wondering what she'd done wrong as so many kids of broken relationships did?

No. No, she wouldn't. Kate crossed her arms. It was her job to make sure that didn't happen. Their...lovemaking of the other night would not be repeated. At least not for a while. Mark did everything with all guns blazing. It would be up to her to bring the man to a screeching halt if necessary.

"Oh, look!"

Kate followed the direction of Lucy's outstretched finger and inwardly groaned. How could she compete when the man hit so below the belt he might as well have taken her knees out with an iron bar.

"What is he doing? Never in a million years did I think..." Kate mumbled.

"Me neither."

Despite the unfairness of the situation, Kate couldn't suppress her smile as she watched Mark and Jessica jump up and down on a pink bouncy castle. Their hands were still firmly clasped together and their matching smiles wider than the iceberg that destroyed the *Titantic*. Kate waved. The pair of them waved back like a couple of prized chimpanzees...Kate's heart melted into a pulpy mess.

She turned to Lucy. "He must've hired it. This is madness. He doesn't realize..."

Lucy slapped a finger to Kate's lips. "Stop it. Now. You're going to enjoy today, do you hear me?"

They locked eyes. Kate nodded obediently.

"Good." Lucy dropped her finger. "Now then..." Promptly sticking two fingers inside her mouth, she let out a whistle of manic, high-pitched proportions. Kate bit down on her bottom lip when Mark and Jess came to an abrupt halt like two cadets at a drill.

"Food, Johnston," Lucy shouted. "We're starving."

Kate laughed when Mark raised his hand to his head in a salute and Jess followed suit with the biggest grin on her face Kate had seen in weeks. Sliding on her sunglasses, she followed Lucy toward the veranda and made a vow to enjoy herself from here on in. Lucy was right. She would take things nice and slow with Mark but today was all about Jessica.

Two hours later, a delicious lunch of burgers, kebabs, sausages, pasta, French bread and salad was no more. Kate hummed happily to herself as she strolled around Mark's enormous kitchen loading plates and cutlery into the dishwasher. The design of the kitchen kept in line with the rest of the house. Cream painted cupboards mounted every wall with a huge granite topped island in the center. An enormous open fireplace with logs stacked two feet high either side sat on the far end room. Kate visualized it lit and warm in cold winter months.

The bottle green range bore the history of its use with chipped paint and scrubbed surfaces adding the perfect amount of authenticity. The copper pots and pans hanging on the rack above it were in an equal state of use. Did Mark cook as well? Kate smiled. Not if her memories were anything to go by. She would ask him where he was hiding his cook, cleaner and driver when she went back outside.

Humming to herself, she wiped down the counter tops and put sauces and condiments back into the cupboards.

“There you are!”

She spun around. Dressed in nothing but swimming shorts, Mark stood ahead of her with a towel flung carelessly over one deeply tanned shoulder. She swallowed. He looked good enough to eat. Maybe she could fling him down on the floor and climb on top...

“Hi,” she managed.

“Why are you hiding away in here? The pool is fantastic. And I know you brought a barely-there bikini for me to enjoy seeing you in.”

Her nipples immediately tingled and the hairs on her arms twitched with excitement. “I think you need to jump back in the water and cool off. Today isn’t about you or me, remember? It’s about Jess.”

He closed the space between them in two strides and Kate backed up to the counter. Dangerous. He placed his hands on her hips. Very dangerous.

“Absolutely. But surely I can enjoy the view?”

Her lips curved into a slow smile, her gaze wandering over his handsome face. “I suppose.”

Sliding the towel off his shoulder, he wrapped it around her neck and pulled her in close. Her gaze turned anxiously to the window. “Mark...”

“She’s in the pool with Lucy.”

His mouth encased hers and the temptation to fight evaporated. His lips, still damp from the water, tasted faintly of chlorine. Relishing the rare sensation of feeling protected within the circle of his arms, Kate melted against him, her hands reaching around to caress the hard muscles in his back. Their tongues touched, teased and excited. The feel of his hands trailing along the waistband of her shorts kick-started a pulse between her legs. She gently drew away from him before she gave into the temptation of shimmying straight out of her denim shorts.

“You’re a bad boy, Mark Johnston. Do you know that?” she whispered.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he lifted his tender gaze to her hair and brushed some behind her ear. “We’d better get back out there before this becomes messy,” he said, his gaze dropping to her breasts and lingering there long enough for Kate to know her nipples were standing to attention.

Lifting his gaze to hers once more, he said, “Why don’t you go and change into the red bikini I caught a glimpse of earlier?”

Kate laughed. “When did you see that?”

“When you pulled Jessica’s swimsuit from the bag, yours dropped onto the patio.”

“Only for a second! What are you? A trained SOS sniper?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Maybe. Go and get it on. Now.”

Smiling, Kate held up her hands in surrender. “Okay. Okay. Why don’t you give me a minute and I’ll meet you outside?”

He grimaced and cleared his throat. “Um...that might be a bit of a problem for a while.”

Kate frowned. “What? Why?”

He nodded toward his crotch, and Kate stifled a laugh when she looked down and saw exactly how big Mark’s problem had grown. “Oh, I see.” She laughed. “I guess I’ll meet you outside when you’re in a better state then.”

The afternoon passed in a summer storm of laughter, water fights, bouncy castles and girlish screams. It was the happiest time Kate could remember having for years and now, as the sun set far beyond the trees at the distance edge of Mark’s land, she didn’t want to leave.

“It’s so beautiful here, Mark.”

He squeezed her hand. “You always loved it, didn’t you?”

“Always. It’s like a dream being here. I feel...I don’t know...alive.”

He grinned. “Then stay.”

Her smile wavered. “Don’t. Let’s enjoy the rest of the day before we have to leave.”

Dropping her hand, his gaze darted over her face. “I’m joking. I’m just happy you and Jess have spent the day here. I told you, I won’t ask for anymore. You’re in charge of this.” He pressed a kiss to her palm and stood up. “The coffee should be ready now. I’ll be right back.”

Leaning further back in her chair, Kate watched him leap from the veranda and jog into the house. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. Her heart shifted inside her chest as she lifted her feet onto a chair in front of her. As much as panic struck when Mark said for her to stay, she didn’t want the day to end.

She squeezed her eyes shut and sent up a silent prayer this was it. This was the dream Mark spoke so confidently about never ending. A movement to her left made Kate turn her head toward it--and she promptly drank in every nuance of the man she loved all over again as Mark came closer. He was beautiful, both inside and out, and the dream he might be hers stirred deep in her belly. He walked back up the steps and put the tray he carried onto the wrought iron table in front of her.

“Coffee, madam?”

She tipped her head back and smiled. “Perfect.” He pressed a kiss to her bared shoulder, and she shivered with desire. “Is Lucy still inside with Jess? Are they okay?”

He lifted the coffee pot and poured. “They’re more than okay, they’ve taken every cushion off my sofas and the last I heard, Norway was due to attack at nineteen hundred hours.”

Kate laughed. “Ah. Lucy service is in full mode then.”

He grinned and passed her a steaming white china cup. Taking it from him, she blew across its surface as she watched his profile over the rim. Nerves surged into her belly and fluttered.

Once he'd filled his own cup, he looked up and met her gaze.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, lifted the cup to her lips. "Thank you, Mark."

He sat down beside her. "For today? You're welcome."

"For more than today. Thank you for making me see my decision to bring Jess back to Foxton was the right one. This is where she can be happy. Life will go on after James."

He shifted in seat and put his cup down on the table. After a moment, he reached over, gently pulled one of her hands into his and brought her knuckles to his lips.

"I want you to be happy in Foxton too," he said quietly. "I want you to want us as much as I do. I want Jess to want us to be together more than anything. But don't ever think I've forgotten James, Kate, because I haven't. I never will."

"I wasn't suggesting..."

He kissed her knuckles again. "I know you weren't." He met her eyes. "But I'd understand if James's memory was the reason for you not letting go one hundred percent. I was stupid not to tell you how I felt before James came along and even more stupid to stand back and let things grow between you and him the way they did."

She shook her head, gave a small smile. "I was there too. He was a massive personality when he came to Foxton. He was dynamic, full of laughter, fun and mischief. We all got caught up in his enthusiasm. He was your best friend, Lucy's hero and my...my savior."

His eyes widened and he dropped her hand. "What? Your savior?"

She put down her cup and touched his face. "I convinced myself I loved him. I needed to find a way to get over you. I was twenty-two years old and still in love with a man I met at seventeen."

"Kate..."

She smiled. "But it didn't work, did it? Because here I am, older and wiser, widowed and a mother...and still in love with you."

His pained gaze softened, and his smile broke through like a rising sun. "In love?"

She grinned. "In love. So don't you dare let me down."

He threw a quick glance toward the house before leaning toward her. He pressed a brief kiss to her lips, winked. "Never."

\* \* \* \*

Mark watched Marcia bow to her audience as the curtain rose for the third time. The crowd went crazy. And it was no wonder. The hairs on the back of his neck weren't simply standing up--they were vibrating. His grin felt wider than his face, and his palms were sore from clapping. The woman was a force to be reckoned with. Phenomenal. Her portrayal of Ophelia in *Hamlet* had been awesomely authentic--the madness, the despair and the ultimate tragedy she reinforced to the role would no doubt be hailed in the review papers the next day as an absolute triumph. His heartbeat finally slowed as the curtain lowered for the final time and the lights cast an amber glow around the auditorium. He stood up and ducked through the private exit leading backstage.

They'd talked several times since the unfortunate encounter in his office and even though feelings were a lot better between them, he'd offered to take her out after tonight's performance to finally settle any superfluous antipathy she might be harboring.

There was every chance Marcia would someday be a theatre diva--the fledging signs were most certainly there--she didn't deserve the sharp end of his tongue when her actions were rooted in ambition rather than jealousy. Their conversations put the suspicions Marcia could be involved with Underwood to rest, leaving Mark even more resentful toward the smarmy son of bitch for winding him up enough to think such things in the first place.

Walking outside, he waited on the front steps of the theatre for her. He'd booked a table for a late supper and drinks at a nondescript bistro he'd stumbled upon a few weeks ago. The press would have absolute no idea of them being there.

As the audience traipsed outside into the warm summer evening, things felt better and better--if his life continued this way for the foreseeable future, hassles like Underwood would be quashed beneath the weight of Mark's contentment.

When Marcia slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, his smile widened. He turned. "Here she is. You were fantastic."

She smiled coquettishly. "Why, thank you, sir."

Mark laughed as she gave a mock curtsy. "Hungry?"

She placed her free hand on his forearm and squeezed. "Like a lion who missed breakfast."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now that...is hungry. Come on."

They ducked into the waiting taxi and Mark gave the driver the name of the bistro. Settling back into their seats, a strange relief swept through him when Marcia's hand finally slipped from his elbow. He cleared his throat and turned to the window.

He'd be an idiot if he didn't acknowledge Marcia's beauty, talent and intelligence. Her success both in the UK and abroad was pretty much guaranteed. If the diva didn't emerge before the talent was proven consistent, of course. He intended to do his job as her agent and make her understand although she was the media's glamor girl at the moment, in a single snapshot of time, they could make her their slender, five feet ten punching bag,

"So...what did you think?"

Her voice broke through his thoughts. He met her eyes as they shone with excitement, making her look more beautiful than ever. He grinned. "Stupendous. Absolutely stupendous."

"And?"

He laughed. "And?"

A flash of red darkened her sharp cheekbones. "And...do you think the audience thought they had their money's worth? Do you think I bettered last night's performance?"

Mark watched her--it still amazed him he'd met someone with more raw ambition than himself. He couldn't help thinking maybe she should take some time off after the *Hamlet* tour. He shook his head. What was he thinking? Telling a client to slow down? Kate must really be affecting his outlook...

"Something funny?" Marcia snapped.

He blinked and met her icy stare. "No. I was just thinking..."

"That my performance wasn't any better than last night?" She pouted. "I knew it. I'm doing my best, and it's still not good enough. It's still not enough for people to take me seriously."

He reached across and took her hand. "You were phenomenal. You have to stop this. You are going to be around for a long, long time. Believe me."

She clasped her other hand over the top of their joined ones. "But will you be with me? What if the success you're expecting doesn't happen and you drop me? What if..."

Swallowing back the irritation bubbling in his abdomen, Mark purposely stretched his smile wider. "I am not going to drop you. Look, I'm here now, aren't I? We're going to spend the night enjoying ourselves, okay?"

She dropped her gaze to their hands for a second before looking up at him from beneath jet black lashes. "And Kate's okay with you spending the evening with me?"

The way she said it set Mark's alarm bells ringing. He slowly pulled his hand from hers but kept his smile firmly in place. "Of course she is. You're a client. An important client. She understands that."

A moment passed before she gave a tinkle of laughter. "Good, because I think tonight we should get very, very tipsy. What do you think?"

Mark grinned. "Sounds good to me. No more self-doubt?"

She shook her head. "No more self-doubt."

"Good. You have got to start believing what is being written about you. For once, the press is writing with integrity. Even Underwood raved about the standard of your performance last week. What more stamp of approval can you receive when a weasel like him, a man who practically lives for the satisfaction of ripping someone down, comes up with a positive review, huh?"

She stared at him. Her blue eyes darkening to almost black.

He felt his smile falter. Now what? He hesitated, torn between responding to her glare and pretending to let it go by unnoticed. He would do everything in his power to help her career but refused to pander to this more frequent sulky side of Marcia. He lifted his chin.

"Something wrong with what I just said?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

She gave a curt shake of her head. "It's nothing." She sighed, looked to the window. "So... where are we going?"

Mark took in the staunch set of her jaw, the way her hands were curled so tightly around her bag the knuckles showed white in the semi-darkness. Was it because his personal life was looking so good that his professional life felt increasingly like a pain in the ass? Or was it him? Could it be that deep down he was afraid Kate would disappear again....or maybe he was aware of the feeling James could intervene at any time, spear a lightning bolt from above through the whole fragile union?

“Hey, is this the place?”

He leaned down and followed Marcia’s gaze through the window. The ivy strewn façade of the bistro came into view. She clapped her hands together.

“Aw, Mark, it’s lovely.”

Feeling the atmosphere lift, Mark forced his shoulders to relax and focused on the promise he’d made himself to make sure she enjoyed herself tonight. He would not scratch the constant itch to ring Kate, and he would not spend the entire evening retelling his latest run-in with Underwood.

“It certainly is,” he said, passing a ten-pound note to the driver through the partition. “Ready?”

She grinned. “Ready.”

They got out of the taxi and hurried into the bistro. He smiled when he heard Marcia’s gasp. Even though Encore! was a little known place, Mark bore the superior knowledge of the delicious blend of good wholesome food, great wine and a family run business that was guaranteed there on each and every visit.

The maitre d’ greeted them with a bow and smile before leading them to a small table in a private alcove. Marcia’s eyes were still wide as she slid silently into her seat. Laughing, Mark ordered nachos to share and a bottle of Shiraz.

“What do you think?” He smiled.

“It’s...oh God, Mark. How could I have never been here before?”

Decorated as a replica theatre, Encore’s floor was decked with terracotta tiles, and the flock-papered walls add a perfect warmth to the velvet covered tables and gold chairs. Small glass oil lamps were lit at the center of each table and subtle crystal candelabras hung from the ceiling. Up above the diners, replica theatre-boxes lined the upper level as a final touch of theatrical inspiration.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

She clasped his hand across the table. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

The next hour passed quickly with Mark showering her with compliments and encouragement. They both admitted to being hungry for alcohol over food so soon bottle number one became bottle number two. Discussion of where Marcia imagined her future heading after such an unparalleled debut soon became bigger and bigger, more and more ambitious. They spoke of everything from future British stage performances to Hollywood feature films, nothing was out of bounds and Mark’s hunger for money, success and his client’s longevity soon burned as hard and hot in his gut as it did before Kate came gloriously back into his life.



The wine flowed, their laughter filling the tiny restaurant. Things were back where they should be between agent and client, and there wasn't a camera in sight. Clearly his message had gotten through Underwood's thick skull.

"Are we ready?"

"Aw, can't we order another bottle?" Marcia sighed.

"Another and you'll be no good to anyone onstage tomorrow." He held out her coat and she stepped into it. "Come on. Home."

"Awww."

Laughing, Mark paid the bill and the two of them tumbled out of the restaurant and onto the street. A summer rain had fallen since they'd been inside and the drops fell from the restaurant's red and gold canopy onto the sodden pavements. Beneath the street lights and fancy boutique windows, the concrete shone and to Mark, Foxton never looked so good.

His gaze turned to Marcia. She looked stupefied in the same state of inebriation as him judging by the wistful smile playing on her lips and the way she tilted back and forth on her heels. She turned and met his eyes.

"Beautiful night."

He nodded. "Yep. Shall we?"

He held out his arm and she took it. They'd barely walked a few feet from the front of the restaurant when Marcia's grip tightened on his forearm and she swung him around. He didn't even have time to suck in a breath before her lips came down on his with terrifying accuracy. Mark winced as their front teeth knocked and her tongue sought his like a frenzied cobra attacking a limp piece of flesh.

He gripped her shoulders to firmly push her from him, but a sudden flash of bright light told him he was too late. He shoved her away as a bolt of anger shot through his chest like a bullet. He growled and made a grab for the photographer but the young boy dodged his grasp, taking off into the night like a God damn thief.

Mark moved to go after him when Marcia grabbed the back of his jacket. "Mark, don't! Let him go."

He turned on her, his heart beating hard. "What the hell were you thinking?"

The drunken wistfulness abruptly vanished, leaving something infinitely more sober in her face. "Oh, lighten up," she said, flinging her hand in the air. "So what? Some kid took our picture. It wasn't a photographer. No one's going to be interested in an amateur snapshot, are they?"

"What? Of course, they'll be interested. The press is bloody desperate to know who Kate is at the moment. Desperate to know what she means to me. If she sees..."

"Oh, here we go," she said, rolling her eyes. "Back to bloody Kate again."

Mark stared at her, his hands unconsciously curling into fists as his sides. He clamped his lips tightly together as he pushed and shoved his temper into submission. He would not let her do this. He would not let her get a rise out of him. She was a client, with the insecurity of a child apparently, but a client all the same. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Let’s get a cab,” he said quietly.

She sniffed. “Good idea. You’re no fun anymore.”

He opened his eyes and watched her turn, wobble and march down the street away from him. Why did he bother taking her out tonight? Now he was up against it again, hoping to God the kid with the camera didn’t decide he could get a bit of cash for a photo of them kissing. A photo that would be misconstrued by thousands...but most of all, misconstrued by Kate.

## Chapter 10

Kate listened to Jess's chatter as they made their way along the road toward her nursery. The sun shone with the promise of another hot day, and Kate's heart swelled as she looked at her daughter. Jessica's face was tanned from the sun, golden streaks highlighted her soft brown curls and her smile was so wide it could have been painted on. They were happy, and it felt fantastic. Their lives had turned on a complete axis in a matter of days. It had only been three short weeks since she'd been reunited with Mark, but it felt as though they'd been dating for months. In a shiveringly good honeymoon, toe-curling kind of way, which made her yearn to see him again the minute they were apart.

Seven days had passed since the barbecue at The Landscape and they'd only managed to see each other twice, but at least a third date was scheduled for that night. They'd taken Jess to the cinema one evening and Kate didn't know who she'd shushed more, Jess or Mark. The man had been as excited as a five-year-old. The second night, they'd spent at home with a DVD and pizza. Mark seemed to love both nights equally. But tonight was just the two of them--her mother was babysitting, and Kate looked forward to spending time some alone with Mark without having to worry if Jess was okay.

When she told her mum who she was going out with, the glint in her mother's eye belied her feigned disinterest. Kate smiled. Her mother bore the same soft spot for Mark half the women in Foxton did. Damn him and his disarming smile.

Her traitorous body reacted as his face filled her mind's eye. They would be alone. For the first time in a week. She shivered. Who knew what the night had in store? But she'd booked time in with Jo for a wax just in case...

Blinking, she re-focused on the here and now and pulled into a space outside TumbleTots Nursery. Having gotten Jess out of the car, they walked toward the nursery gate. Lucy was waiting for them at the front door. But she didn't rush forward with her arms outstretched to envelop Jess in a suffocating hug as she usually did. Instead she stood stock still, her arms clasped tightly across her chest. A heavy weight dropped into Kate's belly.

She stopped and looked deep into her friend's eyes. "What's wrong, Luce?"

Lucy bent down in front of Jessica. "Why don't you go on inside, sweetheart? We're painting stars and moons today, would you like that?"

Jessica eagerly nodded, her warm hand already slipping from Kate's. "Bye, Mummy."

Kate forced a smile and shot Lucy a concerned look over her daughter's shoulder as she hugged her before holding her at arm's length and looking into her emerald green eyes. "Why don't I finish work early today so we can go to the park and feed the ducks?"

"Yay!" Jess exclaimed.

Kate laughed. "I think that's a yes then. See you later, darling."

The minute she was released, the little girl raced inside, the afternoon treat not as imminent as the stars and moon. Kate's fond smile dissolved when she turned back to Lucy. The weight in her belly quivered.

"What is it, Luce?"

"You haven't seen it, have you?"

Kate glanced toward the nursery. "Seen what?"

"This." Lucy whipped a magazine from behind her back and held it out in front of her.

Slowly, Kate took it from her. "What's this? Or don't I want to know?"

Lucy's porcelain skin turned scarlet. "I wanted to be with you when you saw them."

Swallowing hard, Kate forced her gaze onto the magazine. And nausea slammed into her gut and spread through her body on an undulating wave. There, in all its Technicolor glory, was a shot of Mark and Marcia outside a brightly-lit restaurant. Golds and reds and millions of lanterns lit up the happy couple like they were on the Theatre Royal stage. Their faces in profile, Marcia's hands cupped Mark's jaw as he tightly gripped her shoulders. Their lips were so firmly mashed together, Kate couldn't see where Mark's ended and Marcia's began.

She hurriedly flicked through the pages. Her hands trembled and her temperature dropped. There were more pictures. Pictures of Mark looking sensationally handsome in a dark suit, a microphone in his hand, a picture of him and Marcia laughing while looking adoringly into each other's eyes, another of the two of them with their heads bent over what looked like a script, deep in mutual conversation.

"Have you read the copy?" she asked.

Lucy nodded. "It's tabloid rubbish, Kate."

"This is crazy. Mark wouldn't..." She let the sentence drift off as the pages blurred. He wouldn't what? Did she really know anything? Yet her instinct was so strong. She knew Mark was the man for her. But the camera didn't lie, and his gaze didn't look much different from the way it did when he looked at her.

"They might be old," Lucy said, breaking into Kate's thoughts. "You know what the tabloids are like, they'll pull pictures ten years old if it will pack a bigger punch."

Kate shook her head. "You and I both know these pictures are not old. Look at the pair of them, these were taken recently. If not days ago." Her voice cracked as doubt and insecurity flooded her veins and destroyed her hope in one cruel sweep.

"I didn't come back here for this. What have I done?"

Lucy stepped forward and gripped her forearm. "Hey, everything's going to be all right."

Kate squeezed her eyes shut and thrust the magazine toward her as though it was smeared with dog's muck. "Take it. Take it and burn it."

"I am so sorry."

Kate's eyes snapped open. "Sorry? See? You're thinking the exact same thing as me, aren't you? I was wrong about Mark. Oh, God. It's me who's sorry. Sorry I was stupid enough to fall for him again."

Lucy threw a hurried glance toward the nursery and then propelled Kate toward the gate. "Let's take a walk."

Knowing she could not have a meltdown in front of forty kids under the age of five, Kate let Lucy drag her through the gate and out onto the street. Neither of them spoke until they were around a corner and out of sight of the nursery. And then Kate exploded like a woman possessed.

"Bastard. Shitty, smiling, charming, egoistical bastard," she seethed, swiping at the stinging tears blurring her vision. "How could he do this to Jess? After everything I said to him!" She glared at Lucy when no answer came. "I'm asking you. How could he?"

"You don't know he has."

Disbelief rammed into Kate's gut like a boxer's fist. She tipped her head toward Lucy, her ear cocked in her direction, reminiscent of a confused canine. "I'm sorry? What did you say?"

Lucy held up her hands as though protecting herself. "All I'm saying--"

Kate felt her eyes widen. "Are you saying I'm mistaken? Maybe that's not him with his lips stuck to Marcia's by apparent super glue?"

Lucy dropped her hands to her hips and tilted her chin. "I'm saying hear him out before you cut him off completely."

"No."

"It's a photo, Kate. A moment in time. Neither you nor I can guess what happened before or after it was taken. Maybe--"

"He whipped her into an alley and they banged uglies up against the wall?" Kate snapped. "What do I care? He lied to me. He said he was ready. He said he wouldn't hurt Jess."

"Jess? What about you?"

Kate cursed the trembling in her fingers as it spread to her arms, her chest, her lips. "I don't care about me, I care about her." A sob caught in her throat. "Damn it."

She frantically shook her head, but it did nothing to stop Lucy coming forward and wrapping her arms around her. Kate came undone as though Lucy pulled on a fraying thread to her heart. The tears came thick and fast, hot and painful. And stopped just as quickly. She allowed herself exactly five seconds of self-pity before shrugging Lucy's arms off, wiping her eyes with the palms of her hands and standing up straight.

"Right. Well. At least I know he is exactly the womanizing bastard the press has always claimed him to be," she said. "Better I know now than six months down the line."

"What are you going to do?"

Kate looked at her. "I'm going into work."

"I meant about Mark."

“He’s made a stupid mistake messing with a mother. This is going to hurt my daughter. And so, he will pay.”

Lucy grimaced. “I’ll ask you again. What are you going to do?”

“He probably doesn’t even know his picture’s been taken. The quality smacks of a mobile phone to me. I’ll wait until he comes sniffing round, and then I’m going to kick his bollocks to the back of his throat before shoving a handful of incense sticks up his ass.”

Lucy grinned. “Nice.”

“I think so.” Kate turned on her heel and headed for the salon with tears burning her eyes and pain assaulting her heart as though it had been jammed in a vise.

\* \* \* \*

Mark stared at the paper as he walked from the newsagent. No wonder the girl behind the counter couldn’t look him in the eye. What the hell would Kate think when she saw this? His hands shook as he looked closer at the picture of his and Marcia’s second-long lip lock now captured as a significant moment in time by an opportunist photographer. He couldn’t blame Underwood for this one. The photograph was the work of an amateur at best--more likely a screwed up fan of Marcia’s. Marcia.

Could she? Would she? He squeezed his eyes shut and crumpled the paper in his fists. Was he mad to keep thinking she could be behind the obstacles constantly being flung in his and Kate’s path? He opened his eyes and looked to the sky. Or was it forces above and beyond him, a mere mortal? Guilt scorched his face as it had his conscience and heart a million times since Kate turned up at the theatre and Mark knew he had to have her.

Was it so surprising things kept going wrong? He was betraying his dead friend whichever way anyone looked at it.

Cursing, he flung the paper in a trash can as he passed it. He would go to Kate’s salon and explain. Maybe she’d already come to the conclusion there would be a reasonable explanation...no, he knew her and all she’d been thinking of was Jessica. He swallowed. Jesus. He was in deep shit.

The ringing of his mobile interrupted his meanderings of how he could at least protect his manhood if nothing else. He looked at the display. It was his personal assistant.

“Liam?”

“Mark, thank God. You’d better come in.”

“What’s wrong now? I don’t need anymore disasters today. Have you seen the papers?”

“There’s been a break in. Your office is a total mess. I can’t tell if anything’s missing. You’d better get down here asap. Shall I call the police?”

Mark shoved the hair back from his face, held it in his fist. “What? No. The press will get wind of it, and then the whole town will jump on the bandwagon. Just wait until I get there.”

Snapping the phone shut, he sprinted to his car. He plugged the phone into the hands-free console and dialed Kate’s number. It went straight to voice mail. He frowned. If he didn’t know her better, he’d suspect she’d rejected his call. Narrowing his eyes, he dialed the number for the

salon. She could yell at him, hit him, damn well spit at him, but she would not ignore him. They could handle this--one stupid photo was nothing compared to what the press could do if they really put their minds to it. Kate was stronger than this. So was he.

The phone rang four times before Jo picked up.

"Is she there?" Mark demanded.

A pause. "Excuse me?"

Mark turned the ignition and pulled away from the curb, fluidly joining the traffic. "Jo, it's Mark Johnston. Is Kate there?"

Another pause. "She's...she's..."

"Standing right beside you, frantically shaking her head and telling you to tell me I can shove my dick up my ass, right?"

She giggled. "Pretty much. So what shall I tell her?"

Mark couldn't help smiling. Kate's temper was just another thing he loved about her. But when he was on the receiving end, it might be a different ball game altogether. He swallowed.

"Tell her not to make her mind up about the photo of me and Marcia yet. Tell her I will come round to the salon as soon as I've sorted out a crisis at the office. And tell her I am taking her out for lunch, no arguments."

"But--"

He pressed the *end call* button and heaved out a breath. His hands tightened on the steering wheel as his heart rate slowed. He'd bought some time by checking in, but God only knew how he'd get her to leave the salon.

He reached his office building in record time and sprinted to the lift. When the door slid open at the floor housing The Johnston Agency, he surged forward. His staff rose from their seats one by one, whether in sympathy or curiosity Mark didn't take the time to contemplate. He needed to see the damage for himself, needed to identify if anything was missing.

He scanned the outer office as he made his way to his own office. Nothing was touched. Nothing disturbed. Which meant the ransacking was personal rather than a random act of violence. He stormed into his office to find Liam hunched down gathering papers, clearly trying to assemble some sort of order.

"Jesus Christ," Mark huffed. "What the fuck happened?"

Liam threw his hands in the air. "Morning, boss."

"What happened?"

"I got here at eight and found it like this. I rang you straight away," Liam said. "Whoever did this seemed intent on making a bloody mess, that's for sure."

Slamming the door shut behind him, Mark turned the lock and strode toward his assistant. "But is everything here?"

"I don't know. Until I get the clients' files back in order it's hard to tell. It feels as though whoever did this literally picked the files up, gave them a shake and then dumped them all over the bloody place. You were right to push the paperless thing, Mark. Thank God most of this stuff is scanned and archived."

"Where's Marcia Langton's file?"

Liam's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Marcia Langton. Where is it?"

Liam scanned the area around him, snatched up a manila folder and thrust it at Mark. "Here."

Mark quickly flicked through the contents. Everything seemed to be there. Her copy contracts, appearances, fees received and cashed. "Well, at least that one seems to be okay."

"Why did you go straight to Marcia's?" Liam asked. "I mean, I know she's the star of the moment but..."

"Because she and I were snapped by some passerby outside Encore last night. Whoever took the damn picture sold it overnight. I can't help wondering..."

"You think someone's causing trouble for her?"

"For her, for me. I don't know. My life is getting more and more complicated since Kate came into it, but I'll be damned if I'm giving her up."

Liam stood up and grinned. "I don't blame you, man. She is a bloody good-looking woman."

Mark looked at him and smiled, the tension in his shoulders marginally easing. "She is, isn't she? And smart, and sexy and everything else I damn well want." The grin wavered and the tension returned. "But someone certainly isn't as happy about our reunion as I am."

"You seriously think someone's out to hammer what you've got going on with her?"

"I don't know, things just aren't right. The press, the photos, this... I can't help thinking Underwood..."

"Mark, come on, you've got to lay your shit with him to rest. I know what he did to your dad--"

"This isn't just about that," Mark snapped. "Marcia isn't happy about me and Kate either. If the two of them were joined together in ruining this for me..."

"Has Kate seen the photos?"

"Judging by the conversation I just had with her assistant, yes."

Liam shook his head. "Shit."

"I need to find out who's behind this. And even though I've no proof whatsoever, my gut is telling me this has either Marcia or Underwood smeared all over it. And when I get proof..."

"I'll make sure I'm out the way."

Mark smiled. "Chicken. Come on, let's get on with it."

The two of them worked methodically through the paperwork for the next two hours and just when Mark thought he could breathe easy that nothing was missing, a lead weight dropped into his abdomen.



“Wait a minute. Wait a minute.” He pushed his thumb and middle finger against his forehead. “Where’s the fee log for Karen Williams?”

Liam stopped. “What?”

Mark scrambled through the files and pulled out another. He sifted through the papers, looked back at Liam as panic crashed through his bloodstream. “And the log for Simon Scott?”

“They’re missing?” Liam joined Mark at his desk. “But they’re your two biggest clients next to...”

“Marcia. Shit. Why would someone take theirs and not hers? This stinks.” He grabbed his jacket from the back on his chair. “I’m going to see her. Right now.”

Liam gripped his arm. “Wait. Listen. She’s isn’t stupid enough to leave her own stuff here, is she?”

“No. And that’s why I think someone’s either setting her up or she’s doing this to get my attention. Either way, it’s working. Ring Kate, tell her lunch is cancelled. I’m going to see Marcia.”

Forty minutes later, he pulled his Mercedes into the parking lot of Marcia’s apartment building. The plush, overpriced apartments were erected along the Foxton Docks in record-breaking time two years earlier. The river running through Foxton, once famed for its thriving tobacco trade, now stood dormant except for the odd fisherman tug boat or tourist ferry. The apartments bore no respect to days gone-by for which Foxton used to be famous for.

The apartment inhabitants consisted of pretentious city bankers, ambitious entrepreneurs or the young adult children of indulgent millionaires. The non-talking, non-socializing community lacked character and therefore had zero appeal to Mark. He’d take the characteristic Landscape on the outskirts of town over Marcia’s apartment building anytime. He narrowed his eyes. And if he discovered she had anything to do with his current problems, the Quay West apartment building would suit her perfectly. Cold, unfeeling and completely without scruples.

The midday sun burned high in the sky, the July temperature climbing to near eighty-five degrees. He got out of the car and removed his suit jacket. His mind whirled with ways to approach the subject of the break in. It was imperative he treaded carefully if he was going to get the truth out of Marcia, and not risk her quitting on him if his suspicions were wrong.

Throwing his jacket into the back of the car, Mark rolled up his shirt sleeves as though preparing for battle before slipping on a pair of dark sunglasses and looking up at Marcia’s balcony.

She stared down at him, her face an inscrutable mask, hidden beneath the shadow of a straw cowboy hat. No traces of a hangover seemed apparent. Dressed in a black string bikini and matching see-through shirt, she could be ready to strut down a catwalk. He raised his hand even though the hairs at the back of his neck prickled a warning. Her mouth immediately broke into a sunny smile as she gestured for him to come up.

He walked inside.

Two minutes later, she flung open her apartment door with enthusiastic abandon. “Hey you, this is a pleasant surprise.”

“Marcia.” Mark strode past her, not trusting himself to look at her, lest she detect the anger and niggling revulsion stirring violently in the pit of his stomach. “No hangover?”

A moment’s pause and the door clicked shut behind him. She laughed. “Not sure what it says about me but if I end the night popping a couple of painkillers, washed down with a pint of water, and grab eight hours sleep, the next day is never a problem.”

He turned. Her eyes danced with happiness, almost hysterically so. “Have you been out today?”

She frowned, wandered into the open plan kitchen. “No, why?”

“You haven’t seen the papers?”

Turning on the tap, she filled a kettle and switched it on. “No. Why? Am I in there? Did they love the play? Oh, God, did they slam me?”

Mark held up his hand and walked to the drinks cabinet. It was barely midday yet he needed something to take the edge off his mood. “Do you mind?” he asked, holding up an expensive bottle of single malt whiskey.

She folded her arms and shrugged. “Help yourself. Are you okay?”

He didn’t answer her, instead selected a glass and poured a measure. He silently eyed her over the rim as he took a mouthful and bit his teeth together against its potency. “The picture,” he said eventually. “The one you told me not to worry about is splashed over three different papers. The kid obviously knew how to clean up on his investment.”

The smooth skin of her throat shifted as she swallowed. A silent second passed before she waved a dismissive hand. “Forget it. It was a silly drunken kiss, no one will think anything of it.”

“Kate will.” Her jaw clenched for an almost imperceptible moment but Mark saw it, noted it and hated it.

Huffing out a theatrical sigh, she pushed away from the kitchen counter and joined him in the living space. Without as much as a sideways glance at him, she walked to the drinks cabinet. “Maybe I’ll join you in the hair of the dog routine. Clearly you are not here to indulge in any pleasantness.”

Resisting the urge to clamp his hand on her arm and spin her around, Mark took another sip of his drink. “Why would I be? Not only have I dealt with the photo this morning, I got a call from Liam at eight-thirty informing me my office has been ransacked.”

The vodka bottle froze in her hand and when she turned around, her blue eyes wide. “What? Was anything taken?”

He put his glass down on the coffee table, walked toward her. “Yes, Marcia, something was.”

“Anything of mine?” she demanded.

Mark smiled. “Strangely enough, no.”

She sighed, pressed her hand to her chest. “Thank God. I thought you’d come here to tell me my financial details will be splashed all over the press tomorrow morning.” She turned, resumed filling her glass.

He waited until she faced him again. When she did, her face was flushed, and Mark couldn't help wonder if the reaction came from relief or guilt. "None of your details were stolen, but there is stuff missing from two other important clients. Don't you find that a bit odd seeing as you're the one in the limelight at the moment? The one who could make someone a hell of a lot of money right now."

"Are you trying to accuse me of something?" she asked, her eyes narrowing. "Because if you are..."

"What, Marcia? If I am, what?" he demanded, the notion of taking things nice and easy with her abandoned and forgotten. "Will you ring Underwood and let him know how badly I'm treating you?"

She locked her gaze on his for a long moment before brushing past him. She spun around. "You must be mad if you think I'd have anything to do with that idiot."

"You know he hates me."

"And?"

"And you're pissed off about Kate being with me. You're pissed off I'm not spending every waking hour concentrating on your career, that's why."

"Mark, this has to stop. You've never let Underwood get to you like this before."

He glared at her. She was right. His chest grew tight, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "Maybe the reason I seem to be overreacting is because I've never had this much to lose before. I can't lose Kate, Marcia. I can't. Not again."

"Kate? This is more serious than Kate, Mark." She stared at him wide-eyed. "What about your clients? What if they dump you? All you're doing right now is proving my theory is right. You don't give a damn about us, do you?"

## Chapter 11

Kate ran a brush through her hair one more time before placing it on the dressing table. She was afraid to move and break the moment. Jessica hummed to herself as she played with her two favorite dolls on Kate's bed, her face relaxed and happy. Kate watched her in the mirror's reflection. How was she supposed to explain Mark's absence from their lives when Jessica eventually questioned it?

Her stomach swirled with trepidation. Not only had he snogged the face off one of his clients in full public view, he'd also cancelled his pathetic attempt to explain himself at lunchtime. Yet Kate knew the person she was the most peeved at was herself. How could she have been so delusional to be led by her heart? God, if James's change in personality hadn't taught her to be wary of any man and think things through, what else would? Life threw constant curve balls when you least expected it...maybe she deserved the sting of Mark's extra-professional activities if James's death hadn't at least highlighted the danger of that.

She looked back to the mirror. She deserved it--but Jess certainly didn't. Nausea rose bitter in her throat. She knew this would happen--she knew and pursued it anyway.

"What's wrong, Mummy?"

Kate jumped and swiveled around on her stool. "Nothing, sweetheart," she said, slapping on a hundred-watt smile. "I was just thinking you're the most beautiful girl in the whole of England, that's all."

Jessica giggled. "Mummy..."

"What? You are. Come here and let me see that face of yours close up."

Jess scrambled off the bed and Kate pulled her onto her lap. She pressed a kiss to Jess's curls, and squeezed her eyes shut against the stinging at the back of her eyes. "I love you so much, Jessie Louise. So very much."

"I love you too, Mummy. Why am I the prettiest girl?"

Kate grinned, nothing would faze Jess from the matter in hand. "Because of these." Kate pointed a finger at her eyes. "Because of this." She pressed the tip of her nose. "And because of these." She kissed her lips.

Jess's beautiful face turned to a scowl. "Nope. Don't believe you."

Kate's stared at her, mystified. "You don't believe me?"

Jess shook her head.

"Right, we'll see about that." Standing up, Kate planted Jess firmly on her hip.

Jess giggled. "Where are we going?"

"I'm going to ring the queen."

Jess stared at her. "The queen?"

“Yep. I’m going to tell her to post an announcement on the gates of Buckingham Palace that Jessica Marshall is the prettiest girl in England. What do you think?”

Jessica considered this for a moment. “The soldiers with the funny hats won’t like it.”

“They won’t mind.”

She vehemently shook her head. “They only like people coming to tea and other soldiers coming to march.”

Struggling to keep a straight face, Kate placed a finger to her mouth. “Mmm. Maybe you’re right. Maybe we’ll put a notice on our front door instead, what do you think?”

“Yay!”

Twenty minutes later, she squeezed Jessica closer in her arms as they stood on the step admiring their new notice tacked to the front door. She was so wrapped up in the happy moment that she didn’t hear the approaching footsteps behind her until it was too late.

“What are we looking at?” Mark asked, leaning in close and sending whispers of warmth along her earlobe.

She froze. At least outwardly. Inside, her stomach turned over at the sound of his voice, let alone the ridiculous effect the sensuous scent of his aftershave had on her libido as it teased her nostrils. How dare he do that to her? After everything...

She slowly pivoted around.

He met her eyes and took a step back. The words she wanted to say lingered on her tongue as the little girl in her arms erupted into squeals of delight. “Mark’s here! Mark’s here! And he’s got pizza!”

Kate trembled as his gaze stayed locked with hers for a moment longer, before he turned to Jess, his face breaking into a cruelly disarming smile.

“All for you if you want it. Do you think Mummy will let me in?”

She nodded. Kate shook her head. “What are you doing here, Mark?”

Jess snapped her head around to look at Kate. “Mummy?”

Kate kept her gaze firmly on Mark’s, resolutely refusing to look into her daughter’s clear and innocent green eyes and risk crumbling. She could not forsake her determination. This was in Jess’s best interests--even if the man was dressed in faded jeans and a crisp white t-shirt with his dark hair still damp from the shower.

Clearing her throat, she tightened her grasp on Jess at the same time avoiding wincing from the pain of her daughter’s glare boring into her temple. “You need to leave.”

“Kate, please. Let me explain.”

Jess’s head swung back and forth between them as though her neck were made of rubber. “Mark come in now?” she asked.

“No, Mark’s leaving,” Kate said firmly.

“Kate...” Mark moved to touch her.

She stepped back. “No.”

“Mummy?”

Blinking against tears, Kate finally faced her weakness. “Mark has to go, sweetie.”

Jessica turned to look at him. “Please stay with me, Mark.”

It was such a punch below the belt, Kate and Mark simultaneously drew in sharp breaths. She looked at him, and he looked straight back. Kate knew the same panicked, hopeless look in Mark’s eyes was reflected in her own.

“Jess...” But she knew it was fruitless.

“Did you see the sign Mummy made?” Jess asked him.

His eyes lingered on Kate’s, silently pleading. And then before she could stop herself, she nodded. Realizing if he came inside, she could at least rip him to pieces in the privacy of her own home before kicking him out on the street for a public slaying afterward. Two for the price of one. He grinned at her. Kate scowled back.

With the look of a man who’d accomplished his mission, Mark leaned toward Jess. “What does this notice say then? Jessica Marshall...” He stopped, hesitated. “...is the most beautiful three-year-old girl in the whole of England. Mmm...I’m not so sure. Maybe I need to take a closer look at this Jessica Marshall.”

And then Kate looked on helplessly as he dumped the pizza boxes and DVD he held onto the step and snatched Jess from her mother’s embrace. Jessica squealed with happiness as he swung her into the air before poking and prodding at her body.

“Yeah, okay. Now that I’ve had a closer look at this Jessica Marshall, I think that sign is right. In fact, she’s the prettiest girl in the world.”

Kate watched him continue to tickle Jessica as she gestured them inside. Her stomach tossed and turned and her heart ached--but what else could she do? Grab his shirt and toss him into the road? Burst her daughter’s happiness right there and then? He’d clearly no idea of the commitment and fortitude it took to raise a child despite the amount of times she’d asked him, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t find a way--a private way--to let Jess down gently.

Bending down, she picked up the pizza boxes and DVD. If Mark thought he’d be here long enough to watch a DVD, he was sorely mistaken. Stepping into the house, she kicked the door closed with a loud bang before striding through her narrow hallway and peering through the open living room door.

Mark listened intently to Jess as she told him about the characters on her favorite show--the sticky fingerprints on the TV screen evidence of how big and long each of the creatures were when they appeared. Kate fought her smile.

She cleared her throat. “Mark? A word please.”

They both turned. She looked at Jess. “You sit and watch TV, sweetie. Me and Mark will get some plates and drinks, okay?”

Jess nodded and turned back to the TV, happy and content.

With her heart banging like a pneumatic hammer, Kate watched Mark stand up and walk toward her. His six feet two inch frame filled the doorway and she abruptly turned, headed for the kitchen so she didn't have to endure the indignity of tipping her head back in order to glare at him. His footsteps behind her marked the beat of her heart.

"Take a seat."

She pulled out a chair for him. With his eyes still locked on hers, he sat. The height advantage worked wonders.

"Kate--" he began.

She held up her hand, cutting him off. "I don't think so. I'll go first, and then I'll listen to your bullshit for approximately sixty seconds before you go into the living room, say your final goodbye to my daughter, with no mention of what was said in this kitchen, and then you will never ever contact me again."

"No."

A burning hot rage hit her square in the gut. "Pardon me?" she said quietly. "Did you seriously just say no?"

He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms. "I'm not leaving until you listen to everything I have to say. And what I want to say will take more than sixty seconds. So no, Kate, I won't be leaving here anytime soon."

His eyes burned with rage, determination...maybe even a hint of fear, and Kate's body trembled. Her heart ached. "Get out."

"No."

She whirled away from him and curled her fingers around the counter, willing her body into some sort of self-control as she stared out into her garden. She wanted to hit him, kiss him, and hit him again. The view blurred, Kate squeezed her eyes shut.

"You kissed her. After everything I explained to you about Jess, you kissed her."

Kate flinched and snapped her eyes open when she heard the scrape of his chair against the floor tiles. His hands clamped on her shoulders and spun her around before she could put up a modicum of resistance.

"Listen to me," he whispered urgently. "I love you. I've always loved you." His gaze darted over her face, her lips, her eyes. "Why would I risk losing you again by kissing Marcia in full public view? If I wanted to kiss her, I have ample opportunity when we're alone."

The gold flecks in hazel eyes shone, beseeching her to understand. Kate pulled away. "Then why don't you? I don't want you here. This is too hard for me."

He released her. "That's it? One measly photograph and you're giving up on us? I thought you were made of stronger stuff than that."

“Don’t you dare,” she said, through clenched teeth. “Don’t you dare think you can get us past this by challenging me, Mark. How many times do I have to tell you I am not the person I was five years ago? James changed me. His moods, his ego, his God damned demands made me realize more often than not, men do what the hell they want, when they want. Stupidly, I thought you’d last longer than two weeks before showing me your true colors.”

“I am not James. Whatever he did or didn’t do. I am not him, you know I’m not.”

“Why are you talking about Daddy?”

Kate spun around. Jessica’s eyes were wide, her bottom lip trembling. Kate rushed across the room and scooped her into her arms. “We...we...were...”

Mark came up beside them and smoothed Jessica’s hair back from her eyes. “I knew your daddy, sweetheart. I was his friend.”

Kate’s stomach turned over. What was he doing? She didn’t need to know that. Why didn’t he just leave? And then Jess stretched her arms out toward him. He flashed Kate a look of surprise before his face broke in an expression of pure joy. He grinned as Jess scrambled from Kate’s arms to his.

“You knew my daddy?”

Mark’s adam’s apple shifted. “Uh-huh.”

“And you know Mummy?”

“Uh-huh.”

Her frown softened until a shy smile played at her lips. “And now you know me.”

He kissed her cheek. “Yes, I do.”

Jess looked at Kate, her green eyes shining. “Can we have pizza now? Me and Mark are hungry.”

Kate forced a smile and swallowed her tears. “Sure. Let’s eat.”

Two hours later, the three of them were laying on their stomachs in front of the TV, Mark and Jess stuffed full of pizza and diet soda whereas Kate hadn’t managed to eat more than one slice. The movie was barely halfway through as she fondly watched Jess struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Time for bed, sweetheart,” she whispered.

“No, I stay up with you and Mark,” she mumbled.

Kate laughed. “Well, that would be fine with me if those pesky eyelids of yours would stay open.”

Mark got to his feet. “I know, why don’t you get into bed for Mummy, chose your favorite book and I’ll come up and read you a story.”

Jess looked from him to Kate, her bottom lip trembling. “No, Mummy reads to me. Mummy always reads to me.”



Kate's shoulders stiffened. Part of her wanted to jump in and save him but the other still mad part, wanted to see what he'd do with such a blatant rebuff. He glanced at her and Kate stared straight back. Two spots of color appeared high on his cheeks, but he quickly turned back to Jess and tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

"Okay, that's fine, but promise you'll tell me what the book was about next time?"

Kate swallowed back the urge to interrupt him, to tell him there would be no next time.

Jess grinned. "Okay."

Pushing to her feet, Kate stood up and lifted Jess into her arms. "Say goodnight to Mark, honey."

"Night, night, Mark."

He blew her a kiss. "Night, Jess."

Tossing him a glare over Jess's shoulder, Kate's face flushed hot when he grinned back. Turning abruptly, she took Jess upstairs. Grateful Jessica was too tired to talk and ask the endless questions she anticipated, Kate quickly undressed her and tucked her in beneath the bedcovers. Almost as soon as Kate pressed a kiss to her cheek, Jess was softly snoring.

She took a moment to watch her. Life was simple when you were three. Trust. Simple, unbreakable trust. And then you grew up.

Switching on the night-light, Kate quietly pulled the door together. She walked to the top of the stairs and stopped. She could hear the clink of glass against glass and then the pop of a cork. He'd opened a bottle of her wine. Without asking. She marched down the stairs and into the living room. He turned, held out a glistening glass of what she knew to be Chardonnay.

"I'm falling for her, Kate."

She met eyes so somber, so afraid, so unmistakably sincere the fight left her like air escaping from a balloon. She sighed. "We can't do this to her. It's not fair."

"Do what? I'm here for the long haul. You have to believe me. I understand what losing James did to her."

Kate shook her head. "It's not just that. She barely remembers him. It's me who keeps him alive for her. It's the fact she cannot lose another one."

"Another what?"

She met his eyes, felt her heart hitch painfully in her chest. "Another father." She sat down heavily on the sofa. "And that's what you'll be to her quicker than you can say 'no thanks' if she gets any closer to you. Don't you see? Kids aren't capable of differentiating between time and space, Mark. You're a busy man, you work, you network. I understand that. My reaction to the picture of you and Marcia is because this is just the beginning, not because I don't believe the woman isn't capable of throwing herself at you."

"Which is exactly what she did, by the way."

Unable to resist the way he looked at her, Kate smiled. "Fine, I believe you, but it doesn't change what I'm saying."

“Which is what? We’re over before we’ve begun?”

She took a confidence boosting mouthful of wine. “Exactly.”

“And that’s what you want, is it?”

“Mark...”

He put his finger to the top of her glass as it rose to her lips once again. “Is it?”

“It does it matter what I want.”

He put his glass down on the coffee table in front of them. “How can you say that?” He gripped her free hand in his. “What you want is all that matters to me.”

“Fine. Then let me and Jess go. This is going to get worse. The press, Marcia. I don’t want people coming into the salon to gawk at the woman dating the great Mark Johnston. And most of all, I will not risk Jess being exposed--”

The ringing of Mark’s mobile filled the room. “Damn it. Sorry.” He pulled the phone from his pocket and glanced at the display. His finger hovered at the *off* button before he looked at her. “It’s my PA. I’d better take it. My office was broken into last night. It might be--”

“What? Your office...”

He held up a finger and pressed *talk*. “Liam?” Mark’s voice filtered into the background as Kate watched him march around her living room, his phone stuck to his ear. His office had been broken into? Couldn’t he see what was going on here? This was madness.

“Shit!” Mark squeezed his eyes shut as he snapped his phone closed.

“What is it? Why didn’t you tell me you were broken into last night?”

“I didn’t want you worrying until I ascertained how bad it was. That’s why I cancelled lunch and why I turned up here so late this afternoon.” He opened his eyes. “I’ve got no bloody idea who’s behind this, Kate. Well, no one that I can accuse with proof at least.”

Kate put down her glass and went to him. She touched his arm. “And I’m guessing this trouble started when me and you became an item, huh?”

He met her eyes. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Mark, this is ridiculous. You could lose...”

He shook his head. “Maybe I am losing. But none of that matters apart from us. I want you, and I want Jessica.”

“What do you mean you are losing?”

He took a step back, pushed his hair from his face. “Liam’s just told me two clients have phoned demanding to see me first thing tomorrow morning. Someone told them about the paperwork that was taken.”

“Paperwork?”

“Confidential paperwork. Details of their earnings, their contracts.”

“My God, this is serious. This is sabotage.” She shivered. “It’s like...it’s like James is looking down in outrage. Throwing one thing after another in our path to prevent us from being together.”

He cupped her face in his hands and looked deep into her eyes before pressing a rough and urgent kiss to her lips. “No, Kate. We can do this. I will not lose you again, and there is no way Underwood is going to get to me like he got to my father.”

Kate pressed her hands to his chest and felt the rapid beat of his heart against her palms. “You’re shaking. Who’s Underwood? And what did he do to your dad?”

He shook his head. “Not now. I’ve got to go. Just tell me this isn’t it for us, Kate. Please.”

Her heart swelled in her chest, and hot tears pricked her eyes. It was impossible to keep denying her love for him, impossible to think she could stay away and carry on as she had before. Lifting his hand from her face, she kissed his palm. “This isn’t it for us. This is just the beginning.”

## Chapter 12

It was nearing nine o'clock when Mark pulled up in front of Liam's modest three-bedroom semi. He killed the engine and got out of the car. And stopped. Marcia's Mazda6 sports car sat on the driveway. He glanced toward the drawn curtains of the living room and back to the car. His gut churned. What was she doing here? His mind instantly filled with a million scenarios--none of them good. What he wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall inside the house instead of having to announce his arrival by ringing on the doorbell.

Clamping his teeth together, he approached the front door. Liam greeted him with a face full of worry. "You're here," he said. "Thank God."

"What's Marcia doing here?" Mark stepped over the threshold, glaring toward the living room rather than looking at his assistant.

"She called me. Asked to come over. Is that okay?"

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why did she want to come over?"

"Hi, Mark."

Mark turned. She stood in the living room doorway, her arm held above her head against the doorjamb.

"What are you doing here, Marcia?"

She dropped her arm, her eyes darkening. "You really have to ask me that?"

Their gazes locked. Mark stared at the woman in front of him and marveled at how quickly her stance could change from a seductress intent on having her prey to a beautiful and money-hungry black widow determined to crush anyone who stood in her way. He brushed past her into the living room. Marcia and Liam followed. Deciding it best to not get into any sort of dialogue with Marcia considering the density of anger simmering in his chest like fire, he turned to Liam.

"So as predicted Karen Williams and Simon Scott..." He flicked a glance in Marcia's direction. "...have contacted you about the missing papers?"

Liam nodded. "They know. I managed to persuade them to come in and see you first thing tomorrow morning rather than make an immediate visit to their solicitors. But they are pretty concerned. Understandably."

"Did they say how they found out?" Another glance at Marcia. She stared back at him, her expression bordering on smugness and stoking the fire in Mark's chest further. He turned back to Liam. "Well?"

He hesitated. "They wouldn't say."

Mark frowned. "Neither of them?"

“No.”

Mark drew his phone from his inside pocket. “Both Karen and Simon have been with me for over three years. They know and trust me. I can’t believe they wouldn’t tell you where the leak came from.”

“They said they were sworn to secrecy and were more upset they hadn’t heard it from you in the first place.”

He turned to Marcia, not sure what to say to her but knowing the words searing his throat needed to be released. He opened his mouth but she got there first.

“You came to see me this morning because you think I have something to do with the way your business is going belly up, didn’t you?” She smiled and leaned back into the sofa, crossing her legs and nonchalantly swirling the contents of her wine glass.

He tilted his head to the side. “Don’t you?”

She laughed, rolled her eyes at Liam. “See?”

“Mark...” Liam took a step toward him.

Mark held raised his hand, kept his eyes trained on Marcia. “I asked you a question when I came in. What are you doing here?”

“Karen rang me. Wanted to know if my papers had been leaked too.”

Mark narrowed his gaze. “You’re friends with Karen Williams? Since when?”

“Since forever. Do you know something, Mark? I came here to Liam because I knew you’d be busy with Kate. Knew you wouldn’t see this as more urgent than spending time with her. So I thought I could work with Liam to try and salvage some of this mess, but now...” She stood up, drained the last of her wine. “Now, I don’t think I can be bothered after all.”

“And why would you try to help me?”

Her face flushed red. “Because...”

“Because what, Marcia?”

She stared at him, her mouth moving yet nothing coming out. After a moment, she grabbed her clutch bag from the sofa and moved toward the door. Mark stepped in front of her.

“Where are you going?”

“Home. Away from you and your bloody problems.”

“Tell me why you came here.”

Her gaze darted over his face, his lips, his eyes. “Because I care about you.” She paused, looking at him meaningfully. “A lot. I always have.”

“Marcia, come on. Do you expect me to think you see me as anything more than a means to accelerate your notoriety?”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. The sight was as believable as a scene from a second-rate soap opera. “You are changing so much, Mark. I don’t know what it is, but Kate Marshall is changing you for the worse. I love--”

He held up his hand. “Don’t.”

She glared at him, the tears miraculously drying up and her mouth drawing into a thin line. Normal service resumed. "Fine," she spat. "If that woman is all that matters to you, I'll leave you to it. But let me tell you this, my career is everything to me, so if you're going to let your business fall apart because of her and her kid, I'm getting out first."

A glimmer of panic rushed into Mark's conscience. If he lost Karen, Simon, and Marcia, his business would soon be on the wrong side of successful. He needed to find a way of managing this crisis as well as keeping his relationship with Kate on the right track. He dropped his shoulders and forced his expression into some sort of apology.

"Look, maybe things are getting a little out of control right now..."

She smiled. "Oh, here we go. Now that you think I might actually walk, you're growing a professional conscience."

A knot tightened in his stomach. "I'm not going to beg you to stay with me, Marcia. I'm sorry things are the way they are right now, but I will work it out. Either accept that or don't. Maybe you're right, maybe I should have been with Karen and Simon tonight instead of Kate. I admit that, but that's gone. Let's see what I do to fix this from here on in, okay?"

He looked from her to Liam. Liam nodded. "Good idea."

"Marcia?" Mark looked at her.

For a long moment she said nothing, her gaze careful as she enjoyed her moment of divadom. At last, she shrugged. "Fine. But no more choosing Kate over your clients. The press will ruin you, and then they'll ruin her. You have to keep focused on your livelihood or you'll have nothing to give the poor girl anyway, will you?"

Mark bit back the retort that money didn't matter to Kate. "Okay. But right now, I'm going to ring Karen and Simon and try to allay a few of their fears before I see them in the morning."

He left the room and walked into Liam's kitchen. He knew Marcia's sudden love confession and her innate need to help him was as genuine as her professing to regular charity work...so why was she really here with Liam? Liam was clearly struggling at times to look him in the eye too. Mark looked to the ceiling and exhaled.

Was he being paranoid damning everyone a suspect? Not just everyone, but people who'd been loyal to him for years. He loved his work, and he'd strived too hard to let it slip even marginally. Yet Kate and Jess were so damn important to him.

Shaking his head, he pulled back his shoulders and dialed Karen Williams's number, making the decision not to see Kate again until this mess was sorted out--not until he'd found those papers and revealed the thief who'd taken them.

\* \* \* \*

Kate chewed her bottom lip as she paid the vendor for the newspaper and Disney magazine. She'd promised Mark she would ignore the press stories involving anything remotely attached to either of them, and she'd kept that promise--until now. Funnily enough the screaming headline *JOHNSTON'S SLIP: THE ACHIEVE-ALL AGENT SAVED!* caught her eye.

Resisting the urge to whip the pages open and read it right there in the middle of the street, Kate took Jess's hand and hurried toward a small coffee shop they'd passed a few minutes before. She hadn't seen Mark for three days. Not since the night she'd found out about the break in. The night she'd decided nothing and nobody would orchestrate the way she led her life. She loved Mark and she had to trust him. This Underwood creature, Marcia and even James's memory would no longer hold them back and she would not allow gossip mongers and the paparazzi to taint the beginnings of what could be a fantastic future.

Too much time had been wasted by her choice to keep her feelings from Mark and marry James. Stupidity and immaturity had been behind that, but now she was all grown up and knew exactly what she wanted. Mark.

She smiled and smoothed a hand over Jess's head. It still felt strange how much she missed him not being around after spending a year of her life alone with Jess. And as for Jess? Well, Kate now checked her tonsils if more than two hours passed without her mentioning something to do with Mark.

Walking into the coffee shop, Kate steered Jess toward a vacant table in the far corner and they sat down. Decorated in a delightful palette of ice-cream colors with pictures of laughing couples and families on the walls, the café was lovely. Kate looked behind the counter at the staff rushing back and forth and pinned Sunny's as family-run establishment judging by the similarity of the three girls serving and the older woman, clearly their mother, shouting orders at them. She bit back a chuckle when two of the three girls exchanged an eye-roll behind their mother's back when she sent them back into the kitchen for something they'd gotten wrong.

She quickly looked away when the third daughter approached the table for her order.

"What can I get you today?" She smiled and wiggled her nose at Jess who giggled.

Kate smiled. "I'll have--"

"Hey, are you Mark Johnston's girlfriend?" The young girl's eyes grew wide.

Kate glanced around, struggling to keep her smile in place as her cheeks grew hot. "Yes, yes I am. But I'd rather you knew me as Kate Marshall." She held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

The girl blushed as she shook Kate's hand. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. If Mum..."

Kate smiled, waved a dismissive hand. "Don't worry. I'm touchy because of my daughter, that's all. This is Jess."

"Hi, Jess." The waitress held out her hand.

Jess solemnly shook it. "Hello. Mark's nice."

The girl grinned. "I'm sure he is. Now what can I get you?"

Kate ordered a latte and blueberry muffin and a cup of orange juice and a jam doughnut for Jess. With another apology for asking about Mark, the girl walked away and Kate attempted to ignore the excited giggling and surreptitious glances of the waitress's sisters when the girl went

back behind the counter. She reached for the paper. She dealt with that quite well. Maybe she was finally getting used to the annoying, and hopefully temporary, fascination with her and Mark's relationship.

Damn the man for looking the way he did. She smiled when a shiver ran down her spine. If he looked like Quasimodo, with the personality of the Sheriff of Nottingham, the press wouldn't splash them over the tabloids like the next Brangelina.

She opened the paper and read the copy as quickly as humanly possible. Exactly three minutes later, she sat back with a huge grin on her face. So Mark had done as he said he would last night and told the press the confidential papers of Karen Williams and Simon Scott had been recovered. Of course, the press being the press were not wholly rejoicing. In fact, they barely mentioned the triumph, choosing instead to dedicate a further page and half to speculation of whether or not Mark's wealthy clients would stay or abandon him in favor of a different agent or worse, whether they'd take him to court for negligence.

Closing the paper, Kate smiled her thanks when the waitress returned with their order. The papers were found in another client's file and even though both Mark and Liam were adamant they hadn't mixed up the papers during the clean up, neither of them could swear to it. So, the panic had been for nothing but calming the fraught nerves of high-caliber clients was a whole other matter.

During their late night phone call...

Kate shifted in her seat.

Before the phone sex.

Mark told her he would not rest until he discovered who had broken into his office and caused all the trouble. Something wasn't right and if the person involved thought Mark wouldn't dig deeper, they were mistaken. Yet she kind of wished he wouldn't. He needed to learn what really mattered in life--and revenge was far down the list.

"Kate? Wow, fancy seeing you here."

Turning in her seat, Kate's stomach clenched. What the hell was Marcia doing here?

She forced a smile and instinctively rested her hand on Jessica's arm. "How are you?"

"Fine, fine. Do you mind if I join you? I need caffeine, and this place looks so adorable from the outside."

After two or three pregnant seconds, Kate knew she had no choice without looking like a complete bitch and gestured toward the empty seat next to Jessica. "Sure."

Marcia grinned and slid into the seat. She opened the laminated menu, oblivious to the starstruck gaze of the waitress who'd appeared at her side. Kate glanced at the counter and bit back a laugh. The other two daughters looked as though all their Christmases had come at once.

"Let me see..." Marcia drew a scarlet painted nail down the card. "Now that I think about it, I'm absolutely starving." She peered at Kate's muffin. "Is that all your having? Goodness, you put me to shame." She paused. "I'll try the lasagna, please. Calorific hell, I'm sure but what can I say?"



Snapping the menu shut, she pushed it in the waitress's direction without as much as looking at her before turning a hundred-watt smile on Jessica. "Hello, sweetie. Ooh, what's this? Have you been shopping?"

Jessica eyed the strange lady with suspicion, and then as with most females, shopping won her over and she scrambled from her chair, promptly disappearing beneath the table. Marcia mouthed a quick *she's so sweet* at Kate before Jess re-appeared brandishing her bag of goodies.

"Do you want to see what Mummy bought me?" she asked.

Kate cleared her throat. "Umm, I don't think Marcia..."

But Marcia grinned at Jess. "I'd love to, darling. What have you got in there?"

Kate shifted uncomfortably in her seat as she watched Jessica proudly show off the array of plastic bracelets, necklaces and rainbow-colored hair bands Kate had treated her to earlier. The urge to drink the contents of her steaming hot latte and risk permanently scarring her throat suddenly seemed highly desirable rather than Marcia talking to her daughter. And she couldn't have even said why. Yet, there was a certain something about Marcia that Kate didn't like or trust. It wasn't jealousy or possessiveness because the woman worked intimately with Mark...it was more cautious apprehension or wary mistrust.

From the first time they'd met, she recognized the dislike in Marcia's eyes toward her even though her smile couldn't have been friendlier. And with all the trouble she and Mark were experiencing, Kate was increasingly reluctant to spend time with anyone apart from those close to her. And Marcia was definitely not one of those people.

She inched her chair closer to Jessica's and slipped a protective arm around her shoulder.

"So, have you seen Mark today, Marcia?" Kate asked.

She turned from admiring Jess's bracelets. "Um, no. No, I probably won't see him until the film premiere on Friday. Shame you can't come to that."

Kate smiled. "Mark did invite me, but I've got more important things than publicity to take into account," she said, tipping her head in Jess's direction. "I think I'll leave that side of things to you and Mark."

"Good idea. You'd have to have your hair done, makeup and goodness knows what clothes you'd find on such a tight budget."

Kate glanced at Jess who hummed happily to herself, oblivious to the tension building around the table. She met Marcia's eyes. "The budget wouldn't be a problem, I--"

Marcia slapped her hand to her chest. "Oh, Kate, forgive me. I assumed because of the store bought clothes you prefer...but of course, you can't be short of money, can you?" She lowered her voice, turned theatrically away from Jessica. "Not with you being a widow. Mark told me...James, was quite the sporting success, wasn't he?"

Heat roared through Kate's veins. How dare she? And in front of James's child. Her chest rose and fell with each breath and even though she knew her anger would be evident in her gaze, she couldn't care less.

“You’re right. We are okay for money. Not that it’s any of your business,” Kate said, with an exaggerated smile.

Kate turned to Jess, and her temper cooled as she watched her daughter admire the way a green and a red necklace looked knotted together. Marcia touched Kate’s hand, and she snapped her head round and waited.

Marcia grimaced. “I’m sorry, Kate. I didn’t mean--”

“Apology accepted,” Kate interrupted, not wanting her to mention James again in front of Jessica. “I won’t be going to the premiere because I hate the publicity, no other reason. It’s bad enough having journalists poking into my personal life on a day-to-day basis, let alone volunteering for the pleasure.”

A moment passed before Marcia’s smile widened. “Oh, absolutely,” she said, shaking out a napkin and smoothing it across her lap. “I suppose that’s the trouble being with someone like Mark. You have to be a certain kind of person. The press adore him. They’re interested in anything and everyone who is seen with him. If you’re going to be with him, you’ll have no choice but to accept that tabloid journalists are relentless. You’ve nabbed Foxton’s very own celebrity hunk I’m afraid.”

Kate opened her mouth to respond, but Marcia turned her attention to Jess. Kate’s nerves revved closer and closer to the breaking point with each word from Marcia’s mouth. Enough was enough, once Jess was happily tucking into her doughnut, she broke the silence.

“So, what did you make of Mark’s break in last week?” Kate picked up her mug and blew across its surface. “He told me nothing of yours was stolen. That must have been a relief.”

Marcia stared at her. The accusing tone of Kate’s question couldn’t have been clearer. Her icy-cold stare bore into Kate’s. Women knew women, and the gauntlet was drawn. She waited for the return strike.

“A relief, yes.” Marcia sighed. “But also a concern.”

“That’s understandable.”

“You see, Mark has become a little distracted over the last few weeks.”

Kate took a sip of her coffee. “Really?”

Her laugh tinkled. “Oh, Kate, less of the innocence, please. He’s besotted with you. Dangerously so, it seems.”

Kate slowly put down her mug and stared into its depths. “Dangerously so?”

“Yes. Look what happened last week. That silly boy with the phone taking an intimate picture of Mark and me, his office being broken into...”

“The picture was hardly intimate, Marcia,” Kate said, hating the fact her self-control wavered. “Mark explained you’d had a little too much wine, these things happen...”

Marcia grinned, revealing teeth that suddenly seemed amazingly fang-like. “Is that what he told you?” She laughed. “Oh, okay, we had too much to drink.”

Kate glared at her as the insinuation hit home like a dart to her heart. Feeling the temptation to fling her latte in Marcia's face gather strength, she swallowed and steered the conversation away from such potentially explosive ground.

"Anyway, as I said, the important thing is the papers Mark thought were missing were in the office all along. And now the press knows that, hopefully they'll have the decency to let the whole thing go."

"Exactly," Marcia agreed. "And considering he's re-established his commitment to his clients and me, I'm sure his work life will get right back on track."

Watching Marcia over the rim of her mug, Kate said, "The commitment never left, you know. He was extremely angry someone could think he would stand by and let them sabotage his business." She paused. "Or our relationship."

She sat immobile as Marcia ran her gaze slowly over Kate's face before she turned her attention to Jessica. She plucked a bracelet from the pile on the table. "This one's lovely," she said, putting it on Jessica's wrist. "Pink for a perfect little girl."

Kate's gut clenched as she watched her. Her dislike of the woman grew with every passing minute, yet she knew it was based on nothing solid. Sure, she'd aimed a few glowers Kate's way, a few derogatory glances, but nothing she couldn't handle. Yet it grew like a gremlin in her stomach. Mark told her how much he'd admired Marcia's work, and was confident she would become one of Britain's biggest exports over the coming years. Mark liked her, she meant a lot to him.

Distaste burned bitter in Kate's throat. For his sake at least, she should learn to get on with her. She knew Mark didn't want to risk Marcia jumping ship to another agent. But every time Kate was around the woman, she felt as though another blow was imminent. And then it came.

The flash of a camera exploded between them like a flash of lightning. *No, no, no!* Kate leapt from her seat and snatched Jessica into her arms. Her breath caught before she burst into tears when Kate pressed Jessica's face into her bosom, and away from the glare of the camera. Marcia flew headlong at the photographer. She reached for the camera, but he was too fast. He looked like a grinning, evil fox as he held the camera out of reach.

"Give me that camera, Underwood," she yelled. "Now!"

"A picture of Mark's current and ex-lover is worth quite a bit of lolly, Miss Langton. Can't blame a man for making a living."

"If you have that picture printed, Mark will kill you," Marcia spat.

Kate tightened her grip around Jessica, unsure which of them caused the shaking between them, her or her daughter. Mark's current and ex-lover? Did he mean Mark had a sexual relationship with Marcia?

Acid burned hot in her chest as the notion filled her senses. No, it was impossible. He would have said something. Surely he wouldn't do that to her--leave her open to Marcia's goading or superiority? He'd warned her about this Underwood. Explained the vendetta he held against him. Damn Underwood. If it wasn't for Jess being there, Kate would have attacked him right alongside Marcia.

A movement to her side caught Kate's attention. The mother of the waitresses came out from behind the counter, her face etched with fury as she marched toward Underwood, wielding a wok spoon the size of a small shovel.

Knowing she had the back up of yet another female, Kate hitched a now hiccupping Jess higher onto her hip and stepped toward Underwood. She could not let the man walk out of there mistakenly thinking she was a pushover, that she couldn't look after herself because she damn well could. She gripped his forearm as he stood sneering at Marcia, purposely digging her nails into the flesh. He yanked his arm from her grip as he swung around.

"Hey, take your bloody hand off me!"

"Either give me the camera or get out of here right now and destroy that picture," Kate said, quietly. "I will be ringing the police in exactly five seconds, and I'm sure they won't look kindly on a man taking pictures of little girls."

"I didn't..."

"Yes, you did, and if my daughter's picture..."

The owner whipped him around by his other arm before Kate could finish her sentence.

"Get out! Get out!" the petite five feet two inch woman screamed in his face. "You will not hassle my customers. Get out!"

"All right," he said, backing toward the door. "I'm going." He flashed a smile at Kate, held the camera aloft. "I've got what I came for anyway."

"Get out!" The woman pushed him toward the door. He opened it and ambled down the street without an ounce of guilt weighing on his shoulders.

The owner turned and looked at Kate. "I am so sorry."

Kate shook her head. "It's okay. We're fine."

"Are you sure?"

She forced a smile. "Absolutely."

The woman hesitated before heading back toward the counter where her daughters were each holding serving spoons of varying sizes, clearly ready to back up their formidable mother if the situation turned more volatile. Kate gave Jess a reassuring squeeze as she watched Marcia slump into her seat.

"Damn him," she muttered. "Why does he have this thing with Mark? Can't he leave him alone for one minute?"

Ignoring her, Kate sat down with Jess on her lap. She cupped her pretty face in her hands. "Are you all right, sweetheart? It's okay, the horrible man's gone now."

She sniffed. "Why did he do that?"

Kate smiled, wiped the tears from under her baby's eyes. "He wants to take our picture because we know Mark."

"Doesn't he like him?"

She looked at Marcia above Jess's head and the two of them exchanged a collaborative glance. "I don't know. But me, you and Marcia certainly don't like that man, do we?"

Her smooth forehead creased and her green eyes darkened. "No, he's a horrible man. Looks like an ugly Swiper."

"What's a Swiper?" Marcia asked.

Jess shifted around on Kate's lap. "He's a horrible fox on Dora."

"Dora?"

Jess nodded eagerly. "Dora the Explorer."

Marcia laughed. "Ah, in that case that is exactly what he is."

Kate pressed a kiss to her temple. "Right, I think we should go home, sweetheart, don't you?"

Kate moved to stand up when their waitress returned with Marcia's lasagna. "I am so sorry about that man," the young girl said, her cheeks flushed. "Mum is in the kitchen, slamming around because she didn't spot him the minute he came in."

Marcia waved a dismissive hand. "It's fine. Kate and I eat the likes of Mike Underwood for breakfast, don't we?"

Forcing a smile, more for the benefit of Jessica and the waitress than Marcia, Kate nodded. "Absolutely."

The waitress walked away and Kate stood up.

"Oh, no, Kate. Please don't go. Not yet," Marcia said.

Unease rippled across Kate's shoulders. She didn't want to stay one more second and risk anything else happening today. "Marcia, I want to get Jess home."

"I understand Underwood has frightened you somewhat..."

"It's not that he's frightened me," Kate said. "He's frightened Jess, and if her picture appears on the front of any magazine tomorrow..." She stopped. "I will not be held responsible for my actions, put it that way."

"And I totally understand. In fact, I want an invite to watch."

Their eyes met and Kate couldn't ignore the sincerity staring back at her. At least their hatred of Underwood and his damn camera represented an inch of common ground between them--an important step toward forging some sort of relationship with her for Mark's peace of mind. The tension in her shoulders eased and Kate smiled.

"I'll be sure to call you if it happens."

"Could you stay a few minutes longer?" Marcia pressed. "I want to talk to you about something. I was going to catch up with you next week but with Mark being so stressed and everything..."

“Marcia, please. Another time, okay?”

But she didn’t seem to be listening as she turned and took her purse from the back of the chair and reached inside. “Do you want to go on the horsey ride over there, Jessica, honey?”

Kate blanched. “Marcia...”

But it was too late, Jess scrambled from her arms and stood like a soldier at attention in front of Marcia. “Yes, please.”

“Here, take this. Do you know how to put the money in?”

Jess nodded and took the money. “Thank you.”

Marcia grinned. “You’re welcome.”

Kate watched her traitorous and easily bought three-year-old bounce toward the ride, the entire Underwood escapade forgotten already. Glaring at Marcia, Kate dropped back into her chair. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

Marcia picked up her fork, looking suitably ashamed. “I know and I’m sorry. I just can’t go a moment longer without telling you something. It’s not fair.”

“To whom? Me?”

She nodded. Kate noticed Marcia’s hand trembled when she dug into her lasagna. The steam when she broke through the thick layer of cheese and pasta erupted in the space between them. Clearing her throat, Kate tilted her chin.

“What is it you have to tell me?” she asked.

Marcia stabbed at her lasagna. It was a minced beef and tomato massacre within seconds. Once the demolition was seemingly complete, she looked up and met her eyes. They shone with unshed tears and trepidation flung itself against Kate’s stomach pushing the air from her lungs.

“Well?” she managed.

“I want you to know this is extremely hard for me, Kate, but I don’t see that I have any other option. Please don’t think badly of either myself or Mark.”

“Just tell me.”

“It will save a lot of heartbreak in the end.”

Suspecting Marcia was enjoying every minute of her sadistic torture, Kate leaned back in her seat in a show of nonchalance. “Marcia, please just spit it out. I want to take Jess home and the longer I sit here, the more likely it is that some other idiot will come in here with a camera.”

“Mark and I were lovers, Kate.”

The woman might as well have slapped her across the face. Kate’s breath caught like barbed-wired in her throat but somehow she managed to maintain the nonchalance, a small smile even played at her lips. “Why would you lie?” she asked, her voice so much calmer than the fireworks storming around inside her. “What good will it do you?”

“Exactly. So you must know I’m not lying. Didn’t you hear Underwood just say--”

Kate held up her hand, cutting her off. She threw a quick glance at Jessica. Once Kate was confident she was still happily playing on the fiberglass horse, she turned back around and leaned across the table toward Marcia. Her foot bounced manically up and down beneath the table.

"Now you listen to me," she said, quietly. "I don't know what else you want from Mark but you won't get it. Believe me, he'll pour his entire being into your career, but sweetheart, anything else? It's never going to happen."

An unflattering shade of red flooded Marcia's face. "It already has."

Kate swallowed. "For God's sake..."

"I know he hasn't told you about us, but I refuse to let him make fools of us both."

Kate stared at her. Tiny voices of doubt whispered into her brain and try as she might, she couldn't silence them. Marcia looked away and as Kate stared at her profile, she couldn't ignore how fragile, even afraid she looked. If she was telling the truth...

"Fine," Kate said, clasping her hands tightly together in front of her to hide the shaking. "I'll talk to him."

Marcia turned, slapped her hand to her chest. "Good, good. That's all I ask. He needs to tell you about the future we had planned before you came back. We were going to leave Foxton and start building my career in New York or Sydney. Mark was equally as excited as me." She paused. "I'm sorry."

Kate stared at her. The pain on her face was too deep to be denied. She gripped her hands tightly together. "Do you love him?"

She nodded, her sapphire eyes shining. "Yes. But I'm not telling you this in the hope you'll leave him."

"Then why?"

She put her knife and fork down on the table and reached for Kate's joined hands. Kate barely managed to resist pulling them away. "Mark needs to understand he can't get away with hurting people this way. He promised me the world a couple of weeks ago and now he's doing the same to you."

Feeling as though she stood at the edge of an extremely high cliff, Kate took a breath. "Give me one good reason why I should believe there is anything more to this than jealousy."

"I am not lying."

Giving in, she pulled her hands from Marcia's. "I have been away for five years. Don't you think I'd be pretty stupid to think Mark didn't have other relationships in that time? He has no reason to keep them from me. Why wouldn't he tell me about you? Unless, of course, it never happened."

Jess suddenly came bounding up to the table and Kate immediately stood up, refusing to sit there with the tension simmering like a lit bomb between her and Marcia.

Marcia stood too. "Kate..."

"I'm going," Kate snapped. "Right now."

“Fine. But at least take these.”

With her heart beating an out of control tattoo in her chest, Kate fumbled with her handbag and shopping bags while Marcia rifled inside her own bag. Kate hitched the bags onto her shoulders and took hold of Jessica’s hand.

“What are you looking for? I want to go.”

“Wait, wait. You must take these.”

“Take what?”

“These.” Marcia thrust some papers at her.

Kate swallowed. “What are they?”

“Just read them. Then you can make up your own mind.”

Kate’s gaze swept over the front sheet and a cold sweat formed on the back of her neck as she recognized Mark’s handwriting. “Marcia...”

“It’s evidence of our plans together. Our relationship. If you don’t believe what I’m saying, maybe you’ll believe what is right in front of you in black and white. I’m so sorry.”

And then she brushed past Kate and left the coffee shop. Her uneaten lasagna completely devoid of steam and now just an unappetizing mess. Unable to help herself, Kate turned over the first page and nausea immediately burned in her stomach.

The photocopied airline tickets showed Mark and Marcia’s planned flight to Paris the following week. Could it be a business trip? Or had Mark been planning on whisking his long-term lover away for a weekend of passion and romance?

Kate stormed from the shop, dragging poor Jessica behind her. She didn’t know but knew damn sure she would by the end of the day.



## Chapter 13

Kate pulled up to the iron gates of The Landscape. Her anger had simmered into submission on the drive over and now only frustration remained. Deep down she knew it would serve no purpose for Mark to keep a romantic relationship with Marcia from her, but that didn't mean she didn't want an explanation. Leaning through the open window, she punched in the security code on the panel beside her.

"No doubt the explanation is Marcia Langton is a head case," she murmured.

The gates slowly opened, and she drove through them. As she started the drive toward the house, she tipped the rearview mirror at an angle. Jessica had fallen asleep within ten minutes of them leaving the car park in town, and for that at least, Kate was grateful. She loved her more than anything in the world but Jessica's incessant chatter about "Mummy's lady friend" and "the bad man with the camera" had been difficult to listen to.

And Kate knew the moment Jess's eyes opened again, she would be straight in for round two. Not only was her daughter intelligent, she was ridiculously intuitive and Kate suspected she sensed the tension in the café like a heavy cloak around her three-year-old shoulders.

Swallowing her guilt, she pulled to a stop beside Mark's Mercedes and got out. Stretching the kinks from her neck and shoulders, she reached her arms above her head. If she could just transfer Jess from the car to somewhere comfy without waking her, it would be a much needed bonus. Having no idea how the upcoming conversation with Mark would pan out, she didn't want Jess witnessing it, either way.

Lifting her daughter carefully from the car seat and elbowing the door shut, Kate walked around to the back of the house. As she'd guessed, even though it was Saturday, Mark still worked, albeit outside in the sunshine. Concentration creased his brow as he pored over the papers spread out in front of him. It passed through Kate's mind that they probably didn't make as interesting reading as those in her bag. She took a few steps closer, and he lifted his head. The moment their eyes met, her heart stopped. She loved him so much.

His jet black hair shone blue in places beneath the sunlight, his hazel eyes instantly changing from distracted concentration to delight when he saw her. His mouth stretched into a slow sexy smile that kick-started her heart and made her center burn. He was all she wanted and more. Marcia would not ruin it with her words and lies. Whatever she thought she would achieve by this, she was wrong. Together, she and Mark would stamp it out. Yet, despite her positive thoughts, the sharp sting of tears belied the fear Mark may have kept a relationship with Marcia secret from her. That maybe there were other skeletons in the cupboard that would fall out one by one over the coming months.

She climbed the steps onto the veranda, and he rose from his chair. His smile was so infectious, Kate returned it and for a moment they stood in silence grinning at each other.

“Hi,” she said eventually.

“Hi.” He leaned forward to press a kiss to her cheek. “This is a nice surprise.”

She tipped her head toward Jessica. “Can I put her on your sofa?”

His eyes softened when he gazed at Jessica’s sleeping face. “Sure.”

With the maneuverability only a mother could execute, Kate shifted Jessica’s weight, hitched her handbag from her shoulder and dropped it onto the honey-colored decking. She followed Mark back down the steps and he led her across the huge stone patio toward the mammoth conservatory stretching the breadth of the house. The puffy cream and navy blue sofas inside provided the perfect cozy makeshift bed for Jessica. Carefully laying her down, Kate kissed her temple and then she and Mark left the room.

As soon as they stepped outside, Mark drew her into his arms. She welcomed the feel of his lips against hers and melted into it, savoring and filing away each sensation, each touch, in case it was the last. Her hands stole around his waist, inviting him closer, their kiss intensifying as their tongues searched and devoured.

When they pulled apart, Kate laughed as she touched her tender lips. “I guess we’ve missed each other over the last few days.”

He stared deep into her eyes. “I love having you here. It feels...”

Kate’s stomach did a pleasant loop the loop. “Right?”

He nodded. “Right.”

They shared another kiss before Kate forced herself to bring the matter of Marcia to the forefront of her mind. She slid her hands down his strong forearms to hold his hands. He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“I ran into Marcia in town today.”

The frown deepened. “And?”

“Let’s go and sit.” Dropping one of his hands, she kept the other firmly intertwined with his and led him back along the patio and up the steps to the veranda. She sat and watched his handsome profile as he gathered his documents and stacked them in a neat pile.

He placed his pen on top, sat down and met her eyes. “So...what did Miss Marcia have to say for herself?”

Kate leaned down and drew the papers from her bag and slid them across the wrought iron table toward him. With his eyes questioningly lingering on hers, he slowly took them. Kate went rigid in her seat as she waited. His gaze darted over the first page, then the second, then the third, his jaw tightening with each passing second. After what felt like hours, he slowly folded the papers and placed them carefully on the table as though they were made of glass. He looked up.

“What did she say these were?”

Kate's mouth was devoid of saliva, she swallowed. "A trip away. The two of you were in a relationship before I came along, and you were planning to leave for Paris next week."

"And you believe her?" His eyes were unreadable as he stared at her.

She lifted her shoulders. "I don't know."

He pushed out his bottom lip, slowly nodded his head up and down. "I see. Well, why don't I clear up that problem for you first, and then we can deal with the bigger issue."

Kate narrowed her eyes. "Why are you talking to me like that? I'm not the one on trial here."

"No, it appears that would be me."

Defensiveness bristled through her, causing the hairs on her arms to rise. The atmosphere shifted, charging the air around them with its heat. Was he being this flippant due to guilt or anger?

"Why are you reacting like this?" she asked, lifting her hands. "What did you expect me to think when the woman practically wet herself in her enthusiasm to show me those papers?"

"And you didn't stop to think she could be making trouble between us?"

"Of course I did," Kate said. "I'm not stupid, but I still need to know if there is any truth in what she is saying. Is that so wrong? I don't think so."

He crossed his arms. "The tickets were for a business trip. There's a theatre in Paris I think Marcia should visit with me. I hoped it would pull her back to why she started acting in the first place. It is old and modest, the entire audience is the same number that would fill the stalls only at the Theatre Royal."

"So you're saying her ego was escalating sky-high before I even came back to Foxton?"

A small smile twitched his lips. "I can hardly be heard saying that about one of my clients now, can I?"

"Maybe not, but I can."

Mark dropped his arms. "I thought you were going to throw another barrage of doubts at me. I don't think I can do this alone. If you don't believe..."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "I do believe. But I'm not sure if I can pay the price for us to be together."

He looked at her. "What are you saying? God, Kate, I'd pay any price to be with you. Any price at all."

"You can't say that. I have Jess's welfare to consider, and it seems to me that Marcia is becoming increasingly unhinged."

He smiled. "Unhinged?"

"I'm serious! The woman has the look of a maniac sometimes. I don't know how you work with her. You do know she's in love with you, don't you?"

"She said something along those lines. But I don't think how she's behaving backs that sentiment up, do you?"

"Exactly. Why would she be in love with you? I mean she's successful, wealthy and beautiful. She could have pretty much any man, why does she want you?"

“Gee, thanks.”

Kate winked. “I’m joking. I know why she wants you. The thing that sticks in my gut is her reasons are a million miles away from mine. She wants to keep you focused on making her career fly off the scale. God forbid you should have any sort of personal life. I don’t trust her, Mark, and I don’t think you do either.”

He closed his eyes. “You’re right. I don’t. Not anymore. But then again, I don’t trust anyone at the moment.” He opened his eyes. “Except you.”

“What are we going to do?”

He reached across the table for his Blackberry. “The first thing we’re going to do is let Miss Langton know I have a personal life. A personal life I am not giving up.”

Kate covered the hand holding the phone and brought it to the table. “There’s more, Mark.”

He frowned. “What?”

Kate swallowed. “We were photographed by Underwood. Jess too.”

“Shit!” Mark shoved to his feet, his chair clattering to the floor behind him. “I’ll bloody kill him.”

Kate’s heart leapt into her throat. His face grew scarlet with rage, and a vein throbbed at his temple as though struggling to escape. “Mark, calm down.”

His eyes stormed in a maelstrom of green, brown and gold, his fists clenched in front of him, the knuckles showing white against the tanned skin of his hands. “Calm down? No, Kate. This is too much, he’s harassed me for too long. He loved Dad going to court. He made sure he went in there with shame hanging from his name like a bloody noose. And now he’s trying to do the same to me.”

“And if you go after him like this, he’ll succeed.” Kate threw a panicked glance toward the conservatory. She turned back once she could see Jess still curled into a ball on the sofa. “We have to think this through. Do you really want your picture and detrimental copy spewed all over the papers? Think of your career, your clients’ careers. You cannot rise to his bait. Or Marcia’s.”

He stared at her, yet his eyes were unfocused. Kate knew he wasn’t listening to a word she said.

“Mark?”

“Do you think Underwood wanted you or Marcia?”

“What?”

“Do you think he followed you or Marcia?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, he--”

“Where was Liam?”

“Liam? What’s Liam got to do with this?”

Mark cursed. “I asked him to tail Marcia. To make sure that she had nothing to do with the things that have been happening. It seems to me wherever Underwood is, Marcia’s not far behind.”

As Kate watched him pace back and forth, his face a mask of concentration and suppressed fury, a heavy weight of exhaustion fell across her shoulders. How could she possibly expose Jessica to this kind of thing? Photographers? Manic, money-hungry clients with endless agendas? Did she want to spend her life looking over her shoulder in order to protect her daughter?

She dropped her head into her hands. "I feel so tired of this."

A moment passed before his fingers drew her hands from her face. He pulled her to her feet and guided her head to his chest. Kate closed her eyes and listened to the rapid thump of his heart.

"We'll get through this, you know," he said against her hair. "I will deal with both Marcia and Underwood."

"But there will be others, Mark. You're famous. You were the most eligible bachelor in the UK according to the tabloids. We're a couple. They'll never leave us alone."

He drew her from his embrace and held her at arm's length. "This isn't normal. Sure, there's never been anyone special in my life since I became successful, but that doesn't mean I've been a monk. I've dated, I've even had sex."

"Oh, and here I was hoping I was your first." Kate smiled.

He kissed her nose. "Sorry about that. Listen to me. This harassment, my office, the papers, it's too much, nothing like this has happened before. Which makes me think the motivation behind it cannot just be about me."

"What are you saying?"

"When I went to Liam's the other night, Marcia was there. Wherever Marcia is, Underwood is. Don't you see?"

Kate mouth curved into a slow smile. "They're working together."

"Exactly. And that means I get two for the price of one."

"Or if Liam's involved too, it will be buy two, get one free." Kate managed to joke.

He smiled. "God, I love you. We'll sort this. Together."

Slowly his eyes darkened and his smile dissolved as his gaze fell hungrily to her lips. It felt like weeks since their lovemaking when it hadn't even been one. Kate felt an urgent pull between her legs. Their joined determination to beat both Marcia and Underwood at their game clearly sparked an arousal in Mark as much as it did her. She flicked out her tongue to wet suddenly dry lips.

"Why are you looking at me that way, Mr. Johnston?" she whispered, pressing a restraining hand to his chest.

"Why do you think?"

Her nipples tightened beneath the thin cotton of her t-shirt. Dragging her gaze from eyes that should come with a warning, she glanced toward the conservatory. Jess was still flat out on the sofa. Kate looked at Mark once more.

"Well, if my guess is right, we need to be alone."

He nodded, dropped his head to the sensitive curve of her neck. "Uh-huh."

Her eyelids fluttered closed as she gripped his shoulders. Cruel. The man was cruel. She sighed. "What if I ask Mum to babysit tonight?" She paused. "Overnight."

His hesitation lingered beneath her hands for a brief second before he slowly lifted his head. His stare was alive with fire and passion, love and laughter. He kissed her, his lips urgent and firm, insistent and perfect.

"That, Miss Marshall, sounds like a plan."

\* \* \* \*

Kate opened the oven and checked the pasta dish for the fortieth time in the last fifteen minutes. Then she checked her watch--for the thirtieth time in the last fifteen minutes.

"Chill, Kate Marshall. Chill."

Her breath left her lungs in a rush. It was crazy to feel this nervous--or excited--or whatever the hell ripped through her veins at a hundred miles an hour. She walked into the dining room, cast her gaze over the table she had decorated and wondered if it looked too much like a staged production. She stared at the candles, the white china, the pale blue tablecloth and napkins--should she have ordered takeaway and set up a picnic on the living room floor?

She shook her head. He would love whatever she did, she knew that, yet her nerves were stretched to the breaking point as though tonight was their first time together physically. The doorbell rang. Kate froze and clutched her throat before shaking her head and walking into the hallway.

"What is the matter with you, woman?" she muttered.

Mark's silhouette filled the glass partition in the door, and Kate smiled when he lifted his hand to push back his hair. Could he be nervous too? She opened the door.

He stood on her step looking as handsome as ever. With the setting sun turning the sky salmon-pink behind him, the unmistakable sparkle in his eyes and his devilish smile wide enough to light up the moon, Kate snapped a mental picture to keep in her memory forever. He brought his arm out from behind his back.

"Ta-da."

The single white rose was once again perfect in its beauty. She smiled and took it. "From The Landscape?"

He nodded. "Always."

She stepped back, bringing the rose to her nose and watching him over its petals. "I suppose for that, you'd better come in."

He pressed a kiss to her cheek as he walked inside. "Where do you want me?"

Kate arched an eyebrow and pushed the door shut, her eyes never leaving his. "Can't we eat first?"

He grinned. "Mmm...that's a dangerous game to play when you're wearing that dress, wouldn't you say?" He came toward her and clasped his hands around her waist.

Kate's vagina throbbed its impatience, but she held firm. "Maybe," she said. "But I made pasta and if we leave it until afterward, we will be eating rubber on a plate. If we eat now, it stands more chance of actually tasting like something edible." She paused, grimaced. "I'm not a fancy cook by any stretch of the imagination, so be warned."

He bent down and gently nibbled along the soft skin beneath her earlobe and along the curve of her neck. "Then we'd better eat now," he said. "Fast."

She wriggled from his grasp lest she risk contradicting every word she'd said by ripping off her dress and rugby-tackling the man to the hallway floor.

"Let's eat." Swallowing back her newly-emerging nymphomaniac, Kate steered him into the dining room. "Wine in bottle, glasses on table."

"Can't I help with anything in the kitchen?"

She shook her head. "Nope, but thank you. Pour and then sit."

He winked and raised his hand to his head in a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Grinning like a demented clown, Kate giggled as she practically skipped into the kitchen. Grabbing a tea towel, she opened the oven and sent up a silent prayer their *tête-à-tête* in the hallway hadn't resulted in blackened pasta and basil à la Kate.

It survived. She exhaled. "Thank you, God."

Taking out the freshly made and perfectly golden garlic bread, she laid both the dish and bread out on an oak serving board and carried it into the dining room. The aromas of basil and garlic, cheese and smoky bacon filled the room as she placed it in the center of the table.

"That smells amazing," Mark said, leaning forward to peer at the dish. "How can you say you can't cook?"

Kate laughed. "You haven't tasted it yet. Let me grab the salad."

She took the bowl off the counter and then stopped. The collage of photos of Jessica on the refrigerator door stopped her in her tracks. She reached out and drew an invisible line around her daughter's beautiful face and smiled softly.

"Everything's going to be okay, sweetheart," she murmured. "Mummy and Mark are going to fix it all." She paused, swallowed hard. "And Daddy's smiling down because we're all going to be so happy. I promise."

Turning, she walked back into the living room and Mark stood up. "Will you at least let me serve?"

She smiled and put down the salad bowl. "Sure. That would be nice."

Taking her seat, Kate picked up her wine and took a mouthful as Mark dug the serving spoon into the pasta. She watched the way his strong hand firmly clasped the handle of the spoon, the way the tendons of his forearm, left deliciously bare by the short-sleeve shirt he wore, hitched and moved beneath the tanned skin.

"Are you checking me out, Miss Marshall?"

Heat singed her cheeks as though his voice were a blowtorch. She snapped her head up. His eyes glowed wolfishly as he wriggled his eyebrows.

Laughing, Kate said, "Shut up."

He laughed too as he filled their plates with pasta, bread and salad. He topped off their glasses. "A toast," he said, sitting down and raising his glass. "To us and Jess having the happiest and longest future together anyone has ever known."

"Amen to that." They clinked glasses, and Kate drank deeply. "Let's eat."

Mark met her eyes and winked. "Quickly."

"Mmm, dessert is just a course away."

Smiling, he dug in with relish. Kate watched from beneath lowered lashes as he chewed. Two or three seconds passed before he looked up again--but when he did, his eyes were wide.

"Oh. My. God."

She grinned. "Nice?"

"Nice? It's bloody fantastic!"

"Good, now you can tell me everything about this war between you and Underwood."

The atmosphere immediately chilled like she'd thrown cold water over the table. Mark looked up from his plate, a re-loaded fork forgotten in his hand. "Do we really have to talk about him tonight?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. Before anything else can..." She let the sentence drift off, wondering if her plan of talking first, sex later was the right one. Suddenly she felt as though running upstairs and leaving the pasta to ruin might have been a better option. "I won't be able to relax until I know, Mark. It's the final piece to the puzzle of what started this."

He put down his fork. "But tonight? Can't we talk about it tomorrow?"

She forced herself to keep looking at him. "What happened to your dad, Mark? What did Underwood do to him?"

He picked up his glass and their eyes locked above its rim for a long moment before he put it down and took up his fork. "Fine. But we eat while we talk. Dessert is still my goal."

She grinned as the tension left her shoulders. "Deal."

"Okay. Do you remember my Dad's garage?"

"The mechanic workshop on Carson's Road? Sure."

Mark nodded. "That's right. Well, he got himself into a mess when the business started failing."

Kate tore off some garlic bread. "He loved that place."

"Exactly. It was everything to him. Anyway, it began to fail or the old man got too old, one of the two, and he would not...could not admit to me or Mum it was running at a loss. A severe loss." He paused and thoughtfully chewed his food. "This went on for over two years. He got bank loans we never knew about, cut corners on jobs."

"What? But..."



“There was an accident and Dad was found guilty of negligence.”

Kate’s stomach rolled. “No one was killed?”

“No, thank God, but Dad didn’t have any indemnity insurance and when the victims rightly sued him for damages, it ruined him.”

“God. Poor Rob.”

Mark shook his head. “He knew what he did was wrong. Accepted it even. But then I fell out with Underwood and the whole situation erupted tenfold.”

“How?”

“I turned him down for a couple of exclusives.”

“And he used your dad’s mistake to get at you? What’s the matter with him? Has he no conscience whatsoever?”

“It was a chance to get back at me. I turned him down for the first exclusives because there had already been two complaints logged against him for harassment toward young teenage stars.”

“Bastard.”

“The girl he wanted to interview was Kelly Warburton.”

“The actress from *Mockingbird*?”

“Yep.”

“But she’s not from Foxton.”

He smiled. “Yes, she is. She was an ordinary girl looking for a break and lost that chance when she fell down a flight of stairs and smashed up her face. Without reconstructive surgery, I still believe her acting talent would never have been given a chance.”

Kate’s heart swelled inside her chest. “But you gave her that chance, didn’t you?”

He lifted his shoulders. “She would have been discovered eventually. The girl has far too much talent to go unnoticed.”

“But she was discovered by you.”

Silence.

“I love you, Mark Johnston.”

He looked up, met her eyes. “Underwood has never forgiven me for the interviews I’ve turned him down for. Once Mum and Dad paid the massive fines and Dad was served with extended probation, they moved to Scotland to get away from Underwood. I swear for as long as I live, Kate, I will use my money to give people the chance to survive. To win. People make mistakes, but they shouldn’t be forced to pay for them forever.”

“And what mistakes have you made?”

“You really have to ask that?”

Kate frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I let you go. That’s the biggest mistake I ever made--letting James take you away from me. Never again. Never again will I lose you. Never.”

She swallowed as her heart picked up speed and lust and love soared through her body. “Then why don’t we forget the food and take dessert in the living room?”

A smile twitched his lips. “The living room?”

“Humor a mum, Mark. I can’t remember the last time I had the freedom to eat dessert on the living room carpet.” She paused, winked. “If you know what I mean?”

She stood up and walked from the room, her body humming with desire. He followed behind, so close she could hear him breathing. She clutched the banister. “I’ll be two seconds, go on in.”

“Where are you...”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “All will be revealed.”

Kate raced up the stairs, laughing when he planted a smack on her bottom. She went into her bedroom and slipped off her dress. Even though it was far from high-necked, her reliable black dress suddenly felt too restricting. Ideally, she would have the courage to strut naked down the stairs except for the single white rose Mark gave her slipped into her hair like a model from a Renaissance painting. But she wasn’t that brave...yet.

She hurried to the wardrobe and pulled out her new purchase. The sapphire blue satin nightdress and matching wrap had called to her from the picture window of the lingerie shop. She’d been lured inside the shop under its shiny, sheeny spell as though in a hypnotic trance. She shimmied into it and smoothed her hands over her waist and hips. Mark made her feel sexy. Mark made her feel alive. She blinked against the tears that sprung into her eyes.

She couldn’t regret the wasted years, because those years with James gave her Jessica, but if only her stupid pride hadn’t stopped her from telling Mark how she’d felt. Why did she leave it up to him? Reading far too many of her mother’s romance novels were likely to blame. She’d been stuck in the idea her hero would come along and throw her over his shoulder whilst banging his chest with his fist and verbalizing ownership to the entire world.

Sitting at her dresser, Kate laughed and swiped at her tears. Mark would never have done that. Even though he’d owned her the minute he looked at her all those years ago. The man back then lacked the self-belief to act upon what he felt humming between them like a tangible thread--but now? Kate ran her hand over the curve of her breasts. Now, he’d take her and then some.

Grinning, she opened her jewelry box and swapped her simple gold hoop earrings for a pair of pearl teardrops. Memories of Mark’s parents swept through her mind’s eye and she spared a thought for what they must have gone through at the pen and camera of Underwood. Her hands shook and Kate took a few deep breaths. Well, she and Mark would pay him back by standing united against him.

With a final spritz of perfume to each wrist and between her breasts, Kate stood up, tipped a saucy wink at her reflection and made her way downstairs. She peered around the frame of the living room door and gasped. She pressed her hand to her mouth and drank him in.

He'd taken the somewhat presumptuous action of removing his shirt. He lay on her living room floor, all beautiful six feet, two inches of him out flat, his hands relaxed on either side of him, his eyes closed. Kate crept into the room and stood over him with every part of her body aching for his touch. His skin was dappled bronze beneath the moving flames of the ten or more candles he'd lit on the mantelpiece. He looked like a powerful Roman warrior.

Kate surrendered. She released every fear, every reluctance, every doubt she'd felt since leaving Foxton all those years ago. She was home. Home with a child she loved more than life itself and the one man she'd always wanted. The man she knew was her destiny since the age of eighteen when Mark held her hand for the first time.

Lowering her body over his, she lay on top of him and his eyes flickered open.

He smiled sleepily. "Hi."

Kate kissed his jaw. "Hi."

"I was thinking how beautiful you are." He traced his fingertip across each of her eyebrows in turn. He stopped. "Wait. What's this?"

Heat leapt to her cheeks when he fingered the spaghetti straps of the nightdress, the smooth surface of his nail gliding over her skin, waking up every sensitized inch of her flesh.

"That's cheating, Miss Marshall."

She took his bottom lip gently between her teeth and their eyes locked. The hazel irises, the jet black pupils of his eyes bore into her soul as Kate saw her own eyes in their reflection and they were hungry. She wanted him so much it hurt. She released his lip and pressed her mouth hard to his. An almost animal-like moan escaped from deep within his throat, stoking the heat between her legs. She writhed and moved on top of him, felt her dampness through the scrap of her thong and the thin satin of the dress.

With their lips together and his fingers roughly tangled in her hair, she moved from his chest to the side. Sliding her hand down the firm flatness of his stomach toward his belt, Kate smiled.

He inched away from her. "Kate?"

She met his eyes. "Mmm?"

"I love you."

She grinned. "You're going to love me even more in about sixty seconds."

"Aw, man."

She laughed as she slid down the length of his body and with her head level with his fly, she undid that pesky buckle and got rid of those troublesome trousers.

## Chapter 14

Mark stormed into Liam's office and slammed the door.

His assistant leapt from his seat and slapped his hand to his chest as though he'd been shot. "Jesus, Mark. Give me a heart attack, why don't you?"

"A heart attack?" Mark said as he marched toward him. "A heart attack? Count yourself lucky Kate is a saner woman than me, otherwise I would've wrung your neck with my bare hands yesterday."

The color drained from Liam's face, and his throat shifted as he swallowed, but still he tilted his chin in a gesture of defiance. "And what is it I'm supposed to have done?"

Mark rested his knuckles on the edge of the desk. "Sit down. And for Christ's sake drop the attitude. You are nowhere near experienced enough to pull it off."

Bristling, Liam sat down. "I don't know--"

"Why weren't you following Marcia yesterday like I asked you to?"

"I did."

Mark glared at him. "No, Liam, you didn't."

Liam's eyes darkened, his gaze not wavering from Mark's for a second. Mark continued to glare at him, acknowledging that maybe Liam possessed the backbone to be an agent one day after all. Especially if he was going to face him off at that moment--if he was going to seriously try to do that, then the kid's balls were bigger than King Kong's.

"I tailed her until six o'clock," Liam said, quietly. "I tailed her to the theatre and then went home. Her performance doesn't finish until after midnight. I didn't expect her to get up to a lot after that. Did something happen after midnight?"

"Where were you yesterday at lunch time?"

"Outside the coffee shop on Union Street. She went in there for something to eat. Bit downscale for Marcia, but maybe she's changing her ways." He smiled, and then it dissolved. "What?"

"Kate was in there with her daughter."

Liam said nothing for a moment and then blew out a breath. "And? Mark, why are you acting as though she put a gun to her head? She wouldn't do anything to hurt Kate in the middle of a public place."

Mark pushed away from the desk and fisted his hands on his hips. "You don't get it, do you? Underwood went in there afterward and got some pictures of Kate and her daughter. If those pictures show up on the front page of any magazine, I've lost her."

"Who?"

"Kate!" Mark glared at him.

“Oh, right.”

“No, Liam, it’s not right. I spent the night with her last night thinking about this the entire time. I’ve got to put this shit to bed.”

Liam looked at him. “Do you know something?”

“What now?”

“I’m starting to think maybe Marcia’s got a point. The way you’ve been acting since Kate turned up is not normal. I understand she’s the love of your life but this paranoia...”

The occasional suspicion Liam could have something to do with Mark’s myriad of problems came teetering to the top of his conscience again. There was only one way to find out. He crossed his arms.

“How much, Liam?”

“What?”

“How much is she paying you? Do I not pay you enough to ensure your damn loyalty?”

The room fell silent, and Mark heard the roaring of his blood as it rushed through his system--he’d worked with Liam from the start. He was barely out of university when he’d applied for the job as Mark’s PA. He’d respected Mark was starting out and wanted to be a part of the business, learn every aspect from the bottom up before realizing his own dreams of being a theatrical agent one day. Mark saw the glimpses of possibility, but if the kid had stabbed him in the back and slithered in side by side with Marcia, he would kick his ass to kingdom come.

“She’s paying me nothing.”

Mark stomach lurched. “You did this for nothing?”

“I haven’t done anything.”

Mark stared at him. His gut told him Liam spoke the truth. That maybe he had a point about him losing his mind over Kate but his defenses were weak. He needed her and after last night, probably the best night of his entire life, if he lost Liam, the business, none of it mattered. He could start again. He could find new clients. But there was only one Kate--and there was only one Jess.

“You’re not working with Marcia to sabotage my relationship with Kate, the business?”

Liam’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe you’d say that to me, Mark. God, I work my ass off for you. You know I do.” He got to his feet, held up his hand. “Do you know what? I’m sick to death of this shit. First Marcia, now you...”

Mark tensed. “So she has said something to you.”

Liam flicked his hand in the air. “Of course she has. She’s a bloody diva, isn’t she? She threatened to ruin me, to make sure I lost my job with you and never worked in the theatre business. She’s mental. I told her to try.”

“Wait a minute. So you knew what she was up to and never told me? That makes you part of this.”

“She said you needed to get away from Kate and focus on your clients. I told her she was being ridiculous. That your clients are important to you and you’d never let anything personal get in the way of that. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Guilt whispered along Mark’s nerve endings, but he nodded. “Of course.”

Liam gave a satisfied nod. “That was the night you saw her at my place. She knew she had no chance of me turning on you so she never mentioned it again. I thought she’d dropped the whole malicious carry-on. But from what you’re saying, she’s done it again.”

Mark dropped into the visitor’s chair. “She’s working with Underwood, I’m sure of it. Underwood would sell his soul to the devil to get to me. Taking pictures and making up shit is nothing to that man. Nothing at all. He fired off a load of shots of Marcia, Kate and Jessica before skipping out of that damn café like the spineless sap he is.”

“Maybe he won’t publish them. Well, of Jessica anyway. Even a moron like Underwood wouldn’t stoop that low, would he?”

“Who knows? I wouldn’t put anything past him. I just hope Kate keeps to her promise and sees this out.” He paused, bit his teeth together. “But as for Marcia? She’s out of here. She can find someone else to represent her spiteful ass, because I’ve had a gutful.”

He stood up, walked toward the door and stopped when he opened it. “Get her on the phone, tell her I want to see her. Today.”

With adrenaline pumping through his veins and heating his blood, Mark marched along the corridor to his own office. He pushed open the door. And the sight that greeted him sent his blood to boiling point and his anger to fever pitch.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Marcia whipped around, laughed. “God, Mark, don’t do that! I nearly slammed my finger in this thing.”

Dressed in a black skirt suit that skimmed and fitted her body like a second skin, sky-high heels and a low fitting top, she looked like Cruella de Ville. Mark narrowed his eyes and slammed the door shut.

“Why are your fingers anywhere near my filing cabinets, Marcia? Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kick you out on the street right now. You can’t come in here--”

“I think I can, Mark,” she purred, her smile widening. “I’ve been taking care of quite a bit of your business over the last few weeks, wouldn’t you say?”

He strode toward her and without thinking, gripped her wrist. She gasped. “Ow, take your hand off me. Right now.”

“Sit down.” He steered her toward his chair and pushed her into it before releasing her. She rubbed at her wrist as she glowered at him. He stared straight back, his heart beating like a drum in his head. “I want some bloody answers.”

She let go of her wrist and gripped the arms of the chair instead. The seconds passed as her blue eyes moved slowly over his body, from head to toe. She closed them for a moment and when they re-opened her gaze was like that of an innocent doe.

“Has Kate called things off?” she said. “Is that what this is about?”

Mark’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

Ignoring her, he squeezed his eyes shut in a bid to curb the urge to wrestle her from his office. “Why did you show those tickets to Kate? Why did you make out that there is something to our relationship other than professional? I don’t get it. I’ve worked my ass off showcasing your talent. I believed in you. Trusted that you trusted me. What more did you want me to do?”

Her expression bore none of the hardened determination, ruthless or unyielding resolve Mark had come to know so well. Now her gaze was soft with concern, the set line of her jaw loose and trembling.

“Do I have to spell it out to you? Even now, after everything? I’ve never said it outright but I thought you understood me at Liam’s. I love you, Mark.”

He bit back a laugh. Was she serious? Did he expect him to fall for even an ounce of this woe-is-me bullshit from a woman whose ambition was on a par with a heavyweight boxer’s fist pummeling his opponent’s face? God, she was more psychotic than he’d given her credit for. He shook his head and looked to the carpet.

“You are truly unbelievable.”

“What do you mean?”

Snapping his head up, Mark threw his hands in the air. “You have got to be kidding me with this shit. You’re possibly the best actress this side of the Atlantic and you expect me to believe everything you have done was done in the name of love?”

She leapt to her feet and came toward him with her arm outstretched as though to touch him. “Is that so hard to understand? Kate isn’t right for you. She has a child.”

He moved back. “So?”

Her lovey-dovey smile vanished, and an ugly sneer appeared. “Oh, my God, she really has got you under her spell, hasn’t she?”

Mark’s hackles rose like the hair on a dog’s back. “Be very careful what you say, Marcia.”

Their eyes locked, time stood still. The only sounds were the calls and shouts of a busy office on the other side of the door. Mark drew strength from it. The Johnston Agency was all his, built from scratch. Why did he ever hold so much importance on Marcia making it to the top? Because he’d been a man as driven by ambition as she was, that’s why. Yet, after eight short weeks, that man had vanished forever. Crushed beneath the prospect of real love--of the hope for a future so amazing, so tangible, he felt it in every inch of his body.

“What are you thinking, Mark?” She laughed. “You’re thinking this is worth fighting for, aren’t you? This so called romance with Kate is going to last.”

He met eyes colder than ice water. "And it will."

She came toward him, stopping inches away from him. Her gaze travelled over his face like a lover's. "You've taught me to do whatever's necessary to get what I want. And that, my darling, is exactly what I intend on doing."

A slow smile curved Mark's lips. "Tell me when I have told you resorting to violence or having an innocent person victimized by the press is the way to get what you want? After everything you've set up with Underwood, I should call the police right now and have you arrested for unlawful harassment, stalking of a mother and child..."

Her eyes flashed, her mouth twisted. "You do that, and I'll really go after Kate and her precious little girl."

Rage slit through the last thread of Mark's self-control like a sharpened knife. He grabbed her arms. "I don't think so, Marcia. I'm warning you, this ends right here, do you understand me? If I as much as see you walking on the same street as either Kate, Jess or me, I will have you thrown in jail. Do I make myself clear?"

"Let go of me."

He shook her. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Mark, I will scream if you don't let go of me right now."

He dropped her arms and spun away from her, inhaling lungfuls of air. What was he doing? He'd never grabbed a woman in his life. She would not turn him into a monster. It gave her too much power. He turned back around.

"I shouldn't have grabbed you, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I think it's best we accept we can no longer work together. Just go. I'll speak to my solicitor and we'll have the contracts looked at. Just get out of here before either of us does or says anything more damaging."

She smiled, clicked her fingers. "And it will be sorted out, just like that."

Mark glared at her, his heart racing. "Yes. Exactly like that."

She crossed her arms. "Don't be stupid. I'm worth a fortune to you."

He looked at the ceiling. "I don't give a damn about the money anymore. I am not letting Kate and Jessica get away a second time. In fact, standing here with you is wasting precious time that I could be spending with them."

"I'll go to a rival agent," she said, her tone becoming higher in its pitch, more stringent in its false bravado. "I'll talk to Karen and Simon. I'll take their business from you too. Then what will you have? A few mediocre actors and others like them waiting on the sidelines before they shove their appreciation right up your ass when they up and disappear to LA."

He smiled and arched an eyebrow. "Finished?"

She glared at him. "You're a pathetic piece of..."

"Do you know something?" He walked to the door. "I've had enough of this. By the time I've finished, you'll have to move to Bollywood to get work."



She stormed toward him and with eyes shooting pure venom, she said, “You’ll regret this. You’ll regret this for the rest of your life.”

Once she’d marched through the door, Mark flung it shut behind her. Taking a moment to calm his heart rate, he paused before striding back to his desk, more than ready to take out his next obstacle. He picked up the phone.

“Liam? Get me Underwood on the line.”

\* \* \* \*

Kate stood on the salon steps and took a moment to look up and down the street. It was a beautiful summer’s day, she was happy, Jess was happy, everyone who passed them seemed happy. She knew her mood was due to the fact she was insanely in love, and after the time she and Mark had shared two short nights ago...her physical and mental state was decidedly blurred. It didn’t matter. Life felt fantastic.

She turned back into the shop.

“Coffee, Jo?”

Her assistant looked up from the appointment book. “Lovely. I’ll just re-confirm this cancellation and I’ll be right with you. Why don’t I pop to the baker’s and get us a couple of muffins to go with that coffee?”

Kate grinned. “Sounds good to me. See you in a minute.”

Humming to herself, she wandered into the kitchen and a few moments later, heard the bell tinkled above the door, announcing Jo’s departure from the salon. Flicking on the kettle, she spooned coffee into two mugs as she pondered the plausibility of her, Mark and Jess maybe getting away for the weekend sometime soon. Jess hadn’t been on a proper break away ever.

When James was alive, he’d not seen the point of taking one as he believed they were in the perfect holiday destination with snow in the mountains and sunny beaches down below. Any break Kate or Jess needed was right at their doorstep according to him--the idea of a change of scenery never occurring to James as he would never have sacrificed even a weekend without his board. And then when he’d died...

Kate swallowed. Her shock, her worry for Jess and her grief obliterated any thoughts of holidays and replaced them with building the strength they both needed to return home. The tinkling of the door a second time nudged Kate from her thoughts and forcing a smile, she poured boiling water into the mugs.

“Coffee’s served,” she called. “Where are those muffins?”

Silence.

“Jo?”

Further silence.

Frowning, Kate put down the kettle and walked along the corridor into the reception area. It was empty. She peered over the counter, thinking Jo might be hunkered down behind it where various lotions were stored. But she wasn't there. Wondering if she'd actually heard the doorbell, Kate turned and her gaze fell on the gossip magazine sitting like a glaring, tasteless script of impending doom on the magazine table.

Moving in slow motion, Kate picked it up. Her hands trembled as she gripped the magazine hard enough that the edges crumpled. Blood pounded at her temples as she read the bold printed headline for the fifth time--*JOHNSTON'S NEW FAMILY ENJOYS LUNCH WITH HIS EX-LOVER*.

Nausea swirled and surged into her stomach, pushing upward until it stung bitter in her throat. Even though Jess's face was blurred, all Kate saw was her beautiful daughter being used to sell magazines. Anger turned to rage and red-hot heat burned at Kate's cheeks as she raced to the door. She leapt out into the street, her head turning left and right. Although dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, Kate would've recognized Marcia's self-important swagger anywhere.

"Marcia! Marcia Langton!"

With no regard for the security of the salon, Kate took flight. Marcia turned. Kate hurled toward her. Marcia smiled, waved and ran. Kate gave chase but knew she'd never catch her with the head start Marcia already had.

"If I see you again, I'll kill you," she yelled. "Do you hear me?"

Slowing down until her feet were like lead blocks against concrete, Kate stared after Marcia until she was swept up in the sea of shoppers. People stopped on the busy street to stare. Some held their shopping bags against them like shields.

Turning, Kate jogged back to the salon and went inside, closing the door behind her. She squeezed her eyes closed and tipped her head back. It was pointless chasing Marcia anyway. It wasn't her who'd taken the picture even though she now knew Mark's suspicions were right. Marcia must have set the entire thing up that day in the café. What was she going to do?

Kate pressed her hand to her stomach. It was over.

She'd been seduced by the romantic notion she and Mark could build a life together, convinced they could live beyond the fact Mark was constantly in the limelight, that he spent every day of his working life with stars--stars like Marcia Langton who thought of nothing and no one but their next big fat pay check, or film premiere.

Growling like a lioness sensing danger to her cub, she ripped the magazine into pieces, tears burning the back of her eyes. The doorbell tinkled for a third time. Kate opened her eyes and when Jo strolled in her habitual smile dissolved.

Kate's shoulders slumped. "I've had it, Jo. I can't do this."

Dropping the muffins and her purse onto the table, she came forward and wrapped Kate in her embrace. "Don't cry. Everything will be all right."

Kate closed her eyes as the tears came fast and furious. She felt her happiness, her new-found hope wither and die inside her like a blooming flower wilting in the face of the sun's unforgiving glare. She couldn't fight the world's media, she couldn't fight the fact Mark would always be news. Her relationship with James changed from exciting to excruciating when he became so embroiled in his own success Kate and Jessica were forgotten.

And now she found life cruelly repeating itself and could only blame herself. Mark claimed he'd always loved her, but that wasn't enough to stop the inevitable fallout that would come in time. Well, this one wouldn't take her or Jess down with it. The best thing she could was put as much distance as possible between Mark and her daughter--before Jess's heart split in two for the second time. Her own pain she could handle but adding Jess's was too much to contemplate.

Stepping from Jo's arms, Kate swiped at her face, forced a small smile. "I'm okay. I've..." She paused as her gaze fell on the shredded paper littering the floor and table like multicolored pieces of disappointment. "I've got to go away for a few days, Jo. I can't be here right now."

Jo followed Kate's gaze. "They've got Jess, haven't they? They've taken her picture."

Kate nodded. "Listen, I'll ring the agency and get a temp to come in to handle the reception. Call as many clients as you can and see if you can re-schedule the less urgent--"

Jo smiled and cupped Kate's face in her hands. "I'll be fine. Go. Do what you have to do. Call me when you can. I'll be fine. Just worry about that beautiful girl of yours."

Kate drew Jo's hands from her face and hugged her. "Thank you."

And then she sprinted from the room and into the kitchen. With shaking hands, she snatched up her coat and bag. With a final look around, she blew Jo a kiss as she marched through reception and out to her car.

Less than two hours later, she'd packed enough clothes and toiletries to last three or four days. Once she left Foxton, she hoped Underwood would have the sense to realize that it was over between her and Mark and move onto the next unsuspecting victim. Kate prayed the man at least stayed away from any children next time, but didn't hold out much hope of that particular plea being answered.

Leaving the suitcases at the front door, Kate picked up her phone, rang the Carrington Hotel and booked a room. And then she rang Lucy at the nursery.

"Hi. It's me."

"Well, hey you. No need to ask where you've been hiding yourself," Lucy whispered. "Jess tells me she spent the night at Nanna's the other night. You naughty, naughty--"

Kate squeezed her eyes shut. "Luce--"

"I'm teasing! I'm so happy for the pair of you--"

"It's over."

"What?"

Kate sighed. "None of it matters anymore. Listen--"

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

“I’ll be there to pick up Jess in twenty minutes. Can you have her ready at the front door for me?”

“Wait. Slow down, will you? Are you crying?”

Kate brushed away her tears. “No. Look, I have to get out of here for a few days.”

“Why?”

Opening her eyes, Kate stared at the wall. “Underwood snapped me and Jess talking to Marcia yesterday and now our picture is all over the front of *Gotcha!* magazine.”

“What? He took a picture of Jess?” She paused. And then there was a huffed, “Bastard.”

“They have to scramble her face by law, but I can’t handle this, Luce. Just to see her on the front page like that.” Kate turned her gaze to the suitcases. “I will not risk it happening again, I can’t. Me and Mark are no more. Being with him comes with too heavy a price.”

“But Mark loves you so much. You can’t just disappear without a word.”

“I’ll speak to him, but I just need a few days alone. A few days to get the strength I’m going to need to stay away from him.”

“You love him, Kate.”

Kate blinked back more tears. “It’s too much. I can’t do it. Not after James. All I wanted for Jess was some security and look what’s happened. Mark can’t give her that even if he wanted to. The media will never leave him alone.”

“But it’s not as though he likes any of that. It comes with the territory. “

“I know, but that doesn’t make any difference to the likes of Underwood thinking he can go beyond the call of the gossip hungry public, does it? All I’m doing is protecting my daughter. I’ll be back in a few days when I’ve given the press some time to realize that Mark and I are finished, okay?”

Lucy sighed. “Fine, fine, you have to do what you think best, I know that. I’m on your side, I love you. Jess will be ready.”

“Thanks. I’ll be staying at the Carrington. Oh, and one more thing...”

“Don’t tell Mark where you are? How did I guess that was coming?” Lucy said grimly.

Kate smiled. “What would I do without you?”

## Chapter 15

Mark looked at his watch, nearly five o'clock. The end of the day for the majority of working people and today, it was the end of the day for him. Excitement churned in his stomach and his heartbeat grew strong with the knowledge of what he was about to do. He walked slowly around his office. The place he'd strived so hard to achieve. Working day and night to get his agency off the ground until here he was--not with a solitary office but an entire office floor. The director, with several agents working with him--his books held over a hundred famous names. He was a success--a lonely success.

He ran his hand across the back of the plush leather chairs, shifted the crystal cut vase holding an ever-changing fifty pound bouquet of fresh flowers on top of his walnut conference table. The external trappings of both his work and professional life were now unnecessary. What did any of it mean without the love and laughter of two special ladies who'd become such a vital part of him? He would not lose them, and now he would ensure that finally became clear.

Like a bolt from above, the answer to keeping Kate nearby and making Jessica know her life would never be without security was so simple, Mark actually laughed. He didn't need to be here anymore. He had more than enough eager associates just waiting to prove their worth to him. Pride at not being able to tell his family what had been going on way before disaster hit had sent his father hurtling to his demise--it would not do the same to Mark.

He whipped his jacket from the back of his chair and shrugged it on. There would always be another Underwood, another Marcia waiting in the wings to either use or destroy him. He was young, rich and not too bad to look at--he could give Kate and Jessica anything they wanted. He smiled. And all they wanted was him. The money was immaterial. A knot wound deep in Mark's gut.

Smiling, he left the office and strolled into Liam's quartile.

"I'm off. I'll see you tomorrow."

Liam snapped his head up, his eyes wide. "It's five o'clock."

Mark laughed. "And?"

"But you never..."

Mark winked. "From now on I do."

Liam smiled, threw a dismissive hand in the air. "Sounds good to me. You're the boss."

Mark turned with a wave and strolled through the office floor, waving and passing tidbits of conversation with his staff as he made his way to the lift. Filled with excitement for what lay ahead, he felt unbelievably happy.

A few minutes later, he marched from the lift, across the foyer and out into the late afternoon sunshine. Taking his car keys from his pocket, he threw them into the air and caught them. With a ridiculously huge grin on his face, he slid behind the wheel of his car and gunned the engine, heading directly to Kate's house. His fingers tapped to the music filtering from the radio as he drove across the city. She would no doubt be preparing dinner for Jessica before running her bath. The sudden urgency to share in that experience was so powerful he pressed harder on the accelerator.

Half an hour later, he knocked on Kate's door for the third time in as many minutes, a horrible sensation tickling the hairs at the nape of his neck. Something was wrong. He felt it in every fiber of his body. The curtains were drawn, the house eerily silent within. Unease rippled through his blood like a liquid warning. He pulled his phone from his inside pocket and dialed her mobile.

It rang and rang. Gritting his teeth and ignoring the harsh thump of his heart, Mark re-dialed again until the voice mail kicked in.

"Kate, it's me. Where are you? Call me back...love you."

Snapping the phone shut, he pressed it to his forehead and closed his eyes. The last time they spoke, she was happy, excited about their future. Their lovemaking reflected their physical and emotional satisfaction. Their futures clearly etched in both their minds to see and anticipate. But now...now he felt the most devastating sense of it slipping painfully away and he didn't even know why.

Opening his eyes, he looked up at the house as though the answer of what to do next might be sprayed on the walls. What to do? Where was she? He dialed her number again. Still voice mail. He'd try Lucy. Calling directory enquiries, Mark bounced from one foot to the other as he waited to be connected to the nursery where Lucy worked.

"Lucy? It's me."

"Who's me?"

"Mark. Mark Johnston."

A pause. "Mark," she said, brightly. "What a surprise! How can I help you?"

He narrowed his eyes. She may as well have told him she knew where Kate was and had been threatened with death not to reveal that secret knowledge. "Where is she, Lucy?"

"Sorry?"

"Kate. Where is she?"

"Um...have you tried her house?"

"Lucy..."

"Or her mobile?"

He gripped the phone tighter in his hand. "Lucy..."

"Look," she said. "She needs some space. She'll ring you when she's ready."

"What do you mean, space?" He looked up at the house. "She's gone?"

"Yes, for now. You need to be patient and leave her alone."

Mark shook his head and started down the walkway. "I can't do that."

“Yes, Mark, you can.”

“Fine. I’ll do it. I love her. So much.”

Lucy sighed. “Don’t do this to me. Don’t do this to her. Think of Jessica, will you? Kate’s right. That little girl doesn’t need photographers and God knows who else sticking a camera in her face like she’s an exhibition piece.”

“And she won’t. Never again.”

Lucy gave a rather inelegant snort, and Mark winced.

“Ha, because you’re Superman you’re going to fix the age-old problem of unwanted press intrusion just like that, are you?” she asked. “The great Mark Johnston is going to snap his fingers and every tabloid journalist in England is going to lie down like good girls and boys, is that it?”

Mark bit his teeth together. “I’ll deal with it. Please. Just tell me where I can find them.”

There was a long silence and as Mark wondered if she’d hung up the phone, she said, “I promised Kate I wouldn’t tell you where she is. If you can’t respect that then I’m not sure you should be with her anyway.”

Mark reached his car, opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat. He dropped his head onto the steering wheel. “I understand what you’re saying. But can’t you see--” A hard and stubborn lump lodged in his throat, cutting off the ability to speak.

“What? Can’t I see what?”

He swallowed, the fear scratching his throat like nails against the tender flesh. “None of it matters anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“The money, Lucy. The things, the success, the clients....it’s all superficial shit that adds up to nothing. It’s Kate. It’s always been Kate, and I am not the real me without her. I see that now.” He sat up and slumped against the seat. “And without adding more evidence to the idea you already have that I’m an arrogant asshole, I think she needs me to be who she really is too.”

“Really?” Her tone was skeptical--forced skeptical.

“Yes. Was she ever truly happy with James, Luce? Did she ring you and tell you how happy they were in Zante? How he treated her like a queen and their life was perfect?”

A long pause. “No, but you name one couple who can say that. This isn’t a bloody romance novel, this is real life.”

“You’re wrong. If you tell me where she is, I will guarantee this will be Kate and Jess’s life. I have the money, the time, the desire and the passion to give them everything. I promise you Kate will be happy for the rest of her life if you just tell me where she is.”

\* \* \* \*

“Mark rang again this morning, Kate,” Lucy huffed. “The poor guy’s going to have a coronary if you don’t see him soon.”

“But you didn’t tell him where I am?” Kate looked toward the hotel window as though she expected to see Mark shimmy down its pane a la Spiderman.

“Of course I didn’t,” said Lucy indignantly.

“Good. He actually turned up on Mum’s doorstep yesterday. I swear the woman would kick Dad to the curb and elope with Mark herself if she was twenty years younger.” Kate laughed. “You should’ve heard what she said to me. She actually called me, and I quote, ‘insane and completely in need of a sex life.’”

Lucy laughed. “Seriously?”

“Yep. Even my mum thinks I should forget the wrath of the British press and jump into bed with him--leave Jess to the wolves.”

“I’m sure she’s not saying that.” She paused. “She’s just appreciating your leftovers. Although...”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Although what?”

“You’re not going to thank me for saying this but...”

“Just tell me.”

“When he rang on Tuesday he sounded so sincere. God, it was so romantic. Mark Johnston, the hot stud every woman wants, but he only wants you and Jess. Oh, I could cry just thinking about it.”

Kate’s heart gave a painful kick. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m not going to thank you for saying that.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry but it was horrible to hear him begging that way, you know? He’s always so dynamic and in control when you see him on the telly. It was hard to put the two personas together, but he’s serious, Kate. He wants you, and I don’t see how you’re going to resist him if he says to you what he said to me.”

Kate threw a hurried glance toward Jessica lying on her stomach, stuffing handfuls of popcorn into her mouth and giggling at Elmo as he hurtled back and forth across the TV screen. Happy she was sufficiently distracted, Kate dropped backward onto the bed with a groan.

“I can’t do this to her.”

“Jess? You can’t do Mark to her?”

Kate managed a small smile. “Exactly.”

A long pause. “Hasn’t she asked why you’ve been hiding out in a hotel for the last two days?”

“Has it only been that long?” Kate sighed. “I feel like I’ve been cooped up in here for a week already.”

“Well, why don’t you come home?”

“Haven’t you read the papers?” Kate scrambled into a sitting position and lifted the morning’s newspaper from the bedside cabinet. “They’re saying I ran from Mark after he cheated on me with Marcia, or they’re speculating Jessica is in the hospital after being diagnosed with God knows what...they’re even looking into my relationship with James, trying to find out what when on between us and how much of it they can twist. It’s horrible.”

“I know it is, but you can’t stay there forever.”



Kate tossed the paper onto the bed. "I know. I know. We'll most likely be back tomorrow."

"And you'll talk to Mark?"

"Yes. But if he won't listen to me, I'll have no choice but to leave Foxton permanently. I don't want the life I would have if I stayed with him. I don't want any of this media frenzy and crazed starlets. If he won't leave me alone, I'll go back to Zante and that will be the end of it."

"Back to Zante?" Lucy cried. "Why would you do that? You went there for James, Kate. Your family and friends, everyone who loves you is here."

"Because it's all Jess has ever known. It will be going home to her, won't it? Foxton is a strange place to her. Over the last couple of days, I can't help thinking my decision to come here was all about me and nothing about her."

"That's crap and you know it!"

Kate looked up to find Jess carefully watching her. She slapped on a smile and Jess turned back to the TV. Swallowing the knot in her throat, Kate turned her attention back to the phone.

"It's not crap," she whispered.

"Yes, it is. Her family is here. She's got a right to grow up knowing your mum and dad, James's mum and dad. They're thrilled you're back and you need to stay here for Jess as much as you. Imagine how much Jess will enjoy going to see them in Devon, playing on the beach, swimming in the sea. Are you listening to me?"

Kate stared unseeingly ahead of her. James's parents. She'd only seen them once since she'd been back in the UK, and they'd welcomed her and Jess with open arms but...

"My God, why didn't I think about them before?" she murmured.

"What? Who? Your mum and dad?"

Kate stood up and wandered to the window, turning her back to Jess. "James's parents, Oh, my God, what will they be thinking of all this media coverage, the photos and hideous suggestions being made about my relationship with James?"

A pause. "Haven't they contacted you?"

Kate pressed her hand to her rolling stomach. "No, but surely it's only a matter of time."

"Probably you're right. So isn't that even more reason to stay put? To face this out? James was their son no matter what kind of crappy husband he was\_\_"

"Luce..."

"What? He was their son, they loved him but he's gone. Jess isn't. They will love that girl more than they'll love anyone else now, Kate. She's all they've got left of James. They always loved you like a daughter, didn't they?"

"Yes, but..."

"They won't listen to it. They'll want you to be happy. You're their grandchild's mother, and they won't risk estrangement from you. They love Jess far too much."

Kate slowly nodded as the trembling in her fingers subsided. "You're right. Don and Kath have shown me nothing but kindness since the day I met them."

“Exactly. And I’ll put money on it that they want to see you happy.” She paused. “Whether that be with or without Mark.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t change the fact Mark’s life involves the press and psychotic, egotistical and potentially dangerous female stars, does it?”

“You do know Marcia Langton’s disappeared, don’t you?”

Kate’s heart hitched and her breathing stopped. She could hear Lucy’s smile through the phone. “What do you mean disappeared?” she asked slowly.

“Well...” She stopped.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Get on with it, Luce.”

Her friend giggled. “Well...he’s dropped her.”

“Dropped her?”

“Uh-huh. Kicked her skinny size zero ass right out of his office and into space.”

Kate cursed the way her heart picked up speed as her hand became clammy against the phone. “What are you talking about? He can’t just drop her.”

“Can’t you just enjoy the moment?”

“No,” Kate said firmly. “Tell me.”

“Fine, fine,” Lucy huffed. “He told her he doesn’t want to represent her anymore. He knows she masterminded the sabotaging of your relationship. He thinks she’s been working with Underwood.”

Kate silently cursed. “I knew it. He knew it.”

“Yep, well, she will finish her *Hamlet* commitments and then Mark says she will be on the first plane out of the UK to Hollywood. He’s paying for the one-way ticket.” Lucy paused. “So this changes everything, doesn’t it?”

Kate stood up straight. “No.”

“Kate, come on...”

“No.”

“Look, Mark...”

Lucy’s rationale faded into the background as Kate’s brain jammed with ifs, whys and maybes. It shouldn’t matter. What Mark did or didn’t do should no longer matter to her. She’d made her decision. It would be just her and Jess for the foreseeable future--maybe one day she would find a man to love, a man with a normal nine to five job, earning a living, having time to spend at the beach, or the cinema, an evening meal with them. She didn’t need Mark and his flashing paparazzi bulbs, huge cars and the majestic...the wonderful, the dream reality of *The Landscape*.

She didn’t need him. She didn’t need to see his smile, his eyes. She didn’t need to hear his voice, the rich boom of his laughter. She didn’t need to feel the touch of his hands on her skin, the firm and possessive pressure of his lips against hers. She didn’t need--

“Kate?”

She started. “I...um...none of it matters, Luce. None of it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kate snapped the phone shut and walked over to Jess on trembling legs. “You okay, sweetheart?”

Jess nodded without taking her eyes from the screen. Kate pressed a kiss to her crown, wandered into the bathroom, shut the door and slipped to the tiled floor with the tears damp on her cheeks.

She loved him so much.

Her phone rang in her hand and Mark’s name showed on the display. “No. Not now, Mark.”

She turned off the phone.

## Chapter 16

Three days had passed since Kate disappeared, and Mark was grinning like a man who'd been told to spend the afternoon ranking Victoria Secrets models. He'd found her. He knew where she was thanks to the remarkable--and somewhat dubious--resources of his faithful, wonderful and soon to be massively rewarded personal assistant. Liam was a genius!

Swiveling around in his chair, Mark stared out of the window covering most of the wall behind his desk. The mid-morning August sun burned high in the sky, a few clouds enhanced rather than shadowed the gorgeous day. Mark tapped the piece of paper bearing the name of The Carrington Hotel against his palm and laughed. It could be a snowstorm with raging winds and an impending tornado and he'd still think it was a gorgeous day.

Marcia had a final performance tonight. Then he would escort her to the airport and watch her get on the plane to LA. He had delivered the news to her that morning that he'd severed all her future possibilities, telling interested producers and publicists she no longer felt Britain was big enough to contain her talent.

Another burst of laughter bubbled at the back of Mark's throat.

Nothing pissed the British off more than insinuating the united force of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales were any less powerful than any other country in the world. The UK might be small but it was there, loud and proud on the universal map.

"Hoorah!" Mark exclaimed and punched his fist in the air. God, he was losing his mind to his euphoria.

Shaking his head, he swiveled around and slapped his hands on his desk. He felt like a kid in a sweetshop, but he still had one more thing to do before he went after Kate and told her his plans--his fantastic, amazing, exciting and ultimately plausible plans for them to be together. His eyes burned. His plans for them to be a family--him, Kate and Jess together.

Adjusting the knot of his tie and moving his head side to side in a pathetic effort to relax, he reached forward and pressed the button for the intercom into Liam's office.

"Liam?"

"Yes, boss."

"Can you come in here for a second?"

"Sure. I'll be right there."

Mark released the button and inched further back in his seat. His gaze trained on his office door as he fought the grin on his face into a serious, ambiguous expression of nonchalance. The grin momentarily broke. Liam was about to have bloody kittens.

After a discreet knock, the door opened. Mark's smile abruptly dissolved. He met his assistant's eyes.

“Come and take a seat.”

Liam did a double take. “Everything all right?” he asked as he sat.

Mark kept his eyes locked on his. “Any reason why it shouldn’t be?”

“No, you sound kind of...strange.”

A smile battled at Mark’s lips. He pressed them firmly together until the tug surrendered. “I’m fine. In fact, I’m more than fine.”

Liam raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

The smile broke before he could stop it. “I’m bloody fantastic.”

Liam grinned. “Who’ve you signed up? Whoever he or she is must be either the next big thing, or they’re already the big thing and they’ve jumped ship to you. Come on, with a smile on your face that size, it means big bucks either way.”

“This smile has got nothing to do with money. Not a damn thing.”

“Yeah, right. I’ve worked with you for nearly three years, and there’s only two things that make you smile like that.”

“Which are?”

“Money and success. So which is it? Or maybe it’s both.”

“You’re halfway there. It is two things that are making me want to jump out this seat and kiss you...”

“What?” Liam visibly paled.

Mark laughed. “Kiss you, my friend, kiss you. And those two things are Kate and Jessica.”

Liam’s eyes grew wide and his color drained even more. “There’s no new client?”

“Nope. I’m going to be with Kate and Jess, Liam. Permanently. As much as possible. Every dang day if they’ll have me.”

“Well, that’s great, I’m happy for you.” He frowned. “Is that why you called me in here? To tell me you’re reunited with your girlfriend?”

Mark smiled. “No.”

“Then you’re going to have to help me out here. I’ve got work coming out of my ears since you dropped Marcia. Phone calls left, right and center...”

“I called you in to let you know I’m out of here. I’m leaving.”

Liam opened his mouth as if to say something. His gaze met Mark’s, flitted over his face until his eyes grew wide. “The agency? You’re leaving the agency?”

Mark’s grin widened. “Yep.”

“But you can’t. Are you insane?” Liam leapt to his feet. “Business is buzzing. It’s the most successful and renowned agency in England. Stars all over the country want to be represented by Johnston’s. Producers come to you for the best, the newest, the most beautiful. What--”

“I’m glad to hear you have so much pride in the place...” Mark paused, bracing himself for the oncoming onslaught. “Seeing as I’m putting you in charge.”

“What am I suppose to tell Simon Scott when he--” Liam stopped.

Mark swallowed the urge to laugh out loud as his assistant's face evolved into an expression akin to a Disney character who'd slammed his hand in a door. His face turned from pink to red to scarlet in seconds, his mouth dropped open, wider and wider, and his hands came slowly up to press against either side of his head as though his brain was about to explode.

"You're putting me in charge?"

Mark nodded. "Uh-huh."

"What are you talking about, man? You can't think the associate agents are going to take orders from me?"

Still smiling, Mark dropped into his chair. "No, but I do think they'll want to keep their jobs. And I do think you'd find a way to organize a rock gig at a barn-dance so this will be a piece of cake once you get stuck in. And I do think you're going to be one of the finest theatrical agents on the planet within the next couple of years, and as this will be invaluable experience to you I think there is zero chance of you turning it down." He paused, "And finally, I think your heart is close to bursting out your chest right now, because there is nothing you thrive more on than a challenge of manic proportions or why the hell would you have continued working for me for so damn long?"

The silence in the room was only broken by the occasional burst of laughter outside the closed office door or the shudder of the refrigerated mini-bar in the office. Liam's hands lowered from his head until they were stretched out in front of him and his expression changed from a man who's been told he might be pregnant, to a man who'd just won the lottery.

Mark shifted further back in his seat--suddenly unsure of his own safety.

Liam's ensuing yell would've have shook the glass in the windows were they not triple-glazed. He shot around the desk and slapped his hands to Mark's face. Mark noted the crazed exhilaration in his eyes a moment too late--the kiss Liam pressed to his forehead resounded around the room with an audible 'smack'.

Laughing, Mark jumped to his feet and embraced Liam, both slapping each other's backs. The two of them danced a jig before collecting themselves and parting.

Catching his breath, the color and smile simultaneously slipped from Liam's face.

"Shit," he said, crossing his arms. "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have jumped on you when you've just offered me the position of the damn century."

Grinning, Mark swiped his hand through the air. "Don't be so bloody stupid. Despite everything that's been going on around here lately, I trust you. There's nothing wrong with showing me you're as happy as I am. Sit down. We've got lots to talk about." He looked at his watch. "Underwood and the rest of the press will be here in less than half an hour."

Liam sank into the visitor's chair looking half-dazed. "Is this why you called them here?"

"Yep. I'm going to let that son of a bitch Underwood and the rest of the media assholes know that I'm taking a step back. I'm disappearing for a while with Kate and Jessica. If I'm not here, they've no story."

Liam's expression turned somber. "They'll follow you, Mark. You're big news, which means big money."

"Maybe they will. But how long are they going to hang around a couple and a three-year-old child who do nothing out of the ordinary every damn day. Because, my friend, that's exactly what I want to happen. I want me, Kate and Jess to have the most boring, ordinary life possible."

"And she's agreed to that? Even though she only opened her business a few weeks ago?"

Mark looked at him, felt the weight that had continuously dropped and rose in his gut for the last three days fall once again. "I don't know, but it's worth asking her, don't you think? I need them, Liam. And I'll do whatever it takes to prove it to them. I'll leave all this behind. I will move away or become a bloody house husband if that's what Kate wants. I just want us to be together."

Liam stared at him and gave a low whistle. "Man, you've got it bad."

Mark grinned. "Yep, I've got it bad." He stood up. "So let's go deal with Underwood so I can go get my woman."

\* \* \* \*

Mark faced the assembled group of press. As though God knew what was about to happen, the bright sunshine disappeared beneath rolling gray clouds, promising a deluge of rain sooner rather than later. He stared straight at Underwood, the biggest black cloud to ever grace the earth.

The piece of shit stood at the front of the group, clearly thinking himself the leader of the pack rather than the most likely candidate to get punched square in the face if Mark decided that was the route he wanted to take. Underwood threw him a smile and a wink. Mark forced himself to return the greeting lest Underwood achieve the satisfaction of snapping him with anything less than happiness on his face.

Mark ignored the thumping of the vein pulsing at his temple and drew his gaze along the twenty or more faces eagerly watching him. Cameramen and photographers were peppered among the journalists, who held their tape recorders flung outward or their pens poised above notepads. He cleared his throat.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you for being here this morning despite the late hour of my invitation last night. As you know I have asked you here today as I have an announcement to make."

Silence descended, but then Underwood's derisive laugh burst forth like the squawk of a thieving, conniving seagull. "Fucking hell, Johnston. Do you want a mountain to stand on? Or maybe we should set fire to a bush? Who do you think you are calling us here like we're a pack of God damn groupies and then holding court like you're God? You're a joke."

Mark's chest burned as he fought to keep his smile firmly in place. "You think so?"

"Yeah, I do. Now get on with it. I'm a busy man."

"Really? Then explain why a busy man such as yourself continues to sniff around my ass like a dog who wants to mount it?"

A chorus of laughter and knowing smiles rippled amongst Underwood's peers. He glanced left and right before glaring at Mark, his face bright red with anger and humiliation. "You're only of any interest to me because the public thinks you're some sort of celebrity. You sell pictures asshole, that's all."

"Then why go after my father three years ago, Underwood? Didn't you have the guts to face me with your bullshit then? Had to bully an old man into leaving the country first?"

Mark knew the other journalists were scribbling down every word he said--maybe even the cameras were rolling, but he couldn't care less. This life was over for him. The heavy weight on his shoulders slowly dispersed with each passing minute. And as he looked into the bitter and resentful eyes of his nemesis, it made him want to laugh out loud. Love made a man better, stronger and more focused. Love made a man fight another man with everything he had in order to protect it, and this was the last time Mark would take Underwood on.

He was rid of Marcia and he would be rid of Underwood.

Underwood pointed his finger at him. "You are no better than your old man, Johnston. You've got your success, your money, your God damn mansion but underneath it all, you're the same as he is. Pathetic, scared of failure and using other people's lives like you own them." He paused, his puffy man boobs rising and falling with each ragged breath. "Hey, and do you know something? I'll be there when you drop the car on them as well."

The collective intake of breath scraped along the inner workings of Mark's gut like sharpened claws. His hands were curled into fists at his sides and his smile gone but Mark couldn't help it. He shook with the effort it took to stay still--to maintain the distance between him and Underwood and not lunge forward and pummel the scum into the ground. He would not falter. He would not serve a prison sentence at the cost of one of man's goading.

Turning his gaze on the rest of the audience, Mark stared at them as they stood looking at him. He'd give them their story but it wouldn't be about him and Underwood rolling around on the pavement outside his office block. He forced his smile back into place.

"As I was saying--"

"That's it?" Underwood took a step forward. "What's the matter? You got to make sure there are no witnesses before you get heavy-handed with me, Johnston? You're a bloody coward."

Mark swerved his gaze toward him. "And you need to shut your mouth and let me finish talking."

Underwood grinned, revealing his crooked teeth yellowed by cigarettes and cheap red wine. "Is that right?"

"If you can hold that poisonous tongue of yours, Underwood, you'll hear exactly why this is over between us."

"What is?"

"Our fight. The press. Your whole bloody obsession with my life and my clients. It's over, I'm out."



“What the fuck...”

Mark turned, cleared his throat and the frown from his face. “Ladies and gentlemen, the main reason I called you here today is to state I will be stepping back from the theatre business for the foreseeable future. As of tomorrow, my PA and future associate Liam Strong will be running The Johnston’s Agency. The associate agents will continue as they are, yet coordinate with Liam who will be dealing with producers, directors and so forth. I will continue as head of the company, but will no longer be taking part in client’s premieres, promotion or general guidance. My client list will be shared equally and amicably amongst my associates.”

He paused to let the news sink in. A long moment of silence ensued but as Mark already predicted, Underwood was the first to speak. “Bullshit.”

Mark raised an eyebrow, but didn’t answer. Instead he turned back to the camera in front of him. “So officially as of tomorrow--”

“And what has Marcia Langton got to say about you disappearing and her having to answer to your ass-wiper, Johnston?” Underwood yelled.

The camera swung round and gave Underwood the stage he craved. Mark inwardly cursed. His announcement had to be televised--Kate had to know how publicly and truly he needed to be with and loved her and Jess. Mark’s mouth curved into a slow smile when he realized this was perfect. He stood on the ideal platform to show Underwood in all his conniving, devious glory.

“Hasn’t Marcia told you this already, Underwood?” He grinned.

Underwood threw a panicked glance at the camera and then back at Mark. “What?”

“I know you’ve been working with her to destroy me. She confessed.”

Mark saw the camera focus back on him through his peripheral vision. Kate would see it all. She would know the background of what had gone on. She would know just how close Marcia and Underwood came to undoing their relationship and possibly everything Mark worked so hard for.

“You are one paranoid son of a....”

Mark held up his hand, smiled. “Face it. You’re not as close to a potential superstar as you’d like to think, Underwood. But with your super-intelligent investigative skills I’m sure you can track Marcia down in no time and get the money she promised you, can’t you?”

Underwood opened his mouth but nothing came out. Leaving him standing there, Mark addressed the rest of the now smirking media and looked directly into the camera, his heart thundering as a sudden attack of nerves and adrenaline, spiked by potential liberty, raced through his blood.

“And the reason behind my decision to leave the business for the next few months? Well, that is something I want the whole world to know.” He threw up his arms and grinned. “I am leaving the industry to spend time with the woman I love and her daughter. Kate and Jessica Marshall are everything to me and always will be. I just hope and pray they’ll have me. And if they do?” He looked at each of the faces in turn. “I ask that you leave us alone to live our lives.” He turned to Underwood. “And as for you.”

Underwood sneered. "What? I get special treatment, do I?"

Mark slowly nodded. "Oh, yes. As for you, I have enough evidence, witness statements and God knows what else to prove to every editor in the country how slanderous the stuff you write is. How your work is eighty percent guesswork and hearsay, the other twenty percent fabricated crap. So the deal for you? Leave me and mine alone or I'll make sure your entire career is left in pieces."

He turned away as a small cheer erupted from the gathered throng and their cameras and microphones lowered--interview over.

"You're an asshole, Johnston!" Underwood yelled.

Mark stopped, yards from his car. "Yeah? Well, why not leave this asshole the hell alone and see if Marcia Langton has left the country without paying you for your impeccable work."

Laughing, Mark slid into his car and screeched away, leaving Underwood frantically dialing and re-dialing his phone. Mark was already ten minutes late for his appointment with the jewelers, and the last thing he wanted was for that particular door to be closed when he got there.

## Chapter 17

“Yay! You win!”

Kate clapped her hands together and pulled Jess into her lap before tumbling backward onto the bed. Closing her eyes, Kate breathed in the scent of strawberry shampoo and familiarity when Jess put her head to hers, softly humming the theme tune to *Dora the Explorer*.

The time had come to stop hiding and face their future. After her conversation with Lucy yesterday, and her subsequent cry, Kate had decided enough was enough. Mark made her happy, and he made Jess happy. The fact his face sold papers, and he successfully made other people's dreams come true, added up to nothing more than an illustration of how good he was at his job.

And Kate needed him. And therein lay the problem. The same problem that had existed ever since she'd walked into the Theatre Royal three months ago and saw him standing in the bar. She wanted him. For her. For Jess. Not as a piece of public property but the last few days, while she'd been alone without distractions had opened her eyes--she'd been unhappy in her marriage with James because he wanted her to be a different person than she was, to live a life that wasn't hers. And she'd been asking the same of Mark--how dare she?

How dare she ask him to change or alter one single thing that made him who he was. She closed her eyes and pressed a kiss to Jess's temple. And if he'd still have them--Kate and Jess wanted him just the way he was, and with everything that came with him. They'd find a way to deal with the press and the likes of Marcia in good time.

“Can I go watch TV, Mummy?”

Jess's voice broke through Kate's reverie. She let her arm fall back onto the mattress, thus releasing Jess from her maternal headlock. “Sure, but you won't have long. As soon as the lady calls, we have to leave, okay?”

Scrambling off the bed, Jess ran into the next room and the sacred TV that held Elmo inside like a furry red treasure. Pushing off the bed, Kate wandered to the window. The hotel was on the very outskirts of Foxton, built along the docks. Her gaze was drawn across the water to the fancy apartments on the other side. Kate grimaced. She could remember going there with her father as a child. They would walk hand in hand along that side of the dock, and she would listen as he pointed out disused moorings, locks and the huge anchor chains with links the size of her four-year-old hand. Now the history was buried in the foundations of apartments only afforded by the rich and sometimes famous.

Not for her.

The rain spat its first drops against the glass. Kate looked up. Gunmetal clouds skittered across the sky, the wind herding them closer and closer together. Within minutes, it turned leaden and the few drops became a downpour. She turned away and walked back into the room. She and Jess were embarking on a new part of their lives and deep inside Kate knew they would be okay. They would always have one another to lean on if things didn't work out.

Jess came bounding into the room and Kate quickly swiped at her face. "Whoa, slow down." She laughed.

Jess's stared, her green eyes wide. She grabbed Kate's hand. "Quick, quick! Mark's on TV!"

Kate frowned, threw a glance toward the open bedroom door. Mark's voice filtered toward her from the main room of the suite. She looked down at Jess in stunned silence, before picking her up and racing from the room. Dropping into an armchair she stared at the TV, oblivious to Jess climbing onto her lap.

"See, Mummy," she said, pointing at the screen. "It's Mark."

Unable to speak, Kate nodded. Mark stood outside his office block announcing to the whole of Foxton, possibly the country, he wanted to be with her and Jess if they wanted him, as well as walking away from the business for the long-term. Kate wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Could she let him do this? He'd worked so hard to build up his client list, his reputation, his success--all from scratch. Would Liam really be able to take on Mark's associate agents and keep a multi-million pound business running smoothly? Yet her insides churned with excitement and her heart beat so fast she could barely catch her breath. A slow smile curved her lips. He clearly had as much choice in their separation as she did--none whatsoever.

They could be together, and they could be happy.

If they disappeared for a while, let the press see there wasn't a story, no scandal or hidden secrets, then they could return to Foxton and be a family. Her smile stretched to a grin, and she tightened her arms around her baby girl. They'd faced enough interference in two months to fill two years, yet Mark still fought for them. And damn it, how could she have not done the same? Why was she hiding out in a hotel instead of standing by his side?

Jessica's warm fingers touched her face. "Does Mark want us to live with him, Mummy?"

Still grinning like a Cheshire Cat, Kate looked down into the emerald green depths of her daughter's eyes. "Yes, sweetheart, I think he does."

Jessica's forehead wrinkled. "And do you want him to live with us?"

A weight dropped into Kate's belly. Had her instinct been wrong? Didn't Jess like Mark as much as she thought? Guilt seared her cheeks. "Don't you?"

Jessica brought her other hand up and cupped Kate's jaw. "I want Mark to be my new daddy but if you don't like him as much as me, he's not allowed."

A lump the size of Mount Vesuvius rose in Kate's throat, causing burning hot tears to leap into her eyes. She swallowed, laughed and pulled Jess into a bear hug. "You are amazing, do you know that?"

“Do you like Mark, Mummy?”

Pressing a kiss to her daughter’s head of soft curls, Kate said, “I love him.”

And with that Jess wriggled out of her embrace and gave an almighty screech before leaping from her lap and dancing in circles around the room. “You love Mark, and Mark loves us! You love Mark, and Mark loves us!”

Standing up, Kate laughed right along with her. She strode forward and grasped Jess’s hands in hers and the two of them danced the happy dance the length and breadth of the room. They squealed and laughed, danced and jumped. Kate felt the stress and worry of the last few days filter away until nothing was left but pure joy.

And then there was an abrupt knock at the door. They froze.

Mark.

Without opening the door she knew it was him.

She dropped Jess’s hands and clutched at the spot where her heart beat like an out of control bongo drum. He was there. Right now. A wave of nervousness, delight, fear and love washed through from Kate’s toes to the top of her head. Images of James, of her mother, of James’s mother, of Marcia and Underwood flicked past her eyes. Her feet remained welded to the floor.

But Jess held no such qualms or hesitation--Kate was forced to move when Jess made a run for the door.

“Sweetheart, wait. You don’t ever answer the door without Mummy, remember?”

“But it could be Mark. Quick, quick!”

Kate swung Jess up onto her hip just as a second knock rapped on the door. She looked at Jess and winked. “Impatient, isn’t he?”

Jess frowned. “What?”

Kate laughed, shook her head. “Nothing. And it’s pardon.”

She stepped forward and opened the door.

“Mark!” Jess screeched.

Kate’s breath caught in her throat. Whether it was their three day separation or the truth they would spend the rest of their lives together, Kate had no idea, but Mark never looked more handsome than he did in that moment.

His gaze went straight to Jess. “Hello, you.”

Jess put her arms out to him and Kate came undone when he lifted Jess from her embrace and into his own. “You were on the telly,” Jess said.

Mark brushed the hair back from her face. Kate could’ve sworn his eyes were shinier than they were a few seconds before. She blinked back her own tears.

“Did you see me?” he asked, his gaze still locked with Jess’s.

“Yes. And you said you loved us.”

He grinned and whatever tiny piece of Kate’s heart that wasn’t yet his surrendered. “I did.” He kissed her cheek. “I do.” He kissed her other cheek. “Is that okay?”

Jess giggled and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him close, clearly too happy for words. Kate swayed slightly back on her heels when their eyes met over Jess's shoulder. She had never been more in love in her whole life.

She smiled. "Do you want come in?"

"More than anything."

Kate's stomach turned over, and her heart swelled when she recognized the uncertainty in his frown. He'd had no idea if she would agree. He still thought she wanted nothing more to do with him. Wanted to break away and never come back. She locked her gaze on his and nodded. He watched her. Nodded back. She nodded again...

And then she was in his arms along with Jess, the three of them tucked together as one. Kate drew comfort from the feel of his strong hand pressed to the small of her back and the joy shining in Jess's eyes.

But just a few seconds later, she was snapped back to reality by the jabbing, wriggling elbows of a three-year-old. "Can I go and watch TV now?" Jess asked, clearly bored with the whole reunion thing.

Mark planted a kiss on her forehead and set her down.

"Sure, if Mummy doesn't mind."

Kate winked. "Go."

Jess ran back inside and Kate slid her hand into Mark's, pulling him into the suite, closing the door behind them. Silently, the two of them walked passed Jess and into the bedroom. They sat down on the bed. Kate met his eyes.

"I can't believe you did that."

"I want you, Kate. You and Jess," he said, looking down at their joined hands. "I want you both so much." He looked up. "Do you want me?"

She leaned forward and put her lips to his. There was a moment's hesitation before his hand moved to her shoulder, then to the back of her neck.

Knowing she risked Jess seeing them yet unable to go a moment longer without kissing him, she gave him her silent answer. Their soft tentative kiss became more intense, more ardent... Kate pulled away at the urgent tell-tale hitch between her legs.

"Yes, Mark. I want you."

His threw a hurried glance toward the open bedroom door and then back to her. He cleared his throat, his eyes full of mischief as he not-so-subtly adjusted the fly area of his trousers. "Mmm, good. I got that. But what about the long-term? I can't let you have your wicked way with me and then toss me aside like a surplus-to-requirements gigolo."

Kate pushed out her bottom lip and tipped her head to the side as though considering what he'd said. "Well, the thing is..."

"Hey!"

She laughed, and he pulled her into his arms. She closed her eyes when she felt him kiss her hair and rest his chin on her head. "I love you so much, Kate Marshall."

"I love you too, Mark Johnston." She paused as her gaze fell on Jess in the other room. "But I'm also scared."

He gently eased her away and looked into her eyes. "I won't be going anywhere. I'm here for the long haul."

"You have to promise me nothing else will pull us apart."

"It won't."

She glanced toward Jess. "But most of all you have to promise me you'll do everything in your power to protect Jess. Whether that be from the press...or pain. The fear I won't be enough for her, that she'll one day ask for James because she still feels the void he left in her heart and I'm not enough to fill it scares me to death. Do you understand?"

He briefly pressed his lips to hers. "More than anything. I love her, Kate." He paused, smiled. "And that's why I have a plan."

Kate's stomach did a loop-the-loop at the boyish pride in his eyes. "A plan?"

"Uh-huh."

"What plan?"

He gripped her hands. He looked adorable. And sexy. And determined. And...she needed to focus.

"Okay, here goes." He swallowed. "I have more money than we could spend in a lifetime..."

Kate pulled away and cocked an eyebrow. "And clearly modest about it."

He laughed. "If you let me finish..."

She smiled and gestured for him to continue.

"We can travel. I can pay for Jess's education, her hopes and dreams, anything you want. We can live here, abroad...both. What I'm saying is, it's up to us what happens from here on. I want you to be happy and if it means leaving Foxton and starting again where no one knows us or cares who we are, so be it."

Kate shook her head. "Mark..."

He grasped her hand. "We can do whatever we want. But please, Kate, please say we can do this. The three of us can be together."

She leaned forward and kissed him long and hard. "We can. But we'll be together here. I will carry on with the salon, and you will continue to run your company."

"But surely..."

"We are not running from them, Mark. If we're going to do this, we do this here. We live together in Foxton where we are surrounded by family and friends. Where Jess can grow up knowing my parents and James's parents. Where I can tell her about the places we used to go and the places we wanted to once we were old enough. And most of all..." She paused, cupping his jaw in her hand. "She can live in the most beautiful house in the entire world."

He drew her into his arms. "I bought it for you, you know."

She leaned her head against his strong chest, placed her hand over his heart. "I know."

"And one day you will pay me back."

Kate's eyes shot open, and she sat bolt upright. "Pardon?"

He grinned. "Well, there has to be some sort of remuneration. So...once the place is filled with six kids running around the garden, I'll consider the debt cleared."

Kate swatted him on the arm as he casually slid it into his pocket as though what he was asking of her was no big deal. "Six! Are you crazy?" she said.

He shrugged. "Well, okay, I'll settle for four."

She stared back him as a flutter of anticipation rippled through her stomach. "We'll see."

After a moment, his smile slowly dissolved. Kate touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

His adam's apple shifted beneath the taut skin of his neck and a flush of color darkened his cheeks. "Couldn't be better."

"Then what..."

He flipped open the lid of the red velvet box and Kate's heart jumped into her throat. The diamond sparkled and glinted even in the subdued light of the hotel room. Flawless and perfect, nothing too big but oh, so striking, Kate couldn't take her eyes off of it.

She raised her eyes to his. "Mark. . ."

He slipped the ring onto her wedding finger. "Kate Marshall, will you marry me?"

With tears spilling onto her cheeks and his handsome face blurring, Kate nodded. "Yes, yes I will."

And at that moment, Jess came running into the room, her eagle eyes falling on the ring. She looked from Kate to Mark and back again before screaming and scrambling up on the bed between them. And as Mark scooped her up and the three of them fell backward onto the bed laughing and crying, Kate knew they had gotten it right this time.



## About Rachel Brimble

[http://www.lyricalpress.com/store/index.php?main\\_page=authors&authors\\_id=158](http://www.lyricalpress.com/store/index.php?main_page=authors&authors_id=158)

I hope you enjoyed *Getting It Right This Time*--this book was inspired by my eldest daughter, Jessica, who was exactly like the Jessica in the book when she was the same age! This is my fifth novel, the first with the lovely Lyrical Press, and I found myself wanting to include my children in my writing somehow.

So the idea came to explore how I would try to restore my children's confidence and belief all could be good in the world if they were to lose their father. It was an emotional write at times, and I hope it gave you an emotional read--and of course, a great happy ending! xx

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