KRISTI
GOLD

FALL FROM GRACE

Cherish

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Fall From Grace

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When a marriage of twenty years ends, is there any going back? Can you regain what's been lost? For heart surgeon Jack Morgan the answer is yes. Paralyzed by a stroke, he has no choice but to turn to his ex-wife, Anne–just as if they were still married.During the months that follow, they discover that the memories of their marriage have an unexpected power to bring forgiveness–and the return of a love that never really left.

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Fall from Grace
Kristi Gold

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To my mother, Jean,
for surviving all the storms with such grace.

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Any errors in accuracy are my own.

CHAPTER 1

Beat, dammit. Beat…

As if empowered by the surgeon's silent command, the lifeless heart resumed a steady rhythm, again taking its place among the living, cheating death. Only then did Dr. Jack Morgan allow himself to relax.

At this point during surgery, adrenaline normally coursed through Jack's veins, creating a high that kept him running on all cylinders despite a career that might kill a lesser man. Tonight, he was to-the-bone weary. Too tired for someone still not quite fifty. His limbs felt oddly heavy, weighted with fatigue. But organ donors were few and far between, and failing hearts didn't give a rat's ass about his schedule, holidays or his exhaustion.

After stepping back from the table, he addressed the third-year resident at his side. "You can close, Murray."

"Yes, sir." Her expression reflected gratitude and the same thrill Jack had experienced during his tenure as a student years earlier. That thrill that had been waning for some time now.

While Murray completed the procedure, Jack surveyed the O.R., absorbing the atmosphere he'd so often taken for granted. This was his domain, among friends and colleagues and those patients who needed his skill. The culmination of all his sacrifice, all his blood, sweat and tears.

His efforts, though, had not come without a price. No one waited for him at home. No one had for a while. And for some unknown reason, that bothered him more tonight than at any time in his recent past.

Not one to question moods, Jack gave Murray his verbal approval, along with the standard orders for the recovery process. Then he thanked the team members for a job well done, wished them a happy and prosperous 2007, tossed his gloves and gown into the refuse bin and headed out the double doors to tell the family the father of four now had a new heart and a sound future, barring complications and a lapse into an unhealthy lifestyle. For a brief moment he thought about the motorcycle-accident victim, a twenty-year-old kid who hadn't lived to see the arrival of the new year. But he didn't dwell on that. His sanity demanded he remain detached.

After rounding the corner, Jack stopped at the nurses' station, where Peg Jennings sat with her half-glasses perched on the end of her nose as she scanned a chart. He sought refuge at the counter and leaned his full frame against the cold Formica ledge, flexing the tingling fingers of his right hand in and out of a fist. "Where're the Graysons?"

"On the roof. Where else?"

Peg was a Dallas Regional Medical Center fixture, with twenty years' tenure and a wit as dry as West Texas. Jack liked her a lot. She wasn't inclined to cower and she sure as hell wasn't impressed with his status. She did have a propensity for sarcasm, though. He didn't need that right now, considering the bongo drum pounding in his head.

His annoyance came out in a rough sigh. "What conference room, Peg?"

"The main one." She set the chart aside and steepled her fingers beneath her chin, studying him with concern. "Dr. Morgan, you look like hell. Are you okay?"

"Sure." Since he'd had less than six hours'sleep the past two nights, not to mention he hadn't finished lunch or breakfast, he was as okay as could be expected. He needed a solid surface to sleep on, a couple of analgesics, a quick shower—after he met with the family.

As he turned from the station, a searing pain struck the left side of his skull. He clamped his hands over the sides of his head and fought the shadowy abyss that stretched out before him. Fought like a drowning man not to go under.

His knees buckled. A feeling of total helplessness screamed through his brain at breakneck speed. Numbness overtook the right side of his body like frostbite in subzero temperatures. He grabbed for the counter, but couldn't hold on.

God, no!

Annie appeared in his hazy mind, an ethereal presence from a dark place this side of hell. Her hands reached out to him, but he couldn't move. He called to her, a desperate keening cry, yet no sound left his lips. Then she walked away, as she had before.

Too late, Jack…it's too late.

As the blackness closed in, reality settled over him like a thick suffocating fog. For the first time in his life, Dr. Jack Morgan, fearless surgeon, was truly afraid.

And completely alone.

Stroke.

The word echoed like a canyon shout in Anne Cooper Morgan's addled brain, blocking out the flurry of activity in the Intensive Care corridor, where she had been summoned only moments earlier.

Anne stared blankly at the messenger, Hank Steinberg, Jack's internist and good friend. Her one-time good friend, before her and Jack's divorce. "There has to be some mistake, Hank."

He scrubbed a hand over his bearded jaw. "No mistake, Anne."

Not Jack. No way could this have happened to Jack. As far back as Anne could remember, her ex-husband had never caught a cold, even when their daughter, Katie, had brought several viruses home from day care. Jack was obscenely healthy. An avid runner. In all the years Anne had known him, he'd never missed a day of work over health-related problems. He was immortal in everyone's eyes, including his own.

Anne's shock yielded to harsh reality. "How? Why?"

"Aneurysm," Hank said. "He bled out night before last, on New Year's Eve."

"Why didn't someone tell me before now?" She knew the answer to that—because she no longer had a right to know.

"I was out of town, so I didn't learn about it until this morning. I called you as soon as I had the details."

Anne needed more details, although true comprehension still escaped her. "What next?"

"Nan Travers is treating him, which is good, since she's the best neurosurgeon in town. In a couple of hours, she'll determine if he's stable enough for surgery."

"If he survives." Anne posed it as a very real possibility, not a question.

Hank attempted a reassuring smile. "Look, Anne, I have no reason to believe he won't pull through this. He's relatively young. Healthy. And because he was here when it happened, he received early intervention." Hank paused briefly before adding, "He's going to make it."

That slight hesitation told Anne more was yet to come. "What are you not telling me, Hank?"

"What he'll be like afterward is my only concern."

Bile rose into Anne's throat, bringing with it the acrid taste of fear. "Paralysis?" The word came out in a croak.

Hank streaked a hand over his nape and studied the blue-and-gray patchwork tiles beneath his feet. "He's exhibiting some on his right side."

"His hand?" She asked the question for Jack as much as she asked for herself. Surgery was Jack's passion. Jack's life. How well she knew that. Their marriage had paid the price for his obsession, and so had their child. But he didn't deserve this. No one deserved this. Even the man who had shattered her heart.

Hank sighed. "The hand's pretty dead right now. The numbness is extensive, especially in his leg. We'll know for sure how bad it might be in the next couple of days, after he's leveled off. If the

paralysis doesn't resolve on its own, there's no reason to think he can't recover with extensive rehab. At least, enough to be productive."

"Productive?" Anne released a humorless laugh. "Doing what, Hank? If he can't operate, he'll waste away."

"No, he won't. He'll get better. For Katie. For you."

Anne shook her head. Jack wouldn't get better for her. Maybe for their daughter, but not for her. "He has to do this for himself."

"True. And we have to keep him fighting. We can't lose him over this."

All the well-honed detachment from her former husband couldn't save her from the sudden nausea. Jack was sick. Katie's father. Her one-time husband of seventeen years. Years of abounding happiness and devastating heartache.

She didn't want to feel anything, but she did, and she hated that. "Where is he?"

Hank gestured over his shoulder toward the cubicle. "In eight."

Despite all the latent anger, she had to know he was okay, at least for now. "Can I see him?"

"Sure. He's had some mild arrhythmia, but his pressure's stabilized. Nan's hydrating him with maintenance fluids to prevent cerebral swelling. He's on pain meds, so he's pretty comfortable, but he's still out of it." Hank sent her a comforting smile. "Guess you probably know most of the routine, huh?"

Yes, as a medical professional with years of training, she understood the treatment and the procedures. Right now, though, all that knowledge was useless. She wasn't the R.N. She was the wife —or ex-wife, as was the case. She couldn't exercise solid judgment at a time like this. Not when thinking with her heart, not her head.

"Don't leave anything out, Hank. Assume I know nothing."

"Okay. I'll remember that." He patted her arm. "Right this way."

Anne followed Hank on leaden feet down the hall. Rationally, she knew Jack would simply look like Jack, only asleep. But still she was afraid.

Once they reached the window, Hank stepped to one side and motioned for her to join him. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Anne moved slowly to the glass and studied the scene. Jack lay on the white-sheeted hospital bed, his six-foot-two frame nearly covering the length of it. With one wayward lock of dark hair falling over his forehead, his mouth slack, he seemed so vulnerable, so unlike the esteemed surgeon who was openly worshiped and silently feared. In that moment she caught a glimpse of the young man she had married—a brilliant doctor, a good friend, an expert lover. Before the drive to be the best had overtaken the tenderness. Before he'd decided that his life's work was more important than his daughter and wife.

Right now Anne wished he would get up and protest, but he remained motionless. The metal bars on the bed had been raised to prevent him from falling. Jack would hate being confined. But it was for his own good, although he would never see it that way.

Anne touched her fingertips to the clear glass, as if she could somehow connect with him. As if she could bring him back to the way he'd been all those years ago, when they were everything to each other. She grieved not only for the Jack whose future was so tenuous, but also for the Jack she had lost to stubborn ambition. The man who had been so easy to love, yet so difficult to understand.

She shook off the memories, though she couldn't shake off the regret, or the groundswell of feelings that she'd tried so hard to disregard over the past two years. She had to keep the painful emotions buried, never to resurrect them again, for the sake of her sanity and her soul.

"He's going to need you, Anne. More than he's ever needed anything in his life."

No. She didn't want to hear this. "Don't do this to me, Hank."

Clasping her shoulders, Hank turned her around to face him. "He's got no one. Just you and Katie. If he's going to survive, he has to have support. He has to have both of you."

Like someone about to tumble over a cliff, she grasped for anything to save her from this fate. “He has a brother.”

“Bert’s out o the country, Anne. Jack needs friends and family right here to help him recover, and that includes you and Katie.”

Anne admitted Hank was right, but her survival instincts were much stronger than logic. This summer she’d planned to cut her hours at the hospital and begin work on her master’s degree, bringing her one step closer to realizing her dream—a dream she’d put on hold for the sake of Jack’s career. Once she had the degree she could sell the house, with its memories, and start over. She could give Katie a mother who was whole, alive and sure of herself. Jack’s need might take all that away. She would suffocate in Jack’s need.

Anne tried to stay strong, although she was crumbling inside like week-old pastry. She swiped furiously at the tears that slipped past her attempts to stop them. “Katie’s only seven. She wouldn’t understand seeing her daddy this way. It would scare her to death.”

Hank pinned her with a glare. “Are you intending to keep Katie from him? Are you going to just say, ‘To hell with you, Jack. Make it on your own’?” He shrugged. “Of course, you could hire someone to take care of him while he’s recovering. Is that what you want, Anne? Strangers tending to him? Do you hate him that much?”

No, she had loved him too much.

Her tears fell in earnest now. She didn’t know what to do, what to feel. She only knew she couldn’t breathe in this stifling atmosphere. She needed air. She needed to get back to work. She needed to think.

Anne walked away and headed past windows revealing the deluge outside that was no match for the storm of emotions within her. She reached the elevator where she would travel to the labor and delivery floor to resume her shift, a place to forget the prospect of death while welcoming new life. And if that didn’t work, she would go home and prepare for her daughter to return from school.

Hank let her go without protest, but she could sense his accusing glare while she waited for the next car to arrive. The doors sighed opened and several people streamed out, family members of loved ones clinging to life. She didn’t want to count herself among them, so she brushed past the group, seeking an escape, only to run into another man from her past, hospital administrator Maxwell Crabtree, as always looking polished in his tailor-made blue suit, his thinning sandy hair held in place by a light coat of gel.

Before Anne could hand out a polite greeting and be done with it, Max took her by the arm and led her away from the elevator. He stopped outside the ICU waiting room, his expression grim. “I’ve heard about Jack, Anne. Tough break for him.”

His tone was less than compassionate—something that didn’t surprise Anne in the least. He’d despised her ex-husband for many years. “He’ll recover from this, Max,” she said, with only minimal conviction.

“I’m sure he will,” Max replied. “And I’m sure he’ll have plenty of people helping him with that recovery. I only hope you don’t get it in your head that you should be one of them.”

The exact opposite of what Hank had told Anne a few moments ago. She felt as though she was engaged in a mental tug-of-war of opposite opinions. “This isn’t any of your business, Max.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You are considering it, aren’t you?”

Anne could barely think at the moment, much less make any solid plans. “Jack is Katie’s father, and Katie needs him. If that means putting aside the past for her sake, then I have no choice.”

“Maybe you don’t have a choice as far as your daughter’s concerned, but you do have a choice when it comes to how involved you’re going to be in his life.”

Anne tugged her arm from his grasp and backed away. “Again, this isn’t your problem. It’s mine.” A problem that seemed almost insurmountable.

Max slid his hands inside his pockets and leaned against the wall. “I’ll still be here for you, Anne, the way I’ve always been whenever you’ve needed someone to pick up the pieces after Jack tore you apart. Feel free to call me. Or stop by, day or night, if you want to talk.”

An offer she didn’t intend to accept this time. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine.”

Anne rushed back to the elevator and managed to catch a car before the doors closed her out. But she couldn’t close out the decision weighing heavily on her heart after Hank’s comment had sliced through her mind.

“He’s got no one, Anne…. No one but you.”

1983

In the country-club ballroom housing Dallas’s most prosperous physicians, he stood out like a black diamond against a drift of snow. His stance exuded unmistakable confidence. His unkempt dark hair, faded jeans and sport jacket, sans tie, hinted at the unconventional.

Anne Cooper appreciated anyone who went against the norm in this setting. She detested these New Year’s Eve snob-fest soirees. But the stranger across the way had made the obligatory event somewhat bearable. For the past half hour she’d pretended to socialize while covertly watching him, and playing the part of secret admirer suited her fine. Although her mother made an attempt at subtlety, Anne realized Delia Cooper’s insistence that her daughter attend the annual shindig had to do with one thing only—introducing Anne to prospects with M.D. behind their names in the hope that she would eventually find one who suited her discriminating tastes.

“His name is Dr. Jack Morgan, Anne.”

At the sound of the familiar voice coming from beside her, Anne closed her eyes briefly and muttered a silent oath. She should know by now that her mother qualified as a master mind reader. “I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

“The man you’ve been staring at since we arrived.”

Anne saw no use in denying her interest. Only mild interest. “Actually, he doesn’t look like a typical doctor. Are you sure he is?”

In her usual efficient fashion, delightfully refined Delia sent a wave at the hospital’s chief of staff while murmuring through her compulsory smile. “Of course he’s a doctor. Everyone here is a doctor. He’s a first-year surgical resident. He graduated from medical school with honors—”

“Did you take his résumé at the door, Mother?”

Delia didn’t seem the least bit irritated over the question. “Your father’s mentioned him a time or two. He claims Jack’s going to be a brilliant surgeon. The man also happens to be single, so this is your lucky day.”

Lucky? Ha! Maybe if he’d been a tennis pro. For all of her twenty-three years, Anne had been steeped in the sanctity of medicine. Her father was a preeminent surgeon; her mother, a member of every medical auxiliary of acquaintance to God and man and even the inventor of a few; and she herself had become an R.N. She intimately knew the arrogance of physicians, the obsession, the insistence that the lowly folk bow and scrape in their presence. She bowed and scraped for no man.

Before Anne could issue a protest, Delia had her by the hand and was dragging her toward the doctor in question.

Anne stopped dead a few feet prior to the point of no return. “Mother, what are you doing?”

“I’m introducing you. Now, be nice.”

“But I don’t want—”

“Hush, Anne, and smile.”

As much as Anne wanted to run in the opposite direction, as much as she wanted to dive beneath one of the pristine cloth-covered tables, she allowed her mother to lead her forward until she came face to shoulder with the mystery M.D.

Delia patted her blond bob, linked her arm through Anne's and then cleared her throat to garner his attention. "Good evening, Dr. Morgan. I'd like you to meet my daughter, Anne."

Considering his look of surprise, Anne could just imagine what he was thinking—another matchmaking mother foisting her hapless daughter off on a prospective groom. Still, for the sake of civility, she offered a slight smile. "Very nice to meet you, Dr. Morgan."

He gave her hand a brief shake. "It's 'Jack,' and it's nice to finally meet you, too. Dr. Cooper talks about you all the time. I hear you work at the hospital."

The fact that her father had actually mentioned her shocked Anne. Bryce Cooper had never been the demonstrative-daddy type. "I'm a labor and delivery nurse."

"You're at the other end of the building," he said. "That must be why I haven't seen you before. I'm on a general-surgery rotation right now."

Without warning, Delia added, "I'll just leave you two young people to visit," before breezing away with a flip of one manicured hand.

Anne wasn't all that surprised by her mother's abrupt departure. She was surprised that Dr.Morgan hadn't made an excuse to do the same. Following a few moments of awkward silence, she said, "Your apparel definitely makes a statement."

He sent her a cynical yet still charming smile. "What? Screw tuxedos?"

Her laughter earned a curious glance from one of the medical matriarchs standing nearby, who was polishing her snobbish air. "I guess you could say that."

"I like what you're wearing. Nothing better than a little black dress."

His tone was suggestive, and that was when Anne decided it would be best to leave, before she began to make a few suggestions of her own. "Again, it was nice to meet you. Think I'll head home."

"Don't go yet," he said. "I could use the company."

"I'm sure you'll find plenty of company as the night wears on." From single women looking for the consummate catch, and she didn't fall into that category.

"I haven't run into anyone here I care to keep company with. Too much bowing and scraping."

Surely he hadn't really said bowing and scraping. "Excuse me?"

When a roving waiter passed by, Jack snatched two glasses of champagne from the tray and offered her one. "You know, kissing ass for the sake of appearances. I work forty-eight-hour rotations, and I can think of several things I'd rather be doing in my spare time than sucking up."

So could Anne, even if it meant curling up on the couch in her apartment and ringing in the new year alone. "I know what you mean. I'm only here because my mother asked me to come. I need to get a life." Wonderful. She'd just admitted she didn't have one.

He downed the wine in two gulps, then set the glass on the portable tray behind him. "This is going to sound crazy, but I really want to play miniature golf. There's a place on the interstate a few miles away. Are you interested in a game?"

She tightened her grip on the flute as if it were a life jacket capable of saving her from sinking. "Let me get this straight. We've just met and you want me to play miniature golf with you in the dead of winter while I'm wearing a cocktail dress and three-inch heels."

"It's not that cold."

"It's forty degrees out."

"If you don't own a coat, you can borrow mine."

Obviously he'd mistaken her for a fool. "Of course I own a coat."

"Then what's the problem?" When Anne didn't immediately respond, he added, "We only have to play one round. Of course, if you have other plans for the evening, we can do it some other time."

Faced with a situation that meant destroying her pride if she told the truth, she considered a small lie. Yet for some reason, either a lapse of sanity or unseen cosmic forces, she found herself saying, "Actually, no. I don't have any plans. But we barely know each other."

"What's your favorite color?" he asked.

"Red."

"Red's good. Now it's your turn."

Anne thought a moment. "What's your favorite sport, aside from miniature golf?"

"Baseball."

This might go somewhere after all. "I'm a rabid baseball fan."

"Great. Now, one more question," he said. "Why didn't you go to medical school?"

The question she'd been asked at least a thousand times. "You sound like my father. He's never understood why I didn't want to wield a scalpel and a mammoth ego. The truth is, I prefer the personal connection with patients, not to mention keeping doctors in line. You and I both know doctors are nothing without nurses."

He held out his hands, palms forward. "I guess I've touched on a sorry subject."

"You would be right."

He tried on an apologetic look, and it worked well. "I agree—doctors can't function without nurses. Okay?"

Suddenly she felt a little foolish over her semi-rant. "Okay."

"Go ahead and ask me something really personal."

Anne grabbed the opportunity to do a little fishing. "How many women have you propositioned tonight?" She watched for signs of discomfort in his demeanor, but found none. Then again, he could be very good at masking guilt.

"I'm taking the Fifth on that," he said.

Which probably meant he'd delivered too many propositions to count. "You don't play fair, do you? And that really makes me wonder if I should join you in that golf game."

"Are you worried I'd beat you?"

Anne's competitive nature planted a swift kick to her common sense. "That never entered my mind because it's not going to happen. I'm good."

"So am I. Better than most, in fact."

She downed the rest of her drink, ready to meet the challenge. After all, it was only a game. Mindless recreation. She could do mindless, even if she didn't do doctors. "Okay, you're on. And you're paying."

"Believe me, Annie, you're definitely worth the price."

She should have been insulted that he'd called her "Annie," a nickname she'd never cared for. She should rescind the offer and get away fast. But sometimes those "shoulds" weren't at all appealing. "Let's just see if you say I'm worth it when I kick your butt, Dr. Morgan."

Anne expected a comeback, but instead Jack studied her awhile before he said, "Do you want an honest answer to your earlier question?"

"That would be nice." She expected honesty from a man. In fact, she demanded it.

Jack surveyed the room for a moment, as if preparing to tell a secret, before he leaned close to her ear and whispered, "You're the only one."

CHAPTER 2

Delia Hayes Cooper hated only two things—raspberries and pompous asses.

At the moment, one sat in her untouched dessert plate and the other stood at the podium positioned in front of the banquet room. Her attention drifted away as Maxwell Crabtree, supercilious administrator of Dallas Regional, extolled the virtues of altruism to the group of volunteers as if he had personal knowledge of benevolence without the benefit of compensation.

Weary of the hypocrisy, Delia slid her chair from beneath the table and dismissed herself with a polite smile aimed at the dozen or so Pink Ladies, who regarded her with mild shock. Delia Cooper was never late to a luncheon, and she never left a meeting in the middle of a speaker's address. Today she had done both.

Let them think what they would about her departure, be it due to incontinence or the apocalypse; Delia didn't care. She had to get out of here fast before she gave in to the urge to grab a berry and lob it at the administrator's forehead the next time he mentioned commitment. But she was the consummate Southern lady, or had been since she'd crossed over into the realm of acceptable society from her youthful beginnings as a free spirit. That Delia of nearly forty years ago would not have hesitated to hurl a fruity missile at the speaker. Today that Delia no longer existed, at least superficially.

She slipped soundlessly from the room until she reached the double doors that creaked open like worn-out joints in winter. The doors closed behind her, but that did little to shut out Crabtree's booming oration. She made her way to the windows immediately across the hall and looked out over the crowded parking lot. Arms folded beneath her breasts, she shivered despite the fact that the temperature inside was comfortable enough. Outside was another story. The downpour that had begun early that morning hadn't let up, fueling her gray mood. She felt restless, disturbed on a soul-deep level, as if something ominous was about to happen. Her mother had labeled the intuition a gift. Delia considered it a curse.

Right now she wanted to be someplace balmy, kicked back on a sun-warmed beach, with a gimlet in one hand and a cigarette in the other—something she hadn't craved in at least three decades. No use wishing for what could never be. She was locked into a life of her own making, a comfortable life that included good friends and, most important, her only child and grandchild. A life that was safe, secure, necessary—and totally uneventful. Except for Anne's divorce.

If only Delia had been able to prevent it. If only she could somehow have convinced her daughter that she was making a terrible mistake. From the first time she'd seen Anne and Jack interacting on a day much like today, she'd known they were destined to be together, even if she had been the only one who'd acknowledged it at the time.

"He's good for her, Bryce."

As always, Delia had to wait an interminable amount of time for her husband to comment. Profile to her, Bryce continued to stare out the front window, a glass of Scotch in his hand, worry etched on his still-handsome face. A face Delia had enjoyed waking up with for much of her adult life, even though the demands of his career had infringed on a good many of their mornings.

Following a long sip, he finally said, "He doesn't have the sense to bring her in out of the rain, for God's sake."

Delia moved to his side and slid her arm around his waist. Jack and Anne were still playing a game of football in the front yard, soaked from head to toe from the downpour that had ruined the Sunday barbecue, and not seeming to mind at all. "They're young, Bryce. And in love."

"He told me they're just friends, so get your head out of the romantic clouds."

"Friendship is a wonderful place to start," she said. "We started as friends."

"I'm still not sure he's good enough for her."

"You said yourself he's gifted. 'Destined for greatness' is how you put it. Maybe your standards are just a tad high?"

"But that's the problem, Dee. Anne's always resented my absence from her life. She's not going to settle for anything less than all his time, and that's not possible. Not if he's going to be all he's meant to be."

"I managed fine, dear heart. Anne will, too. She's tough. And I suspect she'll learn that some sacrifices are simply worth it."

Bryce draped an arm around her shoulder. "She's her mother's daughter."

"She's your daughter, honey. Headstrong. Determined. She knows her heart, so we're going to have to trust her. And if she's lucky, she'll have what we have."

He shifted to face her and braced his palms on her shoulders, even deeper disquiet showing in his expression. "If anything happened to me, would you find someone else?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

"But if it does, you should find someone else," he said. "You shouldn't have to be alone. I'm serious about this, Dee."

Delia didn't care to consider a life without her husband. "If, God forbid, I do outlive you, I can't imagine finding anyone who'd have such a dearth of sense that he'd be willing to put up with me."

He smiled the smile that Delia had come to know so well, had come to cherish as much as she cherished him. She wished for Anne the blessings of that kind of a smile, the contentment of recognizing where you belonged and who you belonged with, the love of a good man. Anne deserved Jack's love. They deserved each other. And regardless of what the future might hold, Delia realized that she herself would never find anyone to replace her husband—

"You look real nice in pink."

Startled, Delia turned her attention from the window and the memory to the voice and its owner, who was standing a few feet away. With a full head of silver hair and first-class features, the man might have been labeled debonair had it not been for his tie resting loose and askew against his burgundy shirt. His navy suit was neat and nicely pressed, but definitely not Armani. More like outlet. She would guess him to be mid-fifties, and he appeared rather tall, but compared with Delia, everyone was.

Once Delia had established that he was in fact speaking to her, she sent him a tentative smile and told him, "Thank you," when she dearly wanted to mention that about thirty other women in the adjacent room were dressed in the same color smock. But good grace dictated she be kind. Besides, she couldn't remember the last time a man had paid her a compliment.

He forked a hand through his hair and returned her smile. "Hope you didn't take offense at what I said." His voice reflected the drawl many native Texans favored, a throwback to when Dallas hadn't been such a cultural melting pot.

"No offense taken, Mr.—?"

"Gabe Burks."

Delia lightly clasped the hand that he offered for a shake. It felt warm and dry, slightly calloused but pleasantly masculine. "I'm Mrs. Delia Cooper, Mr. Burks."

"It's just 'Gabe,' Delia."

Had she been alive, Delia's mother would have lectured the stranger for calling a lady by her first name without so much as an invitation. Delia found it refreshing.

"So you're married, huh?" Gabe asked.

"Actually, I'm widowed."

His expression brightened. "Yeah? Me, too. How long?"

"Almost eight years."

"Three for me. Cancer?"

People always assumed that had to have been the cause of her husband's demise. In reality, Bryce had worked himself to death. "Heart. He was very driven in his job."

"That'll get you every time. But not me. Not if I can help it. Life's too short to burn the candle at both ends."

Delia relaxed somewhat, intrigued by this man who claimed there was more to life than work. "Are you retired?"

"Nope. Not yet. I'm an attorney. One of the hospital's attorneys."

Bryce would be livid if he learned that his wife was socializing with the enemy—"swamp feeders," he used to call all attorneys. Oh, well. What Bryce didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Delia had never put much stock in the theory that a ticket to heaven included a pass with carte blanche to watch over surviving loved ones. At least, she hoped not.

Gabe inclined his head toward the banquet room. "Were you in the meeting?"

"Yes, I was, but my knee started cramping, so I came out here. That old arthritis. It acts up now and then, especially in this weather." She raised a hand to her chest, feeling a nip of guilt over handing Gabe Burks a lie. Sometimes lies were necessary. Better a lie than revealing her contempt for the keynote speaker.

"Actually, I left because I was about to fall asleep," Gabe said.

Total honesty. That brought about another flash of guilt in Delia. "Mr. Crabtree does tend to go on and on." He also tended to create havoc in Anne's life on a regular basis. The man had carried a torch for her daughter for years, and he continued to do so without Anne's encouragement.

"I take it you're a volunteer," Gabe said.

"Yes. I spend much of my time at the hospital." A sad commentary on her life.

"That's admirable. I'm a little surprised we haven't met, but then, I'm holed up in an office when I'm here."

Applause rang out from the nearby room, signaling the end of Crabby's speech. Delia felt obligated to say her goodbyes to friends before manning the lobby information desk for the afternoon—a reminder of how much she had conformed to proper behavior. "Well, I need to get on with my day, Gabe." His name rolled easily off her tongue, as if she'd known him for years, not minutes.

"Yeah, I guess I should go, too."

Neither of them moved for a long moment, until Gabe closed the gap between them with a few steps, catching Delia off guard. Yet she didn't feel the urge to move back, perhaps because she wanted to get a better glimpse at his eyes to further assess him. A woman could tell a lot from a man's eyes. His were a mossy green and reflected a certain self-assurance.

"Do you think you might like to have dinner with me sometime?" he asked.

"Me?" Good grief. Who else would he be talking to? Certainly not the wilting fern in the corner—unless in reality he had escaped from the psych ward. A possibility, Delia decided. Why else would he be asking her to dinner, a total stranger and a grandmother—granted, a grandmother in the process of being dragged kicking and screeching into her twilight years.

"Just dinner," he said when she failed to respond. "Unless you already have a boyfriend, Delia."

How funny to have her name mentioned in the same sentence with boyfriend. She hadn't been involved with anyone since Bryce's death. Nor had she even considered something so ludicrous, until now. "I'm not seeing anyone at the moment."

His grin expanded, lighting up his eyes. "A woman as attractive as you ought to be fighting them off with a stick."

He was out and out flirting with her. Flirting with Granny Delia. In response, Delia patted her hair and then did something even more absurd. She giggled. Giggled like a sixteen-year-old girl standing in the high school hallway, not a been-around-the-block-more-than-once woman standing in the corridor of a high-tech teaching hospital.

A few people began to filter out the double doors, mostly other Pink Ladies, who sent curious glances her way. Delia could only imagine what this looked like—Mrs. Bryce Cooper, M.D., engaged in a conversation with a man who was more than likely a few years her junior. An attorney, no less. Yet except for the giggling, the scenario would probably appear completely innocent to most. Just a volunteer talking to a member of the team. Then why did it seem that people were whispering behind their hands?

Feeling the need to flee, Delia said, "I really have to go, Mr. Burks."

"It's 'Gabe,' and you didn't answer my question."

She caught a glimpse of loneliness in his eyes, the same loneliness probably mirrored in hers at times, though she'd learned to hide it well. Perhaps even a hint of desperation. She sensed his request was costing him a lot. What would it cost her if she agreed? Oh, to hell with it. She hadn't taken a risk in such a long time. What could be wrong about seeking companionship with a man? She was certainly beyond the age of consent. "Dinner would be nice."

"Can I call you later?"

Excitement as fresh and welcome as dawn hurtled through Delia. "Yes. You can reach me here until 5:00 p.m. Or I'm in the phone book under B. Cooper on Magnolia."

Nellie Mills, the medical center crier, picked that exact moment to rush up to Delia as if she had the demons nipping at her heels. "Can you believe it?"

Surely the main link to the hospital grapevine wasn't already privy to the dinner date Delia had made only seconds earlier. "Believe what?"

"You don't know about Dr. Morgan?"

She knew her son-in-law—former son-in-law—was supposed to be in the hospital, as always. She'd seen his name on the O.R. schedule while working in the surgery waiting room last week. Unless he'd never made it. A sickening feeling settled in her belly. "What about him?"

"He's in ICU. I saw the admission when I was manning the information desk this morning. He had a stroke two nights ago."

Delia's frame went stiff and her mouth went dry. "Are you sure?"

"Sure as can be."

A razor-sharp edge of anger over the pride in Nellie's voice sliced through Delia. She had to find Anne, and soon, in case she had yet to hear the news.

Starting down the hall, Delia had all but forgotten Gabe Burks until she heard him call, "I'll be in touch. Hope everything's okay."

She raised a hand in a brief wave without glancing back. "Thank you."

Delia cursed the fact that her nice calm world had been rocked without mercy today, just when things were beginning to look up. Cursed her intuition. And deep down, she knew nothing would ever be the same again.

"I came as soon as I heard the news."

Anne leaned against the open front door of her house for support and stared at her mother's compassionate yet somber face. The rain had yet to subside, but Delia looked warm and dry, and much too young for sixty-six, though she had survived the death of her beloved husband and the divorce of her only child.

Delia shook out her red umbrella, snapped it shut, then set it aside in the foyer while Anne closed the door and locked it as if she could lock out the world, the pain. Now she was reminded by her mother's sudden appearance of what she had tried so hard to forget. Anne wasn't surprised Delia had learned about Jack, nor did she question how she could tell that Anne needed her at that very moment. Her mother possessed a maternal sixth sense as deeply engrained as her ability to enter a room with poise and confidence even under overwhelming pressure.

Anne turned and trudged down the corridor to the breakfast nook, the place where they had shared their best mother-daughter chats over tea with milk and an occasional butter cookie, only mildly aware of her mother's prim footsteps behind her. She clicked on the fluorescent light above the breakfast table, washing the area in a harsh artificial glare that robbed the place of its hominess. Before, it hadn't seemed to matter that much, but today she longed for warmth and solace. If only she'd insisted on buying the brightly colored Tiffany fixture, the one Jack had deemed too prissy for the contemporary surroundings. It wasn't the only thing she had conceded to him. She had practically given up her soul, as well.

Collapsing into the oak barrel chair, she waited until Delia took a seat across from her. Then she let the tears flow, not bothering to hide them at all.

Delia clasped Anne's hand and wrapped it in her own. "It will be okay, baby girl." Her smile, motherly and forgiving, was the kind of smile Anne had hoped upon hope to present to her own daughter during a crisis. But lately her smile had been a charade due to the fatigue and frustration over not having enough hours to spend with Katie. A lonely smile that had grown only lonelier over the past few years.

Anne slipped her hand from between her mother's and wiped at her face with one sweatshirt sleeve. "I'm okay." She didn't sound okay. She sounded terrified, unsure—and she hated it. She longed to be as strong as her mother. As Jack. She never had been.

Delia fished through her black leather bag, brought out a small plastic packet and offered it to Anne. After taking a tissue, she sucked in a draft of air and released it on an uneven breath as her mother continued to study her, waiting for her to speak, she supposed. Delia had always been a good listener and a friend in times of need. Anne needed her now more than any other time she could think of.

"Did Max tell you?" Anne managed to ask through a rogue sob.

Delia sent her a look filled with disdain. "Maxwell Crabtree and I don't speak unless absolutely necessary, but I'm certain this probably thrills him to no end, considering how much he detests Jack. And that's not only because he's been pining for you for years between his marriages. He covets Jack's career. Did you know he couldn't make the grade in medical school?"

Anne wasn't sure she could handle any more surprises today, and she certainly didn't want to get into this now. "No, I didn't. And I don't care what you think of Max, Mother. He's remained my friend over the years. He's not cruel enough to wish ill will on anyone, even Jack."

"Is that how you found out about Jack—through Max?" Delia's tone sounded indicting.

"Hank told me." Anne preferred to keep her earlier conversation with Max under wraps. "How did you find out?"

"Nellie Mills caught me outside the hospital luncheon."

Anne couldn't imagine why her mother didn't spend her time someplace other than the institution that had been the center of her own husband's existence. The place that had stolen their weekends and deprived them of being a close-knit family. Just as it had Anne's married years with Jack.

But maybe her mother insisted on volunteering there to continue to connect with what had been her husband's life. Anne could relate to that in a very personal way. She could have taken a job elsewhere, yet she still worked in the same place whose hallowed halls her ex-husband graced. Or had until two days ago.

Fresh tears threatened Anne, so she left the chair, walked to the stove and grabbed up the teakettle to put on fresh water to boil.

"How is he, Anne?"

Anne clicked on the burner beneath the kettle. "Hank just called. He's out of surgery for repair of the aneurysm."

"Why aren't you there with him?"

"Because I'm no longer his next of kin, remember? Hank only phoned as a favor to me, not out of obligation." Her obligation to Jack had ended two years earlier with a simple signature. "Hank says he'll be okay if everything goes well the next forty-eight hours or so. But there's some paralysis in his right hand and leg."

"Oh, dear." Her mother's normally calm voice wavered. Anne couldn't stand it if Delia cried. Not the one person in her life who handled crises like a four-star general, including Anne's father's death.

"He'll get better," Delia said. "He'll go back to surgery eventually. Won't he?"

Now her mother was relying on her for optimism. What a switch. Anne turned and feigned calm. "It's possible, but we just won't know for a while."

Anne faced the counter again and absently placed two tea bags in two matching green ceramic mugs from the set of four she and Jack had gotten when they'd married. None had been broken. She wished she could say the same for the marriage. And her heart.

The whistling teakettle startled Anne, but she managed to dole the water into the cups without making a mess. Balancing them in her trembling hands, Anne made her way back to the table to give her mother the tea while preparing for her questions.

"Have you told Katherine?" Delia always insisted on calling her granddaughter by her given name, Delia's mother's name. She'd claimed it was much more elegant than Katie.

"Not yet." Anne braced for the fallout, staring into her tea.

Instead of scolding, Delia said, "I'm sure you will when the time is right," then added, "but don't wait too long."

Anne raised her eyes from the teacup. Her mother's expression held no judgment, only sympathy. Delia was a master of sympathy. "I thought I would do it tomorrow." Suddenly, Anne felt like a teenager again, explaining why she hadn't cleaned her room.

And her mother responded in kind, like the disappointed parent, when she asked, "Why not now, Anne, while I'm here?"

"Because I don't know what's going to happen. If something should happen to him, then…" Anne let the words trail off, hating the thought of that something. Yet she couldn't write off the possibility that Jack could bleed out again, and this time it could be fatal.

Now Delia looked worried. "You don't really think—"

"I'm not sure what to think. I'm concerned." And scared, but she didn't need to voice that emotion. Her mother would already know.

Delia rimmed the cup with a neatly manicured nail. "I'm glad to hear you're worried about him. Things have been so bad between you two since the separation."

Divorce, Anne silently corrected. Her mother couldn't bring herself to say the word. "I still care about what happens to him, Mother." Trouble was, she still cared too much.

Anne sipped her tea for a moment, allowing its warmth to wash through her. All day she had been cold, moving through her shift in a state of shock until she'd asked to leave early. "Hank believes we should be actively involved in Jack's recovery."

"Of course we should. Jack has no one else."

A rerun of the conversation she'd had with Hank. But what did she expect from her overly loyal mother? "I have my own life now. I'm not strong enough—"

"I don't want to hear that, Elizabeth Anne. You're stronger than you realize. And you must help Jack recover, if only for Katherine's sake." Her mother's voice had risen a notch; not to shouting exactly, but pretty darned close for Delia.

Everything sounded so logical to Anne. But logic continued to evade her.

"I can help out," Delia added. "If I need to, I can cut down on my volunteering and help you take care of Jack. We owe him that much."

Anne's gaze shot to Delia, who still looked calm. "Owe him? Do I, Mother? He wasn't around when I needed him. When Katie needed him. When he finished the fellowship in California and we moved back here, he promised me he'd go into private practice. And what did he do? Sign on with the hospital as chief attending cardiothoracic surgeon, increasing his workload because of the added responsibility."

"Yes, he has a demanding career. But accepting that is part of the sacrifice of being a doctor's wife. You knew that when you married him."

And still she'd chosen to ignore it, because she'd loved him that much. "I guess I just wasn't as good at it as you were."

Delia shifted in her chair and showed the first signs of real discomfort. "The day you served Jack with divorce papers, he came to see me."

Anne tried to hide her shock. She wasn't certain she wanted to hear this, but she recognized her mother would continue despite her reluctance. "And?"

"He was devastated. You blindsided him. He'd had too much to drink, so he was open about his feelings. He didn't want the divorce, Anne."

"Great. He never talked to me about his feelings. He never protested, never fought. He just signed on the dotted line."

Delia leaned forward. "Did you give him the chance, Anne? Best I can recall, you refused to speak to him after you threw him out."

"I was afraid he'd talk me out of it." Jack had been, and would always be, Anne's one true weakness.

"If he could do that, then you weren't ready to divorce him."

That brought Anne's chin up in defiance. No one, even her mother, would tell her what was best for her. Not anymore. "Come on, Mother. He's not the saint you make him out to be." The same sainthood Delia had bestowed on Anne's father, as well. Her mother had stood by her man, through countless absences and midnight calls, and she expected no less from her daughter, regardless of the consequences.

Delia sighed. "I realize he's not a saint."

"But you don't know everything."

"If you're referring to the other woman, I know about that, too."

Shock robbed Anne of an immediate response. She'd purposefully kept that information from her mother because it had seemed so sordid. It still did.

Before Anne could comment, Delia looked beyond her and said, "There's my other baby girl!"

Anne glanced up from her tea to see Katie climbing into Delia's lap. Sweet, sweet Katie, with her father's dark pensive eyes and her grandma's flaxen hair. The baby who had miraculously arrived after years of Anne's trying to become pregnant.

"Whatcha doin' here, Grandma?"

"I came to see my bestest girls," Delia said.

Anne smiled at Katie, a shaky smile. "Did you finish your homework, sweetie?"

"Yes, ma'am. All done. Can I play my computer game now?"

Delia studied Anne over Katie's head. Anne recognized that look, exactly what it was saying. Tell her, Anne. Now's as good a time as any, Anne. Don't be a coward, Anne.

Anne inched her chair a little closer. "Katie, I have something to tell you."

After taking a drink from Delia's cup of tea, Katie smacked her lips with satisfaction. "What?"

"Daddy's sick."

Katie set the cup of tea down and squirmed in Delia's lap. "Does he have the flu? A lot kids at school have it."

If only that were so. "No, sweetie, he's had something they call a stroke. It's made him pretty sick, so he's in the hospital."

Her daughter's eyes widened with comprehension and fear. "His hospital?"

"Yes. He's okay, but it'll take a while for him to get better."

Katie scooted out of Delia's lap. "I want to see him."

Anne reached for her and pulled her close. "You can't right now. They have him in a special place where they don't let kids in. He's still sleeping."

Tears welled in Katie's eyes, crushing Anne's heart. "Is he going to die?"

Drawing her daughter into a hug, Anne whispered, "No, honey. He's not going to die." If only she were as sure as she sounded.

Katie pulled back, her expression suddenly stern. "Are you glad Daddy's sick?"

Horrified, Anne tried to hug Katie again, but the girl would have none of it. She just stared hard at Anne, a few tears slipping down her cheeks. "Oh, no, Katie. It makes me very sad."

"You should be sad, even if you are divorced." Katie said the last word with clarity, with the tone of a child who knew all too well the reality of single parents and bitter battles.

Delia rested a hand on Katie's shoulder. "How about you go home with Grandma for the next few days, then we'll go to the zoo on Saturday. If Daddy feels up to it, I'll take you to see him after that."

Katie looked back at her grandmother, then leveled her gaze on Anne. "Daddy always takes me to the zoo. I want to go to the zoo with Daddy." Tears rolled down her cheeks in a steady, heart-wrenching stream.

Anne almost collapsed under the weight of her helplessness. What could she tell Katie? That her daddy might never get to take her to the zoo again? That he might never attend another soccer game or field day? Perhaps not even her wedding.

No, Anne couldn't tell her daughter those things. She had to tell her something that would allow her hope. Something to make her smile again. She could think of only one thing. That one thing would entail discarding latent bitterness toward her ex-husband. But if making the sacrifice of aiding Jack with his recovery meant giving her daughter some peace, she would do it for Katie.

"How would you like it if Daddy came to live here with us until he felt better?"

Katie's expression lit up, and so did Delia's. "Like before?"

Not exactly, but Anne wouldn't dare make that revelation. Not now. "Only until he gets well. He'll have to have lots of rest."

"Can he stay in the room next to mine? I could help take care of him."

Anne considered the stairs, how hard it would be for Jack to scale them at first, if ever. "No, he'd have to stay downstairs."

"In your room?"

Lord, she hadn't even considered that. The other bedroom was upstairs with Katie's. She supposed she could sleep in the guest room, but she would need to be nearby. She could sleep on the sofa in the living room and let Jack have the master bedroom. Or maybe she should arrange to have a hospital bed set up in the den. Already she was planning, and she realized the decision had been made for her.

"I'll figure that out later. First, Daddy will have to say it's okay."

"He will," Katie said with a child's confidence, as though all would be right with the world if she willed it.

Katie hugged Anne, Delia smiled, and one thought gripped Anne's heart. Jack was back in their lives—her life—if he agreed. If he lived.

CHAPTER 3

He awoke with a gasp as if surfacing from treacherous waters, held down by heavy limbs. Recollections came back to him in small frames, like some macabre B-movie with him in the starring role.

He remembered falling. Darkness. Pain. Flashes of Annie seeped into his consciousness. The dreams arrived as one patchwork journey into his past. Annie the way she looked back then. Katie as a baby. He was still running local marathons. Maybe even still in medical school. No—residency. He hadn't known Annie in medical school.

The visions made little sense, yet he found comfort in their familiarity. He wanted to go right on sleeping, fearful of the unknown. Terrified of what he might find when he came fully awake. But sleep wouldn't return, regardless of the fact that he kept his eyes tightly closed in an attempt to ignore the muffled voices, ignore other sounds he knew all too well. The nasal tones of an operator paging his colleagues. The hustle and bustle of the hospital halls. He recognized the sterile smells, the supercharged atmosphere. The place where he'd spent most of his waking hours in the past few years, but never like this.

He had no concept of time, no idea what day it was. Had he been asleep for minutes? Days? Weeks?

Jack searched his mind and vaguely remembered an eruption of activity after the initial confusion. Several times he'd wanted to ask what was happening to him, but he couldn't manage to form the words with any coherency. Hank had been there; he knew that for certain. He'd recognized several of the nurses hovering over him. Most had taken orders from him at one time or another. Now they ordered him around. Asked him his name periodically. What day it was. What year. He'd answered the best he could, but his mind continued to drift off to another place. A place to escape harsh realities.

The creaking of a cart somewhere in the distance caused him to open his eyes. He slowly scanned the functional room. Purple drapes, mauve-and-navy chairs. A TV perched on the stand mounted near the ceiling. He knew the territory like he knew every instrument he used in surgery. Like the back of his hand.

His hand. He worked his left hand into a fist, flexing it open and closed. Yet when he tried to move his right hand, it lay flaccid against his side. His right foot tingled, but he felt nothing above it.

He gulped more air into his constricted chest, trying hard to push away the panic that threatened to consume him. He lowered his eyes to the needle in his arm, then followed the line as it trailed over the metal sidebars and up to where it attached to an IV pump. The equipment surrounding him was all too familiar. He just hadn't been on this side of the bed before.

As a physician, he should know the names of the medications they kept pumping into him, but he couldn't remember. Normally, he would be looking down on this scene—the narrow bed, the starched white sheets, the figure lying among leads and lines to sustain or relieve whatever malady had befallen him or her. But this time, he was the one lying helpless, surrounded by the miracle of modern technology. Half his body as dead as driftwood. Only half a man.

The door swung open and in walked Hank, a grim expression on his bearded face. Jack had seen that look before. He'd worn it several times himself, right before telling a patient's family that nothing more could be done.

Hank strode to the side of the bed and faked a smile. "Hey, bud, you're finally awake." He leaned over and checked the pump. "Do you know your name?"

Shit, Hank was treating him like one of his patients. "Morgan. M-m-miracle worker." It didn't come out quite right; his brain seemed short-circuited.

Hank chuckled. "Hell, the stroke didn't affect your industrial-size ego."

Jack tensed over the word stroke. His worst fears had been confirmed; yet he'd known all along that he'd suffered some sort of cerebral accident. A fried brain. The end of his career.

"What…d-day is it?" His throat was as dry as dead leaves in the winter, and it had taken him great effort to form the words. As if it really mattered what day it was. What was the use in knowing? He had no surgical cases to worry about. No strength. No will.

Hank set the metal chart on the rolling table and perched on the edge of the bed. "It's Saturday, Jack. You fell out around midnight on Sunday, after your transplant case. Do you remember any of it?"

"Some." He remembered the pain, the helplessness. That no one had been there to comfort him.

After clearing his scratchy throat, he pointed at the white pitcher on the table. "Water."

Hank poured a plastic cup full and handed it to him. After Jack took one sip, he asked the question nagging at him. "How bad?"

"An aneurysm. Nan Travers ordered you a nice buzz cut and fixed it. And if you don't have any more problems, you'll be good as new."

Jack sensed his blood pressure rising. Right now he didn't give a damn about anything. "Good as new, huh? What about the h-hand. The leg, Hank?"

Hank laid a palm on his shoulder. "Easy, bud. We'll take it one day at a time. Occupational therapy and physical therapy will work with you, get that hand and leg back up to speed. But you'll have to work with them, while you're here on the rehab unit and after you go home."

Home. Jack hadn't considered the apartment home. He had no idea how the hell he was going to get through this. He'd been alone for two years and he'd managed. He'd manage again, even if it meant wasting away by himself. Then no one would see his suffering, or witness his despair.

"Anne's here."

Jack stopped the cup halfway to his lips, then slowly brought it back down to rest against his chest. He no longer wanted water. He wanted whiskey. "Why?"

"She asked to see how you're doing. Talk to you."

Jack took another sip of water, which partially rolled from the corner of his mouth, before he turned away from Hank's scrutiny. "No."

Hank pushed off the bed and stood. "Be reasonable, Jack. She's worried about you. We're all worried about you."

White-hot anger bubbled up from Jack's gut. He sure as hell didn't want her to see him this way, all the proof she needed that he was too obsessed. Too driven. She'd find some way to blame the stroke on his work. She might not say "I told you so," but he would be able to spot it in her face.

He brought his gaze back to Hank. "Tell her…come back later."

"Can't do that, bud. She's on her morning break and she's damn determined. You know what Anne's like when she's determined."

Yeah, he knew what she was like. He'd lived with her long enough to know that when she had her mind set on something, she fought like a champion welterweight to get what she wanted. Okay, so he'd let her come in. Let her get her grins seeing him lying here like a limp fish. Then he'd tell her thanks for stopping by, now leave.

"Okay." He sounded like a damn bullfrog, a drunk one, but this thing hadn't completely robbed him of his speech. At least he had that much left.

Hank slipped the chart off the table and tapped it twice on the bed rail. "Okay. I'll get her. I'll drop by later when I'm making my evening rounds."

"G-great." Just great.

Hank strode out of the room, leaving Jack alone to face his past. And when she walked in the door, he realized he couldn't run from the inevitable. She was dressed in her standard floral blue scrubs, a stethoscope draped around her neck. She'd cut her hair to her shoulders. He liked it better longer, not that his opinion mattered anymore.

Annie moved to the end of his bed and tried to smile. She'd never been good at hiding her emotions, and right now he could tell she was distressed. Hell, he must look worse than he thought.

She brushed back her gold-brown hair with one hand and said, "Hi."

He focused on her face. Her wary blue eyes held a cast of some unnamed emotion. Probably pity. He didn't like pity. "Nice weather…we're having, huh?"

She moved a bit closer and gave him a once-over. "You look better than the last time I saw you. So how are you feeling?"

"Like c-crap."

She raised a hand to her throat. "Well, that's to be expected for a while."

Enough of the small talk. He preferred to go back to sleep. Escape. Forget this nightmare. "Wh-what do you want?"

She looked surprised, maybe hurt. "I wanted to see how you're doing. See if you're up for visitors."

"You're here. You've seen me. You can…g-go."

"I meant Katie."

God, he didn't want Katie coming here, seeing him helpless and wasted. "I don't w-want…" He tried to calm down, but he almost welcomed the feeling of animosity. At least it kept him from thinking about his situation. "No. Not a good idea. For her to be here."

"She's scared, Jack. I had to tell her something. I think if she sees you're okay, then she'll be less worried."

"I'm n-not okay." Damn his stammering.

Anne stepped to the side of the bed. and laid a hand on his dead appendage. He couldn't even yank it back, away from her charity. All he could do was stare at their joined hands and hope she took the hint. Finally she pulled away.

She started pacing, her favorite pastime when her nerves got the best of her. "Look, Jack, we have a few things to discuss."

When she faced him again, he noticed the worry in her expression and chose to ignore it. "Support check's in the m-mail."

Anger flared in her eyes. "I don't care about your stupid money. I'm talking about your future. What you're going to do when you get out of here."

"Maybe I'll…take up gardening."

She fisted her hands at her sides. Annie was about to blow, and he couldn't even get out of her path. "This isn't a joke, Jack. You've got to consider your health. Your recuperation." She strolled around to the other side of the bed, appearing unsure. Very un-Annelike.

"What d-do you suggest, Annie?"

"I want you to consider coming to live with me and Katie during your recovery."

If that didn't bring on another stroke, then maybe he was out of the woods after all. At least for the time being. "What the…hell for?"

"Because you're going to need help. And we can help you. You don't have to decide now. I just want you to think about it for the next few days."

He didn't understand her motivation, why she was making such a crazy offer. He suspected Hank had had something to do with this. Maybe even Delia. "I don't need…any help. I wouldn't want you to p-put yourself out on my account, Anne."

"Quit being so damn stubborn!"

Annie had cursed at him. She was pissed, and he liked her that way. He liked her as pissed as he was over this whole mess. "You really want a vegetable…on your nice leather c-couch, Annie?"

In a matter of minutes, she recovered, erecting the emotional wall that had separated them for several years. She hadn't changed her attitude about him one whit, but what could he expect? "You'll get better."

"Just 'cause you say it's so…d-don't make it so. Thanks for the…offer. But no…thanks."

She shrugged and raised her hands all in one smooth move. "Okay, forget I asked. You hire someone to take care of you. And when you decide to stop feeling sorry for yourself, then maybe you'll be ready to see your daughter again."

When she spun on her crepe soles and headed for the door, a sudden fear gripped Jack. Irrational fear, yet too strong to ignore. He hated being at the mercy of everyone's idea of what was best for him, but if he let her leave, he might lose his port in the storm. Again. Although there was a lot of garbage between Anne and him, he knew he could rely on her if he had to. She was the connection to his daughter, and he couldn't survive without Katie in his life. He'd already given up too much.

"Annie, wait."

When she turned, her eyes looked red-rimmed and moist. Surely she wasn't going to cry over him. He wasn't worth it. She was willing to make a sacrifice, and he'd gone and hurt her. The way he'd hurt her so many times already. But what the hell was he going to do? He gave her the only response that made any sense.

"I'm s-sorry. Bring Katie. Tonight."

Now Anne stared at him, openly stunned. A long time had passed since he'd apologized to her for his shortcomings, and he had plenty. So many she'd never been able to forgive him, and most likely never would. "This probably wasn't a great time to discuss this, Jack. It's just that Katie cares about what happens to you."

"What a-b-bout you, Annie?" An unfair question, yet he had to know.

"Of course I care, Jack. I still consider you a friend, and you are Katie's father."

But not her husband, or her lover, and despite what she said, not her friend.

Not anymore.

1984

Anne had never believed for a second she would become friends with a doctor, much less go out with one. Twice.

For the past hour she'd tried to find something about Jack Morgan that she didn't like. Some hidden imperfection. Even the tiniest thing to discourage her. So far, she'd had little success. Of course, she could paint his persistence as a character flaw, and persistent he'd been since their NewYear's Eve golf game, calling several times over the past week until he'd finally worn her down. But in all fairness, she couldn't fault him for a trait that she also possessed.

She'd unfortunately discovered they had a lot in common, including a love of nature, which was precisely how she'd ended up sitting in a small outdoor café on her day off, taking a break from the myriad tourists who had flocked to the zoo on a sunny January afternoon following a few days of freezing temperatures.

"Exactly how did you manage this little excursion, Doctor?" she asked.

"Easy. I bought tickets at the gate."

Considering his talent for teasing, she should have known not to expect a straight answer. "I meant, how did you manage to take the day off to entertain me?"

"I called in sick."

She looked up from her purple plastic souvenir cup to find that his grin alone indicated he was lying. "You did not."

"It's my scheduled day off. Do you really think I'd call in sick when I run the risk of having to explain that to your dad, Annie?"

She bit back the urge to panic. "My father knows you're out with me?"

"Not unless you told him."

No, she hadn't told him, or her mother. "I decided not to say anything, just in case. I was afraid it might create complications for you." And for her. "I also don't want people believing there's more between us than friendship."

Jack frowned. "Are you worried some of my fellow residents might cry favoritism if they knew I was fraternizing with the chief's daughter?"

"Yes. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not unless it bothers you."

"You say that now, but I doubt you'd be so cavalier about it if word got out."

"I'll deal with it if I have to." He pushed his own cup aside. "Want to go check out the gorillas now?"

"The gorillas can wait. First, I want to talk awhile longer." They'd been too engrossed in competition during the golf game for Anne to garner any intimate details, and he'd been in too big of a hurry during their previous phone conversations.

Jack leaned back in his chair and stacked his hands behind his neck. "Okay. Talk."

"You've never told me about your family."

His expression turned serious and hinted at sadness. "I have a brother who's a banker. He's married and lives in Boston. My mother died two years ago from breast cancer. When I was eleven, my dad died from restrictive cardiomyopathy."

Like so many doctors she'd known, he'd been driven into medicine by personal experience, when she'd secretly hoped he'd been motivated by the money, prestige, power—all valid reasons for her to cling to the last of her resistance. "I'm sorry, Jack."

"So am I." He straightened, his hands clasped tightly before him on the table. "Back then, all I could do was watch him die. If I can prevent that from happening to someone else's family member, then the hell I go through to become a transplant surgeon will be worth it."

A transplant surgeon. No wonder her father held Jack in such high esteem. "Sounds like you have a long road ahead of you, educationally speaking."

"At least four more years of residency, then probably a couple of fellowships, with heavy emphasis on heart-lung transplantation. I could be looking at another ten years or so before I'm on my own."

Ten years of grueling training, long days and longer nights. He wouldn't have time for a serious relationship or a family. A definite negative to add to the pro-con list Anne had been compiling since they'd met. "And to think I'm worried about how long it'll take to get my master's."

"Your dad didn't mention you're in school."

"I'm not right now. I've only been out of college for two years, and I needed a break. But I plan to go back eventually, after I hone my clinical skills."

"Exactly how old are you, Annie?"

She was surprised he hadn't asked before now. "I turned twenty-three last September."

"You sure as hell seem a lot older."

Hadn't she been told that before? "I'm an only child, and only children tend to grow up fast. Plus I attended the best college-prep boarding school money can buy, so I've basically lived independently of my parents since the age of fourteen. How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-six this summer."

She'd had him pegged to be at least four years her senior. "And you're already a surgical resident?"

"I graduated from high school at seventeen, immediately entered premed and knocked that out in three years. Following medical school, I did one year of internship before I was accepted into Regional's program."

"Wow. I guess that makes you some sort of child prodigy."

"Nope. That makes me determined. When I want something badly enough, I do everything in my power to get it. No holds barred. And that's why you're here with me now."

Anne supposed she should be flattered, but in a way she was uneasy. Uneasy over the look he was giving her at the moment—a look that had nothing to do with simple camaraderie.

A shrill, distress-filled cry drew their attention to a little girl pointing at a red balloon that had managed to drift to the top of the cabana roof covering the area. Jack immediately pushed out of his chair and, with little effort, grabbed the dangling string, then returned the prized souvenir to its distraught owner. When the child rewarded him with a vibrant smile and introduced herself as Sara, Jack knelt before her and asked her about her day. Anne looked on as he listened to the little girl describe her activities, as if he had all the time in the world. The young mother, a fussy toddler in her arms, appeared mesmerized by the man who had saved her daughter from a round of hysteria.

When Jack came back to the table, Anne couldn't help but smile. "Looks like you've done your good deed for the day, Dr. Morgan."

He gave her a no-big-deal shrug. "I like kids. In fact, I thought about specializing in pediatric cardiology, but then I realized how tough it would be to lose one."

The man was simply too good to be real. Surely beneath that white-knight exterior some serious flaws existed. He probably snored. He probably trailed dirty clothes through his apartment. He probably notched his little black bag with every sexual conquest. She didn't plan to be another notch or his good-time girl, available whenever he found a spare moment for her.

He favored her with the same winning smile he'd given the little girl. "So tell me, Annie, why did you decide to birth those babies?"

She couldn't resist teasing the teaser. "Listening to women in excruciating pain wail at the top of their lungs is a good form of birth control."

"You're not serious."

He seemed so disturbed Anne laughed. "Of course I'm not serious. There's something miraculous about seeing a new life come into the world and hearing that first cry. The story doesn't always end happily. Sometimes babies don't make it, and a few times we've lost a mother. Those are the tough days, but at least that doesn't happen very often."

He mulled it over for a moment before reaching across the table to clasp her hand. "Now, see there, Annie? You enjoy bringing new life into the world, and I want to save lives. Just one more thing we have in common."

One more thing among many. They both had a passion for sports. They had the same taste in music—from classical to country. They both had a weakness for cheeseburgers with the works. They shared a certain chemistry that was almost palpable, even though they had yet to kiss. A large divide existed between friendship and something more, and she was beginning to move toward the "something more" side.

The all-too-familiar sound of a pager prompted Jack to release his hold on Anne, and sufficiently jolted her back into reality. His reality.

He withdrew the device from the holder clipped to his belt and sighed. "It's the hospital."

"I thought this was your day off."

He shoved the pager back into place. "Unfortunately, residency doesn't allow for a real day off."

The one thing Anne couldn't quite accept—his career choice—could be the one thing that would put an end to a relationship that otherwise had potential. He lived for his work, just as her father did, and if she stayed in Jack Morgan's life, she could be following in her mother's footsteps. Following in Jack's shadow—something she refused to do. But then, it was much too early to be seriously entertaining a future with him.

He pushed back from the table and stood. "Looks like our day's going to be cut short. But I'll make it up to you next time."

If there was a next time—something Anne would have to decide soon. “That’s how it goes, I guess.”

“Yeah. And it’s a bitch.”

Jack took Anne’s hand, and although she considered pulling away, she simply couldn’t. At least not now. Not until absolutely necessary.

When he led her down a path away from the exit, she gestured behind her. “That’s the way out, Jack.”

He pointed straight ahead. “And that’s the way to the gorilla exhibit. The hospital will own me for the next two days straight. They can let me have at least another hour with you.”

Jack gave Anne’s hand a gentle squeeze, gave her another warm smile. But more disconcerting, he gave her hope.

CHAPTER 4

Delia was no stranger to hopeless situations, or seeing a loved one suffer. She'd kept a twenty-four-hour vigil over her husband some eight years before, only to face the heartbreaking decision to end life support and let him go. Yet that situation was very different from her son-in-law's. Jack was awake and still alive.

When Jack's gaze tracked to hers, she moved to the end of the hospital bed, braced one fist on her hip and said, "A fine mess we have here, but only a temporary mess."

"Maybe not t-temporary."

At least he could speak—a positive sign, Delia decided as she rolled the hospital tray aside, pulled up a chair and dropped into it. "Now, Jack, you're a fighter. You won't let this setback keep you down for long."

"S-stroke, Delia, not a setback."

"And people recover from strokes every day." She chose to save him from the story of her friend Alice, who'd suffered a stroke and amazed everyone by making a total recovery at the age of eighty-five. Jack didn't need an overdose of optimism. He simply needed a leaning shoulder and a nudge in the right direction after refusing Anne's offer to let her care for him.

"Does Annie know you're h-h-ere?" he asked.

She'd purposefully avoided telling Anne for many reasons, the first being that her daughter wouldn't approve of her meddling. "This is about you, not her." Only a partial truth. It was about both of them.

She scooted a little closer and took his right hand into hers—the hand that was as lifeless as his eyes. In a perfect world, she would have been in his place due to her age. Yet nothing about this situation—or life—was perfect. Far from it.

While Delia studied Jack in preparation for what she would say next, he stared straight ahead. Except for the absence of hair, he still looked the same, very much the handsome man who'd captured her daughter's heart and brightened all their lives for a long while. Before the light went out on a love that should have lasted a lifetime.

Perhaps reminding him of that love would serve as a good place to begin. "Do you remember the day you came to the house to ask Bryce's permission to marry Anne?"

"My mind's kind of…foggy."

His mind might be foggy, but Delia's role had become clear. She could serve as his memory for as long as necessary. "It's okay. You don't have to talk. Just listen."

She brought out those fond recollections of days past. Good days, before the bad. "You were so nervous when you were talking to us about the marriage. In fact, I've only seen you nervous three times in twenty-odd years. That day you were going to propose to Anne, your wedding day and the day Katie was born. Anyway, I remember Bryce telling you that he'd give his permission as long as you accepted Anne's faults, particularly her stubbornness."

Jack attempted a smile, but it only formed halfway. "She's not always r-right."

"But she's never in doubt." Delia laughed. "That's our Anne. Bryce also told you she had a long memory and that wasn't always a good thing."

She saw the flash of pain in his eyes and it gave her a much-needed sense of purpose. "I have a long memory, too, Jack. I remember how you looked at Anne from the first moment you met her. I remember that your love for her was so obvious, at least to me. But my best memory of you involves Bryce's funeral. You didn't stay with the other pallbearers at the graveside. You came back and sat between Anne and me. Then you took my hand and you put your arm around Anne, but not before you touched her belly, as if you were comforting your unborn baby, too. It was such a precious moment, and I've never forgotten it."

When she glimpsed tears in Jack's eyes, Delia swallowed around the nagging lump in her throat. "You were a rock. So strong for everyone. You're still strong, Jack."

Though he successfully fought back the tears, Delia felt his sorrow as keenly as if it were her own. In many ways, it was.

"Not strong…now," he said. "I'm n-nothing."

"You'll never be nothing. You're a good man. This stroke hasn't changed that about you." She squeezed his hand, even though she recognized he couldn't feel it. "You told me once that Anne regretted the things she didn't say to her father before he died. She regretted not forgiving him for his absence in her life and failing to give him a second chance before it was too late."

Delia released a long sigh when his expression remained impassive. "She needs that second chance from you, Jack, whether she realizes it or not. You both deserve a second chance. Let her take care of you as you've always taken care of her."

"I wasn't t-there enough," he said before turning his face toward the wall.

"Yes, you were. When it counted most." After coming to her feet, Delia let go of his hand and leaned to kiss his cheek. "Think about it, Jack. That's all I'm asking. Anne needs to be needed by you, and you desperately need her. You need each other. You always have, but never more than now."

He stood alone in the middle of a room, alone and afraid. A stark hazy room filled with strangers. Not all strangers. Annie was there, at a corner table next to a window. He recognized the man seated beside her, but he couldn't remember his name. He did know he hated him. Hated the way he looked at Annie, the way he touched her, like he had the right. He wanted to go to them, but he couldn't move. He wanted to shout to the bastard that she belonged to him, but the words wouldn't form. Slowly he tried to lift one leg, take one step. Move forward. Move toward her. But he lost the battle. He'd lost her—

"Wake up, Doc. Time for a shower."

Jack's eyes drifted open to discover the Samoan R.N. standing over him, a man who had at least three inches on Jack and a massive frame that would rival a West Texas mountain. Despite his casual expression, shaggy hair and close-cropped goatee, Pete the Nurse looked ominous.

Jack's gaze roamed to the shower chair next to the bed—hell on rollers, with a seat that consisted of an open circle made to accommodate a bare ass. His bare ass, if Pete had his way. "Don't need a shower. I had a sponge bath…this morning." A spit-and-shine administered by a young nurse who'd had novice moves, and embarrassment written all over her face. She'd made quick work of her job and chatted nonstop. Enough humiliation for one day, Jack decided. Enough of everything. He wanted only to sleep. To escape from this hell.

Pete sighed. "Come on, Doc. Don't give me a hard time. Policy states everybody has to have a shower bath every three days." He put heavy emphasis on everybody—which meant, We don't give a damn who you are. Or were. Jack felt closer to a nobody than he ever had in his life.

Why couldn't they just let him wallow in his stink? Nobody cared anyway. "L-leave me alone. I'm tired."

It was obvious to Jack that Pete had no intention of leaving. The nurse just moved the damn torture chair closer to the bed. "Now we can do this one of two ways," Pete said. "I can get a lift—and we both know those are uncomfortable as hell—or I can just grab you up and set you in the chair."

As far as options went, Jack found neither appealing. But Pete continued to stand firm. "G-go away."

"Not a chance."

Jack wasn't so ready to accept defeat, at least where the chair was concerned. "Why can't I try standing in the sh-shower?"

"You could try, but if you fall, then my ass is grass. You'll sue the hospital and I'll be in the unemployment line. So let's just do it my way, okay?"

Maybe he would fall. More humiliation. “No lift.”

Pete taped up the IV and hung it on a rolling stand, then in one smooth move slipped his arms underneath Jack and grabbed him up with little effort. Jack’s dead arm dangled lifelessly at his side, his leg just as useless. He could imagine what kind of sick picture this would make—Dr. Jack Morgan in the arms of Pete the Mountain. He suddenly recalled the painting of the Pietà in his mom’s dining room, a depiction of an emaciated Jesus in Mary’s arms. Contrary to popular belief, even though Jack had held life in his hands, he wasn’t God.

The back of the open-air hospital gown split, exposing Jack to the elements, sending a burst of cold air across his butt. At least he could feel the cool on the right side of his hip, and in some odd way he welcomed the sensation. But he didn’t welcome the shower chair’s hard plastic surface as Pete arranged him in it and rolled him and the IV pole into the bathroom shower. A shower not big enough for the all the equipment and both men. Somehow, Pete managed.

The effort of sitting up made Jack’s stomach churn and threaten to expel what little he’d eaten for lunch—his first solid meal, if you could call cold soup and runny Jell-O solid. He fought the nausea, determined not to vomit all over the floor.

“I’m just going to take this gown off, Doc.”

Jack didn’t have time to prepare. As soon as Pete said it, he did it, unsnapping the gown’s shoulders with proficiency and peeling it away. Now Jack sat in his birthday suit in a butt-exposing chair with a Samoan sadomasochist standing by. Thank God, Pete laid a towel over his privates. At least the nurse had left him that much dignity in a totally undignified situation.

After pushing the overhead faucet toward the wall, Pete turned on the water. Still, some frigid droplets bouncing off the tiled surface hit Jack on the face, awakening him to the fact he was completely helpless. Anger simmered in a deep dark place in his soul. He was wasted. Useless.

Pete busied himself with removing the paper from the bar of soap and gathering another towel and a washcloth. Jack sent him his best scowl, hoping the guy would get on with it. Once he’d tested the water, Pete pulled the faucet over him, thankfully angling it so it didn’t drown him, and worked the soap into the washcloth, creating sufficient lather to bathe three men. “Heard your little girl’s coming to see you tonight.”

Jack wasn’t surprised Pete knew. The hospital gab line was notorious for getting into everyone’s business. Especially where he was concerned. And Annie. “Yeah.”

“We’ll get you all cleaned up and ready.” Pete then commenced soaping Jack down, raising his arms to wash pits, moving on to his chest, stopping where the towel draped across his lap. He offered Jack the washcloth and nodded toward his lap. “You’ve got one good hand. You wanna do this yourself?”

“Best idea you’ve h-had…all day, P-Pete.”

“Okay. Go to it.”

“You gonna…watch?”

Pete streaked a damp forearm over his chin. “Hadn’t intended to. But I can’t leave. I can just turn my back here and let you give the package a good scrubbing.”

Jack laid the washcloth in his lap and held out his hand. “Soap?”

Pete handed him the bar. “Watch out. It’s slippery.”

“I can still do s-soap.” Even if he couldn’t speak without stuttering like an idiot. Even if he couldn’t do surgery.

Just as Jack lifted the towel, someone called from outside the door. Pete pushed open the door to Melba, another hospital icon, who was changing the bedsheets. She smiled and asked, “How are you doing today, Dr. Morgan?”

Just peachy, he wanted to say. Come in and join the party. Have a look at Dr. Jack Morgan, today’s sideshow, while he scrubs his jewels. Instead he simply said, “I’m g-great, Melba,” with enough sarcasm to melt a steel O.R. table.

When the soap slipped from his fingers, Jack automatically leaned forward. Pete stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Whoa, Doc. I’ll get that.”

A teenage volunteer with a wide-eyed expression joined Melba at the open door, clutching a stack of magazines to her chest. Now Jack really felt like a circus act. At one time he’d thought to encourage Katie to volunteer at the hospital when she got older. A bad idea.

His anger threatened to combust. This was totally dehumanizing. But hadn’t he treated his own patients the same way? How many times had he invaded someone’s privacy for the sake of his schedule? How many people had he reduced to utter humiliation by holding a conversation while they sat on a bedpan? He swore if he ever got out of this mess, if he ever recovered enough to resume his career—and that was a big if—he’d never let it happen again.

Jack clenched his jaw and hissed, “Sh-shut the d-damn door, Pete.”

Pete blinked as though he’d just woken up to reality. “Sure, Doc. Sorry.” He closed the door with a hangdog look and studied the toilet while Jack finished washing.

“I’m done,” Jack pronounced, realizing how much truth rang out in his words.

Pete helped him dry off, replaced the hospital gown with a clean one and rolled him back into the room. He maneuvered Jack out of the chair and into bed, readjusted all the equipment and monitors, then raised the side rails, leaving him feeling like a caged animal. Couldn’t they see he wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon? Except maybe home alone to wallow in his pity with a stranger attending to his needs. Unless he decided to take Annie up on her offer. Nope. Couldn’t do that. He couldn’t tolerate her sympathy on a daily basis. They’d both be miserable.

The loud reverberation of activity at the adjacent nurses’ station traveled into the room. Jack would normally welcome the sound, but right now it clanked in his head.

He brought his attention back to Pete, who was finishing cleanup. “When you leave, sh-shut the door. Can’t sleep with all the noise.”

Pete gave him a quick salute. “Yes, sir.” Then he left Jack alone to study the ceiling and wonder how in the hell he would ever survive this mess. How he would deal with the inability to take care of himself in very basic ways. Like now. He had to pee, which had become a major ordeal since they’d removed his catheter that morning. Fortunately some of the equipment still worked, or at least the plumbing. He shot a glance at the bedside table, determined to get the damn plastic urinal and do it himself. But the table was on his right side, out of his reach.

He tried to maneuver himself enough to retrieve it, skirting all sorts of tubes and lines, but to no avail. His body was too dead and the table was too far away. He pressed the button on the bed’s metal arm with his good hand to summon the nurse, but it didn’t work. Raising his head as far as he could, he noticed the cord curled on the floor like a hangman’s noose, detached from outlet.

Goddammit! Trapped like a prisoner with no way to communicate. He considered yelling, screaming at the top of his lungs about the injustice, their incompetence. Rant like a madman who had totally lost his mind along with his ability to function normally.

He had lost everything. His dignity. His pride. So what good would shouting do? It wouldn’t take away the pain, the loneliness. The loss. And he felt it all as sharp as a razor’s edge.

But instead of shouting, he did the one thing no one would expect, not even him.

He wept.

CHAPTER 5

"These have to be the most pansy-ass pajamas I've ever seen. What am I supposed to do with them?"

Anne couldn't help but laugh over Jack's reaction, any more than she'd been able to resist purchasing the pj's earlier that day. "How about wearing them?"

"I don't wear pajamas to bed."

That was news to Anne, considering she had no idea what he wore to bed. She hadn't been near his bed. In fact, after four dates, the man hadn't even kissed her yet. She was beginning to feel a bit like only his pal, or a pariah.

She yanked the top from his grasp and held it up. "Just look at all the little blue stethoscopes. They're adorable. Who wouldn't want to wear them?"

"Me. I don't do adorable."

"That's rich, Jack. I've seen your hula-girl surgical cap."

"That's not adorable. That's a conversation piece."

She feigned a dejected look. "You won't make an exception for me? I mean, I went to all this trouble to celebrate Groundhog Day…."

"Since when does Groundhog Day warrant a celebration?"

Since she'd begun to search for any excuse to see him. "That's not the point. The point is I brought you to the batting cage, bought your dinner—"

"Yeah. A great couple of tacos."

She patted his leg. "It's the thought that counts."

He moved closer to her on the bench and draped his arm around her shoulder. "Tell you what. We'll go back to my place, I'll model the pajamas for you, and then I'll take them off and you'll tell me what you prefer."

She leaned away and pointed a finger at him. "Aha! There's the Jack Morgan I've heard about in the hospital halls. The charming sex machine who's reportedly bedded half the staff."

"Don't believe everything you hear, Annie. When would I have had time to bed half the staff?"

"During your coffee break or in the on-call rooms?"

"I only have five-minute coffee breaks and I use the on-call rooms for sleeping."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because you're the only woman I've been with, or cared to be with, in months."

"But not in a sexual sense." She hated the insecurity in her voice. Hated even more that she'd posed such a leading question.

"If you're asking whether I want to make love to you, the answer is yes. I think about it all the time."

So did she. "You haven't even kissed me yet."

"Do you want me to kiss you now, right here in front of all these Little Leaguers?"

She did. With all her heart, she did. "Not if it's going to embarrass you. And not if you don't care to, of course."

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