LUCY RYDER

Tamed by Her Army Doc's Touch

MEDICAL ROMANCE™

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Аннотация

There’s something about a hero!When ex-army medic Luke Sullivan catches sight of a beautiful woman wriggling out of her dress and jumping into a lake at a party, it seems as if his night is looking up! But then, realising she’s swimming to someone’s rescue, he rushes to help.One life saved later, Dr Lilah Meredith locks eyes with her co-rescuer and feels an instant jolt of electricity. She’s learnt men can’t be trusted, but it’s only a matter of time before she gives in to the gaze of the newest, handsomest doctor in town…

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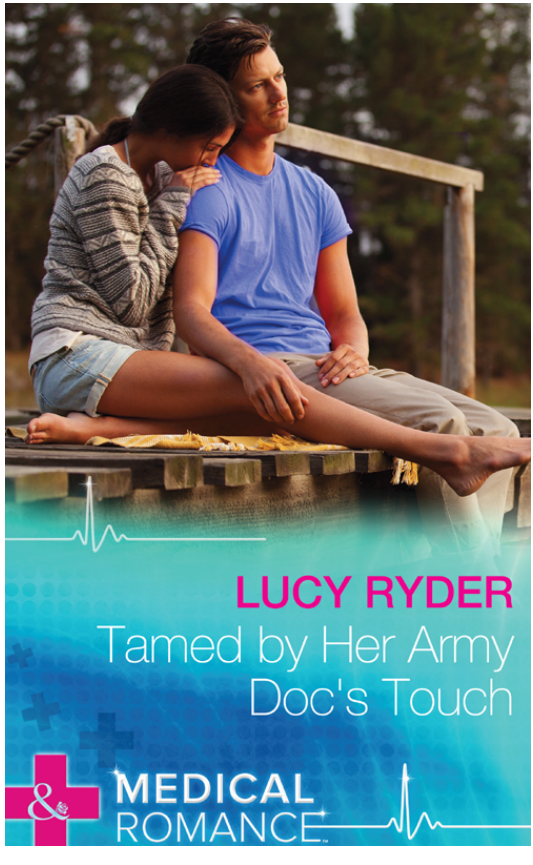

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Praise for Lucy Ryder:

‘RESISTING HER REBEL HERO is an absolute delight to read … the sexy writing and refreshing characters leave their mark on every page.’

—*HarlequinJunkie*

After trying out everything from acting in musicals, singing opera, travelling and writing for a business newspaper, **LUCY RYDER** finally settled down to have a family and teach at a local community college, where she currently teaches English and Communication. However, she insists that writing is her first love and time spent on it is more pleasure than work.

She currently lives in South Africa, with her crazy dogs and two beautiful teenage daughters. When she’s not driving her daughters around to their afternoon activities, cooking those endless meals or officiating at swim meets, she can be found tapping away at her keyboard, weaving her wild imagination into hot romantic scenes.

Dear Reader

It's often said that our families are responsible for the people we become. If that's the case then I must be pretty awesome—because my family is the greatest. We may not always agree, but we never forget that blood far outweighs petty squabbles, and we're there for each other. *Always*.

My hero, Luke, isn't so lucky. He's grown up with emotionally unavailable parents concerned only with their shallow lives rather than being there for their three sons. And, having spent a decade in the military, he's more at ease with actions than emotions. Emotions are messy and they can't be trusted. Give him a crisis any day. He's barely survived his parents' marriages and is determined never to inflict that brand of marital hell on anyone—especially vulnerable kids. In fact he's against marriage and children altogether.

But he does inspire trust in others. He's intelligent, a highly skilled soldier and medic, and he willingly puts himself on the line for others. If that's not hero-worthy I don't know what is.

Lilah has a few 'daddy issues' of her own, having experienced paternal rejection at a vulnerable age. She's bound and determined not to make the same mistakes as her mother. Fiercely independent, she would rather suppress her natural inclinations and go it alone than depend on someone who's not going to be there for the long haul.

Luckily for her, Luke is nothing like her father—or his. He's his own man, capable of making his own mistakes, and it takes history repeating itself—for Lilah, at least—to teach him that love begins with trust. And that, to my mind, is the true gift of family.

Happy reading

Lucy

Tamed by Her Army Doc's Touch

Lucy Ryder

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dedication

As always, I could not have done this without my amazing family, who are always there for me—especially my parents, Peter and Gillian Hucklesby. Mom and Dad, you're the best!

To my nephew Jason, who took time out of his busy study schedule to answer my endless medical questions. Thanks, Jay, you're going to make an awesome doctor.

And lastly to my daughters, Kate and Ash. Words cannot express how much I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

IF DR. LILAH MEREDITH had known she'd be going swimming when she'd dressed earlier that evening, she probably would have chosen to wear something that didn't look like it came from some designer lingerie's "wild" collection.

But then again, she'd recently returned from the jungles of South America and had splurged on expensive underwear to celebrate her return to civilization. And if she was in an emotional place where only she got to see the scraps of silks and stretchy lace, then that was okay—she was having a break from men anyway.

But that was before her evening, which had started out normally enough for a bachelorette party, had rapidly descended into disaster. One minute she'd been surrounded by the debris left over from the gift-opening frenzy, a tipsy bride-to-be and a dozen giggling colleagues chanting, "Take it off, take it off!", the next she'd been scrambling through the open window between two ornamental shrubs onto the restaurant's upper deck.

She'd turned away from the embarrassing sight of a buff young guy stripping off his clothes to the bump-and-grind music blaring from the private room's speakers just in time to see a dozen people leap from the party boat into the lake.

Flashing back to her senior year in high school when a group of pot-smoking students had set fire to a boat, Lilah's heart

stopped for a couple of beats.

Praying it was just another excuse for youthful high-jinks, she held her breath and waited for them to return to the boat. But the longer she watched the more uneasy she became, especially when it became apparent that someone was clearly in trouble.

With her heart surging into her throat, Lilah lurched to her feet and scrambled over the table to the window, knocking over half a bottle of Chianti and a jug of margaritas. Cutlery, glasses and flowers from the centerpiece went flying. There was a lot of high-pitched shrieking and Lilah had a brief glimpse of shocked expressions and open-mouthed gapes as she dived out the window.

Luke Sullivan folded his arms across his chest, tipped his chair back against the wooden railing and smiled as whoops and whistles of encouragement competed with the stripper music pumping from the system. Greg Turner, the man about to take the walk of insanity down the aisle, grinned goofily as Lindi—or was it Mindi?—ripped off her sparkly skin-tight blouse. She shimmied her balloon-shaped rack in the groom's face while her twin rubbed her awesome curves against him.

It wasn't that Luke had anything against stripper twins or lap dances—heck, he'd participated in enough as a wild student and then again in the army to appreciate the manly tradition. But at thirty-two, you'd think Greg would appreciate something a little less clichéd. Something like … poker night.

Yeah, Luke mused as the girl rolled her hips like a belly

dancer. If he ever lost his mind long enough to get hitched—*God forbid*—he'd prefer poker night stag. Now, that was a civilized way to mourn the end of bachelorhood. *If* he were inclined to matrimony, that is, which he most definitely was not! He'd watched his parents' marriages fall apart too many times not to want to put himself or any kid through that kind of hell.

Besides, poker night was a great way for a bunch of guys to kick back, puff on Cuban cigars, guzzle beer and nachos, and talk trash as they bet on a pair of kings. He had a sneaky feeling Greg's wild younger brother had organized the strippers more for himself than the groom.

And while the twins were certainly impressively endowed, Luke thought with a yawn as his gaze slid to the people strolling along the boardwalk below, he preferred his women a little less surgically enhanced. And a lot more natural. Women were not meant to look like they carried alien pods on their chests. They were meant to be soft and curvy. Kind of like the woman dodging through the crowd, barely missing a collision with a couple of teens on skateboards. Her movements were urgent, as if she was either fleeing from someone or racing towards some*thing*.

Instantly alert, he pushed away from the wall and the chair legs hit the deck with a thud. He scanned the crowd for a knife-wielding pursuer but saw nothing suspicious and turned back in time to see her ditch her strappy sandals and hike the slinky dress up a pair of spectacular thighs, before taking off down the pier.

Grinning with masculine appreciation at the flash of long,

smooth limbs, Luke rose and headed for the deck railing to get a better view. The woman slowed down enough to shout and wave her arms at the party cruise heading for open water. When no one responded, she shook her head and threw her arms up as if to say, "What now?"

Then, to his growing astonishment, she wriggled out of that short, snug dress—a sight way more erotic than the striptease going on behind him—and headed for the lake at a dead run.

Now, this, he thought as she launched herself off the pier, was way better than watching a couple of barely legal dancers prance around in strips of sparkly fabric. Her body entered the water with scarcely a splash, only to reappear seconds later as people began heading closer to watch the crazy woman take a swim in her underwear.

Just before the gathering crowd blocked his view, Luke saw her strike out, but not for the boat, as he'd expected. Instead, she headed away from it.

Puzzled, he scanned the water, stilling as he caught sight of movement a couple of hundred yards out. The person's flailing arms told him everything he needed to know.

Someone was in trouble.

Without further thought, he vaulted over the balcony and ignored the cries of surprise as he dropped to the boardwalk below. Wincing when pain shot through his recently healed thigh, he tucked in his body and rolled to his feet in one smooth move, before sprinting after her.

Barely a minute after the woman had entered the lake; Luke was stripping off his own clothes and taking a running dive off the pier. He knew just how cold the water was and braced for the instant brain freeze.

Despite his training, he tensed as his body hit the water. *Jee-hose-phat*. It was freezing. After fifteen years as far away from the Pacific North West as he could get, the waters of Lake McKenzie still felt colder than the North Atlantic in midwinter.

He surfaced and sucked warm air into his lungs before setting out, his powerful strokes quickly eating up the distance. He was still a good forty yards away when he saw the woman disappear beneath the surface. A girl flailed nearby, alternately sobbing and screaming, "Trent! *Trent!*" as she tried to stay afloat.

She must have spotted Luke because her litany changed to, "Help him, help him! I couldn't hold on." She coughed and wiped her face with a shaking hand. "He … he j-just slipped under and I c-can't find him."

"Stay here," Luke ordered as he swam closer. "And calm down. Panicking won't help." He sucked in a quick breath and followed, his powerful kick immediately taking him several feet below the surface. As he descended, he searched for signs of the boy—and the woman.

Fortunately, light from the huge moon hanging over Lake McKenzie penetrated past the surface, eerily illuminating the cold, silent depths. Luke shuddered before he could help himself. He remembered quite vividly the summer his little brother had

almost drowned in the lake and hoped, like that night twenty years ago, everyone walked away having learned a valuable lesson.

Luke looked for bubbles and when he caught sight of a silvery trail rising to the surface, he swam towards it just as a figure rose from the dark depths. It was the woman. She hadn't seen him yet and when he reached out to get her attention she jerked violently and turned.

Her eyes went huge and her mouth opened, as though he'd startled her. A couple of large bubbles escaped and a flash of panic crossed her features. She flailed then began kicking vigorously for the surface.

Realizing she'd swallowed lake water, Luke followed, grabbing her arm and pulling her upwards as he shot past. The moment their heads broke the surface, she slapped at his hands and fought for breath. Feeling a little guilty for scaring her, he grabbed her shoulders and demanded, "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

She made a feeble attempt to pull away but Luke tightened his grip and ignored the furious accusation in her huge eyes. She glared at him between violent coughing spells and he got the impression she'd like to deck him but was too busy hacking up a lung.

Finally she pushed at his shoulders and croaked, "That distinction's yours. Now let go." She shoved him again, and when he reluctantly released her she sucked in a jerky breath and

pushed her hair from her face. Realizing she was about to dive, he grabbed her arm and got a foot on his thigh for his trouble.

"Wait, *dammit*!" he ground out, against the zinging pain that made his teeth hurt. "You wait here."

"No time," she snapped. "He's been under too long." And with a final yank she slipped free and he was left watching as her bottom and long legs disappeared beneath the surface.

Cursing stubborn independent women, Luke inhaled deeply and followed her into the cold depths. He'd been about to suggest that he take his turn looking. *Guess not.*

For someone already half-frozen, she moved with surprising speed through the water and he watched with reluctant admiration as long pale legs disappeared into the darkness. Unused to letting someone else act in an emergency, Luke used his big arms and legs to his advantage.

Finally, when his lungs began to burn and the need for air was forcing him to consider surfacing, Luke spotted movement to his left. Turning, he caught sight of a mermaid rising from the darkened depths. In the shifting silvery light her long curvy body and cloud of pale hair floating behind her reminded him of mystical creatures luring mortals to their watery doom.

Only this naiad was struggling sluggishly to save one. Streaking towards her, he wrapped an arm around the boy's chest, hooked his free hand beneath her armpit, and propelled them upwards with a few powerful kicks.

The instant they surfaced, her eyes met his in a long silent stare

as she raggedly sucked in air. Before he could interpret her look or wonder at the weird flash of familiarity—or was it *déjà vu*?—she'd moved to support the exhausted girl. Luke was happy to let her go. He would rather take on a village of hostiles than deal with hysterical females.

He adjusted his hold on the boy and ordered, "Try to keep up," over his shoulder before striking out for the shore a couple of hundred yards away.

They needed to hurry. One glimpse of the kid's face told him Trent had suffered a head injury and was unresponsive. He only hoped the cold had slowed his vitals and they could revive him without permanent brain damage. The kid had been under at least ten minutes. Maybe longer.

He spotted a rubber dinghy speeding towards them and soon hands were reaching down to pull Trent aboard. Luke was relieved to let them. The faster they began CPR and got the kid warmed up, the better.

He helped the coed aboard before placing both hands beneath the woman's scantily clad bottom and shoving her upwards. Finally, he hauled himself over the side just as the twin engines rumbled.

By the time they pulled up to the marina wharf a crowd had gathered. Several men rushed forward to lift their patient off the dinghy and Luke moved to help secure the boat.

The woman, looking cold but spectacular in a slinky leopard-print bra and teeny matching boy shorts, pushed past him and

scrambled onto the pier, her low, smooth voice saying, “Stand back, I’m a doctor.” She dropped to her knees and put her ear to the boy’s chest before gently prising open his eyelids. Luke moved closer, urging the crowd back.

“Give us some room, folks,” he said. “Anyone call 911?”

“On their way,” someone replied, and shoved his clothing at him.

“Uh, thanks,” Luke said absently, his attention already on the expert way the woman was performing CPR. He knelt down and faced her across the boy’s prone body.

“Can you do mouth-to-mouth?” she asked, counting the compressions she executed.

“Hell no, lady,” he said with a snort, and placed his hands over hers. “I’ll do compressions. You breathe.”

She slid her hands away and sat back, shoving ropes of sopping hair off her face. “Fine,” she snapped, her expression annoyed. “But keep up a steady rhythm and stop when I tell you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, his gaze dropping to her wide, lush mouth. “You just give that boy the kiss of life.”

Lilah didn’t know how long they worked on the unconscious student but she was grateful for the huge guy’s assistance. He seemed to know what he was doing, like he’d done it before. She watched him correctly place his big hands and perform the exact number of compressions before pausing so she could inflate the boy’s lungs.

The muscles in her arms and legs burned, quivering from the

cold as much as from physical exertion. She was clearly out of shape. What made it worse was that the guy didn't even look fazed or out of breath. As though he regularly went swimming in freezing water to save drowning victims.

Maybe he did, she mused, absently noting wide, muscular shoulders, zero body fat and the impressive bulge of biceps as he crouched over her patient. But then again, it might have something to do with all that testosterone pumping off his big, hard body like a nuclear reactor. She could literally feel his heat reaching across the boy's body and wished she could borrow some of it.

He flashed her a concerned look, and Lilah knew what he was thinking. It didn't look good. She felt for a pulse just beneath their patient's jaw and thought she felt a tiny flutter. But when she moved her fingers slightly there was nothing.

She frowned and put her ear at his mouth. "I think I felt something," she murmured, searching for a pulse again.

"Keep breathing," the big guy ordered sharply, without breaking rhythm. "And don't stop until his pulse is steady and strong." Of course Lilah wasn't about to give up. She hadn't spent long minutes submerged in a cold, dark nightmare, thinking she was going to join Trent in a watery grave, to give up now.

They again fell into a grim, silent rhythm until she finally felt the tiniest muscle contraction beneath her hand. She reared back just as Trent's body jerked once, twice and then water began spewing from his lungs in huge spasmodic bursts. Applause

and cheering broke the tense silence as she and her companion exchanged a brief glance of shared relief. Trent might not be out of the woods yet, but he was back.

Sucking in a deep breath, Lilah felt her body sag. *Thank God*, she thought as the boy coughed and wheezed. That breathing—ragged and painful as it appeared—was the most beautiful sound in the world … as was the distant wail of sirens.

Pushing back the kid's wet hair to check his head wound, Lilah was unaware she was shaking until a large warm hand encased her trembling fingers. Instant heat and electricity shot up her arm, making her skin buzz. Startled, her gaze flew up and she got caught in eyes as deep and green and calm as the lake waters in summer.

Crinkles appeared at the corners and Lilah's heart gave a slow lazy tumble in her chest that she quickly blamed on the recent crisis.

"You did great," he said in a rough, dark bedroom voice. His darkened gaze dropped briefly to her mouth before lifting once more to lock with hers. His mouth kicked up at one corner. "It was obviously the kiss that did it. He's a lucky guy."

Feeling her face heat, Lilah slid her hand from his and focused her attention on examining the boy. "You just didn't want people to know you kissed a guy," she snorted softly and reached for a black T-shirt nearby, pressing it to the bleeding head wound. His deep chuckle vibrated the space between them and made her breath catch in her chest. Or maybe that was just because she

was finally coming down off the adrenalin high.

"I can't imagine him liking it any more than I would." He was silent a moment before his large hand reached out to squeeze her shoulder. "Seriously, they're lucky you saw them."

Lilah stilled beneath his disturbing touch and his words. "Someone else would have helped." She looked up briefly as he rose. "You did."

"Couldn't let you have all the fun," he said, and something heavy dropped around her shoulders. Lilah was instantly enveloped in the warm, clean smell of virile man.

Without lifting her head, she snuggled into the garment and checked her patient's pupil reaction. "Do you know where you are?" she asked.

Trent opened his mouth and "Wha-a-at?" emerged on a ragged breath, as though his throat had been scraped raw.

"Stay still a moment," she said, gently soothing him when he made to sit up. "The paramedics are on their way."

He frowned and blinked. "Paramedics?" he rasped, his bewildered gaze clinging to hers, as though he was afraid she would vanish if he blinked.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked, just as someone cried, "Trent?" and the next thing the young coed was dropping down beside him. He turned to blink up at her for a couple of beats and Lilah held her breath. He croaked, "Tiff?" and the girl fell against him, laughing and crying.

Lilah exhaled with noisy relief. If he remembered his

girlfriend's name, his head injury wasn't too serious. She heard someone say the paramedics had arrived and rose to give the lovebirds a few moments of privacy. Within minutes Trent was being hooked up to a portable IV and loaded onto a stretcher.

"Is this really necessary?" he demanded weakly, as Lilah rattled off instructions to the ambulance crew.

"Yes," she said, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze. "But it should only be overnight. Depending on that head wound and the results of the CT scan."

"My head hurts." He frowned. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?" the big guy asked, as he appeared beside them.

Trent thought for a minute. "No. The last thing I remember was dancing with Tiff and then … and then people around us were jumping into the lake."

The rest of his answer was drowned out by the arrival of a group of tipsy women noisily pushing through the crowd. Before Lilah could question Trent further she was being enthusiastically hugged by her friends and peppered with demands about what had happened.

"You were with us one minute, the next you were flying out the window," Angie, a colleague from ER, laughed as she squeezed Lilah. "Heck, if we'd known you were planning a public striptease of your own, we'd have been there to cheer you on instead of that sleazy toy boy."

"And thank God you're wearing your good underwear," Jenna

Richards, obstetrician and bride-to-be, added. “Imagine if you’d been prancing around in laundry-day undies?”

“Oh, horror,” Angie gasped, and everyone laughed, clearly still buzzed from the evening’s festivities.

Lilah pushed a hank of wet hair from her forehead and shoved first one arm then the other through the bomber jacket’s sleeves. Now that the emergency was over, she was very conscious of the fact that she was practically naked beneath the butter-soft leather.

A cool breeze brushed her bare legs, raising an army of goose bumps and she burrowed deeper into the voluminous folds. She was freezing.

“Let’s go,” she said, pushing her way through the group, suddenly eager to get somewhere private—and maybe order a couple of brandies. For medicinal purposes, of course.

Sensing no one was following her, Lilah looked over her shoulder and found thirteen pairs of eyes studying her with an array of expressions varying from curiosity to narrow-eyed speculation.

“What?”

“Do you two know each other?” Jenna demanded, craning her neck to look through the crowd of bystanders.

Lilah frowned. “Who? Trent?”

There was general confusion but it was Angie who demanded, “Trent? Who’s Trent?”

“The boy I—”

“We’re talking about Lucky Luke,” Jenna interrupted,

gesturing wildly to the people crowding around the big guy whose gaze was locked on Lilah. Her breath caught beneath that intense gaze but she must have looked baffled because Jenna's mouth dropped open to a chorus of gasps.

"You don't know?" She looked shocked.

"Know what?"

"And the lucky girl just happened to see Dr. Hunk of the Decade in his skivvies," another voice drawled. "Did you know his father's a cyber-tech billionaire?"

Lilah followed the direction of the woman's predatory look. "Dr who?"

"Sullivan," Jenna prodded. "You know? The assistant director of medicine Sullivan?"

It was Lilah's turn to look shocked. "But … but … I thought the ADM was a … woman?"

"Honey," Angie said, her face lighting up with a wicked grin, "Harriet Sullivan *is* a woman. You just got an up-close-and-personal view of her *nephew*, Dr. Tall, Dark and Buff, practically in the … well, the buff."

CHAPTER TWO

LUKE CHECKED HIS side mirror, flicked on the indicator and turned his motorbike into the hospital visitors' parking. The sixteen-hundred cc engine rumbled beneath him like a large, hungry predator and responded to the merest flick of his wrist.

He'd been back in Spruce Ridge a few months and still couldn't believe he was here at all. But, then, Spruce Ridge had been the spawning grounds of the Sullivan boys' greatest summer adventures, despite—or maybe in spite of—their parents' widely publicized and bitter divorce.

His aunt and uncle had taken in three bewildered little boys and provided a firm hand and a ton of homemade cookies, along with unconditional love. Looking back, Luke sometimes wondered where he'd be if it hadn't been for summers spent here.

His mouth twisted into a self-deprecating grin as he recalled the wild scrapes he and his brothers had got into, partly in a bid for their parents' attention but mostly because they had been budding delinquents. And punishing his parents had been the main reason he'd joined the army after med school, instead of doing his residency at the hospital his mother pulled strings to get him into.

He'd loved every minute of being in the Rangers—right up until eight months ago when his helicopter had been shot down over enemy territory. The crash had taken the lives of six

marines, two rangers, the hostage they'd been sent in to retrieve and Luke's passion for flying.

He and the rest of his team had held off hostiles for fourteen hours before help had finally arrived. Luke didn't remember the rescue. He'd woken up in hospital two days later feeling damn lucky to be alive. He'd also woken up realizing it was just a matter of time before his luck ran out, so he'd signed his release papers and hopped on the first flight home.

Locating an empty parking space near the entrance, he whipped the big motorbike between a faded red truck and a dark blue sedan and brought it to a halt.

Dropping one booted foot to the ground, he killed the engine, released the kickstand and rose to his full six-four height. Shoving up his visor, he stripped off thick leather gloves and turned to survey the parking lot in a move he recognized as a habit left over from a decade in the military. He wasn't concerned about being paranoid—it had saved his ass countless times over the years—but he still had to remind himself that Spruce Ridge wasn't a war zone.

He figured he'd eventually get better at remembering.

Reaching up, he tugged off his helmet and shoved a hand through his hair, ruffling the thick coffee-colored strands. After tucking his gloves in the helmet, he dropped everything into a side storage compartment then headed for the entrance.

People sent him wary glances and Luke smiled and shook his head as they scuttled out of his way. He knew the black leather

made him appear the big badass biker, but he'd seen enough accidents involving motorbikes that he wouldn't consider getting on one without wearing all the proper gear.

Reaching for the big zipper tab, he pulled it down and thought about his favorite leather bomber jacket a certain siren had been wearing the last time he'd seen her.

The memory of huge stormy gray eyes framed by a thick fringe of dark lashes, long ropes of sopping red-gold hair and a lush pink mouth flashed into his head and brought a different smile to his lips. That mouth had breathed life back into a young man's lungs and had featured hotly in Luke's dreams last night.

Stepping through the automatic doors into the air-conditioned foyer, Luke pulled off his aviator shades and slid the earpiece of one arm into the neck of his T-shirt.

He gave a silent chuckle. Okay, so the memory had also included long naked legs and some spectacular curves covered in skimpy leopard-print underwear. He was a guy and hard-wired to recall stuff like that. Besides, in the months he'd been home he hadn't seen anything remotely as impressive or intriguing as the woman who'd stripped in public and dived into a freezing lake to save someone she didn't even know.

That had taken a lot of guts, and Luke was a great admirer of guts.

Entering the nearest elevator, he punched the button for the fifth floor and watched as the doors slid closed. It was his weekend off but he'd decided to check on last night's drowning

victim before heading for the marina.

The elevator bell pinged and the doors opened onto a brightly lit corridor. Luke stepped out and the nurse on duty at the ward station looked up as he approached. Her gaze widened and she blinked a few times as her mouth opened and closed. “D-Dr. Sullivan?” she stuttered. “I didn’t … I almost didn’t recognize you.” Then she hurriedly straightened her white and navy top and flipped her hair in a move Luke couldn’t fail to recognize. “Can I help you?”

“I heard the drowning survivor was brought up here last night,” he said, propping his elbow on the counter and aiming a crooked smile in her direction.

“I … um … drowning survivor?”

“Yeah, Trent something-or-another.”

“Oh, him.” She gave a husky laugh and slid her gaze all over him like he was a mega-sized chocolate snack and she was contemplating a sugar binge. “We heard all about his dramatic rescue this morning. Everyone’s talking about what a hero you are.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he denied, straightening from his slouch. He was used to attracting attention from the opposite sex, but felt like she’d stripped him naked right there beneath the bright fluorescents. He frowned. Sometimes he wondered if the interest had more to do with his father’s money or the fact that he’d been discharged from the army with full military honors as well as a Purple Cross. Some women liked that kind of thing. “I

wasn't the one who saved his life."

"That's not what I heard." She smiled as though he was being modest, and pointed down the corridor. "Just follow the noise. I'm sure Trent and his friends will be thrilled you stopped by."

"Thanks."

"Oh, by the way, Dr. Sullivan?" she called as he headed down the corridor. "Have you seen the morning papers?"

He paused with a puzzled look over his shoulder. "No, why?"

She winked and fanned herself. "You really should check them out."

He shrugged and said, "Okay," although he had absolutely zero interest in the tabloids. He'd spent enough time as a kid trying to live down his mother's publicized exploits or dodging the paparazzi to care about reading whatever had the nurse looking like she was having a menopausal moment.

Approaching the noisy private room, he slowed his pace and came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. The private room was filled with young studs all vying for the attention of a woman propped beside the window. She was flushed and laughing, looking as young and carefree as a college sophomore. Luke recognized her instantly. Those long ropes of tousled red-gold curls were hard to miss, as were the soft, full curves beneath the lilac tank top. And the long legs encased in snug denim were unmistakably those of the woman who'd absconded with his favorite bomber jacket.

Dr. Lilah Meredith.

Lilah rolled her eyes and laughingly declined her fifth invitation for a date. It had been a long time since she'd been around noisy, energetic twenty-year-olds and she couldn't help feeling old—despite their assurances that she was a total "babe" or that she was only a few years older.

Besides, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a "real" date, let alone how to behave if she went on one with a couple of babe-crazy students.

Movement near the door distracted her from the disturbing image of herself as a lonely cougar—at twenty-nine—and Lilah sucked in a startled breath when she recognized the figure filling the doorway.

The last time she'd seen him he'd been standing head and shoulders above the crowd wearing nothing but low-slung jeans, a scowl and looking like the poster boy for Heroes R Us. The last time she'd seen him she'd thought he was just some hunky hot guy who'd been in the right place at the right time. Instead, he was a colleague—a guy from a world she wanted nothing to do with.

Granted, she'd only been working ER for a short while and had never actually been on rotation with him, but she'd heard enough about Luke Sullivan and seen him from a distance that she should have recognized him. But, then, she'd been too busy to pay attention to more than deep green eyes and big warm hands.

Now the sight of him dressed in black leather and looking all big and bad and dangerous reminded her of long muscular

legs, mile-wide shoulders and a body made for underwear ads—underwear for real men, that was, and not the pretty boys they usually featured.

There'd been that brief glimpse of him last night in wet black boxer briefs that still gave her heart palpitations when she recalled the way they'd molded to … well, everything.

Pushing away from the window with a breezy "Well, boys, it's been fun," Lilah reached for the shoulder bag she'd dropped on the bedside cabinet.

She slung it over her shoulder to a chorus of "You can't leave now," and pushed her way through the wall of youthful testosterone.

"Since the real hero of the moment has arrived, why don't I leave you to introduce yourselves? Maybe Connor can ask Dr. Sullivan for a date. I hear he's—"

"Already got a date with you, Dr. Meredith," his deep voice interrupted smoothly, sending goose bumps skittering across her flesh. Her eyes widened. *Oh, heck, no*, she thought with a gasp of dismay. *Absolutely no getting all worked up over some rich guy playing a badass biker dude*. Especially not a guy with the kind of look in his eyes that tempted women to sin.

He stepped into the room, abruptly dominating the space and sucking out all the air with a much more potent cocktail of testosterone and pheromones. But, then, he was a full-grown adult male who'd had years to perfect the recipe. *Oh, boy*.

His disturbing green gaze held hers for a couple of moments

too long for comfort and his mouth curled—as though he was picturing her in her underwear. *Jerk*.

Lilah's face heated and she nervously licked her lips, which caused his eyes to darken instantly.

"Oh, I'm sure the guys will make much better dates than me," she said, cursing the alarming way her breath hitched and her knees wobbled as she moved towards the door. She paused and bit her lip when he made no move step aside. Her eyes narrowed. He was huge, *darn it*, and surrounded by masculine heat and energy that was way too appealing for comfort.

Couldn't he have waited for her to leave before arriving like a hot avenging angel of doom?

His hooded gaze swept over her face to her mouth before dropping to take in the rest of her body as though she was still wearing nothing but scraps of wet underwear. "I sincerely doubt that, *Doctor*," he drawled, drawing snickers from the group behind her. His mouth curled into a slow grin as sinful as the gaze that rose to hers. "I'll just keep my date with you."

"I wouldn't count on that, Dr. Sullivan," Lilah said smoothly, and was forced to brush past his big body on her way out the door. A chorus of whistles and whoops followed her down the passage and she heard him say, "No offence, Connor."

A burst of laughter nearly drowned out Connor's reply. "None taken, dude," was followed by, "You lucky dog," before she was finally out of earshot.

Face burning, Lilah opted to take the stairs rather than the

elevator to the ground floor. She hoped by the time she reached the lobby she could blame her pounding pulse and ragged breathing on jogging down five flights of stairs.

She hit the ground floor and moved across the huge foyer, nodding to a group of ER nurses, who grinned and exchanged knowing looks when they saw her.

Idly wondering what that was all about, she searched through her shoulder bag for her keys, looking up when someone called her name.

Two women who'd been at the bachelorette party the night before, approached. Kim Howard held aloft a folded daily newspaper. "Have you seen the tabloids?" Lilah frowned and shook her head wondering why she should be interested in the tabloids.

"You should take a look, girl," Mandy Morgan advised her. "They're calling you Wild Woman and speculating about which underwear house you're moonlighting for."

Lilah felt her mouth drop open. "Wha-what?"

Kim snapped open the newspaper and flipped it around so Lilah could see the headlines and color picture dominating the front page.

A loud buzzing noise filled Lilah's ears and she thought she might faint. Beneath the headline "Wild Woman to the Rescue" was a picture of her diving off the pier. If she hadn't been so horrified to see herself on the front page—in her underwear—she might have admired the almost perfect execution of the dive.

As it was, her cheeks felt numb and her fingertips tingled as though she was about to pass out.

She grabbed the paper. "Oh, my God," she whimpered, too shocked to do anything but gape at the large color pic.

"There's more on page three." Kim bumped her shoulder sympathetically and Lilah turned the page with shaking hands. She gasped when she saw a grainy picture showing her stripping off her dress in full view of an entire waterfront packed with people. There were others too: of her stepping from the boat onto the pier; giving Trent what appeared to be a passionate kiss; and a close-up of her and Luke Sullivan sharing an eye-lock. The caption read *"Wild Woman and Dr. Oh-So-Dishy share a scorching hot look."*

Yikes.

She looked naked. She felt exposed and … and horrified. How could this happen? It was like she was back in high school and someone posted an embarrassing photograph of her on the bulletin board. Only *worse*. Because now everyone in Spruce Ridge could gawk at her in her underwear.

There was a pic of Luke in his wet boxer briefs looking buff and hunky. It was practically X-rated and Lilah could easily imagine thousands of women across the city drooling over him as they enjoyed their morning coffee.

"Where …?" She swallowed the hot lump of mortification that had settled in her throat and tried again. "Where the heck did these come from?" she rasped.

Kim's sideways glance was sympathetic. "Cellphones probably."

"Cellphones?" Lilah turned and gaped at her. "People were filming me with cellphones instead of doing something to help?" She knew she was getting a little hysterical and a lot outraged, but she felt outraged. "Two young people could have died while they whipped out their cellphones and caught it on video?"

Kim shrugged as if to say, *Yeah, go figure* and said, "Yay for teenagers and their technology. They must have made a fortune selling them to the tabloids."

Lilah's eyes dropped to the close-up of her and Luke Sullivan and felt her face go hot. That simmering instant of connection had been caught for all eternity by some pimply faced adolescent. "This is a nightmare." Kim studied the picture and Lilah felt the other woman's sideways look. "What?"

"It looks kind of hot. Like a freeze-frame from a movie where the romantic leads share a sexy moment."

Lilah groaned and covered her face.

"It gets worse," Mandy said, and squeezed Lilah's shoulder in silent support.

"How can anything be worse than this?"

"Easy," Kim said with a snicker. "You've gone viral."

Luke approached the church and took the stone stairs to the open wooden doors. A wedding was the last place he wanted to be. He'd rather be caught in hostile territory without a weapon. But, last night, after he'd helped pour a wasted Greg into a taxi,

he'd made a solemn promise that he'd be here.

He nodded to the guests gathered at the entrance and slipped his aviator shades into the inside pocket of his jacket. He'd had to buy a new suit, but considering the last one he'd owned was about nineteen years old he'd thought he was probably due for a new one. Especially if he was contemplating civilian life.

He might hate weddings and all they entailed but even he knew he couldn't arrive dressed in black leather. Other than a duffle bag full of army fatigues, jeans and tees, leather was all he had in his meager wardrobe. And owning one suit didn't mean he was turning out to be like his mother's husbands.

Resigning himself to a few hours of excruciating torture, he accepted a program from a pimply-faced usher in an ill-fitting suit and moved into the church, choosing a seat near the back. He'd come solo partly because he didn't know anyone outside of hospital personnel, and partly because women tended to get the kind of ideas at weddings that he wanted to avoid.

Besides, the only woman he'd been remotely attracted to since his arrival at SeaTac, just happened to think he was a card-carrying anarchist who couldn't be trusted. At least, that's what her expression had said this morning as she'd sashayed from a ward full of horny twenty-year-olds.

A low murmur of voices approached and a flash of ice-blue in his peripheral vision caught his attention. It was only when a tall curvy figure passed and moved further down the aisle that he realized it was the woman he'd just been thinking about. And

she was being escorted by their boss, Dr. Peter Webster—smug ER director and all-round womanizing sleazebag.

Feeling his skull tighten, he watched as Webster indicated aisle seats a few rows down and slid in after her, moving until he was practically in her lap.

Luke narrowed his gaze and watched as Webster leaned close but with a quick head-shake Lilah Meredith shifted until there were a few inches between them. Were they involved or something?

And if he was asking himself what a married man was doing at a wedding without his wife, it was because he'd experienced first hand the devastation that kind of behavior left behind and not because the feeling in his gut felt very much like betrayal.

According to the grapevine, Webster had a habit of targeting young unmarried personnel and Luke wondered why no one had reported him. If there was one thing he hated more than a bully, it was someone using their position to sexually harass subordinates who needed their jobs.

And then he wondered why he cared that Lilah Meredith was involved with anyone. He didn't.

After the service he joined a group of colleagues outside and waited for the newlyweds to leave the church. And while everyone pelted Greg and Jenna with rose petals Luke stood with his jacket slung over his shoulder and his free hand shoved into his pocket. When Lilah finally appeared, Webster's proprietary hand was on the curve of her hip as he ushered her solicitously

down the steps.

Solicitous, my eye, Luke snorted silently, and barely resisted the urge to head over and deck the smug bastard. He knew exactly what the man was thinking and it wasn't good manners—especially not with Dr. Meredith dressed in that blue dress and short stylish black jacket. All she needed was a wide-brimmed black hat and she'd look like a sexy gaucho.

Besides, it was none of his business how, and with whom, Lilah Meredith spent her free time. For all he knew, she was enjoying all the attention she was getting from a "respected" professional who could do a lot for her career.

Besides, when he'd been a student it had been common knowledge that a lot of girls dated med students, hoping to snag themselves a doctor. He hadn't thought Lilah Meredith was like that, but what the hell did he know?

Lilah drove through the huge iron gates and down the tree-lined road that led to the exclusive Greendale Hotel. Grimacing at the thought of how out of place her grandmother's old sedan would look amongst all the luxury vehicles, she headed for the portico entrance. She didn't know why she cared. It was way better than arriving in a low-slung sports car with a man who was not only her boss but reminded her of why her recent relief work in South America had gone so horribly wrong.

Peter Webster, with his charming smile, wandering hands and practiced seduction technique, was cut from the same cloth as her ex-boss, Dr. Brent Cunningham the Third—the person

responsible for the Amazonian Disaster, as Lilah had come to think of that chapter in her life.

Like Brent, Peter suffered from a God complex and tended to think he was entitled to more than professional courtesy from his subordinates. As if Lilah should feel honored by his attention. She didn't, and had experienced first hand what happened when men like him felt rejected and humiliated by someone like her. Careers suffered and lives were ruined.

Lilah told herself to remember that the next time she felt like kneeing the man in the nuts or punching that perfect nose. If there was one thing she hated, it was influential men taking advantage of vulnerable young women.

Lilah was neither that young nor vulnerable, unless you counted on the fact that she really needed this job. Besides, every time she looked in a mirror she was reminded that her own mother had fallen for a man just like Peter. Handsome, charming, married and wealthy. Rowan Franklin had swept her off her feet with promises of a bright and rosy future together. Only the future hadn't turned out so rosy for Grace Meredith. She'd found herself alone, pregnant and out of a job.

Frankly, no matter how handsome or charming the man, Lilah had absolutely no intention of making the same mistake—even at the promise of career advancement.

Following the stream of cars to the hotel's front entrance, she waited until a young uniformed valet approached her door before grabbing her clutch purse and sliding from behind the wheel.

She murmured her thanks and sent him a smile that made his ears turn red, before heading into the neo-classic lobby. A hundred feet overhead, late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the huge glass cupola and lit up the opulent marbled lobby like the sun god illuminating the temple of Zeus. Lilah had to blink a few times to dispel the image, especially when it highlighted a pair of broad shoulders, a wide tapering back and long muscular legs she recognized almost immediately—a figure that looked oddly out of place in the opulent surroundings when he should have looked right at home. Like a dangerous predator pretending to be housetrained.

She shivered at the image and decided it was the coiled readiness and lazily alert gaze that took in everything around him.

As though sensing her scrutiny, Luke Sullivan turned his head and an errant ray of sunshine fell across his face. It illuminated a slashing cheekbone, hard jaw and a surprisingly sculpted mouth, leaving the rest of his face in deep shadow.

She watched his unsmiling mouth for a couple of beats and shivered again—this time for an altogether different reason. *Dammit*. The man just had to look at her and she was reacting like a high-school sophomore with her first crush.

Reminding herself that he was from a world so far removed from hers that he might as well be from another galaxy, Lilah bit her lip and followed other guests to the ballroom. She told herself that she didn't care since he was out of most women's league. But it didn't help.

It also didn't help that even in an elegant suit Luke Sullivan looked as relaxed as a warrior god in Zeus's temple—like a hero from the Golden Age. It didn't take much imagination to picture him swinging a huge bronze broadsword at some hapless mortal enemy or whipping out a handgun and going all Super Spy on hotel guests.

She'd seen him in scrubs and a lab coat, biker leather, formal suit and almost nothing at all, and had yet to decide which look suited him best. He was a man of mystery, and Lilah didn't need anyone to tell her it would take a determined woman to peel away the layers to get to the real man beneath.

Not that he would allow it, she mused. The man had more layers than an onion and, frankly, anyone stupid enough to try deserved the tears that were sure to follow. She wasn't stupid and had long ago come to the conclusion that men weren't worth getting dehydrated for.

Shaking off the disturbing thoughts, Lilah paused at the ballroom entrance to scan the seating plan for her name. Besides, Luke Sullivan wasn't her problem and she would do well to stay as far from him as she could.

Someone come up behind her and she knew by the way her entire back heated and tingled who it was, even before a deep voice said near her ear, "Table eight, near the far left French doors. We're together."

They were?

Lilah turned and found her nose practically touching a crisp

white shirt. Startled to find him so close, she took a step back and slid her gaze up past a green-and-gold-patterned tie, strong tanned throat and hard jaw. Her gaze lingered for a couple of seconds on his mouth before lifting to look into deep green eyes surrounded by fringes of long dark lashes.

Her stomach gave an alarming little dip.

"*Oh … uh …* Dr. Sullivan," she said lamely, and cursed the breathless quality of her voice. "It's you."

"Uh-huh." He lifted one eyebrow in a move that made Lilah wish she could look as mocking. "Expecting someone? Webster, maybe?"

"Peter?" Lilah was confused. "Why would I be waiting for him?"

Luke rocked back on his heels and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Peter?" he demanded with a ferocious scowl. "Since when are you on first-name terms with the Emperor of ER?"

"Since it's none of your business," she shot back, angered and confused by his confrontational attitude. The last time she'd seen him he'd been dressed like a bad biker dude. But at least he'd been smiling. Right now, glaring at her as though she'd done something unforgivable, he looked like a sophisticated angel of doom. A very *sexy* angel of doom. *Darn him. And darn those tingles.*

She turned back to pretend interest in the seating plan and tried to ignore the way the hair at the nape of her neck lifted —as though straining towards him—like he was a giant magnet

yanking at every atom of iron in her body. Then he leaned closer and the tingles turned into a full-body shiver accompanied by goose bumps and tightening nipples.

Her eyes widened and she sucked in a shocked squeak.

Stop that, she ordered, but her body ignored the warning despite every instinct alerting her to danger. *Holy cow*, his blatant masculinity called to something deep and primal and feminine within her—something that had chosen now, of all times, to awaken and unfurl deep in her belly. She held her breath and kept her body as still as she could. Maybe he'd think she was a statue and go away.

Please go away.

"Why did you tell everyone I saved the kid, wild thing?" he murmured softly in her ear, and the breath she'd sucked in escaped in a soundless whoosh. She felt at once dizzy and amazingly clear-headed; something that was not only impossible but alarming.

And she didn't like it. And because she didn't, her spine stiffened and she said, "You did."

"Did not," he denied softly, chuckling when she made an annoyed sound in her throat.

Schooling her features, she turned slowly to face him. "I have no desire to become a celebrity," she informed him coolly. And she had no desire to become some rich playboy's newest toy either.

Luke rocked back on his heels, his hands shoved casually in

his pockets. One dark brow arched arrogantly. “And you think I do?”

Lilah shrugged. “You have broad shoulders.” She let her gaze drift over his wide, solid chest. “You can handle it,” she added, before turning on her four-inch heels and escaping into the ballroom.

CHAPTER THREE

THE INSTANT DINNER ENDED, Lilah escaped to the ladies' room to freshen her make-up and shore up her shaky composure. What the heck had Jenna been thinking to seat her beside Luke Sullivan?

Okay, so she knew what Jenna had been thinking. It was what everyone else had been thinking ever since the tabloids had hit the stands this morning. *Damn that picture*. And damn the rosy cloud of romance Jenna was floating around on. She was madly in love and wanted everyone else to be too.

Little did she know that Luke Sullivan was the last person Lilah would ever consider having a romantic *anything* with. And although he wasn't her boss, he was the boss's nephew. In Lilah's mind it was the same thing. It was a nightmare to go along with all the other nightmares she'd had recently. Like South America but with a guy she couldn't ignore no matter how much she tried. A guy who refused to *let* her ignore him.

The harder she tried the more perverse pleasure he seemed to take in sabotaging her. Like brushing against her when she talked to the man on her left or *accidentally* bumping her arm and spilling her champagne down her cleavage.

And he smelled delicious. Like warm, virile man and cool, earthy forest. Every breath she took filled her senses with his wonderfully warm woodsy smell until she was dizzy with the

notion of finding out exactly where it originated. With her mouth.

Or maybe that was just the champagne.

Whatever it was, she became excruciatingly aware of his every move, and soon found herself holding her breath, waiting for his next. And, boy, he made plenty. Playing with the stem of his wine glass, invading her space while he kept her champagne glass filled, or removing his jacket and tie, rolling up his shirtsleeves to expose the corded strength of his forearms and his big boney wrists. Accidentally brushing his knuckles against her thigh.

And breathing. Especially breathing.

It all combined to make her as twitchy as a preschooler in Sunday Mass, and if she'd gulped down more champagne than usual, it was his fault. As was the headache blooming behind her eyes.

Exhaling with relief at finally being able to breathe without inhaling his potent masculinity, Lilah joined a host of other women at the mirrors. While listening to the gossip flowing around her, she spent a few minutes wrestling with her hair, even though she knew it was a lost cause. Taming the long curls had always been a challenge.

Finally, when she could no longer avoid the inevitable, she shoved everything back into her clutch bag and left the bathroom, praying Luke Sullivan had ridden off into the sunset on his big black hog. Maybe then she could start enjoying the evening.

Following the sounds of the band, she exchanged a few

greetings with other guests on their way back to the ballroom and paused in the doorway as Jenna and Greg took to the floor for the newlyweds' dance.

It was a beautiful moment and she couldn't help feeling a little envious of the way Greg looked at his new bride. The couple practically glowed with happiness, reminding Lilah she hadn't had anything resembling a date in over two years.

The dance ended to hoots and cheers as the couple shared a heated embrace. Without pausing, the band segued into another song and the little pinch of envy became a sharp ache of emptiness as Jenna's father stepped onto the dance floor. He tapped Greg's shoulder then swept his daughter into his arms with a look of such pride and love that Lilah felt tears prick the backs of her eyes.

This was a moment she would never experience for herself. And though she tried to shove them back into hiding, all the old feelings of resentment and abandonment she hadn't felt since adolescence came rushing back.

Right there in the midst of celebration she was sucked back to her mother's death and the letter telling Lilah about her father.

It had taken her almost a year to get past the grief and anger following the plane crash that had killed her mother to summon the courage to open it. Sometimes Lilah wished she never had —wished she didn't know about her mother's summer internship at a prestigious Seattle law firm or her wild romance with the married son of the firm's founding partner. Life would have been

so much simpler.

When twenty-two-year-old Grace Meredith had revealed she was pregnant, Rowan Franklin had been furious. He'd accused her of trying to ruin his life and his career, and then he'd offered her money.

Her mother hadn't exactly said it had been for a termination, but Lilah wasn't stupid. She could read between the lines. Even at sixteen she'd known her father had paid Grace to have an abortion then kicked her to the curb like an unwanted pet.

She clearly remembered hopping on an intercity bus with plans to confront him. Lilah snorted silently. She didn't know what she'd expected, but to a girl who'd dreamed of the day she would meet him, Rowan Franklin III had been handsome and dazzling as a movie star. She recalled being struck dumb in his presence as a chaotic mix of anger and desperate hope filled her.

Unfortunately, he'd been no happier to see her then than he'd been the day her mother had dropped the baby bombshell. He'd checked his watch and listened impatiently while she'd introduced herself and explained about her mother's death. When she'd finished, he'd walked to his desk, pulled out his checkbook, and without once looking in her direction he'd coldly asked how much it would take for her to go away.

She'd been devastated. With one stroke of his ten-thousand-dollar gold pen he'd destroyed a young girl's fragile dreams as easily as he'd signed his name.

So she'd reacted badly.

Lilah huffed out a silent laugh. Okay, badly was an understatement. She'd flung scathing insults in his smug, handsome face and when he'd looked her in the eye and denied being her father, she'd snatched some fancy glass paperweight along with several family photographs from his desk and hurled them at the wall of glass cabinets behind him. The destruction had been as satisfying as it had been horrifying. Even to this day she couldn't believe what she'd done.

White-faced with fury, he'd stalked over, grabbed her arm in a bruising grip and dragged her to the door. Then he'd slapped the check in her hand and warned that if she ever contacted him or tried to blackmail him again, he would have her arrested.

She'd walked into that lavishly appointed corner office a nervous, eager child with dreams of finding a father who'd been searching for his daughter and had left with her heart and pride in tatters. She'd also left determined never to let anyone close enough to hurt her again.

That meeting had cured her of any "daddy" issues she might have had. And just in case she forgot, she'd kept that uncashed check of twenty-five thousand dollars as a reminder that she had to rely on herself and that some men made promises they never intended to keep.

Lost in the past, she didn't notice someone come up behind her until a deep voice drawled, "Don't tell me you buy into all this sappy stuff, wild thing?"

Startled, Lilah sucked in a sharp breath and rounded on him.

“Will you stop sneaking up on me?” she snapped, slapping a shaking hand over her pounding heart. “And stop calling me that.” Besides, she didn’t want to be anything like her mother.

Luke shoved his hands in his pockets and hiked a dark brow up his forehead as though she was acting crazy. Lilah felt a little crazy. *He* made her crazy, dammit.

“Lady, you’re either in hearts-and-roses land or you need another glass of champagne.” He snagged one from a passing waiter and shoved it at her. “Here, maybe this will help.”

Lilah stepped back and looked at the glass like it might bite her. Frankly, the last thing she needed was another glass of champagne. Muttering something, she swung away to watch as other couples began drifting onto the dance floor. Maybe if she ignored him long enough he’d get the hint and go away.

But, of course, he didn’t. That would be asking too much, Lilah thought furiously. Instead, he chuckled deep in his chest and leaned closer, the heat of his big body sending awareness shivering into every strand of DNA.

His deep voice held more than a hint of amusement when he asked, “Did you just say the only way champagne will help is if I drown in it, Dr. Meredith?”

Lilah fought the embarrassment heating her cheeks and inhaled slowly to give herself time to get a grip. But that only gave her a head full of his amazing scent. Besides, she hadn’t meant for him to hear that. Had she?

She finally ground out, “Of course not,” through clenched

teeth and tried to edge away, but the darned man had practically herded her into a corner. She couldn't escape without drawing attention to herself, and after the past twenty four hours, attention was the last thing she wanted. "I would never be so rude."

He gave another chuckle as though he didn't believe her, and lifted his hand to play with the soft curls at her nape before drawing a light fingertip down her spine to the zipper tab. His touch, so deliberately casual, sent goose bumps fleeing across her flesh, and to Lilah's absolute horror, could be felt all the way to her tingling toes. Her belly clenched, her nipples tightened, and this time she didn't even have the benefit of her little jacket to hide her visceral response.

She hitched her shoulder to dislodge his touch and tried to move away but the man obviously had a hard head if he could ignore such obvious go-away signals. Instead, he dropped his hand to her hip and pulled her back against his chest.

She gasped and tried to jerk away but his fingers tightened. Heat instantly spread up to her nape and down to the backs of her knees—and, heck, everywhere in between. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded in a low voice, and tried to turn, but his palm slid across her jittering belly and pressed her against his front.

Lilah froze at the unexpected intimacy of his embrace. "You haven't answered my question," Luke reminded her against her ear, his thumb idly brushing warmed silk. His deep voice vibrated against her back like the rumble of distant thunder—or

maybe a huge satisfied cat after eating a fat pigeon.

She sucked in a shivery breath and tried not to feel like a frightened pigeon. It was humiliating enough to discover how threatened she felt, especially when his touch heated up all the lonely places in her body that hadn't seen action in way too long.

"About what?" she rasped, her throat as dry as the Mojave Desert.

"About buying into all … this romantic garbage," he murmured, using his free hand to indicate the white-and-gold-decorated ballroom. Lilah tilted her head and looked up over her shoulder into his shadowed face.

"You don't?"

Amusement lit up his green eyes and lurked at the corners of his mouth. He snorted. "You're kidding, right?" And when she continued to stare at him he shrugged a heavily muscled shoulder. "I'm a guy. We're allergic to weddings." Her eyebrow rose up her forehead and he chuckled. "Okay, *I'm* allergic to weddings."

"Then why come?"

"I heard the food's great." He must have noticed her expression because he laughed and said, "I promised Greg I would."

When he laughed, golden flecks lit the green depths of his eyes. Like sunlight shining through water. "And you keep your promises?" she asked to distract herself from the feel of his hard body against hers and what it did to her.

Something indecipherable came and went in his expression

and the golden lights winked out. “Don’t you?”

“I asked first,” Lilah countered, and instantly wondered at the shift in the energy around them. His eyes turned somber as they slid over her face before moving to the ballroom. She didn’t know why but she got the odd impression he wasn’t seeing the opulent room with its flickering candles and laughing guests. As though he’d withdrawn somewhere she couldn’t follow—somewhere a lot less cheerful than a hotel ballroom in uptown Spruce Ridge.

His jaw flexed and she felt like she was intruding on a private moment filled with pain and bleak memories. “Some promises are impossible to keep,” he murmured, and dropped his hand. Lilah shivered at the abrupt loss of heat and cursed herself for caring.

Something must have happened to put that haunted look on his face, she thought, fighting the urge to turn and wrap her arms around him. Luke Sullivan didn’t need her concern. He was big and hard and capable. And dangerous. Very dangerous, she reminded herself. At least to her peace of mind. So when a young resident appeared beside them and asked her to dance, she accepted, suddenly eager to escape Luke Sullivan’s disturbing presence.

She didn’t know why she sent him a silent look over her shoulder. She certainly didn’t need his permission. But when he shrugged and said, “I don’t dance,” before turning and disappearing from the ballroom, she couldn’t help feeling rebuffed.

Fortunately the resident made it impossible to brood and before long Lilah was laughing at his bad jokes as he twirled her around the dance floor. Finally, after a dozen dances with as many new partners, she laughingly cried uncle and escaped out the French doors into the warm night.

A few people were scattered around the torch-dotted terrace and Lilah wandered over to the low stone balustrade. She looked out into a night as dark and lush as black velvet—a night perfect for romance and moonlit trysts. Frangipani and night-blooming camellia scented the balmy air while solar-powered lights led a rambling path through the extensive gardens to a pool, glowing like blue magic in the darkness. To her right the well-manicured lawns rolled towards the lake, slumbering like a sea of ink beneath a fat yellow moon.

The scene might have come right out of a movie if memories of the previous night hadn't flooded her mind. She shivered and rubbed her arms just as someone came up beside her. A jacket dropped around her shoulders in an echo of her thoughts but even before a smooth voice solicitously murmured, "You're cold," in her ear, she knew it wasn't the man she'd been thinking about.

Lilah bit back a grimace and looked up into Peter's handsome face. Just when she'd decided he'd lost interest, here she was cornered on the terrace in the dark. By her boss. *What joy*.

And from the look in his eyes she'd have to think of something fast if she wanted to escape with her job and her integrity intact. Something like an aneurysm or appendicitis. Or maybe mad cow

disease. People tended to get a little paranoid when the words "mad" and "cow" weren't being used to describe a crazy woman at a Bloomingdale shoe sale. But then she reminded herself that he was a doctor and would know he'd have to eat her brains before contracting it. She couldn't see that happening in the next five seconds.

Dammit. She was trapped—by good manners and his hands on her shoulders.

"Finally," he murmured, like she'd been waiting all night to be alone with him. *Yeah, right*. In the moonlight his golden hair gleamed almost as brightly as his smile. Like an angel—or some equally perfect celestial being. And if she were any other woman she might have been charmed. But she wasn't. She had too much history with men like him to ever forget that he was married—and used vulnerable women.

"It's been torture, sitting alone," he said deeply, rubbing her arms, and for the second time that night Lilah felt herself pulled back against a man's warm chest. But whereas Luke's chest had felt wide and warm and oddly comforting, Peter's just felt … vaguely threatening.

"Miss me?"

And that was Lilah's cue to escape. She faked a shiver and seized the excuse to pull away. "I'm cold, maybe I should go in." His hands prevented her attempts to slide his jacket off her shoulders. They also kept her swathed in a cloud of expensive cologne and the cool calculation of a practiced seduction. Lilah

shivered, this time it was genuine. She had an awful feeling the man had no intention of letting her go without a struggle.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a steadying breath and pushed memories of another man and another seduction attempt from her head. *Damn*. She really needed this job but Peter was making it increasingly difficult for her to remain polite when what she wanted to do was turn and knee him in the nuts and bolts.

Turning abruptly, she backed up against the balustrade and fought the urge to vault over it.

"Dr Webster," she said, deciding to confront him and risk being fired. "You're … um … my boss and … and married."

He hummed in his throat and stepped closer, dropping his hands onto the stone behind her, caging her with his arms and body. She had to press her hands against his chest and lean back to keep a few inches between them.

"My wife doesn't care," he explained with a smile, as though her protests amused him. *God, as though her protests aroused him*. "She does her thing and doesn't interfere with mine." He leaned forward to kiss her mouth but she turned her head at the last moment and his lips glanced off her cheekbone. "It suits us both."

"Well, it doesn't suit me," she said briskly, and grabbed his wandering hand before it could reach her breast.

He sighed and shifted back a little. "Don't tell me you're one of those women?" He sounded a bit annoyed, as though she was playing hard to get when she should be flattered by his attention.

Lilah felt her jaw drop open.

"Excuse me?"

He must have heard something in her voice because he sighed and straightened. "All I'm saying is you've been sending out signals all night." *What?* "I'm not the only man to pick up on them, Lilah."

"Signals?"

His mouth slid into a charming, coaxing smile. "I am, however, the only man with enough balls to follow through."

Lilah stared at him as though he was speaking an alien dialect. Besides, the last subject she wanted to talk about was his … well, *that*. "What are you talking about?"

He sighed impatiently. "You're not making this easy, sweetheart."

Sweetheart? "Easy?"

"You're lucky I saw you slip away." She spluttered and he chuckled. "Let's not waste time," he cajoled gently, framing her face in his hands. "We can go back to your place, or get a room at the hotel if you prefer. Your choice. But you should know …" he paused and smiled meaningfully "… I can do things for your career."

Lilah stared up at him for a couple of beats and wondered if he'd lost his mind or was drunk. But he appeared sober and quite serious. As though she would actually consider taking him up on his less than flattering offer. She didn't know whether to laugh or slug him.

She shook her head and shifted to remove his jacket, but he covered her hands with his and drew the satin lapels together like a straitjacket. Maybe he meant it to be comforting but she just felt claustrophobic.

"All right." He chuckled indulgently. "We'll do this your way. Why don't we go to the bar for a drink? Then …" He waggled his eyebrows and Lilah had to bite her lip to keep from rolling her eyes. She wanted to tell him what he could do with his drink—and anything else he was considering—but then again if she agreed, she could say she had to go to the bathroom and then make a break for it.

"Talk about what?"

"Yeah, Webster," a deep voice drawled from the inky shadows. It was so close that Lilah jolted and gave a little shocked gasp. She'd been so intent on escaping unscathed she hadn't noticed anyone approaching.

Luke materialized out of the dark looking big and dark and sinfully dangerous. "Talk about what?" he drawled, and Lilah wondered if she was the only one to detect the edge to his tone. His hair was rumpled as though he'd run his fingers through the thick strands. "About why you're moving in on my date?"

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