MILLS & BOON

Dr. Destiny

Kristi Gold

Vintage Desire

KRISTI GOLD

Dr. Destiny

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Social worker Cassie Allen had always fought her heart-stopping attraction to drop-dead-gorgeous Dr. Brendan O'Connor. After all, best friends didn't feel that way about each other…did they?Then, one shattering night, long-denied passion finally spilled over. Now Cassie was stunned to discover that she and her best friend were about to become parents–of twins!Brendan wanted to marry her, strictly for the sake of the babies, and Cassie reluctantly agreed. But could she really settle for a marriage of convenience with this devastating man–when she really wanted so much more from him…?

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There Was Nothing Innocent About The Kiss, Brendan Thought.

Not the way Cassie tasted, cool and sweet and tempting. Not the way she melted into him, fitting so perfectly against him.

He moved away from her, breathing raggedly. “I don’t know what made me do that. We’re friends—unless I’ve screwed that up.”

“You’ll only do that if you tell me I’m a lousy kisser. Then I’ll have to beat you over the head.”

She should have done that to him a minute ago, Brendan thought. Knocked some sense into him. “I’d say on a scale from one to ten, your kissing rates—” he narrowed his eyes “—about a twenty.”

Cassie smiled. “You’ve saved yourself from a terrible fate. For now.”

Brendan wondered what fate would bring the next time they met. The next time, he might not be able to stop with a kiss.…

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Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Dr. Destiny
Kristi Gold

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KRISTI GOLD

began her romance-writing career at the tender age of twelve, when she and her sister spun romantic yarns involving a childhood friend and a popular talk-show host. Since that time, she's given up celebrity heroes for her favorite types of men, doctors and cowboys, as her husband is both. An avid sports fan, she attends football and baseball games in her spare time. She resides on a small ranch in central Texas with her three children and retired neurosurgeon husband, along with various livestock ranging from Texas longhorn cattle to spoiled yet talented equines. At one time she competed in regional and national Appaloosa horse shows as a nonpro, but she gave up riding for writing and turned the "reins" over to her youngest daughter. She attributes much of her success to her sister, Kim, who encouraged her in her writing, even during the tough times. When she's not in her office writing her current book, she's dreaming about it. Readers may contact Kristi at P.O. Box 11292, Robinson, TX 76116.

To my mom, Jean, a heroine in her own right.

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One

Adonis disguised as a doctor, and he was standing at Cassandra Allen's office door.

Cassie gave all her attention to Brendan O'Connor as he strode into the room, pulled back a chair and collapsed onto it. His ruffled brown hair indicated he'd had a hectic day. So did his eyes, a rich green-blue to match his scrubs. They changed like a chameleon to suit his attire, and sometimes to suit his mood. He was a chameleon, although most would not believe that of the calm, collected miracle worker. But Cassie knew better.

Even though she considered Brendan a good friend and an expert neonatologist, Cassie couldn't ignore her awareness of the man. Most women who came in contact with the doctor couldn't help but fall a little bit in love with him. She was no exception.

Flipping the case file closed, Cassie tapped her pen on the desk and said with mock exasperation, "Okay, so what did I do that brought you all the way down here?"

His slow grin caused Cassie's heartbeat to accelerate. "Nothing wrong. Just wanted to tell you how well I thought you handled the Kinsey couple today."

Cassie shrugged off the compliment. "That's what social work's all about. Besides, they're nice kids."

His smile faded. "Kids having kids. Give 'em a six-pack of beer and a case of hormones then look what happens. Premature twins."

She took a sip of too-cold, too-strong coffee and winced. Bad stuff, but the only thing she had available at the moment to wet her dry mouth. "At least the Kinseys have a good support system." And at least the new babies had two parents who seemed to love them, something Cassie had never really known. "No money to speak of, but I'm working on that."

"No high school diploma, either." Scooting back the chair, Brendan propped his heels on the edge of the desk, crossed his ankles and laced his hands on his abdomen. "I make these sick babies well, then I send them home to God-only-knows-what."

Cassie had known Brendan on a personal level for over six months now, had worked with him on several cases as one of San Antonio Memorial's staff social workers, yet she had rarely heard him criticize his patients' parents.

Although he was incredibly hard to read at times, she had gotten good at sensing when something bothered him. And this evening, something was bothering him. Badly. "What's really the problem, Brendan?"

His gaze zipped from his folded hands to her. "What do you mean?"

"Come on. It's me you're talking to. Cassie the clairvoyant, remember?" She smiled at the label he had personally given her when she'd accurately assessed his frame of mind on more than one occasion. Lately he hadn't even tried to hide his feelings, perhaps because he'd grown comfortable with her. Exactly what friendship was all about, and Cassie valued his friendship more each passing day.

She allowed him a few moments of silence. With Brendan, she had learned not to push. Eventually he would come clean without any persuasion on her part, if luck prevailed.

His sigh came out rough, frustrated. A hint of sadness passed over his expression, clouding his eyes. "I don't think the Neely baby's going to make it."

Cassie struggled for something consoling to say. Something that might lessen his pain. "Mrs. Neely delivered at what, twenty-nine weeks?"

"Twenty-seven. The baby's a little over two pounds with too many problems." He sat in silence for a few moments, his torment almost palpable. "Sometimes I wonder why I do this."

So did Cassie, but Brendan had never been forthcoming with that information. It wasn't the first time she'd seen him worried about one of his patients. In fact, it troubled Cassie that at times he seemed to worry too much. Not that he readily revealed his concern.

Despite the stress, something drove him. Something personal, she suspected. She had never asked, and he'd never even hinted at his reasons for subjecting himself to such a high-pressure field.

"You do this because you're wonderful at it," she said in her optimistic voice. "You do it because you're the best."

"So you say."

"So I know."

"I do have some good news," he said.

Cassie leaned forward with interest. "You found the girl of your dreams?"

He hinted at another smile. "Matthew Granger's going home with his parents tomorrow."

She wanted to shout with relief, not only because the Granger baby had survived his premature birth, but also because Brendan hadn't found his life partner. That shouldn't concern her in the least. From the moment they'd met six months ago, she'd known they were destined to be only friends, though at times she found herself wishing for more. But Brendan had made it more than clear he wasn't looking for anything beyond friendship, and she certainly didn't intend to complicate their relationship by making her feelings known.

"Wow, Brendan, that's great," she said. "Dr. Granger and Brooke must be thrilled. You need to concentrate on that. You're responsible for that little miracle, and so many others."

"Losing even one isn't good enough for me." He dropped his feet from the table and stood. "I'm getting out of here. I've had about all of this place I can stand."

One thing Cassie knew for certain, he didn't need to be alone tonight, considering his present state of mind. And what did she have to go home to? An empty house and a cocky cat. Not at all appealing at the moment. Not when compared to spending the evening with Brendan O'Connor in some friendly competition.

All she could do was make the offer and hope that he accepted. "So you're through for the day?"

Brendan paused at the door. "Yeah. My shift's up. Segovia's taking over."

"Good. Meet me at the tennis courts in an hour."

He checked his watch. "It's late."

"We've played later than this before."

"I'm not sure what kind of company I'd be."

Time to bring out the big guns. Brendan was as driven as Cassie when it came not only to work but also to sports. She would shamelessly use that to her advantage, or at least try. "Nothing like a friendly game to alleviate stress."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not in the mood."

"Come on, Brendan. Be fair. It's my turn to kick your cute butt."

His expression softened and the familiar competitive gleam flashed in his eyes. "You think you can kick my butt, huh?"

"Yep."

"So you say."

"So I know." She rose from her chair and smiled. "And your answer is?"

He let go an exaggerated sigh. "I guess if you're determined to kick some butt, it might as well be mine."

"Great." She sauntered over to him and patted his whisker-shaded jaw. "You might want to wear extra padding in order to protect your derriere."

"That's not necessary. You're not going to win."

"Whatever you say, Doctor."

His smile reappeared, deeper this time, revealing the prominent right-sided dimple creasing his cheek. She loved his smile. Loved it when he let down his guard and morphed from doctor to man. Loved it when he laughed, which didn't happen too often lately.

That would be Cassie's goal for the evening. To make Brendan O'Connor laugh—and, of course, to win.

"I won! I won! I won!"

Brendan stood at the net and chuckled as he eyed Cassie strutting around the court, racket held above her head as if it were a Wimbledon trophy. Her short white tennis skirt bobbed up and down with her revelry, revealing a nice glimpse of tanned thigh. A few strands of her shoulder-length silky blond hair escaped her ponytail and ruffled in the cool October breeze. That effervescent smile, those mischievous dark eyes, that prime athlete's body, could disinte-grate any man's resistance. Even Brendan's.

But he wouldn't spoil their relationship by considering anything other than friendship, no matter how tempting she could be. He also wouldn't spoil her moment of victory by telling her that he had let her win. Okay, not exactly let her, but his heart hadn't been in the game. Considering what the next day would bring—the anniversary of an event he would just as soon forget—he had his mind on little else. He hadn't been able to forget, even after years of trying.

Cassie rushed to the net and taunted him some more. "I told you your butt was in trouble, didn't I?"

"Would you just leave my butt out of this?" He tried to sound serious, but he couldn't stifle more laughter or resist her joy.

She pointed and grinned. "Aha! You did it twice in one day."

"What?"

"Laughed."

He shrugged. "So? Are you keeping score?"

"Yes, and as promised, I did what I set out to do." She reached over the net and gave him a hefty slap on the part of his anatomy in question.

"You've really done it now, Cassandra Allen."

Brendan scaled the net but Cassie was too quick. By the time they'd made it to the commons area near the club's rear entrance, he'd caught up to her. He grabbed her around the waist and spun her several times, then turned her into his arms and held on fast.

"Let me go, Brendan O'Connor." She sounded winded, but not all that threatening.

"Not until you apologize for taking advantage of my exhaustion, and my vulnerable buttocks."

She jutted out her chin in determination. "Bully."

He tightened his hold on her and grinned. "I'm the bully?"

"I mean it. Let me go." Amusement flickered in her dark eyes as she wriggled against him.

He wished she would stop squirming. Parts of his body were finding it difficult to ignore her. Difficult to disregard her breasts pressed against his, her bare thighs touching his. All he had to do was release her, but for some reason he couldn't. Or maybe he didn't want to. "What are you going to do now?"

She stared for a moment, then a devious grin appeared. "You really want to know?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. You asked for it."

Working her arms from his grasp, she framed his jaws between her palms and kissed him square on the mouth.

Shocked, Brendan dropped his arms from around her.

She stepped back and smiled. "Works every time."

Brendan didn't move, didn't speak. He couldn't. His feet were fettered to the grass by some immovable force created by Cassie's lips. As far as kisses went, he'd rank it as harmless. But what it had done to him would qualify as anything but harmless.

Cassie pivoted on her tennis shoes and swayed toward the glass door. Brendan found his footing and followed.

She stopped with fingers poised on the handle and faced him. "I'm hitting the showers. Meet me in twenty minutes out front. You can buy me a beer."

Brendan needed to go home, get some shut-eye—5:00 a.m. would come all too soon. But considering Cassie's impromptu kiss, he doubted he would immediately fall asleep. Might as well accept her offer. "Okay, you're on. But hurry."

"You hurry." With that she was gone.

He headed into the locker room and stood in the shower longer than usual, all the while trying to stop thinking about Cassie's kiss. All the while trying to figure out why something so innocent had him contemplating some not-so-innocent ideas.

After leaving the shower, he paused from drying off to tap his forehead against the cold locker door, attempting to dislodge the thoughts from his brain. It didn't work. He couldn't get the image of Cassie's kiss out of his head. Why had she done it? If she'd really wanted him to let her go, she could've punched him. Actually, he'd reacted as if she had. Maybe she'd intended to shake him up. If that had been her goal, she had definitely succeeded.

But he liked Cassie a lot. Liked the fact she was a great listener, a compassionate friend. He didn't intend to mess up a good thing by doing something stupid like kissing her back. Really kissing her.

He didn't need any complications right now. His job was complicated enough. So was his life.

Brendan dressed in jeans and T-shirt then set out to find Cassie. He came upon her at the front doors impatiently tapping her foot. "You're five minutes late," she said.

"The showers were crowded." A blatant lie. Only one other guy was in the shower, and he'd finished long before Brendan had. Cassie's spontaneous kiss had kept Brendan under the spray longer than planned, but he didn't intend to make that admission. Best to just ignore it, if he could. Maybe a beer would help. Maybe a sudden bout of blindness might, too.

They walked to the small lounge down the street and took their favorite table in the corner. The place was practically deserted with only a couple of businessmen seated at the bar, nursing their drinks and talking about their latest ventures.

Brendan ordered him and Cassie a beer, a routine that had become as welcome and familiar as her smile. He liked import; she favored domestic. He usually drank two; she rarely finished one. He smiled to himself when he considered how he had memorized her habits—the way she always swept her hair back with one hand, her high-energy aura, the fact that she always toyed with whatever was in reach, be it a straw or paperclip. Tonight was no exception. Right then she was steadily shredding a cocktail napkin.

Brendan began the conversation with a belated apology. "I'm sorry I came down so hard on the Kinseys."

Cassie stopped her shredding and laid a palm on his hand where it rested on the table. "It's okay, Brendan. Really."

"No, it's not okay. I don't have any right to judge anyone." His statement held more truth than Cassie would ever know.

Pulling his hand from beneath hers, he picked up his beer to thumb away a drop of condensation on the mug, wishing he could as easily discard his unexpected reaction to Cassie's touch. Being so close to her had never bothered him before. But it bothered him now in a very elemental way.

He'd never required more from her than easy conversation. He sure as hell hadn't needed to touch her, although many times he had wanted to. Right now it was all he could do to keep his hands to himself, resist the urge to trace the contours of her mouth with a fingertip, with his own mouth.

He tried to shake off the sudden urges, but they wouldn't go away.

She took up the paper-mincing where she'd left off. "You're frustrated and concerned about the pitfalls of teen pregnancy, Brendan. No one can fault you for that."

No, Cassie wouldn't fault him now. But if she ever found out that his reaction to the young parents had to do with his own lack of judgment years ago, she might change her mind. "At least they're trying, I guess." More than he had ever done.

Cassie sipped at her near full beer and regarded him with concern. "True. They both seem committed to raising their babies. Heaven knows that's not always the case."

Brendan imagined she had seen it all as a social worker. The good and the ugly. He admired her conviction, her strength. If only he had been so strong, then and now. For a moment he thought about confessing his sins to Cassie but reconsidered. She didn't need to know about his lousy past mistakes. That could very well lower her opinion of him, and ruin the best friendship he'd ever had.

He glanced at the clock flashing an ad for premium scotch—11:00 p.m. Later than he'd realized. He definitely needed to head home. As bad as he hated to leave Cassie's company, he had a responsibility to his patients to be at his best come morning. "Are you done?"

Cassie seemed to have zoned out, carried off into some realm of consciousness that didn't include him. Totally out of character for her. Normally she was always attentive. Maybe something was disturbing her, too.

He waved his hands in front of her eyes. "You in there?"

Startled, she brought her attention back to him. "Sorry. Just daydreaming, I guess." She smiled, a shaky one. Her dark eyes looked troubled. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

She gripped her near-full mug with both hands. "Nothing's wrong. I was just thinking, that's all."

"About what?"

"About babies."

That definitely threw him mentally off-kilter. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Like what?"

"Are you pregnant?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you crazy?"

He shrugged. "You're a beautiful woman, Cassie. Anything's possible."

"You're so wrong, Dr. O'Connor. One would have to be—how should I say it—exposed in order to be expecting. And unless I slept through it, that hasn't happened in a long time."

"No prospects?"

"No way."

"Why is that?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Why is what?"

"Why haven't you settled down? As long as I've known you, I don't remember you ever mentioning dating anyone."

She shrugged. "I don't have time for that right now. My work is too hectic. Besides, I don't intend to settle down or have children until I have all the time in the world to devote to them."

That relieved Brendan, especially the part about her not having any prospects to father her offspring. Although he had no say in what she did, or whom she did it with, he didn't like the thought of Cassie carrying on with some guy that he knew nothing about. "Well, heck, Cassie, your lack of exposure is really a shame. Anything I can do about that?"

She crumpled the napkin's remains and tossed the wad at him. "You're so funny."

Truth was, he wasn't necessarily being funny. He didn't want any kids, either, but practicing with Cassie wasn't at all repulsive. In fact, it was a downright pleasant idea. One he had no business entertaining.

He yanked back his chair and stood. "Time for bed." Man, oh, man, he hadn't meant to say that.

If Cassie was at all shocked, she didn't show it. Instead she grinned. "Brendan, as much as I'd love to go to bed with you, I'm thinking maybe we should pick a time when we're not quite so tired from work and our tennis game."

Was she kidding? Did she really want to go to bed with him? Nah. As usual she was trying to get to him with her sassy sarcasm. Two could definitely play that particular game.

Leaning forward, he braced his hands on the arms of her chair. "You're right, Cassie. If I'm going to show you all the O'Connor moves, that's going to require all night. As it stands, I've got a NICU full of preemies that need my attention, and I need to be fully awake in the morning."

Cassie slipped her bag over her shoulder and gave a one-handed sweep of her hair. "All night, huh? It would take me all of ten minutes to bring you to your knees."

Blood rushed to Brendan's ears, along with other places much lower. He took a step back and allowed her to stand. But her sensual challenge echoed in his brain. Ten minutes? No way. Then again, she could be right. At the moment, his knees felt like putty, and it wasn't from the effects of the tennis game or the lone beer.

Brendan walked Cassie to her car thinking he should see her off and get out of there fast, before he made one huge mistake. Before he suggested that he had a few more minutes to spare. Ten minutes, to be exact. He chalked up his sudden desire to stress, his recent lack of sex. Maybe even the need for escape from life's realities. The need to forget past mistakes. By virtue of her presence, Cassie happened to be on the receiving end of that need, or she would be if he didn't get the hell out of there.

When they reached her faded red sedan, she turned to him once again. "Good game, O'Connor. And I promise I'll go easier on you next time, in deference to your demanding profession and your poor tired bootie."

He didn't want her to go easier on him. He didn't want her to leave, either. Right now what he wanted and what he needed had little to do with competition and a whole lot to do with flawed judgment. "I had a great time, too, except for one thing."

"My gloating?"

Without regard to wisdom, he cupped her jaw in his palm and stroked a thumb down her silky cheek. "It has to do with something you started but didn't finish."

"Well my gosh, Brendan. I'll pay you back for the beer. Besides, you're the one who rushed me—"

He cut off her words with a kiss. Not a simple innocuous peck. There was nothing innocent about it—not when her lips parted—or the way he took advantage of the moment and slipped his tongue inside the warm heat of her feisty mouth. Not with the way she tasted, like the peppermint she'd grabbed on the way out of the bar, cool and sweet and tempting. Definitely not the way she melted into him and fitted so perfectly against him.

But perfection had a price. Brendan's body was paying it. He was just this side of losing control. He couldn't allow that any more than he could allow the kiss to continue. Not at the expense of their friendship.

He moved away and issued another apology on a ragged breath. "I don't know what made me do that."

She leaned back against the car and folded her arms beneath her breasts. Her cheeks were splotched with red, her eyes dark and dazed. "I'm not sure what good grace dictates at this particular moment, but all I have to say is let's not make a big deal out of this."

Brendan grabbed his nape with both hands thinking he should probably wring his own neck for being so stupid. "It is a big deal."

She inclined her head and studied him straight on. “Does it really have to be? I mean, it’s not like you threw me to the ground and ravished me.”

It’s not like he hadn’t considered that, either. “We have a great friendship going here. Or we did. Unless I’ve screwed that up now.”

“The only way you’ll do that is if you suddenly declare I’m a lousy kisser. Then I’ll have to beat you over the head with my racket.”

She should have done that to him a few minutes ago, Brendan decided. Knocked some sense into him. “As far as your kissing ability is concerned, I’d say on a scale from one to ten you would rate…” He narrowed his eyes and studied her.

“I’m waiting.”

“About a twenty.”

Cassie’s spirited smile jump-started Brendan’s pulse back to life. “Lucky for you, you’ve saved yourself from a terrible fate. For now.”

Brendan wondered what fate held in store for them the next time they met. If he didn’t get a grip, next time he might not be able to stop with only one kiss.

Two

A rough tongue abrading Cassie's cheek woke her with a start. She opened her eyes to a gray furry feline curled up on her chest eyeing her expectantly.

A sudden sense that something wasn't quite right niggled at her muddled mind. Then she remembered. Brendan's kiss. The no-big-deal kiss. What a joke. Even though she'd said otherwise, it had been a big deal. It still was.

She rested one hand on the cat's head and the other over her eyes. While she scratched the tabby behind his ears, she relived every moment of the kiss in feature-film clarity—the soft feel of Brendan's lips, the silken glide of his tongue, the strong yet careful way he had held her. She shouldn't be surprised that he'd kissed her with the same gentleness he practiced with his tiny patients. She should be surprised that she had so actively participated and so willingly enjoyed it.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't fathom what had happened between her and Brendan. A momentary lapse in sanity? A glimmer of chemistry? A mutual need?

All of the above?

She couldn't let that happen. Long ago she had learned that intimacy did not lead to love. At one time she had made that mistake only to learn that giving in to physical needs only led to heartache. Giving all of yourself to someone didn't mean that that someone would give themselves emotionally to you.

Cassie uncovered her eyes and checked the bedside clock. Although it wasn't quite time for her to get up, she might as well since the hungry cat and thoughts of Brendan's kiss wouldn't let her go back to sleep.

"Okay, Mister. Time for tuna."

She picked up the cat, who gave a meow of protest and a nice love scratch down Cassie's neck as she carried him into the kitchen to feed him. She opted for a diet soda instead of coffee after doling out disgusting kitty tuna. Then she went into the bathroom and began applying her makeup only to poke herself in the eye with the mascara wand when she couldn't keep her mind on what she was doing.

Now she was an absolute mess—bloodshot eyes, a red welt compliments of the kitty, and too-fine hair that refused to do anything but lie flat against her head.

She added drops to her eyes before applying her contacts, tried to hide the unsightly scratch with a turtleneck and twisted her uncooperative coif up into a plastic clip, sprigs of hair sticking out on top of her head like random wheat.

Cassie feared this was only the beginning of a daylong battle for control with Brendan invading her brain. How was she going to face him? Like a mature adult, of course. The spontaneous kiss would ruin the relationship only if she let it. She wouldn't do that. Brendan's friendship meant too much to her. Neither of them wanted to take the relationship to another level. Or did they?

As Cassie climbed into her car and headed for the hospital, she wondered whether that kiss was only the beginning of something more. Something unexpected and maybe even welcome. Maybe even something wonderful.

"Cassie, you've got to come see him!"

Cassie turned from the In box on her file cabinet and regarded her unexpected visitor. Michelle Lewis Kempner stood at the office door, all smiles and elation, not a strand of shimmering dark hair out of place, her makeup applied to perfection.

Cassie felt like road kill in Michelle's presence. "I've already seen your husband. Passed him twice this morning as a matter of fact."

Michelle rolled her blue eyes. "Not him, silly. My new nephew. He's all dressed and ready to go home. Hurry before Jared and Brooke leave."

Cassie suddenly remembered Brendan telling her that the Granger baby was going home. Not surprising she had forgotten that bit of welcome news considering the events from last night. She certainly didn't want to miss seeing the family off. But if she followed Michelle up to the fifth floor neonatology ICU, chances were she would run into Brendan. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. After all, the entire Lewis clan would be there, the attention focused on the Granger baby. A good place to get lost in the crowd. Besides, she enjoyed being around the close-knit family even if the matriarch, Jeanie Lewis, was a bit on the flighty side. At least Michelle and Brooke had a mother, despite her flaws.

Cassie did want to see little Matthew Granger finally free from the constraints of IVs and other equipment that had brought him to this moment. If Brendan happened to be there, she would simply deal with it.

"Okay, give me a second." For some reason Cassie felt the need to do a quick touch-up. She pulled a mirror and a tube of lipstick from her desk drawer. Unfortunately, her hair looked like the product of a screwdriver rammed into an electrical outlet. Not much she could do about it now.

"Hurry up, Cassie."

Cassie shoved the drawer closed on the reminders of her bad-hair day and followed Michelle out the door. Michelle's husband, Dr. Nick Kempner, joined them on the elevator along with two teenage girls.

"Hey, where have you been all my life, beautiful?" Nick gave his smile and a kiss to Michelle. The girls giggled; Cassie grinned. She couldn't help it. The couple's joy over seeing each other was contagious, serving as fuel for Cassie's fantasy that someday she might be as lucky as Michelle.

The elevator seemed too small to contain Michelle's overt enthusiasm. She rocked back and forth on her heels and muttered, "This thing is so slow."

"They'll wait for you, Auntie Michelle," Nick teased.

"I know. But I can't wait to get my hands on him."

After the teens exited on the second floor, leaving only Cassie and the Kempners, Cassie regarded Michelle with a curious stare. "Are you getting some maternal urges, Michelle?"

Michelle and Nick exchanged a look. "I have some urges all right," Nick said. "Cassie, mind getting off on three and walking up to five? I was thinking maybe I'd take advantage of my wife in this empty elevator."

Michelle sent him a playful look. "Nick, we just got back from our honeymoon yesterday." She turned her grin on Cassie. "The man is greedy."

A bite of envy mixed with embarrassment fired up Cassie's face. She felt like an intruder horning in on two lovers' private moment.

"Cut it out, you guys," Cassie said when Nick buried his face in his wife's neck. "This isn't a nice thing to do to a single woman with no prospects." She immediately thought about Brendan and fought back a rush of excitement and apprehension about seeing him again.

Nick looked at her with surprise. "Hey, Cassie, I happen to know more than a few guys—"

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open, saving Cassie from Nick Kempner's offer to rescue her from the cesspool of self-imposed celibacy by finding her "a man." They traveled down the hall and pushed through the double doors and into the area immediately outside the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. In the nearby waiting room they found Dr. Jared Granger standing over his wife, Brooke, who was seated in a chair holding a bundle of soft blue blanket. Next to Jared stood Jeanie and Howard Lewis, proud-grandparent smiles plastered on their faces.

Cassie released a breath of relief when she noted that Brendan wasn't anywhere around. That fact also brought about disappointment. Just as well, she supposed.

Michelle hovered over the baby, cooing like a mourning dove. Cassie made her way to Brooke who pulled back the blanket, revealing the tiny baby boy with a small cap of downy blond hair and one hand curled against his cheek, his eyes struggling to focus against the harsh fluorescent light.

Warmth flooded Cassie's chest, and longing gripped her heart. "He's beautiful, Brooke. I know you're thrilled to finally be taking him home."

Brooke looked from her son to Cassie, her eyes misty. "Two months is a long time to wait. But it was worth it." She gazed at her husband with adoration. "We did good, didn't we, Daddy?"

"No, we did great." Jared leaned down and brushed a tender kiss across Brooke's cheek, then did the same to his son.

A few people might overdose on all the love radiating from this family, but not Cassie. She craved being a part of something so special. Thoughts of the mother she had never known filtered into her consciousness as she watched the group gather round to discuss who little Matthew Granger favored. The general consensus was Howard Lewis, due to the baby's sparse hair and chubby cheeks.

Cassie shared in the laughter while wondering what her own mother had been thinking when she'd left three days after Cassie's birth. Had she realized that her careless disregard had left her then-husband a bitter man who'd never been able to make an emotional commitment to his only child? And in turn, Cassie had tried to find love in all the wrong places, a mistake she still paid for even after years of trying to right that wrong by being a success in her career, a faithful daughter. Futile attempts to earn her father's respect, even if she couldn't earn his love. She never had, and she'd finally come to realize that she never would.

She had also come to terms with the fact that she'd never know her mother after learning through relatives that the woman who'd borne her, then deserted her, had died two years ago.

At least the Granger baby would never have to experience such heartache, never lack in the love department.

"You ready to go, Brooke?" Jared asked, drawing Cassie out of her melancholy remembrance.

"Sure, but I want to thank Dr. O'Connor first."

"No thanks needed. Just send me a picture now and then to add to my collection."

Cassie looked from the baby to Brendan, and her heart took a plunge. She routinely came in contact with him on a daily basis, but today was different. He looked the same, still gorgeous with that even-tempered aura everyone had come to respect and admire. His staff adored him and so did his patients' parents. Though the stress level in the NICU was off the scale, morale was high on that unit, all because of Dr. Brendan O'Connor's grace under fire.

Brendan shook Nick and Jared's hand then his gaze met Cassie's. He gave her a slight smile and a guarded look that told her he was remembering last night, too. Or maybe she was reading too much into it.

After handing Jared a vinyl case, Brendan said, "Here's the apnea monitor. Any questions?"

"Millie gave us instructions," Jared said. "We'll let you know if anything comes up."

Jeanie Lewis stepped forward, wringing her hands. "Doctor, do you think he's well enough to go home? Since his lungs—"

"He's fine, Mrs. Lewis." Brendan sent her a reassuring smile, revealing his little-boy dimple. "The monitor's a precautionary measure. It's only for a little while to make sure everything's okay. Try not to worry."

Howard Lewis laughed, taking Cassie by surprise. The man rarely got a word in edgewise with his wife's penchant for chatter. "That's like telling a politician not to make promises."

They all laughed then, except for Jeanie Lewis. But the laughter died when a nurse rushed through the NICU doors. "Dr. O'Connor. The Neely baby's crashing."

Brendan spun around and said, "Good luck," then disappeared through the unit entrance.

A heavy silence settled over the group until Jared said, "Let's get out of here."

Cassie followed the party down to the lobby and said her goodbyes, then returned to her first-floor office. She made a few necessary phone calls, all the while worrying about the Neely's critically ill baby, and Brendan.

An hour later she received the news that Brendan had pulled the baby through the latest crisis and that the Neelys were waiting on five, in dire need of some consolation.

Cassie returned to the fifth floor and spoke with the frazzled parents, doing her very best to assure them that their daughter was receiving excellent care under Dr. O'Connor's expert guidance. She encouraged them to go to the cafeteria for some coffee; they would be paged if anything changed. When they insisted on staying nearby, Cassie set out to find Brendan.

She donned a paper gown and entered the NICU. Once inside, she conducted a visual search and encountered the usual flurry of activity among the staff, several she acknowledged with a brief greeting. Sounds of periodic alarms and the hiss of ventilators rang in her ears. In the most critical area, rows of transparent incubators held babies of all sizes and conditions, some so small they were barely visible among all the lines and tubes. A few parents sat near the tiny beds, touching with care in an attempt to bond with their babies, infants who could not be held because of the detriment to their fragile conditions.

Time suspended in this place of heartache and hope. Cassie had seen it all before, the sadness, the joy, the precious battle for life from the smallest of warriors. She had dealt with disheartened parents and provided bereavement counseling when necessary, all facets of her job. Yet she didn't know if she could deal with the stress of caring for sick babies on a daily basis. How did Brendan do it, day in and day out?

When she didn't immediately see Brendan, Cassie approached one of the nurses crouched in front of a supply cabinet. "Excuse me, Millie."

The woman looked back, and recognition dawned in her expression. She smiled. "Hi, Cassie. What can I do for you?"

"I just finished speaking with the Neelys. How's their little girl doing?"

Millie glanced at a nearby crib where another nurse and respiratory therapist stood close by monitoring the baby girl. "Okay, for now. Dr. O'Connor worked like the devil to bring her around. That guy is amazing."

Cassie couldn't agree more. "Do you know where he is?"

"He left a while ago after talking to the parents." She nodded toward a man at the end of the aisle. "Dr. Segovia's relieving him."

"Did Dr. O'Connor say where he was going?"

Millie shrugged. "Home, I guess. He wanted to stick around but Segovia told him to get out of here."

Cassie's concern increased ten-fold. "Is he okay?"

Millie's brows drew down beneath the blue cap covering her salt-and-pepper hair. "I probably shouldn't mention this, but he really did need to go. Normally he's pretty calm under pressure, but today he was a wreck, barking orders at everyone. He's got the whole department in an uproar. In the year that he's been here, I've never seen him like that before."

"For some reason he's taking this one hard."

"Maybe the whole atmosphere is finally getting to him. This place can be a hotbed for burnout, I tell you."

Cassie intended to find out exactly what was going on with Brendan and what she could do to help. "I'll see you around, Millie. If anything happens with the Neely baby, have someone call me at home or on my cell phone. I'll come back in."

"Sure thing, Cassie."

Bent on a mission, Cassie hurried back to her office and gathered a few files she could work on at home. She picked up the phone and dialed Brendan's number. No answer. Although she'd never been to his apartment, he'd told her that he lived not more than ten minutes away. Maybe he stopped somewhere to have a drink or dinner. She hated to think about him doing either alone.

After she pounded out his cell phone number, his voice mail kicked in. Cassie opted not to leave a message. She would go home and try again. And again and again until she reached him, even if it took all night.

He kicked the dumpster twice in an attempt to expend some of his anger. Not finding any relief, Brendan turned the anger on his car, pounding his fist into the door. The shooting pain in his knuckles did nothing to alleviate his frustration, his fury.

He braced his palms on the top of the sedan and lowered his head, relieved that no one was in the outdoor parking lot to play witness to his stupidity.

The emotions were no strangers. They came calling the same time each year. Today had been worse than before, compounded by his efforts to save an infant barely hanging on to a slender thread of life, knowing that it might be only a matter of time before the baby lost her battle.

Even though he fought against his own well-guarded memories, they came rushing back on a surge of bitter recollections, his experience as fresh in his mind as if it had happened yesterday.

Thirteen years ago he had lost his baby son.

That loss had led him to his career, driven by a powerful need to never let anyone suffer the same anguish of watching their child die, if he could help it. But he wasn't God, and although there had been many victories, the failures still ate at his soul like potent acid.

"Brendan?" Cassie's cotton-soft voice floated in on the breeze from behind him.

He was suddenly caught between wanting to tell her to go away and leave him to his misery, and an overwhelming need for her to stay. He could use her strength right now but he had no right to ask. Not after last night.

Slowly he turned to face her, the setting sun burnishing her blond hair, turning it to a rich gold. She looked beautiful in that moment, and worried.

Her eyes widened as she zeroed in on his hand. "You're bleeding!"

He hadn't even noticed the trickle of blood trailing down his arm. "I'm okay. It's only a scrape."

Her expression was grim. "No, you're not okay. What are you still doing here? Millie told me you'd gone home."

He leaned back against the car and swiped his arm against his thigh, leaving a streak of blood on his scrub pants. "I locked my damned keys in the car."

She walked over to him and gently clasped his hand in hers to examine his wound. "And you decided to beat the door down?"

"Something like that."

"Leave the car here and come home with me. I can clean this up for you."

He yanked his hand from her grasp and immediately regretted the action when he noted the hurt in her eyes. "I'll take care of it. I'll call security and get them to unlock the door."

"I don't care about your car. I do care about you. You look like you've lost your best friend."

No, he hadn't, at least not yet. She was standing right in front of him. "It's been a really sorry day, Cassie."

"I know it has," she said in that quiet counselor's voice he'd heard her use on other people, and even at times on him. "That's why you need to come to my place. I'll fix you some dinner and we can watch one of those trauma shows."

"Nothing like taking your work home with you."

She shrugged and smiled. "We can find some cable channel and watch dirty movies. Or cartoons. Doesn't matter to me."

Watching dirty movies wasn't something Brendan cared to do with Cassie. Not with the way he was feeling—frustrated and looking for a way to vent that frustration. Sex wasn't an option, especially not with Cassie. Not that he wouldn't like to make love to her, long and hard and all night. He wouldn't risk it. He'd already taken one too many chances, made one too many mistakes. Enough to last a lifetime.

But he didn't really want to be alone, either. Cassie had a way about her, the means to make him forget. Right now he needed to forget, if only for a while. "Okay, I'll have dinner with you. After I call security and have them unlock my car. Otherwise, you'll have to bring me back."

"Suit yourself." She rummaged through her purse and withdrew a business card, then scrawled something on the back. After she was done, she handed it to him. "Here's my address. It's easy to find. Just look for the smallest house."

He studied the card. "You live in a house?"

"Yes, why?"

He met her gaze once again. "I don't know. I figured you for the swinging-single-apartment type."

"Well, you figured wrong."

"Do you have a roommate?"

"No, it's just little old me."

That both relieved and worried Brendan. An empty house and Cassie could be a lethal combination, especially with the way he was feeling. Not if he kept his wits about him, exactly what he intended to do. What he had to do.

"I'll see you in a while then," she said as she turned away. After taking a few steps, she faced him again. "Oh, I do have a cat, in case you're allergic."

"No, I'm not allergic. But I hate cats."

She grinned. "Don't worry. He hates everyone but me."

Three

The cat loved Brendan. No great surprise to Cassie. Everyone loved Brendan, so why wouldn't a crazed cat?

Still, she'd never seen Mister snuggle up to a man. Of course, the men in Cassie's life had been very few and very far between, at least since high school. Other than a rare visit from her dad, no man had sat on her couch since that day the kitty had shown up on her doorstep, begging for handouts. And Mister definitely did not care for her father. Maybe the animal sensed that Cassie's dad didn't really care for Cassie. Smart cat.

Cassie stood at the kitchen entrance to the living room and watched Mister rub against Brendan as if he were a treat. She couldn't blame him. She actually wanted to join him. Rubbing against Brendan would be the highlight of her evening. That certainly would make her purr. But she wouldn't. She'd simply fantasize about it later, after he left. Safer that way.

Brendan just sat there, eyeing the overly friendly feline with mild disgust. At least the doctor looked more relaxed now than he had at dinner. He'd said very little during the meal of pasta and salad, something Cassie had whipped up with a jar of sauce and the greens she'd had on hand. Not exactly her idea of a romantic meal. Of course, her offer had nothing to do with romance. She was only trying to provide Brendan with some company and comfort.

On that thought, Cassie tossed the dishtowel onto the cabinet and strolled into the small living room. She took a seat on the couch opposite Brendan and Mister.

Brendan awkwardly patted the enamored cat's head with his bandaged hand. "Does this walking hairball have a name?"

"Mister Ree."

"Mystery?"

"No. Two words, Mister R-e-e."

"Weird name."

"Not really. His background is a mystery. I have no idea where he came from. He just showed up one day two years ago, and he's been here ever since."

"Do you always pick up strays?"

"Only cats. And every now and then a man who's locked his keys in the car."

Brendan frowned. "So you bring men home often?"

"I'm kidding. If you recall, we've already had this conversation about my love life, or lack thereof."

Cassie leaned over and pulled Mister out of Brendan's lap with some difficulty when the cat decided to hang on. The doctor looked more than relieved.

"Time to go outside." She stood and opened the door, and Mister scurried out.

"He's sure in a hurry," Brendan said. "Must be some hot kitty waiting for him."

Cassie reclaimed her place on the end of the sofa. "He's neutered."

Brendan grinned. "Do you do that to all your guests?"

She leaned her head back and laughed, then brought her gaze back to his sparkling green eyes. "You betcha. Helps to keep the population of unwanted offspring down."

Brendan's features switched from relaxed to serious as easily as one would click off a lamp. The glow of amusement had left his eyes, as well. "Probably not a bad idea at that."

Scooting around on the sofa to face him, Cassie crossed her legs in front of her, determined to wipe the frustration away from his face. "I spoke to the Neelys this afternoon. They're so grateful to you for bringing their baby back around."

His mouth formed an unforgiving line to match his grave expression. "Back around to what? A child that might be blind? Chronic pulmonary problems because of a respirator?"

She hated the sadness in his tone, in his eyes. “Would you like to know what Mrs. Neely said to me today?” When he didn’t respond, she continued. “She told me that she’s had three previous miscarriages. This pregnancy was the closest she’s carried to full term. She also told me that no matter what happens to her little girl, as long as she can bring her home, she’ll deal with any lingering problems when the time comes.”

Brendan sighed. “Knowing what could happen doesn’t make dealing with it any easier.”

“I realize that, and so does she.” Cassie drew in a breath and forced back the threatening tears over Mrs. Neely’s parting words. “She also told me, ‘God’s given me a baby who needs me as much as I need her.’”

Brendan leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and lowered his head into the cradle of his hands. The silence was excruciating while Cassie sat helpless, waiting for him to speak, wondering what she could do to make him feel better.

When he failed to raise his head, she slipped behind him on her knees and rested her hands on his broad shoulders to try and knead the tension away. “I hate seeing you this way, Brendan. Talk to me.”

“I couldn’t help him…” His words trailed off on a lingering sigh.

“Him? You mean her, don’t you? The Neely baby?”

“No, I mean…” He expelled another broken breath then straightened as if trying to recover. “It was years ago, and it doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

No, it wasn’t over, at least not for him, whatever “it” was. She suspected he was thinking back to another baby, probably one he didn’t save. Most likely something he deemed a failure, a circumstance that had stuck with him even after a long passage of time.

Cassie had been trained to handle such instances with patients, most of them strangers, but Brendan wasn’t a stranger. Still, she wouldn’t push him for more information than he was capable of giving. She hoped that by allowing him space and time, he would eventually talk to her. At the moment she only wanted to comfort him, get him past this particular crisis.

Cassie tightened her hold on him. “Tell me what you need, Brendan. Tell me what I can do to help.”

Looking back with a soulful gaze, he twined his fingers with hers. “I need you, Cassie. Only you.”

She moved into his lap then and held him, her heart breaking for the strong yet troubled doctor. Turning her face up, she accepted his sudden kiss. Not the same kiss from the night before. This one was full of frustration, fueled by Brendan’s despair. His hold on her tightened, as if he feared she might pull away. She had no desire to do that.

But could she risk it all by letting the intimacy continue? What would tomorrow bring if she did? An end to their relationship, or the beginning of something more, something deeper? If she took the plunge, the ultimate chance, would she find herself landing in love? Or was it already too late?

Taking Cassie by surprise, Brendan moved her aside and rose from the sofa. He held out his hand to her. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To your bedroom.”

Shock momentarily stole her voice. “Brendan, I’m not sure that’s—”

“Just for a while, Cassie. I need to hold you. I’m beat.”

Cassie stood, questions racing around in her head, yet she took his hand and led him in silence to the darkened bedroom. Once there, he turned her into his arms and kissed her again, this time more gently. But she felt his despair as keenly as if it were her own.

Backing to the bed, he pulled her down to join him. They stretched out and faced each other, bodies and emotions intertwined, surrounded by comfortable darkness and welcome silence. She soon became lost in more of Brendan’s intoxicating kisses.

Deep down Cassie knew she should stop this before it went any further. Before she made the same mistake again, giving all of herself to Brendan knowing it could ruin the friendship, knowing he probably couldn't give her more. Knowing that she would become even more emotionally drawn in to his world, probably to her own detriment.

Thankfully, he seemed content to only hold her close, but he continued to kiss her. Then he set his hands in motion over her back, trailed touches over the dip of her spine, caressed her bottom for a time, curled his fingertips between her thighs. His touch grew more insistent, carried her away from reality, from past lapses in judgment that seemed intent on repeating themselves. But this was Brendan touching her, Brendan holding her, something she had only imagined in her most secret fantasies.

From the sound of Brendan's rapid breathing, his insistent kisses, she sensed he was nearing the edge, barely clinging to a fragile thread of restraint. So was she, and then suddenly the thread broke. They undressed with abandon, his scrubs and briefs, her sweatshirt, pants and underwear, until nothing came between them except warm flesh contacting warm flesh.

With a rough groan, Brendan rose above her, nudged her legs apart with a hair-roughened thigh and buried himself inside her. At first her body reacted with a spark of discomfort from the sudden sensual invasion. But as he held her close and whispered her name, she was struck with a sense of pleasure, of wonder, like nothing she had ever known before.

His thrusts grew almost desperate, all consuming. "I need you, Cassie," he said, his words shot through with an agony that Cassie felt in the deepest reaches of her soul.

"I'm here, Brendan," she told him over and over, trying desperately to absorb some of his pain.

He trailed kisses across her neck and settled his lips on her breast. Cassie surrendered to the blissful moment, immersed herself in the rhythm, welcomed the intimacy and Brendan's strength. She held fast to him, not daring to examine the feelings bubbling up inside her—a deep-seated longing—and love. A love that she had hidden from him, from herself for several months, until now.

Cassie was so close to the edge, wanting the sensations to go on forever, but they ended much too soon. With one last thrust and a moan, Brendan collapsed against her.

Neither of them moved as several seconds counted down in time with the ticking bedside clock, in sync with Cassie's galloping pulse. Her heart raced frantically when she suddenly realized what they had done.

She hadn't looked beyond the moment, beyond providing comfort. Nor had she considered the consequences. What should she do now? What would Brendan do?

Cassie knew the moment awareness hit Brendan. She sensed it in the tightening of his frame, the long sigh from his lips that now rested against her neck, and the single word, "Damn," that came out in a harsh whisper.

Brendan slipped from her body, sat up and streaked both hands through his hair. "What in the hell have I done?"

Cassie draped her legs over the edge of the bed, scooted beside him and laid a palm on his shoulder. "It wasn't only you, Brendan."

He shrugged off her hand. "But I know better."

She flipped on the bedside lamp and sighed. "Like I don't? We're both responsible for what happened."

He focused on the watercolor painting hanging on the wall across the room, his hands fisted on his bare thighs. "Are you on the Pill?"

"I was. Low dose to regulate my periods. But I haven't been taking them for three months."

"That's what I was afraid of." He sounded afraid.

"Pregnancy's not our only concern."

He still wouldn't look at her. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm safe."

"So am I." She didn't feel at all safe, not from an emotional standpoint. The intangible wall Brendan had raised concerned her almost as much as the threat of pregnancy. They should be holding each other in the aftermath, not debating the possible outcome. Maybe at some other time, some other place, that might actually happen. But not now.

She had intended to give him comfort, not cause him more pain. But that's exactly what she had done. "Look, Brendan, odds are nothing will come of this."

He yanked on his scrubs then pushed off the bed to pace. "What if we defy the odds and you end up pregnant?"

"I'll deal with it."

Halting before her, he said, "We'll deal with it. You have to swear to me that you'll tell me if you are."

"Of course I'll tell you. But that's something we shouldn't worry about now. No need to borrow trouble."

"I am worried. Damned worried."

So was she, about many things, the least of which was the possible detriment to their relationship. How could a few moments of bliss that had felt so right, at least to Cassie, turn out to be so wrong? "Let's take it one day at a time, okay?"

His gaze traveled slowly over her flushed body, his eyes full of concern. "Did I hurt you? I was pretty rough."

Suddenly self-conscious over his steady perusal, Cassie grabbed the comforter to cover herself. "Of course you didn't hurt me."

"But I didn't do that much for you, either."

"I'm fine, Brendan. Really."

He took a seat next to her and clasped her hand between his large palms. "I'm an idiot, Cassie. I wouldn't blame you if you hated me now."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I could never hate you, no matter what."

"But you didn't even—"

"It doesn't matter."

"Dammit, it does matter. You deserve better."

Normally she would agree. She preferred slow seduction, a little romance, long kisses, lots of foreplay, something she'd never really had before. But this hadn't been a normal circumstance. Brendan didn't realize that making love with him had meant a great deal to her, a union that had little to do with the physical and all to do with the emotional. He would never understand that. Most men wouldn't.

"I'm not going to break in two over this, Brendan."

"No big deal, right?" he asked with a good deal of sarcasm.

She certainly couldn't admit to that because it wasn't at all true. "More like just one of those things."

He took her into his arms and stroked her hair with tenderness. The Brendan she knew—and loved—was back, at least for the moment. "I can't stand the thought of losing our friendship over this."

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