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Romance*TM

MARGARET MCDONAGH

Italian Doctor,
.....
Dream Proposal
.....



Margaret McDonagh

Italian Doctor, Dream Proposal

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Shy Ruth Baxter lost interest in relationships long ago ; until a seductive encounter with one dangerously handsome Italian: Dr Rico Linardi, leading specialist and Ruth's potential new boss! Rico knows the connection between them overwhelms Ruth, so he begins to break down her defences. .. gently. Because Rico wants this intelligent beauty as his lover ; and his wife! /

Содержание

Italian Doctor,	6
Table of Contents	7
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	21
CHAPTER FOUR	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

**Italian Doctor,
Dream Proposal
Margaret McDonagh**



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Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Praise](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Copyright](#)

Praise for Medical™ Romance author Margaret McDonagh:

‘Margaret McDonagh is an exceptional writer of romantic fiction...she will tug at your heartstrings, make you cry, and leave you breathless!’—*The Pink Heart Society Reviews*
‘Romance does not get any better than this!’
Margaret McDonagh is a writer readers can always count on to deliver a story that’s poignant, emotional and spellbinding!’—*CataRomance.com*
,

Margaret McDonagh says of herself: ‘I began losing myself in the magical world of books from a very young age, and I always knew that I had to write, pursuing the dream for over twenty years, often with cussed stubbornness in the face of rejection letters! Despite having numerous romance novellas, short stories and serials published, the news that my first “proper book” had been accepted by Harlequin Mills & Boon for their Medical™ Romance line brought indescribable joy! Having a passion for learning makes researching an involving pleasure, and I love developing new characters, getting to know them, setting them challenges to overcome. The hardest part is saying goodbye to them, because they become so real to me. And I always fall in love with my heroes! Writing and reading books, keeping in touch with friends, watching sport and meeting the demands of my four-legged companions keeps me well occupied. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I loved writing it.’

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CHAPTER ONE

DR RUTH BAXTER breathed a sigh of relief as she arrived at her destination, even though the only empty space she could find in the car park was the one furthest away from the hotel's main entrance. Having got up at stupid o'clock—after a scant few hours' sleep following two patient callouts during her Sunday night as on-duty GP—the journey had taken longer than expected thanks to heavy Monday-morning traffic and a lengthy hold-up after an accident on the M6 motorway. All of which meant she was now late for the two-day medical conference she was here to attend.

Ruth picked up her briefcase and overnight bag, locked her car, and headed towards the hotel. Currently bathed in warm May sunshine, the impressive building stood in its own grounds and overlooked the glittering expanse of Morecambe Bay. The lovely weather was a welcome change from the grey skies she had left behind in Strathlochan—not to mention the torrential rain she had encountered once she had crossed the Scotland/England border and had skirted the edge of the Lake District on the motorway.

As she walked, Ruth reflected on the last month and the events that had brought her here. Immunology was a field of medicine she had known little about until the arrival of a new patient had set her on an unexpected journey of discovery. Instinct had led her to the Internet where her research had uncovered papers written by Dr Riccardo Linardi, a world-renowned immunologist and allergist.

She had emailed Dr Linardi about her patient and, despite the many demands on his time, he had responded at once, his detailed advice proving to be invaluable. Instead of ending there, as Ruth had expected it to, their email correspondence had increased, widening to discussions on immunology and allergies in general. When he'd told her he was speaking at this conference and had invited her to attend as his guest, Ruth had been amazed and delighted.

Dr Linardi knew she was based in the UK, and she knew he was flying in from America, but that was the extent of their exchange of personal information. Now they were to meet. And the implication had hovered, unmentioned, that this could become a kind of informal interview. A testing of the waters for both of them. For now she was keeping an open mind, and her feet on the ground, waiting to see how the next two days played out. Who knew what opportunities might lie ahead?

Entering the hotel, Ruth crossed the spacious lobby to the reception desk, where the clerk welcomed her with a warm smile before informing her that she had, indeed, missed the meet-and-greet welcome breakfast.

'The first session of the conference has just started, but you are by no means the last to arrive, Dr Baxter. Several other delegates have also reported delays,' the clerk reassured her as Ruth signed in. 'May I arrange for your luggage to be taken to your bedroom? That way you can head straight to the conference.'

'Thank you.'

Smiling, Ruth accepted the efficient young woman's suggestion and pocketed her room key. Keeping her briefcase, she took the name badge and conference schedule the clerk gave her, then followed the directions to the adjacent extension where the conference was being held. It seemed ages since the banana and hasty cup of coffee she had managed to grab before leaving home, but further shots of caffeine would now have to wait until the mid-morning break.

Trying to stem the nervousness that always assailed her when facing people she didn't know, Ruth took a deep breath and stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind her. She found herself at the side and near the front of the large room. The two-hundred-plus delegates sat listening to the greyhaired, bespectacled man who was talking into the microphone. Behind him on the platform was a line of several speakers and officials, and nearby was a display screen which currently depicted a super-sized illustration of the virus under discussion.

Spotting an empty chair at the end of the third row from the front, and hoping not to be noticed, or to disturb the speaker, Ruth tiptoed towards it. Once settled in her place, she wondered if the bespectacled older man still at the microphone was Dr Linardi. She suspected not, given the oldschool opinions he was sharing with the audience, opinions that were way out of sync with those expressed in his emails to her. There was also the absence of any identifiable accent, American or otherwise.

Ruth suppressed a smile. It was unlike her to indulge in fancy, yet she had built up an image of 'her' Dr Linardi these last few weeks. In her mind he was a middle-aged, avuncular figure, not exactly a caricature of the archetypal mad professor but certainly a paternal, kind, possibly slightly eccentric man who was respected by his peers, his students and his patients alike.

Opening the conference programme, Ruth noted that, as well as holding a two-hour workshop that afternoon and giving the final talk that would bring the conference to a close on Tuesday afternoon, Dr Linardi was also scheduled to speak next, right before the mid-morning break. Anxiety, excitement and expectation welled inside her. Soon she would see and hear the man who had made a big impact on her life this last month and who, quite possibly, could play a major role in her future.

She had no idea what might lie ahead but there was no turning back now.

Dr Riccardo Linardi sat on the raised dais at the front of the conference room, stifling a yawn as the first speaker continued his talk. After a two-month tour of lectures and consultations in North America he was tired, Rico conceded. Mentally weary. And longing for home. However, he had commitments to fulfil before he could return to Italy, one of which had brought him to this hotel on England's Lancashire coast.

He had complicated matters by asking Dr Ruth Baxter to attend this conference, but she had impressed him from the moment her first email had arrived seeking guidance about her patient. The one hundred or more disorders that came under the category of primary immunodeficiency often went undiagnosed and were difficult to spot. Which was why he had been so surprised that Ruth, apparently a young and relatively inexperienced GP, had not only recognised what several more senior doctors had missed but had backed her intuition and pursued the matter with single-minded determination.

Ruth's thirst for knowledge and enquiring mind had grabbed his attention, and he had continued their correspondence over the last month. The amount she had learned in a short time amazed him. He came across few people with such instinctive and innate talent as that which Ruth had displayed. If, in person, she lived up to his expectations, he would definitely offer her a job.

Catching movement from the corner of his eye, Rico turned his head in time to notice the door at the side of the room open. His weariness was forgotten as his attention became riveted on the woman who entered. She closed the door and paused for a moment before trying to slip unnoticed to a vacant chair at the end of the third row right in front of him.

But Rico noticed. How could he not? She was stunning. In her mid-to-late twenties, he guessed, she was coolly beautiful. Elegant and graceful. Polished. Not in a flashy way but with a natural style and class. Left loose, her blonde hair fell to her shoulder blades in a pale gold curtain. It shone with health and looked silky soft. His fingers itched to run through the satin strands, and he imagined how they would look fanned out across his pillow or feel feathering across his bare skin.

He tried to rein in his wayward thoughts, to turn away and ignore the woman who had immediately intrigued him. It proved impossible. He had neither the time nor inclination for a dalliance, however pleasurable, yet his disobedient gaze lingered, appraised, admired. He was just looking, he reassured himself. That was all. It didn't mean he was going to do anything about it—even if it had been far longer than he cared to admit since he'd been with a woman.

Giving in to temptation, Rico tuned out the speaker and gave the woman the attention and appreciation she deserved. As she approached the vacant chair, he could tell she was above average height and was wearing shoes with an almost flat heel. She would be the perfect fit for his own six-foot frame.

The slate-grey trousers that encased long, long legs were impeccably tailored, fitting her to perfection, hinting at her womanly curves rather than clinging to them, teasing and tempting rather than being obvious. She slipped off the matching jacket and turned to hang it over the back of the chair. The hem of her long-sleeved, dark green jumper brushed the gentle swell of her hips, riding up slightly as she bent to untangle the jacket, allowing him a brief glimpse of her delectable *derrière* before she turned round again.

His gaze roamed upwards. The jumper's cashmere fabric hugged the slight indentation of her waist, then moulded to the shape of her breasts—breasts that were not big but were natural and exquisitely formed. Just the right size to fill his palms. Rico sucked in a ragged breath, his body tightening with a rush of desire. He clenched hands that itched to caress her firm softness, shifting on his chair to mask his discomfort.

As the woman sat down, Rico noted that the demure neckline of her top served only to highlight the graceful line of her throat. Her jawline was feminine, although the tilt of her chin betrayed a hint of stubborn determination. Rosy and tempting, her mouth was designed for kissing, with a plump lower lip and an appealingly bowed top one. Her nose was straight, her cheekbones high, while her brows—a few shades darker than her hair—arched neatly above her eyes. From this distance he could not determine their colour but he guessed they would be blue. He looked forward to a break in conference proceedings so that he could get close enough to her to find out.

She looked up, a slight frown on her face as she glanced around the room. The way even white teeth nibbled at her lower lip not only had his gut clenching in response but also betrayed a nervousness endearingly at odds with her outward composure. Filled with a sense of heated anticipation, Rico waited as she scanned the row of speakers on the platform to his left. He held his breath as, one by one, she moved closer.

Finally, her gaze clashed with his—and held. Rico saw her eyes widen and her lips part in a gasp, but he was too busy trying to contend with his own fierce reaction to assess or worry about hers. All the air had been squeezed from his lungs and his heart was pounding, sending his blood careening through his veins.

He felt as if he had been hit with a sledgehammer or zapped with an electrically charged thunderbolt. Probably both at once. The eye contact sparked an immediate, intense connection, unlike anything he had experienced before. He had known attraction in the past, even basic lust, but all that paled into insignificance given what was happening now. Nothing had prepared him for this shocking, incredible moment of recognition, of knowing he wanted her, *needed* her, had to have her...that she was *the one*.

Dio mio!

Maybe lack of sleep was causing his mind to play tricks on him. There had to be some reasonable explanation for this madness. He was an intelligent man, a scientist. He dealt in facts, in reality, in logic, not in some inexplicable and implausible flight of whimsy. But their private moment of connection continued and neither of them was able to look away. Rico felt as if time was suspended, as if they were somehow being locked together by invisible bonds. Everything around him faded to a blur. He could hear nothing but the rush of blood in his ears, could see nothing but the vision a few feet away, was aware of nothing and no one but her.

Why here? Why now? How could it happen out of the blue like this? How could one look throw his whole world into confusion? Who *was* this woman playing havoc with his senses?

Rico had no answers. Not yet. But soon he would find out everything he needed to know about the mysterious woman who so unexpectedly touched something deep inside him. He did not understand it, but neither did he question it, because he knew it had happened to his father, and he had seen it happen to his cousin. Now, for the first time, Rico truly understood how they had felt. Because he was feeling it, too. When he was least prepared, and when he had thought it might never happen to him, he had found *her*.

He was all too aware that many obstacles lay ahead. Yet one look at her had been enough to know this was it...and to bring his libido raging back to life after a long hibernation. Holding her gaze, he felt the crackle of electricity zinging back and forth between them.

Impatience gripped him. It was the wrong time and the wrong place. And he never allowed anything to distract him from his work. But right now he longed to forget this conference, Dr Baxter and his responsibilities. Instead, he wanted to gather up this woman and take her away from all these people so they could get to know each other in private and see where this incredible connection took them.

The sound of the chairman thanking the first speaker and asking for questions from the floor impinged on Rico's consciousness, but he still did not break the eye contact that made him feel so charged and aware. Soon it would be time for him to speak. If he could remember how to string two words together. Then would come the first refreshment break. It could not come soon enough. He needed to meet the woman who had just changed his life.

A shiver rippled through Ruth as she sensed that she was being watched. Looking up, she cast a surreptitious glance around the room, but everyone appeared to be focused on the speaker. Nibbling her lower lip, she switched her gaze to the platform. Starting with the person furthest away from her, she moved one by one along the row until she reached the man on the nearest end, in line with her, only to find herself staring into a pair of intense dark eyes, eyes that seemed to devour her, looking at her with...what?

From this distance Ruth wasn't sure, but whatever it was it scared the life out of her. A gasp escaped unchecked before her breath lodged in her lungs. Her heart thudded unnaturally fast under her ribs and the room suddenly seemed far too hot. Everything and everyone around her faded from her consciousness. All she could see was *him*. Panic welled within her as she struggled to make sense of the overwhelming surge of emotions now assailing her. Principal amongst them was unfamiliar yet recognisable—desire. Alarmed, she tried to deny it, to banish it, but it refused to go away.

She had given up on men, Ruth reminded herself. Her only serious relationship had been at medical school. It had ended in acrimony, with Adam, a fellow student doctor, leaving her in no doubt about her many deficiencies as a woman. Since then she had never met a man who had remotely stirred her interest to try again and she had been happy to remain alone. In her albeit limited experience, sex was vastly overrated and not worth the effort. Which only served to confirm that the hurtful things Adam had said at the moment of their final parting were true.

Feeling ashamed and humiliated, she had determined never to get involved with a man again, the experience cementing her disbelief in love and romance. At least for herself. Now all that mattered in her life was her work. The only desire that bloomed inside her was to be the best doctor possible for her patients.

So why had one glimpse of *this* man made her feel hotter than Hades? Why was her body betraying her as everything female in her responded to him, causing all her previously redundant hormones to spring to life? Even the dozen or so feet of floor space that separated them failed to lessen his impact or temper the searing force of his gaze.

Something about the man and the way he looked at her made her tremble with awareness and caused an aching knot to tighten deep inside her. She couldn't comprehend the potent affect he had on her. The immediate and uncharacteristic rush of arousal and blaze of sexual hunger were completely beyond her experience or understanding.

In his early thirties, she judged, and younger than the rest of the people on the platform, the man was impossibly gorgeous. He had the kind of roguish, bad-boy edge about him that gave mothers the vapours and caused fathers to lock up their daughters and throw away the key. Everything about him oozed wickedness and sinful sensuality...warning enough, if any were needed, that he was far too much man for an inept novice like her to handle. Not that she had any intention of *handling* him. No way.

Untamed, his dark hair was thick and over-long, brushing over the collar of his shirt almost to his shoulders, a few strands flopping across his forehead. The few days' growth of stubble that enhanced the masculine set of his jawline added to his rakish good looks and made him appear more like some latter-day buccaneer than a respectable doctor. Those compelling eyes regarded her steadily. Another tingle feathered down her spine. It felt as if he were holding her captive, casting some kind of spell over her from which she would never escape. She had no idea what was happening to her but she sensed its importance, feared the consequences, and wanted to follow every instinct of self-preservation that was crying out for her to run away. But she couldn't move, couldn't break the connection between them.

Ruth was dimly aware of the first speaker taking questions from the delegates, but it was too much effort to concentrate on what was being said. All her energies and focus were centred on the man in front of her. She sensed the very real danger he posed. Somehow she had to avoid him. When everyone rose for the first break, she would find Dr Linardi, have her talk with him, thank him for his help, and then make an excuse to leave early. Then she would hightail it back to Strathlochan and the safety of home.

It was only when the chairman introduced the man she had come here to meet that Ruth was able to wrest her gaze free. Her pulse was racing in response to the intensity of the last few moments. And her hands had clenched so tightly that her short, neatly manicured nails had left crescent-moon indentations in her palms. Feeling vulnerable, her senses heightened, she waited to see who rose to their feet as the chairman handed the stage over to Dr Riccardo Linardi.

Seconds ticked by.

Then...finally...there was movement.

Ruth froze in horror as *he* stood up.

No!

This was *not* the man she had been emailing, the man who had made her feel valued, and with whom she had agreed to spend the next two days. It couldn't be. And yet some inner part of her had recognised the danger he posed and the lifechanging affect he could have on her.

Feeling light-headed with shock, she watched him walk to the microphone with deceptively lazy strides and the catlike grace of a hunter. And then he spoke, introducing himself in perfect English but with a lilting Italian accent. A wave of fearful desire surged through her as the rich timbre of his voice electrified every nerve-ending in her body.

He briefly scanned the room, then that mesmerising gaze inexorably found her once more, calling to her, claiming her, binding her to him. Terrified, she trembled as she absorbed the enormity of what was happening. This man had jolted her out of her safe cocoon and rocked the very foundations of her world.

Ruth didn't know what to do.

Go...or stay and face the dangerously exciting possibilities that lay ahead?

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CHAPTER TWO

‘MAY I pour you some coffee, *signorina*? Or would you prefer tea?’

Ruth had not needed to hear the question, delivered in that knee-weakening, huskily accented voice, to know that Dr Linardi had moved up beside her in the informal queue at the self-service refreshment table. She had felt his approach. Every atom of her being was attuned to him. Had been since the moment their gazes had first met.

His talk had been mind-blowing, displaying the breadth of knowledge and passion for the subject that had been so evident in his emails. He had inspired and enthralled her then but even more so in person. Once she had overcome the shock of him, and their inexplicable connection, she had forced herself to focus on her notes. In part because it stopped her looking at him. So she had written copiously, struggling to put the sound of his voice and what it did to her out of her mind. She’d already learned so much over the last month, and listening to Dr Linardi’s talk only made her more fascinated with the often obscure and puzzling worlds of allergy and immunology.

That she was also fascinated by the man himself, Ruth tried to ignore. But she had been aware every moment of him watching her. And the knowledge that they would soon meet face to face, that she would most likely be alone with him later in the day, had brought back the urge to run, as if for her very life. He was going to turn her whole world upside down. She knew it. Was scared of it. But she hadn’t been able to move a muscle to save herself.

What shocked and puzzled her was that a traitorous part of her didn’t want to escape...wanted, instead, to discover where this blaze of attraction might lead. That it should be Dr Linardi who had caused reactions and responses she had never experienced before made things all the more complicated. What if he *did* offer her a job? Could she work with him if every time she saw him or heard his voice she felt the burn of desire? She couldn’t imagine he would want an employee who acted like a teenager going through her first crush.

Dr Linardi had been waylaid by several people as he had attempted to leave the stage and head in her direction at the start of the mid-morning break. Thankful for the temporary reprieve, Ruth had slipped on her jacket and, leaving her briefcase under her chair as other people had done, she had gone in search of the refreshments. Feeling nervous, self-conscious and incredibly confused, she had needed as much time as possible to compose herself. All the while she had known there would be no escape, had sensed that he was closing in on her—stalking her as a hunter did its prey.

Now he had caught her and he was waiting for her answer. Unable to resist the magnetic pull, she turned her head and met the full force of that compelling gaze. ‘Thank you. Coffee, please.’ She silently cursed herself, feeling like a tongue-tied schoolgirl rather than a thirty-year-old doctor.

‘Milk and sugar?’

‘A splash of milk but no sugar,’ she managed, finding the mundane nature of their first actual encounter bizarre given the frighteningly real electric current that flowed back and forth between them.

Half turned away from him as they waited in line at the table, Ruth found herself hemmed in and jostled by the press of other delegates as someone in the line tried to manoeuvre out, carrying a tray of cups and saucers. As she lost her balance, Dr Linardi’s arm came out to steady her, an instinctive gesture of protection as he moved to place himself between her and the crowd. The action brought her even closer to him. So close that when she drew in a shaky breath she caught a teasing hint of his scent. Cedar. She recognised it thanks to her best friend Gina’s interest in essential oils. On him, the aroma was warm and exotic, masculine and arousing, heightening her awareness of him. Even more disturbing was the way the touch of his palm resting on her hip seemed to brand her right through her clothes.

‘You are all right?’ he asked with evident concern.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

He hesitated, and they shared another moment of silent connection before he released her and turned to busy himself with their drinks. Ruth exhaled a shaky breath, feeling unaccountably light-headed. She pressed one hand to her throat, feeling every throb of her pulse against her palm. Up close he was imposing...six feet of impressive, male perfection. Unable to look away from him, she watched as he filled two cups with fresh, richly scented coffee, adding milk to one and a teaspoon of sugar to the other.

He had nice hands, she noted, well cared for, capable and dexterous. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring and there was no tell-tale paler band of skin to betray that he had ever worn one. The sleeves of his pale blue shirt had been turned up to the elbows, revealing leanly muscled forearms, the olive-toned skin dusted with dark hairs. A functional watch with a plain black strap circled his left wrist. Nothing flashy or ostentatious for this man. Her gaze slid upwards. He wasn’t wearing a tie and the top couple of buttons of his shirt were open, allowing a view of the strong column of his throat. Again her gaze roved on, over his handsome profile, just as he turned his head and caught her assessing him.

Ruth felt warmth bloom across her cheeks. Then he smiled, and she feared she might melt into a puddle at his feet. Gentle laughter lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes and the hint of a dimple teased his right cheek, adding to his roguish appeal. Being so gorgeous ought to be illegal. Once more her gaze locked with his and, close to, she discovered that his eyes were an unusual dark hazel with intriguing speckles of gold in them. And they were fringed by the kind of thick, long lashes women yearned for—or paid to imitate—but which in no way softened his overwhelming masculinity.

‘Come, *signorina*, let us find somewhere away from this melee to enjoy our coffee and talk.’

Trying to ignore the effect the sound of his voice had on her, Ruth accepted the cup and saucer he gave her, fearing she would spill her drink because her hands were shaking so much. As he drew her away from the milling throng and the noise of myriad simultaneous conversations, he smiled and exchanged greetings with several people, but refused to allow them to detain him. His hand settled possessively at the base of her spine, keeping her close to him and guiding her through an open door and into a small, empty side room where a few tables and chairs had been laid out. Ruth set down her coffee and undid the button on her jacket, thanking him as he solicitously drew out a chair for her to sit down before pulling his own chair nearer to her.

‘We have not been properly introduced. I am Dr Riccardo Linardi. But my friends call me Rico.’ He rested one arm on the table as he faced her. ‘I feel that you and I are going to become very close friends.’

Wondering quite *how* close, Ruth took a fortifying sip of her coffee. As she leaned forward to replace her cup back on its saucer, her jacket parted, revealing the name badge pinned on her jumper. She saw his gaze follow the movement but, before she could speak, shocked surprise registered on his face.

‘*You* are Dr Ruth Baxter?’ Incredulity laced his voice, while the possessive nature of his next words stunned her and made her pulse race. ‘*My* Ruth?’

It took Rico a moment to recover from the initial amazement that this woman, who had all but brought him to his knees from the first moment he had looked at her, was the woman he had been emailing for a month, the woman he had invited here in the hope she would accept his offer of a job. *His Ruth*. The coincidence did not escape him. Rico didn’t know how it had happened, but it was destiny. Fate. They had been meant to meet.

There was nothing remotely scientific about the knowledge, but deep inside Rico knew it was true—knew that the special moment of recognition that had happened first to his father and then to Seb when they had met their future wives had now happened to him. Ruth was his dream woman come to life, the one he had been waiting for. Not that he could tell her that. Not yet. She would think he was crazy. And she was already edgy. More than once he’d sensed her urge to flee. Thankfully

she was still here, but if he handled things badly at this early stage, he would spook her. They needed to get to know each other and for Ruth to feel comfortable with him. Not easy in this setting. And discovering her identity was an unexpected twist that added hugely to the complications that lay ahead. He would need to consider those. But for now, conscious of where they were, he needed to keep things as professional as possible until they had the opportunity to be alone.

Waiting was not going to be easy, however, so he allowed himself a few moments to study her and drink in all the details that were revealed now he was close to her. Nervousness and bewilderment were reflected in the eyes that shyly observed him—eyes that were not blue, as he had predicted, but a beautiful sage green.

She looked adorably flustered by what was happening and also a little scared. The former brought a welling of affectionate amusement, but the latter concerned him. Her inexperience had been obvious immediately and he was astonished by it. Unlike most other women he had met, women who knew how to use their wiles to get what they wanted and had no compunction about doing so, Ruth seemed not to have any understanding of her own appeal.

Ruth was like a breath of fresh air, with no artifice about her, no game playing, no hidden agenda. Instead she displayed an unusual innocence for someone with all her attributes, intelligence and maturity. She had a natural, understated beauty yet was genuinely unaware of it, just as she had no clue about her own sensuality and desirability. And she appeared mystified and more than a little unnerved by the intense mutual attraction they shared. Which only intrigued him more. Ruth was a puzzle, a mass of contrasts. He couldn't wait to unravel all her secrets and to discover how she could be so competent and authoritative in her professional life but seem all at sea in terms of social interaction.

It was unsurprising that Ruth seemed overwhelmed. He certainly was. He'd never experienced anything like this in his life and he was still struggling to make sense of the suddenness of it. Not to mention the urgency of the desire, the desperate need to keep her close.

There were many issues to be faced and overcome, Rico acknowledged, but he was determined that no matter how unexpected, and how inconvenient the timing, having found Ruth, he was going to do everything he could not to lose her again. Careful not to rush her, knowing they both needed time to make sense of what was happening, he curbed his impatience to ask the thousand and one questions bubbling within him and gave her a few moments' peace to drink her coffee and compose herself.

The couple of times he had managed to be close to her he had enjoyed the subtle scent of lavender and sweet sexy woman, a combination unique to Ruth that aroused and excited him, and to which he was already addicted. As he watched, sunlight spilled through the window beside them and reflected on Ruth's hair, making it shine like a halo of pale gold around her face. Just looking at her took his breath away. She was amazing. If this was how Seb had felt when first meeting his special woman, it was no wonder his cousin had been so tied up in knots. Having seen what Seb had been through eight months ago, Rico hoped he had learned enough from his cousin's experiences not to make the same mistakes in his as yet unplanned campaign to win Ruth.

The buzz of awareness and charge of desire were ever-present, but he also felt edgy with tension, knowing he was stepping into the unknown. He was in danger of breaking all his rules about any kind of involvement with a colleague...or potential colleague. But the rules he had lived by until now went out of the window when faced with the reality and the temptation of Ruth. He had never felt like this before, had never experienced this rush of emotion and out-of-control need. Somehow he had to find a way to reconcile work life and private life because now that Fate had delivered Ruth to him, he was not letting her go.

Pushing his coffee aside, no longer needing the caffeine as Ruth was the only stimulant he required, he indulged in studying her. If she wore any make-up at all, it was done with such a light touch it was unnoticeable. There was nothing worse in his opinion than kissing a woman and getting a mouthful of gunk, of tasting powder and grease instead of her sweetness. That would not happen

with Ruth. Close up he could see that a faint dusting of freckles was scattered across her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, and her skin was flawless, almost translucent, incredibly fair.

He was relieved to see no wedding or engagement ring on her finger, but confirming there was no one in her life at the moment was a top priority. Aside from the delicate platinum chain around her neck—her jumper hiding whatever was suspended from it—and the inexpensive watch on her right wrist, she wore no adornment. She didn't need any.

Rico was disappointed as the other tables began to fill up around them and their moment of seclusion was lost. He wanted to keep Ruth all to himself. But several people stopped to speak to him and it was some minutes before he could politely extract himself and return his full attention to her.

'I am sorry, *cara*. If we are visible here we will not be able to avoid interruptions,' he told her with a mix of apology and frustration.

'It's all right.' Her smile was shy and tentative but so pure it sucked the air from his lungs and left him feeling as if he had been punched in the gut. 'I'm sure you're in demand and lots of people will want to discuss things with you. Events like this must give you the chance to catch up with colleagues and exchange views on the run.'

Relieved she was relaxing a little, Rico nodded in agreement, enjoying the sound of her voice, which was melodious yet throaty, her English tones clear and refined, and without an identifiable regional accent. 'You are my guest, Ruth, and my time is devoted to you. These days conferences are thankfully shorter and more focused than they used to be as we are all too busy to be away from our posts for long.'

'You must have a full list of patients awaiting you in America,' she suggested, demonstrating how much they had yet to discover about each other.

'Not in America.' He paused a moment, thanking the waitress who came to clear away their cups and saucers. 'I was there for a few weeks giving lectures and training sessions, as well as consulting on a couple of cases, but my home and my clinic are in Italy.'

'Oh! I didn't realise. When you said you were flying in from New York, I assumed that was where you were based.'

Before he could explain, a German colleague wanted to exchange a few words about the workshop Rico was leading that afternoon. Instead of the enjoyment he normally felt in being able to meet up and talk shop with fellow doctors, now it was impatience that gripped him. He wanted everyone to go away so that he could have time alone with Ruth. But he was destined to be thwarted. For now.

The temptation to escape and miss the rest of the programme was great, but he couldn't yet succumb to the urgent desire to forget everything else and carry Ruth off to bed. Not only did he have his own commitments but it was important for Ruth to learn and absorb as much as she could, both in terms of increasing her knowledge and being able to make a decision on whether or not to consider a change of direction in her career. However difficult, it was work first and pleasure second—when he had worked out a plan to win her trust and her heart.

'There is much we don't yet know about each other,' he said when they were left alone again. 'I am looking forward to learning all about you, but unfortunately I will have to wait a little longer.' He smiled, noting the mix of anxiety and anticipation that warred in her expression. 'We will have time when conference business has finished for the day—I'm sure we can slip away a bit early. But there is much for us to discuss on a professional level.'

'Pippa Warren,' Ruth ventured, mentioning the eight-year-old girl whose illness had been the catalyst, causing Ruth to email him in the first place.

'Indeed, yes. Sadly her situation is far from rare. I learn about cases of delayed or incorrect diagnoses all too often, both in adults and children. And, with the latter, there are parents who are often at the end of their tether, with no idea which way to turn,' he explained, momentarily distracted by the shimmering colours as Ruth nodded her head and her pale gold hair glinted in the sunlight.

‘That was certainly how Pippa’s mother Judith appeared when I first met her,’ Ruth agreed, a tiny frown knotting her brow. ‘She had been passed from pillar to post for several years, with various doctors insisting that Pippa was fine and telling Judith that she was fussing unnecessarily and an overanxious mother.’

Rico heard similar stories far too frequently. ‘A mother’s instinct should never be dismissed out of hand. Judith and Pippa struck gold the day they walked into your surgery,’ he praised, seeing the hint of a blush colour her cheeks.

‘I don’t know about that.’

‘I do,’ he insisted, refusing to let her play down her achievements. ‘Many doctors, including those with far more experience than you, would not have recognised what you did, never mind follow it through with such tenacity.’

Looking embarrassed, she shrugged. ‘I was just lucky.’

‘Luck had nothing to do with it,’ Rico chastised, determined that she acknowledge what she had done for Pippa and her mother. ‘You are a special doctor, Ruth. And equally as important as your academic excellence is that you really care about your patients. You listen to them and you give them your time—not easy given the pressures doctors are under and the limited period allotted to each consultation. But you go the extra mile, just as you demonstrated with Judith and Pippa. Whereas many others had taken the easy way out—treating only what they saw on the surface, or simply not understanding the relevance of the history and range of symptoms because of lack of training and knowledge—you trusted your instincts and you didn’t give up until you had solved the puzzle. And, with immunology, making a diagnosis is often a case of detective work, of sticking in there and not giving up. You did that, Ruth. On your own. I think—in fact, I *know*—that you are amazing.’

‘Thank you.’

Two little words and yet they revealed so much, especially an inner aloneness that tightened a knot in his stomach and made him want to pull her into his arms and hug her tight. Her smile was tremulous, while the emotion in her voice, and the expression in eyes glimmering with a suspicion of unshed tears, brought the instinctive knowledge that support *of* her and belief *in* her had been in short supply in the past. He didn’t yet know why, but he intended to find out. And then he would ensure that she knew her own worth in the future.

‘Where do things stand with Pippa now?’ he asked, forcing himself to keep things professional.

‘We are waiting for the hospital appointment to come through. I saw Judith last week and she has lots of questions about what will happen when Pippa goes for assessment, and what is involved if the consultant confirms that it is CVID.’ It was through Rico’s help that Ruth had been able to determine that common variable immunodeficiency or CVID, was the most likely diagnosis. She paused, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear, an endearing knot of consideration creasing her brow. ‘I’ve tried to reassure her as best I can, but I can’t answer everything for her.’

‘Have Pippa’s symptoms improved at all?’ he asked, happy to help Ruth set Judith and Pippa’s minds at rest about what might lie ahead for them.

‘There has been a small lessening in the severity of some of the symptoms now she has started the broad-spectrum antibiotics you recommended,’ Ruth told him, gratitude evident in her smile. ‘After her years of recurring infections and other problems, I’m hoping that there hasn’t been any permanent damage and that she hasn’t developed bronchiectasis.’

Rico nodded as Ruth expressed her worries about the chronic condition that caused widening and scarring of the structures of the bronchi, or breathing tubes. It was one of his concerns for Pippa, too. ‘You said that the blood tests showed low levels of serum immunoglobins.’

‘That’s right. Very low.’ She glanced at him, then away again, but not before he had noted the flash of indecision in her eyes. A small sigh escaped and she seemed to be wrestling with something, but before he could question her, she grimaced and began speaking again. ‘I had a few problems getting the blood tests done.’

‘How do you mean?’ Rico frowned.

‘They are not tests that would usually be requested from a general practice surgery.’

Rico’s frown deepened. ‘You had trouble from the hospital when you asked for the tests? Or from your own practice?’

‘Questions were asked. But the tests got done, that’s what matters. And it told us what we needed to know to help Pippa,’ Ruth said, but Rico was certain she was glossing over much of the struggle she had faced. He wanted to know who had put obstacles in her way. And why. But he let it go...for now.

‘The consultant immunologist will test Pippa’s antibody levels. The vaccine tests can take up to six weeks, which I know is frustrating, but it is important to define the degree of immunodeficiency,’ he explained, seeing the sharp intelligence in Ruth’s eyes and knowing she was absorbing all the information. ‘If the final diagnosis is CVID—as we believe it will be—Pippa will have immunoglobulin replacement therapy, which should help end the cycle of recurring infections.’

‘I read that the immunoglobulin infusions can be delivered either intravenously or subcutaneously?’ Ruth commented, a query in her voice.

Rico nodded, unsurprised by her thoroughness. ‘That is so. At first Pippa will have regular treatment at the hospital, but once she is stabilised, and if both mother and daughter can cope, they can be taught how to administer the subcut treatment at home.’

‘The subcut sounds scary,’ Ruth pointed out. ‘Especially for an eight-year-old.’

‘Patients generally find it easier than they first think and it is well tolerated. It is better than prolonged IV access, which can increase the risk of infection and also becomes difficult if the veins are hard to find. And, because the home infusions are given once a week, they help to keep the levels more constant than with the IV infusion in hospital,’ he reassured her, although her desire to keep her patient informed was typical of the caring doctor he was coming to know.

Aware that time was running out, he ran through some advice and suggestions that Ruth could pass on and which might help the Warrens as they faced the next stage of the journey in gaining a diagnosis and an ongoing treatment programme for Pippa.

A high-voltage smile hit him full on, testing his restraint. ‘I’m very grateful, Rico. You’ve given so much of your time and I know how Judith and Pippa really appreciate your advice. As do I,’ she added shyly, touching his heart. And he loved the way she said his name, how her refined English voice, melodious but throaty, made it sound.

‘It has been my pleasure to help, *carissima*. And I shall be interested to hear how things progress in the weeks and months ahead. You must keep me up to date.’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll do that,’ she promised.

Rico knew that whatever happened between Ruth and himself in the next couple of days, the Warrens’ case would keep their link intact and the avenue of communication open. He obviously didn’t like the fact that Pippa was ill, but without Ruth being concerned and searching the internet for information, he would never have met her. And even after a very short time in her company, he could not now imagine his life without Ruth in it. He just hoped he didn’t mess things up.

Rico wished the moment of intense closeness could go on forever but, much to his regret, the call came to announce the start of the conference’s second session that would take them up to lunch.

‘As I have told you in our email exchanges, I am genuinely impressed by your skills. You have an innate gift for learning, Ruth, and for caring, for healing.’ Aware of people moving around them and returning to their places in the main room, Rico leaned closer and focused on Ruth. ‘We have no more time now, and this afternoon I have the workshop.’

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ she admitted, making him smile.

Private time with Ruth would be scarce, at least until the evening, but he was determined to be alone with her so he could learn all about her and do everything possible to persuade her to come and work with him. And be with him. Once more the line between professional and personal blurred.

‘We can continue our discussion later.’ He drew in a deep breath, realising how nervous he was, how desperate to get things right and not scare her away. ‘Will you have dinner with me tonight, Ruth?’

Time seemed suspended as he waited for her answer. He felt each beat of his heart beneath his ribs, was sure she must hear its anxious pounding. He watched her changing expressions, wondering what more he could do to convince her, nearly groaning aloud as she nibbled at her bottom lip, making him yearn to taste her, kiss her.

‘Yes... I will.’

The whispered words brought untold relief and gratitude that this first hurdle had been crossed. But he knew more lay ahead. They could sort out the details of the evening later. Now he had a few short hours in which to plan his campaign to get Ruth to say yes to a whole lot more than dinner.

CHAPTER THREE

FOR the tenth time in as many minutes, Ruth checked her watch. Any moment now, Rico would arrive to escort her to dinner and her anxiety was growing. As was her excitement. Her whole body felt alive with anticipation, her breathing was too fast and too shallow, and her blood was pulsing wildly through her veins. Unable to settle, she paced across the room and paused at the window, scarcely noticing the view out over the shimmering expanse of Morecambe Bay to the western horizon where the sun would soon be setting.

No matter how many times she told herself that the only reason she had accepted the invitation to have dinner with Rico was because of the work-related discussions they were going to have, she knew it was a lie. Just as she could not deceive herself about the extra effort she had made when getting dressed for the evening. She rarely wore dresses, but as well as insisting on swimwear, in the unlikely event she had time to try out the hotel's indoor pool, Gina and Holly had persuaded her to bring her black dress—standard issue in most women's wardrobes—in case of a smart dinner.

As promised, she had sent her two friends text messages to confirm she had arrived OK, but she had not divulged any information about Rico. Both were nurses. Gina McNaught at Strathlochan's multi-purpose drop-in centre and Holly Tait on the children's ward at Strathlochan Hospital. Both had expressed concern about her intention to accept the last-minute invitation to this conference, although Gina had been the most vociferous.

'Being stuck with two hundred stuffy old doctors for a couple of days doesn't sound like fun to me,' Gina had complained in her soft Scottish burr. 'Besides, you probably know more about the immune system and allergies than most of the delegates, even though you've only been learning about the subjects for the last month.'

Ruth hadn't taken umbrage at the implication that she was a swot because she'd known no judgement had been intended. Not from Gina. Aside from the fact that her friend never said a bad word about anyone, there had been obvious affection and admiration in her voice. Far removed from the criticism, resentment and snideness Ruth had become accustomed to all her life...first at home, then at school, following on during her medical training, and now in her first job as a GP.

'You'll be too busy overseeing final preparations for your wedding on Saturday to even notice I'm away,' Ruth had teased in an effort to reassure her friend.

'I'll notice. And I can't get married without you and Holly beside me as my bridesmaids. So make sure you don't let the mysterious specialist you've been emailing persuade you to disappear off to America to work for him.' Genuine worry had laced Gina's tone. 'Remember how much we all love you here.'

Recalling the words now brought a lump to Ruth's throat, just as they had at the time. She wasn't good at emotion and personal involvement. And she had no idea how to deal with affection, especially when directed at her, as she had never experienced it in her life before. Not until she had arrived in Strathlochan a couple of years ago when, much to her surprise and bemusement, she had immediately been taken under the protective wings of Gina and Holly. Likewise, the warm and generous welcome she had received from many within the local medical community had been equally unforeseen and overwhelming.

Snapping back to the problem at hand, Ruth nibbled her lower lip in indecision, wondering for the umpteenth time whether to change into something else. Turning round, she cast a nervous glance at her reflection in the hotel room's full-length mirror. The hem of the dress brushed her knees, while the sleeves were three-quarter length and the neckline demure. More than respectable. Not at all revealing. Her freshly washed hair had been left loose, and she was wearing flat shoes, dark tights and the bare minimum of make-up. With her watch and her late grandmother's locket on a chain around her neck her only additions, she should have looked stylish but unnoticeable. Not like

a maiden schoolmarm, exactly, but far removed from the sensual siren who now gazed back at her. Her eyes looked huge and startled as she studied her alien image, awed and alarmed at the way the fabric hugged her body, subtly hinting at every curve.

This was *not* the effect she had intended. She had no idea what had gone wrong. And she was certainly nothing like the stranger she saw in the mirror. It had been a while since she had last worn the dress but she didn't remember it ever looking this provocative. Had she realised, she never would have packed it, no matter what Gina and Holly had said.

A sudden knock at the door made her jump and warned her that there was no more time for indecision. Or to change her clothes. Pressing her palms to her cheeks, finding them unusually warm, she walked towards the door, wishing now that she was meeting Rico downstairs amongst the other delegates instead of agreeing that he call for her at her room. Sucking in a steadying breath, sure he would hear each rapid beat of her heart, she opened the door, only for all the air to leave her lungs in a rush when she saw him.

Wearing designer jeans, a black crew-neck sweater and a mid-brown leather jacket, Rico looked casual but smart...and devastatingly handsome. He hadn't shaved, so still had the roguish, bad-boy edge she had uncharacteristically found so sexy when she had first seen him. Her gaze clashed with his and the hunger in gold-flecked hazel eyes seared her to her soul. He took his time looking over her from head to toe and back again, his appreciation so blatant that even she, with her total lack of self-confidence, could not fail to grasp that he liked what he saw.

Ruth shivered. Rico looked as if he wanted to forget all about dinner and would rather stay and feast on her instead. The knowledge weakened her knees. And her resolve. An unrecognisable part of her willed her surrender. A wild and wicked side she had never known she possessed had been fighting for freedom ever since she had met Rico. She had never found pleasure with a man, and her failings as a woman had been well and truly drummed into her, so this new and sudden desire was shocking and bewildering. Her attraction to Rico scared her—almost as much as his apparent attraction to her.

'Good evening, Ruth.' Taking her by surprise, his hands settled on her upper arms and drew her closer so he could place a kiss on each cheek. Her skin tingled from the brush of his lips and her hastily indrawn breath was fragrant with his arousing cedar-wood scent. 'You look beautiful.'

She didn't believe his extravagant compliment, but politeness demanded her response. 'Thank you.'

'You are ready to go?' he queried, his hands gliding slowly down her arms before releasing her.

'Yes. I'll just get my things.'

Turning away to pick up her bag and room key, Ruth used the few seconds to try and regain some measure of composure. She only had to be near Rico and her body betrayed her. That the phenomenon had been happening all day, from the first moment they had looked at each other, in no way made it easier for her to understand. Why now? Why this man when no other had ever stirred her interest?

Before she could wrestle with the questions any further, Rico stepped into the room, the door slowly swinging to behind him. 'Allow me to help you with your coat,' he said, picking up the garment she had left draped over the back of a chair.

Ruth frowned in puzzlement. Why did she need to wear a coat to go to dinner in the hotel restaurant? Too on edge to argue, she did as she was bid as he held it ready for her to put on. His solicitousness came as no surprise. She had discovered many times during the day that his manners and courtesy were instinctive, and shown to men, as well as women, young and old alike.

Far too aware of his nearness, Ruth slipped each arm in turn into the coat sleeves, an aching knot forming deep inside her as his hands lingered a moment before gently gathering up the long strands of her hair and easing them out from under the collar, his fingers brushing tantalisingly across the back of her neck. The temptation to remain in his arms, to lean back against him, was hard to

resist. Forcing herself to move, she stepped forward, but failed to break the contact between them, or the electric connection, as Rico slowly turned her to face him. Several seconds ticked by as they watched each other in silence.

‘Green.’

Ruth stared at him in confusion. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Your eyes,’ he explained, voice husky. ‘I expected them to be blue.’

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you.’

Her response was sharper than she had intended but his comment had played on her insecurities, her belief that she never met expectations. She turned her head away, discomfited by his inspection, angry with herself for her naivety. Even if she wanted more than the possibility of working with him—which she didn’t, she was swift to try and convince herself—she could never be enough for a man as successful, intelligent and good looking as him. The intense and shocking moment of connection when they had first looked at each other had clearly short-circuited her brain.

Ruth was startled when he caught her face, his hold gentle but insistent as he drew her gaze back to his. She couldn’t decipher the expression in his eyes, but her own widened in surprise, a tremor running through her as the pad of his thumb brushed across the little indentation between her lower lip and her chin. Her skin tingled from his touch. She’d had no idea she was so sensitive there.

‘You mistake my meaning, *carissima*. I was in no way making a complaint.’ His voice dropped to a rough purr and her insides clenched in response. The intensity with which he looked at her made her feel as if she were the tastiest morsel he had ever seen and he was very, *very* hungry. ‘Your eyes are beautiful. There is nothing remotely disappointing about them—or any part of you.’ He paused, regarding her for a moment in speculative silence before stroking his fingertips softly across her cheek, leaving little fires burning in his wake. ‘That you should think so is something we will have to address later.’ After a quick glance at his watch, he released her. ‘Now it is time for us to leave.’

Hooking the strap of her bag over one shoulder, she preceded Rico out of the room and locked the door. As she made to move down the corridor towards the main stairs and lifts, Rico caught her hand, a wicked smile on his face as he led her in the opposite direction.

‘Rico, where are we going?’ she asked, her fingers linking far too naturally and easily with his.

‘We are playing truant, *carissima*.’

The staged whisper, followed by a sexy wink, sent a tremor down her spine. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked as he opened a door that led to the back stairway used only by staff or in case of emergency.

‘If we stay here we will have little peace,’ he told her, leading the way down and keeping her close. ‘I am selfish enough to want you all to myself, so I have arranged for us to have dinner away from the hotel. If we go down the normal way we will be accosted long before we can reach the front door.’ On the ground floor, he peeped down the deserted corridor, then pushed open the fire exit and drew her outside with him, making sure the door clicked safely back into place behind them. ‘There is a taxi waiting for us. Our escape to carry out our secret mission is more fun, no?’

It was, Ruth admitted, unable to hold back a smile. She caught his arm as he made to step out into the open, and there was a query in his eyes as he turned back to look at her.

‘You make for the car, Agent Linardi, and I’ll cover you,’ she told him in a terrible attempt at an American accent, ruining her efforts by giggling.

Rico’s answering chuckle warmed her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, as did the delighted appreciation in his eyes that she was playing along. ‘Good thinking, Agent Baxter. When I give the signal, make a run for it,’ he instructed, adopting an even worse accent than hers.

A moment later Rico waved to her and she hurried across to join him. They were both laughing as he opened the rear door of the taxi and bundled her inside. She slid along the backseat, feeling wonderfully light-hearted as he climbed in beside her, then he leaned forward to greet the driver and

give him the address of the restaurant. Not for the first time that day she wondered how this man could make her feel cherished one moment and as if her whole ordered existence was threatened the next.

Rico also made her feel valued. When he had told her how impressed he was with her quick study and her natural abilities, Ruth had been flattered and warmed by his praise. His words had meant more to her than he, or anyone else, would ever know. People saw her as cool, self-confident, even emotionless, but she was none of those things. That image was a façade, a shield she had cultivated in order to function and to hide the doubts and rejections, the disappointments and lack of self-worth that she had experienced for as long as she could remember.

She may not like it, but she recognised that her craving for acceptance, her need to please and to belong, stemmed back to her childhood. And, deep inside, a part of her still yearned for approval, still struggled to be good enough. Her patients were appreciative, her few friends supportive, but it was Rico who had demonstrated the kind of belief in her that she had once longed, forlornly, to receive from her hyper-critical parents.

Rico had accepted her intelligence and had encouraged her to push herself, challenging her over the past month with the questions he had posed in his emails. She had been fascinated and had spent any spare time studying the topics he had raised—much to the despair of Gina and Holly, who had literally dragged her out with them on several occasions, claiming she would burn out if she didn't have some fun time. What they couldn't understand was that she thrived on learning and stretching her mind. Rico's emails had invigorated her. In person he was so much more.

As the taxi driver engaged Rico in conversation, Ruth leaned back and reviewed the way the day had unfolded after the morning coffee break. It was hard to believe that she had only met this man in person ten hours ago. She still knew little about him, and yet she felt as if she had known him forever.

When the morning session of talks had ended, Rico had rejoined her, staying close and making sure to sit next to her at lunch. He had introduced her to the people at their table, and to many others during the afternoon, especially those whose work he thought would interest her.

Rico's workshop had been incredible, and although he had often singled her out with testing questions, she hadn't felt awkward, and his obvious approval when she had got things right had made her feel good. As he'd walked around the room, talking, questioning, presenting examples, his brief but frequent touches as he passed her—a hand resting on her shoulder or her head—had seemed to be instinctive, unconscious gestures, and always discreet, out of sight of the other people present. They increased her awareness of him but also gave her the novel feeling of being special and cared for. It had been a heady experience and she feared it would be all too easy to lose her head over this man.

He was very protective and whilst he made her feel incredibly safe, she also knew the very real danger he posed. Aside from his stunning looks, his presence and his masculinity, she was drawn to his intelligence and his humour. And his voice had a crazy effect on her. It couldn't just be his accent, Ruth mused. There were two Italian doctors living and working in or around Strathlochan—Gina's fiancé, who worked with her at the drop-in centre, and Nic di Angelis, a GP from the practice in Lochanrig, one of the neighbouring villages. Both were handsome and charming men, and Ruth was comfortable with them, but neither affected her in the slightest. Not that way. No man ever had. Except Rico.

Ruth was roused from her reverie when the man in question rested one hand on her knee. The touch was light and yet it burned her like a brand, sparking a fresh wave of desire, flames of it flaring through her whole body. The magnetic pull was too strong to resist and she looked at him, feeling the now-familiar jolt as their gazes connected. A slow smile curved his mouth, tightening the ache deep inside her.

'You are all right, *carissima*?'

Ruth wasn't at all sure she was, but she managed a shaky smile in return. 'I'm fine.'

'We are here,' Rico told her, and she realised she had been so engrossed in her thoughts that she had not noticed that the taxi had stopped.

Rico opened the door and climbed out, taking her hand again when she joined him on the pavement. Having thanked and paid the taxi driver, they walked a few yards along the seafront, enjoying the early evening sun glinting off the expanse of the bay.

‘Were we followed, Agent Linardi?’ she murmured, pretending to look around and continuing their charade.

A sexy smile curved Rico’s mouth. ‘I think we have given them the slip for now, Agent Baxter. We can discuss our secret mission while we eat.’

Inside, the restaurant was inviting and warm, with muted lighting, soft background music and a welcoming ambiance. Ruth appreciated Rico’s innate good manners as he helped her off with her coat before removing his jacket. He rested a hand on her hip, keeping her close to him. So close she felt his body heat and was aware of and aroused by his heady, masculine scent.

‘One of the hotel staff recommended this place,’ Rico told her when they had been shown to an alarmingly intimate and secluded table in a quiet corner at the back of the restaurant.

Ruth manufactured a scandalised expression. ‘You compromised our mission?’

‘Do not worry.’ Rico leaned closer, his voice dropping. ‘My informant will not give us away.’

The return of the waiter with menus and a basket of bread sticks curtailed further silliness, and Ruth sat back to assess the selection of dishes available.

‘If the food is not to your taste, we can go somewhere else,’ Rico offered, reverting to his normal voice.

Ruth shook her head. ‘No, this is lovely,’ she assured him, her mouth watering as she made her choice from the menu.

She liked the fact that Rico asked her opinion. Even when she had asked him not to, Adam had always arrogantly ordered for them both when they had gone out, and she had hated that. Not only had she been perfectly able to make decisions for herself, but he had invariably picked things she did not enjoy and had then had the effrontery to take umbrage if she had not liked something or had asked to change it. Rico, by contrast, treated her with respect, and as an equal,

They sat at the small, attractively set table, out of sight of the other diners in the restaurant. Rico was at right angles to her and so close that his leg brushed against hers. His hand toyed with her fingers or rested on the back of her chair, touching her shoulder, her neck, stroking her hair, and the attention was flattering but overwhelming, keeping her on a knife-edge.

After discussing the food and wine, and discovering that they had similar tastes, they gave their orders to the waiter. Ruth felt relaxed and able to talk to Rico about anything. And he made her laugh as no other man had done. He showed no sign that he found her brains intimidating, something she had encountered so often in the past. It was a refreshing experience and eased some of her tension. Not that she could ever forget or escape the awareness that increased each minute she spent with him. The sexual desire was unfamiliar, scary, yet undeniably exciting. She was completely out of her depth and the only life raft she could cling to was Rico himself—the very cause of her venturing into uncharted waters in the first place.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘SO, ARE you a want-to-be female James Bond?’ Rico asked when their starters arrived, delighted by the way Ruth had revealed her sense of fun and had played along, turning their escape from the hotel into a game.

Savouring her brown shrimps—which she had told him were a Morecambe Bay speciality—served with hot, buttered, granary toast, Ruth smiled, lighting up their secluded corner of the restaurant. ‘Not really. I’m more a closet Miss Marple.’

‘Really?’ She never ceased to surprise him. ‘You like whodunits?’

‘I love crime fiction in general. There are many excellent modern writers, but some of my favourites are the older ones like the Father Brown books by G. K. Chesterton and pretty much everything by Agatha Christie,’ she elaborated, her enthusiasm evident by the sparkle in her eyes and the tone of her voice. ‘Poirot is great, but it was always Miss Marple who appealed to me the most.’

‘I bet you have identified the culprit long before the end,’ he teased, smiling as a tinge of colour warmed her cheeks and confirmed his suspicion.

‘Sometimes.’

Her admission made him chuckle. ‘It’s that amazing mind of yours. And perfect for immunology which, as I told you earlier, often involves detective work. You are a natural,’ he added, appreciating her smile, her quick wit...everything about her.

‘How about you?’ she asked. ‘Did you long to be 007?’

‘No, not really. I wanted to be Dirk Pitt,’ he confided, naming the well-known lead character from his favourite series of adventure books.

The conversation broadened to other genres of book, and then to movies and music. Enjoying every moment in Ruth’s company, Rico took a drink of his wine. He’d nearly been driven to his knees when she had opened her hotel-room door and he’d had his first sight of her in her chic black dress. He had wanted nothing more than to kick the door shut behind him, sweep her into his arms and make love to her all night. She was the most beautiful, sensual, incredible woman he had ever met. And she didn’t know it. She had no idea of her power over him, no clue that he was putty in her hands.

Her starter finished, Ruth lightly dabbed rosy lips with her napkin, and his gaze focused on her irresistible mouth. His gut tightened and a fresh wave of desire crashed over him. He longed to taste the sweetness of her and to feel the softness of those lips against his. Meeting her gaze, aware that his hunger for her must be showing in his eyes, he watched the veil of shyness and confusion slide down between them as the fun, sparkly Ruth retreated.

There were so many layers to her personality. Yes, she was beautiful to look at, but it was so much more than her looks that attracted him. He adored everything about her. Her intelligence and quick mind challenged him, her beauty made him weak, her compassion moved him, her skills as a caring doctor impressed him, while her humour and laughter warmed his heart.

He could talk to Ruth about anything. As he already knew from their emails, she was knowledgeable and had her own opinions on things, but she was also open-minded, prepared to consider an issue from another point of view, unafraid to admit it if she subsequently felt she was wrong. Meeting her in person had revealed that they shared many tastes in everyday things but also had similar values on matters of wider and deeper importance.

As their starter plates were cleared away and their main courses set in front of them, he could not stop looking at Ruth. Her eyes captivated him. Framed by long, dusky lashes, they were a bewitching sage green with a narrow dark outer ring around the irises. He wanted to know why his comment about their colour had drawn such a surprising reaction from her...as if he had been criticising, finding fault, proclaiming her less in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. But the flash of

hurt had been genuine and was one of several hints he had gleaned, both from her emails and in the first hours since meeting her, that she had remarkably little confidence in herself as a woman.

Suspicion grew that someone at some time had taken a sledgehammer to her self-esteem and as a result she hid behind her work. She was a superb doctor and he guessed she felt safe and assured in that role, but take that façade away and her confidence ebbed. He wanted to know who had done that to her...and when. And then he wanted to cut away the invisible bonds that held her back from all she could be and watch her bloom and grow and live life to the full. With him.

In the last few years, work had taken precedence in his life. He'd had fun in his youth and as a medical student, knowing full well that most of the women who'd come on to him were interested more in the Linardi name and family money than they were in him as a person. It hadn't mattered because he had always kept everything light-hearted. Unlike his cousin Seb Adriani, he'd never been burned and hurt by a woman. And he had made sure that he never left any broken hearts behind him, either. But he had never lived with a woman, or been involved in a serious relationship and, in his thirty-four years, he had never met a woman who had made him want to embark on one.

Until now. Until Ruth...who had tilted his world on its axis and changed his life.

Both his father and Seb—who was more a brother to him than a cousin—talked of how they had known the moment they had met the right woman. It was something Rico teased them about but which he respected and envied, knowing that it had never happened to him. Today that thunderbolt of knowledge and desire had hit him full on when he had seen Ruth. Now, for the first time, Rico believed that he, too, could know that loving togetherness.

The food was excellent, but Rico was too wrapped up in Ruth to give much thought to his meal. 'What other hobbies and interests do you have away from work?' he asked, eager to know every little detail about her.

'I don't have a lot of free time,' she admitted, nearly giving him heart failure as her tongue-tip peeped out to wipe a spot of sauce from her lower lip. *Dio!* He tried to clear the sudden restriction in his throat and struggled to concentrate on what she was saying. Not easy given the rush of desire and his body's inevitable response. 'I volunteer a few hours each month at a local clinic for homeless people and others, such as migrants, who are without access to regular health care. And, when my hours allow, I volunteer at the animal rescue centre.'

Doing things for others rather than herself, Rico noted, not at all surprised. 'What about time just for you?'

'My friends and I go out to the cinema or for a meal, and we'll often have a girls' night in, relaxing with a bottle of wine, all talking at once, and eating far too much chocolate,' she added with a bewitching chuckle. 'I'm not very sporty, but I like to swim...and go for long walks. Most of all, I enjoy learning new things.'

'Do you have pets of your own?' Rico asked, captivated by her, and barely tasting his meal of fresh local fish.

'No. Although I've always wanted to.' She took a sip of her wine, then set down her glass, her slender fingers toying with the stem. 'I was never allowed pets when I was young, I...'

Rico watched her, silently urging her to continue, sensing a moment of inner turmoil as a shadow clouded her eyes. Her words concerned him and made him wonder about her childhood. Had it not been a happy one? Before he could find a way to ask that would not have her retreating from him even further, she gave an imperceptible shake of her head and the moment was gone.

'With the hours I work, it isn't practical at the moment, but hopefully that will change one day. Until then I get to babysit my friends' animals when they are away, and enjoy the ones at the rescue centre. I sometimes wonder if maybe I should have been a vet.'

There was humour in her words but also the edge of something else. Something dark and sad. There was so much more to learn about her and her life, and they had not yet begun to talk about

work and whether she would be interested in a change of direction in her career. He had asked her to come here because he had wanted to offer her a job...having met her, he wanted so much more.

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