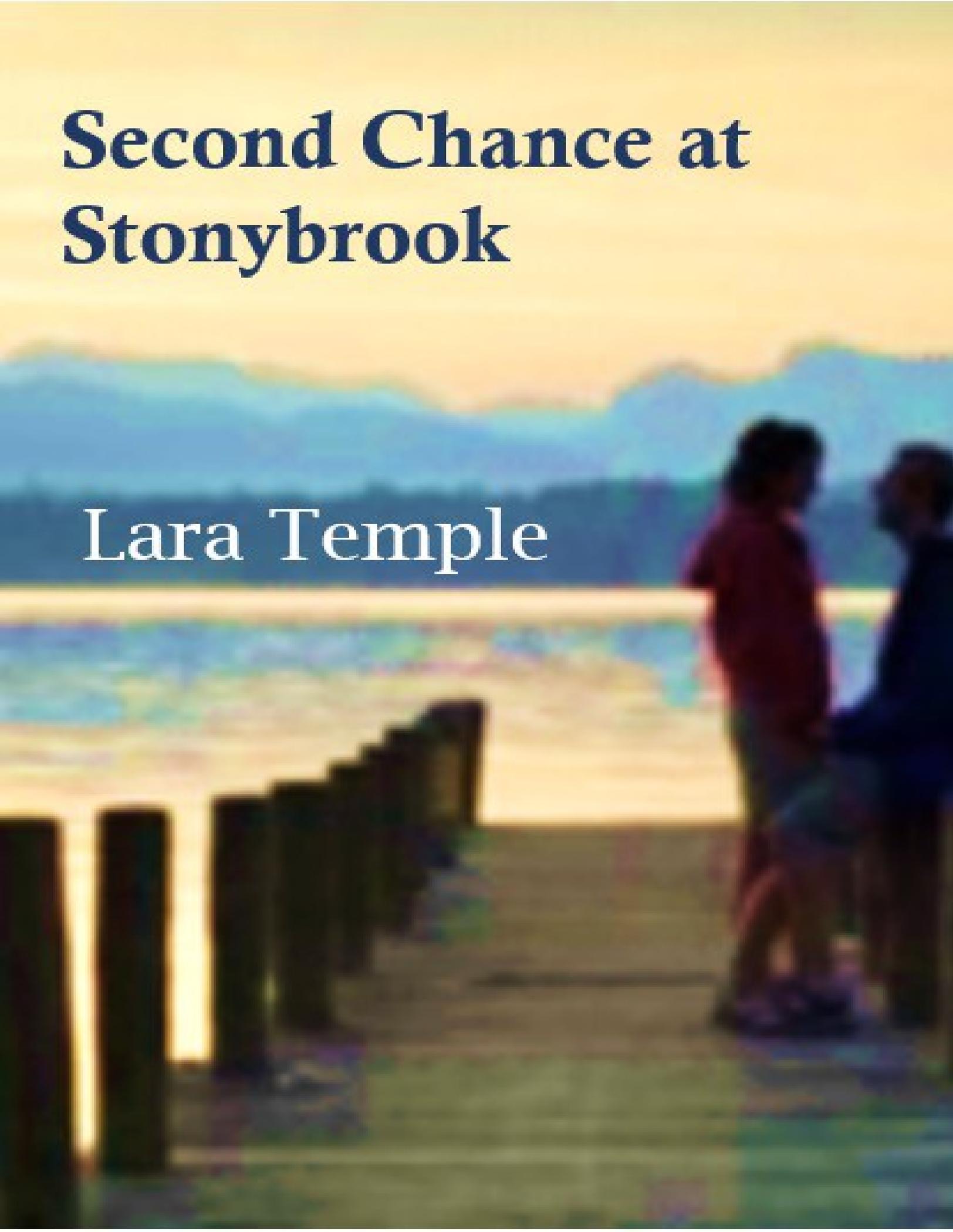


Second Chance at Stonybrook

Lara Temple



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CHAPTER 1:

Stonybrook. Finally.

She'd forgotten what climbing uphill with a full backpack felt like.

Too much city living. Or as her mother put it: *'Riding your bike to work through London isn't what I'd call proper exercise, Sophie!'*

'Maybe not, but it makes for excellent survival skills,' Sophie shot back as her mother continued packing for her latest jaunt to...where were they going this time? Belize? No...Chile – for the spring flowering in the Atacama Desert.

Well, she'd have her own lovely spring flowering in the Lake District soon enough – the ferns would turn cartoon green, purple foxgloves would spear the sky, and Ellen's garden would burst into a rainbow chorus. Though right now the world looked a little brown and wilted at the edges under the threatening clouds. She'd forgotten that spring in the Lake District could be distinctly winterish.

She laughed out loud at her mental griping, and raised her face to the grumbling.

'Do your worst, clouds! I have three weeks, my laptop, and plenty of chocolate. You don't scare me!'

Past the hills the clouds shimmered with lightning and cooled again, and she counted the seconds until thunder cracked. Much closer this time. Well, that was fine with her, she loved a good storm.

Before the thought even settled, the rain began in earnest and she ran the last few yards through the deluge, fumbling in her pocket for the key she'd picked up from Ellen and Peter's London flat.

The door bounced open against the entrance wall under the force of her enthusiastic entry. It was even darker inside than out and she let her backpack slide to the floor with a moan of relief.

'What the hell?' A harsh voice erupted from the darkness and she turned with a muffled shriek as an enormous, glistening, and near-naked body came towards her like something rising out of the shadows of hell.

Her heartbeat was already through the roof thanks to her uphill run with several stone of weight on her back, but it clearly had a great deal of room to accelerate. She instinctively clasped the keys between her fingers as she used to when walking home late through some of the places her journalistic assignments took her. She knew the limits of such a defense against a truly determined attacker, but amazingly it stopped the man in his tracks, his gaze on her outstretched hand. Then he looked up and what was left of her breath whooshed out of her in a strange hiss.

She didn't believe in angels and devils, or in practically anything, but if she had she could imagine the devil would look like this. No, one of those fallen angels, dark and beautiful as sin. Except this one was painfully familiar.

She also realized why he was glistening. He was wet. His hair, raven wing dark, was dripping, the water was running down his chest. A fallen angel's chest, tightly muscled and complete with a jagged scar from his

shoulder almost to one dark male nipple.

Her mind was still in lock down but her fingers tingled with the memory of tracing that scar. They'd travelled along it gently, a little afraid of that sign of his vulnerability. She could even hear his voice again, the smile in it.

'It looks worse than it is – I fell from a tree as a kid, that's all.'

The room lit suddenly, briefly, and the crack of thunder was almost immediate. The storm had covered the last miles with amazing rapidity; either that or she'd been frozen in place with shock for much longer than she realized.

'Adam.'

'What the hell?' He said it differently this time – a different kind of shock. 'Sophie.'

Eight years.

He'd changed.

Still beautiful, though, damn him.

What the hell was Adam Tarrant doing at Stonybrook?

Near naked.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'I think that's my question. I have a key.'

He wrenched his eyes from her face to fix on the key she was still holding outstretched and the faintest glimmer of amusement softened his harsh features.

'So I see. Was that supposed to scare me away?'

'One doesn't need a key to scare you away, Adam. There are much easier ways.'

The amusement leached away, and the statue was back. He looked her up and down.

'You're wet.'

'So are you.'

She shouldn't have said that – because she couldn't resist looking him up and down as well. She breathed in, drawing several calming breaths, but that only gave her time to inspect him further, trying to compare him to the Adam she'd known.

It was shocking how well she remembered his body, her mind immediately pointing out the differences – he looked even more powerful now or perhaps that was the darkness and the aftermath of shock. He must have just been in the shower when she barged in because he was still clutching a damp towel in one hand and his black boxer shorts were molding over his hips like a second skin.

Her mind, always graphic, presented her with the image full born – Adam under a stream of hot water, head back, his sculpted face raised, water cascading along the line of his jaw, drawing the fine silk hair on his

chest into an arrow to guide her gaze lower...

He dragged a hand through his wet hair and a trickle of water ran down his chest. She felt her own cold clothes on her suddenly, but only because her skin was tingling, a strange sensation – like it was trying to separate itself from her.

For heaven's sake, she must be oxygen deprived. She searched for something sensible to say or do but he spoke first.

'How did you get a key?'

She closed her eyes, centering herself. For a moment she couldn't even come up with the answer. Then the world started righting itself again.

'Ellen said I could stay at Stonybrook for the a few weeks. What are *you* doing here?' She demanded, deciding to move on the offensive.

'As of last week Stonybrook, including that key you are brandishing so futilely, is mine. Peter sold it to me.'

'How...' she didn't finish the question. Lightning burst again, turning Lucifer into a landscape of silver and black again, and she swallowed. Her fear came back, but it was different this time, deeper, almost a premonition.

He wiped one hand across his forehead, brushing aside the moisture coiling down from his wet hair.

'Look, Sophie. We're both soaked and I'm freezing so I suppose you are too. I remember Peter saying you and your brothers were here as kids. Do you still know your way around the cottage?'

She nodded.

'Then make yourself useful and put a kettle on for tea. I'm going to dress then we'll figure out what to do with you.'

He turned before she could even react to that provocation and she watched as he headed up the stairs. He was as beautiful from behind as he was head on. She watched as lines and curves formed along his legs and buttocks as he climbed.

She couldn't cope with any of this. The only thing that made sense was the mention of tea so she pushed everything else aside and headed for the familiar kitchen.

CHAPTER 2:

'You should change as well. Your hair is wet.' Adam said behind her.

The rising sibilance of the electric kettle masked his steps, but at least this time she was prepared. She didn't turn, just glanced over her shoulder as she poured the boiling water into the teapot.

'Tea first. Do you like it strong?'

A completely innocent question, but her voice almost trailed off by the end of it and she nudged her knee against the counter. She was acting like a complete idiot!

'Strong and hot.' The words were flat but they shot up her legs like an electrical current from the tiled floor. He was directly behind her now and he reached out. She watched his hand, the hand of a renaissance statue, long firm lines, close on the cup handle.

'Is this mine?' he didn't move immediately and the half of her body bracketed by his closeness was tingling, heavier, weighing her towards him. She felt an almost bizarre fascination by this almost forgotten behavior of her flesh, her nerves, everything that for years had been part of a fairly obedient conglomeration of cells she called her body. How was it possible for her own body to be subverted again in seconds?

'Yes, it's yours.' Even her mind was joining in the fun, layering meaning on everything where no meaning existed.

'Thank you, Sophie.'

She blinked at the sound of her name. There was nothing seductive in it, but the memories of how he'd once spoken her name were enough to hit her hard. She suspected that if he read the ingredients on a can of beans at the moment she would be hit just as hard. Idiot.

'Since when do you own Stonybrook and why on earth would Ellen tell me I was welcome to the cottage for three weeks if you'd already bought it?' she asked, picking up her own cup and turning, forcing him to move back.

For a moment it wasn't clear if he would answer. His eyes were deep set and though they looked black at first glance, as would suit Lucifer, they were a dark grey, between slate and the color of the storm clouds before they broke.

This close she could see he'd changed – there were fine lines fanning out beside his eyes which might have been laugh lines or more likely because he was accustomed to narrowing his eyes at people as he was at her right now. But then he was thirty-eight now.

'I bought it last month from my uncle. And I have no idea why Ellen gave you a key. Maybe she thought I wouldn't be coming here yet or maybe she's angry at Peter for selling. Ask her.'

He was still too close and her heated blood followed the trail of his eyes as they moved over her face and downwards. She could almost imagine it, like a cartoon depiction of avid blood cells chasing the path of his

gaze like lovesick damsels. Ludicrous.

'What's so funny?' he asked, turning to sit down by the large wooden table. He wore dark jeans and a black tee-shirt but he still didn't look any less dangerous than he had naked. She picked up the plate of croissants she'd bought in Windermere and sat down as well.

It was the same rough wooden table she remembered from over a decade ago, and beyond it were the windows with the view down to the small pond, but they were shuttered now. How could Peter have sold Stonybrook? And how had Ellen not told her? She might be seventy but she was as sharp as a pin. First opportunity she got she'd have a little talk with her aunt.

'Not much at the moment,' she replied. 'I can't believe Peter sold Stonybrook.'

'Since Peter and Ellen spend most of their time in Ibiza, I'm surprised you're surprised.'

'I know that, but...'. She shook her head and froze as he reached out and caught a strand of her hair.

'You're still wet. You should change. I turned the heating on when I arrived, but it will take a while to raise the temperature in here.'

The shiver that worked down her body had nothing to do with the cold. If anything she was too hot, the tea working its way down as the fireball of heat and damp gathered force between her legs.

Even taking into account their past, this kind of conflagration just wasn't normal for her. Perhaps she *had* been struck by lightning without realizing it and this was a form of shock. Serious Sophie didn't hover on the brink of melting simply because a man touched her hair, not even if that man was Adam.

She leaned back and her hair fell to her shoulder.

'I'll change in a moment. Tea is always a priority.'

She looked away from his smile. There was a limit what she could cope with right now. In a few moments the tea and sugar and milk would work their wonders and the universe would steady again.

Adam.

Tea.

She sipped, savoring the familiarity of her favorite brand of Earl Grey. She should have let it brew longer but she needed comfort more than she needed caffeine.

'You hiked up? From where?' he nodded at her open backpack leaning by the door to the mudroom.

'Grasmere.'

'Well, you can't walk down in the dark in the middle of the thunderstorm and I'm sure as hell not driving another mile today. You can stay in the guest room tonight and tomorrow I'll drive you into town. It was bloody foolish to hike up with the weather turning like that. Though knowing you, I'm not surprised.'

It seemed in keeping with his brusque manner to end this reasonable statement with an insult and she considered various possible responses and dismissed them. He was probably as annoyed as she by the situation.

She thought with regret of her plans for an isolated retreat. She could always find a room in Grasmere but it wasn't the same. She looked around the kitchen and sighed.

'Trying to make me feel guilty?' he asked.

'I happen to know your capacity for guilt isn't highly developed, and I don't waste time on futile objectives.'

He added tea from the pot, his storm cloud eyes narrowing in a smile that was anything but amused.

'You always had a way with words, Sophie. Are you hungry?'

'Starving. I brought my own food so I won't impose on your hospitality more than necessary.'

'Don't be silly. I put in an order on the way up, there is plenty of food. I don't remember you used to talk like a prim and proper schoolteacher.'

'I only do it when I'm trying to politely convey dislike.'

'Of me, of the situation, or of your aunt who landed you in it?'

The gloves were coming off and she was glad. Annoyance was an excellent antidote for her dazed physical state. He might be as sexy as sin but she knew all too well what a bastard he was.

'Of life, the universe, and pretty much everything at the moment.' She could have added, mostly of myself because bastard or not, I'm alright in a way I'd forgotten was possible.

He laughed. 'I'd forgotten you quote Hitchhiker and Princess Bride when annoyed.'

She went to the refrigerator so she could put some distance between herself and his smile.

Sometimes, especially that first year after she returned from Brazil, she'd give in to the urge to google him. He might be wary of the press but there were plenty of photos of him – he avoided the gossip rags but there were the unavoidable conference photos or business publications discussing the latest investments made by Tarrant Holdings and occasionally, the worst, there would be an informal photo of him at one of the overseas projects, dressed as casually as she remembered, his hands in his pockets as he listened to someone or his profile as he looked out over one of the sites.

But she'd never seen him smile in these photos. Which was strange because she remembered him smiling often with her. At her.

Now she was glad there hadn't been any photo of him smiling because she'd probably have used it as a screen saver.

She turned away from her treacherous thoughts and went to the refrigerator. Here at least he'd spoken the truth – he'd done some thorough shopping. She scanned the salad and curries and cheeses, her mouth watering and her mind escaping into the mundane. Compared with the carefully wrapped eggs and bread and butter in her backpack he had the makings of a feast. And there was also a bottle of...oh, my heaven...she picked up the bottle of Mithra Cabernet and gawked before replacing it with regret and an internal promise that if she could manage it she would have him open this bottle, even if she had to seduce him again...she shivered and he stood up.

'Go shower and change. I'll prepare something.'

'There is no need for you to cook for me, Adam.'

'I have to cook for myself anyway and as you can see there is plenty. Go change.'

He stood just a couple feet from her, much too tall and broad, and the heat began again, curling outwards like smoke from a genie's lamp, down to her loins which had clearly not really become quiescent, just waiting, and up, over her breasts, raising her nipples hard against her damp shirt, climbing her neck and cheeks like a virulent vine.

The lightning saved her, dimmed the lights for a second and flicked them back on and she forced herself to move towards the safety of the hallway.

CHAPTER 3:

At the sound of the bathroom door closing upstairs Adam finally moved.

He opened the refrigerator again and took out the bottle she'd inspected.

Trust Sophie to go for the jugular – in her attacks and in her choice of wine.

Well, actually he *was* a little surprised. The Sophie he remembered had very modest tastes. But then he'd known her before she became a successful journalist and non-fiction author.

It was pure back luck he'd met her then, too. The experienced journalist writing a series of articles about the challenges of balancing large-scale construction projects with environmental concerns broke her leg, and the newspaper asked to send a promising young journalist out to the Brazil project in her stead. Adam was about to turn them down when he recognized Sophie's name as Peter and Ellen's niece, the daughter of Ellen's wild child sister. He also remembered they'd proudly showed him a couple of Sophie's articles when he'd last seen them at Stonybrook. The articles were surprisingly good and balanced for such a young woman, so for Peter and Ellen's sake he'd decided to give her a chance after all.

And made the biggest mistake of his life.

That day almost exactly eight years ago was carved into his mind. How she'd jumped out of the jeep the project site, her boots sinking into the mud. She'd looked down and laughed, squelching forward towards then and stumbling through her greetings in Portuguese. She'd charmed his project managers with her admission she'd tried to learn the language on the plane, begging them to forgive her for massacring it.

Then she turned to him, her hand extended and her smile wavering a little.

'I thought you'd look like Peter.'

He took her hand and almost let it go as a surge of heat spread upwards like a contagion.

He managed to ignore the aberration and smile back. 'I take after my mother's family. They're from Florence.'

Her eyes turned dreamy, the gold flecks standing out brightly.

'I love Florence. I once stayed at a campsite near those wonderful steps where you can watch the sunset turn the city into a peach and pink masterpiece. I wish I could sit there and watch the world change every night.'

He knew precisely the place she meant. With some trick of his mind he felt he was there beside her – watching her vivid face absorb the sight, the city, the world. And in his mind he reached out and turned her to him and kissed her.

It was so out of character for him he shut it out. For a whole week he managed to think about her as nothing other than a bright and demanding journalist and a distant relation. Until the Friday he'd gone to Rio and very foolishly invited her along. He and his project manager had a meeting with an environmentalist there and he'd hated leaving her alone in Minas. He told himself it was just a courtesy to Peter and Ellen, a

chance for her to explore Rio on her own, he'd even ensured she was booked into a different hotel. But he'd taken her to the meeting and on the way back they'd walked for miles along the beaches, talking as if they'd known each other all their lives.

When they reached Copacabana beach he he'd suggested stopping for something to eat at his hotel. She'd been charmed with the Copacabana Palace's 1920s grandeur and after dinner they stood on the Verandah look across the beach at the sugar loaf hills bursting out of the sea.

Then she'd sighed and turned to him with the smile that was beginning to plague his dreams.

'Thank you for this. It's been a lovely day.'

And he realized he didn't want her to leave.

Not just that he wanted to take her up to his suite, strip her from her simple cotton shirt and skirt and taste every inch of her, make love to her in full sight of the Atlantic Ocean beating and breathing beyond the verandah.

Sex and lust he could cope with. Had coped with often enough in his thirty years.

This had to do with something that until that second he'd been convinced didn't...couldn't exist.

In thirty years he hadn't been in love once. He'd been convinced it just wasn't part of his makeup and that suited him fine. He would love the children he planned to have and he would care for the wife who shared that family with him and that was more than enough.

The young woman standing on the verandah – with her mercurial mind and that swift, warm smile that never quite hid a set of emotional armour he recognized as impressive as any he'd developed, despite her age – what he suddenly and blazingly felt just looking at her didn't make sense in his world. It was something foreign and threatening, like a tropical fever; so far outside his controlled life he wanted nothing at all to do with it.

So he'd made his plans to wrap up his stay in Brazil and leave her to the perfectly adequate care of his project manager.

But two days later he was still at the site, and when she made the first move only two days later he'd made the second, third...and final move.

Adam took down two wineglasses, placing them side by side on the counter with more force than necessary.

He'd never expected to see Sophie again after that strange, intense interlude eight years ago. Certainly not for her to barge into his newly purchased hideaway, looking half drowned and brandishing a key at him.

And then came recognition – his mind and body pushing everything out of the way as if those eight years were nothing but a blip.

He hadn't been able to account for her power over him then, and he still couldn't. She wasn't beautiful, and except for her eyes there was nothing that would account for the pummeling of lust that hit over him like a rockfall him as his eyes moved from the outstretched key, up her arm, past the wet cotton molded over the

curve of her shoulder and up to meet the most incredible eyes he'd ever seen.

He wasn't quite certain what it was about them, possibly the color, between honey and warm wood and with clear flecks of gold and jade and fringed with thick, dark lashes that were also touched with gold at the tips, as if they were smiling as well. They were the eyes from a renaissance painting of a Venetian courtesan – lush, mysterious and full of promise. Her mouth was just as lush and full of promise, though her thinner upper lip should have warned him she had a will of steel. Her voice – that cross between a schoolteacher and an English Marilyn Monroe – held the same unsettling mix of invitation and warning.

He'd felt both. Hard.

He shook his head as his mind played out that aberrant moment again. It didn't really matter. He would feed her and kick her out in the morning. That was the sum total of it.

He was too old for the kind of mercurial story they'd played out in Brazil – it had been heaven, then it had been hell, and then left him in purgatory for far too long. And now it belonged to the past.

He turned to inspect the contents of the refrigerator. She was starving, she had said. It wasn't the words but the expression in the honey gold eyes that had flicked him on the raw – hot and dreamy like that first day in Minas as she went inwards to see Florence again, as if she could already see a feast laid out...

Starving...

Well so was he, and not for food.

This is a very bad idea, Adam.

He leaned his hand on the cool metallic surface of the refrigerator, willing his erection down but it was developing a mind of his own from the moment he came downstairs and saw her brandishing a key at him.

If he had an ounce of sense, he would bundle her into the Landrover and take her to the Wordsworth in Grasmere. Instead he was proposing to share his dinner with a woman who's only recommendations were a pair of incredible hazel eyes, a sinner's mouth and a killer voice.

The only woman he'd ever been fool enough to fall in love with.

He was definitely too old for this. They would have dinner, avoid talking about the past, each go to their own room and tomorrow morning he would drive her to Grasmere and that would be that.

Then, slowly, methodically, he began preparing a feast.

CHAPTER 4:

Sophie looked out the kitchen window onto the early morning sky which was a squeaky-clean blue after the overnight storm. Everything looked better with a cup of tea, even the morning after the most uncomfortable night she'd spent in years and years.

In eight years.

She breathed in and turned away from the lovely sight, only to half choke on her indrawn breath. She hadn't heard Adam enter the kitchen and though she'd meant to be prepared, a stinging wave of awareness rushed through her once more before she managed to calm it and smile politely.

'It looks like spring might be here after all.'

'There's another storm due this afternoon. A big one,' Adam said as she walked past her to pour tea from the pot. He'd been polite and gracious during dinner but apparently he wasn't going to waste any more of his quota of good manners on her now that she was about to be kicked out. Resentment chased away her discomfort.

'Good morning to you too, Mr storm-on-my-parade.'

'Just preparing you for disappointment.'

Oh, she was ready for that. That was one of the conclusions of her almost sleepless night.

She'd expected dinner with him to be as uncomfortable as their meeting, but he'd been as diplomatic as she'd decided to be. They'd talked about Peter and Ellen's move to Ibiza, politics, the changes to the Lake District, he'd even asked about her latest book which led to a discussion of history and kept them going until the Mithra was finished and Sophie realized she'd best go to her room before she did an embarrassing repeat of eight years ago by begging him to kiss her.

'Well, then I have to take advantage of this moment of perfection. I'm going up to the tarn.' She spoke swiftly, well aware the next thing he would probably say was remind her it was time for her to leave Stonybrook.

'Now? It's barely seven in the morning.'

'Even better – there won't be any hikers out yet. There's some scrambled eggs and toast in that covered plate over there if you're hungry. My peace offering for invading your privacy and as thanks for that amazing meal last night. I'll leave for Grasmere after that. Unless you'd rather I leave now.'

She hadn't meant to sound sulky but that's how it came out. His mouth quirked and he shook his head as he leaned his hip against the counter, meeting her eyes for the first time. She wished he hadn't. It cost her quite a few calories not to show how much he could still affect her just by looking at her. But then he surprised her.

'Give me ten minutes. I'll go with you.'

'I won't get lost, you know.'

'I meant to go up today anyway. You're right, spring in the Lake District is a fickle entity. I'll take advantage of the sunshine while I can.'

CHAPTER 5:

'Oh.' Sophie breathed as they cleared the mound of rocks that marked the foot of the crag. Beyond them the little lake spread out like a patch of sky fallen to earth. The water was as flat as sheet ice and probably just as cold.

But she didn't care.

The tarn wasn't large and it was tucked cozily between two low peaks. In a couple hours the more intrepid hikers from Grasmere and Ambleside would probably appear but this early they had it to themselves.

'Every time we came here as kids we would go into the water and see who chickened out – we called it baptism by tarn. My brothers will call me a wimp if I don't even try.'

Adam gaped at her, his usually inscrutable face mirroring disbelief as she unlaced her boots.

'What? You can't be serious. It's freezing.'

'I beg your pardon; I can be very serious. My livelihood depends on it.'

All too often all too serious, but not today. She wasn't quite certain what today would bring, but since she already knew she was in trouble after a mere few hours in his company, she didn't have much to lose but her pride and dignity.

She tucked her socks into her hiking boots and stepped off the boulder into the water with a hiss that sent two ducks flapping out of the reeds.

She took another tiny step, her shoulders contracting and her feet gripping at the slippery stones. The cold made her skin skitter and screech in denial, but after that first shock it settled, and she wove her toes in the dark water, sending silvery ripples outward. It was colder than her childhood memories, but it was still there – the quiet, the pure simple joy of it. Even when she'd been miserable about school or her often absent parents, this joy would jump up and grab her.

She closed her eyes and breathed and tried to find that old joy and calm; and ignore the fact that the man who'd robbed her of one and upset the other was standing behind her, as unsettling as ever. She clenched her jaw and stared at the beauty of the peaks before her, wishing she could make him suffer just a little of what he put her through.

CHAPTER 6:

An empathic shiver of cold coursed up Adam's legs as he watched her delicate movements send out ripples along the surface of the tarn. It was a welcome contrast to the persistent heat in his groin that had been climbing along with them all morning. He must have been mad to insist on coming with her.

Well, that was true. It was madness to fall right back into the same pitch of lust as if the last eight years were only eight days. To be thrown right back into the aching nights of longing and the heavy days of regret he'd suffered after sending her away. He'd already been too old for that shit then, but at thirty-eight he should be long past it.

Should be, but here he was staring at her legs, his hands itching to shape themselves over the lush behind he'd been forced to watch march ahead of him up that endless trail. He forced his gaze upwards, battling a wave of dislike for both of them. Baptism by tarn. What kind of idiot did something so...idiotic?

'Two minutes,' he said and she half turned at his comment.

'Two minutes?'

'That's how long you'll last. One minute and a half left.'

She climbed back onto the boulder and he laughed, a little surprised at her capitulation.

'That wasn't even a minute.'

'Pause that timer.' She unzipped her fleece and tugged her T-shirt over her head, revealing a simple sports bra that had a more devastating effect on him than the laciest concoction.

'What are you doing?' he demanded, hating how strangled he sounded.

'Accepting your dare, but I will need dry clothes when I'm done so I had best leave these here.' Balancing on one foot she cast one more glance around the horizon and pulled off her running shorts and turned back into the water now dressed only in her simple cotton panties and sports bra. Adam watched between shock and awe as she moved from the shallows towards the dark grey where the water turned deep.

He must be as mad as she, he thought as he stripped to his boxers in record time, but he could hardly stay on the shore and hope she didn't go into hypothermic shock and sink into the dark waters of the tarn.

He reached her when she was waist deep, pulling on every vestige of male pride not to admit defeat before she did. Amazing to think he had gone scuba diving off Scotland and now a little English lake made him want to turn tail.

He grasped her arm and she turned with surprise and slipped. He caught her before she slid under, just the tips of her hair brushing the surface before he hauled her to him. The shock of her wet skin pressing against his was worse than the shock of the freezing water. But in the split second he had to rethink his move, the burn of fire underneath that cold made him tighten his arms around her, as if to capture it and hold it between them.

Her nipples were erect and hard against his chest and without thinking he sank his fingers into her

buttocks, half raising her out of the water and in the same motion she hooked her legs around him, shivering and clinging to him like a limpet.

'Little madwoman,' he growled against her hair as he moved towards the shore, the contrast of the cold water and the burning heat spreading through him like an illness. 'You owe me. I ought to dunk you.'

'D..don't you d...dare!'

'Don't dare me, Sophie. That alone would tempt me. Oh, God don't do that.'

'What?' she mumbled against the side of his neck, her lips shivering but her breath hot.

'This...!' They'd reached the shore and her legs slithered down his just as he bent to press his mouth against her throat. That was supposed to be it, but he breathed in her scent and all hell broke loose inside him. Maybe he would still have drawn back but shock made her arms close around his neck, holding him there and then he was tasting her – remembering everything, even the texture of her skin. Remembering how sensitive she was just there, how she would shake and tense, caught between pushing him away and holding him there. Remembering her telling him that when he did that she felt it between her legs, as if the nerves were connected directly there, being twanged like a cello – deep and thrumming and breaking her down.

It was like reaching through time, he was back in their bed, still deep inside her but not moving, or only his hand between them and his mouth and tongue on the sensitive skin on the side of her neck, coaxing her towards her second orgasm.

Then he remembered where they were and why this was a terrible idea and reality came back, he raised his head and let her go, grabbing her arms as she wavered.

'Th...thanks for saving me from my stupidity,' she said as she unpeeled herself from him. She was shivering but her cheeks were crimson, and her embarrassment sobered him a little.

'It's not the first time. I had to drag you out of the water in Minas as well.' He grumbled, forcing himself to detach his hands so he could reach for her fleece jacket and drop it over her shoulders. She shrugged into it, her arms fumbling in a bunched up sleeve.

'That's not fair. It wasn't my fault they hadn't secured the beams on the footbridge.'

He didn't answer, just concentrated on dressing though he didn't want to – all he wanted was to drag off her soaked panties and make love to her in the middle of the field as if they were part of a ritual to the hills around them. Something pagan, belonging to this ancient place, to the rawness of nature. His body didn't care they were yards from a public footpath. It wanted her stretched out on the short grass, her hair a honeyed tangle on the green, her pubic hair darker against skin leached of color by the cold.

Memories were bombarding him now. How he'd hauled her out of the stream near the construction site at Minas. It had been much warmer but her skin was chilled by the time they reached his trailer. He'd warmed her, first in the shower, and then on the narrow bed they'd shared more nights than not.

He'd never meant to stay in Minas for more than a week but in the end he'd stayed over a month, putting everything second to the madness that caught him completely off guard.

His mistake, but they'd both paid the price.

The descent to Stonybrook was silent and Adam was grateful. The last thing he needed right now was a dissection of what just happened. In a couple hours she would be on her way and until then he would keep his hands to himself. Meanwhile he would shower, alone, and concentrate on the work he'd brought with him.

He glanced over his shoulder and she looked up from the path, her eyes a shine of honey and moss. He clenched his jaw but the words escaped anyway.

'You can stay at Stonybrook for the weekend. I have work to do so I'll be in the study most of the time anyway. That should give you time to find another arrangement other than a hotel. There are plenty of places around you can lease for a few weeks.'

She lowered her gaze to the path as she answered, as prim and proper as a schoolgirl.

'Thank you, Adam. I appreciate that. It's very generous of you.'

He couldn't tell if there was any irony in her words and he was already regretting his offer. He turned to her and she skittered to a stop, pebbles rushing ahead to bounce against his boots.

'On condition we declare a truce. While you're at Stonybrook you and I are just two distant relations. *Polite* distant relations. Can you do that?'

'I can if you can. Truce.'

She held out her hand and he took it. God, he was an idiot.

'Truce.'

CHAPTER 7:

Truce.

She must have been mad.

She'd been a political correspondent, she knew truces were about as peaceful and could be much more treacherous than spending the night in a wasp's nest.

Externally everything was just lovely. The storm he'd predicted had headed towards Scotland and for two days perfect spring weather reigned supreme. Perfect weather for hiking. They'd hiked again, over to Alcock Tarn though this time she'd stayed clear of the water. They'd shared the sandwiches she'd prepared and been masters of politeness, as if they were precisely what he demanded – distant acquaintances thrown together by circumstances.

Back at Stonybrook they split the house and the chores. He cooked, she washed. He took the upper floor and she the guest bedroom at the back of the house with the door that lead out to the garden where she was curled up now in her fleece blanket with her laptop or a book and a cup of tea. Externally it was the perfect retreat. Internally she was in confused purgatory that would have done a Hieronymus Bosch painting proud.

Tomorrow she would go and see a lovely little guest cottage near Grasmere she'd seen on-line which meant her time at Stonybrook was almost up.

Which was for the best.

Her cellphone buzzed on the low wooden table beside her and she was about to turn it over when she saw who was calling.

She took a breath and answered.

'Hi Ellen.'

There was a moment's hesitation on the other end.

'Sophie? Where are you?'

'Guess.'

'At Stonybrook?'

'Yes.'

'Oh. Alone?'

'I brought my two lovers. And their pet ferrets.'

'What?! Oh, very funny.'

'No funnier than you sending me to a house you don't own, Aunt Ellen.'

Another silence.

'I'm sorry. That was foolish.'

'Very.'

'I've never been good at subtlety. I know something happened between the two of you when you were in Brazil and that it ended badly but I was hoping you could, well...make up. You see, Peter and I want to reaffirm our vows here and Peter is worried about inviting both of you at the same time...'

'Then you should have spoken with me. And him. Not ambushed us.'

'I know. Peter is furious at me. I didn't even tell him until this morning I'd told you to take the key and go up. He's still upset about us interfering all those years ago.'

Sophie sat up straighter.

'What do you mean, *'interfering'*?''

'Oh, dear, me and my big mouth.'

'Ellen!'

'Remember you called from Brazil to wish me happy birthday? Well you sounded so...elated I was worried...under the circumstances. You were so young and we knew he had been planning to marry that Berkeley woman and...well, I told Peter I was worried and he called Adam and...We meant it for the best, Sophie.'

Sophie plucked a blade of grass from her fleece blanket.

She remembered all right.

She and Adam had been in bed together though it was already well into the morning. When the phone rang Adam's initial smiling greeting turned serious and he'd sat up and told Peter he'd call him back. He'd dressed in silence and left the trailer with his phone, and when he'd come back he'd still been silent, his mouth pressed thin.

And that very day he'd told her she had what she needed for her story and that his project manager had arranged for her return to London and then promptly departed himself.

She'd been too shocked to demand an explanation, but it took her two days back in London and the simplest of questions to uncover the truth. A truth she should have learned before she took one step towards his bed. That he had been together with Katherine Berkeley, the CFO of Braden Pharmaceuticals, for three years, and were rumoured to be married soon.

That marriage never took place as far as she knew. Perhaps someone at the site knew what they were doing and told Ms Berkeley. Sophie didn't know whether to feel sorry for the woman or glad she'd helped spare her from a cheating bastard.

When Adam called her after the appearance of her article she'd been polite and business-like. When he asked, as uncharacteristically tentative as a teenager, if they could meet and talk, she recruited every ounce of self-control to be casual and dismissive.

When he called a third time she handed her phone to Sam, a journalist who worked in the adjoining

cubicle, and told him to get rid of Adam. Sam outdid her, making it sound like Adam had caught the two of them in bed as he told Adam to stop harassing his fiancé. And that had been that.

Until she walked into Stonybrook one sullen spring day and had her world turned on its head. Again.

Sophie closed her eyes. She could almost feel Ellen's worry reach through the ether in waves.

'I know you did, Ellen. Don't worry. We've declared a truce and he's letting me stay until I find another place, and tomorrow I'm going to look at a little cottage near Grasmere.'

'I'm so sorry, Sophie. Peter was right. Sometimes I'm like a sledgehammer.'

Sophie calmed her, turning the discussion to Ibiza and by the time they hung up Ellen was much more cheerful and Sophie felt like she was neck deep in mud. She closed her book and went into her room and lay down on her bed. All she could think was that Adam was upstairs, probably bent over some project papers for another multi-billion-dollar development, that crease between his brows deeper, his beautifully carved lips pressed together in concentration. In another life she would touch her mouth to his, feel it soften, warm against hers...

Oh, hell, hell, hell.

If she had an ounce of brains she'd pack and leave now. If she had an ounce of guts she'd stalk upstairs and demand he do something about this...this...

She tucking the fleece blanket about her and closed her eyes. She was exhausted and depressed and yet still more alive than she'd felt in so, so long. She didn't want to leave tomorrow. She didn't want to leave. Ever.

It wasn't fair.

CHAPTER 8:

She woke with a start. She must have slept longer than she thought because it was dark. Not just with the fall of evening but the heaviness of rainclouds letting loose their fury on the world. A spear of lightning brought the room into brief focus before darkness fell again, even more heavily.

Adam's predicted storm had finally arrived, and with a vengeance.

She glanced at the clock. It was only six o'clock but it felt like midnight. And she was hungry. She should go and see if Mr Sexy Cheat would like to prepare some dinner for her. She might as well make him pay for his sins in the only ways open to her.

The kitchen was empty and she went upstairs. But here too there was no sign of light from any of the rooms and for a panicked moment she wondered if he'd tired of having her underfoot and decided to leave. No, not Adam. It wasn't his style. More likely he went to town to shop.

She went down the hallway to what had once been a sitting room from which she could probably see the driveway, but when she opened the door a burst of lightning illuminated the world as a monstrous silver vein streaked from sky to earth, raising mountains and turning the pond at the bottom of the garden into a disc of mercury. Then it was gone in a crack and rumble that shook the windows.

In the aftermath the black was even darker and she had the oddest sensation of being suspended in space, weightless. She was so enthralled at the magnificence of the spectacle it took her a second to register the movement in the room. But when darkness shaped out of darkness, moving towards her, she stumbled backwards, slamming into the doorjamb and gave a yelp of pain.

'Sophie. It's only me. Are you hurt?'

His hand grasped hers, pulling her into the room, his other hand reaching up to brush over her head. 'Did you hit your head?'

Her head wanted so desperately to lean into that soft slide of his fingers over her hair but she held still.

'No. My shoulder. I'm fine. Why are you here in the dark?'

'That's why.' He turned his head towards the ceiling high glass windows just in time for the next act. Lightning erupted, a jagged tearing of the dark into a cameo profile of a world and thunder came almost as quickly. She forgot her discomfort for a moment and moved towards the windows, unaware she was pulling him with her.

'These windows weren't here when I was a child.'

'I had them put in when I bought the place and the skylight.'

She glanced up and realized why she'd felt suspended in space. He's replaced half the ceiling with a slanting sheet of glass.'

'Oh. It's...amazing! Oh, look!'

This time she was prepared for the spectacular burst of light, but still her hand tightened around his like a child at a firework display.

'I told you the storm would be back.' He said as the crack of thunder settled into a grumble.

'Now it not the time to say I told you so, Adam.' She laughed, forgetting everything for a moment in sheer pleasure at nature's magnificence. Again lightning struck and she rose a little on tiptoe.

'It's like Night on Bald Mountain.'

'I forgot how much you like storms.'

She didn't answer, couldn't. She knew precisely what he was remembering.

Running down the muddy road in the deluge that broke over their heads the day after their return from Rio. Him pulling her into his trailer because hers was on the other side of the compound. It was much larger than hers – a whole two rooms and tall enough to accommodate his six foot three height. They'd stood there streaming rain and laughing and he'd convinced her to take off her wet and muddy clothes and put on a shirt and blanket of his while they waited for the tropical storm to ease.

He'd had his back to her but she felt him as if *he* was undressing her, her skin cold but on fire. Then he'd made her tea and she'd been so nervous she spilled some on her hand and he'd taken her hand and put it under running water and as they stood side by side at the sink, his body warm beside hers, she'd lost all her veneer of sophistication and descended to being just twenty-four-year-old Sophie, just two years out of graduate school, and when he'd asked if it was better, she'd blurted out:

'It would be even better if you kissed it.'

His eyes had been near black when he turned her to him but he'd still tried to joke.

'Your hand or you?'

'Me. Definitely me.'

He had. And they'd spent the rest of that stormy day and night in his trailer and the rest of those three weeks in a strange version of heaven. Not the mud or the long days following the workers around the construction site made any difference to her sense of being in absolutely the only place she ever wanted to be. During the day they were exactly what they'd been before, but at night...

But most good things come to an end.

His hand tightened on hers and suddenly she could hear him breathing and her body burst into being as surely as that lightning bolt. It was Brazil all over again and it was too late to stop it.

'I'll turn on the light,' he muttered.

'No!' She reached out, her hand closing on the soft cotton shirt, soaked in his heat,

'Light will ruin it.' She could hardly talk, she didn't want to talk, or think. If she did she would realize this was sheer and utter madness.

The room lit up again, but she wasn't looking at the tortured landscape outside, but at the stark granite lines of the man glaring down at her like Lucifer come to claim his own. She wasn't superstitious but tonight she could believe in witchcraft, in possession. He'd cast a spell on her years ago and it hadn't ever lifted, no matter how hard she'd tried.

Beyond him she saw the outline of a large bed and realized this wasn't a sitting room but his room. The thought of him lying on that enormous bed, watching the night sky, probably naked as he'd been in Brazil, hit her harder than the explosion of lightning and thunder. She curled her fists into the fabric of his shirt, her fingers scraping against the hard muscles underneath, and moved closer, breathing the musk scent of his skin.

Don't think. For the second time in your life, don't think, just take what you want.

'Sophie...' his voice was caught by the crash of thunder but she heard it down to her toes, curling through her like the finest wine, filling her and emptying her. **'If you don't step back I'm going to fuck you right here in full sight of the heavens. This isn't a game.'**

The remains of the rumble shuddered through her. Could she come just from his voice and the heat of his shirt? This was anything but a game.

'I want you to. Here. I want you inside me when it strikes again.'

He was pulling her towards her before she could drag enough air into her lungs to calm the furious flush of heat her own words images released.

'Damn you Sophie!' The words were lost against her lips, his hand pressed hard against her nape, holding her though she had no intention of resisting as he fused his mouth to hers, his body to hers. She pressed up against him, completing the circuit.

God, she needed this. Him.

His hand was tangled with hers, shocking her as he raised it, flexing back her fingers so he could press his mouth against her palm, his teeth catching at the heel of her palm. He knew what that did to her, he was going for surrender before the battle had even started but there was nothing she could do to stop her body's immediate unequivocal response. She moaned, her arm shaking as silvered shocks ran down her arm, sparking through her breasts, ending in a thunderclap of lust that made her instantly damp.

'Your hand is cold,' he murmured against her, his tongue testing the ultrasensitive skin of her palm. She'd forgotten what that felt like. She couldn't even understand it – every man since who'd tried to touch her there made her pull away, her nerves protesting. But when he did it...

It wasn't fair.

'I need you to warm me,' she moaned, the words smothered as his mouth fused with hers again, his hands gathering her behind towards him, moving her against him his erection as he spoke, his voice a physical abrasion against her nerves, his lips and breath scalding her as he moved from her mouth to her neck.

'No problem, I'm already on fire. I've been on fire every second since you barged in here. I've dreamed of stripping you bare, spreading you out on the grass by the tarn, tasting every inch of you...'

She shuddered at the image and at his fingers that were a striking contrast to his mouth, working with infuriating slowness to massage her buttocks, trace her hips, sliding behind to raise her thigh, just teasing the soft inner flesh of her legs but stopping short of the pulsing need between them. The contrast between words and the languorous progress of his fingers had her stretched tauter than a piano wire, vibrating as she waited for another chord to be struck. This time she was going to let him run the show. She needed him to take back the rejection, show her he wanted her.

'I thought you just wanted me to go.'

His laugh was shaky and it spread heat over the swell of her breast as he raised her shirt.

'No, I want you to come. Again...' he slid his fingers into the cup of her bra, very gently smoothing out her breast, like a careful excavator a precious find. 'And again...' cupped in his warm large hand he bent to brush the swell with his lips; hot feathery kisses, never settling, never reaching the insistent tingling of her nipple. 'And again.'

His teeth closed very gently on her nipple. It was like someone cut her strings, her body sagged against him, heat surged through her, undeniable damp pulsed between her thighs. She was ready for him so quickly, too quickly. She didn't want it over so soon. Not this time, not the next, not ever.

Even in her haze of desire the intensity of her need scared her. But not enough to stop. And not enough to keep the words safe inside her.

'Adam. I want you inside me. Now. *I need you...*'

Mistake. His mouth stopped its progression just on the rise of her breast, his breathing harsh and hot, spreading over her flesh like a scorching desert wind.

Then deliberately his hand slid into her leggings, over her buttocks, raising her against him so she could feel the full pulsing heat of his erection against her. He held his mouth just above her nipple, his breath teasing it, taunting her.

'Say that again.'

She drew breath, her chest rising to just scrape her erect nipple against his lower lip but he didn't move.

'I want you inside me...' she repeated obediently and her whole body rose this time, as if under the administration of an electric shock and his indrawn breath dragged cold air over her nipple, adding pain to pleasure.

'I need you...' he prompted, pulling down her leggings so he could slide his hand between them, his fingers hot as they slipped through her curls to the thudding pulse between her legs.

'Oh, God...*I need you...*' Her body twisted against his hand, she couldn't help it. He hardly had to move his fingers, a soft feathering caress that that was becoming everything, the very center of who she was.

'Now...'

'Now!...Adam!'

CHAPTER 9:

She woke into a cocoon of warmth and a canopy of stars.

Her leg was tangled between Adam's and her breasts pressed against his chest, her breathing aligned with his. It felt so right

And so wrong.

Already sanity was returning and with it every fear possible. Eight years didn't just disappear. They were different people. She couldn't trust him. She had no idea who he was – for all she knew there was another woman in his life. She hadn't even had the guts to ask.

She would have to face reality soon but she closed her eyes again. Just a little longer...

'What happened to him? To your fiancé.'

That woke her fully. His arm was still around her, but it was suddenly hard against her, like she was a burden. She tried to move away but he turned, looming over her, blocking out the stars.

'Was he your fiancée before you came to Brazil or were you just as quick at getting him into bed as you were with me?'

That got to her. She planted her hands against his bare chest and shoved.

'You have a bloody nerve! *You* were the one who was engaged when you slept with me. Get *off* me.'

He surged to his feet, moving through the dark like a big dark cat. He stopped in front of the window and she saw his hand outlined on the glass when distant lightning shifted black into indigo and back,

'I wasn't engaged.'

'Engaged, in a long-term relationship. It's the same thing.'

'Hardly. Katherine had been cheating on me for a while with a friend of ours. She said it was my fault for being away so often. She wanted to try again but I told her it was over before I went to Brazil. I went there to get away while she moved out of the flat. I still only planned to be in Brazil a week at the most but then you showed up and...I stayed.'

She shivered, dragging the blanket around her.

'I don't understand. Peter told you off and you sent me away. Why would you do that if you and... Katherine weren't...'

He glanced back at her and then away.

'You don't just come out of a three-year relationship singing and dancing. I might not have loved her as she wanted but I honestly thought we would marry, have a family...I thought what we had was enough for our purposes and then I find out I was a bloody fool. Peter asked me if it was fair to get involved with you when I was still cleaning up the mess Katherine and I made. You were young, ambitious, inexperienced...'

'Was I that bad in bed?' She couldn't mask her pain and bitterness at the evident regret in his voice.

He turned so swiftly she caught her breath and flinched.

'You were magic. Every time you touched me I had to tie myself in knots not to drag you into bed. Hell, you didn't even have to touch me. That first day you stepped off the Jeep and smiled at me I felt...I don't even know what I felt but it was all downhill from there. By the time we went to Rio I was ready to beg but I knew it was all wrong. I knew before Peter lectured me that the smart thing to do would be to ignore this, let you finish your article, get some distance from the goddamn hurricane you sparked each time I looked at you... I told myself that once I cleared everything up I would call you and see if this was real or just something I was escaping into like Peter said.'

He raised his hands and moved back towards the window and she sat on the side of the bed and dragged the blanket around her. She was shivering, her mind tumbling over itself to absorb everything, adjust.

'Did you love her? Katherine?'

'I had no idea what that meant at the time. It took me a week with you to realize I'd never really spoken with her. Within one bloody week I was telling you things I'd never told her in three years. You had this damnable way of listening as if you were looking past the words to the person. It's bloody dangerous. I told myself that was part of the problem. I like people keeping their distance.'

'Well, thanks.'

He breathed in, flexing back his shoulders.

'It happened too fast, too hard. I was thirty and I'd never, not once in my life, lost control but with you...I would hear you laughing half way across the site and every cell in my body would start begging. I felt like an idiot half the time. I couldn't help worrying that it was a dangerous sign that the thought of sending you away hurt a thousand times worse than discovering the woman I'd been thinking of marrying was cheating on me. It was so out of proportion it scared the hell out of me. I thought, maybe Peter was right, maybe this was some...reaction. That I needed some time and distance.'

The room sank into silence, nothing but the faint clanking of the radiator, not even distant thunder. She breathed in and spoke but she felt emptied, her words for form only.

'You should have told me. All of this. You owed me that.'

'I should have but I didn't. You were just twenty-four, this was probably just a spring fling for you. I could just imagine how you would react if I told you what I was thinking...'

'What were you thinking?'

Her heart was thumping so hard it felt like it filled her whole chest. She could hardly breathe with fear and hope, but he didn't seem to notice. He laughed, shaking his head.

'We'd only known each other three weeks, two of which we spent every night having mind-numbing sex. I'd just recently realized that the thought of actually marrying Katherine made my blood run cold, but I knew as clear as day that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. If I'd told you any of that you would have laughed at me or run for the hills and you would have been right to. I could hardly believe it myself.'

I wouldn't have run.

She didn't say the words because they were choking her, and he continued.

'I told myself I would wait until I untangled my life from Katherine's categorically before calling you,' Adam continued. 'But I lasted less than three weeks. I was desperate by then. I missed you so damn much. Even when you blew me off I kept calling. It took finding you in bed with another man... Knowing you were engaged. That finally got through my thick skull.'

He sat down, leaning his elbows on his knees, his bare back a landscape of strong lines, and her fingers tingled with the memory of mapping it just moments ago and the need to touch him, calm the tension that shimmered in the air between them. She was afraid of what he was saying because she so wanted to hear it.

'I wasn't in bed.'

His head turned a little in her direction but he didn't speak.

'And he wasn't my fiancé. It was Sam, he was a colleague, married with two kids. I asked him to get rid of you because I couldn't stand being tempted to do something I wanted to but knew I shouldn't. The rest was his inspiration. And it worked.'

Oh, god, she wished it hadn't.

Silence settled again.

He rubbed his face and a wave of pure anguish rose through her, like bile.

It was all too late. They'd both fucked up. He should have told her and she should have trusted her instincts about Adam.

'People are terrible at talking and listening sometimes,' she said, her voice wobbling at the end.

She didn't want this to be about regret and chances missed. She wanted this to be about a second chance. It wasn't possible that they find each other again only to lose this.

She pressed her face into the blanket and breathed in his scent, just like she'd breathed it in while he slept back in Brazil. But back then she'd thought she had a right to do that, because she's truly believed they had a future.

'This isn't quite the springtime jaunt to the Lake District I expected.' She said into the silence, trying to feel her way forward and not break anything in the dark.

'This isn't quite the quiet hideaway from the pressures of work I expected either.' He laughed, but she could hear his own wariness and it struck at her heart.

He might be a billionaire with an overabundance of confidence in many areas but he was as wary as she when it came to emotions. Wary enough to plan his future with a woman he didn't love, and wary enough to push away when he found a woman he did. Because now she could feel it – he *had* loved her then. As mad and immediate as it had been. She hadn't been wrong about that. Perhaps she wasn't wrong about it now.

'I don't want to leave tomorrow, Adam. I know it's been eight years but...it doesn't feel like eight years. I feel like I've been waiting to be with you again and now I am. Which is a little mad. Unless you really want me

to leave, I'd rather stay for a few more days so we can see...either way.'

He turned and pulled her onto his lap, his voice muffled against her hair.

'I don't need 'a few days' to know if I want you to stay longer, Sophie. Do you really think there's a chance in hell I'll let you just walk out of here after this? I couldn't bear it.'

'Good. I don't think I would be so easy to get rid of this time.'

'Good.' His laugh was a little shaky and she wrapped her arm around him, pressing her mouth against the pulse beating beneath his ear, breathing him in.

It felt so right. She'd been waiting to for this so long. Home.

He must have felt her shiver because he shifted, wrapping them both in the blanket. But it was his warmth, his skin that soothed her. His fingers laced through hers and his mouth moving softly against her hair. His voice telling her he felt this as well.

'What I need from you is the same thing I needed from you eight years ago, Sophie. A lifetime. If you stay, I want you to know that's what I'm aiming for.'

'Not just a spring fling?'

'That too. We can have one each for each season. For the rest of our lives.'

The End