

Limits

Susie Tate

Chapter 1

Limits

Millie stood at the very back of the club, her eyes fixed on the stage. If she wasn't so terrified she would be smiling. But with her level of anxiety at being around this many people, that would be an impossibility. When Jamie had asked her to come tonight she'd been surprised. But then he had literally asked *everyone* who knew his girlfriend Libby to come.

Still, it was a surprise.

Millie was never invited anywhere. Nobody wanted the Nuclear Winter (she'd overheard that nickname more than once) around socially, she knew that. Even if somebody had decided to extend an invite, she would never usually have gone.

Millie knew her limits.

She knew what she could cope with, and this was way, way beyond them. Eleanor had been ecstatic that Millie needed something more casual to wear. They'd spent over an hour picking the perfect outfit. She'd even made a move to give Millie a hug after they'd finished, which Millie had deftly avoided. El was nice, but then El was paid to be nice. Millie imagined that most people would be nice if they were a personal shopper who took a commission from someone who didn't care about cost of clothes.

Money meant nothing to Millie, but wearing the right outfits did, and she did not trust her own judgement. Years ago, at the start of their interactions, Eleanor had tried to extract an opinion from Millie about the clothes she got her to try on, but she didn't bother anymore. Millie simply gave El the situation the clothes would be worn in, El had her try a few outfits, and then she chose everything for her – right down to her underwear. Millie knew that she herself had no taste. She knew that if *she* chose her clothes it would not be perfect, and appearing perfect was *very* important to Millie.

'Hey, Dr M.'

Her head whipped round to see *Him* grinning down at her, his eyes twinkling with mischief. This man's eyes were always twinkling with mischief.

Pavlos Martakis was definitely beyond her limits.

As Millie was a radiologist and Mr Martakis a consultant surgeon, she managed to avoid him to a certain extent, but she couldn't avoid him completely and he'd always unsettled her an unreasonable amount. In a way he was her complete opposite: physically intimidating, likable, naturally attractive, extremely confident, sexually promiscuous (and very talented in that area, if hospital gossip was to be believed). Yes, he unsettled her, but more than that she got the impression that to him she was just one big joke. That he took an interest in her purely for his own amusement – like poking a turtle with a stick.

'Hello, Mr Martakis,' she said in a tight voice, taking a small step back. She fixed her attention back on the stage and heard him sigh.

'Why don't you call me Pavlos?' he asked. When she didn't reply she heard another more drawn out sigh. Why was he wasting his time talking to her?

'You okay? You seem a bit tense.'

Millie blinked. She wasn't really used to concern. It threw her for a moment.

'Fine,' she managed to get out eventually. He was still studying her and she got the impression he didn't miss much. After a long pause, Mr Martakis finally broke the silence.

'Here.' A drink was held out in front of her. She looked down at it but made no move to release the death grip she had on her handbag.

'I don't drink alcohol,' she told him.

Mr Martakis burst out laughing, but when she kept on staring straight ahead it slowly died. 'Bloody hell, you're serious. Why on earth not?'

'Well the latest evidence suggests that the interaction of alcohol with primary and secondary targets within the brain causes alterations in gene expression and synaptic plasticity, that leads to long-lasting alteration in neuronal network activity.' Out of the corner of her eye Millie could see the pint that had been making its way to Mr Martakis' mouth being slowly lowered.

'Jesus,' he muttered. Millie's hands clenched her handbag even harder, and her eyes dropped to her white knuckles. This is what she did: take a perfectly happy, socially confident person and make them feel uncomfortable. It was her special gift. She closed her eyes in a long blink and counted in her head, just like Anwar had told her to, trying to slow her breathing. Mr Martakis cleared his throat. She thought he would move away but he just put his pint down on one of the high tables next to them.

'Okay, so, no alcohol. Can I get you something else?' he pushed, and Millie started sidling towards the exit she could see from the corner of her eye. To her annoyance he simply moved with her.

'No,' she told him. 'I'm fine.'

A low sound came from deep in Mr Martakis' throat, almost like a growl. Millie took another step to the side.

'Do you know any words other than "fine" and "no"?' he gritted out.

Millie jerked in surprise and risked a brief moment of eye contact. He was watching her closely, his arms crossed over his broad chest. She suddenly felt very small and very intimidated. In general Millie kept most of her interactions with people superficial and free of emotion. As a consequence, she might not be liked but she encountered very few openly rude comments. The only experience she had to draw on was her hostile, critical parents, and she'd never been great with dealing with them either.

'Er ...' She took a step back. The music had changed to another song now, and most people had already moved to the stage to dance. Millie had seen what she came to see: Jamie had proposed to Millie's one and only friend in front of the whole club (at least Millie considered Libby a friend – Libby probably only thought of Millie as convenient childcare). She had never danced in her life. It was time for her to leave.

'Bugger, that came out wrong,' Mr Martakis said, moving with her and putting his hand on her forearm to stop her retreat. Her eyes flew open wide and

she jerked her arm away violently, shooting him another nervous glance and taking another step back.

'Hey, hey, hey,' Mr Martakis said, lifting both his hands in the air, palm up, in a gesture of surrender. Millie glanced around and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the nearest exit was now only feet away. This time when she moved, he didn't touch her, but he did spring forward and block her path. Millie took a step to the side and he moved with her. She focused on the exit sign and bit her lip.

'I'm sorry, that was rude,' he said.

'It's fine,' Millie told him before she could stop herself, and then watched his lips twitch.

'I really just wanted to ask you about speaking at the Grand Round.'

'Oh,' Millie said, breathing a sigh of relief. She was always much better if she knew the context of the interaction with another person. Now she understood. Mr Martakis wanted her to speak at the Grand Round. That was why he was talking to her. Whilst she felt relief to have his approach explained, there was a tiny part of her, buried deep, that was disappointed. 'I can't do that.'

'Of course you can,' he said. 'It'll be a great warm-up for speaking at conferences.'

'Conferences?' The word came out strangled and Millie cleared her throat. 'I won't be talking at any conferences.'

'But you've made a big breakthrough, Dr Morrison. People will want to hear what you have to say.'

'I've published my findings,' she said, her voice still high and tight. 'I ... look, I just can't ...'

'You can.' Mr Martakis' face was set with determination. 'I've set it all up for the week after next.'

'No.'

Mr Martakis blinked. 'You can't just say an outright no, that's not -'

Millie could feel a ringing in her ears; she knew she was breathing too fast.

'My answer is no,' she said through gritted teeth. The very idea of public speaking was making her come out in a cold sweat. She swallowed, glanced behind her to see another exit a bit further away, and she ran. On the way through she collided with a huge man covered in tattoos, who steadied her to stop her going down.

'Hey, what's up?' the giant asked, taking in her pale face and wide, fearful eyes. He looked over her shoulder. Millie could hear Mr Martakis calling after her. The huge man's jaw clenched tight and his eyes narrowed. 'Don't you worry, miss,' he told her. 'I'll deal with this joker.' Millie didn't wait to see what 'dealing with this joker' might entail. As soon as the giant released her was off.

She didn't stop shaking until she was in the back of a taxi five minutes later. This had been a mistake. She knew her limits. It was just that, recently, living within those limits had felt so very lonely. As the taxi took her all the way back to her boring house and her narrow life she felt a dull ache in her chest, but she didn't cry.

Millie never cried.

Chapter 2

Him

'Ki-Ki! Please!' groaned Libby, chucking a bread roll at Kira's head. 'Can we not talk about *my* sex life. God.'

Kira rolled her eyes. 'Libby, it's not like I've been going through the dong-meets-foo-foo logistics or anything. I just think you guys should have a dirty weekend away. Maybe then you'd be a bit less vomit-worthy around us more sexually frustrated mortals. And you could do with a break. You know you could.' Libby had only just recovered from a bout of pneumonia. There was real concern behind Kira's teasing.

'We are not vomit-worthy,' Libby hissed in outrage.

'Uh, Lib,' Pav cut in. 'That would hold a lot more water if Jamie hadn't had his hand on your leg under the table for the last ten minutes, and if you hadn't sent him a dirty text just now.'

Libby's face flamed bright red as Jamie jerked both his hands onto the table-top and swept his phone up into his pocket. 'I did not send him a dirty text,' she hissed, and Pav rolled his eyes. 'I didn't, I just –'

'Okay, maybe not *dirty* dirty but I bet there were a few emojis involved.'

'Yeah,' Kira said, sitting forward in her chair. 'You probably sent a couple of aubergines and a crazy ghost. Am I right?'

'Wh ... what are you –'

'Don't act all innocent you frisky little minx. You know exactly what I'm talking about.'

Pav started laughing whilst Jamie's eyes were dancing and his mouth was pressed into a firm line. The filthy look Libby shot Jamie as his shoulders started to shake only served to increase the volume of Pav's merriment. He shook his head in his amusement and something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. She was standing completely still across the canteen, and her perfectly made-up face was staring straight at him. It was her expression that surprised him.

Just for that moment she didn't have her standard uptight, aloof mask in place. Instead the corners of her mouth were tilted up ever so slightly and her eyes were warm. For some bizarre reason her expression seemed almost ... longing. However it didn't take long for her to notice his stare. Her face shut down again and her eyes slid away as she practically ran over to the new coffee stand.

'Don't you think, Pav? Pav?'

'Er ... what?' Pav replied, keeping his gaze fixed on Dr Morrison's rigid back. Kira huffed out a sigh.

'Don't you think they should be letting us babysit more? Hello? Earth to Pav?' she said as she waved a hand in front of his face.

'I'll ... um, just be a minute,' Pav mumbled as he pushed away from the table to stand up. 'Anybody want a coffee?'

There was a long pause. 'Pav you've just had a coffee. One that *I* bought for you seeing as you don't have the patience for it.'

'Right, well, I've got a long list this afternoon, so a bit of a caffeine boost is in order. Ladies?' Libby and Kira looked down at their barely touched cups and then back at Pav with identical frowns.

'Wh –' Libby started, but Pav didn't catch the rest as he was already striding away.

'An Americano, please.' For some reason Dr Morrison's soft voice ordering coffee gave Pav a weird buzz of excitement as he came up behind her.

'A what, dear?' Doreen was a lovely lady in her eighties who had served the teas and coffees for the last twenty years in aid of The League of Friends, a money-raising charity for the hospital. She and her cronies used to have a little hole in the wall with only tea bags and some milk. In a real pinch they would make you an instant coffee, but it would provoke a rather stern look. But a couple of months ago, since Costa had moved into the gym across the road, the management had decided to get The League of Friends up to speed with a state-of-the-art coffee machine that ground its own beans, frothed milk and made a massive assortment of coffees, all of which were listed above Doreen's head and none of which she actually knew how to make. Apparently Doreen and co. had undergone 'intensive training', but this was certainly not evident in their customer service. After Pav had climbed over the counter, kissed a flustered Doreen on the cheek and made his own bloody latte last month, Jamie had banned him from any further coffee ordering.

'She means black coffee, Doreen,' Pav put in as he moved to stand inches from Dr Morrison with his hand nearly touching hers on the counter. He had just a brief moment to inhale the scent of her shampoo and some sort of expensive, subtle perfume before she took a startled step to the side away from him.

Damn it, Millie thought as she studied the jar of cookies in front of her and smoothed a non-existent wrinkle in her skirt. She *knew* she should have stuck to the Nescafé in the radiology department, but the lure of the new machine and the smell of everyone else's freshly ground coffees in the morning meeting had been too much for her. Generally she avoided the rest of the hospital as much as possible. She liked to stay on familiar ground. When she'd walked into the canteen and seen *Him* laughing with his friends, she'd actually been glad to have broken her normal routine. Whilst direct interaction with Him was stressful, being able to observe him from afar was one of her favourite things.

Of course he was always handsome; but with his head thrown back and his deep, rich laugh filling the air around him, he was so beautiful it was almost painful to look at. Mr Martakis fascinated Millie. He was the most uninhibited, charming, outgoing and *free* person she had ever encountered in her life. The way he expressed himself with his hands, his extravagance of movement, his familiarity with everyone (except her, obviously; Millie wasn't familiar with anyone apart from Donald, and he didn't really count): it was almost ... wild, and it thrilled and terrified her in equal measure. So when he'd caught her staring, those dark eyes focusing intently on hers and the laughter dying on his lips, she'd skipped thrilled and gone straight to terrified.

What she should have done was leave immediately, but that would have shown weakness. Millie might actually *be* weak, but that didn't mean she had to *show* it. So, in spite of her heart beating practically out of her chest she'd made it to the coffee stand. Unfortunately Millie had not factored Doreen into the

equation, but by the eighth time of giving her order she had seen the error of her ways.

And now He was right *there*. That was twice in one month she had been this close to him. Millie had only felt his body heat and seen his large hand next to hers before she heard his voice, but for some reason she'd known it was Him. Having put sufficient distance between them to keep control of her hammering heart, but not so much as to betray fear or weakness (she hoped), Millie resolved to try and ignore Him whilst Doreen bashed away at the coffee machine in slightly alarming fashion.

'I'll have a latte whilst you're at it, Doreen,' he said, smiling across at the flustered, white-haired lady.

'You'll get what your given, young man,' she told him. 'And stay on that side of the counter.'

Mr Martakis chuckled and the sound skittered over Millie's skin, making her shiver.

'You cold?' he asked.

She could see him turn fully towards her out of the corner of her eye, and sucked in a startled breath.

'No,' she managed to squeeze out past her tight throat. It sounded rude and curt – exactly what he, and most other people, would expect from her. But for some reason this man was not put off. In fact he chuckled. *Chuckled*, in the face of her Nuclear Winter. Nobody chuckled at Nuclear Winter; they ignored her, they left her alone – she did not make them chuckle.

'Well, I've been bloody freezing all day,' he continued, as if they were having an actual conversation. 'The theatre air-con is bugging about. Had to wear thermals to stop my hands shaking.'

'Uh ...' Millie bit her lip, her eyes flicking from his tanned hand up to his thermal-clad arm. Something about the white material pulled tight over his muscular forearm caused the most weird sensation to sweep up from her stomach. Her heart actually felt like it had stopped for a moment, before it picked up double time.

'It's my Greek blood I guess,' he said, and she blinked before taking another small step away. 'Thanks, Doreen.'

It was then Millie realized that her coffee was in front of her and she had inadvertently moved away from the cash register. Oh God, he was paying for her coffee! She watched in horrified silence as Mr Martakis handed Doreen a tenner and was given a twenty and some loose change back. The most ridiculous argument ensued, culminating in him forcing another tenner on a confused Doreen, leaning right over the counter to *kiss* Doreen on the cheek, and refusing any change. Millie watched all this with her mouth slightly open. That was until he turned to her and started moving forward. She sucked in a breath and skittered back, catching her hip on the condiment counter.

'Hey,' Mr Martakis said softly, stopping his advance and holding his hands up. 'Hey, you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she croaked, then cleared her throat. 'You ... you can't pay for my coffee.'

Mr Martakis' concerned frown melted away to be replaced by his wide, glamorous smile, showing his white teeth off against his olive skin. Millie's heart

skipped another beat as she focused on his mouth, before quickly dropping her gaze down to her feet.

'I think I just did so ... maybe you can get the next one?'

He was moving towards her again, and as her back was now pressed up against the counter, short of darting around him (which again would have revealed weakness and she had been weak enough around this man already) she had nowhere to go.

'The ... the next one?' she muttered, frowning down at her coffee cup in confusion.

'Yes,' Pav said as he moved right into her personal space and put his hand gently on her back to propel her forward away from the counter. 'The next one. Like, tomorrow? You sort of owe me after that stunt you pulled at the club. I had some explaining to do to Mr Steroids on the door.'

'I ... oh, you mean the ... the bouncer? I just -'

'Don't worry about it,' Mr Martakis dismissed, waving the hand that was not at the small of her back. 'I know Barry. We sorted it. Now, about that drink -'

'Wh ... what?' she stammered, feeling the heat of his large hand on her back and moving faster to get away from it. That was until she couldn't move any further. He'd manoeuvred her over to his table before she'd even realized what was happening.

'Hi, Millie,' Libby said gently, giving her an encouraging smile.

'Hey,' Jamie put in, giving her a brief nod before he turned to Mr Martakis and frowned, probably confused as to why he'd dragged her over here. *That makes two of us*, Millie thought in bewilderment.

'Dr M.,' Kira muttered, not bothering with an encouraging smile. Libby and Kira had both started as medical students at the hospital a few months ago and whilst Libby was kind, Millie was well aware how much Kira disliked her. Ironically, though, the feeling was not mutual at all. Millie thought Kira was hilarious and a little bit crazy. Unfortunately, when faced with big personalities and extreme extrovert behaviour, Millie tended to shut down. So any interaction she'd had with Kira in the past had been strained to say the least. The friendlier Kira was, the more dismissive Millie became and there was no way for her to stop it.

'Dr Morrison and I have been grappling with Doreen for the last ten minutes,' Mr Martakis explained smoothly whilst he pulled out a chair and gestured for Millie to sit down. Millie looked at his hand and up to his thermal-covered forearm before she glanced at his face, still sporting that wide glamorous smile. 'Take a seat.'

Her mouth dropped open and she blinked once. There was no way in hell she was sitting down.

'I think you're making Dr Morrison uncomfortable, Pav,' Kira said, her voice uncharacteristically flat and unwelcoming.

'I ... I'm not ...' Millie took a step back and watched as Mr Martakis shot Kira an annoyed look before he skirted his chair to move towards her, causing it to scrape along the linoleum.

'Ta-ta, Dr M.,' Kira said with a fake smile and a small wave. 'Great chat, as always.'

Millie took another step back but came to an abrupt halt as her back hit a solid wall of flesh. The coffee she was holding spilled over the edges of the cup and onto her hand. She barely registered the scalding pain.

'Shi – I mean, sorry, Dr Morrison,' the large ODP (operating department practitioner) that worked with Jamie and with whom Millie had just collided said.

'It's fine,' she said. 'I ... sorry ...' She trailed off and turned on heel to leave. As she weaved through the tables she put down her coffee cup; it was only half full now anyway and she couldn't exactly run back to the radiology department with it sloshing all over the place. Her hand started to throb as she rounded the double doors of the canteen and strode down the corridor at speed. Once in the safety of her office, she leaned up against the door and closed her eyes.

Donald was on leave today. It was bad timing. She needed him here. Shaking her head in an attempt to clear it, she took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Needing Don was a bad idea. Needing anyone was a bad idea. Millie knew she had to rely on herself. Her hand throbbed again and she rolled her eyes. If she hadn't scuttled backwards like a terrified rabbit she wouldn't have run into that ODP and she wouldn't have burnt her hand. She moved away from the door, and was just about to start running some cold water into the small sink in the corner when a loud staccato knock caused her to jump about a foot in the air.

She knew who it was before his head appeared around the frame. That knock could only belong to someone as larger-than-life as Him. She contemplated hiding under her desk (it wouldn't have been the first time – she'd tucked herself in behind the front panel more than once before to avoid people) but there just wasn't time to sufficiently squash herself into the available space, and the thought of how ludicrous she would look if caught made her break out in a cold sweat.

'Hey,' Mr Martakis said as he stepped into the office as if it was his own. Millie would *never* enter someone else's space unless specifically invited. She marvelled at how confident, pushy and ... and *rude* this man could be. Then, after entering her office without permission, he proceeded to casually stroll up to her, stand way too close and take both her hands gently in his. 'Ah, bugger,' he muttered as he moved her right hand into the light to see the red burn marks over the back and fingers. 'Let's get this under some cold water.'

He propelled her forward to the sink by her elbow, turned on the faucet and then held her hand under the flow. Millie's whole body had gone rigid with shock as soon as he put his hands on her. And now, with her back to his front and his arms around her to hold her hand under the tap, she felt like she couldn't breathe. There was the instinctive fear she had when in physical contact with anyone, but this was mixed with a far more worrying and foreign feeling, almost like flying; kind of what she imagined it would be like to take drugs. Her ears were ringing and her heart was hammering in her chest.

'It's pretty red but hopefully it won't blister,' he murmured behind her ear, and she could feel his breath on her cheek. 'Jesus, what are all these bruises?' Her sleeves had ridden up and the inner surface of her forearms was showing. 'What the –'

Millie had dropped down and ducked under his arm, then dashed across the room, putting her office chair between them. He spun around to face her with

a bemused expression on his face. She gripped the back of the chair and kept her eyes focused on her desk.

'Dr M.?' he called, and she flinched. 'Okay, I'm going to move away from the sink now, all right,' he told her as he started walking backwards to the other side of the room and Don's desk. 'I'm sorry I crowded you but can you please put your hand back under the water?'

Millie blinked down at her hand, which started throbbing again as her adrenaline receded. She glanced at Mr Martakis out of the corner of her eye; then, with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances, she walked to the sink.

'Will you keep it under the water?'

Millie never cried. Tears did not work for her when she was a child. Instead of crying her throat would close over almost completely, making it impossible to speak. Thus, a distressed Millie was always, always an entirely silent one. So, with no other option, all she could do was nod her head whilst she stayed focused on her hand under the running water.

'I'm going to go now, okay?' he said cautiously, and she nodded again.

After the door closed behind him, part of her was weak with relief, but the other part, the part that had experienced that rush when he was near her, that part felt such an acute sense of loss it was almost painful.

Chapter 3

Thwarted ambition

Pav shoved his hands in his pockets and frowned as he made his way back to the canteen. He'd been so distracted that he'd left his phone on the table. Yes, he was normally a disorganized bastard, but that level of inattention was rare, even for him.

'What was all that about?' Jamie asked as Pav approached the group. They'd all finished their lunches and were starting to collect their things together.

'Is she okay?' Libby's face was awash with concern. To Pav's knowledge Libby was the only other hospital worker who did not seem to hold any animosity towards Dr Morrison. Dr M. had even looked after Libby's little girl in the past, which was a shock in itself, seeing as people in general did not seem to be the radiologist's forte. As Libby was a medical student and a single mother (well, not quite so single anymore thanks to Jamie), Dr Morrison's help had been a much needed lifeline – but it was still a bizarre choice of childcare in Pav's opinion.

'I didn't mean to piss her off so much that she'd scald herself,' Kira put in, shifting uncomfortably on her feet. 'You know I can't control my mouth sometimes. It's just that she can be *such* a mega-bitch.'

Dr Morrison had an unfortunate but well-earned reputation around the hospital for her cold manner and her ability to make you feel stupid when you requested a scan. Consultants like Pav and Jamie took that sort of humiliation on the chin, but it was a bit mean-spirited when it came to students like Kira. There had been a couple of times over the last month when Kira had come back from the radiology department with a pale face and without her usual relentless banter. Pav knew that Kira's confidence clinically had been knocked recently, when she'd failed an anatomy viva, so the last thing she needed was for Nuclear Winter to make her feel even more substandard.

Pav reached for his phone and tucked it into his back pocket.

'Is she okay?' Libby asked, a small frown marring her forehead.

'She's fine,' he told them with a confidence he didn't feel. His mind flashed back to the red burn marks on her hand and the bruises he'd seen on her forearm, and his stomach tightened. 'Maybe you could go check on her though Libs? You seem to be the only one she's comfortable with.'

Kira snorted in agreement.

'You know, Ki-Ki,' Pav said after a moment, 'I'm not sure she means to be a bitch. Maybe she's just ... shy.'

'You think?' Kira's forehead was creased in a frown and her head cocked to the side so that her long red hair fell over one small shoulder. 'I have to say she's pretty high up on my list of People Who Need a Slap With a Wet Fish.'

Libby sighed. 'I've told you all before,' she said in an exasperated tone. 'You don't know Millie. She's got ... issues.'

'Yeah, well, you're bang on there,' Kira muttered, and Libby shot her an annoyed look.

'She's really good with Rosie, Kira. But you've got to be a bit less ...' Libby paused and looked up at the ceiling before she shrugged and focused back on Kira with a small smile, '... you.'

'A bit less me?'

'Yes. I think you intimidate her.'

'I intimidate *her*?' Kira rolled her eyes. 'Her heart is carved of ice Libs. I doubt any human could intimidate her.'

'Just give her a chance.'

Kira paused. 'Well ... I guess she did call me to sort you out when you were ill. She can't be a complete robot.'

'I think we should all make a bit more effort with her actually,' Pav cut in. 'I've certainly got to try and get her on side if I want to get her to present at the Grand Round.'

Pav *needed* to talk Dr Morrison around. So far she'd refused to even consider speaking about her research in public. Pav knew this because, as the Director of Surgery, he was the one who received the emails from conferences, when they had no luck with her. Apparently she'd turned down every one of them. Pavlos could not understand why anybody would turn down that opportunity. He himself would give his right arm to present his new surgical technique for minimally invasive prostatectomy. Knowing this, and desperate for Dr Morrison to speak at his conference, the organizer of the European Urological Association meeting had contacted Pav last week with an offer of a slot to speak to the main lecture hall, *if* he could convince Dr Morrison to take a slot as well. So far her study had only been into orthopedic and surgical patients; both specialties were vying for who could convince her to talk first, and Pav's assistance would give the urologists the edge. The conference was in six months. Pav had told the organizer 'no worries'.

'Millie needs genuine friends, Pav,' Libby said with more than a hint of reproach in her voice. 'Leave her alone if you're just trying to get her to speak at that bloody conference you're always on about.' Pav had told them all about the stalemate he was involved in with Dr Morrison. Libby had been adamant that he not push 'Millie' too hard to present.

'You've no chance, mate,' Jamie chuckled. 'Even the legendary Pavlos rays of supercharm won't be enough to warm up Nuclear Winter.' Libby punched Jamie in the arm.

'Don't call her that,' she snapped. 'And Pav, I'm serious about you leaving Millie alone. Jamie's being a dick, but he's right about the conference; there's no way she'll do that.'

We'll see, Pav thought as he clenched his jaw in frustration. Thwarted ambition was not his style. *We'll just see*.

Millie's body tensed as she heard the far softer knock on her door.

'Millie?' At the sound of Libby's voice she sagged slightly in relief but also a little, tiny bit of disappointment. It was official: she was losing her mind. Her office door was pushed open and Libby's head appeared around it, followed by Rosie's underneath.

'We've come to fix your hand,' the five-year-old bossed as she pushed her way into the office and planted her little feet wide with her hands on her hips. Her bright blue eyes, so similar to her mother's, were sparking with

determination and she shook her dark curls behind her shoulders. Rosie had turned five last month. Millie knew that her party had been at Jamie's house, as she had been invited – another surprise. Of course she couldn't go. Apart from anything, she'd known He'd be there, and after the club incident Millie was avoiding Him at all costs. Something that had backfired spectacularly today.

'You, young lady, have come to watch. *I've* come to check on Millie,' Libby said, trying to gently draw Rosie to the side. The little girl, however, was not in the mood to be pushed aside. She shook off her mother's hand and moved to Millie, climbing up into her lap and putting her strong little arms around her neck, before giving her a squeeze. Millie swallowed past a lump in her throat as she closed her arms around the warm curled body. Since she'd been babysitting for Libby (at first it was in the mornings so that Libby could go to the ward round before the hospital nursery opened, but Rosie had since started school, which meant Millie was now only allowed the odd evening babysit) she had become used to Rosie's affection. The only reason she'd even become sort-of friends with Libby was because Rosie had marched into Millie's office a few months ago after Millie had refused a scan request from Libby, and asked her straight out why she was 'being mean to my mummy?'. Libby had been mortified – she'd been trying to keep the child hidden behind the door whilst she asked for the scan (as a single mother and restricted by the nursery opening times Libby hadn't had much choice), but Millie had been enchanted by the child from the start.

In fact now she looked forward to the evenings Libby need babysitting so much it was almost pathetic. The casual affection she found so difficult with other people came easily with Rosie. Maybe because the social cues Millie found impossible to interpret with adults were easier to read with this child; there was no artifice, no small talk, no double meanings. Everything was clear and on the table. Affection was genuine. Millie had no idea why the little girl had taken to her so much, but she was not going to turn her away. In the company of this child Millie almost felt normal, something she hadn't experienced in a long time – if she was honest there was never really a time when the word normal would have applied to her.

'Right, now you can fix her hand, Mummy,' Rosie further bossed as she released Millie and slid off her lap. Libby rolled her eyes but smiled at her daughter.

'Can I see?' she asked Millie.

'Listen, my hand's fine. I don't –'

'That's not what Pav told me, Millie,' Libby said gently, and Millie let out a breath at the use of her Christian name. Everyone except these two and Don called her Dr Morrison. She absolutely hated it. It meant a lot to her that Libby called her Millie. Even her parents wouldn't use the shortened version of her name, preferring instead the more formal Camilla.

Libby sucked in a breath as she prised Millie's hand from her lap and turned it over. 'Sh ...' Libby glanced at her daughter, whose ears had pricked up in preparation for a swear word, '... sugar, that had to have smarted, hun.'

Millie blinked. Endearments were not something she was used to either. From childhood they had been few and far between. Libby's beautiful, make-up-free face was frowning down at Millie's burns. Her short messy hair looked like she'd run her fingers through it about a thousand times already today. The way she looked and acted was so natural and carefree it made Millie feel stilted and

repressed. No doubt Libby had a two-minute shower in the morning, brushed her hair, flung on whatever she had to hand and that was that. It made a mockery of Millie's own ninety-minute routine: her obsessional need to be wearing the perfect outfit, for her appearance to be flawless, faultless.

'Jesus, we need to get this looked at by plastics.'

'No.' Millie pulled away her hand and leaned back in her chair. Libby's head tilted to the side and her forehead creased in confusion.

'But I think -'

'No plastics. It'll be fine.' Millie knew what would happen if she saw a burns specialist. They would dress her hand in such a way that it would be rendered pretty much useless. Her right hand. They would then tell her to contact someone to look after her whilst the hand healed: a friend, family - someone to stay with her. She wouldn't be able to work.

'Millie, please -'

'*No plastics.*' Millie stared at Libby, her mouth set in a thin stubborn line, and Libby sighed.

'Okay, but let me dress it at least. I have iodine and gauze.'

Millie hesitated but caught sight of Rosie's concerned little face. For a five-year-old she saw way too much.

'Yes,' Millie said, slowly uncoiling her hand and laying it back on the desk for Libby to see. Making sure a medical student left her free use of her hand would be a lot easier than a fully qualified plastic surgeon. 'I ... um, thanks,' Millie muttered. Accepting kindness was not her strong suit, but then she hadn't really had that much practice.

Pav waited.

He could be patient when he needed to be and he got the feeling that with Dr Morrison he needed to be very fucking patient. That didn't mean he wasn't keeping tabs on her. Pav knew just about everyone in the hospital and he had his sources in the radiology department as well. Dr Morrison hadn't taken any time off with her hand, which, whilst annoying, did not entirely surprise him.

What did surprise Pav was the tightness he felt in his chest when he thought of her using a burnt hand to click through her images, or the way his stomach had hollowed out when he'd seen her bandaged hand in the urology MDT and her flinch of pain when she used it to open up her laptop. He wasn't quite sure why the thought of Dr Morrison in pain should create such a visceral reaction in him, but there was no mistaking it was there. He reasoned that maybe it was because he had indirectly been the cause of it. If he hadn't propelled her over to their table and pushed her out of her comfort zone she wouldn't have been hurt in the first place. No doubt guilt was playing a part then. There was a healthy dose of anger too, which also surprised Pav. He was generally a pretty mellow guy. But the thought of Dr Morrison pushing on to work through her pain and not resting her goddamn dominant hand made him want to smash something.

Normally if Pav thought that somebody was being stupid (and in his opinion working with your right hand after sustaining a second degree burn was right up there), he would make his view known fairly rapidly, and, more often than not, pretty loudly. But he'd already pushed Millie into a corner, not once but twice, with disastrous consequences, and for once in his life he needed to employ

a bit of subtly. So he waited until he knew Don was back in the office from his holiday to approach her. That was about as subtle and considerate as Pav got.

'Hey, Don,' he said from the doorway of the office. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Dr Morrison jump in her chair before she settled back down and focused on the screen. At a glance she looked perfectly composed, but Pav could see how rapidly her chest was rising and falling, and how white her knuckles were as she gripped her mouse to click through the scans. 'How were your hols?'

Donald turned in his chair and narrowed his eyes on Pav before flicking a concerned glance over at Millie. 'I went to Bogner. It rained. What do you want, Stavros?'

'Don, come on.' Pav forced out a good-natured chuckle: the stubborn old man knew his name by now. Don just crossed his arms over his chest and raised one white eyebrow. Pav sighed. 'Look, I'm actually here to talk to you if that's okay, Dr Morrison?' He watched her blink at the screen but no response was forthcoming. He tried again. 'How's the hand?'

'Her hand is fine,' Donald snapped. 'Now, what is it you really want, son?'

Pav rubbed the back of his neck and then extended the journal he was holding in his other hand. Don glanced down at the front cover and smiled. 'Millie? Why didn't you tell me about this? Bugger me, it got into *The Lancet*! I can't believe it.'

Dr Morrison turned in her chair and, still avoiding eye contact with Pav, reached for the journal that was now in Don's hands. He passed it across and she laid it reverently in her lap, staring down at it and then touching the featured article title, 'CBT and Surgical Outcomes: The Psychology of Recovery'. A very small smile tugged at her perfectly painted lips before she masked her expression. She looked up at Don.

'I didn't know it was coming out this month and I -'

'You never said it was getting into *The Lancet*,' Don grumbled through a smile so wide Pav thought it might split his face. 'My Millie,' he said softly, reaching for her hand and laying his wrinkled one on top, 'changing the face of medicine.' Millie rolled her eyes.

'Don't be ridiculous, Don,' she mumbled, a blush creeping up under her foundation. 'It's just an idea. Hardly groundbreaking. And Anwar had just as much credit, maybe more.'

Don snatched the journal away and started flicking through it. 'Ha!' he said triumphantly as he poked the page with his finger. 'It says right here that this has the potential to be the biggest advance in post-op recovery in the last decade. It says that in the Editor's letter. You can't argue with the Editor of *The Lancet*.'

'You would, Don,' she told him, her small smile back in action and her eyes soft on her colleague. 'You would argue if they hadn't said that about me, if they'd said it was rubbish.'

'Well,' Pav broke in, and Dr Morrison flinched again as if she'd forgotten he was even there in her excitement, 'the fact is that this is a breakthrough, and as Surgical Director I can assure you the hospital is fully behind you attending whatever international conferences or meetings you need to.'

Pav let that hang there for a minute as he watched Millie bite her lip. He knew very well that she had no intention of going to any international conferences. Over the last month he'd had more emails from organizers all over

the world, and he knew that she was continuing to turn them all down flat, each and every one. One of them was to Hawaii, for fuck's sake. Was she mad?

'That won't be necessary,' Millie told him as she spun her chair back around to her computer monitor and started scrolling through images again.

'Listen,' Pav said, making a fairly rubbish attempt to soften his tone, 'you can't just ignore all this. At the very least you're going to have to present it to the rest of the hospital -'

'No.'

Don sighed. 'Millie maybe you could just -'

'Don, *no*.'

'Dr M., look ...' Pav spoke to her stiff back. Other than a small flinch she did not acknowledge his presence. 'You have to present this stuff. You -'

'Talk to Anwar,' she said, still not making any eye contact. 'He did all the CBT. He'd be -'

'*You* set up the study!' Pav's voice was raised in frustration. 'Most of the CBT that the patients did was online in a computer program *you* created. I can't just get the psychologist to talk about it on his own. That's ridiculous. It's *your* study.'

'No!' To Pav's shock, Dr Morrison's normal, controlled tone went up a pitch and she actually slammed her hand down on her desk. Unfortunately it was her injured hand. He saw her wince in acute pain as she snatched it from the desk and hugged it to her chest. That dreadful hollow feeling was back again as he watched her in pain. Why was she so bloody stubborn?

'I think, Stavros, you'd better leave.' Donald was out of his chair now and drawing himself up to his full height (which unfortunately for Donald only came up to Pav's chest); but the steely look in the old man's eye and the disapproval in his expression had Pav backing away to the corridor.

Chapter 4

Safe space

'Dr Morrison?'

Millie's stomach clenched, not only because, yet again, it was Him, but also at that formal greeting. Despite being used to it, the small rejection that the use of her surname elicited always cut her deep, every single time. The worst thing was the awful awareness that the situation was her own damn fault. She'd been too unfriendly to too many people for too long, and had never invited any sort of informality. And now she found it upsetting, as if the people around her went out of their way to maintain that extra distance by using the formality of her surname. No other doctor in the hospital, probably the whole trust, was as disliked. It was two weeks since he'd confronted her with *The Lancet* and Millie had hoped he would have given up trying to convince her by now.

'Yes,' she replied, not taking her eyes off the computer screen.

'Listen,' the deep voice continued. 'I know you're busy but I would really appreciate it if you could afford me the courtesy of looking at me when I'm speaking to you. I might only be a surgeon, but I *am* a consultant at this hospital too.'

Millie blinked at the screen and her hands balled into small fists. The feel of her nails digging into the skin of her palms helped to calm her racing heart and slow her breathing, but only just. She didn't correct him. She knew that most of the hospital thought she was a consultant. It was easier for the management that way. At her last placement she had been acting as a registrar and it made everyone involved very uncomfortable.

Millie passed the radiology exams before she even started the radiology training programme. Once the college found out that she was only a second-year doctor at the time they had wanted to take the exam away from her, but the fact that she achieved an unheard-of perfect score on all tests made this more than a little tricky. Nobody had ever completed the postgraduate exams without getting a single answer wrong. She was a phenomenon. At the highest level it was decided that the last thing they wanted was to lose Millie from their specialty, so they allowed her to count her exams but made her start at the bottom of the training. That had worked for the first couple of years, but as she became a senior registrar it became more difficult. She knew more about radiology than any of the consultants she was working with. She picked up errors in reporting that had been missed by the most experienced radiologists. Working beneath people she intimidated, if only unintentionally, had been very difficult; eventually the consultants couldn't hack it.

So a solution was reached. She would be transferred to a different hospital, instated in her own office, which she would share with a consultant who could supervise her and guide her, but who wouldn't be intimidated by her knowledge base. That consultant was Donald. He was seventy-two, unfailingly calm, incredibly perceptive and ridiculously kind. He had seen through Millie's cold indifference almost immediately. He was her only real friend.

It made sense for the rest of the hospital to think Millie was a consultant. She did Don's on-calls for him under his extremely loose supervision (Don had no intention of doing any on-calls any more). Without her, the consultant rota

would fall apart. And she got through twice the amount of reporting as any of her colleagues, so they could hardly demote her back to first-year trainee: they needed her.

She forced her hands to relax in her lap and turned in her chair to face Mr Martakis. Her eyes rose to meet his gorgeous, dark ones for a split second before she focused on the far safer territory of his shirt collar and heard him let out a loud sigh.

She could feel the panic rising up to her throat and tried to swallow it down. Millie was not good with people, but this man ... for some reason this man terrified her. It may have been to do with him being the most beautiful human being she'd ever seen before, or his manner: totally uninhibited, completely at ease with himself and others, quick to smile and laugh – the complete opposite of Millie. He fascinated her, although in much the same way a hawk would fascinate a tiny field mouse: with a good amount of fear and awe.

Well, he wasn't smiling now. In fact, his mouth was set in a grim line and a muscle was ticking in his jaw. Feeling the hostile vibes fill the room, Millie scooted back slightly in her chair and kept her hands coiled into fists to stop them shaking. Thankfully the burn had healed enough that she didn't need the dressing on anymore.

'C ...' she cleared her throat and swallowed down her anxiety. 'Can I help you, Mr Martakis?' For the last two weeks Millie had been successfully avoiding Mr Martakis. To the extent that at the last urology MDT she hadn't even glanced at the coffee he'd put in front of her on the conference table (despite the fact it smelt amazing and she'd been having to survive on the terrible instant stuff in the radiology department for the two weeks before – there was no way she was venturing to the canteen again), and at the end of the meeting she'd raced past him without acknowledging his greeting. Millie was willing to admit that might have come across a little ... weird, and a lot rude. She doubted Mr Martakis was used to being blanked by anyone. Donald had done a lot of the Mr Martakis fielding as well. Twice he'd effectively barred the man from coming into the office, and once he had managed to keep a straight face when Millie hid under her desk.

'My medical student came to you to request a perfectly reasonable scan twenty minutes ago.' He paused and Millie decided to keep her mouth shut, adjusting her gaze to the centre of his chest, then wishing she hadn't when she took in the way his broad muscles filled out the shirt he was wearing, something she would never normally notice with other men. The sight gave her an unfamiliar swooping sensation deep in her stomach. Almost as though she was falling on a rollercoaster.

'Hello? Dr Morrison?'

Millie started in her seat. Her perusal of his chest seemed to have scrambled all functioning neurons. Which for her was an almost unheard of occurrence.

'I'm sorry,' she said, her voice high and tight. She cleared her throat again but knew the tightening wouldn't fade, not whilst He was here. 'I don't know whi –'

Mr Martakis let out an annoyed huff and crossed his arms over his chest. More negative vibes filled the room and Millie shrank back into her chair.

'I'm not surprised you don't remember the request, seeing as you didn't even spare the medical student in question a single f-word' he looked away and took a deep breath in an obvious attempt to reign in his temper, 'a single glance to acknowledge her existence.'

Millie managed to stop herself flinching at near-use of the f-word, but only just. It wasn't that she was offended by swearing itself: only that the words were so harsh, so confrontational. Millie was not good with confrontation. Not at all.

'I ... Are you talking about the IVU that was requested?'

Where was Don? Millie thought to herself. He should be back by now; she knew Irene had packed his lunch today. How long could picking up a bag of Wotsits (something Irene's strict food rules did not allow) take?

'Yes,' he bit out, and it was clear from his tone that his patience was fraying. 'And you know what: yes, okay, it's not always appropriate for a medical student to request a scan but ... Jesus, you could at least have the courtesy to look at her when you dismiss her from your exulted presence. Maybe explain why you won't do the scan for us. They do have to learn somehow you know. I presume you were a medical student once?'

Yes, Millie had been a medical student once, but she'd been nothing like *that* girl. Kira was full Technicolor high-definition, to Millie's dull, black and white persona. She always intimidated Millie and put her on the defensive. But this time Kira had changed tactics, being so friendly it was almost unreal: she smiled and chattered and *sat* on Millie's *desk*, apologizing for the 'coffee incident' when that wasn't even her fault; the strange girl had even offered Millie a custard crème in order to 'butter you up, you cheeky badger'.

Millie dreaded her on-calls more than anything. If you were the starred consultant for the day you had to be available to discuss scans and investigations for patients. Thankfully most of this could be achieved over the phone, but sometimes junior doctors (rarely medical students) would venture down into the bowels of the radiology department to actually discuss a scan face to face.

Dr Morrison's a.k.a. Nuclear Winter's reputation as a stuck-up bitch was now firmly ingrained, mostly because Millie had a tough time making eye contact with the doctors that sought her out, and she often communicated non-verbally with just a curt nod if the request was reasonable. However, if the request was unreasonable or another investigation was indicated, she had to speak, and her anxiety normally made her voice tight, coming across as if she was angry and not terrified. Millie was good at her job, her suggestions were always correct; had they come with an encouraging smile, a bit of banter or a glimmer of friendliness, then the doctors she corrected would have thanked her. As it was, the fact she often changed requests and couldn't manage casual niceties had earned her a pretty unsavoury reputation.

Millie had certainly not known what to do with Kira's rampant friendliness, so she had withdrawn into her shell. The warmer Kira was, the colder Millie became. She barely spoke to her. Eventually, as was normally the case with Millie's social interactions, the other woman's smile had faltered and she had started to look uncomfortable. This was all the more excruciating as Millie would put money on the fact that it was very rare indeed for this particular girl to be uncomfortable in any situation. It had to take a really socially inept total bitch to make her appear so.

That's what Millie had been.

She'd been a bitch.

And whether intentional or not, she still took that on as her fault. She was the one who had insisted that medicine was what she wanted. It would have been easy to bury herself in the safe world of quantum physics or mathematics, but she'd known that if she went down that route, if she allowed herself to hide away in the backroom of some university or major company with them just being happy that she was producing results and supporting her hermit ways in order for her to continue doing so, she *knew* that she would lose her chance to be normal. She would lose her chance to really be a part of something.

The patient interactions Millie could handle: those followed set lines, set protocols, she knew the boundaries, the rules, and could work well within them. She could even communicate effectively with patients – not that that was always an essential part of radiology, but when it was required Millie could take a history, break bad news, reassure patients. It was interactions like this one now that she fell down on. She simply didn't understand the rules. And like it or not they were an essential part of being a doctor: you had to be able to interact with your colleagues.

Millie hated the fact that she'd made Kira feel uncomfortable. That she'd dimmed that girl's light for even a short time. Not for the first time it made her reconsider her decision. Maybe she should be festering away in some lab somewhere? At least then she wouldn't be able to upset anyone.

This bloody woman is not to be believed, Pav thought as he tapped his foot with impatience. Kira – *Kira* for Christ's sake – had come back to the ward with a blank expression after her run-in with Nuclear Winter. He knew that she felt bad about what had happened in the canteen and wanted to give Dr Morrison a chance; hell, Pav had been the one to encourage her to do so. When Kira explained what had happened earlier, she'd clearly been embarrassed.

Kira, *embarrassed*.

And she hadn't smiled since. Kira was always smiling; it was like some sort of disease with her. Okay, Pav knew she could be annoying, but the way Miss High and Mighty Reader of Scans treated her was totally out of order. And worse, it made Pav feel guilty – not an emotion he was particularly familiar with, or one he enjoyed overmuch. Kira was still low on confidence clinically since failing her anatomy viva, and he was the one who had suggested she go down to discuss the scan with the on-call radiologist. The fact he was scrubbed in theatre and they were a junior doctor down on the team was a big factor in his decision, but *come on*. Couldn't this bloody woman even discuss the options with Kira? Instead of point-blank ignoring her? Add in the fact that Dr Morrison had been avoiding him for weeks now, and the time she'd cut him dead in the MDT meeting, giving that smug twat Lucas the chance to smirk behind his back, and Pav was furious.

'Right, well,' he said, gritting his teeth as he noticed she still hadn't bothered to actually maintain eye contact with him for more than a few seconds. She was sitting there in her perfect pencil skirt and pristine white blouse, with immaculate hair (not a mousy strand out of place) and expertly applied make-up, lording it over his medical student. For fuck's sake, she was lording it over *him*. He hadn't worked all this time to become a consultant surgeon just so snooty know-it-all radiologists could look down their noses at him. 'I'm here now and hopefully you can discuss the options with *me*.'

‘The best investigation would be a CT urogram as the patient has a history of atopy and is taking beta blockers, giving him an increased risk of allergic reaction to the dye we use in the IVU ...’

All this information was imparted in an almost bored monotone and directed straight at his right upper arm.

‘How did you even know the patient’s medical history? You can’t –’

‘Instead of looking at Miss Conway I was looking at the screen and had drawn up his details after she said his name. We are now linked to System One GP records. He had a reaction to shellfish recorded on the 12th of May 2003 whilst he was a patient in Derbyshire.’

‘But ...’ Pav scratched the back of his head. ‘But there aren’t any allergies in his –’

‘It wasn’t recorded as an allergy by either the hospital or the GP. It was mentioned in a pre-assessment for an appendectomy.’

‘But Kira was only down here for a few minutes. How could you have gone through all the notes in that amount of –’

‘I read ... um ... fast ... Very fast.’

‘Well, okay but that still means –’

‘Your patient is in the scanner.’

‘What?’ Pav did not like being on the back foot. He prided himself on being a step ahead of most people, usually using his charm and humour to achieve whatever he wanted. ‘How did you –?’

‘I ordered the scan after Miss Conway left.’

Pav clenched both his fists by his sides, reining in his formidable but normally dormant Greek temper. ‘Could you not have *told* Kira that was what you were going to do? Don’t you think that might have saved her and me some time?’

He watched Dr Morrison sitting motionless on the chair for a few seconds before she gave an almost imperceptible shrug. He’d been running around like a blue-arse fly trying to sort out this patient, and after Kira told him the scan had been refused he’d been distracted for the crucial last half hour of the nephrectomy he was doing, and all this bitch could do was shrug?

‘Right, well, thanks for that information, Dr Morrison,’ he bit out. ‘And please don’t worry, in future I won’t *dream* of sending anyone less than registrar grade to request scans or ask advice.’

She was still motionless, but now her attention had turned back to her computer screen. He rolled his eyes and muttered ‘stuck-up icy bitch’ under his breath as he stomped out of her office.

Pav had thought he’d been pretty restrained when it came to that particular confrontation with Dr Morrison. Unfortunately he underestimated how loud his voice in anger could be, even when spoken under his breath; but he did see her visibly flinch as that verbal blow hit home. What he didn’t see was her shoulders sag in relief as he left, or the repair job she had to do on her wrists later that night. Pav prided himself on his ability to read women, but with Dr Morrison, as was so often the case for her in the hospital, he’d failed miserably.