



Medical

Resisting Her Ex's Touch

Amber McKenzie

MILLS & BOON®

Fighting her attraction...

In-demand senior surgeon Kate Spence is at the top of her game. But now her career is hanging in the balance, and the only man who can help her is hotshot lawyer—and her oh-so-gorgeous ex—Matt McKayne!

Matt might have shattered her world, but now he's her only hope. And, to protect her career, cool and controlled Kate must do the unthinkable and trust Matt again. But to protect her heart she must resist the lure of a touch that still sets her on fire...!

Anger became her dominant emotion as she turned to look at Matt, who was asleep on top of the blankets with one arm extended across her. That explained the weight.

He was wearing a ragged university T-shirt and jeans, and looked too much like the old Matt, her Matt. As if on cue he opened his eyes, and a few inches away she saw the familiar blue eyes that looked softer than she had seen them since their reunion. Her heart fluttered and she forgot her anger.

He didn't say anything, and she was too overwhelmed with memories of the past to tear her eyes from his, still trying to understand the man she'd thought she once knew. His eyes didn't have the answers—seemed only to have more questions for her. She watched as he propped himself up on one arm. His other hand moved from her waist to the side of her face, his wide palm spanning her cheek, his fingers in her hair. His eyes changed then, darkening as his pupils widened and his mouth came down on hers.

Dear Reader,

It is my true belief that at the heart of every woman is a romantic. In some way or another we all envisage our hero and the moments that will perhaps change our lives forever. My parents, however, raised a very practical young woman who was taught from an early age not to look for a hero to complete me, but instead to complement and enrich a life I had built for myself.

Throughout my prolonged fourteen years in postsecondary education I gained that partner, and a further respect for my parents' teaching. I have been privileged to have met and worked with some of the finest, most beautiful and most dedicated female physicians around. By the end of my training, when life was moving away from textbooks and on to ways to maintain a decent work/life balance, a spark began to burn.

As a lifelong reader of Harlequin® books, I always had dreams of what I considered the perfect book—and then I realized. Who would be better heroines than my friends? Women who are gorgeous, smart and by all means successful, but maybe have some unconsidered challenges when it comes to finding love. Meet Kate, a combination of many of my friends, and aptly named, as thirty percent of my colleagues at one time were named Kate. Her story is completely original, though, featuring some of my most favorite romantic gestures, from emotional torment in the rain to forehead-kisses.

My debut novel, *Resisting Her Ex's Touch*, is the first of hopefully many forays into the perfect romance. I hope that you fall in love and gain the same admiration that I have for the men and women who devote their lives to the world of medicine.

Amber

RESISTING HER EX'S TOUCH

Amber McKenzie

Medical
www.millsandboon.com.au

There is nothing better in life than the people who love and support you and inspire you to be better than you ever thought you could be. My love and gratitude to my mom, Linda, my ultimate best friend, Jennie, and my amazing husband, Kyle.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER ONE

HER HEART POUNDED against her chest, keeping cadence with the rhythm her heeled boots made against the linoleum floor. She had everything to lose and little to no control over an outcome that was going to decide her future. Some people would take comfort in knowing they were in the right and hadn't done anything wrong, but not Dr. Kate Spence. She had learned early in life that bad things happened whether you deserved them or not.

She walked through the corridors of Boston General with reluctant determination. For the first time in five years she felt out of place in the hospital. She was used to being in her element, dressed in surgical scrubs with her entire focus on her job as a general surgery resident. Today was different. Every fiber of her being was on alert and she was conscious of waiting for the intense foreboding sensation that had come over her in the past several weeks to be fulfilled.

After years of school and sacrifice, Kate had almost made it. She had made it as a doctor, as a surgeon, and in three months' time would be starting a fellowship in New York, in one of the most acclaimed hospitals in the country. She had three months left of residency and then she was done in Boston and on her way to New York to complete her final training and have a second chance at a new beginning.

They had called it a strategy meeting, whatever that was supposed to mean. The only thing that had registered with Kate was that they were going to have to talk about "that night" and the guilt was overwhelming.

Kate took a deep breath and tried to gather her mind and her facial expression into that of the composed professional she was widely regarded as being. She was the chief resident of general surgery in one of the nation's top five surgical programs. She arrived at work no later than five-thirty every morning and was never home before seven—and that was on evenings when she got home, because most nights she stayed and operated. Being in the operating room, fixing people, had become her salvation in life. She loved the feeling of working meticulously at something, never knowing what challenges lay inside and pushing herself to overcome all the difficulties and limitations that could arise.

In a place where things could easily get out of control, Kate felt the most in control, confident in her ability to get the job done and do what was needed for her patient.

Kate pushed through the frosted glass door leading to the conference room and took in the scene. Sitting at the large wooden conference table were all of the expected people. The hospital's chief executive officer, lawyer, chief of staff, and Dr. Tate Reed, Vascular Surgeon, her co-defendant and ex-boyfriend as of six months ago.

She knew this wasn't going to be easy, but it still hurt more than she had prepared herself for. No one liked facing their own mistakes and Kate rarely made mistakes. She had taken an oath to do no harm and had promised herself years ago that she would never be responsible for causing someone she loved pain, and she hadn't until Tate. It had been six months and every day she regretted what had happened between them. She had never fallen in love with him and that horrible night she had been

forced to accept that he wasn't the man for her no matter how hard she had tried to feel otherwise.

When she walked in, every face peered up at her with acknowledgement, except for one, who refused to acknowledge her presence.

"Good afternoon Dr. Spence, please take a seat," Dr. Williamson, the chief of staff instructed.

Then and only then did he look up and their eyes meet. The same combination of hurt and anger that had been there six months earlier stared back at her. The worst part was that she knew she deserved it. She felt every muscle in her face strain as she struggled to maintain a neutral expression and conceal the feelings of hurt and regret she felt every time she thought of Tate.

Kate walked towards one of the two empty places at the conference table, choosing the one farthest from Tate. She sat down in the leather chair and wished she could just keep sinking. She looked away and focused her gaze towards the other men, reminding herself that she needed to stay confident and collected. She was the only woman in a room full of the hospital's most prominent male leaders. There would be plenty of time for guilt and remorse to torture her thoughts later, without an audience.

Jeff Sutherland, the hospital's lawyer, started the meeting. "As you all know, four weeks ago Boston General, Dr. Reed, Dr. Spence and several other hospital personnel were served with a multimillion-dollar lawsuit for wrongful death on behalf of the Weber family. The lawsuit alleges that there was a critical delay in Mr. Weber reaching the operating room, which led to his death, and that had he received more timely medical and surgical attention he could have survived his condition."

"They're wrong," Tate responded unequivocally.

Jeff looked up briefly, but continued. "In their affidavit, the Weber family alleges there was a twenty-minute delay and critical time lost between the diagnosis of Michael Weber's ruptured aortic aneurysm and Dr. Spence's ability to locate Dr. Reed and communicate the findings. Mr. Weber subsequently did not reach the operating room until fifty-five minutes following diagnosis, and by that time was so unstable that he did not survive attempts made by Dr. Reed to repair the aneurysm."

"He was never going to survive," Kate said. She replayed the images of the night in her mind, as she had a countless number of times. That night the happiness then the devastation, the genuine love, followed by pain and loss, had been heartbreaking. It had been the first and only time she had ever wanted out of a case, not to be in the operating room. Working across the table from Tate, knowing it was hopeless, knowing there was nothing left for Mr. Weber or for them. For the first time in her career she had felt like a coward because she hadn't been able to bring herself to confront Tate with the futility of their actions. She didn't know if it had been because of what had happened between them or if it had been because on that night she had been unable to bear the prospect of telling Mrs. Weber the man she loved was gone.

Dr. Williamson spoke. "Tate, I have reviewed this case, and in my medical opinion and in the opinion of this hospital you acted in an appropriate and timely manner in your complete care of Mr. Weber. His condition was such that even with immediate surgical intervention he was unlikely to have survived such an extensive rupture. Most vascular surgeons would not have even attempted surgical management, and unfortunately because you did you are now the target of the family's grief."

Kate exhaled for what felt like the first time since she had entered the room, grateful for a small reprieve from the nightmare.

“Thank you, David. I appreciate your support,” Tate replied.

She glanced up to look at Tate, her first instinct to share their sense of relief, but he wasn’t looking at her. Her relief that the chief of staff was on their side quickly left her when she remembered there was no “their” any more and that had been her choice.

She focused her attention on the chief of staff, once again mentally trying to separate her professional and personal lives. The problem was that Tate had been both. Between the demands of the hospital and the need to study whenever she wasn’t at the hospital she didn’t have time for a social life, but Tate had come as the complete package. They had become colleagues, then friends, and eventually lovers. Everyone had thought they were a perfect match, everyone except Kate.

Kate was forced to refocus when Dr. Williamson began speaking again.

“Unfortunately, Tate, it is more than my opinion that counts in this matter. The Weber family has been able to document and produce several witnesses who verify a twenty-minute delay in your response to Kate’s repeated attempts to make contact that night. It is this evidence that has led the family to believe they have a case, and despite several medical experts, who all agree that Mr. Weber’s condition was medically and surgically futile, they are bent on having this matter argued in court.”

Kate could not think of anything she wanted less and felt her stomach heave with the implications of a court hearing. The events of that night were completely entwined with every personal and private detail of her life. The thought of her personal life being discussed and examined in public, when she could barely face the details in private, was unfathomable. Kate had had six months to think about that night. Professionally, in her heart and her brain she knew that the delay had not caused Mr. Weber’s death.

“In response to the legal action, the hospital has retained outside counsel to represent all parties named in the lawsuit,” Jeff announced. Kate’s defensive body language and Tate’s unusual silence must have said more than words could express.

“Drs. Spence and Reed, this hospital expects your one hundred percent co-operation with our attorney and in all matters relating to this lawsuit,” Quinn Sawyer, the chief executive officer, announced with finality. “I do not need to impress upon you the risk this hospital and your careers face if this does not go in our favor. I trust your personal relationship, whatever it may be, will not interfere with your ability to protect those interests.”

“I no longer have a personal relationship with Dr. Spence.”

An uncharacteristic flush burned up Kate’s neck, coloring her entire face. She focused on the window, unable to face the humiliation of having her personal life referenced so openly among the most important men of the hospital. She had kept everything about her relationship with Tate private. She had never wanted anyone to think she was getting ahead by any means other than her natural surgical ability and strong work ethic, so it hurt and embarrassed her to think just how un-private things had become and what questions people would have about her now that the relationship had come to light, even if it no longer existed. She barely noticed the door open and close as she fought for control of her emotions.

“Mr. McKayne, I would like to introduce you to our senior management.” Jeff’s

voice echoed in the background.

Kate felt her heart stop and then everything around her seemed to be suspended in time. There was no way she could have heard that correctly and she quickly turned to the door, looking for reassurance.

In as long as it took for their eyes to make contact, Kate went from pink to white. She felt a sharp pain hit her chest and tasted bile in the back of her throat. She closed her eyes, hoping for someone different to be standing at the head of the table when she reopened them. Please, not him, anyone but him, she thought, but the man standing at the front of the room was the same. He had not changed in the past ten seconds and, for the most part, not in the past nine years.

Kate was vaguely aware of introductions being shared around the table. She was falling, her mind was in free fall, overwhelmed with flashes from the past and desperately trying to reconcile what was happening in the present. Nothing that was going on inside her was in her control.

“Dr. Spence.”

“Kate.”

“Katherine.” It was Tate’s voice biting out her name for the first time in months that brought her back to the table. Tate was staring at her with a new look of confusion. She had a well-earned reputation for being focused and unshakeable, even in the worst circumstances, until today. Everyone was standing and staring at her. She rose to her feet, praying her legs would support her, and turned to face the group.

“Dr. Kate Spence, this is Matthew McKayne. He will be representing you, Dr. Reed, and the hospital in this matter.”

Kate turned towards Matt and saw that his hand was outstretched towards her. The gesture was appropriate in the circumstances but completely inappropriate given their past. She didn’t want to shake his hand, look at him, or want any part of him in her life. Shock evolved into anger as she once again met the eyes of the one man she never wanted to see again.

* * *

Katie was still the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, though any hint of “girl” had been replaced by a very grown-up and striking woman. Matt struggled to keep his expression neutral as he studied her. She had always been taller than most women, with both a long body and legs to match. Her figure had changed. Gone was the softness from her body and from the expression on her face. The new “Kate” that was standing before him had more of an athletic build. Her legs appeared well toned beneath her fitted dress pants and her waist was more defined, making both her hips and breasts appear more prominent and sensual. Her light blue shirt was tucked in and the top two buttons were undone, only hinting at the curves underneath.

Discomfort tore through Matt’s body as he remembered the old Katie and took in the sight of new Kate. Her hair appeared darker, like a rich dark chocolate, though he couldn’t tell if her hair had changed or merely now appeared darker in comparison to her pale complexion. Her skin still appeared perfect, though, with the pattern of beauty marks he could have drawn from memory.

Then he met her eyes and whatever track his mind had been on, it was sharply

derailed. Katie had changed a lot in the last nine years but his enjoyment of those changes was halted by the look in her eyes. It was the same look he had seen the day he'd left, the look that had tortured him for almost a decade.

"Dr. Spence," he greeted her, the formality of calling Katie by her full title necessary but awkward on his lips. She placed her hand in his and his hand wrapped around hers as though every muscle remembered the feel of her, before she snatched it away and sat back down at the table.

Everyone else followed and Matt took the last remaining chair. That chair was next to Kate, and with his first breath he smelled the familiar scent of her rosemary and mint shampoo, which brought back more memories than the sight of her had.

His position beside her spared him from the look in her eyes. He had known he had hurt her, badly, but he had never imagined that Katie could hate him and what that would feel like face-to-face for the first time.

"Mr. McKayne, Matt, Drs. Reed and Spence have been briefed regarding the details of the lawsuit. They are aware that this hospital and its medical staff are completely behind them and their actions. They are in turn willing to work with you and your team as much as needed to resolve this matter," the CEO stated. "They have been informed that we expect an honest, full disclosure regarding all the details of that evening, so that we can resolve this lawsuit for both the hospital and the Weber family."

Matt studied the other men at the table and his focus landed on Tate Reed. In turn Tate appeared to be studying both Matt and Kate with what appeared to be hostile curiosity. He wasn't the only person who seemed to have noticed the change in her since his arrival.

"We will leave you three to co-ordinate your schedules and work on your response. Matt, if there any difficulties, in any regard, I expect to hear about them sooner rather than later," the CEO remarked to Matt, with a message that was obviously more for Kate and Tate. The group of men left and the room fell silent.

Kate and Tate remained seated at the table. Tate was looking at the pair of them intently and Kate strongly refused to look at either man. "Do you two know each other?" Tate asked.

"No," Kate responded firmly, before he could even turn to see her response to the question. When he did turn towards her, her back was straight, her head was high and she was entirely focused on Tate, dismissing Matt completely.

Tate stood from his chair and for the first time since he'd arrived, Matt took a long look at the man he was representing. Tate Reed was tall, similar in height to Matt's six feet three inches. Where Matt had dark, thick hair and the constant appearance of shadow along his jaw, Tate was dark blond and clean-shaven. Tate was well built; if paired against each other they would both probably be able to do a significant amount of damage before a victor was declared. Tate's green eyes appeared to similarly be evaluating Matt before he turned his attention back to Kate.

"I wish I could believe you, Katherine." Tate spoke, and the comment was directed only to her.

"Mr. McKayne, here is my card. I can be available to meet you when you are ready to discuss the medical facts of the case." He passed Matt the card and then shook his hand with obvious strength and power in his grip.

When the two broke apart, he turned to Kate. “Katherine, try not to make things any worse for me than you already have.”

Tate left the room and Matt turned to look at Kate, who was staring intently at the door Tate had just walked through. Her gray eyes looked stricken and he felt equally struck. He recognized that look in her eyes—it was one that reflected her feelings of pain and love.

“Katie,” he said softly a few moments later, his inherent need to comfort her taking precedence over the jealousy was that simmering inside him.

She flinched and turned to meet his eyes, not bothering to hide her fury. “Do not call me Katie. It’s Kate or, better yet, Dr. Spence.”

“Not Katherine?” He couldn’t resist it, his compassion turning to jealousy and anger.

She stood from her chair and glared down at him. “I meant what I said to Tate. I don’t know you and I don’t want to know you. I don’t know what you were thinking when you came here today, but I don’t need you or your help.”

“I am not sure you have a choice in that. The hospital has hired me to defend you and Dr. Reed, who, in case you haven’t noticed, doesn’t care what happens to you, Katie,” he delivered coldly from his chair, waiting to see if he hit his mark.

He watched her response. Her gray eyes widened, initially looking hurt, then narrowed. She straightened her back and drew her shoulders down to focus on him and he felt instant unease.

“Like I said, it’s Kate, and I guess that makes two of you. The difference being that I care what happens to Tate and you can go to hell.” She turned and walked out of the conference room, seemingly controlled, apart from the slamming of the door behind her.

Too late, Katie, or Kate, he thought, I’m already there.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE WANTED TO run. Run to escape the confines of the hospital and her professional reputation. Run until she was so exhausted that there was no chance of being able to think about the lawsuit, Tate, or Matt. Run as far and as hard as she could until the only pain she could feel was the burning in her lungs and the tightness in her chest and not the emptiness in her heart. As she entered the hospital hallway the only other thought in her head was how to get out of the building as quickly as possible without having to talk, see, or take care of anyone else. She needed to be alone, needed to gain control of her thoughts before she risked sharing them with anyone.

“Kate!” She looked up to see her best friend, Chloe Darcy, leaning against the hallway wall, waiting for her. Chloe had been her best friend since the first day of medical school when the two women had sat next to each other, and they had been constants in each other’s lives since. Chloe had chosen emergency medicine and was almost as busy as Kate. The fact that the two women still found time for each other was a tribute to the strength of their relationship. When Kate reached Chloe she felt her friend’s assessment. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” she replied, turning her head in dissent, her eyes shut against the scene that had just unfolded.

“Okay. Is there anything I can do to make it better?” Chloe offered, not pushing Kate, as usual. Kate couldn’t help but smile at her best friend. Chloe was the most beautiful person Kate had ever known, both inside and out. When they had met in medical school Kate had been an emotional disaster and most of her classmates had not made the effort to befriend her, but not Chloe. She had sat by her side daily, never prying, never pushing, just being there for the little things, until Kate had realized that she had found a true friend.

With a sense of horror Kate felt her resolve begin to crumble. Kindness at that very moment had been enough to push her over the edge. Chloe read her friend perfectly.

“Kate, let’s get you out of here before you ruin your macho surgical reputation.” She felt her friend’s strong grip on her arm as she led her down the hall. Moments later they were in the women’s change room, away from at least half of the prying eyes that filled the hospital.

“Kate, I know how private you are but sometimes it does help to talk about things.” Chloe spoke quietly, her voice intentionally no louder than necessary.

Kate stared back at Chloe and knew she could tell her anything. She wanted to pour out every thought and feeling inside her in the hope that the purge would rid her of the maelstrom of emotion tormenting her. But how could you explain to someone something you couldn’t bring yourself to face? “I can’t, Chloe, I just can’t.”

It was the truth. She couldn’t explain what had happened, how she was feeling, what she was going to do, what she should do, and she couldn’t talk about Matt and Tate without completely breaking what little of herself she felt she was still holding together.

Chloe stepped back and Kate could tell she wanted say something and was choosing

her words carefully. “Kate, you are one of the strongest women I know and there is nothing you cannot do or overcome. You just need to remind yourself of that more often.”

Perfection, thought Kate. Chloe was always perfect in her words and in her support and her friendship. At that moment Chloe felt like the only secure thing in her life and more than she deserved. “Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.” She smiled weakly at the understatement.

“Keep that in mind, Kate. You can’t keep living your life holding everything on the inside and hidden from those who love and care about you.” It was the closest Chloe had ever come to confronting her and she recognized the truth and sentiment behind her friend’s words.

“I know.” Her acknowledgement surprised even herself. It was another truth to add to the avalanche rolling through her mind and threatening to bury her. “But I can’t, not here and not tonight.”

“I know, Kate. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy for you to see him today and I don’t expect you to change overnight.”

Kate blanched. How did Chloe know about Matt? She had never talked about Matt to anyone.

Chloe noted her friend’s pallor and lowered her voice even further to ensure complete privacy. “Kate, are you sure you are okay with Tate and I still being friends? You need to be honest with me and tell me if you’re not.”

Kate felt relief wash through her and then guilt for focusing on Matt and forgetting the significance of today’s meeting with Tate. Chloe had been talking about Tate. There was no one other than she and Matt who knew about their past together. Matt was her past and even though he was forcing himself back into her present, what had happened between them was something she had never told anyone about, and she only hoped he had done the same.

Chloe was staring, waiting for a response, and she had to think hard to remember the question.

“Chloe, you are an amazing friend to me and to anyone else you decide to be friends with. If feeling worse about what happened with Tate was possible, thinking that I ruined your friendship with him would make it so.”

She reached over and hugged her friend, trying to convey her emotions with the uncharacteristic action.

“I need to get out of here. Thank you, Chloe, for being my friend and knowing me better than I know myself sometimes.”

“Always.” Chloe smiled.

* * *

It was raining and she didn’t care. She didn’t even attempt to avoid puddles as she ran along the trail parallel to the Charles River. She let her feet strike the wet pavement as music blared in her ears and she tried to free herself from the memories that had been flooding her mind since the initial shock of seeing Matt again had worn off. The cold spring rain hit her face and blended with the warm tears that streamed from her eyes. Classic Kate, she chastised herself. Hold everything in as though nothing is wrong and

then cry alone so no one can see that you are hurting, so no one thinks you are weak. The irony was that it made her feel even weaker.

As the miles passed she forced herself to accept that Matt McKayne was back in her life and she had no idea why or what he wanted. All she knew was that it was going to be hard, maybe impossible to be around Matt again. For their entire relationship she would have sworn that she knew Matt better than anyone else in the world. Then he had completely proved her wrong and now he was a familiar stranger. A stranger whose motivations and actions she couldn't predict and didn't understand. That alone terrified her, but not as much as the feelings she experienced, seeing and being near him again.

She could still describe every inch of Matt—except after today she couldn't tell if her mind had downplayed his features or if he had become even more beautiful in the intervening years. She hated it that she'd noticed, even in that brief time she had seen him. Hated it that when he'd sat next to her she had recognized his scent. But what she really hated was that when Matt had been sitting next to her, her body had remembered him in all the wrong ways. While the sharp pain in her chest had resurfaced, so had the flood of heat and spasms of attraction that had rippled through her body, the latter being responsible for her shortness of breath.

Even now in the cold rain she could still remember what it was like to be with Matt, and the combination of desire and pain associated with the memory kept her running.

She was being punished, that was the only conclusion she could settle on. This was karma because she had done to Tate what Matt had done to her, and now she was being served up the consequences. She could remember every second of their breakup, recognizing Tate's look of disbelief and hurt as the one she had worn after Matt had walked out on her. It felt hypocritical to feel this much anger towards Matt, knowing that she wasn't any better than he was, but it didn't matter. It didn't stop her from feeling like there was not enough air and that what was left of her heart was going to die. It didn't stop the desire to rip into his chest to confirm the heart she'd thought had loved her was not actually there.

She pushed forward, harder, resolving to herself that even though she had hurt Tate, at least the reason she had broken up with him was because it had been the right thing to do for Tate. Matt had broken her heart because it had been the right thing for Matt.

It was dark when Kate started to make her way home. Her apartment was a one-bedroom in a brownstone that had been divided up for rental. It was small and cheap, but it was one of her favorite places in the world. It was the place where no one put demands on her and she could let herself be who she needed to be and not what people expected of her.

Kate had spent a lot of time making her apartment the home she craved and needed. She had chosen the soft cream paint that adorned the walls. Over time she had saved and slowly put together the furniture that made her house a home. The antique wood that filled the space was precious both because of the money it had taken to purchase it and because of the time, her limited time, it had taken to find it at markets and small town shops nearby. Her favorite spot was the deep, wide, soft yellow couch that she probably slept on more than her bed. It was where she felt at peace and that thought propelled her forward to home as her body screamed at her to stop running.

The cold had finally started to set in as she rounded the final corner to her

apartment. She knew her clothes were soaked through and she felt the squish of her feet in the watery soles of her shoes. All she could think of was a hot shower and curling up on her couch with her favorite charcoal throw, away from all the memories that were tormenting her.

She didn't see him in the darkness until she started up the brownstone's stairs. Her first reaction was fear at the sight of the large man tucked under the staircase awning out of the rain; her second thought was still one of fear when she recognized that man as Matt.

Stay away, her mind screamed at her. She refused to acknowledge him as she reached the door and tried to free her key from inside the wristband she wore for running.

"Katie." He said her name, asking her with his tone to acknowledge him.

"I can't talk to you right now. You need to leave," she said, not looking at him and trying to focus on the task at hand.

"I'm not leaving, Kate," he replied with a firmness that left her little doubt of her inability to dismiss him.

"Yes, you can, and you did," she said flatly, staring ahead at the door and refusing to give him any more notice. She didn't trust herself to look at him so instead looked away. Her attention was drawn to her hands, which were shaking. Her whole body was shaking and the key, which she had managed to get out, dropped onto the concrete step.

"I'm cold," she declared, hoping he would believe that was the reason for the tremors that were starting to overtake her body.

He didn't reply. Before she had a chance, he bent down and picked up the key and used it to unlock the building's front door. He walked through and held the door open, waiting for her to follow. She didn't. She stood under the awning, staring at him with a sense of panic that was building at the thought of him in her home.

"Kate, you are wet and probably freezing. Please, just come inside. I promise you can despise me just as much from in there." His new position in front of her forced her to look at him for the first time and she was immediately drawn to his face and eyes. She recognized his expression of concern and it brought her back to all the other times she had thought Matt cared for her. Familiarity propelled her forward.

Once she was inside the building, the warm air and bright lighting brought Kate back to the present. Matt was tall and overpowering in the small entryway. His hair was damp and had started to curl slightly at the ends. The angle of his jaw and the rigid way he held his shoulders gave Kate some indication that he shared her tension. He had changed out of his business suit but was no less stunning in an open leather jacket and dark blue striped shirt that he had left untucked from the jeans, which hugged low on his hips. His sexual power was breathtaking, and she struggled to get her breath back and gain control of the situation.

Never before had she felt self-conscious about her running clothes. But at this moment she desperately wished to be wearing anything other than the black tights and fitted heather-blue base layer top that provided her protection from the cold, but no modesty, outlining every curve of her body. She crossed her arms across her chest and held out one palm.

"Keys?" she asked, trying to adopt the same tone she used in the operating room

when calling for an instrument.

He didn't yield and her sense of discomfort was replaced by anger. "Not until I'm sure you are okay."

When had it started to matter whether she was okay or not? It hadn't mattered to Matt nine years ago, and even though she felt far from okay, she resented his concern.

"I'm not your responsibility, Matt. You don't get to worry about me," she ground out. She tilted her head upwards, trying to make up the six-inch difference in their height, and held his gaze.

"Easier said than done," he sighed, and started climbing the stairs towards the second floor. His long legs took the stairs two at a time and before she could react he was at the top.

Not in her home, she thought. Matt could not go into her apartment, her home. It was her refuge, her place where no memories of Matt existed.

She reacted quickly to this thought, running up the stairs and without thinking, wedged herself between him and the apartment door. He wasn't ready for her movement and his body followed through on its planned course, causing him to fall against her.

She was pressed between Matt and the door, and she didn't know which one felt harder against her. She started to shake and felt warmth spread through her, his warmth. She could feel every contour of his chest through his open jacket, his shirt slowly dampening from her wet body. He instinctively widened his stance and braced himself with a hand on the door behind her to keep himself from falling any further forward into her. She ended up nestled between his legs, pelvis to pelvis, his upper body bracing over her.

Instinctively, she pressed into him and felt the hard ridge that was increasing in prominence. Beyond the slow roar that was filling her head she heard a small gasp but couldn't tell if it came from him or her. She wasn't sure how long they stood pressed against each other, until she felt him pull away at the same time he brought his forehead down to rest against hers, his eyes closed.

"Why?" he demanded quietly.

"Why what?" she whispered, confused and trying to block out the sense of loss his body's retreat had caused.

"Why don't you want me in your apartment? Is it about him? Is Tate Reed in there, waiting for you?" His voice was accusing, each new question seeming more condemning than the next. But he kept asking, not pausing, as though not wanting to hear her actual response.

Tate. Every warm enticing feeling she was having left her and she felt cold again as guilt washed over her. She tried to move even further back but felt the wood of the door against her. Tate loved her, Matt had never loved her, and she felt empty inside, thinking about both men.

"I'm not discussing my relationship with Tate with you and you have no right to ask me," she whispered, not being able to bring her voice above the intimacy his question had possessed but still containing the outrage she felt. "You need to leave."

He didn't reply. He simply lifted his forehead, replacing it with his lips. She felt both heat and memories surge through her before he backed away and pressed her key into her hand. She remained against the door as she watched him leave, not trusting

herself to move until he was gone.

She wasn't sure how long she stood against the door even after he left. She felt like part of the wood, except for the small spot where her forehead burned with the memory of his soft lips pressed against her. It took hearing the beat of her shivering against the door to force her into action. She walked through the apartment in the dark, removing her clothes and leaving them in a wet trail behind her.

She stepped into the shower consumed by the cold inside and out. She had loved Matt then she had hated him, and now she had no idea how to feel. Part of her wanted to act out for the first time in her life and force him to tell her why. Why had he done it? But her instinct for self-preservation was stronger. No matter what she had told herself about why Matt had left, it would hurt more to hear him say it aloud. Seeing him today had not only brought out her anger but also unleashed every painful question and feeling of self-doubt she had tried to bury away and forget.

It took the water transitioning to cold before she thought of leaving the shower. She changed into scrub bottoms and a cotton tank top and ate the only thing she had the energy to prepare for supper—toast. It wasn't long before she was lying on the soft yellow couch cocooned within the gray blanket, trying to focus on her medical textbook and not the memories that kept replaying in her mind.

As a child she had been outgoing and bright, ready to tackle and succeed at every challenge presented to her. She had been fearless with the knowledge that her parents had always been behind her, supporting her and loving her. Then things had changed when she was eleven. Her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and for two years everything had focused on her mother and the disease. Kate had watched helplessly as nothing had worked, nothing had made things better, for her mother or her family.

She'd died when Kate was thirteen and from then on her family had no longer existed. She remembered one of their last moments together at the hospice. Her father had been sobbing and with what little energy she'd had her mother had stroked her hair and told her not to cry. And she hadn't.

Without her, Kate had felt lost, but not as lost as her father had. Kate's parents had been the loves of each other's lives, and without her mother Kate's dad had withdrawn from life and from his daughter. She had lost both parents, one to cancer and the other to depression, which as a thirteen-year-old she'd had no capacity to understand.

Kate's memories of middle and high school were not normal ones, something she had realized but didn't have time to care about. She spent those years trying to be the perfect daughter, student, homemaker, and friend to her dad, anything to make him happy, to make him come back to her. She hid every feeling of unhappiness and loneliness away, afraid that her pain would make her father worse and ruin what little they had together. She never discussed her mother and carried her grief alone. Every new womanly feeling or change she experienced she ignored, because it hurt too much to miss the mother she wanted to share those moments with.

Kate was terrified to graduate from high school, knowing that it meant she would have to leave home and her dad. It wasn't until she arrived at Brown University and had some time on her own that she realized how different she was from the other students, especially the other girls. They all seemed so beautiful and confident and, next to them, she felt completely inadequate and unprepared for life as a woman. She

went home every weekend, not just to see her dad but also to escape the weekend social gatherings where she felt so out of place.

This eventually became a comfortable routine that lasted three years, until one weekend she came home and her dad introduced her to Julia. Her father had found love again and for the first time since her mother's death he was happy. Kate shared his happiness and at the same time felt her feelings of loneliness hit rock bottom.

Watching her father and Julia made her feel even more alone than she had before because they were together, a team, and she had no one. It was no longer necessary for her dad to be her focus in life, and she was now being forced to focus on herself and she didn't even know who she was or who she wanted to be. All her anxieties and feelings of inadequacy battered her every solitary moment while she continued to play the role of the perfect daughter, stepdaughter and student. Her dedication towards a career in medicine was her only life raft in the storm in which she found herself.

She met Matt three months later and her world changed. She had been studying at her favorite coffeehouse when she glanced up and saw the most attractive man she had ever seen in her life. The glance had easily turned into an irresistible stare. He was tall and broad shouldered with thick dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He was standing beside her table and it took her an embarrassing amount of time to acknowledge to herself that he was talking to her and to figure out what he had said. He asked to share her table, because it had an electrical outlet in the wall beside it for his laptop computer.

Previously, she would have just offered him the table, making some excuse as to why she needed to leave, but she was so drawn in by everything about him that she just managed to say yes and slide her own computer toward her to make space. He thanked her and while he started studying, her mind completely shifted, thinking only of him. He was perfection. His strong jaw was covered with a shadow of stubble that screamed masculinity to her. A gray T-shirt spanned his broad chest so that she could see the outline of every muscle group she had just been studying attentively in her textbook before he'd joined her. His shoulders led to muscular tanned arms and hands that were twice the size of hers. She could imagine the strength in his hands and what it would feel like to be held by him, to feel his jaw brush against hers, to press against his strong frame.

She started and blushed when his voice broke through her thoughts with an offer to buy her coffee. She barely managed to tell him her order without stammering, feeling completely stunned by the most outrageous thoughts she had ever had and insecure with her inexperience.

When he returned to the table with their drinks he didn't reopen his computer. He introduced himself and she was drawn in by the kindness and genuine interest she saw in his eyes. There was something about Matt that had made her feel instantly safe, and with that feeling grew the confidence she had been lacking. They spent the rest of the afternoon talking and Kate felt more important in those few hours than she had in years.

In the course of their conversation she learned about his long-distance girlfriend and on hearing that felt crushed and disappointed, but still intrigued by the man who already had someone special in his life and was still interested in her, even if she wasn't girlfriend material. The more they talked the more she liked him and the more