
Chapter 1

Grace Miller walked through the swishing automatic doors and looked around the buzzing emergency room, breathing in the sterility with something akin to trepidation.

A wall of noise greeted her—groans and wails, the occasional scream and the inevitable sobbing. She might have felt at home with the sounds if she'd been at a kink club, rather than a hospital.

Along with it, came a haze of antiseptic odour that only partially disguised the more pungent smells, the metallic taint of blood and acrid stench of vomit.

Grace blew out an uneasy breath. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all, except she'd considered all the other options—several times—and hadn't managed to come up with a better one. Perhaps she should just leave it.

She flexed her shoulders and felt the zing of pain arrow down her spine and the slow, sticky ooze of blood and pus as the fabric of her shirt unstuck itself from the festering wounds on her back and opened them up yet again.

Somebody jostled her from behind, making her flinch and

forcing Grace to take a couple of hasty steps forward while they cursed her for standing in the way—more sick and injured people, desperately seeking urgent medical attention.

Sighing in resignation, Grace steeled herself and mentally pulled up her big girl panties. She was a respected human rights lawyer, for goodness sake, accustomed to prosecuting sleaze ball felons who thought they could take unfair advantage of anybody weaker or more disadvantaged than themselves. She was perfectly at home haranguing the counsel who was trying to get them off. She could surely manage to deal with this and still keep her dignity intact.

Of course, maybe that was the problem. The knowledge that a lawyer such as herself should be seeking medical attention—long overdue medical attention—for an injury like this in the first place.

They don't know what you do for a living, Grace told herself, decisively, as she made her way, grudgingly, toward a harried looking woman at the uninviting reception desk.

You're just another ordinary, unexceptional patient who they'll deal with and dismiss before moving on to someone else. They won't even remember your details; they'll be too busy seeing to the next person on the never-ending list of patients they see day in and day out.

And that was what Grace was banking on. The fact that the ER would be too busy to do anything more than patch her up and send her on her way without so much as a backwards glance.

It was several tedious hours before she was seen; her condition wasn't critical after all. But then Grace had known that would be the trade-off for utilising a system where she could try to remain more anonymous. That was why she had come in today, on her day off, when there were no other demands on her time.

She had found an empty, rather sticky looking seat between the cold, drab wall and a mean looking, inebriated muscle-head

who was bleeding profusely from a cut above a rapidly blackening eye.

Grace sat gingerly and resolutely dug out her laptop. She made a valiant attempt at concentrating on some work until her name was finally called, saving her from the foul breath and the sour reek of body odour of the increasingly bolshie drunk.

A tired looking nurse pulled the drab, phlegm green curtain around the cubicle she had been ushered into and made a quick scan of the forms Grace had filled in with as little detail as she could possibly get away with.

"Okay, open wounds to back and shoulders, possibly going septic," she read from the sheet in front of her. "Why didn't you just take this to your GP?" she asked with vaguely concealed irritation, which caused Grace a moment of guilt. She knew these people were busy.

"Because I couldn't get an appointment," she replied coolly but civilly.

The nurse harrumphed under her breath but didn't argue. Heck, everyone was busy; it wasn't as if the emergency room had a monopoly on that.

"Right, well, strip down to the waist then, and let's take a look," she said briskly, and Grace busied herself removing her suit jacket and unbuttoning the blouse underneath.

The nurse's manner softened slightly as she caught the grimaces Grace was trying to conceal as she struggled to get out of the shirt.

"Here, let me help you with that," she offered, hurrying around behind.

"Looks like the fabric has stuck to the wound." She was matter of fact in her assessment, for which Grace was grateful, but then, in A&E, she probably saw plenty of this on a daily basis and far worse besides.

Together, they managed to peel the garment away with the least amount of damage, and the nurse bustled around grabbing

up gauze, saline solution, antiseptic wipes and a medical pan, before snapping on a pair of sterile gloves.

Grace held her breath, anticipating the worst as the woman went to work. She was swift but surprisingly gentle, and Grace was just about to relax and consider the worst behind her when the very question she had dreaded all along was finally asked.

She thought she'd managed to avoid the interrogation, but, no, it appeared her luck had run out.

"How did you say you got these wounds?" the nurse queried with a frown and lips that were pursed in tight compression.

Grace sucked in a quiet, bracing breath. "I didn't," she replied, aiming for nonchalant non-committal. She wasn't certain she pulled it off.

"Hmm..." was all the nurse said. She didn't call her out on the evasiveness, but Grace was damn sure she hadn't overlooked it.

She still wasn't sure whether she had managed to dodge that particular bullet when the woman proclaimed, "Right, I'm going to have to tag a doctor, in case you need antibiotics. Give me a moment."

With that, she bustled out, leaving Grace feeling self-conscious and guilt ridden for not being more forthcoming, but hell, what was she supposed to say? If it weren't for the fact that the nurse had left the wounds uncovered while she went to find the doctor, she would have cut her losses and discharged herself.

DR. XAVIER DIAZ sat at the sparse, utilitarian desk in the duty doctor's office on a chair so uncomfortable, he figured it was deliberately designed to stop anyone from sitting down for too long. Like they'd ever get the chance! Still, he had an uncommonly quiet five-minute break and aimed to catch up with some of the necessary admin for the patients he'd treated so far today.

That way, he just might get home at a decent hour after his shift was finished instead of having to stay over and finish it after his replacement arrived.

Having his own private practice, he didn't normally spend so much time at the hospital, but he had volunteered himself as an emergency bank doctor with the ER department of the hospital where he had completed his residency because of a desire to give something back to the community.

The idea was that he would only be called in during set times, when he would normally be free, if there was an emergency staff shortage. Of course, with the current slew of budget cuts, that seemed to be happening more and more often these days, since the hospital seemed to be perpetually short staffed.

He was just finishing up when there was a knock on the door and one of the practice nurses slipped in.

"Is there a problem, nurse?" he asked with a frown. Usually, he just got paged if somebody needed him.

"I just wanted to have a quick word in private, doctor," she replied, biting her lip and beetling her eyebrows together. Clearly, something was bothering her.

"What seems to be the problem?" he enquired, gesturing for her to take a seat.

She didn't take it but stood on the other side of the desk, shuffling from foot to foot as if struggling with her words.

"It's the patient in bay three," she finally disclosed. "I don't know quite how to read her. I mean she's not a kid...not old either, but, you know, mature and smartly—expensively—dressed in a business suit, so she doesn't seem like your usual push over."

Xavier squelched his impatience that she wasn't getting to the point. There was a lot of that required for the job, but the nurses were usually more direct.

"The thing is," the nurse continued, "she has marks on her back and her shoulders. They're open wounds, and she's being a bit cagey about how she got them. They've clearly not been

treated properly, so a couple of them look to have turned septic as a result..." She trailed off and Xavier climbed to his feet, figuring she wanted him to take a look and sign off a script and maybe have a private word in what sounded like a typical case of domestic abuse.

But...well...it's just that...geez, this is going to sound bizarre!" She huffed out a breath, but Xavier could see steel forming behind her eyes as she simultaneously straightened her spine and looked him directly in the eye. "They look like whip marks!" she finally huffed out. "And it's not just the few that are open and infected...she's covered with them!"

Xavier stilled where he was pulling his suit jacket back on and looked at the nurse. "Where are her records?" he asked with a frown that brought his thick, black eyebrows together into an almost continuous line.

The nurse thrust out a clipboard and Xavier took it, glancing through the details while he continued to button his jacket one handed. There was nothing familiar about the name, although that didn't necessarily mean anything, but the nurse was right, the details were certainly evasive. Address given, but key elements like the house name or number left off. No next of kin listed. No employment recorded, just 'lawyer' listed as occupation. Interesting.

"Okay, nurse, I'll go and deal with it now. Cubicle three, did you say?"

"Yes," she confirmed as she hurried to leave the room and resume her duties. "Thank you, Doctor."

Xavier paused for a moment outside the drab green screen. He could hear the sharp, staccato tapping of what he guessed was a pair of ladies' heels, the rhythm of which implied agitated pacing. It paused the moment Xavier swept back the curtain and stepped inside the cubicle.

"Doctor, I really need to..." The woman trailed off as Xavier ensured what little privacy there was to be had by pulling the

screen back into place and turned toward her, smiling what he hoped was his most reassuring smile.

"I understand you're busy, but I need to get back to work."

Her eyes skittered off to the side, refusing to meet his own, a lie then. She fidgeted even though she sat back down on the examination bench, her knee jiggling and her hands wringing together before she made an obvious effort to appear calm and nonchalant.

"Let's get this dealt with then, shall we?" Xavier replied casually, pressing the switch to lay the cubicle bed flat. "The nurse who saw you feels you may need antibiotics, so why don't you lie on your tummy, and I'll take a look."

The woman, who was possibly somewhere close to his own forty-two years, was already dressed in an open backed hospital gown. She followed his instructions somewhat resignedly, but without another word, and stretched herself out on the bed while he collected the tray of dressings the nurse had prepared.

Unlike the nurse, Xavier didn't have to look twice to know that these were indeed whip marks. Maybe a half dozen had split the skin; the rest were minor lacerations and a few bruising welts.

As he made a thorough examination of the rest of her body, while he treated the worst wounds, he also came to the opposite conclusion to his nurse. He knew exactly how the patient had come by these unusual injuries, but, contrary to what would surely be the popular theory, it wasn't the result of any kind of abuse. Well, not the type that most people would automatically conclude, anyway. In fact, they weren't so very different to the type of marks he had left on a submissive or two of his own over the years. A little harsher than he'd like to see, but the real divergence was in the aftercare, and he figured there was probably an answer for that too.

"I'm assuming that you don't have anybody at home who can change these dressings for you?" he probed as he finished patching her up.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," she replied, her dissipating levels of unease evident now, in the way she had relaxed since the grilling she'd clearly expected hadn't come.

"Okay, well, we're done for now, so if you'd like to get dressed, I'll write you a prescription for an oral antibiotic. No point in prescribing a topical one if there's no one to put it on for you."

He glanced up from writing when he heard a rustling sound. He supposed he should have anticipated that she wouldn't bother waiting for him to leave the room before she stripped off the hospital gown, as he'd expected. She was clearly a woman confident in her own skin and obviously well used to being on display. It seemed she never even gave it a thought as she paused, naked from the waist up, and inspected the bloodstains on the shirt she had removed earlier, as if he wasn't there. No embarrassed fumbling or reserved modesty for this woman.

The sadist inside of him strained at its shackles as she stood before him, proud and self-assured, wearing those lash marks like she owned them, and Xavier was shocked at the unexpected surge of desire he felt for her. He saw dozens of women every week, in various stages of undress, and he could look at them completely impersonally, without the slightest bit of interest. But somehow, this woman spoke to him on an elemental level that he wasn't used to encountering during his day job.

He shifted imperceptibly, trying to get his unruly cock under control. All that bad boy could perceive was a half-naked woman with whip marks all over her back and the damn thing was behaving as if they were in Club Risqué in the aftermath of a scene and now it was his turn.

Digging in his inside pocket, Xavier busied himself with finding a business card instead. He wrote a quick note on the back of it while she finished dressing.

"Okay, try to keep those dressings dry and pop into my clinic

the day after tomorrow so that I can change them and make sure they're healing," he told her, handing her the card.

She hesitated in taking it. "Oh, but I—"

"Now, be a good girl for me, pet, and be honest. Is there anybody at all who can redress these wounds for you? Parent, siblings, a close friend even?" Xavier interrupted, carefully choosing his words so she would understand the connotation while mindful that the fabric 'walls' lacked the privacy for him to say anything more.

Her eyes flew to his and her mouth dropped open, just a fraction, in surprise. She answered automatically. Reacting to the recognition of a dominant in the lifestyle, rather than because she actually wanted to answer his question, he suspected.

"No, I was a late only child to two only children. There's no one..." She trailed off as if realising she had revealed too much, but Xavier pressed the advantage.

"You can drop in any time during the afternoon. Just hand this card to my receptionist, and she'll slot you in between patients."

With that, he gave a curt nod and passed across her discharge papers, before leaving to continue his rounds.