

CHAPTER ONE

I was running when I saw my father kill himself. Not that he jumped off a tall building or stepped in front of a truck but – professionally, personally – what I watched him do was suicide.

Although I hadn't been keeping a check of the distance, I reckoned I'd covered around eight miles at that point. Not fast, not slow. Just nicely settled into a rhythm where I could concentrate on working through the pain barrier. After six months' slog, it didn't seem to be getting any less solid, nor any further away. The doctors had told me I'd probably make a full recovery from the double-gunshot injury that had damn near been the end of me. They just hadn't said when.

But just as I thought I might finally reach the finish this time before I hit that particular wall, I ran headlong into something else entirely.

As soon as I saw him, my stride faltered, all coordination leaving me. I stumbled and fell against the guardrail of the treadmill, rebounding heavily. The heartrate monitor pads came away from my chest and the alarm began to screech.

'Charlie!' Nick, my personal trainer, reached out a steadying arm. 'Are you all right? Your leg—'

I shook my head, shook him off. ‘Turn it up,’ I said, swiping the sweat out of my eyes. When Nick just gaped, I jerked my head towards the overhead TV. ‘The sound, Nick. Turn up the damn sound!’

I hadn’t immediately recognised my father on the morning news programme playing silently above me during this latest fitness test, but that was no great surprise. I was in New York City and he was safely back home in England – or so I’d thought. I hadn’t spoken to him since I’d moved out here in the spring.

Not that relocating permanently to the States had greatly widened the rift that already existed between us. My parents had always disliked the career that had chosen me, almost as much as they’d disliked the man who’d helped make that choice: Sean Meyer.

Knowing the main reason I’d come here was to be with Sean didn’t exactly make them enthusiastic about the whole scheme. And the fact that the pair of us had been offered jobs with Parker Armstrong’s exclusive close-protection agency working out of midtown Manhattan probably put the final seal of disapproval on it for them.

The Americans, I’d discovered, had a policy about persistent offenders – three strikes and you were out. As far as my parents were concerned I’d had my third strike and they were finished with me, and I’d done my best to put them out of my mind.

So, my father was the last person I’d expected to see on one of the news channels, but it was the scrolling headline across the bottom of the screen that identified him with the words ‘Disgraced British Doctor Faces Questions’ that really rocked me.

The ‘doctor’ part was familiar, at least, although that was a little like describing Field Marshal Montgomery as a mere soldier. My father was a consultant orthopaedic surgeon, brilliant, arrogant, at the top of his game.

But the rest of the caption – now that didn’t square with the man I knew at all.

So, what the hell...?

Nick, slow with sculpted muscle, had dropped the clipboard on which he’d been keeping a nit-picking note of my progress and had grabbed for the remote control, fumbling with the volume. He overdid the balance and suddenly my father’s cool clipped tones cut across the gym, startling the handful of other occupants.

‘Patients die,’ he said with a bluntness that would never win him the sympathy vote. ‘Sometimes it happens, despite one’s best efforts.’

‘So tell me, Doctor,’ said the woman with the big hair and the microphone. ‘exactly how many patients would you *normally* expect to die in your care?’ Her tone was snappy, verging on a gloat.

‘I have been a surgeon for over thirty years,’ my father said, supercilious. He was holding his shoulders tightly bunched and the normal wealthy tan of his face was bleached out, the skin drum-taut across his bones. ‘I don’t expect to lose any.’

‘So you’re claiming this is an isolated case?’ the woman said blandly. ‘Surely, Doctor—’

‘It’s *Mister*, not *Doctor*,’ he cut in acidly over the top of his gold-framed glasses, the same way he would have castigated a junior trainee who bungled a simple diagnosis. ‘Kindly make *some* attempt to get your facts correct, madam.’

I sucked in a breath. I'd skirmished with the media myself in the past, enough to know that outright provocation was a grave mistake. They had the ultimate power, after the event, to manoeuvre you into the role of villain or fool, according to their whim. They'd played both ends of that game with me, and won with insolent ease.

Her eyes narrowed momentarily, but she was too much of a pro to let him rattle her. Instead, she tilted her head and smiled unpleasantly. 'Oh, I think you'll find that I've done my research very carefully,' she said. 'Last week, for instance, I know that one of your patients died suddenly and unexpectedly in a hospital in Massachusetts.'

He paused just a fraction too long before responding. 'Yes, but no surgery had been performed—'

'And that your first reaction was to try and shift the blame for this away from yourself by claiming that the patient in question had deliberately been given an overdose of morphine. Despite the fact,' she went on, steamrolling over any attempt at interruption, 'that no evidence has been found to support this.'

'I have withdrawn my comments,' my father said stiffly, with such self-control that I could almost hear his teeth enamel breaking up under the strain. 'And it would be unethical for me to discuss—'

"Unethical"?' She cut in, her voice cool even though her eyes betrayed the glitter. 'Isn't it the case that the patient in question, Jeremy Lee, was an old friend of yours and was suffering from a painful degenerative disease? You were very...*close* to his wife, I understand,' she murmured. Her voice was artfully casual, but the unspoken inference came across loud and clear. 'You were staying with Mrs Lee –

alone, at her home – while you were treating her husband in the hospital. Isn't that somewhat...*unethical?*'

Walk away. I found myself willing him, hands clenched. *Why are you standing there like a bloody fool and letting her carve you up like this? Walk. Away.*

But he didn't.

'I've known both the Lees for many years,' he said instead, keeping his impatience in check only with visible effort. 'It's natural that I should stay with Miranda – Mrs Lee – while I'm in America. It was Mrs Lee herself who asked me to come and advise on her husband's condition. Nothing more.' I wondered if he knew that his uneasy denials only added weight to the reporter's snide insinuations.

'I see,' she said, injecting an artful note of doubt into her voice. She frowned, as though considering his words and her own carefully, but underneath it I saw the triumph building, and realised that she'd been leading him to this point right from the start. 'And is Mrs Lee aware that you've been suspended from your duties for being drunk on the job?'

'I have never endangered a patient through alcohol,' my father snapped, but as he spoke something flickered in his face. I saw it only because I was looking, but I knew others would be watching him just as closely and they would have seen it, too.

Guilt. Unmistakable.

Holy shit...

'But you don't deny that you've made life-and-death decisions after you've had a drink, Mr Foxcroft?' She left a pause he didn't rush to fill and she allowed herself a small smile, as though politely acknowledging his admission.

‘Maybe even a couple of drinks.’ Smooth, smiling, she moved in for the kill. ‘Isn’t it the case that your earlier allegation was simply an attempt to divert attention from your own transgressions?’

My father flushed, took a breath. ‘The hospital will no doubt hold some kind of internal inquiry. Until then, it would be improper to comment further,’ he said, struggling to regroup and only managing to sound pompous instead. ‘Not to mention unprofessional and unfair to the patient’s family.’

She didn’t quite crow at this obvious retreat, but she allowed herself the luxury of another feline smile. ‘Oh, really, Mr Foxcroft,’ she said. ‘I think it’s a little late to worry about things like that, isn’t it?’

He stiffened. ‘At this stage I have nothing further to add to my statement,’ he said. And then, just when I’d begun to think that the whole thing was some kind of gigantic mistake, he took my breath away by adding, ‘I—I’ve admitted that I have a problem with alcohol. I have agreed to withdraw from all surgical procedures and take an unpaid leave of absence until that problem is resolved.’

What?

Finally – *finally* – he began to move away, but the reporter wasn’t so easily shaken off. They were on a city street, I saw, with generic modern concrete buildings behind them and the sound of traffic in the background. My father was wearing an immaculate dark blue suit, white shirt, sober tie that reeked discreetly of old school, his thinning hair sleek to his scalp. An archetypal authority figure. The kind the media loved to see crash and burn.

‘Mr Foxcroft, numerous patients must have – perhaps

misguidedly – placed their trust in you as a highly respected member of the medical profession,’ she persisted, thrusting the microphone into his face. ‘Have you *nothing* to say to them?’

‘Charlie, what the—?’ Nick began, unconsciously echoing my earlier thought, as his brain finally caught up with what was happening.

‘Ssh!’ I braced my arms on the front of the stationary treadmill, suddenly far more badly winded than a mere eight-mile jog would ever justify.

My father paused and, possibly for the first time in my life, I saw uncertainty in him. Perhaps even the faintest suggestion of panic.

He glanced away from the woman’s face and looked directly into the camera, as though he could see me staring back at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said simply. Then he turned, ignoring the clamour the apparent admission caused, ducked into a waiting car, and was gone.

The reporter faced the camera, power suit, power make-up, scarlet nails clutched round her microphone as she delivered her gleeful wrap-up. Her words scalded me but afterwards I couldn’t recall a single one of them.

It had finally dawned on me that the reporter was a regular on one of the local news channels. That the car my father had climbed into was a black Lincoln Town Car with no stretch, and the building he’d been standing outside was one of the big hotels less than a dozen blocks from where I stood.

He was right here. In New York. In trouble.
And I hadn’t known a thing about it.

Nick still had hold of the remote control. He was big enough that it looked like a toy in his hands. As the reporter handed back to the studio, he thumbed the volume down again and eyed me with quizzical concern.

‘So, that guy – someone you know?’

For a moment I didn’t – couldn’t – answer. My head was buzzing like I’d taken a blow. My leg ached fiercely, more of a burn. ‘I thought I knew him,’ I murmured at last, slowly. ‘But now I’m not so sure.’

Nick frowned. ‘You OK to go on?’ he said. ‘Or you wanna take five?’

That got my attention. I flicked him a fast glance. ‘Look, Nick, I need to leave. Now.’

‘You can’t,’ he said. He picked up his clipboard, lifted a page, frowning harder. ‘You got maybe another twenty minutes, tops, then we’re all done. Way you’re going, you’re gonna ace this. C’mon Charlie, what’s so important that it can’t wait twenty minutes?’

‘That,’ I said, jerking my head towards the TV set. I scooped up my towel from the bench and started for the changing rooms, only to feel Nick’s hand rough on my shoulder.

‘Hey! You don’t walk out on me, lady.’ His voice rose, harsh. ‘Mr Armstrong pays me for results and I got a lotta time invested in you.’

The only excuse I have for what happened next is that my mind was half in shock from the news report. It slackened the usual restraints that govern my behaviour and my temper ignited to a white-hot burn. I grabbed his imprisoning hand and stepped out from underneath it, jerking the heel of his palm upwards into a vicious lock.

Nick was around six-foot one and more than two hundred pounds. He had six inches in height and maybe eighty pounds on me. Now, he tried to use that differential in resistance but his bulk was gym cultivated. Useful as a deterrent maybe, but clearly he had never been a fighter.

I tightened the lock and yanked him round like an Olympic hammer thrower going for gold. He sprawled into one of the racks of dumbbells, sending half of them rebounding to the wooden floor, and thudded down heavily onto his knees. The noise was thunderous. Somebody nearby – a man – squealed.

I still had the lock on his wrist. Nick was grunting now, his substantial muscles trembling. In the right hands, pain compliance can be a wonderful thing. I leant in close enough to smell the sweat.

‘I’m in a hurry, so I’m willing to forget what just happened here,’ I said, my voice entirely reasonable. ‘But if you ever lay a hand on me again, *you’re* the one who’s going to need half a year of physio, OK?’