



FLINGING
IT

WHAT'S A LITTLE
DISTRACTION...



G. BENSON

CHAPTER ONE

Frazer was awake before sunrise on a Monday. A combination that was already exhausting. Yet screaming was echoing down the hallway, bouncing off walls to reverberate in her ears, making that combination even more painful.

The sound was enough to make a grown man cower. Sure enough, she spotted one doing just that before a closed door through which emerged the bloodcurdling screams. Frazer approached him and stifled a yawn. The man pressed his hands harder against his ears, his eyes screwed shut as if that could shut out the sound. The corridor was dim, the lights not yet on for the day.

Frazer waited to see if he'd look up. He didn't, but a loud grunt from the other room made him wince. She tried to smother any amusement that may have appeared on her face.

"Sean?"

Nothing.

"Sean?" She raised her voice slightly. Still nothing. Frazer brushed his arm and he startled. Red eyes opened to stare at her. His mouth partly dropped open.

"Hey." She grinned at him.

His shoulders sagged. "Frazer! I'm so glad you're here. We knew we couldn't guarantee we'd get you, even if you'd been with us from the beginning."

"Lucky for you, I'm covering an on call tonight."

Which was super unlucky for Frazer since her Monday was going to be as normal, meaning a meeting in five hours and then her usual work day. Thankfully, the night had been uneventful thus far, and she'd slept in the on call room on the top bunk above a snoring resident she'd never met.

"What are you doing out here, Sean?"

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Even in the dull light, Frazer could see the red that swept up his neck and into his cheeks.

“She kicked me out.”

Frazer was unable to bite back her amusement. “She throw something at you?”

After a pause, he nodded. “A tissue box.”

Frazer snorted and Sean smiled weakly as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Let’s go see how Tanya is doing.”

For a minute, Frazer thought he’d refuse, but then he straightened his shoulders and gave a nod. It was as if he was about to go into battle. Frazer almost felt bad for him.

Almost.

Even as tired as she was, the usual excitement overtook her. She missed on calls sometimes. But she supposed she was lucky that being the head of Midwifery still left her a few days a week on the ward. She’d go crazy if all she ever did was deal with budgets and rostering and staffing issues. Besides, it was kind of nice to go back to her roots.

Inside the room, Frazer was hit by fluorescent lights and a woman on the bed who looked ready to cry. Or scream. Or all of the above. Her large, pregnant belly was straining and Frazer remembered that the nurse who had woken her had told her that Tanya was at nine centimetres and almost ready to go.

“Frazer.” The woman on the bed grunted, veins popping in her neck. “Thank God it’s you. Sean is being fucking *useless*.”

Already next to the bed, Sean flinched, arms hanging at his side.

Frazer choked down a laugh. Tanya had never sworn in Frazer’s presence before. Always soft spoken, gentle—she’d seemed on the timid side.

“Well,” Frazer said as she washed her hands and looked over her shoulder so she could keep her patient’s eyes on her, “it’s your lucky night.”

Tanya’s already flushed cheeks were growing redder, and the sheen of sweat on her forehead shone in the light. With a flick of

her wrist, Frazer threw the paper towel in the bin and snapped on a pair of gloves. As Tanya huffed on the bed, her eyes screwed shut, Frazer dropped onto the wheeled stool by the sink and pushed herself to the edge of the bed. Tanya had already scooted down it.

“Do you want me to ask Sean to go?” She winked at him as he jolted up, staring at her wide-eyed as if she’d just betrayed him.

“No! No.” Tanya’s eyes snapped open, and she gripped Sean’s arm, yanking him half onto the bed, her knuckles white. “No. I want him here.”

Just as Frazer had known she would.

Sean gave Frazer a look that verged on grateful and let Tanya grip his hand, his face only twitching a little at what must have been a very hard grip.

“Great! Now that that’s settled, you want to tell me why you waited so long to come in?”



It was still Monday morning.

Eight o'clock.

At least the sun was up now.

Another work meeting at the hospital. The only sounds Frazer could hear were the ticking clock and yawning.

Apparently this was the only hospital in Perth that had these meetings. Robin didn't have to suffer through them. Maybe Frazer could transfer and work with a friend and get to sleep in past eight on a Monday like a civilised person.

It was like some kind of hell. Looking around the half-asleep employees, Frazer hugged her coffee tighter against her chest and wondered what she'd done to deserve this. The seat wasn't even comfortable. She shifted, the hard plastic biting into her tailbone. Surely Alec could hold these meetings another day. Or at least another time. Eight in the morning on a Monday? Why?

Across the room, Frazer caught Tia's eye. Alec's secretary was plump and deceptively pleasant looking, with an acidic tongue that shocked most employees and Frazer found utterly delightful. She paid out Frazer on an almost daily basis. Now, in the shifting, sighing silence of the room, Tia rolled her eyes and gave a pleading look towards the coffee in Frazer's hand. It only made Frazer clutch it tighter. There was no way she was giving up this liquid gold. Once Tanya had delivered a perfectly healthy baby, Frazer had run to her favourite coffee place so she could get through the meeting without murdering anyone.

In response to Frazer's small but unmistakable headshake, Tia's eyes narrowed. Frazer shot her an evil grin.

The door at the back of the room opened. Everybody straightened, then slipped back into their seats when they saw it was just a group of fellow employees. One of the women, the head of Social Work, slid into the seat next to Frazer, who gave her a lukewarm smile.

Alec's wife, Cora. For reasons that made no sense, Frazer blamed her by extension for the early hour. It was doubtful that Cora had anything to do with planning her husband's horrible morning meeting, but when Frazer was this tired, logic didn't play much of a role.

Did she have to sit next to Frazer? The two of them always clashed a little, and Frazer did *not* have the energy for that right now. Also, sitting next to someone who looked so damn put together so early in the morning was really not good for Frazer's self-esteem. How did she manage to look so flawless while Frazer looked like she'd scraped herself out of bed with a spatula? How did her hair look like *that* while Frazer's resembled a bird's nest?

Just because she was married to the guy that controlled all their budgets, she somehow got all the better deals on the money side of things. A fact that drove Frazer crazy.

Cora's returned smile was on the cold side, and Frazer was grateful for the heat of her takeaway cup.

"Morning, Cora."

Cora gave a nod, her amber eyes somehow bright when everyone else's were barely open. "Good morning."

"Excited for another meeting?"

The sarcasm in her voice was clear, and Cora's chin jutted out just slightly. "I wouldn't say excited, but aware that it's a necessary one."

Necessary? Frazer just barely bit her tongue. Every Monday they rehashed the same information and went over certain cases. As head of Midwifery and coordinator of her team, Frazer was required to attend. But after being on call all night, Frazer was even less inclined than usual to put up with it.

Still, she didn't go there. Clearly, this was not an argument she would win.

"Alec coming? He's late."

Again, there was a hard edge to Cora's eye. "He'll be on his way."

Strange—indirect information. Shouldn't she come in with her husband? Maybe even Alec was bored by her.

Guilt flared in Frazer's stomach as she sipped her coffee. That was an unfair thought. Granted, Frazer had trouble thinking fairly so early. Maybe Cora secretly hated the meetings too, and if she and Alec were in the same car together, she would request a divorce then and there out of spite. That thought made Frazer smirk against the lid of her coffee.

Finally, the door opened, everyone straightening again as Alec swept in, shoulders back and spine straightened with the sense of authority his higher position as a suit provided him. Even though he was on the lower end of the blurry hierarchy that ran the hospital, his power over budgets and staff cuts and the privilege of never dealing with anyone but the heads of departments seemed to have left him quite inflated. However, Frazer's thoughts about her boss were generally quite neutral. Right now, though, she was about to suffer through this meeting, seated next to his boring wife with legs to die for, and she blamed him for all of that.

Brown legs that were a welcome distraction, especially in the pencil skirt Cora was wearing.

Alec stood in front of them, one hand in his pocket and his laser pointer in the other. He looked as put together as his wife, though different in that he was clearly European descent as he was much paler. Maybe he was a vampire. Frazer hid her glee at the thought with another sip of her coffee. To be fair, he wasn't *that* pasty. There was a sharpness to his face, though, with his high cheekbones. His blonde hair, still slightly damp after a morning shower, was shorn close to his head.

The first projector slide was already up. It took everything within Frazer to stifle a yawn.

They spent a long time going over some recent cases, updates provided by other departments. After a long report from someone in Renal, Frazer almost fell asleep in her chair. When she caught Tia's raised eyebrows, Frazer sat up straighter and tried to ignore the fact that the look made her feel like a teenager rather than a grown woman in her thirties.

A slide covered in figures popped up, and Frazer wanted to scream. Next to her, Cora sat straight, legs crossed and eyes focussed on the screen, taking in everything Alec said.

God, maybe they discussed this stuff over dinner. How romantic.

Since the figures were up, department heads started raising questions about their budgets and grant distribution. Frazer felt a twist in her stomach. This was when she should speak up, but she really didn't want to. It would be much better to speak to Alec one-on-one.

"Obstetrics?"

Across the room, Lee spoke up, her glasses glinting in the fluorescent light. "Nothing from me, and no one's reported anything. But I know that Midwifery had something."

Inwardly, Frazer groaned as every eye in the room turned to her.

Alec raised his eyebrows, a placating smile on his face. "Okay. Ms Jindal?"

Straightening at her name, Frazer was ready to dump her coffee on Lee's head, chief of Obstetrics or not. Next time Lee wanted Frazer to adjust the Midwifery roster so she didn't have to work with someone that rubbed her the wrong way, she was going to be met with a glare. Even if Lee did always show up on the ward with coffee and muffins for everyone. "Uh. As brought up at the last meeting, I'm through the final stages of planning the outreach programme for hard-to-reach pregnancies, especially teenage parents. It's going to include topics on natural births versus caesareans, formula and breast feeding, drugs and alcohol—the usual topics, but with easier access and with incentives to come. The focus, however, will be support, rather than pushing information down their throats. The key to this being the mentors, of course."

Alec nodded. Frazer was just happy he'd apparently read her grant requests. All five of them she'd had to send through.

"Remind me of the projected start-up date?" he asked.

"Three months, all going to plan."

As she'd stated in all five of those requests.

"Great. I saw your report costs—you need to halve that."

Frazer's eyebrows shot up. Halve it? She'd already cut all the costs she could. A not so neutral feeling swelled in her chest. "Alec, that was the third revision of costs. If we cut any more, we may as well just sit in a box on the side of the road and throw condoms at people, for all the good it will do."

On the other side of the room, Tia snorted and Alec glared at her. Frazer winced internally. Professionalism, she reminded herself.

Alec turned his look back to her, and Frazer resisted the urge to poke her tongue out at him. "Revise the budget, have it on my desk." He turned his head, already moving on. "Then we can talk."

Clenching her jaw, Frazer nodded and Lee winced at her.

Traitor.

Smoothly, Alec moved on. Ten minutes later, he informed them of an increased budget for Social Work for the geriatric side,

and Frazer turned her head so fast she almost got whiplash in order to glare at Cora. The woman kept her eyes on Alec.

Well. Wasn't *that* interesting.

When the meeting ended, Frazer stood up, jaw clenched, and practically ran for her office.



“Need some ice for that burn?”

Looking up from her desk, Frazer gave Tia, who stood outside her office door, a dirty look. “Funny.”

Arms crossed, Tia stepped forward out of the way as someone ran past with a transport bed. She leant against the door frame.

“Oh, I thought so. If we were on Tumblr, I’d attach that photo with the burnt arm and the water.”

“You have Tumblr?”

“I’ll have you know, sweet summer child, I tumble with the best of ’em.”

Frazer chuckled, leaning back against her chair. “I don’t think thirty-five counts as a sweet summer child, Tia.”

“Pish posh.” Her hand waved in the air. “When you’re in your sixties like me, you’re definitely that. Though for you, we can forget the sweet.”

“Did you need something, evil woman?”

The playful tone dropped out of Tia’s voice and she rolled her eyes. “Alec wants the revised proposal.”

“My God, it was six hours ago. I’m drowning in rosters, and I had two deliveries. Does he think I’m magic?”

Tia glanced behind her before she spoke, bit her lip, and walked in to stand in front of Frazer’s desk. “I think he’s hoping you’ll give it up.”

Of course he was. There was never enough money to go around in health. It was maddening.

They both paused as a code blue was announced over the PA system from the corridor, Frazer’s muscles tensing automatically.

She sank back into her chair when the ward announced was orthopaedics.

“Well,” Frazer resumed easily, “that’s not going to happen any day soon.”

The smile on Tia’s face looked softer than her usual teasing one. “Good. That programme’s going to do great things. My girl had a baby when she was sixteen, to a real messed-up guy. I wish something like your programme had been around then.”

“Really?” Frazer was always amazed at the things you could learn about people you saw almost every day. People walked around, bumping into each other, and never knew what was going on. “What happened?”

Sighing, Tia shrugged. “She gave him up for adoption after six weeks. Even if the result would’ve been the same, having something like this openly available would have helped her a lot.”

It took a moment for Frazer to catch her breath. Finally, she said, “Thanks, Tia.”

Tia straightened. “Don’t let the big fish get you down. And I may have sent you some links on some other government grants I heard mentioned through the office door just now.”

She sauntered for the door and Frazer suppressed a laugh.

“You know,” she called after Tia, “you’re not awesome at all.”

Without turning around, Tia held her hand up and wiggled her fingers in a wave.

Time to delve into her e-mail inbox. She opened up all the links and bookmarked them before opening one. She skimmed through the information as quickly as she could.

“Oh, and Frazer.” Tia’s head had poked around the doorway. “Instead of sulking that the others always get the grants they need, why not get those others on board?”

Frazer stared at the door once Tia had disappeared again. Maybe she was right?

Who was she kidding? Tia was always right.

Though maybe not about this. Working *with* Cora on Frazer’s baby? There wasn’t a worse idea in the world.

CHAPTER TWO

“A home?”

Mrs Stein trained her bright blue eyes on Cora and stared her down. Cora resisted the urge to turn tail and flee. This job was exhausting. There were times she returned home so emotionally drained that she fell into bed embarrassingly early.

“Yes, Mrs Stein. A home.” When she said it, Cora didn’t bother lacing her tone with enthusiasm. She wouldn’t add insult to injury.

Wrinkles layered around her mouth as Mrs Stein pursed her lips. “I... I don’t want to go to a home.”

If it weren’t for Mrs Stein’s three despicable, ungrateful children, Cora’s job would be solely researching the least terrible, government-funded aged-care facility to send a referral. But those charming children, who were selling their mother’s house, refused to spend the money on a private facility so that they could ensure a greater inheritance when she passed away. Even more charming. On top of that, they didn’t want to be the ones to tell her she’d be going into a public facility because they were greedy little worms.

If only this was something that rarely happened, rather than a common occurrence. A headache was starting behind Cora’s eyes, and all she wanted to do was go home. Unfortunately, she still had hours to go. The day was dragging, not helped by those stupid early meetings Alec insisted on. Sometimes she wondered if he actually hated his staff since he put them all through that each Monday. At times, she found herself missing the days she wasn’t head of the department simply because that had meant she didn’t have to go.

Those sorrowful eyes stared at her unblinkingly and Cora gave in, sitting next to her patient and putting her hand over hers. “I’m

sorry, Mrs Stein. You're unable to look after yourself anymore independently." Cora squeezed gently. "This is your third hospital admission in as many months."

The papery skin under Cora's hands was remarkably soft; translucent enough to show blue veins tracing their way up the wrist under her fingers. This skin was a map of a history of a woman that was now culminating in a loss of dignity she couldn't fight. Beneath Cora's thumb whispered a slow, thready pulse.

"Can't someone help me out at home?" Mrs Stein asked.

"The hours you could be supplied with by government funding were all used up last time." This was the point at which Cora could dump this woman's children in the blame pile, but really, who would that hurt in the end? Only Mrs Stein. "Your risk assessment score shows you need to be placed in a care facility, and with your hip broken again..."

Mrs Stein sagged against her pillows, her breath leaving her in a slow exhale. "I see." She stared out her window, lucky enough to have a view of the ocean, just visible from this height.

Cora wondered if she was thinking about the last time she'd actually dipped her toes in the salty water, the wind whipping her hair around her face in a dance. The times she'd taken her three small children to the beach to watch them kick up sand and create castles they could destroy with one quick motion, then rebuild as easily as a dream.

Or how she wouldn't do that again.

Wet eyes stayed focussed on that window. "Thank you, love."

Cora knew a dismissal when she heard one. Grateful, Cora left the poor woman contemplating the way her next years of life would play out under the constant, repetitive routine of overworked and understaffed carers.

Nurses bustled down the hallway, and Cora slipped past unnoticed, leaving her discharge notes on the desk for whoever found them. Tracing the maze of hallways she could now walk through blindfolded, Cora looked at her watch and, of course, slammed into someone very solid and very warm.

“Christ!”

That voice. God she didn't need that right now. Did it have to be Frazer? That woman stared daggers at her all day, and all Cora could do back was return them in the hopes that she looked half as threatening. Which she was fairly certain she didn't, because that wasn't something Cora had ever really mastered.

Sparkling green eyes focussed on her. “You do know you're in a hospital and should probably watch where you're going?”

Yeah, Cora really didn't need this. She'd already started at stupid o'clock for the meetings her husband insisted they attend and insisted she support if her department wanted any funding. There'd been telephone calls with angry family members and from various wards whose resources were stretched too thin, asking if Cora could somehow work their patients into a suicide prevention programme that was already full or asking to change a denied request that was completely out of her hands. Her favourite coffee bar was closed, and instead, she'd drunk dregs from the coffeeshop where good coffee went to die. The stuff in her cup tasted faintly of burnt metal.

Finally, Cora said, “Yeah, I'm sorry.”

Some of that spark cooled. Frazer crossed her arms and leant against the wall. “I should have been paying attention too, I suppose.”

Cora's eyebrows shot up. The arrogance; it was up there with Alec's. At that thought, a retort slipped out before she could stop it. “You suppose?”

A toothy grin answered her and Cora wanted to roll her eyes.

“Well,” Frazer said, “remove the suppose.”

When Frazer wasn't glaring at her, she looked less like an angry viper and more like a snake lain out in the sun. Mildly less terrifying, but arrogant in her safety due to the fangs that lashed out so easily.

Frazer barely ever said anything to her, but it was clear enough she hated the way Alec never helped Midwifery and Obstetrics. Which wasn't completely true. He helped it as much as he helped most. His funding wasn't endless.

“If I remove the ‘suppose’ it’s almost an apology.” Cora said.

Frazer winked. “Almost.”

Frazer was being almost...playful. Definitely verging on nice. She was never rude to Cora, but was never overly friendly either. What was this?

Whatever it was, Cora didn’t feel like playing games. The fact that she had to go and refer several more patients in Mrs Stein’s position sat heavily on her shoulders. With a tight nod, she started to take a step around Frazer. “Okay. So. I’ll just be going.”

“Do you ever smile?”

Cora whipped her head around, eyebrows furrowed. “What?”

“Do you smile?” Frazer did so just then, easily. “You know, it’s associated with happiness, though humans do it pretty automatically for a lot of other things.”

“I have to go, Frazer.”

And with those words, Cora’s pager beeped, thankfully pulling her to the other end of the hospital.

“Yeah, okay.” Frazer gave a wave. “I’ll see you around.”

Seriously, what had that been about? Again, Frazer had barely ever said more than three sentences in a row to her. Cora wasn’t so sure she wanted her to again, even if it sounded genuine; or maybe because it did. Where would she see Frazer? Next Monday at the meeting?

That was far too bizarre.



“You know, bumping in to her isn’t the same as asking for her help.”

Frazer jumped, turning around. Why was Tia everywhere? Thankfully Cora was already turning the corner to go solve some social problem. “To be fair, she did most of the bumping. I even took some of the blame.”

Tia narrowed her eyes, something like the fifth time that day and it was barely three o’clock. “You’re terrible at socialising.”

Mouth open to object, Frazer snapped it shut. “Just at work.”

The nod Tia gave her was compassionate, but the glint in her eye did not match. “Still burnt from that surgeon that broke up with you?” she asked.

“Oh my God, even *you* know about that?”

“Honey, I’m pretty sure the morgue attendants know about that.”

Frazer turned to walk away. She made sure that Tia heard her groan. “And now I’m going to go eat a kilo of chocolate and pretend you didn’t say any of that.”

Tia called after her, completely unrepentant. “If you want that project to work, you have to do more than that.”

Frazer stopped. She closed her eyes. Drew in a breath. In the end, she turned back around. “I can’t just ask her for her help the first time I see her. That would prove that—”

“That you need help?” Tia asked, eyebrows raised.

“No.” Well, yes. “It would show I was just talking to her for a favour.”

“You are.”

The fact that she had two teenage sons she interrogated regularly at home, in addition to another two grown daughters, was incredibly obvious at that moment.

“Yes, but—”

“Look, don’t beat around the bush with this thing. She’s in Social Work. She has Alec’s ear—if he listens to anyone, that is.” They shared a look. “She’s someone who can help.”

“What if she doesn’t want to help?”

“She will. And if not, then you know. But don’t butter her up. It looks cheap.”

Seriously, Frazer needed to work on her game if it was that obvious. Her cheeks warmed. “We never, you know, chat. I barely see her, and when I do, it’s just in those stupid meetings. It felt rude to just ask for a favour.”

Tia rolled her eyes. “You’re not on different sides you know. You can help each other.”

“What can I offer her?”

“Something down the road, I’m sure. What makes you think she wouldn’t want to help this programme? It shoots right to the bleeding heart of a social worker.”

“It’s not like she ever spoke in support.” Frazer juttled out her chin. One point to her, finally.

“It’s not like she ever speaks in general.”

Her shoulders sagged. Minus one point to her. “True.”

Really true. Cora usually slipped into those meetings, then slipped out. Eyes downcast, off to save the world or whatever social workers did. Frazer had always assumed she was a bit... boring. But maybe she was just shy.

“Fine.” Frazer scowled, feeling fifteen as she did so. “I’ll speak to her like a grown-up.”

“Good girl. Now off you go. Oh, and enjoy passing Lauren on your way through to her office.”

Frazer groaned again. Loudly.

Tia tittered and walked off.

Frazer pursed her lips.

Really, Frazer had no idea why she liked that woman.



After a dramatic breech birth that had left even Frazer flinching, she finally managed to find the time to heed Tia’s advice. She left the new parents lying on the lumpy hospital bed, their tiny bundle of new life nestled between them. Snapping off her gloves, Frazer rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck. Normally she would be buried in paperwork on a Monday, but this had called for someone with more experience, and Frazer had jumped at the opportunity. Warm water washed over her hands, the soap lathered between her fingers as she scrubbed at them.

A birth like that was far better than paperwork.

She left the first-year observing midwife to fill out the documentation Frazer would quickly check later and started

up the stairs. Paperwork, the bane of any nurse or midwife's existence. Frazer was doing the new girl a favour, creating the opportunity to practice her documentation, just like people had once done for her.

She smirked to herself. No one would believe that excuse. She'd just been happy to handball the work to someone else.

The social services floor was empty, and that was bad. How could Frazer hide behind people and dash through to Cora's office when there was no one there?

"Frazer!"

There it was. Trying to look friendly and forcing her lips up in a way that probably wasn't normal, she walked over to the desk.

"Hi, Lauren."

"How are you?"

Lauren was all teeth and lipstick right now, and she really was very nice. But so interested. And they worked together. And no.

"I'm good. Just looking for Cora, actually. Have you seen her?"

"She's in her office, but..." Lauren lowered her voice. "Alec's in there."

Of course he was. Frazer was really in no mood to speak with her boss. At all, actually. It was his fault she was even here. But she also didn't want to speak to Lauren. Rock, hard place, Frazer.

Choosing hard place, Frazer turned her attention to the woman who was still looking up at her with a soft look in her eye.

"How long ago did he arrive?"

"About ten minutes."

Maybe they were canoodling. A smirk played at her lips at that thought. Cora didn't seem the type. Alec also didn't seem like a rule breaker.

"I'd take that look off your face. They won't be doing that." Lauren's voice lowered again. "They were yelling before."

Interesting.



It was one of those situations in which Cora didn't feel like she was in her own life.

How was it that she was sitting on the 'power' side of the desk, yet Alec was standing across from her, and it felt as if he was towering over her? No one wins in these situations.

"For God's sakes, Cora, if you just thought sometimes!"

The anger glinting in his eyes still took her by surprise every time she saw it. Which was all too often lately. Cora really didn't want to be doing this at work, but when Alec wanted to talk about something, it couldn't wait.

With an internal wince, she really wished he would lower his voice.

"It would be easier, if I knew everything that was actually *involved*, Alec." She hated the tone of her voice. Placating. Soothing. Yet raised a touch too high.

"Don't you try to turn this around on me." And with those words, he spun on his heel and left the room.

He closed the door too loudly for a work environment, and Cora had to resist the urge to throw something after him. She took a long, deep breath. Cora wasn't five. She didn't throw things.

How had that even started? Something about some words Cora had said wrong to Alec's parents? Or had it been about the tone of an e-mail Cora had sent?

If they had been at home, it would have escalated, but at least only the neighbours and not a building full of their colleagues would have overheard. How did they both become people she really didn't like the minute they were left alone together? How did two mature adults fight like such children? How was it that it was always her soothing Alec's hot temper, apologising when most of the time she didn't really know what for?

It was becoming exhausting.

Her cheeks hot, Cora clicked open her e-mail and promptly closed it again when she saw her inbox. When had her mother figured out e-mail? She glared at the screen, huffing. Had someone given her Cora's address? It must have been Alec. Damn. Just

another way her mother could be constantly involved in her life, leaving Cora with no way left to dodge her. There was a time Cora had thought mobiles were a fantastic invention. Now everybody expected everyone else to be constantly contactable. Half of the time, her mobile was dead, left in the bottom of her bag. Usually with five missed calls from her mum.

A knock at the door jerked her head upwards. It couldn't be Alec. He never knocked. Knocking at an office door seemed absurd when you'd peed in the toilet while the other person showered.

"Come in."

When the door opened, she suppressed a groan. Frazer? Why? Just why?

"Hey! Sorry, am I interrupting?"

Cora leant back against her chair and gestured to the one across from her that Alec hadn't bothered to sit down in. "No, take a seat."

If there was anything Cora hoped for, it was that Frazer hadn't heard the tail end of Alec's exit. Like something toxic, she and Alec couldn't bury it down until they were in the safety of their own home anymore, smaller things echoing repeatedly in the shadow of themselves, building to a cacophony. It made her... sad. And tired. And mostly frustrated that while it seeped into Cora's consciousness, it was often Alec instigating it.

"Thanks." Frazer slid into the chair like she'd done it every day of her life. How was she so comfortable in an environment she'd never been in? "So, I have a favour to ask."

Startled, Cora laughed out loud.

Over the desk, Frazer simply smiled at her. "Shocking, I know."

If Frazer wasn't so arrogant, she could almost be charming. So that was why she'd been conversational in the hall.

Frazer shifted in her seat. "It was made apparent to me that, for some reason, if you need a favour, it's more polite to simply ask with a please, rather than beat around the bush."

"Your attempt to talk to me this morning was um..."

"Obvious?" Frazer asked.

“With hindsight, yeah, that’s a good word for it.”

“I need help.” The words were said rapidly, as if Frazer had to force them out.

Well, that was unexpected. Cora blinked rapidly. “Wait, did you say you need help?”

“Yep.” That grin Frazer so easily gave popped a dimple in her left cheek again. It was a little crooked, quirked higher on that side. It *was* almost endearing. “I really do. I need this project to get off the ground, Cora.”

“And Alec is trying to cut down your funding to—what was it you said? Leave you throwing condoms at people?”

Something like a sheepish look flashed over Frazer’s face at that comment. “I need the funding. If you could meet some of the people this could help...”

“People? I thought it was focussed on women?”

“It’s focussed on all pregnant *people*.” The emphasis threw Cora off for a moment, yet Frazer continued as if she hadn’t noticed. “To begin, I’ll focus on teens, though we’ll broaden it to focus on a larger population when we find our feet. We already have a waiting list. We want them to have somewhere they can go and not feel judged, with a mentor they have access to throughout the pregnancy and into postnatal. The focus, in the long run, will be after birth, the support for the parent.”

Frazer crossed her legs, her fingers locking together over her knee. Clearly, she’d been in the delivery room today. She was no longer in her clothes from that morning but in baby blue scrubs. Sometimes Cora eyed those scrubs with jealousy—she’d love to dress so comfortably. They were like pyjamas. Instead, she was stuck with staff polo shirts or smart casual clothes.

The reports and proposals Frazer had clearly spent months on sat in Cora’s inbox, open for all employees to see. She’d read them. The work Frazer wanted to do was so necessary, exciting even. But really, what was it she expected from Cora? “The idea is a good one, Frazer.”

“I know.” Again with her arrogance. “But I think I was ambitious when I focussed it on my team.” For a half a second, Frazer paused and looked away, then caught Cora’s gaze again. “I want to combine forces.”

Cora stared at her. “Frazer...” She took a second to order her thoughts. “I’m already involved in a lot of programmes, with more down the road that I want to get started. I’m constantly fighting for more time, for more money, for things that can help the elderly patients that keep getting pushed into understaffed care facilities.” For a second, Cora could almost feel Mrs Stein’s papery skin under her fingertips, and she clenched her hands together in her lap. “And you want to add another programme to my ever-growing list?”

“Look, I know your department is busy. I know your focus is on the geris. I know. But you’re head of Social Work. You have employees who are involved in the cases that I see too. Wouldn’t it be great if we could get intervention happening, support for these parents before your department had to step in? Providing a mentor that is always with the parent as support? Prevention, rather than waiting to have to intervene later?”

Frazer was on a roll, her green eyes bright as she talked about something she was obviously passionate about. A soft flush clouded her cheeks. The darkness of her skin against the redness that was there now made her look almost delicate. “Long term, we’d be freeing up funds and people and resources,” she said. “With earlier intervention, we’d no longer be demonising these parents but helping them, getting them whatever help they need—ongoing care for parents and babies, support long after the baby is born, even long after the baby is given up or aborted.”

The fathers were going to be involved too? Both parents meant more time, more funding, more of the services needed. Frazer might be biting off more than she could chew. No wonder Alec was trying to crush it before it started.

But it was a programme that could change things. One that deserved a chance.

Finally, Cora asked, “You want to team up for this, pool funding from both our departments?”

Slowly, Frazer smiled. “Exactly.”

“And maybe use my connection with Alec.”

When Frazer’s smile grew, Cora nodded. She’d thought as much. Frazer thought that Cora would get some special treatment from Alec. If only she knew how Cora had to fight tooth and nail for what resources she was given.

But maybe with two of them behind this programme, Alec wouldn’t be able to ignore it.

“Cora, if we get this up and running over the next few months, I have parents whose lives I can change. We can be a go-between for them and shelters, ongoing health care, adoption agencies, abortion clinics. We can offer them counselling and support. All free. They can make informed decisions and, most importantly, have ongoing care *after* the baby is born, not support that just disappears after they leave the hospital or relies on them having transport or free time. Not care focussed on the baby, but on *them*. The key to this is the mentor programme.” The expression on Frazer’s face was all serious now. Her eyes were intent on Cora’s. “If we got some of your team on board, and mine, this could really make a difference. I just need the funding, and I need Alec to see the programme’s worth.”

Cora licked her lips. Her pager buzzed at her hip, but she ignored it.

“Okay. I’m in.”

CHAPTER THREE

Hump day drinks had been a habit for far too long.

It was a habit they should have probably broken after university, yet somehow, almost every Wednesday, there they were. Drinks and gossip in hand. They should've grown out of it by now.

Clearly, Frazer's friends didn't agree.

The bar they were in was clearly trying to be edgy. Everything was black and chrome, with dim lighting that was a welcome contrast to the bright lights of the hospital environment. It was new, the smell of fresh paint still lingering, yet full of people, the surfaces scattered with half-drunk drinks.

"To Frazer! Too stubborn to let the bosses bring her down." Andy raised her gin and tonic to Frazer.

"That I'll toast to." Frazer said and clinked her glass against Andy's, unable to wipe the beam off her face. Her cheeks were starting to hurt. She tried to toast Rob's glass, but he was scrolling through his phone with one hand, glass in the other, hovering only vaguely in the general space before him.

"Rob." Andy rolled her eyes at Frazer when he didn't even look up. "Rob!"

He finally dropped his phone to his lap. "Sorry! Sorry. The new deal is closing, and I want to know the second it's gone through."

"Yeah." Frazer furrowed her brow seriously and nodded. "You've really got to make sure those deals close. They won't uh... close themselves."

Rob raised his perfect eyebrows. But at least he'd stopped looking at his phone. "What's my job title, Frazer?"

Frazer sought out Andy for help, but all she did was smirk. With a grimace and her hand waving vaguely in the air, Frazer said, "Deal...closing...market-share selling, uh, wonderfully dressed best friend?"

“Yeah. That. Exactly that.” He shook his head at her. “It may have taken Daniel two years, but at least he learnt.”

“He’s your boyfriend. He’s required to know.”

Andy snorted. “Nice try, Frazer.”

“What?” he asked. “And an over-a-decade-long friend shouldn’t?”

“Rob.” Frazer had definitely reached her drink limit for the night. She could hear herself whining. “You know I’m useless.”

“Lucky you’re pretty.”

Andy was still smirking at them both. “Speaking of useless, when are you going on a date, Frazer?”

“Oh God!” This conversation was one Frazer could happily do without. “Never, if you keep going on about it.”

Andy’s eyes shone as she leant forward, her teeth glinting white in the gloom. “What if I said I ran into your sister, who said you’ve been at home with your fish every night you’re not with us and that if you don’t get your arse into gear, she’s going to help us set up a dating profile for you?”

Frazer’s face fell. “Shit, you’re conspiring now?” When Andy did nothing but jut out her chin, Frazer sighed. “I liked it better when Jemma was my twerp of a sister who used to annoy you.” As she paused to sulk further, Andy’s words really sunk in. “An *online dating site*? Seriously?”

The snort Rob gave her and the way his eyes lit up doubled the anxiety. All three of them? An online dating site? The idea made her shudder.

She looked from one to the other, finding no sympathy on either face. “Why do you both hate me?”

Andy patted her leg. “It’s because we love you. And if you buy any more fish, I’m going to wonder if you’ve replaced sex with fish, and that’s just strange.”

“I like my fish.”

Rob laughed. “Lesbian.”

Both Andy and Frazer turned their looks on him, and he quietened down. “Sorry. But come on. That was funny.” They

didn't take their glares off him. His eyes widened as his gaze darted from one to the other. "So. Frazer," he tried. "Hasn't been on a date in, like, forever..."

With a sniff, Andy turned back to Frazer. "So, come out with us this weekend, or online profile it is."

Frazer couldn't think of anything worse. She loved a night at the bar, but not one in which her friends tried to pimp her out. "I have a date already."

She did?

"You do?"

The surprise in Andy's voice hurt more than it should have.

"Yeah. With, uh..." Frazer's own eyes widened at the name that came out, "Lauren. From work."

Rob's hand froze on the way to take a sip of his drink. "You're going to date someone from *work*?"

"Well." Frazer gathered all the fake bravado she could. "It went so well last time."

Andy snorted again.



"She's obnoxious."

"I know."

Her sigh was heavy enough to ensure her best friend heard it over the line. Cora gripped the phone more tightly as she walked down a corridor crowded with patients and nurses.

"But Lisa, she's *really* obnoxious."

"I get it. But the programme sounds like a great one, and you can keep her head to a reasonable size."

With a side-step, she danced past an orderly with a cleaning cart. "Fat chance," she said.

"Do you like her proposal?"

Shoulders drooping, Cora nodded. "Yes."

"Do you think it will benefit lots of people?"

Another sigh. "Yes."

"So go help."

Frazer's office door loomed ahead of her, and Cora stopped in front of it. "Fine, oh reasonable one. I've got to go. Give my love to your mum."

"Will do. Enjoy the next hour."

"Har har." Cora pressed the *end call* button with more force than necessary, straightened, and knocked on the door. Her best friend was really not helpful sometimes.

At the muffled "come in," Cora took a breath and did just that. It was for a good cause.

Frazer greeted her from her desk. "Hey, Cora. Thanks for meeting me here. I've got everything all set up on my computer and anything that's on paper here, so it seemed easier."

"No problem." Cora slid into a chair. "It was easy enough. No birthing mothers?"

Frazer nodded to the pager next to her keyboard. "There are always babies coming. It's almost as if they don't follow a schedule."

"Do many of the mothers understand that?"

"Oh my God, Cora." Frazer leant back in her chair heavily, throwing her hands up. "You've no idea. You should read some of the birthing plans the parents give me. One wanted to reserve three rooms in case one had bad energy."

"Like the hospital is a hotel?"

"Exactly." Frazer shook her head. "I'm all for trying to have a birth plan, especially because it helps a lot of parents feel less anxious. But to ask to be 'stimulated' during contractions by the midwife?"

Cora blinked. "*Stimulated?*"

"Stimulated."

"As in..."

"As in exactly what you're thinking." Frazer chuckled. "Can't make that up."

"Wow."

"Yup. So!" She clapped her hands together and sat up. "Did you have a chance to read through what I e-mailed you?"

“I did. It’s solid.”

For a moment, the carefree look on Frazer’s face darkened. “Apparently not solid enough. But it will be. Any fresh ideas? I’ll take anything—it’s been pretty much me, solo, from the beginning.”

Cora nodded in relief. Sometimes people were precious about their projects. “Well, to start, the mentor programme? This is where your idea shines. It’s what makes it unique. Parents are always sent home with really minimal support afterwards. And that support doesn’t take into account the at-risk parents—the ones who don’t have their own support network, transport to their community nurse, all of that.”

“Exactly!” Frazer’s eyes lit up. She was nodding enthusiastically to everything Cora said.

“Well, let’s pool our resources, like we already planned. Why just use midwives who volunteer as mentors? Let’s source social workers, and even Accident and Emergency nurses—I chatted to some of the girls in A&E and my department and already have a preliminary list of those that are interested.”

“Great! More people power.”

“And...” Cora wasn’t sure Frazer would go for this.

“And?”

Cora took a breath and surged ahead. “What if we used other parents as mentors? People already with kids, who are interested in doing it? Many won’t be, I’m sure, they’re so busy. But we could do a training week, go over expectations. Use them for the lower-risk people, have them involved from the beginning?”

Frazer’s brow furrowed. She leant back against her chair again and stared at Cora.

Twisting her fingers in her lap, Cora shook her head. “It’s probably a bad idea.”

“No, it’s good.”

Cora’s hands stilled. “Really?”

“Yeah. We need the people. If we advertise for people to have the correct checks, even source people with certain degrees, why

not? And a training programme...I mean, that will cost money, but if I run it, that decreases the cost a lot." A slow smile had worked its way onto Frazer's face. "Like an AA supporter—someone who's been there."

"Yeah."

"To start with, each mentor can have one or two clients." Frazer was running with Cora's idea, almost vibrating with energy across the desk. "That way, people with full-time jobs won't get overwhelmed, and we can see more clearly what's working and what's not."

Warmth blossomed in Cora's chest. Maybe this wouldn't be so terrible.

Arms on the desk in front of her, Frazer asked, "What other ideas do you have in there? We can get this new proposal off to Alec in the next hour."

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FLINGING IT

BY G BENSON

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