

A woman with red hair, wearing a vibrant red strapless dress and black high-heeled shoes, stands on a film set. She is being kissed on the cheek by a man in a dark suit. The background is filled with the warm, golden light of a fire, and a black metal crowd control barrier is visible. A sign on the barrier reads "NO TR FILMING". The overall atmosphere is dramatic and cinematic.

JUST  
*Physical*

NO TR  
FILMING

JAE



## PROLOGUE

THE LAST TIME JILL HAD been seriously sick was when she came down with pneumonia at the age of seven, but in the last two months, she'd spent more time in doctors' offices than on set or in her own house. She grinned halfheartedly. *I doubt I'll get a lollipop for good behavior this time.*

She sat in the waiting area, leafing through a five-month-old magazine without really reading it. The clock on the wall above her was ticking noisily, each tick sounding as loud as a drum. Or maybe it was the thumping of her heart that was filling her ears.

*Calm down. It's just your damn leg, not something life-threatening.* Normally, Jill was an incorrigible optimist, but she had a bad feeling about this.

None of the many health-care professionals she'd seen in the last eight weeks had been able to help her or at least find out what was wrong with her leg. The pins-and-needles sensation in her left big toe, which she had blamed on the pointy-toed shoes she had to wear on set, had spread to the entire foot and then up her calf. Now her left leg was numb from her toes to her hip.

Her blood tests looked normal, though, and so did an X-ray. They had ruled out diabetes, Lyme disease, vitamin B12 deficiency, orthopedic problems, and a trapped nerve. Rest hadn't helped, and neither had physical therapy. She was beginning to think they suspected her of being a hypochondriac—one more wannabe Hollywood diva who thought the world was a stage and delivered a rendition of *The Dying Swan* every time she had a simple cold.

Finally, Dr. Stevens had scheduled an MRI. After weeks of waiting...waiting for appointments, then waiting for the results, she might finally find out today what was wrong with her.

"Ms. Corrigan?" a nurse called. "Dr. Stevens will see you now."

A lump formed in Jill's throat. She followed the nurse down what felt like the longest hallway she had ever encountered. She white-knuckled her cane as she took a seat across the desk from Dr. Stevens. His puke-green walls hadn't gotten any more attractive since her last visit.

"So," Dr. Stevens said. "How are you doing?"

She wished he'd cut out the small talk and get right to the point. "Fine," she said. Describing her symptoms again wouldn't do her any good; he already knew them.

"That's good." He nodded repeatedly, shuffled his feet beneath the desk, and peeked at the report in front of him.

Even when she craned her neck, she couldn't make out any of the words.

He fingered the report. "I have good news and bad news."

Jill gritted her teeth. Oh no, she would not allow him to play this game with her. She had never been one to draw out things unnecessarily, and she wasn't about to start now. Firmly, she put both hands on his desk. "Just tell me, please."

"It's not a brain tumor."

Jill blew out a breath. After he had sent her to get an MRI scan of her brain and spinal cord, she had halfway suspected that he was thinking she might have cancer. Okay, this had to be the good news. What was the bad news, then? Nothing could be worse than a brain tumor, right? She leaned forward. "What is it, then?"

"Well, diagnosing it is a real challenge because there's no one specific test that can confirm it all by itself, but..." The doctor stared at the radiology report instead of looking her in the eyes.

Clearly, he had failed Bedside Manner 101. She rapped her knuckles on the desk to make him look back at her. Her cane, which she had leaned against the desk, thudded to the floor, but she didn't care. "But what?"

Dr. Stevens scratched his nose. "From the symptoms you're describing and that episode of blurred vision you experienced a couple of years ago—"

"That just lasted for a day or two, nothing like this." She waved at her leg. "And I was under a lot of pressure to find roles back then, so it was probably just stress."

The doctor slowly shook his head. "I don't think so. The bright spots on the MRI indicate areas of inflammation in the CNS, and with your history of neurological symptoms, I'm pretty sure it's MS—multiple sclerosis. It's an autoimmune disorder, which means that your immune system attacks the protective sheath around your nerve fibers..."

Jill didn't hear the rest of what he was saying. The two letters echoed through her mind. *MS*. She tried to remember what she had heard about it—which wasn't much. *Isn't that what Mr. Rosner has?* Her parents' neighbor was in a wheelchair, unable to even lift a hand.

"No," she said loudly, interrupting the doctor midsentence. "That's not possible, is it? I'm only twenty-five."

Dr. Stevens's gaze softened. "I'm sorry to say so, but that's a typical age for the onset of MS."

A numbness of a different kind spread through her, shackling her to the chair, while her thoughts raced at a frantic pace, bombarding her with questions and grim

images of what the future might hold for her. Finally, she managed to get out one of them. “Will I end up in a wheelchair?”

The doctor lifted his hands and then dropped them to his lap. “There’s no way to tell. The course of MS is different for everyone. You seem to have the relapsing-remitting type, which means that you’ll experience flare-ups followed by periods without symptoms. They might change and get worse over time, but it’s impossible to predict the course of your disease.”

“Periods,” Jill repeated, trying to understand how her life had changed so drastically in such a short time. “How long?”

“Like I just said, it’s different for everyone. If you’re lucky, maybe one or two relapses a year.”

Jill suppressed a snort. At the moment, she didn’t feel very lucky. “If I really have MS...” Saying it out loud made her head spin. “Is there nothing I can do to treat it?”

“Of course there is. I’ll refer you to a neurologist, who’ll discuss treatment options with you. He might want to put you on a round of corticosteroids to treat your recent attack. And there are medications that can delay flare-ups.”

“But there’s no cure?”

The doctor sighed. “No. At least not yet.”

Silence spread through the room until Dr. Stevens asked, “Do you have any other questions?”

Jill had hundreds of them, but she couldn’t grasp any of them long enough to voice it, so she just shook her head.

He stood, handed her a stack of brochures, and a card. “That’s the address of a local support group. You might want to go to a meeting.”

Jill took the brochures and the card without glancing at them or saying anything. She left the doctor’s office on legs that felt even shakier than before. For what felt like an eternity but might have been just minutes, she sat in her car without starting the engine and stared through the windshield, not seeing a thing. Something pricked behind her eyes, but no tears would fall.

“Okay. Get a grip.” She clutched the steering wheel with both hands, trying to ground herself in reality. “This isn’t the end of the world.”

Then why did it feel as if it were?

\* \* \*

After two days of pacing around her house, sleeping just for an hour or two at a time, sheer exhaustion finally forced Jill to sink down onto the couch. She eyed the brochures lying there. After a moment’s hesitation, she reached out and took the one on top.

She'd started to read it yesterday, but after encountering words such as *bladder issues*, *choosing a mobility device*, and *daily injections*, she had quickly put the brochure away. Now she forced herself to read on, even though her stomach clenched with every word. Was this really what her future would hold?

"Come on. You can do this. You're not going to let this disease defeat you," she said out loud, as if that would make it true. Without allowing herself to stop, she reached for the next brochure. This one was titled "Getting Help" and listed counseling and self-help group options.

Jill imagined herself sitting in a circle of chairs and wheelchairs, telling perfect strangers about any bladder issues she might develop. She shook her head and smiled despite herself. No, a support group wasn't for her.

The last page of the brochure listed other places to get support—including family members.

Jill groaned. *Oh shit*. She hadn't even thought about her parents and James. Did she really have to tell them? It wasn't as if they were a big part of her life. They saw each other maybe once a year, and all her mother ever talked about on the phone was Jill's brother, perfect James, who—unlike Jill—had the right kind of job and the right kind of relationship. But since Jill had strayed from that path of perfection when she'd come out and moved to Hollywood, they hadn't supported her when she'd struggled to find roles, nor had they been there for her when her first girlfriend had broken up with her.

It made no sense to get them involved, she decided. If she ended up needing help, she'd be better off paying someone for it. Maybe she'd hire a housekeeper. That way, she could save her energy for important things, not for ironing and cleaning, which she hated anyway.

Now ready to find out more about how to manage this damn disease, she opened her laptop and clicked through a few websites, reading bits and pieces until she finally ended up on the YouTube channel of a young woman. It was a video diary that described life with MS. She watched the entry on diet tips and then one about exercise, glad to hear there was something, however small, she could do.

The next video started automatically. The subject—MS and relationships—made Jill reach for the touchpad to click over to the next video. She was single, and starting a new relationship was the last thing on her mind right now. In fact, she didn't think she'd ever get involved with anyone again. She didn't want to live with MS, so how could she do it to a person she loved?

But the young woman's voice, now choked-up instead of upbeat as it had been in the previous videos, made her stop and listen.

"It's not that I don't get it," the woman in the video said, sniffing. "I mean, living with the prospect that he might one day have to feed me and dress me and push me around in a wheelchair... That's a lot to take in. No one wants to take on

that kind of responsibility at twenty. Everyone warned me, telling me how much of a burden the situation is for the partner of a person with MS and how MS puts a lot of strain on a relationship. But I wanted to believe that we were different. That we would make it. Through the good times and the bad, right?”

The young woman pulled a tissue from a box, then another one and finally a third. “He didn’t even wait until I was out of the hospital. He just moved out without much of an explanation, other than saying he felt trapped and couldn’t do it anymore.” The rest of her words were unintelligible because she was sobbing into her bunch of tissues.

*Jesus. That asshole just abandoned her.*

After a minute of crying and venting, the woman calmed enough so Jill could understand her again. “Why can’t he be more like Michael? He takes such good care of Sara, drives her to doctor’s appointments, and even helps her with bathing and dressing.”

Jill wasn’t sure that was any better. Just because a couple stayed together didn’t mean they were happy. How could they be under such circumstances?

She tapped the touchpad and closed the browser. Her determination grew to never, ever put herself—or someone she loved—in that position. It was better if she stayed alone. Someone in her situation had no right to tie a partner to her and expect the poor woman to take care of her. That burden was hers and hers alone.

She had always been the take-it-or-leave-it type when it came to relationships anyway. While she’d been in love a time or two, she’d never been the clingy type who had to be in a relationship or feel lonely.

With a decisive nod, she closed the laptop. Staying single would be for the best.

# CHAPTER 1

## **Eighteen months later**

“SUSANA?” JILL CALLED TOWARD THE kitchen. “I’m heading over to Grace’s. Can you set the alarm when you go? And don’t feed you-know-who too many treats while I’m gone.”

“Me?” her housekeeper called back in her most innocent tone. “I don’t do that. He just likes to keep me company in the kitchen because he’s a real love sponge.”

Jill snorted. “Yeah. That and an anything-edible-that-dropped-to-the-kitchen-floor sponge.” When she reached for her car keys and walked to the door, Tramp came running from the kitchen.

“Oh no.” She shook her head and pushed him back a little. “You stay here with your grandmother.”

“I heard that.” Susana Rosales stepped into the hall, combing back her salt-and-pepper hair with one hand. “I’m not old enough to be a grandmother.”

“Not yet,” Jill answered with a grin. “I hear Tomás finally has a girlfriend.”

Susana beamed at her. “Sí. It seems seeing you naked didn’t traumatize him for life after all.”

They looked at each other and started laughing.

A year ago, it hadn’t been a laughing matter at all. Jill sobered as she thought back to the day she had discovered that taking hot baths was no longer a good idea. The heat had made her MS symptoms flare, and she had nearly passed out before managing to make it out of the tub. She’d stumbled out of the bathroom—and into the arms of Susana’s sixteen-year-old son, who had just stepped down from a ladder after changing a lightbulb in her room. It had been a toss-up as to who had been more mortified: Jill or Tomás.

“Traumatized?” Jill repeated and shook her head. “Nah. If anything, seeing me naked would have spoiled him for other women.”

Susana flicked the dish towel she’d tucked into her apron in her direction and tsked. “Go, or I’ll tell Tomás not to mow your lawn after all.”

Laughing, Jill escaped out the door and to her car. A push of a button on her remote control opened the wrought-iron double-swing gate in front of her home

in Glendale. She felt like a character in a spy thriller as she guided the car onto the street, peeking left and right to make sure no paparazzi were lurking.

After she had come out as a lesbian and a woman with MS last June, they had followed her around as if they were a starving pack of wolves and she a tasty rabbit, even though they hadn't given her the time of day before. *That's Hollywood for you. You have to die, go into rehab, or at least get diagnosed with a chronic illness to get any attention.*

When she was sure the coast was clear, she drove to Grace's cottage in Topanga Canyon. The hidden home had been a safe haven for Grace and her girlfriend, Lauren, when they first got together. Jill had spent some time up in the cottage too, especially last year, during the media frenzy after she had been forced to reveal her MS to the public. Back then, Lauren had still been her publicist, but in the past months, she had become a friend.

Grace's SUV and Lauren's Honda Civic were in the driveway when Jill reached the end of the steep dirt path.

*Ooh, great!* Jill parked her bright red Beetle convertible and rubbed her hands. She couldn't wait to find out what the casting director of *Shaken to the Core* had said. Would he give her the lead role in the historical drama Lauren had written—or at least let her audition for it? She had been captivated by Lauren's script from the moment Lauren had shown it to her. It wasn't just the historical setting and the suspenseful action scenes of two young women trying to survive the earthquake and fires of 1906. This was finally a script with not just one but two strong female characters. Truth be told, Jill was sick of always playing the witty sidekick or the dorky best friend. Now, with Lauren putting in a good word for her, she might finally have a chance to prove herself in a more challenging role.

Grace opened the door wearing a turquoise bikini that was almost the same color as her eyes.

Not that Jill was looking into her eyes. Her gaze was drawn down to her friend's generous cleavage. She stared for a second, startled by the unexpected sight and the reminder that her libido was still alive and kicking.

"Come on in," Grace said, giving her a hug. Her skin was warm, and drops of water clung to it. "We're outside in the hot tub." She led the way to the stone patio at the back of the cottage.

*Jeez.* Jill shook her head at herself. *You're not so desperate that you'd ogle your best friend, are you?* Okay, maybe she should cut herself some slack after more than eighteen months of not looking at, much less touching, another woman. Besides, even priests and gay men ogled Grace. She hadn't been voted one of the sexiest women alive for nothing.

When they stepped through the sliding glass door, Lauren lifted a hand out of the bubbling water and gave a short wave. "Hey, Jill. Want to join us?" She pointed at the redwood hot tub that was big enough for three.



Jill playfully clutched her chest. “Skinny dipping with the two of you? Thanks for the very tempting offer, but I’m not sure my heart could take it.” Her heart was just fine, but immersing herself in hot water still wasn’t a good idea. Any rise in body temperature could make her symptoms flare and force her to use a cane for the rest of the day. But she didn’t mention that. There was no reason to constantly remind the people in her life about her damn MS, now that it was in remission.

Grace gave her a look that said she knew exactly why Jill had rejected the offer. Thankfully, she said nothing.

Lauren smiled, leaned back, and watched Grace climb back in. “Suit yourself. Grace and I get it all to ourselves, then.”

Jill’s friends looked at each other and seemed to forget that they weren’t alone.

Jill smiled wistfully. She was happy for Grace, really. After her failed marriage and all the bullshit she’d been through last year, she deserved whatever happiness she could get. But sometimes, a part of Jill rebelled at the unfairness of her own situation. Her friends had it all—they were successful, healthy, and in love, while she...

*Ob, come on. Stop the pity party! You’re doing just fine.* She sat on a deck chair in the shade and cleared her throat. “So, did you get a chance to talk to the casting director?”

“Um, yes, I did,” Lauren answered.

“You did?” Grace asked. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Well, I just met with him earlier today, and when I got back...”

Grinning, Jill shook her head at her friends. “Let me guess... You got a little distracted.”

Lauren’s gaze strayed to Grace’s bare shoulders, which were peeking out of the water. A wide grin formed on her face. “A lot distracted, actually.”

“So,” Jill said, “what did the casting director say?”

The smile disappeared from Lauren’s face. She might have once been one of Hollywood’s top PR experts, but she couldn’t act to save her life.

Jill suppressed a sigh. “He said no.”

Biting her lip, Lauren nodded. “I’m sorry. I know you really wanted that role.”

“It’s okay,” Jill said, trying not to let her disappointment show. “Maybe I wouldn’t have been a good fit anyway.”

“You would have been perfect,” Grace said, her cheeks reddened either by the hot water or her passionate defense. “You’re strong and tough with just a hint of vulnerability. That would have worked great for the role. Not to mention that you’re gay, so you would have had no problem kissing another woman. I really can’t understand why they wouldn’t let you audition.”

“It’s a pretty challenging role,” Lauren said quietly.

Grace frowned at her girlfriend of six months. “You think Jill isn’t up to it? You saw her in *Ava’s Heart*. She acted circles around the rest of the supporting cast! She—”

“I’m not talking about that kind of challenge. The script calls for a lot of physical action. The two lead actresses will have to do some of their own stunts.”

Jill bit down on the inside of her cheek. So that was the true reason. It wasn’t her looks or her acting skills. It was the MS. She hadn’t had an attack for seven months and two weeks. At times, she could almost forget that she even had MS. The people in the industry never forgot, though. Disaster movies were expensive. The powers that be didn’t want to risk production being held up by an actress who couldn’t keep up.

“I understand,” she said as calmly as possible, even though she was raging inside. What good would it do to make her friends feel bad about it too?

“I don’t,” Grace said, her famous sky-blue eyes darkened to a thundercloud gray. “Why couldn’t they at least offer her a supporting role? One that didn’t involve so much running and jumping and climbing over mountains of debris?”

Years of acting experience enabled Jill to look calm while her friends talked about her as if she weren’t even present. She knew they meant well.

“Actually, I was able to convince the casting director to take a look at her head shot.” Lauren swiveled around on the hot tub’s bench seat to face Jill. “With your green eyes, red hair, and fair complexion, you look exactly the way I imagine Lucy Sharpe to look like. You’re even the right age.”

Lucy Sharpe... Jill tried to remember who that was. Maybe it was just her imagination, but since the MS had started, her memory didn’t seem to be the same. Sometimes it took her forever to learn her lines.

“The lady doctor, remember?” Lauren prompted when Jill directed a questioning look her way.

*Ab.* Jill nodded. She was also a strong female character, and she starred in nearly as many scenes as the two leading ladies, but she wasn’t a main character. Jill forced a grin. “Ooh, so I’d get to play doctor?”

“If you want the role...” Lauren searched her face.

“Sure, what’s not to want?” Jill swallowed her pride. It wasn’t as if casting directors had been knocking down her door in the past nine months since her double outing.

Lauren brightened. “Okay. I’ll let them know, then.”

“Do you think they’ll go for it?” Jill asked.

“They’d better.” Lauren flashed a grim smile. “The casting director is my godfather, and after he shot me down about you playing Kathryn Winthrop, he owes me.”

Even though it might be stupid, Jill shook her head. “I don’t want to get the role just because the casting director is doing you a personal favor.”

“Are you kidding? They’d be lucky to get you. I think you bring just the right kind of spunk to the role. Besides...” Lauren gave her a playful leer. “I’m sure you’ll look great in a corset.”

Jill groaned. “I hate period costumes. You can’t breathe in those things. Next time, write a script about a female version of Casanova who does nothing but lie by the pool and seduce women all day. I’d be perfect for that role.”

Both of her friends snorted and splashed water at her.

“Hey!”

\* \* \*

The walkie-talkie crackled to life. “Crash?” came the stunt coordinator’s voice through the device. “You still there?”

Crash grinned. She was standing on the rooftop of a six-story building. Where was she supposed to go? “Still here and ready to rumble.”

“We need a few more minutes to set up the cameras,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll stand by.”

The walkie-talkie fell silent.

Normally, Crash didn’t mind the waiting involved in making a movie. In her five years in the stunt business, she had gotten used to it. But up here on the rooftop, the dry March wind was so much stronger than on the ground that it made her eyes tear. She had to repeatedly reach up, wipe her eyes, and brush strands of her blonde wig out of her face.

While she waited, she went through her reminders: keep an eye on the wind currents, to make it less likely she would jump into a sudden gust that would blow her off course and make her overshoot the air bag. Hit the inflated bag straight in the middle, so she wouldn’t get a bad bounce and smash against the building or the ground.

She took a deep, steadying breath. While a certain risk always remained, the stunt was safe. She’d checked out the equipment and had done a practice jump earlier today.

Finally, the stunt coordinator’s voice came through the walkie-talkie again. “Ready?”

Crash peered down the building to the blue heavy-duty air bag below and made sure the safety spotters were in the correct places. “Ready to roll.”

“Remember to do a face-off and—”

“I know the drill,” she told him.

The second-unit director’s commands came through the walkie-talkie as he instructed his crew. “Roll camera.”

“Rolling.”

Crash eyed the spot on the rooftop ledge where she had to go over in order to hit the air bag just right.

“In three, two, one...”

At the countdown, Crash’s body started to buzz with excitement. The thrill of doing a high fall never got old, no matter how often she’d done it. She planted her feet more firmly and waited for the final cue.

“Go!”

She jumped over the ledge face-first, kicking her legs and flailing her arms just the way the director wanted it. The ground rushed up fast. *Wait, wait, wait...* She gave the cameramen as much time as she could so they’d have plenty of material to shoot before rotating her body.

She landed flat on her back, her chin tucked into her chest, with the impact as evenly distributed as she could. A bit of air whooshed out of the bag.

Everything went quiet for a moment. Then the crew broke into applause.

Crash lifted up on one elbow, looked behind her, and grinned. *Perfect landing.* She had hit the white X in the center of the air bag.

Their stunt coordinator, who was also the second-unit director, walked over. “You okay?”

She smoothly rolled off the air bag and dropped to the ground. “Yeah. Need me to do that again?”

“No. You nailed it on the first take. Nice job.”

“Too bad,” Crash grumbled. With the adrenaline still pumping through her body, she was ready to climb back up and do it all over again.

He looked her up and down as if taking her measurements. “Do you have more stunt work lined up for the next few months?”

“Not yet.” Crash wasn’t at a point in her career yet where she would constantly work. Just when she had started getting bigger jobs, she hurt her leg in a motorcycle stunt. Then, on her first job after that had healed, a fire stunt had gone wrong. Memories of heat searing her skin flashed through Crash’s mind, and she stifled the impulse to rub the burn scar on the back of her neck. The screw-up hadn’t been her fault, but that didn’t matter. If people thought she was still skittish about it, word would get around, and stunt coordinators would stop hiring her. Nothing was more dangerous than a stunt person who couldn’t keep a lid on their fear.

“You might want to hit up a buddy of mine, Ben Brower.” The second-unit director handed her a business card. “They start shooting a historical drama with lots of action scenes in mid-May, and they’re still looking for a girl to double one of the actresses and maybe play a few extras in the more dangerous scenes.”

“Woman,” Crash said.

He frowned. “What?”

“They’re looking for a *woman* to double one of the actresses,” Crash said softly, but without flinching away from his gaze.

His frown deepened. “That’s what I just said, isn’t it?”

Crash decided to let it go. The second-unit director looked as if he were old enough to have gotten his start doubling for John Wayne, so compared to his age, she really was little more than a girl. He was offering work, so he hadn’t meant it in a belittling way. “So, who would I be doubling?” she asked. “The lead actress?”

“No, one of the supporting actresses. Jill Something-or-another.”

Great. So she’d be doubling for some unknown wannabe starlet who probably had one scene in the movie. Crash sighed. Well, it was better than nothing, and he had said she could play an extra in some of the more dangerous scenes. If she did well, it might get her on the list of candidates for bigger, more exciting work. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll give Mr. Brower a call.”

“It’s a movie about the great earthquake and fires of 1906, so you’ll probably have to do some fire stunts. You’re up for that, aren’t you?”

Crash gritted her teeth. News in the stunt business traveled fast. “I’m up for it,” she said as evenly as possible and pocketed the card. “Thanks.”

## CHAPTER 2

“AND CUT,” FLOYD MANNING CALLED. He gave Jill a nod. “Thank you, that was great.”

Jill stuck her index finger into the high neck of her starched blouse and tugged, while trying to adjust her corset with the other hand. She didn’t know how women in 1906 had lived like this every day. She’d been saddled with the corset and the two petticoats for less than a day, yet she was already sick of them.

“Why don’t you take a short break?” Floyd eyed her with a wrinkle of concern between his eyebrows. “We won’t need you for the next hour.”

Truth be told, Jill could use a break, but she didn’t want any special consideration. “Um, wasn’t I supposed to head over to the second-unit set?”

The director shook his head. “That’s not necessary. We’ll get someone from the stunt department to do it. Just join them after your break so they can shoot the lead-in.”

Jill gave up on her attempts to get the corset to fit more comfortably and narrowed her eyes at Floyd. “Nikki and Shawn are running through walls of fire, climbing tons of debris, and dodging panicked horses, and you think I can’t even trip over a bedpan?”

Floyd got up from the director’s chair and walked over to her, probably so none of the crew and cast would overhear what he had to say. “It’s not that I think you can’t do it. But if you get hurt, we’ll have to stop production while you heal. That means a lot of lost money. If the stunt person gets hurt, we just call in another one.”

After seven years in the business, Jill knew that was how things worked, but she still felt there was more to it than the routine procedure. “Yeah, but it’s not like I’m supposed to do a backflip and land on a galloping horse. I’m tripping over a bedpan, for Christ’s sake!”

Folding his arms across his skinny chest, Floyd faced her squarely. “It’s not as easy as it looks. You could still get hurt.”

“Would you let me try if I didn’t have MS?” Jill asked.

A slight flinch. “It’s not like that,” he said but couldn’t look her in the eyes anymore.

*Bingo.* She'd been right. Not that it gave her any satisfaction. She opened her mouth, about to tell him where he could shove his unwanted consideration, but then she bit her tongue. He probably meant well, or he had the producers and their insurance company breathing down his neck. Besides, it wouldn't do her any good to get a reputation as a diva who flew off the handle when things didn't go her way.

She inflated her cheeks and then blew out a breath. "All right. If you're sure you want to bother a stunt person for an easy thing like that..."

"I'm sure," he said.

When he didn't add anything else, she turned and walked to her trailer. At times like this, she really regretted coming out to the press and the public—not as a lesbian, but as a person with MS.

*Well, it wasn't as if you had much choice.* The paparazzi had snapped pictures of Grace helping her to her trailer when her symptoms had flared. The press and the public had promptly concluded that they were having an affair. If she hadn't revealed the truth, the rumors would have gotten out of control, hurting her friend's career, because back then, her fans had still assumed Grace to be happily married to action star Nick Sinclair.

Jill entered the trailer and flopped down on the couch. Exhaustion settled over her without warning, so she closed her eyes, not even bothering to get out of her costume. She'd rest here for a moment and then head over to the second-unit set. Maybe Ben, the second-unit director and stunt coordinator, would let her try no matter what Floyd said.

\* \* \*

Crash grunted as the pink-haired wardrobe assistant laced up her corset. Man, this thing was worse than a stunt harness.

The young woman stepped back and eyed her from head to toe. Usually, women didn't frown like that when they regarded her half-dressed body.

"What?" Crash asked and peered down her body too.

"Um, you're about the same age, height, and weight as Ms. Corrigan, but...uh, you need a little something..." She gestured at Crash's chest and then stuffed some padding into the corset.

Chuckling, Crash held still. She had yet to meet the actress she would double, so she had no idea about her bra size. Of course she had planned to pay her a visit and study the way she moved so she could copy her as closely as possible, but the stunt coordinator had called her in two weeks early, saying there'd been a change of plans and they needed her right away.

She didn't yet have the call sheet or the stunt script, but when she had arrived, the second-unit set had been buzzing with activity. The rigging coordinator had

set up a ratchet and debris cannons, so apparently, one of the stunt performers would be thrown through a wall or a window by some kind of explosion. She hoped she'd get to do that gag or another, equally exciting stunt.

Once she was in costume and had her makeup done, she headed back to the set. Her petticoats rustled, and she looked down at the long skirt she was wearing. It always felt a bit strange. While her job sometimes made it necessary to wear a dress or a skirt, the last time she'd worn one off-set had been her sixth birthday. *Good thing they pay me well for this.* At least the high-neck blouse and the ankle-length skirt would cover the pads she'd wear for some of the stunts. Usually, stuntwomen had it harder than their male colleagues since they didn't get to wear baggy pants and long-sleeved tops that could hide their pads.

When she stopped a PA and asked him where Ben was, he directed her toward one of the buildings. They were shooting in an old, abandoned hospital that reminded her of the one in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. She followed other cast and crew members up the stairs and found herself in a long room, with two rows of metal-framed beds lined up along the walls. Gas light fixtures hung from the ceiling.

All the cables, lighting equipment, and the technology of a modern movie set contrasted sharply with the cast moving around in period costumes—the women wearing skirts or dresses and the men trousers, vests, and bowler hats.

An actress in a white nurse's uniform sat at a desk in the center of the room, listening to something Ben was explaining.

Crash's steps echoed across the shiny hardwood floor.

Ben looked up and waved her over. "There you are. Thanks for coming in on such short notice."

"Sure. So, what do you need me to do?" Crash looked around, but there was no equipment set up that would give her any indication of what kind of stunt they wanted her to do.

"Well..." Ben stepped away from the actress behind the desk and scratched his neck.

Was he hesitating to tell her because it was a dangerous gag, maybe one involving fire? Crash swallowed. She wanted to shove her hands into her pants pockets while she waited for his reply but then realized she was wearing a skirt.

"Nothing big," Ben finally said. He handed her a stack of stapled pages—the list of scenes they would shoot that day.

Her name was on one of the scenes. There was just one line of description for the stunt she was supposed to do.

*Dr. Lucy Hamilton Sharpe walks over to one of the patients, stumbles across a bedpan, and crashes into a metal cart.*



She turned the page over, thinking there had to be more. Nothing. This was a joke, right? No one booked a SAG-eligible stunt performer for something like that. She squinted over at Ben. “Uh, you want me to do...what?”

“Stumble over a bedpan.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded and scratched the stubble on his chin, looking a bit embarrassed. “I know, I know.”

She stepped closer to him so no one could overhear her. “Let me guess. The actress I’m doubling for is a bit...” She waved her hand while searching for the right word. “Difficult.”

Someone cleared her throat behind Crash.

When she turned, she came face-to-face with a woman who wore a costume that was identical to hers.

*Oh shit. That’s the actress I’m doubling. Just her luck.*

She didn’t look like the spoiled Hollywood diva Crash had expected. In fact, Jill Corrigan was exactly the type of woman who usually caught Crash’s eye. Compared to some of the actresses Crash had met, she wasn’t stunning, but there was a vibrancy, a spark to her that made Crash take notice anyway. The actress’s flaming-red hair contrasted with her fair skin, and for a moment, Crash thought it was a wig, just like the one she was wearing, but then a second look revealed that it was real. She stood eye to eye with Crash’s five foot eight, and yep, the wardrobe lady had been right—she was indeed a bit better endowed than Crash.

*What are you doing?* Crash forced her gaze up and took in the charming smattering of freckles across the actress’s nose, which were visible even through her stage makeup. *Cute. Definitely cute.*

But now the actress’s green eyes sparked with annoyance, destroying any hope that maybe she hadn’t heard what Crash had said about her being difficult. Jill folded her arms across her chest, which looked a bit out of place in her historical costume. “I happen to think that I’m fairly easy to work with. That is, unless someone assumes things about me without even meeting me first.”

“Uh...” Well, if Jill refused to shoot the stumbling-over-a-bed-pan scene herself, she probably was a bit of a diva. But Crash knew better than to voice her thoughts. She’d have to work with this woman for the next two or three months, after all. “Hi,” she said with her most disarming smile. “Crash Patterson. Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand.

After a few moments, the actress reached out and accepted her handshake. Her grip was firm. “Jill Corrigan.” She eyed Crash with a small wrinkle on her forehead that was just too adorable. “What kind of name is Crash?”

“The name of someone who doesn’t mind stumbling over bedpans,” she said and then mentally slapped herself. The quip wouldn’t help establish an amiable working relationship.

“Just to make one thing perfectly clear. I would rather do the scene myself, but Floyd wants to have a stunt person take over. It wasn’t my decision.”

Crash hadn’t worked with the director before, but he didn’t seem the type who would coddle his actors. Was there something going on between him and the pretty actress, and that was why he didn’t want her to do this very simple stunt? It wouldn’t be the first time a set romance had impacted the production schedule, but Crash didn’t like it. She had never let her private life interfere with her work. In fact, she hadn’t even had a private life her first two years in the business. She’d been too busy introducing herself to any stunt coordinator who would talk to her and doing any gag, no matter how small. Kind of like the one she was supposed to do now.

“No big deal,” she said. “I really don’t mind.”

Jill mumbled something that sounded like “Well, I do,” before turning toward Ben and dragging him toward the edge of the set.

Crash watched them, observed Jill’s gestures as she talked to Ben and waved her arm to indicate the set. She told herself she wasn’t ogling her; she was just trying to familiarize herself with the actress’s body language so she could adjust her own on camera.

Finally, Ben shook his head to whatever Jill had requested.

“Excuse me,” someone said behind Crash.

The camera crew and the sound people were setting up their equipment all around her.

Crash quickly got out of their way.

\* \* \*

Normally, Jill knew exactly how to use her Irish charm to get whatever she wanted. Not this time, apparently.

Ben kept shaking his head, no matter what she said. “No, Jill. I can’t just ignore Floyd’s decision. You don’t want me to get in trouble with the boss, do you?”

Jill sighed. “No. Of course not.”

Nikki, one of the movie’s leading ladies, joined them. She wrapped one arm around Jill and gently nudged her. “Why are you so eager to get fake urine all over your costume anyway?”

A grin slowly made its way onto Jill’s face. “Well, when you put it that way... Maybe I should be glad that the stuntwoman is doing it.” Despite her words, she couldn’t bring herself to be relieved. Shame and anger made her cheeks burn. She hated that the stuntwoman now assumed her to be a prissy diva who had requested a stunt double because she was afraid to chip a nail. Crash Patterson seemed to be

the only person in the room who had no idea that Jill had MS. Hard to believe that anyone in Hollywood had missed the tabloid frenzy last June, but it seemed Crash had managed somehow. Normally, Jill would be glad about it, but now it meant the stuntwoman thought she was a slacker.

Jill glanced over at Crash. Wearing the wig and the same costume, she could be mistaken for Jill from behind, but a closer look revealed that she didn't look like Jill at all. While people often referred to Jill as cute, Crash was gorgeous, in that nonclassical, almost androgynous way that would have immediately captured Jill's interest in the past. The woman's jawline was a bit too square and her nose a bit too strong for her to ever make it as an actress, but Jill liked her dimpled chin and her striking blue eyes.

She watched as Ben and Crash—or whatever her real name was—did a quick walk-through of the scene. Lighting was adjusted and the boom mikes moved back a bit, and then the cameras were rolling.

“And...action!” Ben called.

It was weird to see someone who looked so much like her, at least from behind and with a wig, walk down the row of beds. Was it just her imagination, or had Crash even adjusted her long, loose-limbed stride to the way Jill moved? Either she was really that good, or it was the skirt that changed the way she moved.

Halfway toward her patient, Crash tripped over the bedpan. It looked real, as if she hadn't known it was there. Crash almost fell and then careened into a metal cart that held medical supplies, which went flying in all directions.

“Cut!” Ben called. He reviewed the take on his monitors, then immediately nodded. “Great. I don't think we need to do it again.”

Crash took off her wig, revealing short, disheveled black hair, and grinned. “Well, that was easy money.”

Jill gritted her teeth. When the stuntwoman glanced over at her, she scowled and looked away. While it was Floyd who'd made that decision, it was hard not to resent Crash for being allowed to do what she no longer could.

“Jill?” Ben called. “Ready to film the lead-in?”

“Ready,” she answered, resolved to bag it in one take too. She'd show that stuntwoman that she wasn't a difficult diva who held up production whenever she felt like it.

\* \* \*

They didn't have time to break for a hot, sit-down meal from catering, so once Jill was done with her scenes for the day, she changed out of her costume and headed over to the craft services tent to see if there was any leftover food.

She ran her hands down the seams of her pants while she walked. God, after thirteen hours in petticoats, skirt, and corset, jeans had never felt so good. She grinned inwardly. *I might just set up a shrine to Levi Strauss!*

Someone cleared her throat behind her and said, “Hi.”

Quickly, Jill snatched her hands away, embarrassed to have been caught practically caressing her own legs. Her cheeks heated, so she refused to turn around. She had a pretty good idea of who was behind her anyway. That low voice with the faint Texas accent was unmistakable.

“Long day, huh?” Crash commented.

Jill nodded but otherwise didn’t react to Crash’s obvious attempt to start a conversation. She wasn’t in the mood to make small talk with someone who had called her difficult in front of half the crew. She was working hard not to cause any trouble on the set, and she wasn’t about to let this stuntwoman—who didn’t even know how lucky she was to have her body do anything she asked it to do—make her look bad.

When she stepped up to the twelve-foot-long craft services table that had been set up on one end of the tent, Crash joined her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jill saw that Crash had changed out of her costume too, apparently just as eager to get rid of the corset as Jill had been. Her low-rise jeans fit her like a second skin, making Jill’s dormant libido take notice. They had filmed some of the same scenes today, so the director would have the best material to choose from, but while Jill felt ready to drop, Crash looked fresh as a daisy.

*Figures.* At least temperatures were still relatively cool for the middle of May in LA, so except for the fatigue, her symptoms didn’t flare up.

Other actors and crew had wrapped their scenes too and were now descending on the food like a locust swarm.

Jill threw a longing glance at the rapidly disappearing brownies, grilled cheese sandwiches, and muffins. In the past, she would have grabbed some of that food too, but she tried to stick to a healthier diet these days.

Suppressing a sigh, she put a mango-lettuce-cucumber wrap onto her paper plate and reached for an apple—only to have her hand collide with another set of fingers reaching for the same piece of fruit.

A shiver ran through her body. Quickly, she snatched her hand away. Not turning toward Crash, she felt more than saw Crash watch her. “What?”

“Listen,” Crash said and gestured for Jill to go ahead and take the coveted apple. “I wanted to apologize for calling you difficult. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Jill weighed the apple in her hand. “Then why did you?”

“Well, I’m not usually hired for a simple scene like that, so I assumed—”

“You know what they say about people who make assumptions, don’t you?”

Crash folded her arms over her chest and regarded her with a dismayed expression. "Are you always this...?"

"Difficult?" Jill finished for her.

One corner of Crash's mouth twitched. "I didn't say that."

"But you thought it," Jill countered.

"Oh, now you're a mind reader too?"

"I don't have to be a mind reader to know what you're thinking." Jill knew she was a bit touchy, but she couldn't help being hurt that this stranger had formed an opinion about her so quickly.

At a stand-off, they stared at each other. Crash's blue eyes were almost eerie, and it irritated Jill even more how fascinating she found them.

"Ms. Patterson?" One of the PAs peered into the tent. "Mr. Brower is looking for you."

"Tell him I'm on my way," Crash said but made no move to follow him out of the tent. When the PA walked away, she turned back to Jill. "I really want us to be able to work together."

"That's one thing you don't have to worry about. If you knew me at all, you'd know that I never allow my personal feelings to interfere with my work." No matter what Crash thought of her, she was a professional.

Crash didn't look happy with the way they left things, but she finally gave her a nod. "I'd better go see what Ben wants. See you tomorrow."

Jill watched the tent flap fall closed behind Crash. God, it was going to be a long three months of shooting.

## CHAPTER 3

TWO SOUND TECHNICIANS WHO'D SNEAKED off for a smoke stared at Jill as she passed them on the way to her car.

*What is it, boys? Never seen a woman in her underwear before?* Chuckling, she glanced down at the pair of knee-length drawers and the chemise she was wearing. She unlocked her Beetle and let herself sink behind the wheel with a relieved sigh. Sitting down felt good, and so did being inside the car, where it was warmer. This was only the third day of filming, yet she was already exhausted. Today's night shoot was kicking her ass, but Jill was determined to prove herself in the upcoming fight scene—even if she was only allowed to film the lead-in and the close-ups.

Just when she reached for the jacket on the passenger seat, her cell phone rang. She fumbled it out of the jacket pocket and glanced at the display.

*Great.* Her mother was calling. If she didn't answer, she'd later have to listen to her ranting and raving about how worried she'd been. Sighing, she swiped her finger across the screen to accept the call. "Hi, Mom."

"Finally! I've been trying to reach you for hours!"

"I'm still on set, so I couldn't have my cell phone with me. I just went to the car for a minute. Did something happen?"

"Oh, yes!"

Jill gripped the steering wheel with her free hand. "Is Dad okay?"

"What? Oh, yes, nothing like that. Your brother got a promotion! Isn't that great?"

"Yes," Jill said dutifully. "It's wonderful." *And it would be wonderful too if you didn't scare me half to death!*

Her mother started to go on and on about the promotion.

"Mom, I really can't talk right now. We're doing a night shoot, and I have to get back to the set."

"I just wanted to give you the good news and ask if you got my e-mail," her mother said.

The e-mail sat unread in her in-box, but there was a good chance it had to do either with her brother's great accomplishments or with MS. Since her mother had

chosen to tell her about James's promotion on the phone, that left option number two. "The one about the MS health advice?"

"Yes."

*Bingo.* Jill halfheartedly listened to her mother's monologue about acupuncture, bee sting venom, and pH balance, all of which she was supposed to try out. Shaking her head, she thumped the steering wheel with her free hand. Since she'd finally told her parents about the MS last year, she'd stopped being their daughter and started being the family patient. Her mother hadn't even asked how the shooting of *Shaken to the Core* was going.

"Mom, I need to go," she said when her mother started talking about some aloe vera drink. She hung up, threw the phone onto the passenger seat, and closed her eyes for a moment.

\* \* \*

When Crash started to shiver in the cool night air, she slipped her leather jacket over her costume, not caring how ridiculous it might look.

It seemed to take forever until the cameras and the rest of the equipment had been set up. Why was it that everything always seemed to take twice as long on night shoots?

Spotlights cut through the darkness, illuminating a sea of tents that, in the movie, housed the injured and sick after the hospital had burned down.

When her colleague who would play the looter breaking into the makeshift hospital arrived, she went over the fight choreography with him.

After two run-throughs, both she and Ben were satisfied that all would go smoothly.

"Okay, let's get this over with so we can finally go home and get some sleep," Ben said. He looked around. "Where's Jill?"

Crash peered around too but couldn't locate her anywhere. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen her for the last half hour.

"I think she headed to her car to get a jacket," one of the PAs said.

Crash looked over to the parking lot, but everything was pitch-dark over there. A hint of worry skittered down her spine. Why was it taking Jill so long to get her jacket?

Ben let out a sigh. "Can someone go and get her? We're losing time here, people!"

"I'll go," Crash said before anyone else could volunteer. Maybe this would give her the opportunity to apologize again.

In the last two days, she'd had a lot of time to watch Jill while she waited for her next stunt. It hadn't taken her long to figure out that Jill was not the difficult

diva she'd first thought her to be. Even after half a dozen takes, Jill was always ready to repeat a shot as often as it took to get it right. She never complained, and she never treated any member of the crew with disrespect.

Crash jogged toward the parking lot. Once she'd left the circle of light on the set, she couldn't see much.

Voices drifted over from the edge of the parking lot. When her eyes adjusted to the near darkness, she could make out two members of the sound crew who'd wandered off for a smoke.

Crash continued on her way. She'd seen Jill arrive in a cute Beetle convertible this morning, and she tried to remember where Jill had parked it.

Finally, she made out the Beetle across the parking lot. Gravel crunched under her ankle-high costume boots as she strode over.

Someone was sitting in the car.

Crash bent and peered through the window.

Jill sat behind the wheel, her head leaned back and her eyes closed. She was wearing the same historic underwear that Crash had on, but she looked much better in it. A jacket was lying across her knees, as if she hadn't quite managed to put it on.

Just when Crash was about to get worried, Jill's lips parted and she started snoring so loudly that it could be heard even through the closed car door.

Relieved laughter burst from Crash's lips. She watched her for a while. Jill looked so cute—not to mention exhausted—that Crash hated to wake her. But she had no choice. Ben and the rest of the crew were waiting.

Softly, she knocked on the side window.

The snoring instantly stopped. Jill's head jerked up, and she smashed her knee into the steering wheel. She rubbed her leg and looked around as if needing a few seconds to remember where she was.

When their gazes met, Crash grinned and gave a sheepish wave.

Jill opened the door and climbed out of the car, still looking half asleep.

"Not used to staying up all night?" Crash asked and then shook her head at herself. *You'd better cut out the teasing—and the flirting—before she gets mad again.*

"Something like that," Jill mumbled.

"Sorry to wake you, but everyone's waiting." They headed toward the set.

"I'm fine," Jill said. "You can let go."

Puzzled, Crash peered over at her and only then realized that she'd taken hold of Jill's elbow to safely guide her through the darkness. She quickly let go.

\* \* \*



Jill crossed the parking lot as fast as she could. The knee-length drawers didn't allow her to wear her foot brace today, so she couldn't outrun Crash.

It was bad enough that the damn fatigue had made her fall asleep while at work, but why did it have to be Crash of all people who found her? The stuntwoman already thought she was a spoiled diva who didn't pull her own weight on the set.

"Jill?" Crash said as they were about to step into the circle of light surrounding the tents.

Jill just wanted to get back to work. Annoyed—more with herself and her fatigue than with Crash—she turned around. "What?"

"I...I really am sorry."

"No big deal," Jill said with a wave of her hand. "I wasn't really asleep, just resting my eyes for a second."

"Not for waking you. For saying...what I did about you. It was a stupid assumption to make, and I'd like to leave it behind us."

The faint light and the distance between them made it hard to make out her expression, but her words sounded honest. Either she was a better actress than Jill had given her credit for, or she could be taken at face value.

"So?" Crash held out her hand. "Do you accept my apology?"

Jill took two steps toward her so she could see her better. She glanced down at Crash's hand and then back up at her face.

Traditionally, blue eyes were thought of as cold, but Crash's looked warm and sincere.

"Apology accepted," Jill said and laid her hand into Crash's.

Crash's strong fingers cradled hers carefully. The simple touch felt unexpectedly good, reminding Jill how long it had been since a woman had held her hand.

Quickly, she pulled her hand away, not allowing herself to linger. "We need to get back to the set," she said and marched off without waiting for Crash's reply.

\* \* \*

Once they reached the set, Ben called Jill over to show her the sequence of motions that she would need to execute so the camera could capture her face during the fight with the looter. "He enters and finds you in the tent, asleep in the middle of the medical supplies. When you don't move out of the way, he shoves you back to get to the supplies. You stumble backward and fall." He pointed to the mat they'd set up in one of the tents. "Crash will do that part. One of your hands finds a broken-off branch on the ground, and you grab it as you get back up. You take a swing at him, but he blocks it and the two of you tussle for the weapon." He turned and looked at Crash. "Can you show her?"

“Sure.” Crash shrugged out of her leather jacket so she could move more freely. “I can even teach her how to fall safely if she wants to do the stunt herself.” She looked back and forth between Ben and Jill, careful not to make the same mistake as before and assume that Jill wouldn’t want to do any of her own stunts.

Jill opened her mouth, but before she could answer, Ben shook his head and said, “No, I’d rather you do it. Just show her what she needs to do so we can shoot the close-ups with her.”

What the hell was going on? Crash was used to producers and directors hesitating to allow their actors to do their own stunts, but this seemed a bit over the top. By now, Crash doubted that the director was so overprotective of Jill because they were lovers. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but her gaydar kept insisting that Jill was a lesbian. Even if she wasn’t, she didn’t seem to be the type who would allow herself to be coddled while at work.

But now wasn’t the time to solve this puzzle. Crash grabbed the branch with both hands. “You swing it like you would a baseball bat. Like this.” She demonstrated and then handed over the branch for Jill to try.

Jill swung the branch, looking as if she’d done it a thousand times before.

*Maybe she really is a lesbian. After all, we’re supposed to be good at softball.* Crash grinned to herself.

“What?” Jill asked.

“Nothing.” She led Jill over to the tent so they could practice right where they would shoot the scene. “Now take a swing at me.”

Jill hesitated.

“Don’t worry. You won’t hurt me. I’ll block it.”

Halfheartedly, Jill tried to hit her with the branch.

Crash blocked it, grabbed the branch, and pulled.

Their bodies collided, with both of them holding on to the branch. “He tries to take the makeshift weapon from you, but you refuse to let go.” She tugged on the branch, pulling Jill even closer. The ruffles of Jill’s chemise brushed Crash’s chest, and she caught a whiff of Jill’s perfume, nearly making her lose her grip on the branch.

“Like this?”

“Yes, exactly,” Crash said, annoyed with herself for sounding so breathless. “He slowly pushes you toward the tent post until you can’t back up anymore.” She did it.

\* \* \*

Jill’s back hit the tent post, but she hardly even noticed; she was too busy staring into Crash’s ice-blue eyes, which looked fierce and wild in the spotlights filtering in through the tent walls.

“And then?” she asked. Why was her voice so hoarse? *Get yourself together, or Ben will think you either have the hots for Crash or aren't fit enough to do this simple scene.*

“And then,” Crash said, “he grabs the branch with both hands and presses it to your throat.” With Jill still holding on to the middle of the branch, Crash grabbed it at both ends, brought it up horizontally, and laid it against Jill’s throat, exerting only the slightest pressure.

They stared at each other, their hands touching on the branch, their faces only inches apart.

Crash licked her lips as if her mouth had suddenly gone dry, and Jill mirrored the gesture.

*Are you crazy?* She tried to shake herself out of it. She had no business lusting after anyone, least of all a woman who was so physically active and full of energy. A woman who most likely had no idea that Jill had MS and that she would end up a burden, not an equal partner.

For Christ’s sake, she’d just fallen asleep in her car when all she’d wanted to do was get her jacket. Until someone found a cure for MS or at least the goddamn fatigue, she would never be able to keep up with someone like Crash.

She let go of the branch and slid out from between Crash and the tent pole. Distance. She needed some distance so she could think clearly.

“You okay?” Crash asked but didn’t try to follow her. Her voice sounded a bit husky too.

“Fine,” Jill croaked. “So, that’s when one of the nurses comes in and hits the guy over the head, right?”

“Uh, yes, exactly. All you need to do is stand there and look surprised as he goes down.”

Jill gave a decisive nod. She glanced at Ben, who stood at the tent’s entrance. “Okay. I’m ready.”

\* \* \*

Four days later, Jill had just settled on the couch with the script when a knock sounded on her trailer door.

Jill groaned. “Not yet,” she muttered, aware that she sounded like a whining teenager who had been ordered to go to bed. She was supposed to have one more hour before they needed her back on set—and she needed that hour to go over her lines for tomorrow’s scenes.

By the time she got home that night, she knew she’d be exhausted and any attempt to memorize lines would feel like wading through molasses, so she’d rather do it now.

When she opened the door and peeked out, it wasn't a PA sent to summon her back to the set. Instead, Crash stood on the top step, still in the Lucy Sharpe costume, but without the wig. Her short, black hair looked strangely out of place in the turn-of-the-century garb. With a broad grin, she presented a shiny apple. "I didn't see you at the craft services table, so I thought I'd bring you a snack."

Jill took the apple, careful not to touch Crash's fingers in the process. "Thanks." They stood facing each other in silence for several moments.

"Um, do you want to come in?" Jill asked and opened the trailer door wider.

"Sure." Crash followed her in. Her vibrancy filled the trailer, immediately making it seem much smaller. She looked around and let out a whistle. "Nice digs."

After a week of shooting, Jill was already so used to her home away from home that she didn't notice the details anymore. She took in the tiny kitchenette at one end of the trailer, the comfortable couch along one wall, and the small table with two chairs in the other corner, trying to see them through Crash's eyes. "You think so?"

"Yeah. I think it's even nicer than Nikki's and Shawn's trailers."

Crash had been in their co-stars' trailers? She shoved away the thought, firmly telling herself it didn't matter to her one way or the other. Instead, she focused on the apple and took a big bite out of it.

"I'm not even sure theirs have air-conditioning," Crash said.

Jill nearly choked on her bite of apple. *Dammit*. Lauren must have found out from Grace what effect heat had on Jill, so she had pulled some strings to get her the nicest trailer with the best air-conditioning on set. She didn't know whether to be grateful or angry with her friend and former publicist.

"Careful." Crash stepped closer and softly patted her on the back. "Women and apples don't have the best of history."

Finally, Jill managed to stop coughing and took a deep breath. Crash's scent filled her nose—an irresistible mix of shampoo, fresh sweat, and horses from one of the stunts earlier that day. She took a step back and focused on the conversation. "That's what people think, but actually, the Bible doesn't say that the fruit was an apple."

Another grin flashed across Crash's face. "I wouldn't know one way or another. I was talking about Snow White."

Jill flopped down on one end of the couch, inviting Crash with a nod of her head to take the other. She grinned at her. "I didn't take you for a fan of fairy tales."

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for happy endings." Crash sat and stretched out her legs, getting comfortable despite the corset she was wearing. "So, how do you know so much about the Bible?"

"Are you saying I don't look like the typical devout Irish Catholic girl to you?"  
"Um..."

Jill laughed and took pity on her. “I’m not religious. I’ve always preferred to rely on myself rather than some higher power. But my brother is big on religion. He quoted from the scripture whenever he had me over for dinner.”

“Had?” Crash repeated.

*Damn.* She was too perceptive for her own good. Jill resolved to be more careful about what she said around Crash in the future. While she didn’t mind sharing funny anecdotes about past movies and TV shows she had filmed, she preferred not to share too much about her private life with her colleagues. “Well, I’m here in LA, and the rest of my family lives in Ohio, so we don’t get the chance to have dinner together anymore,” she said. It was the truth—but not the real reason why she no longer had dinner with her brother. She hadn’t talked to him since the day she’d told him about the MS. Instead of telling her he was sorry or offering help, he had suggested it was her punishment for defying God by doing unnatural things with other women.

Crash looked at her. Something in her blue eyes told Jill that she sensed there was more to it, but Crash finally nodded and accepted that no further explanation would be forthcoming. She reached for the script that lay on the middle cushion between them. “I hope I didn’t interrupt you memorizing your lines.”

“That’s okay. It wasn’t going too well anyway.”

“Yeah? Why not?”

Jill shrugged. “I’m not sure.” It could be the MS messing with her focus or her memory, or maybe it was the fact that some aspects of her character’s behavior didn’t ring true to her and that was why the lines were giving her such trouble.

“Would it help if I ran lines with you for a while?” Crash asked.

“Are you sure you’ve got the time?”

“Oh yeah. I’m bored to death out there, waiting for them to need me for another gag.”

“Gag?”

“Stunt,” Crash said. She looked at Jill, her head tilted to the side like an overeager puppy begging for a treat.

Jill had to smile. “Sure, why not.” Running lines with Crash might be fun, and maybe it would help her memorize her lines. “I’m granting you asylum in my air-conditioned domicile, as long as you don’t mind being threatened by a scalpel.”

“Uh, excuse me?”

Jill chuckled. “You’ll see.”

Crash reached across the middle cushion and picked up the stapled script pages.

“The highlighted lines are mine, so just read the rest,” Jill said.

Crash took a minute to skim the first page before giving Jill a nod to show that she was ready. Instead of staying on the couch, she stood and moved around the

room, as Jill had done in the past when learning her lines, before she'd learned to conserve her energy. She looked so powerful and energetic that Jill couldn't help envying her.

"You need to get out of here, ma'am," Crash said. She wasn't just reading the text, but acting it out, lowering her voice to sound like the soldier who'd just rushed into the makeshift hospital.

Jill stood as well and bent over the coffee table, pretending to be busy with a patient. "Doctor," she said without looking up. "And we *are* getting out—but not without our patients. I need to stabilize her first."

"There's no time! If the fire reaches the park, the tents will go up in flames within seconds!"

Jill didn't answer. She remained bent over her imaginary patient.

Crash crossed the trailer in two long steps, marching like a soldier on a mission. She cursed under her breath, grabbed Jill by the shoulders, and dragged her toward the door.

"What are you doing? If you—"

Shaking her head, Crash let go of her. "The script says, 'What do you think you are doing, Corporal?'"

Jill stepped closer and half turned so she could look at the script pages Crash was holding. *Damn*. She was right. Jill closed her eyes for a moment and repeated the line three times to herself, hoping it would finally stick in her memory. "Okay, let's try this again," she said when she opened her eyes.

They ran through the lines again from the beginning. Jill attempted to get into the scene, trying out different gestures and inflections. But something was still off, making her stumble over her lines at times.

Finally, she plopped down on the couch and shook her head. "See what I mean? This isn't working, and I'm still not sure why."

Crash sat next to her. "Well, I'm not an acting coach, and far be it from me to tell a seasoned actress like you how to do her job..."

"But?" Jill prompted.

"I think the scene needs more...fire."

"More fire? That's what they're running from."

Crash threw the script down on the coffee table. "No, I mean more fire from you. More anger."

"Um, excuse me. I'm butting heads with an armed soldier, refusing to leave. I'd think that's enough anger, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but...I just don't feel it."

Groaning, Jill let her head fall back against the couch. "Damn. I think you're right. I just don't get why Lauren wrote the scene this way."

"Lauren?"

“Oh. She’s the screenwriter who wrote *Shaken to the Core*. And she’s a friend of mine,” Jill added after a moment’s hesitation. “I mean, Lucy is a trained doctor. Shouldn’t she be calm and level-headed in the face of this crisis? Shouldn’t she trust the soldier to do his job, just the way she’s doing hers? Why get so angry with him?”

Crash seemed to consider it for a moment before shaking her head. “I think she’s angry at much more than him.”

“What do you mean?” When Jill turned on the couch to face her more fully, their skirts brushed and she sensed the warmth of Crash’s knee against hers. Quickly, she moved back a bit.

“You have to view this scene in context and consider Lucy’s background. I only read bits and pieces of the script while I was waiting for a stunt yesterday, but didn’t she grow up on a ranch?”

Jill nodded. “She did. Her mother was the first female veterinarian in the US.”

“And Lucy is one of only eight thousand lady doctors in 1906,” Crash added.

“Right.” To prepare for her role, Jill had read the memoir of one of the first women to graduate from a medical college, so she knew what that meant. “She’s a woman living and working in a man’s world.” A thought occurred to her. “Just like you.”

“Things are much easier for stuntwomen nowadays, but I’ve heard some stories from women who used to be in the business twenty or thirty years ago...” Crash shook her head. “Let’s just say I understand why Lucy wouldn’t react too well to being ordered around when she’s trying to do her job.”

Jill looked at her with new respect. She hadn’t expected Crash to be able to provide such insights into her character.

Crash laughed. “What? You thought I was all brawn, no brains?”

Jill’s cheeks warmed, and she cursed the fair complexion she had inherited from the Irish side of her family. “Well, far be it from me to underestimate your intellect, but I think Ben hired you for your athletic skills.”

Crash let out an exaggerated sigh. “Story of my life. People just want me for my body.”

A witty—and slightly flirty—reply was already on the tip of her tongue, but Jill bit it back. *Back to work*. “Could we try the scene again?”

“Sure. I’m all yours.”

So she wasn’t the only flirt around. Too bad it couldn’t go anywhere. “Let’s take it from ‘There’s no time.’”

Crash nodded and moved back to the door, as if she had just entered. “There’s no time! If the fire reaches the park, the tents will go up in flames within seconds!”

Jill stiffened her shoulders but kept working on her patient.

Urgently, Crash strode toward her and grabbed her by the shoulders.

Jill allowed herself to connect with all the anger she'd bottled up inside in the last two years. Anger at this damn disease that made her future unpredictable at best. Anger at the doctors who were just as helpless as she was. Anger at the acquaintances who told her how good she looked every time they saw her, as if that somehow meant she couldn't possibly be sick.

Rage bubbled up from the deepest core of her being until the next line almost burst from her lips. "What do you think you are doing, Corporal?" She grabbed hold of the coffee table with one hand and swung up the nearest object with the other, waving it threateningly. "If you don't let go of me this instant, I'm going to stab you with—"

"The remote control?" Crash burst out laughing.

Jill's gaze went to the object in her hand, which was indeed the remote control. "My scalpel," she said, trying to hold on to her anger, but then she couldn't help it. She joined Crash's laughter.

They fell onto the couch next to each other, holding their sides.

A knock on the door interrupted their hilarity.

Jill wiped her eyes. God, she couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed like this. It felt good. She took a calming breath and called, "Yes?"

The door swung open, revealing a PA with a walkie-talkie hanging around his neck. He looked from Jill to Crash with a curious expression, obviously having heard their laughter through the door. Then his gaze zeroed in on the remote control Jill hadn't realized she was still clutching.

Jill looked over at Crash, who gazed back with one corner of her mouth twitching.

They burst out laughing again.

"Uh, they need you in five minutes, Ms. Corrigan," the PA said and left with a puzzled shake of his head.

When she could talk again, Jill shook the remote control at Crash. "If I burst out laughing while we're shooting the scene, you're in trouble."

"Me?" Crash clutched her chest with a faux innocent expression.

Jill dropped the remote control onto the couch and walked to the door. "Better stick to stunt work. Your acting skills are seriously lacking."

Grinning, Crash followed her back to the set.



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BY JAE

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