

IN BED WITH A STRANGER

Writing this book – the continuation of Kit and Sophie’s story from *Craving the Forbidden* – was very different from writing any other. Obviously knew the characters pretty well, which was a plus, but I had no idea what was going to happen to them. And I was almost afraid to go there, if I’m honest. Having spent the previous few months immersed in the first part of their story, and having brought them to their grand Happy Ever After, the thought of anything undermining that or putting the love they (and I) had fought to find in jeopardy was unsettling.

Initially I kicked myself for not even vaguely thinking of the second book when I was writing the first, or for leaving a tiny cloud of doubt in the blue-sky ending that would give me some idea of the direction it was going to take. For a while I wondered if my perennial failure to plan had well and truly caught me out this time and doomed the project to failure. But then it dawned on me that real life is like that all the time, and if Sophie and Kit themselves had no idea of what storms that lay ahead there was no reason why I should. It wasn't a case of drawing out the conflict that had already kept them apart (any couple that keep going round in circles with the same old arguments without resolving them probably won't be getting a telegram from the Queen on their Diamond Wedding Anniversary) but at looking at aspects of their characters and their history that had the potential to develop into new issues entirely.

So, it turned out that the ingredients for the second story were all there in the first... Kit's (*ahem* - trying to avoid spoilers...) family background, along with his unwillingness to show emotions were two areas that raised red flags for future peace and harmony, along with the large chip Sophie has on her shoulder about her own upbringing, and a minor health problem that had been put into the first book for fun (and for the sake of realism!) Kit’s job in bomb disposal provided a reason to bring about a separation between them, and endless scope for emotional conflict (as well as interesting, harrowing research.) From there, and with a desperate urge to get them out of Alnburgh and somewhere a bit warmer and more exotic, the story mercifully fitted itself together.

Although it’s a continuation of the love story started in *Craving the Forbidden*, *In Bed with a Stranger* is a stand-alone book too. It feels quite different in tone from its prequel, but although the ending is just as happy and resolved I still find myself wondering how Kit and Sophie are getting on...

Extract from the book

Sophie stopped in the kitchen doorway.

Kit was sitting at the table with the pile of letters that had come while he’d been away, drinking coffee. He was wearing jeans but no shirt, and his skin was tanned to the colour of mahogany. Sophie’s stomach flipped.

‘Hi.’

Oh dear. Having leapt out of bed almost as soon as she opened her eyes, brushed her teeth like a person on speeded-up film and even slapped a bit of tinted moisturiser onto her too-pale cheeks before running downstairs, it was ridiculous that that was all she could manage. Hi. And in a voice that was barely more than a strangled whisper.

He looked up. The morning light showed up the mess of cuts and bruising on his face, making him look battered and exhausted and beautiful.

‘Hi.’

‘So you are real,’ she said ruefully, going across to fill the kettle. ‘I thought I might have dreamed it. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d done that while you’ve been gone – dreamed about you so vividly that waking up was like saying goodbye all over again.’ She stopped, before she said anymore and gave herself away as being a terrifying crazy obsessive fiancée. To make it sound like she was joking asked, ‘Did they let you off a day early for good behaviour?’

‘Unfortunately not.’ He put down the letter he was reading and pushed a hand through his hair. It was still wet from the shower, but she could see that it had been lightened by the sun, giving the kind of tawny streaks only the most expensive hairdressers could produce. ‘A man in my unit was badly injured yesterday. I flew home with him.’

‘Oh Kit, I’m so sorry.’ Filled with contrition for thinking such shallow thoughts, Sophie went over to stand beside him. ‘How is he?’

‘Not good.’

His voice was flat, toneless and he looked down at the letter again, as if the subject was closed. On the other side of the kitchen the kettle began its steam-train rattle. Sophie touched his cheekbone with her fingertips.

‘What happened?’ she said softly. ‘Was it an explosion?’

For a moment he said nothing, but she saw his eyelids flicker, as if he was remembering something he didn’t want to remember; reliving something he didn’t want to relive.

‘Yes...’

His forehead creased into a sudden frown of pain and for a second she thought he was going to say more. But then the shutters descended and he looked up at her with a cool smile that was more about masking emotion than conveying it.

Sophie pulled out the chair beside him and sat down, turning to face him. ‘How badly hurt is he?’

‘It’s hard to tell at the moment,’ he said neutrally. ‘It looks like he’ll live, but it’s too early to say how bad his injuries will be.’ His smile twisted. ‘He’s only nineteen.’

‘Just a boy,’ she murmured. The kettle boiled in a billow of steam and hissed into silence. Aching for him, Sophie took his hand between hers, feeling the hard skin on the undersides of his fingers, willing him to open up to her. ‘It’s good that you stayed with him. It must have made a huge difference to him, having you there, and to his family, knowing that someone was looking after him...’

She trailed off as he got abruptly to his feet, giving her no choice but to let go of his hand.

‘Coffee?’

‘Yes please.’ Hurt blossomed inside her but she didn’t let it seep into her tone. ‘Sorry – there’s only instant. I was going to go shopping today to get things in for when you came back.’

She thought of all the plans she had made for his homecoming; the food she was going to buy that could be eaten in bed – olives, quails eggs, tiny dim sum and Lebanese pastries from the deli around the corner – champagne and proper coffee, piles of croissants and brioche for breakfast. And the x-rated silk nightdress, of course. Now they all seemed to belong to a silly, frilly fantasy in which Kit took the part of the Disney Prince, doe-eyed with adoration.

The reality was turning out to be slightly different.

‘What on earth have you been living on?’ he said, his voice an acerbic drawl. ‘I was going to make you breakfast, but the cupboard seems to be bare.’

‘I usually eat on the go,’ she said lightly, getting up and going over to the designer stainless steel bread bin. ‘But look there’s bread. And...’ she opened a cupboard and pulled down a jar with a flourish. ‘Chocolate spread.’

Splinters of guilt lodged themselves in Kit’s throat. She was making a good attempt to hide it but behind the show of nonchalance he could tell she was hurt. She’d tried to reach out to him – to talk to him like a normal human being, and he’d behaved as if she’d done something indecent.

It must have made a huge difference to him, having you there, and to his family, knowing that someone was looking after him...

Jesus. How she overestimated him. In so many ways.

He looked at her. She was putting bread into the toaster and her glossy hair was tousled, her legs long and bare beneath an old checked shirt she must have taken from his

wardrobe. He felt his chest tighten with remorse and desire. He wasn't brave enough to shatter her illusions about him yet, but he could at least try to make up to her for being such a callous bastard.

Gently he took the jar from her and unscrewed the lid. He peered inside and then looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

'You actually eat this stuff?'

She shrugged, reaching for a knife from the cutlery drawer. 'What else would you do with it?'

'I'm surprised,' he said gravely, taking the knife from her too, 'that you need to ask that...'

Reviews

IN BED WITH A STRANGER (4.5) by India Grey: Kit and Sophie's love story continues, as Kit returns from active duty. The fallout from the discovery of his lineage remains, so when his mother requests a visit, he and Sophie take off for Marrakech. Sophie loves Kit but ever since his return from the Middle East he's been distant and he becomes more so after they visit his mother. A timeless, unforgettable romance that deals adeptly with a very real wartime affliction, starring an award-worthy couple and mixed with scenes that go from the everyday ordinary to the extremely exotic.

(Romantic Times 4.5 stars)