

'Full of romance
and sparkle'
Lovereading

Summer Kisses

Coffee Shop



Sarah Morgan

Sarah Morgan

**Summer Kisses: The
Rebel Doctor's Bride**

«HarperCollins»

Morgan S.

Summer Kisses: The Rebel Doctor's Bride / S. Morgan —
«HarperCollins»,

This summer the sun has gone to everyone's heads...Flora and Jenna should be working busy shifts but something more fun has come up! Two new arrivals have blown into Glenmore and life at the hospital could get tricky. So it's time to set some rules. Flora's summer is simple: Avoid kissing Conner MacNeil. (He may be gorgeous, back in town and single... but he snogged everyone except you at school, remember?!). Jenna's summer 'Why I shouldn't fall in love with Dr Ryan McKinley' list is a little more complex...I've been divorced less than a year?I'm ordinary and he is a sex god?I have my daughter to think of?He might break my heart...It's so difficult to be good with temptation on the doorstep. But rules are rules. Summer is sunshine. And, just maybe, a wish is a kiss that might just come true!Includes: The Rebel Doctor's Bride and Dare She Date the Dreamy Doc?Praise for Sarah Morgan'Sarah Morgan continues to hang out on my autobuy list and each book of her that I discover is a treat' - Smart Bitches, Trashy Books'Full of romance and sparkle' – Lovereading'Morgan's brilliant talent never ceases to amaze' - RT Book Reviews'Dear Ms Morgan, I'm always on the lookout for a new book by you...' - Dear Author'Morgan is a magician with words' - RT Book Reviews'Definitely looking forward to more from Sarah Morgan' - Smexy Book

Содержание

About the Author	6
prologue	7
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	18
CHAPTER THREE	24
CHAPTER FOUR	31
CHAPTER FIVE	39
CHAPTER SIX	51
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	53

About the Author

As a child **SARAH MORGAN** dreamed of being a writer and, although she took a few interesting detours on the way, she is now living that dream. With her writing career she has successfully combined business with pleasure, and she firmly believes that reading romance is one of the most satisfying and fat-free escapist pleasures available. Her stories are unashamedly optimistic, and she is always pleased when she receives letters from readers saying that her books have helped them through hard times.

Sarah lives near London with her husband and two children, who innocently provide an endless supply of authentic dialogue. When she isn't writing or reading Sarah enjoys music, movies, and any activity that takes her outdoors.

Readers can find out more about Sarah and her books from her website: www.sarahmorgan.com. She can also be found on Facebook and Twitter.

Summer Kisses

Flora

Jenna

Sarah Morgan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Flora

Sarah Morgan

prologue

THEY were all staring.

He could feel them staring even though he stood with his back to them, his legs braced against the slight roll of the ferry, his eyes fixed firmly on the ragged coastline of the approaching island.

The whispers and speculation had started from the moment he'd ridden his motorbike onto the ferry. *From the moment he'd removed his helmet and allowed them to see his face.*

Some of the passengers were tourists, using the ferry as a means to spend a few days or weeks on the wild Scottish island of Glenmore, but many were locals, taking advantage of their only transport link with the mainland.

And the locals knew him. Even after an absence of twelve years, they recognised him.

They remembered him for all the same reasons that he remembered them.

Their faces were filed away in his subconscious; deep scars on his soul.

He probably should have greeted them; islanders were sociable people and a smile and a 'hello' might have begun to bridge the gulf that stretched between them. But his firm mouth didn't shift and the chill in his ice blue eyes didn't thaw.

And that was the root of the problem, he brooded silently as he studied the deadly rocks that had protected this part of the coastline for centuries. He wasn't sociable. He didn't care what they thought of him. He'd never been interested in courting the good opinion of others and he'd never considered himself an islander, even though he'd been born on Glenmore and had spent the first eighteen years of his life trapped within the confines of its rocky shores.

He had no wish to exchange small talk or make friends. Neither did he intend to explain his presence. They'd find out what he was doing here soon enough. It was inevitable. But, for now, he dismissed their shocked glances as inconsequential and enjoyed his last moments of self-imposed isolation.

The first drops of rain sent the other passengers scuttling inside for protection but he didn't move. Instead he stood still, staring bleakly at the ragged shores of the island, just visible through the rain-lashed mist. The land was steeped in lore and legend, with a long, bloody history of Viking invasion.

Locals believed that the island had a soul and a personality. They believed that the unpredictable weather was Glenmore expressing her many moods.

He glanced up at the angry sky with a cynical smile. If that was the case then today she was definitely menopausal.

Or maybe, like the islanders, she'd seen his return and was crying.

The island loomed out of the mist and he stared ahead, seeing dark memories waiting on the shore. *Memories of wild teenage years; of anger and defiance.* His past was a stormy canvas of rules broken, boundaries exploded, vices explored, girls seduced—*far too many girls seduced*—and all against an atmosphere of intense disapproval from the locals who'd thought his parents should have had more control.

Remembering the vicious, violent atmosphere of his home, he gave a humourless laugh. His father hadn't been capable of controlling himself, let alone him. After his mother had left, he'd spent as little time in the house as possible.

The rain was falling heavily as the ferry docked and he turned up the collar of his leather jacket and moved purposefully towards his motorbike.

He could have replaced his helmet and assured himself a degree of privacy from the hostile stares, but instead he paused for a moment, the wicked streak inside him making sure that they had more than enough time to take one more good look at his face. He didn't want there to be any doubt in their minds. He wanted them to know that he was back.

Let them stare and speculate. It would save him the bother of announcing his return.

With a smooth, athletic movement, he settled his powerful body onto the motorbike and caught the eye of the ferryman, acknowledging his disbelieving stare with a slight inclination of his head. He knew exactly what old Jim was thinking—*that the morning ferry had brought trouble to Glenmore*. And news of trouble spread fast on this island. As if to confirm his instincts, he caught a few words from the crush of people preparing to leave the ferry. *Arrogant, wild, unstable, volatile, handsome as the devil ...*

He pushed the helmet down onto his head with his gloved hands. Luckily for him, plenty of women were attracted to arrogant, wild, unstable, volatile men, or his life would have been considerably more boring than it had been.

From behind the privacy of his helmet, he smiled, knowing exactly what would happen next. The rumours would spread like ripples in a pond. Within minutes, news of his arrival would have spread across the island. Ferryman to fisherman, fisherman to shopkeeper, shopkeeper to customer—it would take no time at all for the entire population of the island to be informed of the latest news—that Conner MacNeil had come in on the morning ferry.

The Bad Boy was back on the Island.

CHAPTER ONE

‘THE waiting room is packed and you’ve had five requests for home visits.’ Flora handed Logan a prescription to sign, thinking that he looked more tired than ever. ‘Given that they were all mobile and none of their complaints sounded life-threatening, Janet’s managed to persuade them all to come to the surgery because it just isn’t practical for you to go dashing around the island at the moment when you’re running this practice on your own. What happens if we have a genuine emergency? You can’t be in five places at once. We can’t carry on like this, Logan. *You* can’t carry on like this. You’re going to drop.’

Logan looked at the prescription. ‘Gentacin ear drops?’

‘Pam King has an infection. She has her ears syringed regularly, but this time the whole of the canal is looking inflamed. There didn’t seem any point in adding her to your already buckling list. I’ve taken off half your patients and if I can sort them out, I will. Otherwise I’ll have to push them back through to you.’

‘You, Flora Harris, are a miracle.’ Logan signed the prescription. ‘And persuading you to come back here as my practice nurse was the best thing I ever did. When Kyla and Ethan left, I couldn’t imagine how we were going to cope. I lost nurse and doctor in one fell swoop.’

‘Well, I’ve only solved one half of your problem. You still need to find a doctor to replace Ethan. Any progress?’

‘I think so.’

‘Seriously?’ Flora picked the prescription up from his desk. ‘You’ve found someone?’

‘Ask me again at lunchtime. I’m expecting someone on the morning ferry.’

‘Oh, that’s fantastic.’ Relieved, Flora relaxed slightly. ‘Is he or she good? Well qualified?’

‘It’s a he.’ Logan turned back to his computer. ‘And, yes, he’s extremely well qualified.’

Flora stared at him expectantly. ‘And ...?’

‘And what?’

‘Aren’t you going to tell me any more?’

‘No.’ He tapped a few keys and frowned at the screen. ‘How are you finding Glenmore, Flora? I haven’t really had a chance to ask you and you’ve already been here for a month. Everything going all right? Have you settled into Evanna’s cottage?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ *Hadn’t they been discussing the new doctor?* Why were they suddenly on the subject of her cottage? Why was he changing the subject? ‘Evanna’s cottage is beautiful. I love it.’ It was true. She’d never imagined she’d live anywhere so pretty. ‘You can see the sea from the bed ...’ she blushed ‘... but, of course, you already know that, given that the two of you are married. I’m sure you spent plenty of time in her cottage.’

‘Actually, we didn’t.’ Logan glanced at her, amused. ‘We usually stayed at mine because there was more room. Are you finding the work very different from the practice in Edinburgh?’

‘Not really, but everything takes four times as long because this is Glenmore and people like to chat.’ Flora gave a helpless shrug. ‘I always seem to be running late.’

‘You need to cut them off when they gossip.’ Logan turned his attention back to the computer screen, searching for something. ‘That’s what the rest of us do.’

‘I haven’t worked out how to do that without appearing rude. I don’t want to offend them. They’re all so nice and they mean well.’ Flora picked up the prescription and moved towards the door. ‘Anyway, I’d better let you carry on. At this rate you’ll still be here at midnight. And so will I.’

As she left the room and returned to her own consulting room she suddenly remembered that Logan hadn’t given her any more clues as to the identity of the new doctor. On an island where no one kept a secret, Logan appeared to have one. Why? What possible reason could he have for being so cloak and dagger about the whole thing?

Who exactly had he appointed?

Conner parked the motorbike and dragged the helmet from his head. The rain had stopped and the sun fought a battle with the clouds, as if to remind him that the weather on Glenmore Island was as unpredictable as ever.

It was July and still the wind blew.

That same wind had almost landed him in jail at the age of sixteen.

Tucking his helmet under his arm, he strolled into the surgery. *Nice job, Logan*, he thought to himself as he took in his surroundings in one casual glance. Sleek, clean lines and plenty of light. Despite the early hour, the waiting room was already crowded with patients and he saw heads turn and eyes widen as he passed.

Without adjusting his pace, he ignored the reception desk and made for the first consulting room. As he approached the door a patient walked out, clutching a prescription in her hand. She took one look at him and stopped dead, her open mouth reminding him of a baby bird waiting to be fed.

‘Conner MacNeil.’ Her voice trailed off in a strangled squeak and he lifted an eyebrow, a sardonic expression in his eyes as he observed her mounting discomfort.

If he'd been in any doubt as to the islanders' reaction to his return, that doubt had now gone.

‘Mrs Graham.’ He was cool and polite, his neutral tone a direct contrast to her shock and consternation. He moved past her, knowing that he should cut short the encounter, but he couldn't quite help himself and he turned, the devil dancing in his eyes. ‘I hope your beautiful garden is thriving. If I remember correctly, it's always at its best in July.’

Her soft gasp of outrage made it obvious that her memories of their last meeting were as clear as his and a smile played around his hard mouth as he walked into the consulting room without bothering to knock.

Mrs Graham's garden.

He still remembered the girl ...

He pushed the door shut with the flat of his hand and the man at the desk looked up.

‘Conner.’ Logan rose to his feet, welcome in his eyes as he stretched out his hand. ‘It's been too long.’

‘Not long enough for some,’ Conner murmured, thinking of Mrs Graham who, he was sure, at that precise moment was still glaring angrily at the closed door. ‘Prepare yourself for a riot. The locals will be arming themselves any minute now.’ He shook the hand of the man who had been part of his boyhood.

‘Kate Graham recognised you, then? I seem to recall that you were stark naked the last time she saw you.’

The devil was back in Conner's eyes. ‘Mrs Graham had extremely tall delphiniums in her border,’ he recalled. ‘She only saw my face.’

Logan laughed out loud. ‘You have no idea how pleased I am to see you. You're looking good, Conner.’

‘I wish I could return the compliment.’ Conner's dark brows drew together in a frown as he studied his cousin, taking in the faint shadows and the lines of strain. ‘You've looked better. Island life obviously doesn't suit you. You need to leave this backwater and find yourself a proper job.’ But his tone was light because he knew that the medical care that his cousin delivered on this remote Scottish island was of exceptional quality.

‘There's nothing wrong with island life, just the lack of medical staff. To run this place effectively we need two doctors and two nurses.’ Logan rubbed his fingers over his forehead. ‘It's been tough since Kyla and Ethan left. I lost a doctor and a nurse in one blow.’

Conner thought about his cousin. ‘I never thought Kyla would leave this place.’

‘She married an Englishman with itchy feet.’

‘There's treatment for that.’

‘Yeah.’ Logan grinned. ‘Anyway, it’s only temporary and I’ve replaced Kyla. Now you’re here, so we’re back on track.’

‘If I were you, I’d postpone the celebrations until the whole island gets wind of your little plan. The jungle drums will start beating soon.’

‘They’re already beating.’ Logan picked up his coffee-mug and then realised that it was empty and put it down again. ‘My phone has been ringing and you’ve only been on the island for twenty minutes. You certainly know how to make a lasting impression, Conner MacNeil. What exactly did you do on that ferry?’

‘Travelled on it. Apparently that was more than enough.’ Conner stretched his legs out in front of him and put his helmet down on the floor. ‘There’s going to be a rebellion. If looks could kill, I’d be in your mortuary right now, not your consulting room. The natives will probably return to their roots and take up arms to defend themselves from the unwelcome invader. They’re preparing themselves for rape and pillage.’

‘Ignore them. You know what the islanders are like.’ Logan reached for a pack of papers. ‘They don’t like change. Can you read this lot quickly and sign? Just a formality.’

‘And you know how much I love formality,’ Connor drawled softly, but he leaned forward to take the papers, grimacing when he saw the thickness of the documentation. ‘Life’s too short to wade through that much bureaucracy. What does it say? *Conner MacNeil must not steal, destroy property or otherwise harass the citizens of Glenmore?*’

‘All that and the fact that all single women under the age of thirty are now considered to be in danger.’ Logan’s eyes gleamed as he handed his cousin a pen. ‘The men of the island are locking up their wives and daughters as we speak and Mrs Graham is probably shovelling fertiliser on her delphiniums to increase their height and preserve her modesty and yours. Sign the back page.’

‘Single women under the age of thirty? Why thirty? That doesn’t give me nearly enough scope. I’ve always preferred experience to innocence.’ Conner flipped straight to the back of the sheaf of papers and signed with a casual flourish.

Logan lifted an eyebrow. ‘Aren’t you going to bother to read what you just signed?’

‘I’m presuming it’s a load of rules and regulations.’

‘And knowing that, you’re prepared to sign? I thought you hated rules and regulations.’

‘I do, but I trust you and I admire what you’ve built here on Glenmore.’ Conner handed the papers back to Logan, a faint smile on his mouth. ‘I promise to do my best for your patients. I’m *not* promising that I won’t bend the rules a little if it proves to be necessary.’

Logan reached for an envelope. ‘I bend them all the time. It’s the only way to get things done. It’s good to have you here, Conner.’

‘I don’t think everyone is going to agree with you. Judging from the shock on the faces I’ve seen so far, you didn’t warn them in advance.’

‘Do I look stupid?’ Logan slipped the papers into the envelope and dropped it into the tray on his desk. ‘I was waiting until you showed up.’

‘Did you think I wouldn’t?’

‘Reliability isn’t your middle name. I wasn’t sure you’d actually do this when the time came.’

Connor gave a humourless laugh. ‘Then that makes two of us.’

‘But you did, so now I can break the happy news to the inhabitants of Glenmore. How have you been? Tell me, honestly.’ Logan hesitated. ‘It must have been hard ...’

‘Coming back? Why would you say that?’ Conner was surprised to find that his voice sounded so harsh. ‘You know how much I love this place.’

Ignoring the sarcasm, Logan watched him steadily. ‘Actually, I was talking about leaving the army.’

The army?

Conner realised that since he'd stepped off the ferry, he'd given no thought to the life he'd just left. All he could think about was Glenmore and how it felt to be back. The bad memories poured into him like some dark, insidious disease, gradually taking possession of his mind. 'Leaving the army isn't my problem at the moment,' he growled. 'And, anyway, I don't believe in living in the past when there's a perfectly good future to be getting on with.'

'Are you going to sell the house?'

'You get straight to the point, don't you?' Conner rose to his feet and paced across the room, keeping his back to his cousin as he rode the pain. 'Yes.' He turned, his eyes fierce. 'Why would I keep it?'

'So that you have a place on Glenmore?'

'If I'd wanted that,' Conner said softly, 'why would I be renting your barn?'

'Good point.' Logan gave him a sympathetic look. 'This must be hard for you, I know.'

'Nowhere near as hard as it's going to be for the locals.' Conner studied a picture on the wall. 'They're going to think that you've lost your mind, appointing me as the locum.'

'They'd be less shocked if you told them the truth about what you've been doing since you stormed off Glenmore all those years ago.'

'Island gossip has never interested me.'

'You sound like Flora. Her clinics are taking twice as long as they should because she doesn't like to interrupt people when they're chatting.'

'Flora?'

'My practice nurse. She replaced Kyla.'

'Flora Harris?' Conner turned, the pain inside him under control. 'Daughter of Ian Harris, our island solicitor? Niece of our esteemed headmistresses?'

Cloudy dark hair, soft brown eyes, an impossibly shy and awkward teenager, and as innocent as the dawn.

Logan's eyes narrowed. 'You didn't ever ...'

'Fortunately for her, there were enough wild teenage girls on the island who were more than happy to experiment, without me having to corrupt the saintly Flora. Anyway, she didn't take her nose out of a book for long enough to discover the existence of sex.'

'She isn't saintly. Just shy.'

'Maybe. But definitely not the sort of girl who would skip classes in favour of a practical session on human reproduction.' Conner rolled his shoulders to ease the tension. 'I'm not surprised she's a nurse. It would have been that or a librarian. Does she know I'm the new doctor?'

'Not yet.'

'She won't approve.'

'Even if she doesn't, she would never say so. Flora is sweet, kind and incredibly civilised.'

'Whereas I'm sharp, unkind and incredibly uncivilised. I'm willing to bet that the first thing she does, when she finds out about me, is remind you that I blew up the science lab.'

'I'd forgotten about that.' Momentarily distracted, Logan narrowed his eyes. 'What did you use—potassium?'

'Too dangerous. They didn't keep it at school.' Restless, Conner paced across the room again and scanned the row of textbooks on the shelf. 'But they did keep sodium. That was good enough.'

'It should have been in a locked cupboard.'

'It was.'

Logan laughed. 'I'm amazed you weren't expelled.'

'Me, too. Very frustrating, given how hard I applied myself to the task.' Conner suppressed a yawn. 'So I'm going to be working with Flora. The excitement of this place increases by the minute.'

'She's a brilliant nurse. She was working in Edinburgh until last month but we persuaded her to come back. And now you've joined us. I've been thinking—we should tell the islanders what you've been doing with your life.'

'It's none of their business.'

Logan sighed. 'I don't see why you're so reluctant to let people know that you're a good guy.'

'Who says I'm a good guy? If you wanted a good guy for the job then you've appointed the wrong man.' Conner turned, a ghost of a smile on his face. 'You'll have a hard job convincing Flora, Mrs Graham and any of that lot on the ferry that there's a single decent bone in my body.'

'Give them time. How soon can you start?'

'That depends on how soon you want to clear out your surgery.' Conner unzipped his jacket. 'I can guarantee that they won't be queuing up to see me. I'm assuming that, by appointing me, you want to encourage your patients to deal with their ailments at home. We both know they won't be coming to the surgery once they know who the doctor is. Which means I get to lounge around all day with my feet up while you pay my salary.'

'That's rubbish. You know as well as I do that the women will be forming a disorderly queue all the way to the harbour.' Logan's expression was serious. 'Tell them the truth about yourself, Con. It will help them understand you.'

'I don't need them to understand me. That's always been the difference between us. You *are* a nice guy. I'm not. You care about them. I don't.'

'So why are you here?'

'Not out of love for the islanders, that's for sure. And I'm here because ...' Conner shrugged. '... you rang me. I came. Let's leave it at that.' He didn't want to think about the rest of it. Not yet. He frowned, his attention caught by one of the photographs on the wall. 'Isn't that little Evanna Duncan? Are you two together?'

'She's Evanna MacNeil now,' Logan's tone was a shade cooler as he corrected him. 'I married her a year ago and if you so much as glance in her direction you might just discover that I'm not such a nice guy after all.'

'Seducing married women has never been on my list of vices.' Conner turned and looked at his cousin. 'She always adored you. Children?'

'Evanna is due in five weeks.' Logan hesitated. 'And I have a daughter from a previous marriage. Kirsty. She's two.'

'So, you're a regular family man.' Conner saw the shadows in Logan's eyes but he knew better than to ask questions. He had plenty of shadows of his own, *dark corners that he kept private*.

Logan's gaze didn't waver. 'What about you? Wife? Children?'

'I'll assume that wasn't a serious question.'

'I was just hoping you had a reason not to wreak havoc across the female population of Glenmore over the summer. Just don't touch the patients, it's strictly frowned on and definitely against the rules.' Logan rose to his feet. 'Use the consulting room across the corridor. Do you want to shave or change before you start?'

'And ruin the opportunity to shock everyone? I don't think so. I'll stay as I am.'

'I've just broken the news of your arrival to Janet, our receptionist. She's already lined up some patients. Is there anything you need to know before you start?'

'Yes.' Conner paused, his hand on the door. 'If I'm not allowed to seduce the patients, how am I supposed to relieve the boredom of being trapped on Glenmore?'

'I don't suppose you'd consider a round of golf?'

'No.'

'I didn't think you would. Well, I'm confident you'll find something or someone to distract you.' Logan gave a resigned laugh. 'Just steer clear of Mrs Graham's garden, that's all I ask.'

She needed to talk to Logan quickly.

Flora nipped across the corridor and tapped lightly on the door. Without waiting for an answer, she walked into his consulting room and immediately collided with a tall, dark-haired man whose body seemed to be made of nothing but rock-hard muscle. She stumbled slightly but his hands came out and steadied her, his strong fingers digging into her arms as he held her.

'I'm *terribly* sorry,' she apologised breathlessly, catching her glasses before they could slide down her nose, 'I had no idea Logan had a patient with him.'

'Hello, Flora.' His lazy, masculine drawl was alarmingly familiar and her eyes flew wide as she tilted her head back to take a proper look at him.

'Oh!' Her heart started to beat in double time and she felt decidedly faint. Her knees weakened and from a distance she heard Logan's voice.

'Flora, you remember my cousin Conner?'

Remember? *Remember?* Well, of course she remembered! She might be short-sighted, but she was still a woman! And it didn't matter how many rules or hearts he'd broken, there wasn't a woman alive who would forget Conner MacNeil once she'd met him.

Especially not her.

And he would have known how she'd felt because arrogance and Conner had gone hand in hand. Even as a young boy he'd known exactly what effect he had on the girls and had used it to his advantage.

But it wasn't a boy who was standing in front of her now. It was a man. And his effect on the opposite sex had grown proportionately.

Determined not to boost his ego by revealing her thoughts, Flora screwed up her face and adopted what she hoped was a puzzled expression. 'Conner ... Conner ... The name *is* familiar—were you below me at school? Or were you above me?'

His blue eyes glinted with wicked humour. 'I don't recall ever being above or below you, Flora,' he murmured softly, 'but that may be my defective memory.'

She felt the heat flare in her cheeks and remembered, too late, that anyone trying to play word games with Conner was always going to lose. His brain and his tongue worked in perfect unison whereas hers had always been slightly disconnected. Without fail she thought of the perfect thing to say about two days after the opportunity to say it had passed.

'Well, you do look vaguely familiar,' she said quickly, stepping back and concentrating her attention on Logan to cover up how unsettled she felt. A moment ago she'd been happily existing in the present, enjoying her life. The next she'd been transported back to her childhood and it was a lonely, uncomfortable place. If this was time travel, then she wanted none of it.

She'd had such a desperate, agonising crush on Conner. *A crush that had been intensified by the fact that her father had forbidden her to mix with him.* 'Sorry to disturb your reunion, but Amy Price just rang me. Heather has chickenpox.'

'And?' Logan frowned. 'Tell her to buy some paracetamol and chlorpheniramine from the pharmacy.'

'I'm not worried about Heather. I'm worried about your wife. Evanna saw the child in clinic yesterday.'

'And the child would have been infectious.' Understanding dawned and Logan cursed softly. 'Has Evanna had chickenpox?'

'I don't think so. That's why I thought you ought to know straight away. I remember talking about it with her a few months ago. She was telling me that her mother sent her off to play with everyone who had chickenpox, but she never caught it.'

'Chickenpox is a disease that you don't want to catch in the third trimester of pregnancy.'

'That's what I thought.'

Somehow she was managing to have a normal conversation with Logan, but her head and senses were filled with Conner. In some ways he'd changed, she mused, and yet in others he hadn't. The

muscular physique was the reward of manhood but other things—*the air of supreme indifference and the ice-blue eyes*—had been part of the boy.

What was he doing here, anyway? Like everyone else, she'd assumed he'd never show his face on the island again.

Logan walked to his desk. 'I'll call Evanna now.'

'I've already done it. She's about to start her clinic, but she'll come and talk to you first. I thought you might want to delay your first patient or pass him across to the new doctor when he arrives.'

'Relax. She's probably immune.' Conner leaned his broad shoulders against the doorframe, watching them both with an expression that could have been amusement or boredom. 'Do a blood test and check her antibody status.'

She was wrong, Flora realised with a flash of disquiet. *There was nothing of the boy left*. There were more changes than she'd thought, and some were so subtle that they weren't immediately obvious. Those ice-blue eyes were sharper and more cynical, and his arrogance had clearly developed along with his muscles. *What did he know about antibody status?* Or was he one of those people who watched all the medical soaps on television and then assumed they were qualified to diagnose?

To make matters worse, Logan was nodding, encouraging him. 'Yes—yes, I'll do that, but if she's not immune ...'

'Then you just give her zoster immunoglobulin. What's the matter with you?' Conner's brows drew into a frown as he looked at his cousin. 'This is why I'm careful not to fall in love. It fries your brain cells and obliterates your judgement.'

'There's nothing wrong with Logan's judgement.' Fiercely loyal, Flora immediately flew to Logan's defence and then wished she hadn't because Conner switched his gaze from Logan to her and his attention was unsettling, to say the least.

Apparently unaware of the change in the atmosphere, Logan rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. 'When you love someone, Conner,' he said, 'you lose perspective.'

Conner's eyes held Flora's. 'I wouldn't know. That's one mistake I've never made.'

She swallowed, every bit as uncomfortable as he'd clearly intended her to be. Was he trying to shock her? He'd had women, she knew that. Probably many. Was she surprised that he'd never found love? *That he considered love a mistake?*

'True love is a gift, given to few,' she murmured, and Conner's mouth tilted and his blue eyes glinted with sardonic humour.

'True love is a curse, bestowed on the unlucky. Love brings weakness and vulnerability. How can that be a gift?'

Flustered, she cleared her throat and looked away. *What was he doing here?* Why had he returned to Glenmore with no warning, looking like the bad guy out of a Hollywood movie? His hair was dark and cropped short and his jaw was dark with stubble. He was *indecently* handsome and the only thing that marred the otherwise faultless symmetry of his features was the slight bump in his nose, an imperfection which she assumed to be the legacy of a fight. He looked tough and dangerous and the impression of virile manhood was further intensified by the width and power of his shoulders under the black leather jacket.

He wasn't attractive, Flora told herself desperately. How could he possibly be attractive? He looked ... rough. Rough and a little menacing. She thought of the conventional, bespectacled lawyer she'd dated for a while in Edinburgh. He'd always let her through doors first and had been completely charming. His hair had always been neat and tidy and she'd never, ever seen him anything other than clean-shaven. He'd almost always worn a suit when they'd dated and his legs hadn't filled his trousers the way that Conner's did. And then there had been his smile. His cheeks had dimpled slightly and his eyes had been kind. *Nothing like Conner's eyes*. Conner's eyes were fierce and hard, as if he was just waiting for someone to pick a fight so that he could work off some pent-up energy.

Her heart thudded hard against her chest. Conner MacNeil wasn't charming or kind. He was —He was ... unsuitable. Dangerous. A woman had to be mad to look twice at a man like him.

Why, she wondered helplessly, *was the unsuitable and the dangerous always so much more appealing than the suitable?*

'We need to get on.' With a huge effort of will, she broke the connection and turned her attention back to Logan. 'We've a busy surgery this morning. What happened to the new doctor? Did he show up? You didn't tell me who he is or when he or she can start.'

'You heard the woman.' Logan turned to Conner. 'Go and do your job.'

Conner shrugged and a slight smile touched his mouth. 'Prepare for chaos.'

It took Flora a moment to understand the implications of their conversation. 'You can't—Conner?' Her voice cracked. 'But Conner isn't—' She broke off and Conner lifted an eyebrow.

'Don't stop there,' he prompted softly. 'I'm keen to hear all the things I'm not.'

Not suitable. Not safe. Not conventional. Not responsible ... She could have drawn up a never-ending list of things he was not. 'I—You're not a doctor. You *can't* be a doctor.'

He smiled. 'Why? Because I didn't hand in my homework on time?'

'You didn't hand in your homework at all. You were hardly ever at school!'

'I'm flattered that you noticed.' His soft observation was a humiliating reminder that she'd always been aware of him and he'd never even noticed her.

She was probably the only girl on Glenmore who hadn't been kissed by Conner MacNeil.

She turned away, horrified that after all this time she still cared that she'd been invisible to him. 'You're forgetting that my aunt was the headmistress.'

'I've forgotten nothing.' There was something in his tone that made her glance at him and speculate. There was resentment there and—*anger?*

He'd always seemed angry, she remembered. Angry, moody and wild.

Was that why he was back? Was he seeking revenge on the people who had disapproved and eventually despaired of him?

'Ann runs a wonderful school.' She felt compelled to defend her family. 'The children all adore her and they get a fantastic education.'

'There's more to education than sitting in rows in a classroom with a book in front of you.' Conner leaned nonchalantly against the table, his glance speculative. 'Still the same Flora. Conventional. Playing everything by the rules. I presume that all your affairs are still with books?'

His comment stung. He made her feel so—so—*boring*. Plain, boring Flora. And that was what they'd called her at school, of course. *Boring Flora*. Hurt, she clawed back. 'Rules are there for a reason and if you're really a doctor then I hope you've read a few books yourself along the way, otherwise I pity your patients.' She stopped, shocked at herself and aware that Logan was gaping at her in amazement.

'Flora! I've never heard you speak to anyone like that before. Usually I have to drag a response from you. What is the matter with you?'

'I don't know. I—Nothing.' Flora's cheeks were scarlet and she blinked several times and adjusted her glasses. She didn't know what was the matter. She didn't know what had come over her. *She didn't know why she felt so hot and bothered.* 'Sorry. I apologise.'

She felt miserably uncomfortable and mortified that she'd embarrassed Logan. The only person who didn't seem remotely embarrassed was Conner himself. He simply laughed.

'Don't apologise. I much prefer to be around people who say what they think. I'm sure most of the inhabitants of Glenmore will share your sentiments and express them far more vociferously.' He turned to Logan. 'I did warn you that this wouldn't work. It isn't too late to change your mind.'

'Of course I'm not going to change my mind.' Logan sounded exasperated. 'Flora, Conner's credentials are—'

'Irrelevant,' Conner interrupted smoothly, and Flora bit her lip.

She knew she ought to say something nice and welcoming, but her brain just didn't seem to be working with its normal efficiency. Seeing Conner again without warning was shocking, confusing and—*thrilling*?

Horried, she quickly dismissed that last emotion and pressed her fingers to her chest, wishing that her heart would slow down. It was not, definitely not, thrilling that he was back on the island. If she'd been asked to choose the least suitable man to be a doctor on Glenmore, it would have been Conner MacNeil.

Over the years, she'd thought of him often.

Too often.

She'd wondered where he was and what he was doing. She'd imagined him languishing in some jail, maybe in a foreign country; she'd imagined him sitting by a pool in a tax haven, having made piles of money by some unspeakably dubious means.

Never, in her most extravagant fantasies, had she imagined him training as a doctor and never, in those same dreams, had she imagined him returning to Glenmore.

One thing she knew for sure; the calm, tranquil routine of Glenmore Island was about to be overturned.

She didn't know what sort of doctor Conner was going to prove to be, but she knew it wasn't the sort that the islanders were used to seeing.

CHAPTER TWO

CONNER buzzed for his first patient and braced himself for the reaction.

He wasn't disappointed.

The first man who walked through his door took one look at him, gave a horrified gasp and immediately backed out, muttering that he'd 'wait for the other doctor'.

Conner watched him leave, his handsome face expressionless. Clearly people had long memories and he understood all about that. *He hadn't forgotten a single minute of his time on Glenmore.*

With a dismissive shrug, he buzzed for the next patient and the moment Susan Ellis walked through the door, he prepared himself for a repeat performance. If he had any supporters among the islanders—and *he was beginning to doubt that he had*—this lady wouldn't be among them. She ran the shop at the harbour and she had reason to know him better than most.

'Good morning, Mrs Ellis.' He kept his tone suitably neutral but her face reflected her shock at seeing him.

'Conner MacNeil! So the rumours are true, then.' She glanced behind her, obviously wondering if she'd wandered into the wrong building, and Conner lifted an eyebrow.

'Is there something I can help you with, Mrs Ellis?' *Perhaps this wasn't going to work after all.*

'I don't know. I'll have to think about it.'

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her to think quickly because there was a queue of patients waiting but then he realised that the queue was probably dwindling by the second so a slightly longer consultation wasn't likely to matter.

'If you'd rather see Logan, go ahead. My feelings will remain intact.'

'I'm not thinking about your feelings,' she said tartly. 'I'm thinking about my health. I assume Logan knows you're here?'

'You think I broke a window and climbed in? Looking for drugs, maybe?'

She gave him a reproving look. 'Don't give me sarcasm, Conner MacNeil. I'm not afraid to admit that you wouldn't leap to mind as someone to turn to in times of trouble.'

Clearly recalling the details of their last encounter, Conner relented slightly. 'I don't blame you for that.'

She studied him from the safety of the doorway, her mouth compressed into a firm line of disapproval. 'So you've mended your ways. Are you really a doctor?'

'Apparently.'

'There's plenty on this island who will be surprised to hear that.'

'I'm sure that's true.' Conner kept his tone level. 'Are you going or staying? Because if you're staying, you may as well sit down. Or we can carry on this consultation standing, up if that's what you would prefer.'

'Not very friendly, are you?'

'I presumed you were looking for a doctor, not a date.'

Susan Ellis gave a reluctant laugh. 'You always were a sharp one, I'll give you that.' After a moment's hesitation she closed the door and sat down gingerly on the edge of the seat, as if she hadn't quite decided whether she was going to stay or not. 'I'm not sure if I can talk about this with you.'

Conner sighed. *It was going to be a long day.* 'As I said, if you'd rather see Logan, I quite understand.'

She fiddled with the strap of her handbag and then put it on the floor in a decisive movement. 'No,' she said firmly. 'I've never been one to live in the past. Times change. People change. If you're a doctor then—I don't suppose you'll be able to help me anyway.'

'Try me.'

‘It’s hard to put a finger on when it all started, but it’s been a while.’ She glanced at Conner and he sat in silence, just listening. ‘Probably been almost a year. I’m tired, you see. All the time. And I know doctors hate hearing that. You’re going to say it’s just my age, but—’

‘I haven’t said anything yet, Mrs Ellis. You speak your lines and then I’ll speak mine.’ He could have been wrong but he thought he saw her shoulders relax slightly.

‘Fair enough. Well, I feel washed out and exhausted a lot of the time. It doesn’t matter how well I sleep or how much rest I take, I’m still tired.’ She hesitated and then sighed. ‘And a little depressed, if I’m honest. But that’s probably because I just feel so ... slow. If this is getting old, I want none of it.’

‘Have you gained weight?’

She stiffened. ‘Are you going to lecture me on my eating?’

‘Are you going to answer the question?’

Susan shifted self consciously, automatically pulling in her stomach and straightening her shoulders. ‘Yes, I’ve gained weight, but I suppose that’s my age as well. You just can’t eat so much when you get older and it’s hard to change old habits. Aren’t you going to make notes? Logan always keeps meticulous notes.’

‘I prefer to listen. I’ll do the writing part later.’ Conner stood up and walked towards her, his eyes concentrating on her face. ‘Your skin is dry. Is that usual for you?’

‘Didn’t used to be but it’s usual now. My hair’s the same.’ She tilted her face so that he could take a closer look. ‘Observant, aren’t you?’

‘Sometimes.’ Having looked at her skin, Conner took her hands in his and examined them carefully. Then he looked at her eyelids. ‘You have slight oedema. Can I take a look at your feet?’

‘My feet?’

‘That’s right.’ He squatted down and helped her slip her shoes off.

‘I never thought I’d have Conner MacNeil at my feet.’

‘Savour the moment, Mrs Ellis. Do they bother you?’

‘They’re aching terribly and I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re a bit swollen ...’ She wiggled her toes. ‘I assumed it was the heat.’

Conner examined her feet and ankles. ‘From what I’ve seen, Glenmore is in the middle of a typical summer. Wind and rain. I’m not expecting any cases of heatstroke today.’ He was sure that her feet were swollen for a very different reason.

‘We had sunshine last week. You know Glenmore—the weather is always unpredictable. A bit like you.’ She looked at him, her gaze slightly puzzled. ‘You’re very gentle. I hadn’t expected that of you.’

‘I prefer not to leave marks on my victims.’ A faint smile on his face, Conner rose to his feet. ‘The swelling isn’t caused by heat, Mrs Ellis. I can tell you that much.’ He washed his hands and picked up the IV tray that Flora had left on the trolley. ‘I’m going to take some blood.’

‘Is that really necessary?’

‘No. I just want to cause you pain.’

His patient laughed out loud. ‘Revenge, Conner?’

‘Maybe. You called the police that night.’

‘Yes, I did.’ Susan stuck out her arm. ‘You were out of control. Only eight years old and helping yourself to what you wanted from my shop.’

He ran his fingers gently over her skin, searching for a vein. ‘I needed some stuff and I didn’t have the money to pay.’

‘And how often did I hear that from the children? Plenty of them did it.’ Her laughter faded and she shook her head as she watched him. ‘But I remember you. You were different. So bold. A real rebel. Even when John, our island policeman, gave you a talking to, you didn’t cry. It was as if you were used to being shouted at. As if you’d hardened yourself.’

Conner didn’t falter. ‘You have good veins. This shouldn’t be hard.’

‘You’re not going to excuse yourself, are you?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Because we found out later that there were things happening in your house.’ She spoke softly. ‘Plenty to explain why you were the way you were.’

Suddenly the room felt bitterly cold. Conner slipped a tourniquet over her wrist. ‘Everyone’s family is complicated. Mine was no different.’

‘No?’ Susan looked at him for a moment and then sighed. ‘I remember how you looked on that day. You just stood there, all defiant, your chin up and those blue eyes of yours flashing daggers. Oh, you were angry with me.’

‘As you said, you’d called the police.’

‘But it didn’t have any effect. You were never afraid of anyone or anything, were you, Conner MacNeil?’

Oh, yes, he’d been afraid. *‘Don’t do it. Don’t touch her—I’ll kill you if you touch her.’*

With ruthless determination Conner pushed the memory back into the darkness where it belonged. ‘On the contrary, I was afraid of my cousin Kyla.’ Keeping his tone neutral, he tightened the tourniquet and studied the woman’s veins. ‘She had a deadly punch and a scream that would puncture your eardrums.’

‘Ah, Kyla. We all miss her. It’s not good when islanders leave. It’s not good for Glenmore.’

Swift and sure, Conner slipped the needle into the vein. ‘Depends on the islander, Mrs Ellis. There are some people that Glenmore is pleased to see the back of.’ He released the tourniquet and watched as the blood flowed. ‘I’m checking your thyroid function, by the way.’

‘Oh. Why?’

‘Because I think hypothyroidism is a possible explanation for your symptoms.’ Having collected the blood he needed, he withdrew the needle and covered the area with a pad. ‘Press on that for a moment, would you? If you leave here with bruises, that will be another black mark against me.’

She looked down at her arm. ‘That’s it? You’ve finished? You’re good at that. I barely felt it.’ The expression in her eyes cooled. ‘I suppose you have a lot of experience with needles.’

Conner picked up a pen and labelled the bottles. ‘I’m the first to admit that my list of vices is deplorably long, Mrs Ellis, but I’ve never done drugs.’

Her shoulders relaxed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said softly. ‘That was uncalled for. If I’ve offended you ...’

‘You haven’t offended me.’ He dropped the blood samples into a bag, wondering what had possessed him to take the job on Glenmore. He could have come in on the ferry, sorted out his business and left again.

‘Hypothyroidism, you say?’

‘There are numerous alternative explanations, of course, but this is a good place to start.’

‘I don’t know whether to be relieved or alarmed. I was expecting you to tell me it was nothing. Should I be worried?’

‘Worrying doesn’t achieve anything. If we find a problem, we’ll look for a solution.’ He completed the necessary form and then washed his hands again. ‘I’m going to wait for those results before we look at anything else because I have a strong feeling that we’ve found the culprit.’

‘You’re confident.’

‘Would you prefer me to fumble and dither?’

She laughed. ‘You always were a bright boy, Conner MacNeil. Too bright, some would say. Bright and a rebel. A dangerous combination.’

Conner sat back down in his chair. ‘Call the surgery in three days for the result and then make another appointment to see me. We can talk about what to do next.’

‘All right, I’ll do that. Thank you.’ Susan picked up her bag, rose to her feet and walked to the door. Then she turned. ‘I always regretted it, you know.’

Conner looked up. ‘Regretted what?’

‘Calling the police.’ Her voice was soft. ‘At the time I thought you needed a fright. I thought a bit of discipline might sort you out. But I was wrong. You were wild. Out of control. But what you needed was a bit of love. People to believe in you. I see that now. What with everything that was happening at home—your mum and dad. Of course, none of us knew the details at the time, but—’

‘You did the right thing calling the police, Mrs Ellis,’ Conner said in a cool tone. ‘In your position I would have called them, too.’

‘At the time I was angry that they didn’t charge you.’

‘I’m sure you were.’

It was her turn to smile. ‘Now I’m pleased they didn’t. Can I ask you something?’

‘You can ask. I don’t promise to answer.’

‘There was a spate of minor shoplifting at that time but everyone else was taking sweets and crisps. You took the oddest assortment of things. What did you want it all for?’

Conner leaned back and smiled. ‘I was making a bomb.’

‘He blew up the science lab!’ Flora stood in front of Logan, trying to make him to see reason.

‘Funny.’ Logan scanned the lab result in front of him. ‘Conner said that you’d bring that up.’

‘Of course I’m bringing it up. It says everything about the type of person he is.’

‘Was.’ Logan lifted his eyes to hers. ‘It tells you who he was. Not who he is.’

‘You really think he’s changed?’

‘Are you the same person you were at fifteen?’

Agonisingly shy, barely able to string a sentence together in public. Flora flushed. ‘No,’ she said huskily. ‘Of course not.’

Logan shrugged. ‘Perhaps he’s changed, too.’

‘And what if he hasn’t? What sort of doctor is he going to make?’

‘An extremely clever one. Most people wouldn’t have had such a good understanding of the reactivity series to cause that explosion. Anyway, I thought you were relieved that I’d found another doctor.’

‘I was, but I never thought for a moment it would be— I mean, *Conner*?’ Flora’s expression was troubled. ‘He’s right, you know. The locals won’t be happy. What if they make life difficult for him?’

‘They always did. He’ll cope. Conner is as tough as they come.’

‘I can’t believe he’s a doctor. How did you find out? I mean, he vanished without trace.’

‘I stayed in touch with him.’ Logan lifted his gaze to hers. ‘He’s my cousin, Flora. Family. I knew he was a doctor. When I knew I needed help, he seemed the obvious choice.’

‘Are you sure? He used to be very unstable. Unreliable. Rebellious. Disruptive.’ *Attractive, compelling, addictive.*

‘You’re describing the teenager.’

‘He created havoc.’ she looked at him, wondering why she had to remind him of something that he must know himself. ‘He was suspended from school *three times*. If there’d been an alternative place for him to go, I’m sure he would have been expelled. Not only did he blow up the science lab, he set off a firework in the library, he burned down the MacDonalds’ barn—the list of things he did is endless. He was wild, Logan. Totally out of control.’ *And impossibly, hopelessly attractive.* There hadn’t been a woman on Glenmore who hadn’t dreamed of taming him. Herself included.

She’d wanted to help.

She’d wanted.

She pushed the thought away quickly. She’d been a dreamy teenager but she was an adult now, a grown woman and far too sensible to see Conner as anything other than a liability.

‘His parents were going through a particularly acrimonious divorce at the time. There were lots of rumours about that household. My aunt—his mother—left when he was eleven. That’s tough on any child.’ Logan turned his attention back to the pile in his in-tray. ‘Enough to shake the roots of any family. It’s not surprising he was disruptive.’

‘He isn’t interested in authority.’

Logan threw the pen down on his desk. ‘Perhaps he thinks that those in authority let him down.’

Flora bit her lip. ‘Perhaps they did. But if that’s the case then it makes even less sense that he’s back. He couldn’t wait to get away from Glenmore the first time around and he stayed away for *twelve years*.’

‘Is it that long?’ Logan studied her face thoughtfully. ‘I haven’t been counting, but obviously you have.’

‘It was a wild guess,’ Flora muttered quickly, ‘but either way, it’s been a long time. And the question is, why has he picked this particular moment to come back?’

‘Why does it matter? If he turns out to be a lousy doctor, I’m the one who will pay the price. Or is there more to this than your concern for the reputation of Glenmore Medical Centre? Is this personal, Flora?’ Logan’s voice was gentle. ‘Is there something going on that I should know about?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Flora rose to her feet swiftly, her heart pounding. ‘And I think it’s obvious to everyone that I’m not his type. I’ve never been attracted to unsuitable men.’ A painful lump sat in the pit of her stomach. *He’d never looked at her. Not once.*

‘Then you’re probably the only woman on the island who wasn’t,’ Logan said mildly, ‘if I recall correctly, Conner had quite a following, and the more reprehensible his behaviour, the bigger the following.’

‘I suppose some of the girls found him attractive because he was forbidden territory.’ Flora wished her heart would slow down. ‘I still can’t believe he’s a doctor.’

‘I know you can’t. You didn’t exactly hide your astonishment,’ Logan said dryly and Flora felt a twinge of guilt.

‘I didn’t mean to be rude but weren’t *you* surprised when you found out?’

‘No.’ Logan rolled his shoulders to ease the stiffness of sitting. ‘Conner always was ferociously clever.’

‘He hated school. He was barely ever there.’

‘And he still managed straight As in every subject. As I said—we all let him down. He was too clever to be trapped behind a desk and forced to learn in a prescribed pattern. People were too conventional to notice the brain behind the behavioural problems.’

Flora gave a puzzled frown. She’d never thought of it that way before. ‘Well, he obviously learned to study at some point. Where did he train, anyway?’

‘In the army.’

‘In the—’ Stunned, Flora swallowed. ‘He was in the *army*?’

‘Army medic.’ Logan flipped through a pile of papers on his desk and removed a file. ‘Read.’ He handed it to her. ‘It’s impressive stuff. Perhaps it will set your mind at rest about his ability and dedication.’

‘But the army requires discipline. All the things Conner doesn’t—’

‘Read,’ Logan said firmly. ‘The patients might doubt him to begin with, but I don’t want the practice staff making the same mistake. The man’s qualifications and experience are better than mine. Read, Flora.’

Flora opened the file reluctantly. After a moment, she looked up. ‘He’s a surgeon?’

‘Among other things. I did tell you that the man was clever.’

Her eyes flickered back to the page. ‘Afghanistan? That doesn’t sound very safe.’

‘No.’ Logan’s voice was dry. ‘But it sounds very Conner. I don’t suppose anything safe would hold his interest for long.’

‘Which brings me back to my original question.’ She dropped the file back on his desk. ‘What’s he doing back on Glenmore? He hates Glenmore and if he still needs adrenaline and excitement in his life, he’s going to last five minutes on this island.’

‘I don’t think it’s any of my business.’ Logan leaned back in his chair. ‘He’s back, that’s all I need to know.’

‘It’s going to be like putting a match to a powder keg. And I’m just worried he’ll let you down in the middle of the summer tourist season. You and all the islanders.’

Logan’s gaze followed her. ‘They let him down. This is his chance to even the score or prove himself. Either way, he’s family, Flora, and I’m giving him this opportunity. It’s up to him what he chooses to do with it.’

Flora bit her lip. Family. On Glenmore family and community was everything. It was what made the island what it was. But Conner had rejected everything that Glenmore stood for. He’d walked away from it.

So why was he back?

CHAPTER THREE

CONNER WATCHED as Flora entered the room. Her eyes were down and she was clutching a bunch of forms that he assumed were for him.

Probably from Logan, he thought, finding an excuse to engineer peace.

The fact that she seemed reluctant to look in his direction amused him. As a teenager she'd been impossibly shy. He remembered her sitting on her own in the corner of the playground, her nose stuck in a book. What he didn't remember was her ever stringing more than two words together. But today, in Logan's surgery, she'd been surprisingly articulate.

He gave a cynical smile.

It seemed his presence was enough to encourage even the mute to speak.

'The lamb enters the wolf's den unprotected,' he drawled softly, and watched as the heat built in her cheeks. 'I never saw you as a risk-taker, Flora. Aren't you afraid I might do something evil to you now we're on our own?'

'Don't be ridiculous.' She adjusted her glasses and put the forms on his desk. 'Logan wanted you to have these.'

No, Conner thought to himself. Logan wanted us to have a moment together because he doesn't want his staff at odds with each other.

He heard her take a deep breath and then she looked at him.

As if she'd been plucking up courage.

'So ...' She cleared her throat. 'How is it going? Any problems so far?'

'No problems at all. The locals are refusing to see me, which means I don't have to spend my time listening to the boring detail of people's minor ailments.' He studied the slight fullness of her lower lip and the smooth curve of her cheeks. *She was pretty*, he realised with a stab of shock. She was also wonderfully, deliciously serious and he couldn't resist having a little fun with her. 'And it's really interesting to make contact with all the girls I ... grew up with.'

As he'd anticipated, she flushed. What he hadn't expected was the sudden flash of concern in her eyes. *The kindness*. 'The patients are refusing to see you?' She sounded affronted. 'That's awful.'

'Don't worry about it. I'm allergic to hard work and it gives me more time to spend on the internet.'

'You're just saying that, but you must feel terrible about it.'

'I don't give a damn.'

She gave a faint gasp and blinked several times. 'You don't need to pretend with me. I'm sure you're upset. How could you not be?'

'Flora,' he interrupted her, amused by her misinterpretation of the facts, 'don't endow me with qualities that I don't possess. To feel terrible I'd have to care, and I think we both know that my relationship with the islanders is hardly one of lasting affection.'

'You're very hard on them and perhaps that's justified, but you need to see it from their point of view. Everyone's a bit shocked, that's all. No one was expecting you because Logan didn't say anything to anyone.'

'Given that this is Glenmore, I expect he'll be struck off for respecting confidentiality.'

Her sudden smile caught him by surprise. 'They do gossip, don't they? Everything takes three times as long here because of the conversation. I can't get used to it.' Her smile faded. 'Logan told me about what you've done—your training. That's amazing. I had no idea.'

Conner sat in silence and she spread her hands, visibly uncomfortable with the situation.

'I'm *trying* to apologise. I didn't mean to be rude. It was just that ...' She gave an awkward shrug. 'Anyway, I really am sorry.'

'Never apologise, Flora.'

'If I'm wrong, then I apologise,' she said firmly. 'Don't you?'

'I don't know.' Enjoying himself, he smiled. 'I've never been wrong.'

Derailed by the banter, she backed away slightly and then stopped. 'I'm apologising for assuming that you weren't qualified for the job. For thinking that you being here would just cause trouble.'

'It *will* cause trouble,' Conner drawled softly, 'so you weren't wrong.'

'You knew it would cause trouble?'

'Of course.'

His answer brought a puzzled frown to her face. 'If you knew that, why did you come back?'

'I thrive on trouble, Flora. Trouble is the fuel the drives my engine.'

This time, instead of backing away, she looked at him. Properly. Her eyes focused on his, as if she was searching for something. 'You're angry with us, aren't you? Is that why you're here?' She fiddled with her glasses again, as if she wasn't used to having them on her nose. 'To level a score?'

'You think I became a doctor so that I could return to my roots and exterminate the inhabitants of Glenmore, one by one?'

'Of course not. But I know you're angry. I can feel it.'

Then she was more intuitive than he'd thought. Raising his guard, Conner watched her. 'I'm not angry. If people would rather wait a week to see Logan, that's fine by me.'

'But it must hurt your feelings.'

'I don't have feelings, Flora. Providing I still get paid, I don't care whether the patients see me or not. It's Logan's problem.' He could tell she didn't like his answer because she frowned and shook her head slightly.

'I can't believe that you're not at all sensitive about the way people react to you.'

'That's because you're a woman and women think differently to men.' This time his smile was genuine. 'Do I look sensitive?' He watched as her eyes drifted to his shoulders and then lifted to his jaw line.

'No.' Her voice was hoarse. 'You don't.' And then her eyes lifted to his and the atmosphere snapped taut.

Conner felt his body stir.

Well, well, he thought. *How interesting.* Sexual chemistry with a woman who probably didn't know the meaning of the phrase. His gaze lowered to her mouth and he saw that her lips were soft and bare of make-up. He had a sudden impulse to be unforgivably shocking and kiss her.

'Well, if you're sure you're fine ...' She was flustered. He could tell she was flustered.

Normally he had no qualms about making a woman flustered but somehow with Flora it seemed unsporting. She might be older but she obviously wasn't any more experienced. With an inner sigh and lingering regret, he backed off. 'I'm fine,' he said gently. 'But thank you for asking.'

He wondered idly if she'd ever had sex.

A boyfriend?

'My consulting room is next door.' Apparently unaware of what had just happened between them, she suddenly became brisk and efficient. 'Evanna is still doing a morning clinic, but if you need a nurse to do a home visit then ask me because she's too pregnant to be dashing around the island. You know your way around, so that shouldn't be a problem. If there's anything you're not sure of, ask.'

'I'll do that.'

If she had a boyfriend, it was someone tame and safe, he decided. Someone who hadn't taught her the meaning of passion.

'Well—I've held you up long enough. Morning surgery can be a long one.' Her gaze slid to his legs, encased in black leather. 'You know, people might feel more comfortable with you if you changed.'

'I am who I am, Flora.'

'I meant your clothes.' She pushed her glasses onto the bridge of her nose. 'You could change your clothes.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Because the patients expect a doctor to look like a doctor.'

'Flora.' He failed to keep the amusement out of his voice. 'It wouldn't matter whether I was wearing a set of theatre scrubs or a white coat, the inhabitants of Glenmore would still struggle to believe that Bad Conner is a doctor. Just as *you're* struggling.'

'I'm not. Not any more. But I don't see why you should confirm their prejudices by dressing like a biker.' She flushed. 'Do you always have to antagonise people? Break the rules?'

'Yes. I think I probably do.' Conner watched her. 'Just as you always like to please people and do everything that is expected of you. In our own ways we're the same, you and I. We're both working hard to meet society's expectations of us.'

She looked at him, her dark eyes reproachful. 'There's nothing wrong in being part of a community.'

'True. But neither is there anything wrong with *not* being part of it,' he said gently. 'Do you really think the way I'm dressed is going to compromise my ability as a doctor?'

'No. Of course not. It's just that you look—' She broke off and he knew he shouldn't follow up on that comment but he couldn't help himself.

'How do I look, Flora? Tell me. I want to know what you think of the way I look.'

She looked hot and flustered. 'I-intimidating,' she stammered, eventually. 'I wouldn't want to bump into you on a dark night.'

'Is that right?' Conner gave a slow smile and gave up trying to subdue his wicked streak. 'In that case, we'll have to make sure that we leave the lights on, angel.'

He was impossible and she was never going to be able to work with him.

Flora tried to concentrate on the dressing and not reveal how shaken she was by her encounter with Conner. He'd played with her, toyed with her carelessly, like a predator having fun with its prey before a kill. And as usual she hadn't been able to think of the right thing to say because she'd been trying to sort out surgery business and he'd been—well, he'd been Conner. Selfish, indifferent and supremely cool. Just the thought of him seeing patients—or *not seeing patients*—in the room next door unsettled her.

She shook her head and studied the skin around the leg ulcer. 'You still have a degree of varicose eczema, Mrs Parker. Are you using the cream Dr MacNeil gave you?'

'The steroid cream? No, I forget.'

Flora studied the skin, checking for infection. 'Is this tender when I press?'

'No more than usual.'

'There's no erythema and your temperature is fine.' Talking to herself, Flora made a judgement. 'We'll leave it for now but do me a favour and try the cream, would you? If it isn't looking better in a week or so, I'm going to ask one of the doctors to look at it.'

'As long as it's Logan.' Mrs Parker's mouth clamped in a thin line of disapproval. 'I'm not afraid to say that I almost fainted dead away when I saw Conner MacNeil stroll into the surgery this morning. Bold as brass. Not even trying to hide his face.'

'Why would he hide his face, Mrs Parker?' Flora swiftly finished the dressing and applied a compression bandage. 'He's a doctor and he's come to—' *create havoc?* '—help Logan.'

'Help? Help? This is the boy who was so much of a handful that his mother left home! Can you imagine how badly the boy must have behaved for his own mother to give up on him? His father stayed, of course, but he was driven to drink by Conner's antics. Died five years ago and did his son bother turning up to his funeral? No, he didn't.'

Flora flew to Conner's defence. 'He's a man now, not a boy. And no one knows what happened in his childhood, Mrs Parker.' He hadn't told anyone.

She paused for a moment, lost in thought as she remembered the love of her own family. Just what had Conner endured? She remembered the day she'd walked along the cliffs to his house.

She remembered the shouting.

'Well, I tell you this much,' Mrs Parker said firmly. 'That boy isn't capable of warmth or sensitivity and he doesn't care about anyone but himself. I still don't believe he's a doctor. He never did a day's studying in his life and as for the way he dresses—well, I mean, Logan's always smart in trousers and a shirt, but Conner hadn't even shaved! He looked—'

Handsome, Flora thought helplessly as she fumbled with the bandage. *He'd looked impossibly, outrageously handsome.*

'Dangerous,' Mrs Parker continued with a shudder, watching as Flora finished the dressing. 'Who in their right minds would trust him with a medical problem? He causes more problems than he solves. Not too tight, dear.'

'It has to be quite tight because we need the pressure on the ankle.'

'I couldn't believe it when I heard Janet booking patients in to see him. I said to Nina Hill, "Well, that's going to be interesting to watch. Now he'll get his comeuppance because no one will see him." Having delivered that prediction, Mrs Parker paused expectantly and Flora glanced up at her, realizing that some sort of response was required.

'They'll see him, Mrs Parker,' she said quietly. 'That was then and this is now. Conner is well qualified. And it's great news that Logan finally has help. Super.'

'Super?' Mrs Parker gaped at her. 'You think it's great news?'

Far too loyal to reveal her own reservations, Flora secured the bandage. 'Of course. Logan is barely managing on his own. We need another doctor on the island.'

'Well, don't imagine for one moment that Conner MacNeil will make a difference! Even if he *is* a doctor now, which frankly I doubt because everyone knows that these days you can fake everything for a price, there won't be a soul on this island who will trust his opinion.'

Flora took a deep breath and tried to speak. 'Mrs Parker, you really shouldn't—'

'Anyway, enough of that conversation.' Mrs Parker apparently didn't even notice the interruption. 'I refuse to waste the air in my lungs on Conner MacNeil when there are so many more important things going on around us. I meant to say to you, John Carter was seen talking at the school gate with Meg Watson. Now, *that's* an interesting match, if you ask me. She's a single mother and he's ...'

Realising that a two-way conversation wasn't required, Flora stood up and washed her hands, only half listening as Mrs Parker regaled her with all the latest island gossip.

How could Conner not be hurt by the negative reaction of the islanders?

Was he really as indifferent as he seemed?

If it were her, she'd be completely mortified.

She tugged a paper towel out of the holder and dried her hands, part of her brain listening to Mrs Parker while the other half thought about Conner. He'd built a shell around himself, and who could blame him?

'So what do you think, dear?'

Realising that this time Mrs Parker was waiting for a response, Flora turned. 'I honestly don't know,' she said truthfully. 'I couldn't give an opinion.' And even if she could, she wouldn't. 'Don't forget it's important to walk when you have a venous ulcer.'

'Yes, yes, I can't possibly forget because you keep telling me.' The elderly lady put her foot on the floor and tested it gingerly. 'Oh, that's much more comfortable. You're a wonderful nurse, dear. Simply wonderful.'

But a useless gossip, Flora thought wryly. 'That's very kind of you, Mrs Parker.'

'Not kind at all. I'm only saying what everyone else is saying.' Angela Parker slipped on her shoes. 'We're all so thrilled that you've come back to the island to take over from our Kyla. Only

yesterday I was saying to Meg in the café that we could have ended up with some mainlander with no idea how things work on Glenmore but, no, Dr MacNeil managed to tempt you back. When your father died I thought you might never return but then Nina reminded me that your aunt is here. Did you miss it when you were away?”

Flora felt a sudden shaft of pain as she thought of her father. *She still missed him.* ‘Well, I suppose I—’

‘Of course you did and now you’re back, which is perfect. And Logan has been in desperate need of a practice nurse since Kyla and Dr Walker left, and what with poor Evanna being so pregnant.’ Without waiting for Flora to respond, Mrs Parker forged ahead like a ship in a force-nine gale. ‘Well, we all know that Dr MacNeil is worried about her, given the tragedy with his first wife. Not that Evanna should have a problem in that direction. She’s a girl with good childbearing hips.’

Flora winced and hoped that no one repeated that comment to her friend and colleague. ‘Logan doesn’t seem worried,’ she lied, ‘and Evanna is a midwife, so if anyone understands her condition, she does!’

‘Do you really think she should still be working, this close to having that baby?’

Aware that whatever she said would be spread around the island by nightfall, Flora once again kept her answer suitably neutral. ‘She isn’t on her feet that much. She’s just doing the odd morning clinic.’ She sat down at her desk and updated the notes on the computer. ‘It’s fortunate that their house is attached to the surgery. At least she doesn’t have to come far to work and I do all the community calls so she doesn’t have that to cope with.’

‘You see? That’s what I mean. It’s great that you’re back.’ Angela Parker picked up her bag and stood up. ‘Everywhere I go I hear people saying, “Have you seen our Flora? Doesn’t she look well?”’

An intensely private person, Flora felt herself shrink slightly inside. ‘People are talking about me?’

‘Of course,’ Angela said cheerfully. ‘A new nurse on Glenmore is big news. People are thrilled. We’re all hoping you’ll meet a nice young man and then you’ll be a permanent fixture on the island. Glenmore is a good place to raise a family, dear.’

A family? ‘I think it’s a bit soon to be thinking of that,’ Flora said faintly, deciding that it was time to end the conversation before gossip about her ‘wedding’ reached the pub. ‘Your leg is healing well, Mrs Parker. Make an appointment to see me again on your way out.’

‘Yes, I’ll do that. I certainly won’t be seeing Conner, that’s for sure.’ She sniffed. ‘I value my health far too much for that.’

Flora opened her mouth to reply and then realised that no reply was expected because Angela Parker was once again answering her own question.

‘I think this time Logan will discover he’s made a mistake.’ She slid her bag over her arm. ‘If he’s not careful, he’ll find himself handling the summer singlehanded and that won’t be an easy task with a toddler and a new bairn.’

Knowing that to comment on that statement would trigger a conversation she didn’t have time for, Flora stood up, worried that she’d never finish her clinic if all her patients had as much to say as Angela. ‘It was nice to see you. Don’t forget to put that leg up when you’re sitting down.’

‘I always do that.’ Angela opened the door. ‘Take care of yourself and give me regards to your aunt.’

‘I’ll do that, Mrs Parker.’ Flora waited for the door to close behind her and then sank back into her chair. A quick glance at the clock on the wall confirmed that she was now running *seriously* late and she gave a despairing shake of her head. She still hadn’t adjusted to how long each appointment took on Glenmore. Everyone had something to say and a consultation involved so much more than it did on the mainland.

‘Problems?’ Logan stood in the doorway, a question in his eyes. ‘Angela Parker was with you a long time. Is her leg giving her trouble?’

‘She still has some signs of eczema around the ulcer but that’s because she isn’t using the cream you gave her. She’s not pyrexial and there’s no pain or tenderness to speak of and no obvious signs of cellulitis or infection. I’ll keep an eye on it. If it isn’t looking any better next week, I’ll give you a shout.’

Logan walked into the room and closed the door behind him. ‘If there’s no sign of healing in another month or so, I’ll refer her for a biopsy. We need to exclude malignancy.’

‘I think it is healing, it’s just that she doesn’t do much to help it along.’

‘So why are you looking so worried? I can’t believe that Mrs Parker’s leg ulcer is responsible for that frown on your face.’

‘I’m hopeless at this job,’ Flora confessed simply. ‘Absolutely hopeless.’

‘That’s utter nonsense.’ It was Logan’s turn to frown. ‘You’re a brilliant nurse.’

‘It’s not the nursing that worries me, it’s the rest of it. The gossip, the chat, the rumour machine.’ Flora waved a hand in a gesture of despair. ‘I’m just no good at it. I’ve never been any good at just chatting. When I did the clinic in Edinburgh, patients just wanted me to dress their leg or take their blood. On Glenmore, I’m supposed to have an opinion on everything from the Carpenters’ divorce to Janey Smith’s speeding fine.’ She brushed her hair out of her eyes and shot him a helpless look. ‘I don’t know how to handle it. I don’t want to join in, I have no intention of revealing confidential information, but I don’t want to look rude. How do you do it? How do you cope?’

‘I say “That’s interesting” a hundred times a day and if they’re really rambling on I adopt my “this could be something serious” look and that soon focuses their minds back on their medical problem. The skill is to cut them off tactfully.’

‘I definitely need to work on that skill,’ Flora muttered. ‘And I confess that I *hate* the idea that everyone is talking about me.’

‘This is Glenmore,’ Logan said easily. ‘Of course people are talking about you. They’re talking about everyone. But it’s mostly friendly talk. People care and that’s what makes this island so special. You’ve been in the city for too long. You’ve forgotten what island living is all about. You’ll adjust.’

‘But the talk isn’t friendly about Conner, is it?’ Troubled, Flora looked at him. ‘They’re being horrid to him. I mean, I know I was shocked to see him and even more shocked to discover that he’s a doctor, but boycotting his surgery ...’

‘Some of the patients saw him and word will spread.’ Logan smiled. ‘Providing he isn’t too outrageous. Don’t worry about Conner. He can look after himself.’

‘Maybe.’ She suddenly noticed the dark shadows underneath his eyes. ‘You look really, really tired, Logan. Is there anything I can do to help?’

‘You’re already doing it. Being tired is part of the job description when you work here, as you’re fast discovering.’ He rubbed his fingers over his forehead. ‘And on top of that I was up in the night with little Helen Peters because she—’

‘Had a nasty asthma attack,’ Flora finished his sentence with a laugh, ‘and before you ask, the reason I know is because Mrs Abbott mentioned it when she came in to have her ears syringed and *she* heard it from Sam when she was buying fish on the queue this morning and Sam knew because—’

‘He lives across the road from the Peters’ sister.’ Logan looked amused. ‘Relax, Flora. This is how things work on Glenmore. Don’t knock it. Sam was the one who called me because there were lights on all over the house and he went across the road to see if he could help.’

Flora’s eyes softened. ‘That was kind.’

‘People are kind here. Don’t worry—you’ll soon get back into the swing of it. And they’ll get used to Conner.’

‘I hope you’re right. So what happened to little Helen? Did you change her medication?’

‘No, but I talked to her mum about exercise.’ He frowned. ‘It was sports day yesterday. I’m confident that the physical exertion is what triggered it. Any chance that you could pop in and see them today? It was pretty scary for everyone and I think they’d appreciate an extra dose of reassurance. You might want to have a conversation about lifestyle.’

'I'll pop in, no problem.' This was the Glenmore she knew and loved. Where else would the medical team find time for that sort of visit? That level of care and attention was what made the island special. And she was doing the job she'd been trained to do. Feeling more relaxed, Flora added Helen's name to her list of afternoon calls.

'I'll see you later.' Logan opened the door to leave and Conner strolled in.

Flora's world tilted and her insides knotted with an almost unbearable tension. 'Conner.'

He stepped aside to let Logan pass. 'Isn't Angela Parker a little old to be training for the Olympics? She took one look at me and ran as if the hounds of hell were after her. What's the matter with her leg?'

'Venous ulcer. She's supposed to be mobilising but she doesn't do enough of it.'

'Then perhaps I should stand behind her more often. She ran so fast I could have entered her in the Derby.'

He was so confident, so easy with a situation that most people would have found agonisingly awkward. He really didn't seem to care that the locals had been distinctly unwelcoming. *But if he'd cared, he wouldn't be the man he was.*

Flora cleared her throat. 'Mrs Parker was a little surprised to discover that you're now a doctor.'

Conner smiled. 'Sweet Flora, always coating the truth with honey. Come on, angel. Tell me what she said. The truth. It will be good for you. And my shoulders are broad. I can take it.'

She knew his shoulders were broad—in fact, she was far, far too conscious of his body.

'She doesn't believe you're a doctor and she values her health too much to see you.'

'And I value my sanity far too much to see her, so both of us are happy. If her health is that good, she doesn't need a doctor anyway. So I'm spared.'

'It's not funny.' Ignoring the amusement in his eyes, Flora kept her head down and put a box of vaccine back in the fridge. 'You have no idea what things are like here! We're overwhelmed with work and every day the ferry brings more tourists. Logan needs help. He's barely had time to see his wife and daughter since Ethan left and the baby is due in a few weeks. He needs someone he can trust.'

'And you think he can't trust me?'

'I don't think that's relevant.' Desperate to make him understand, she turned to face him. 'If the patients won't see you, then it doesn't matter what Logan thinks.'

'Relax. The tourists will see me. I'll talk to Janet and make sure she allocates me a surgery full of patients who know nothing about my wicked past.'

'Conner—'

'I wasn't expecting a hero's welcome, Flora.' He gave a faint smile. 'And now you'll have to excuse me. There's a bit of a rush on. Patients are fighting to see me and I don't want to disappoint them.'

Her heart bumped against her chest and she didn't understand it. She couldn't possibly find him attractive. It was ridiculous to find him attractive. *So why were her legs shaking so much she needed to sit down?*

CHAPTER FOUR

‘GLENMORE is in an uproar. Eight patients refused to see him this morning and insisted on waiting for Logan.’ In the café near the harbour, Flora leaned across the table and helped herself to one of Evanna’s sandwiches. ‘These are delicious. Why aren’t you eating them?’

‘Because there’s no room in my body for anything except the baby.’ Evanna shifted in her seat, obviously uncomfortable. ‘They refused to see him? Really? Oh, poor Conner, that’s dreadful. Were his feelings hurt, do you think?’

‘Does he have feelings?’ Flora glanced out of the window, watching idly as groups of tourists walked from the ferry towards the beach. ‘Since when did Conner MacNeil care what people think of him? He is Mr Tough Guy.’

‘Deep down, I’m sure he cares.’

‘If he cared he wouldn’t have done his surgery wearing black leather and half an inch of stubble.’ Flora winced as a toddler tripped over a fishing rod and fell hard onto the pavement. She watched the mother scoop up the child and offer comfort. ‘Believe me, he has no intention of modifying his behaviour to please anyone. He was as defiant and confrontational as ever.’ *And sexy. Indecently sexy.*

‘If he didn’t care, he’d be living in his parents’ old house up on the cliffs.’

Flora was silent for a moment. She hadn’t given any thought to where Conner was living. ‘And he’s not?’

‘Logan gave him the barn.’

‘I thought it was let for the summer.’

‘It is. To Conner. When Logan thought he might be coming back, he kept it free for him. I suppose he knew Connor wouldn’t want to stay in his parents’ house.’ Evanna shrugged. ‘Who can blame him? I don’t suppose it has any nice memories for him. By all accounts, he had a pretty miserable childhood.’

‘Then why didn’t he sell it after his father died?’

‘He hasn’t been here to sell it. Perhaps he’ll deal with it this summer.’

‘Break his final tie with the island? Do you think that’s why he’s come back? To sell the house?’

‘I wouldn’t think so. He could have done that with one call to the island estate agent. Perhaps he’s laying old ghosts.’ Evanna gave a suggestive smile. ‘Or maybe he’s laying old girlfriends.’

‘Evanna!’ Struggling between shock and laughter, Flora sent a weak, apologetic smile towards the tourists eating lunch at the next table. ‘If you’re going to make obscene comments, lower your voice. We still have to work here after Conner’s gone.’

‘And life will be considerably more boring.’

‘Pregnancy has driven you mad.’

‘You might be right.’ Evanna shifted in her seat. ‘I can’t remember what it’s like not to be fat and exhausted.’

‘I think Conner is trying to shock them on purpose. I suspect he wants to provoke a reaction from them.’ Flora looked at her and smiled. ‘Do you want to know something funny?’

‘Not too funny.’ Evanna patted her enormous bump gently. ‘I have to be economical with laughter at the moment. Go on.’

‘Mrs Ellis saw him.’

‘As a patient? You’re joking.’

‘I’m not. I expected her to walk straight back out and call the police, but she was in there for ages and she came out smiling.’

‘So he even charmed her.’ Evanna sighed wistfully. ‘You see? It doesn’t matter how badly he behaves, women just can’t help themselves. It’s the danger, I suppose. The fact that he’s a bit volatile

and unstable just adds to his appeal. If you had a date with Conner you never quite knew whether you were going to end up in bed or in a jail cell.'

Flora gasped. 'What exactly do you know about dates with Conner? There is no way your parents would have allowed you anywhere near him.'

'Didn't stop me dreaming.' Evanna sipped her tea. 'I had fantasies, just like you.'

'I did not have fantasies.'

'Now you're lying.' Evanna grinned placidly. 'Every woman dreams about the local bad boy.'

'Conner is well educated.'

'Which makes him all the more attractive,' Evanna sighed.

'My idea of a perfect date never involved a close encounter with the police,' Flora said lightly, 'and I don't believe yours did either. You were always crazy about Logan.'

'That didn't stop me looking. I suppose that's part of the reason Conner was so attractive,' Evanna said simply. 'He was forbidden. Are you seriously telling me you've never had a few fantasies about Conner?'

'Never.' Keen to end what was increasingly becoming an uncomfortable conversation, Flora finished her sandwich and glanced at her watch. 'I have to go. Little Helen Peters had an asthma attack in the night. I'm going to call on her on my way back to the surgery.'

Evanna yawned. 'Yes. Poor Logan was up and down in the night. First it was Helen, then it was our Kirsty.'

'How is she?'

'We've moved her from a cot to a bed in preparation for the arrival of her sibling.' Evanna patted her swollen abdomen gently. 'And she's just discovered that she can leap out whenever she likes and come in with us. Which is fine, except she sleeps like a starfish, arms and legs stuck out at angles designed to cause maximum discomfort to those sharing the space.'

Flora laughed. 'She's gorgeous. Who is looking after her today?'

'Meg had her this morning and I'm going home right now.' Evanna stood up and winced. 'I can't believe this is how it feels to be thirty-five weeks pregnant. Remind me to be more sympathetic next time I run the antenatal clinic. Give little Helen a kiss from me.'

'I will. Why didn't you tell me that Logan had appointed Conner as the doctor?'

'Neither of us were sure he'd turn up. It didn't seem worth mentioning until we knew for sure.'

'So you really don't know why he's back, Evanna?' Flora tried to keep her tone casual.

'No. Logan hasn't said any more to me than he has to you.'

Flora reached for her bag. 'No pillow talk?'

'Are you kidding? Our pillow talk revolves around me telling him how uncomfortable I am and him trying not to phone for an air ambulance.'

'Is he that nervous?'

'He's hiding it quite well but, yes, he's nervous. Of course. His first wife died in childbirth and none of us are likely to forget that, myself included.' Evanna breathed out heavily. 'He wants me to go and stay on the mainland, but the baby's not due for another five weeks and if it was two weeks late I could be stuck over there for seven weeks. Even if I wanted to, which I don't, it just isn't practical. There's Kirsty to think of. I don't want her unsettled.'

'No. Well ...' Flora leaned forward and gave her friend a hug, carefully avoiding her bump. 'We're all keeping an eye on you and we can get you over to the mainland at the first sign of movement.'

'That's the plan.' Evanna stroked her bump. 'Just hope the baby is listening.'

Flora drove with the windows down, humming to herself and enjoying the breeze and the sunshine. She loved Glenmore at this time of year. Wild flowers clustered on the banks of grass at the side of the road and in the distance she could see the jagged silhouette of the ruined castle.

She waved at Doug MacDonald who was out on his bike and then caught sight of Sonia Davies pushing a buggy on the pavement.

‘Sonia!’ She slowed to a halt and called out to the young mother. ‘Everything OK? How’s Rachel?’

‘She’s beautiful.’ Sonia pushed the buggy over to the car. ‘I’m due in clinic later this week for another immunisation.’

Flora nodded. ‘She’s twelve months, isn’t she? So that will be the Hib booster. *Haemophilus influenzae*.’

Sonia handed Rachel a rattle to play with. ‘I hope she doesn’t freak out. It’s different when they’re babies, isn’t it? They don’t know what’s happening and it’s over in a flash.’

‘She’ll be fine. Have you booked her in for Thursday afternoon?’

‘Yes.’ Sonia jiggled the pushchair. ‘No sign of Evanna having the baby yet, then?’

‘She has a few weeks to go yet.’

‘I bet Dr MacNeil is nervous.’ Sonia gave a little frown. ‘We all know how uneasy he gets when women get near their due date. When he had to deliver me on the island last year, he was horrified. Never saw him look nervous before that night. I still think that if Evanna hadn’t been there, he would have done a runner.’

‘I’m sure he wouldn’t, although we all know that he prefers babies to be born on the mainland. I’m sure he’ll be packing Evanna off on that ferry in good time. And I’d better go. I have a visit to do before my afternoon clinic.’ Flora slid back into her car. ‘See you later in the week, Sonia.’

She carried on up the coast road, called in on Helen to check on her and offer reassurance to her mother. Then she drove to the medical centre, parking next to a sleek black motorbike.

She gave a faint smile. That explained the black leather. A motorbike.

She couldn’t imagine Conner with anything else. He was a man who always chose to live his life on the wrong side of risk.

Janet was at the reception desk, trying to find an appointment for a patient. ‘Flora has had a cancellation so she can see him straight away, Mrs Gregg,’ she was saying. ‘I’ll put you in with her. If she thinks Harry should see a doctor urgently, she’ll arrange it.’

Looking anxious, Mrs Gregg took Harry by the hand and led him to the chairs in the waiting room.

Flora walked up to the desk. ‘Problems?’

‘Just the one problem. People don’t want to book in with Conner.’ Janet sighed and rubbed her fingers over her forehead. ‘I can’t believe that Logan has done this to us in the middle of summer. His afternoon surgery is bursting at the seams and how many does Conner have? Two people.’

‘Two? That’s all?’

‘No one wants to see him, Flora.’ Janet looked exhausted. ‘I’m sure he’s a very good doctor, but all anyone round here remembers is a boy with a lot of problems. They don’t trust him.’

Remembering what Logan had said to her, Flora straightened her shoulders. ‘His qualifications are excellent.’

‘Well, maybe he’d like to put them above my desk in neon lights.’

‘It’s only his first day. People will settle down,’ Flora said firmly, hoping that she was right. ‘I thought the women, at least, would be queuing up.’

‘I’m sure they will, but not for his medical skills,’ Janet said dryly. ‘If Logan was looking for help, I think he was looking in the wrong place. Anyway, the Greggs are back from holiday and Harry isn’t well. He has a rash and Diane is worried. Your first patient has cancelled so I’ve put them in with you. If you’re worried, perhaps you can persuade them to see Conner, but I don’t hold out much hope.’

‘Leave it with me. If you see Logan can you tell him that I popped in to see Helen and she was fine?’ Flora walked to the waiting area. Harry was sitting on his mother’s lap and his eyes were closed.

‘Hello, Nurse Harris.’ Diane gave her a tired smile. ‘Janet said you might fit us in.’

‘Of course.’ Flora touched the little boy’s forehead with a gentle hand. ‘He’s very hot.’

‘I’ve spent the past two nights trying to bring his temperature down.’ Diane clearly hadn’t slept for days and her face was pale and drawn. ‘But it’s the rash that’s really worrying me. It’s spreading.’

‘I’ll take a look.’

The woman gave her a grateful smile and gently eased Harry onto the floor. ‘You’re too big for Mummy to carry now,’ she murmured, taking his hand. ‘Just walk as far as the consulting room, then you can sit down again.’

Harry murmured a protest but trotted along the corridor towards Flora’s consulting room.

‘Tell me what happened. I’d like to know when Harry first became ill.’ Flora flicked on her computer and stowed her bag under the desk. ‘Presumably it started on holiday?’

‘Three days ago he developed this rash. One minute he was fine and the next he had a temperature, neck stiffness, headache.’ Diane swallowed. ‘He’s gone from well to ill really fast and that’s—Well, I’m worried.’

Understanding that she didn’t want to say too much in front of the child, Flora nodded. ‘And you think the rash has spread?’

‘Oh, yes. Definitely.’

Flora washed her hands. ‘I’ll take a look, if that’s all right.’

‘I’m just going to take your T-shirt off, Harry.’ Diane reached forward and lifted his T-shirt carefully over his head. ‘I want to show Nurse Harris.’

Harry gave a moan of protest. ‘I’m really, really cold.’

‘That’s because you have a temperature,’ Flora said gently, lifting his arm slightly and turning him towards the light. ‘When did you first notice the rash, Mrs Gregg?’

‘Well, it didn’t look like this at first. It started with just one red spot under his arm and then it spread. Then his temperature shot up and he’s been feeling boiling hot ever since.’ Diane pushed her son’s hair away from his face and touched his forehead. ‘He’s hot now.’

Flora examined the rash carefully. It was scarlet and circular and she’d never seen anything like it before. ‘Did you see a doctor when you were away?’

‘Yes, but he said it was just a virus.’ Diane rolled her eyes, her worry evident. ‘Perhaps it is, but I wanted a proper opinion. It isn’t until you leave Glenmore that you realise how good the medical care is on this island. I was hoping to see Dr MacNeil, but Janet says his surgery is full.’

Flora checked Harry’s temperature and recorded it. ‘Logan isn’t the only doctor working at Glenmore now,’ she said carefully, and Diane pursed her lips.

‘If you’re talking about Conner MacNeil, I’m not interested. I remember the time he set off that firework in the school library.’

‘That was a long time ago, Mrs Gregg.’ Flora checked Harry’s pulse and blood pressure. ‘He trained in the army. His qualifications are excellent.’

‘I don’t care. I—’

‘Didn’t you ever do anything you shouldn’t when you were young?’

‘Well, I—I suppose ...’

‘I know I did.’ Flora shrugged. ‘And I also know I wouldn’t want to be judged as an adult by how I was as a child. People change, Mrs Gregg. And everyone deserves to be given chances. Logan wouldn’t have taken Conner on if he didn’t trust him. I’d like him to see Harry. I don’t recognise this rash and the fact that he has a temperature makes it worth exploring further.’

Mrs Gregg hesitated and then glanced at Harry, clearly torn. ‘I don’t suppose Conner will know any more than that doctor on the mainland.’

‘Let’s give it a try—see what he says? I’ll see if he’s free,’ Flora said cheerfully, trying not to reveal that the chances of Conner having a patient with him was extremely remote.

Hoping that she wasn’t making a mistake, she went across the corridor and tapped on his door. ‘Conner?’ She walked in and found him absorbed in a website on the internet. She peered closer. ‘Wetsuits?’

'I'm planning to do some sailing. It looks as though I'm going to have plenty of time on my hands.' He swivelled his head and looked at her. 'Are you here to relieve my boredom?'

She flushed. 'I have a patient that needs to be seen by a doctor.'

'And?'

'You're a doctor.'

'Am I?' He lounged back in his chair, his ice-blue gaze disturbingly direct. 'So why am I sitting in an empty consulting room?'

'Because this is Glenmore and it takes folks a while to get used to change. The last time they saw you, you were stirring up trouble all over the island. I don't suppose anyone imagined you'd become a doctor. So will you see Harry Gregg?'

Conner's eyes narrowed. 'Diane's son?'

'Yes. He's eight years old and a really nice little boy. Very lively usually, but not today. Diane is frightened.'

'She always did have a tendency to overreact. I remember she slapped my face once.'

'You probably deserved it.'

He smiled. 'I probably did. So what do you think, Flora? Paranoid mother?'

Flora shook her head. 'I think it's something that needs looking at. The child is poorly, there's no doubt about that. And he has a really weird rash. I've never seen anything like it before.'

Conner rose to his feet. 'Is she going to slap my face again or run away screaming in horror if I walk into the room?'

'I've no idea.' Flora gave a weary smile. 'Let's try it, shall we? Harry needs to see a doctor and I'd rather it was sooner than later.'

Diane looked up as they walked into the room. 'Dr MacNeil.'

'Diane.' Conner's greeting was cursory, his eyes focused on the boy, who was now sitting on his mother's lap, his head on her chest. 'Hey, sport.' He hunkered down so that he was on the same level. 'What's going on with you?'

Harry opened his eyes but didn't move his head. 'Feel bad.'

'His temperature is thirty-nine degrees.' Flora gently lifted Harry's arm so that Conner could see. 'He's had this rash for three days.'

'Feel horrible,' the boy muttered, and Conner nodded.

'Well, we need to see what we can do about that.' He studied the rash in silence, his blue eyes narrowed slightly. 'Circular rash.'

Diane watched his face. 'You're going to tell me that it's just a virus and that I shouldn't have bothered you.'

Conner lifted his gaze to hers. 'You were right to bring him. Harry? Do you mind undressing down to your underpants? I want to take a proper look at this rash.'

Flora helped the child undress and Conner examined his skin carefully and questioned Diane in detail.

'It started under his arm when we were on holiday,' she told him. 'Just a red spot. And then it grew bigger and it turned into that weird thing he has now.'

'Where did you go on holiday?'

Flora glanced at him in surprise. She wouldn't have expected Conner to be interested in small talk.

'Mainland.'

'Highlands?' Conner ran a finger over the rash, his expression thoughtful. 'Were you walking?'

'Yes.' Diane looked at him. 'How do you know?'

Conner straightened and reached for Harry's T-shirt. 'It fits with what I'm seeing. You can get dressed now. I've seen all I need to see.' He gently pulled the T-shirt over the boy's head. 'Were you camping?'

‘Yes. We spent a few nights in a forest. It was lovely.’

‘Lots of deer around?’

‘Actually, yes.’ Diane frowned. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Because Harry has Lyme disease.’ Conner washed his hands. ‘He was almost certainly bitten by a tick, which is why he started off with one red spot. Did you see an insect?’

‘No.’ Bemused, Diane shook her head. ‘No, I didn’t. But we’ve been camping every year since he was born and we’ve never had a problem. Lyme disease? What is that? I’ve never even heard of it.’

‘It’s not that common in this country, although the number of cases is increasing. Ticks are tiny insects and they feed by sucking blood from animals such as deer. Some ticks get infected with the bacterium that causes Lyme disease and if they bite a human then they pass the disease on.’

Diane looked at him in a mixture of horror and amazement. ‘And you’re sure Harry has it? How do you know?’

‘Because his symptoms fit the history.’

Flora felt the tension leave her. Clearly Conner hadn’t been making small talk about holidays, he’d been verifying the cause of the symptoms he was seeing. Logan was right. Conner was a good doctor. *A clever doctor*. And Diane appeared to have forgotten that she’d ever had reservations about seeing him.

‘You’ve seen this Lyme disease before?’

‘When I was stationed overseas.’ Without waiting for an invitation, he sat down at Flora’s computer and hit a few keys, bringing up a list of antibiotics. ‘The rash that Harry has is fairly typical.’ He scrolled down, searching for the one he wanted. ‘It starts as a single circular red mark and it gradually spreads. It isn’t always painful or itchy and some people don’t even notice it, depending on where they were bitten.’

‘Is there any treatment?’

‘Yes.’ Conner’s eyes were fixed on the screen. ‘I’m going to give Harry some antibiotics.’

‘And will they work?’

‘They should do because we’ve caught it early. You did the right thing, bringing him in.’

‘The doctor on the mainland thought it was a virus.’ Diane’s mouth tightened with disapproval. ‘Virus is a word doctors use when they haven’t got a clue what’s going on.’

‘You might be right. I usually say “I don’t know” but that phrase doesn’t win you many friends either. In fairness to your guy on the mainland, Lyme disease is not a condition every doctor will have seen.’ Conner printed off the prescription and handed it to Diane. ‘Make sure Harry finishes the course.’

‘I’ll do that.’ She slipped the prescription into her bag and hesitated. ‘Thank you.’ She looked Conner in the eye. ‘I wasn’t sure about seeing you ...’

‘I don’t blame you for that.’ As cool as ever, Conner rose to his feet. ‘Make an appointment to see Logan in a few days. Harry needs to be followed up. We need to be sure that the antibiotics are working.’

Diane took Harry’s hand in hers. ‘Why should I see Logan? Are you going to be busy?’

Conner gave a faint smile. ‘On current form? Probably not. But it’s important that the patients have faith in the doctor they see.’

‘I agree.’ Diane walked towards the door. ‘Which is why we’ll be making that appointment when you’re doing surgery. Thank you, Dr MacNeil. I knew I could rely on a Glenmore doctor to get the diagnosis right.’ The door closed behind her and Flora smiled happily at Conner.

‘I think you’re a hit. That was pretty impressive. I predict that once word spreads, your surgery will be crammed with patients.’

‘And I’m supposed to rejoice about that?’

‘Maybe not. But Logan will. So, tell me about Lyme disease because I’m feeling horribly ignorant.’

‘What else do you want to know? You get bitten by a tick that clings on once it bites. Then it sucks your blood—’

‘Don’t!’ Flora pulled a face. ‘You’re telling it like a horror story. If you carry on like that I’ll never set foot outside again.’

It was the wrong thing to say to Conner. He leaned against the desk and gave a wicked smile. ‘As I was saying, they suck your blood and slowly become more and more engorged—’

‘You do it on purpose, don’t you? Try and shock people.’

‘I admit it’s an extremely stimulating pastime.’

‘You might not find it so funny when I’m sick,’ Flora said sweetly, and his smile widened.

‘Nurses aren’t supposed to have delicate constitutions.’

‘Doctors aren’t supposed to be bloodthirsty.’

‘I’m just delivering the facts.’

‘Well ...’ She was horribly aware of just how strong his shoulders were and how much he dominated her tiny room. ‘Could you deliver them with slightly less gruesome relish?’

‘Where was I?’ He angled his head slightly. ‘Oh, yes, they were engorged with blood. Anyway, the bacteria that cause Lyme disease are usually carried in the gut and only travel to their mouth once they’ve been feeding for about twenty-four hours. So if you remove the tick as soon as you’re bitten, you’re unlikely to be infected.’

Flora shuddered. ‘So you’re telling me that a method of prevention is to drag this greedy, engorged creature off your skin?’

‘You remove it before it’s engorged. And you don’t drag. If you drag, you’ll just leave the mouth stuck in your body.’

‘Enough!’

‘The best thing is to smother it with Vaseline. It suffocates and then you can remove it with a pair of tweezers. You shouldn’t use your fingers—’

‘I wouldn’t touch it with a bargepole! And I’m never venturing outside again without full protective clothing.’

Conner’s eyes flickered to the neck of her uniform. ‘You don’t need to overdo it. The tick that carries the bacteria likes areas where there are wild deer.’

Her heart started to beat just a little bit faster. ‘And that’s why you were so interested in where the Greggs went on holiday?’

‘The symptoms fitted. The fact that they’d been camping in a forest in warm weather made it highly possible that he’d contracted the disease. Ticks like warm weather and people wear less then so they’re more likely to be bitten.’ His eyes lifted to hers and the tension between them increased.

‘Why haven’t I heard of it?’

‘Obviously there haven’t been any cases on Glenmore. It’s sensible to take precautions if you’re walking or camping in an area where infected ticks are known to live.’ His eyes dropped to her mouth, his gaze lingering. ‘Wear long sleeves and trousers, use a tick repellent spray—all the obvious things.’

They were talking about medical matters and yet there was a sudden intimacy in the atmosphere that she didn’t understand. It circled her like a forcefield, drawing her in, and when the phone rang suddenly she gave a start.

He was between her and the desk and she waited for him to move to one side so that she could answer it, but he stayed where he was. Left with no choice, she was forced to brush past him as she reached for the receiver. ‘Yes? I mean ...’ Flustered by the fact that he was standing so close to her, she stumbled over the words. ‘Nurse Harris speaking—Oh, hello, Mr Murray.’ Struggling to concentrate, she listened as the man on the other end spoke to her. ‘Well, no, I hadn’t heard of it either, but—’ She broke off and listened again before finally shaking her head. ‘You’d better speak to him yourself.’

She sighed and handed the receiver to Conner. ‘It’s Mr Murray, the pharmacist down on South Quay. He has a question about the prescription you just gave Harry.’

Relaxed and confident, Conner took the phone from her, his gaze still locked with hers. 'MacNeil.'

Flora felt as though someone had lit a fire inside her body. She should look away. She knew she should look away but she just couldn't help herself. There was something in his ice-blue eyes that insisted that she look.

'That's right, Mr Murray, the dose is large.' He listened, his eyes still fixed on hers. 'Yes, I do know that I'm not treating a horse.'

Flora frowned and mouthed, 'A horse?' But Conner merely lifted a hand and trailed a finger down her cheek with agonising slowness.

'No, believe it or not, I'm not trying to kill him, Mr Murray,' he drawled softly, his finger lingering near her mouth. 'I'm treating a case of Lyme disease. If you look it up I think you'll find that the dose I've given him is appropriate ... Yes, even in a child.' He brushed her lower lip with his thumb as he continued to field a tirade from the island pharmacist. 'Yes, I do remember the incident with the firework. Yes, and the barn—No, I don't blame you for questioning me, Mr Murray.' His hand dropped to his side and she sensed a sudden change in him. 'Of course, you're just doing your job.'

Finally he replaced the receiver. 'Apparently it isn't just the patients who have a problem trusting my judgement.'

His tone was flat and Flora stood still, wanting to say something but not knowing what. 'It was an unusual prescription.'

'You don't need to make excuses for them, Flora.' Conner straightened and walked towards the door, his face expressionless. 'You'd better carry on with your surgery. You have patients lining the waiting room.'

She stared after him as he left the room, wanting to stop him. She wanted to say something that would fix things because she sensed that beneath his bored, devil-may-care attitude there was a seam of pain buried so deep that no one could touch it.

The islanders were wary of him, that was true, but what did he think of them?

Remembering Logan's words, Flora bit her lip. When had anyone given Conner MacNeil a chance? When had anyone given him the benefit of the doubt? Why should he bother with any of them when they'd never bothered with him?

It was going to take more than one or two successful consultations to fill his consulting room with patients because no one believed that Conner MacNeil could be anything but a Bad Boy.

It was going to take a miracle.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE miracle didn't happen.

A few of the locals reluctantly agreed to see Conner, but the majority refused, choosing to wait a week to see Logan rather than be forced to consult the island rebel.

'It's ridiculous,' Flora told Evanna crossly a week after Conner had arrived on Glenmore. They were sitting on a rug on the beach, watching Kirsty dig in the sand. Finally the wind had dropped and the sun shone. 'They tell Janet it's urgent, and then say they'd rather wait than see Conner. I mean, just how urgent can something be if it can wait a week? Frankly, it would serve them right if a bit of them dropped off.'

'Well, to be fair to them, Conner was a bit wild and crazy,' Evanna said mildly, picking up Kirsty's sunhat and putting it back on her head. 'We just need to give them time to realise that he's changed.'

'Time isn't on our side. Glenmore needs another doctor. A doctor the patients will see! Your baby is due in four weeks,' Flora reminded her. 'If the patients don't stop demanding to see Logan, you won't get a look-in.'

Evanna sighed. 'I know. He's shattered. He used to always get home before I put Kirsty to bed. Now I'm lucky if he's home before *I'm* in bed.' She lifted her face to the sun. 'It's hot today.'

'I gather from Logan that your blood result was all right,' Flora lifted a bottle of water out of her bag and took a sip. 'That's a relief all round.'

'Yes, I was already immune to chickenpox, so that's one less problem to contend with.'

Flora was still pondering the problem of Conner. 'It isn't as if he's a useless doctor. He's brilliant. You should have seen him with Harry Gregg.' She leaned forward and helped Kirsty ease the sand out of the bucket. 'There! A perfect castle.' She smiled as Kirsty clapped her hands with delight. 'And he's diagnosed Mrs Ellis.'

'Yes, she told me he's given her thyroxine. He certainly seems to know what he's doing.'

'So why hasn't word spread? Why won't the islanders see him?'

'Because they see the boy and not the man? I'm guessing, but I suppose they just don't trust him.' Evanna hesitated. 'Apparently Finn Sullivan refused to rent him a yacht a few evenings ago.'

Flora stared at her. 'Are you serious?'

'Yes, but it's not all black. I saw Conner kicking a football around with the kids on the beach yesterday. They think he's *so* cool. And several women have made appointments to see him, but I don't think he was too thrilled about that.'

'He certainly wasn't.' Flora brushed sand from Kirsty's face. 'He strode up to Janet and said, "I'm not a bloody gynaecologist" or something equally unsympathetic. And Janet pointed out that as we didn't have a female doctor, he was expected to see female problems.'

'And what was Conner's response to that?'

'I don't know because he lowered his voice but Janet went scarlet.'

Evanna laughed. 'I don't suppose there was much call for gynecology in the army. According to Logan, he was dealing with a lot of trauma. Anyway, it's time we helped him settle in, which is why I've invited him to join us for lunch later.'

Flora's heart bumped hard against her chest. 'He's coming to lunch? I thought it was just your family. Logan, Meg and a few others.'

'Conner is family. I thought it might be a good idea to remind people of that.'

'Oh.' Flora concentrated on Kirsty. 'Well, that's great. Really nice of you, Evanna. So we should go back to the house. Start getting ready.' She rose to her feet and picked Kirsty up. 'Come on, sweetheart. Let's get the sand off your feet and take you home. Who knows? Your daddy might even be there.'

Conner's feet echoed on the cracked wooden floorboards and he glanced around him, feeling the memories swirl. The house smelled of damp, but that wasn't surprising because it had been years since the light and air had been allowed to pour unrestricted through its doors and windows.

He'd always hated this house and nothing had changed. It was as if the walls had absorbed some of the anger and hatred that had been played out in these rooms.

He tried to feel something positive, but there was nothing that wasn't dark and murky, and he gave a soft curse and strode out of the front door and back into the sunshine, drawing the clear air deep into his lungs.

Just walking into the house had made him feel contaminated.

He shouldn't have come.

He should have just paid someone to sell the damn place.

Beneath him the sea crashed onto the rocks and he sucked in a breath, drinking in the wildness of it—the savage beauty. Everything about this part of Glenmore was angry. The coast, the sea, the wind, the house ...

Him?

Conner stood for a moment, battling with uncomfortable thoughts until some inner sense warned him that he wasn't alone.

He turned swiftly and saw her.

Flora was standing only metres away from him, the wind lifting her brown curls and blowing them around her face, her expression uncertain.

'Sorry.' Her voice faltered and it was obvious that she couldn't decide whether to stay or retreat. 'I didn't mean to disturb you.'

He wished she hadn't, because he was in no mood for company and his desperate need for isolation fuelled his temper. 'Then why did you?'

Flora flinched at his directness, but she didn't retreat. 'You were supposed to be at Logan and Evanna's for lunch. We assumed you'd forgotten.'

'I needed some space.'

'Oh.' She took a breath. 'It's just that ... you didn't ring or anything.'

'No.'

'I was worried.'

'Why?' *Since when had anyone worried about him?*

'This business with the islanders,' she shrugged, embarrassed and awkward. 'It's horrible. I thought by now they would have accepted you.'

'It's not important.'

'Of course it's important! Evanna told me that Finn wouldn't rent you a boat—'

When he didn't answer, she gazed at him in exasperation. 'Don't you *care*?'

He could feel the blood throbbing in his veins. 'What are you doing here, Flora?'

'When you didn't show up, I thought I'd bring lunch to you.'

It was then that he noticed the basket by her feet. He could see a bowl of strawberries, thick whipped cream and another bowl, this one piled high with bronzed chicken legs. And white and red checked napkins.

A traditional picnic.

It was all so civilised and in such direct contrast to this place and everything he was feeling that he felt his tension levels soar.

He wasn't feeling civilised. He wasn't feeling civilised at all.

In fact, he was in an extremely dangerous mood.

'It's pretty here,' she ventured hesitantly, glancing over to the rocks and the tiny beach. 'This is the only house on the island that has its own private beach.'

'Flora, if you have any sense, you'll leave right now.'

Her eyes flew to his. Widened. 'I've made you angry.'

There was something different about her but he couldn't work out what it was. 'I was angry before you arrived. I know you mean well, but I don't wish to take a trip down memory lane and I especially don't want to do it holding anyone's hand,' he said harshly. 'How did you know where to find me?'

'I went to your barn first and you weren't there.' She captured a strand of hair as it danced in the breeze. 'And I saw Mrs North picking blackberries in the lane outside and she said she'd seen you coming in this direction.'

Conner's mood darkened still further. 'Now I know why they don't bother with CCTV on Glenmore. They have locals stationed on every street corner.'

'I shouldn't have come. I really am sorry.' Flushed and flustered, Flora lifted the basket and stepped forward. She pushed the basket into his hands, her smile brief and shy. 'Take it. Evanna is an amazing cook. Her chicken is delicious and the strawberries are freshly picked from the Roberts' farm. If you're not hungry now, you can eat it later.' Without waiting for him to reply, she turned and walked quickly away from him, her long flowery skirt swirling around her body, outlining the soft curve of her hips.

He'd offended her. *Or had he frightened her?*

Conner watched her for a moment and then looked down at the basket and swore long and fluently. The day was *not* turning out as he'd planned. He lifted his gaze from the strawberries and stared after her retreating figure with a mixture of exasperation and anger.

He didn't care that he'd offended her.

He really didn't care.

It wasn't as if he'd invited her here. He hadn't asked her to follow him.

Caught in an internal battle, he opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind and closed it again, then growled with frustration and called out to her. 'Do you like strawberries?'

She stopped and turned—slowly. 'Yes. I love them.'

But she didn't move and even from this distance Conner sensed her wariness and remembered what Logan had said about her being shy.

'Good. Because there's a large bowlful in this basket and I hate them.' He dumped the basket on the ground and looked at her expectantly, but she still didn't move.

'Just eat the chicken, then.'

Realising that she wasn't going to walk to him, he strolled towards her and suddenly saw what was different about her. 'You're not wearing your glasses.'

She lifted a hand to her cheek and shrugged self-consciously. 'Contact lenses. I don't usually wear them at work. I'm not a morning person and I'm never awake enough to risk putting my fingers into my eyes.' She looked over his shoulder at the basket, which now lay abandoned on the soft grass. 'I can take the strawberries with me, if they offend you that much.'

'Or you can sit down and eat them here.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'I didn't think you were looking for company.'

'If the strawberries aren't eaten, I'll hurt Evanna's feelings.'

A smile touched her mouth. 'I thought you didn't care about other people's feelings, Conner MacNeil.'

'I don't, but if I upset her, Logan will give me a black eye. And then the locals will think I've seduced someone's wife or girlfriend. And I'm already in enough trouble.'

She laughed, as he'd intended. 'You told me that you thrive on trouble.'

'That's just habit. I've never known anything else.'

Her laughter faded and she stared up into his face. 'I shouldn't have come here. It's personal for you. Stressful. And you don't want to talk about it, do you?'

He gave a twisted smile. 'Let's just say that if I talk, you wouldn't like the language I'd choose to use.'

'Use whatever language you please. I'm not as shockable as you seem to think I am.'

'It would be all too easy to shock you, Flora.' He thought of what his life had been and then he looked down at her gentle eyes and her soft mouth and wondered why he'd stopped her walking away. 'I'm not the type of man who eats strawberries with girls in flowered skirts.'

'You don't like my skirt?'

'You look ...' He gave a faint smile as he searched for the word that best described her. 'Wholesome. Like an advert for that whipped cream in the basket.'

'It's Evanna's whipped cream. And I don't see what my skirt has to do with anything. Do you always push people away?'

'I don't have to. They usually run all by themselves.'

'Well, I can't run in these shoes.'

'Is that right? In that case, you can sit down and help me eat this damn picnic.'

'Where?' Flora glanced towards the house and he made an impatient sound.

'No way.' *He wasn't going back in there.* Instead, he took her hand, scooped up the basket and then led her down the path to the tiny cove at the bottom. The path was steep and stony but she didn't falter, confident and sure-footed despite her comment about her shoes.

She was a local girl, he remembered. She'd spent her childhood playing on these cliffs and exploring Glenmore's rocky shores.

As they reached the sand, she slipped off her shoes and stooped to pick them up. 'It's pretty here. Really sheltered.'

'Haven't you been here before?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Honestly?' She hesitated. 'This beach is part of your property and we were too afraid of your father. Even Kyla.'

Conner gave a bitter laugh. 'Lovely man, my father.' He sat down on the sand and then glanced at her with a frown. 'Did you bring something to sit on?'

She smiled and sat down on the sand next to him. 'This is perfect.' She reached into the basket and then glanced at him, her eyes twinkling. 'Napkin?'

'Of course,' he said sarcastically. 'I'd hate to drop anything on my tuxedo.'

She laughed and passed him the bowl of chicken instead. 'Try this. I guarantee it will taste better than anything you've ever eaten before, tuxedo or no tuxedo. I bumped into Diane Gregg in the supermarket this morning. She said Harry is feeling much better.'

'Yes. I saw him in surgery yesterday. One of the advantages of being treated like a leper is that I have plenty of time for the patients that do want to see me.' He bit into the chicken and flavours exploded on his palate. 'You're right—this is good.'

'I have a boat, if you want to sail.'

Conner lifted an eyebrow. 'Are you making a pass at me?'

The colour poured into her cheeks. 'Of course not.'

'But you're offering to lend me your boat?'

'Yes.' She delved into the basket and pulled out some crusty bread. 'Or we could sail together. You can sail it singlehanded but it's more fun with two.'

'I didn't know you sailed.'

'I suspect there's quite a lot about me that you don't know,' she said calmly, and Conner gave a surprised laugh.

'And what do you think the locals will say when they see you consorting with Bad Conner?'

Flora broke the bread in two and handed him half. 'I suppose it might be sensible to avoid getting into trouble, just in case the lifeboat crew refuse to help.'

'You'd be all right. They'd pick you up and leave me in the water.'

'No problems, then. Lemonade?'

Conner winced. 'Are you serious? What is this—nursery food?'

'It's home-made. Evanna makes it.' She poured him a glass and he heard a dull clunk as ice cubes thudded into the glass. 'It's very refreshing.'

He took the glass and stared at it dubiously. 'If you say so.'

'You'd probably prefer beer.'

'I don't drink.' He felt her eyes on his face and when she spoke her voice was soft.

'Because of your father.' Her quiet statement required no response and so he didn't give one.

They ate in silence and he found himself glancing at her occasionally and noticing things about the way she looked. Like the fact that she had tiny freckles on her nose and that her eyes were incredibly pretty.

'You should ditch the glasses,' he said softly, and she blinked awkwardly.

'Oh ...' She concentrated on the chicken and suddenly he was reminded of a baby kitten he'd found abandoned when he'd been a child. It had been so soft and vulnerable that he he'd been afraid to touch it in case he harmed it. So he'd placed an anonymous call to the vet's surgery and had then hidden behind a tree, watching until they'd picked it up.

Flora had that same air of vulnerability.

They finished the picnic in silence and she packed everything away tidily in the basket. 'There's a good wind. I always find there's nothing better than sailing to clear the mind and put everything into perspective.'

'Flora—'

'Don't pretend you don't want to sail, because I know you tried to hire a boat from Finn at the sailing school. I'm offering you my boat. With or without myself as crew.'

He stared out to sea. 'I was going to clear the house out this afternoon.'

'There's no worse job in the world,' she said softly. 'After Dad died, it took me six months to even go into the house. I just couldn't face all those memories. And mine were happy ones. Are you sure you don't want to talk about this?'

'I wouldn't know what to say. I've been away for twelve years. But it seems even that isn't long enough.' Conner took a mouthful of his drink and choked. 'That is truly disgusting.'

Flora laughed. 'Some people prefer it with sugar.'

'The only way I'd drink it is topped up with gin. And given that I don't touch alcohol, there's no chance of that.' Pulling a face, he emptied his glass onto the sand. 'Where's your boat moored?'

'South Quay.'

His eyes narrowed. 'In full public view.'

'Yes.' She scrambled to her feet and brushed the sand from her skirt. 'We need to go via my house so that I can change, but that will only take a minute.'

'You seriously want to sail? I thought you hated being the focus of people's attention.'

'I won't be the focus,' she muttered, carefully stacking everything back into the basket. 'You will.'

She was being kind, he realised. Trying to show solidarity in front of the locals.

He probably ought to refuse but just as he opened his mouth to do just that, the wind gusted and he glanced at the waves breaking on the beach. 'It's a perfect afternoon for a sail.'

'Then what are you waiting for?' She walked towards the path. 'Are you coming, Dr MacNeil? Or would you rather spend the afternoon being moody?'

She'd never had so much fun. The wind was gusting at five knots and Conner was a born sailor, with a natural feel for the wind and the sea and blessed with nerves of steel. And although they came close several times, he didn't land them in the water.

As the water sprayed over the bows, Flora laughed in delight. 'Who taught you to sail?'

'Taught myself. Sank two boats in the process. Probably why Finn won't rent me a boat. I always loved being on the water. The sea was the place where everything came together.' He tightened the mainsheet as he turned the boat into the wind. 'Ready about,' he called. Flora released the jib sheet and they both ducked under the boom as the boat came swiftly around. The wind caught the sails and the boat accelerated smoothly away, the sea sparkling in the summer sunshine.

It was hours before they finally turned the boat back towards the jetty and Flora felt nothing but regret. 'Do you ever feel like just sailing away and never looking back?'

'All the time.' He adjusted the sail. 'What about you?'

'Oh, yes.' She gazed dreamily up at the sky, loving the feel of the wind and the spray on her face. 'I love being on the boat. It's just so easy and comfortable. No people. No problems.'

'You are full of surprises, Flora Harris.' Conner laughed. 'I never imagined you were a sailor.'

'I bought her with the money Dad left me when he died. He was the one who taught me to sail. I was hopeless at team sports at school because I was too shy. No one ever picked me. I think Dad realised that sailing would suit me. I love the freedom of the boat. And the fact that you're away from people.' She closed her eyes and let the sun warm her skin. 'I'm always tense around people.'

'You're still incredibly shy, aren't you?'

She opened her eyes. 'Yes. But I've learned to act. That's what you do as an adult, isn't it? You act your way through situations that would have paralysed you as a child.'

'Was it that bad?'

'Yes.' Her simple, honest response touched him.

'I didn't realise. I just thought you were studious.'

Flora stared at the quay, measuring the distance. 'If I was absorbed in a book then no one bothered with me, and I preferred it that way. I liked being inconspicuous.'

'So why did you come back to Glenmore? Logan said you were working in Edinburgh before this. I would have thought it was easier to be inconspicuous in a city.'

'It's also very lonely and I missed the scenery and the sailing. Coming back here seemed like the right thing to do.'

'And was it?'

She glanced at him. 'I don't know. Even though I know they mean well, I can't get used to the fact that everyone knows what everyone is doing.'

They approached the jetty and she released the jib sheet and the sail flapped in the wind. Conner turned the boat head to wind and brought her skilfully into the quay.

'She's pretty.' He ran a hand over the mast and Flora felt her heart kick against her chest.

She wished she were the boat.

He leapt over the foredeck onto the quay and secured the boat to the jetty while Flora de-rigged the boat, wishing they could have stayed out on the water. Now that they were on dry land she was suddenly aware that she was with Conner MacNeil and that all the locals were watching them.

As usual, Conner was totally indifferent. 'I had no idea your father encouraged you to indulge in such dangerous pastimes. My impression was that he kept you under lock and key. He was strict.'

'Not strict, exactly. Protective.' Flora stepped off the boat and onto the quay. Hot after the exertion, she removed her hat and her hair tumbled loose over her shoulders. 'My mother died when I was very young and I think he was terrified that something would happen to me, too. He never relaxed if I was out.'

'I don't remember you ever going out. All my memories of you have books in them.'

Flora laughed. 'That was partly my fault. I was painfully shy and books stopped me having to talk to people.'

'So why aren't you shy with me, Flora?'

Her eyes flew to his, startled. It was true, she realised. She'd had such fun she hadn't once felt shy with him. Not once. 'I'm never shy when I'm sailing.'

But she knew that it had nothing to do with the sailing and everything to do with the man.

She felt comfortable with Conner.

Unsettled by that thought, she looked across the quay at the throngs of tourists who were milling around on their way to and from the beach. 'Can I treat you to a hot fudge sundae? Meg's café is calorie heaven.'

'I don't think so.' He checked that the boat was securely tied. 'I just upset the balance of Glenmore. I'm like you. Better with the boat than people. I've never been any good at platitudes and all the other false things people say to each other.'

It was so close to the way she felt that for a moment she stood still. Who would have thought that she and Conner had so many similarities? 'But you came back.'

He gave a careless shrug. 'It was time.'

But it wouldn't be for long, she knew that.

Suddenly she just wanted to drag him straight back on the boat and sail back out to sea. On the water she'd had glimpses of the person behind the bad boy. He'd been relaxed. Good-humoured. Now they were back on dry land his ice-blue eyes were wary and cynical, as though he was braced for criticism.

A commotion on the far side of the quay caught her eye and she squinted across the water. 'I wonder why the ferry hasn't left yet.' Flora glanced at her watch. 'It's five past four. Jim always leaves at four o'clock sharp. He's never late.'

'Obviously he is today.'

'What are they all staring at?' An uneasy feeling washed over her. 'Something is happening on the quay. Conner, I think someone must have fallen into the water.'

A woman started screaming hysterically and Flora paled as she recognised her.

'That's Jayne Parsons, from the dental surgery. Something must have happened to Lily. It must be little Lily in the water.' She started to run, dodging groups of gaping tourists as she flew towards the other side of the quay.

And suddenly she could see why people were staring.

Blood pooled on the surface of the water and Flora felt a wave of nausea engulf her as she realised just how serious the situation was.

Her hand shaking, she delved in her pocket for her mobile phone and quickly rang the coastguard and the air ambulance. Then she caught Jayne by the shoulders before she could throw herself into the water after her child. 'No! Wait, Jayne. What happened? Is it Lily?'

'She fell. One minute she was eating her ice cream and the next ... Oh, God, she fell.' Jayne's breath was coming in hysterical gasps and out of the corner of her eye Flora saw movement, heard a splash and turned to see Conner already in the water.

A local who had seen the whole incident started directing him. 'She went in about here. Between the quay and the boat. I guess the propeller ...' His voice tailed off as he glanced towards Jayne and the woman's eyes widened in horror as she focused on the surface of the water and saw what Flora had already seen.

The blood.

Jayne started to scream and the sound had a thin, inhuman quality that cut through the summer air and brought horrified silence to the normally bustling quay. Then she tried to launch herself into the water again and Flora winced as Jayne's flying fist caught her on the side of her head. She was

too slight to hold the woman, her head throbbed and she was just about to resign herself to the fact that Jayne was going to jump when two burly local fishermen came to her aid.

They drew a sobbing, struggling Jayne away from the edge of the quay and Flora gave them a grateful nod. Whatever happened next, Jayne being in the water would only make things worse.

Oblivious to the audience or the building tension, Conner vanished under the water. Time and time again he dived, while strangers and locals stood huddled in groups, watching the drama unfold.

Offering what comfort she could, Flora took Jayne's hand. 'Conner will find her,' she said firmly, praying desperately that she was right. 'Conner will find her.' *If she said it often enough, perhaps it would happen.*

'Conner?' Shivering violently and still restrained by the fishermen, Jayne looked at Flora blankly, as if she hadn't realised until this point who was trying to rescue her daughter. 'Conner MacNeil?'

'He's in the water now,' Flora said gently, wondering whether Jayne was going into shock. Her eyes were glazed and her face white. 'He's looking for her, Jayne.'

'Conner? When has he ever put his life on the line for anyone? He won't help her. *He won't help my baby.*' Her eyes suddenly wild with terror, Jayne developed superhuman strength, wrenched herself from the hold of the two men and hurled herself towards the edge of the quay once again.

The two men quickly grabbed her and she wriggled and pulled, struggling to free herself. 'Get the coastguard, anyone—Oh, God, no, no.' She collapsed, sobbing and Flora slid her arms round her, this time keeping her body between Jayne and the quay.

'Jayne, you're no help to Lily if you fall in, too. Leave it to Conner. You have to trust Conner.'

'Who in their right mind would trust Conner MacNeil?'

'I would,' Flora said simply, and realised that it was true. 'I'd trust him with my life.'

'Then you're obviously infatuated with him,' Jayne shrieked, 'like every other woman who comes close to him.' But she sagged against Flora, her energy depleted by the extravagant surge of emotion.

Infatuated?

Dismissing the accusation swiftly, Flora stared at the surface of the water but there was no movement and a couple of tourists standing next to her started to murmur dire predictions. She turned and glared at them just as there was a sound from the water and Conner surfaced, the limp, lifeless body of the child in his arms. He sucked in air and then hauled himself onto the concrete steps with one hand, his other arm holding the child protectively against his chest.

Lily lay still, her soaked dress darkened by blood, her hair streaked with it.

Flora felt panic, jagged and dangerous. Oh no, please no.

There were no signs of life. None.

Next to her Jayne started to moan like a creature tormented and then the sound stopped as she slid to the concrete in a faint.

'Leave her,' Conner ordered, climbing the steps out of the water, the body of the child still in his arms. Lily's head hung backwards and her skin was a dull grey colour. 'Someone else can look after her and at the moment she's better off out of it. Get me a towel, Flora. With the blood and the water, I can't see what we're dealing with here.'

A towel?

Feeling sick and shaky, Flora scanned the crowd and focused on two tourists who were loaded down with beach items. 'Give me your towel.' Without waiting for their permission, she yanked the towel out of the bag, spilling buckets and spades over the quay. Then she was on her knees beside Conner.

Lily lay pale and lifeless, her tiny body still, like a puppet that had been dropped. Blood spurted like a fountain from a wound on her leg.

‘It’s an artery.’ With a soft curse Conner pressed down hard. ‘I’m guessing she gashed it on the propeller as she fell. She’s lucky the engine wasn’t on.’ He increased the pressure in an attempt to stop the bleeding. ‘She’s stopped breathing.’

Flora almost stopped breathing, too. Panic pressed in on her and without Connor’s abrupt commands she would have shrivelled up and sobbed, just as Jayne had. Perhaps he realised that she was on the verge of falling apart because he lifted his head and glared at her, his blue eyes fierce with determination.

‘Press here! I need to start CPR. Flora, *move!*’

She stared at him for a moment, so stunned by the enormity of what was happening she couldn’t respond.

‘Pull yourself together!’ His tone was sharp. ‘If we’re to stand any chance here, I need some help, and you’re the only person who knows what they’re doing. Everyone else is just gawping.’

Flora felt suddenly dizzy. She’d never seen so much blood in her life. She’d never worked in A and E and all the first-aid courses she’d attended had been theoretical. *She didn’t know what she was doing.*

And then she realised that *he* did. Conner knew exactly what he was doing and she knelt down beside him.

‘Tell me what you want me to do.’

‘Press here. Like that. That’s it—good.’ He put her hands on the wound, showed her just how hard he wanted her to press, and then shifted slightly so that he could focus on the child’s breathing. With one hand on her forehead and the other under her chin, he gently tilted Lily’s head back and covered her mouth with his, creating a seal. He breathed gently, watching as the child’s chest rose.

Then he lifted his mouth and watched as Lily’s chest fell as the air came out. ‘Flora, get a tourniquet on that leg. She’s losing blood by the bucketload.’

‘A tourniquet?’ Flora turned to the nearest tourist. ‘Get me a bandage or a tie, something—anything—I can wind around her leg.’

The man simply stared at her, but his wife moved swiftly, jerking the tie from the neck of a businessman who had been waiting to take the ferry.

Flora didn’t dare release the pressure on Lily’s leg. ‘If I let go to tie it, she’s going to bleed.’ Feeling horribly ignorant, she sent Conner a helpless glance. ‘I haven’t done this before. Do I put it directly over the wound?’

‘Above the wound. You need a stick or something to twist it tight. Tie it and leave a gap and tie it again.’

Flora swiftly did as he instructed. The towel was soaked in blood and her fingers were slippery with it and shaking.

‘The bleeding’s not stopping Conner,’ she muttered, and he glanced across at her, his expression hard.

‘You need to tighten it. More pressure. Get a stick.’

She glanced at the uneven surface of the quay. ‘There’s no stick!’

‘Then use something else!’ He glared at the group of tourists standing nearest to them. ‘Find a stick of some sort! A kid’s spade, a cricket stump—anything we can use.’

‘The blood is everywhere.’ Flora tried to twist the tie tighter but the bleeding was relentless and she felt a sob build in her throat. It just seemed hopeless. Completely hopeless. ‘She’s four years old, Conner.’ She was ready to give up but Conner placed the heel of his hand over the child’s sternum.

‘She’s hypovolaemic. She needs fluid and she needs it fast.’ He pushed down. ‘Where the *hell* is the air ambulance?’

Someone thrust a stick into Flora’s hand and she looked at it with relief. Perhaps now she could stop the bleeding. ‘Do I push it under the tie and twist?’

‘On top.’ Conner stopped chest compressions and bent to give another rescue breath. ‘Between the two knots. Twist. Make a note of the time—we can’t leave it on for more than ten minutes. But if we’re not out of here in ten minutes, it will be too late anyway.’

He covered Lily’s mouth with his again and Flora followed his instructions, placing the stick between the first and second knots and twisting until it tightened.

‘The air ambulance has just landed on the beach,’ Jim, the ferryman, was by her shoulder, his voice surprisingly steady. ‘What can I do, Flora?’

‘I don’t know. Keep the crowd away, I suppose. How’s Jayne?’

‘Out cold. Might be the best thing. Someone’s looking after her—a nurse from the mainland on a day trip.’

Conner returned to chest compressions. ‘Jim—get over to the paramedics. I want oxygen and plasma expander. And get them to radio the hospital and warn them. She’s going to need whole blood or packed cells when she arrives. I want her in the air in the next few minutes. We don’t have time to play around here.’

‘Will do.’ Without argument, Jim disappeared to do as Conner had instructed and Flora lifted the edge of the towel.

‘The bleeding’s stopped.’ She felt weak with relief and Conner nodded.

‘Good. We’ll release it and check it in about ten minutes. If the bleeding doesn’t start again we can leave it loose, but don’t take it off—we might need it again.’ He bent his head to give Lily another life-saving breath and Flora saw the paramedics sprinting along the quay towards them.

‘They’re here, Conner.’

Conner wasn’t listening. His attention was focused on the child. ‘Come on, baby girl,’ he murmured softly, ‘breathe for me.’ His eyes were on her chest and Flora watched him, wondering. Had he seen something? Had he felt a change in her condition?

‘Do you think she—?’

And at that moment Lily gave a choking cough and vomited weakly.

‘Oh, thank God,’ Flora breathed, and Conner turned the child’s head gently and cleared her airway.

‘There’s a good girl. You’re going to be all right now, sweetheart.’

He spoke so softly that Flora doubted that anyone else had heard his words of comfort and she felt a lump block her throat as she watched him with the child.

So he was capable of kindness, then. It was there, deep inside him, just as she’d always suspected.

But then he lifted his head and his eyes were hard as ever. ‘Get some blankets, dry towels, coats—something to warm her up,’ he ordered, and then looked at the paramedics. ‘Give her some oxygen. I want to get a line in and give her a bolus of fluid and then we’re out of here.’

‘How much fluid do you want?’

Conner wiped his forearm across his brow, but he kept one hand on the child’s arm. *Offering reassurance.* ‘What’s her weight? How old is she? We can estimate—’

‘I know her weight exactly,’ Flora said. ‘I saw her in clinic last week. She’s 16 kilograms. Do you want a calculator so that you can work out the fluid?’

‘Start with 160 mls of colloid and then I’ll reassess. I don’t want to hang around here.’ Conner released Lily’s hand and started looking for a vein, while one of the paramedics sorted out the fluid and the other gave Lily some oxygen.

The child was breathing steadily now, her chest rising and falling as Conner worked. Occasionally her eyes fluttered open and then drifted closed again.

‘She’s got no veins,’ Conner muttered, carefully examining Lily’s arms. ‘Get me an intraosseous needle. I’m not wasting time looking for non-existent veins. We need to get her to hospital. We’ve messed around here long enough.’

The paramedic dropped to his knees beside Conner, all the necessary equipment to hand. 'You want an intraosseous needle?'

'Actually, just give me a blue cannula. She might just have a vein I can use here.' Conner stroked the skin on the child's arm, focused. 'One go—if it fails, we'll get her in the air and I'll insert an intraosseous needle on the way.'

Flora leaned forward and closed her fingers around the child's arm, squeezing gently and murmuring words of reassurance. Lily was drifting in and out of consciousness and didn't seem aware of what was going on.

There was a commotion next to them but Conner didn't seem to notice. He didn't look up or hesitate. Instead, he applied himself to the task with total concentration, slid the needle into the vein and then gave a grunt of satisfaction. 'I'm in—good. That makes things easier. Let's flush it and tape it—I don't want to lose this line.'

The paramedic leaned towards him with tape but just at that moment Jayne launched herself at Conner and tried to drag him away. '*What are you doing to my baby?*' Her face was as white as swan's feathers, her eyes glazed with despair. 'Let me get to her—I need to hold her—*Get him away from her.*'

'Jayne, not now.' Flora quickly slid an arm round her shoulders and pulled her out of the way so that the paramedic and Conner could finish what they'd started.

'But she's dead,' Jayne moaned, and Flora shook her head.

'She's not dead, Jayne,' she said firmly. 'She's breathing.'

'Not dead?' Relief diluted the pain in Jayne's eyes but then panic rose again as she saw Conner bending over her child. '*What's he doing to her? Oh, God, there's blood everywhere.*'

'Lily cut herself very badly,' Flora began, but Jayne began to scream.

'Get him away from her! *Get him away from my baby! I don't trust him!*'

'You should trust him. He's the reason the bairn's breathing now.' It was Jim who spoke, his weatherbeaten face finally showing signs of strain. Gently but firmly he drew Jayne away from Flora. 'Flora, you help Dr MacNeil. Jayne, you're staying with me. And you'd better remember that Conner MacNeil is the reason Lily is alive right now. I know you're upset, and rightly so, but you need to get a hold. The man is working miracles.'

Conner straightened, conferred with the paramedics and together he and the crew transferred Lily's tiny form onto the stretcher. Then he wiped his blood-streaked hands down his soaked shorts. His handsome face was still damp with sea water and the expression in his ice-blue eyes cold and detached as he finally looked at Jayne. 'We're taking her to hospital.'

Jayne crumpled. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' Tears poured down her cheeks as she looked from him to Lily's still form. 'Can I come with you? Please?'

Conner took a towel that a tourist tentatively offered him. 'That depends on whether you're likely to assault me during the flight.' He wiped his hands properly, watching as Jayne breathed in and out and lifted a hand to her chest.

'I—I really am sorry.'

'No, you need to understand.' Conner handed the towel back, his voice brutally harsh. 'This isn't over. If she arrests during the flight, I'll be resuscitating her. Can you cope with that? Because if you can't, you're staying on the ground.'

Jayne flinched but for some reason his lack of sympathy seemed to help her pull herself together and find some dignity. 'I understand. Of course. And that's fine. I'm just grateful that you ...' She swallowed and nodded. 'Do everything,' she whispered. 'Everything. I just—I just want to be near her. And with her when we get there. I—Thank you. Thank you so much. Without you ...' Her eyes met Conner's for a moment and he turned his attention back to Lily.

'We're wasting time. Let's move.'

In a matter of moments the helicopter was in the air and Flora watched as it swooped away from Glenmore towards the mainland.

Suddenly she realised how much her hands were shaking.

She stared down at herself. Her shorts were streaked with blood and Lily's blood still pooled on the grey concrete of the quay. 'Someone get a bucket and slosh some water over this,' she muttered to Jim, and he breathed a sigh and rubbed a hand over his face.

'I haven't seen anything like that in all my time on Glenmore.'

'No. I suppose it was because the quay was so crowded. She must have been knocked off the edge and into the water.'

'I didn't mean that.' Jim stared into the sky, watching as the helicopter shrank to a tiny dot in the distance. 'I meant Conner MacNeil. He was in the water like an arrow while the rest of us were still working out what had happened. And he just got on with it, didn't he?'

'Yes.' Flora cleared her throat. 'He did.'

'Logan says he was in the army.' Jim pushed his hat back from his forehead and scratched. 'I reckon if I was fighting in some godforsaken country, I'd feel better knowing he was around to pick up the pieces.'

'Yes. He was amazing.'

'He's not cuddly, of course.' Jim held up five fingers to a tourist who tentatively asked whether or not the ferry would be running. 'Five minutes. But in a crisis which do you prefer? Cuddly or competent?'

Flora swallowed, knowing that Jim was right. Conner's ice-cold assessment of the situation had been a huge part of the reason Lily was still alive. He hadn't allowed emotion to cloud his judgement, whereas she ...

Suddenly Flora felt depression wash over her. The whole situation had been awful and she was experienced enough to know that, despite Conner's heroic efforts, Lily wasn't out of danger. 'I'd better go, Jim. I need to clean up.'

'And I need to get this ferry to the mainland.' Jim gave a wry smile and glanced at his watch. 'It's the first time the Glenmore ferry has been late since the service started. Nice job, Flora. Well done.'

But Flora knew that her part in the rescue had been minimal.

It had been Conner. All of it. He'd been the one to dive into the water. He'd pulled Lily out. And when she'd been frozen with panic at the sight of Lily's lifeless form covered in all that blood, he'd worked with ruthless efficiency, showing no emotion but getting the job done. Nothing had distracted him. Not even Lily's mother. He'd had a task to do and he'd done it.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE COULDN'T relax at home so she went back to the beach with her book and when it was too dark to read she just sat, listening to the hiss of the waves as they rushed forward onto the beach and then retreated.

She wanted to know how Lily was faring, but Conner wasn't answering his mobile and she didn't want to bother the hospital staff.

Shrieks of excitement came from the far corner of the beach where a group of teenagers had lit a fire and were having a beach party. Flora watched for a moment, knowing that she was too far away for them to see her. They weren't supposed to light fires but they always did. This was Glenmore in the summer. She knew that sooner or later Nick Hillier, the policeman, would do one of his evening patrols and if they were still there, he'd move them on. Back home to their parents or the properties they rented for a few weeks every summer.

'What's a nice girl like you doing on a beach like this? It's late. You should be home.' The harsh, familiar male voice came from directly behind her and she gave a gasp of shock.

'Conner? Where did you come from? I thought you'd still be on the mainland.'

'Hitched a lift back on a boat.'

'How's Lily?'

'Asking for her dolls.'

Flora felt a rush of relief and smiled. 'That's wonderful.'

'If it's wonderful, why such a long face?' He sat down next to her and there was enough light for her to see the dark stains on his shirt and trousers. It was a vivid reminder of just what he'd achieved.

'It would have been a very different outcome for Lily if you hadn't been there.'

'Someone else would have done it.'

'No. No, they wouldn't. And I was no use to you at all. I'm sorry. I was completely out of my depth. I've never seen anything like that before.' Just the thought of Lily's body, lifeless and covered with blood, made her feel sick.

'You were fine.' He reached behind him for a pebble and threw it carelessly into the darkness. There was a faint splash as it hit the water.

'Conner, I wasn't fine.' She'd been thinking about it all evening and becoming more and more upset. 'You always imagine that you'll know what to do in an emergency, but I didn't. I didn't know! I mean, I suppose I knew the theory but nothing prepares you for seeing a little girl you know well, covered in blood and not breathing. I—I just couldn't concentrate.'

'That happens to the best of us.'

She was willing to bet it had never happened to him. 'I've never even tied a tourniquet before.'

'Join the army,' he suggested, and reached for another stone. 'You get to tie quite a few. Believe me, it's a talent I'd willingly not have to use ever again. You were fine. Stop worrying.'

'There was so much blood.'

'Yeah—it has a habit of spreading itself around when you hit an artery.'

'It didn't worry you.'

'Blood?' He shrugged. 'No, blood doesn't worry me—but emotion ...' He gave a hollow laugh and threw the stone. 'Now that's a different story. When they discharge her from hospital, you're the one that's visiting.'

She curled her toes into the soft sand. 'I remember Jayne from school.'

'Me, too. I think I might have kissed her once.'

'You kissed everyone.' *Except her.* She turned to look at him. Fresh stubble darkened his jaw and in the dim light he looked more dangerous than ever.

He flung another stone and then leaned back on his elbows, watching her through narrowed eyes. 'What the hell are you doing out here at this hour, Flora Harris? You should be tucked up in bed, having exhausted yourself with a fat book.'

Flora drew a circle in the sand with her finger. 'You think I'm so boring, don't you?'

'Trust me, you don't want to know what I think.'

'I already know.' Her heart thumping, she looked at him. 'I'm probably the only girl on Glenmore that you haven't kissed, so that says quite a lot.'

'It says that I still had some decency, despite what the locals thought of me. You weren't exactly the kind of girl to indulge in adolescent groping.' Conner glanced towards the crowd on the beach, barely visible in the darkness. 'You didn't do late-night beach orgies. I suppose you were studying.'

'Yes, I probably was.' Flora thought of the life she'd led. 'Dad hated me being out too late. He always worried about me.'

'You were a good daughter. You never once slipped off the rails, not even for a moment. That's good. Be proud of it.'

'It was easy to stay on the rails because my rails were smooth and consistent. I lost Mum but I still had Dad.' She glanced at him, hesitant about saying something that would upset him. 'It must be very stressful for you, coming back here after so long. You had such a difficult childhood and all the memories are here.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.