

THE EMERGENCY DOCTOR CLAIMS HIS WIFE
Margaret McDonagh



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Margaret McDonagh

**The Emergency Doctor
Claims His Wife**

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There's a sexy new doctor in town!Pulses rise at Strathlocan Hospital when a tall, dark-haired, drop-dead-gorgeous new doctor strides purposefully through the doors, especially Dr Annie Webster's! Nathan Shepherd is her ex – the very man she's never been able to get out of her system. It's been five years, and they both have very different recollections of their break-up.Whatever the tensions between them, neither can deny the smouldering passion they still share. It's clear to Nathan they have unfinished business, and this time he's not leaving without answers...or his woman! Margaret McDonagh welcomes you back to Strathlochan Hospital

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Annie froze as he moved one hand, his palm cupping her cheek, the caress of his fingers sending a trail of heat across her skin and firing every nerve-ending to zinging awareness.

His thumb under her chin tilted her face up until she could no longer avoid his gaze.

‘How is it possible that you are even more beautiful than ever?’

His husky words sent waves of arousal washing through her, tightening her insides and speeding her pulse. Every part of her was on red alert, his touch, his nearness, his musky male scent all combining to rob her of common sense and strip away her resistance.

‘Nathan...’

Her warning stalled, his name escaping on a whisper of breath rather than sounding like the denial she had intended. And when the pad of his thumb grazed across the swell of her lower lip she couldn’t maintain coherent thought. Instead, her traitorous lips parted in eager anticipation when his own brushed across them. She responded instinctively as his mouth captured hers, demanding, needy, plunging her back into the once familiar abyss of heady excitement and unquenchable desire.

Annie had forgotten how incredible Nathan’s seductive, erotic kisses were. No, that was wrong. She hadn’t forgotten...

Praise for Medical™ Romance author Margaret McDonagh:

‘This is such a beautiful, wonderfully told and poignant story that I truly didn’t want it to end. Margaret McDonagh is an exceptional writer of romantic fiction, and with VIRGIN MIDWIFE, PLAYBOY DOCTOR she will tug at your heartstrings, make you cry, and leave you breathless!’

—*The Pink Heart Society Reviews*

‘Romance does not get any better than this! Margaret McDonagh is a writer readers can always count on to deliver a story that’s poignant, emotional and spellbinding, and AN ITALIAN AFFAIR is no exception!’

—*CataRomance.com*

Margaret McDonagh says of herself: ‘I began losing myself in the magical world of books from a very young age, and I always knew that I had to write, pursuing the dream for over twenty years, often with cussed stubbornness in the face of rejection letters! Despite having numerous romance novellas, short stories and serials published, the news that my first “proper book” had been accepted by Harlequin Mills & Boon for their Medical™ Romance line brought indescribable joy! Having a passion for learning makes researching an involving pleasure, and I love developing new characters, getting to know them, setting them challenges to overcome. The hardest part is saying goodbye to them, because they become so real to me. And I always fall in love with my heroes! Writing and reading books, keeping in touch with friends, watching sport and meeting the demands of my four-legged companions keeps me well occupied. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I loved writing it.’

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Dear Reader

I was starting to write Nathan and Annie’s story when I was invited to take part in some special projects to celebrate Mills & Boon’s centenary in 2008.

Nathan was left pacing restlessly in my mind, demanding I get down to the business of reuniting him with Annie, his heroine, who has appeared as a secondary character in several of my previous Medicals™. But Annie doesn’t want a reunion with the man she once loved beyond reason—the man she thinks rejected her five years ago.

Now Nathan and Annie must work together as dedicated A&E doctors. Although Annie tries to keep Nathan at bay, she is forced to confront the past and her role in it, discovering that her reality is distorted. As the truth becomes clear, Annie’s plans backfire on her—and then an event threatens to change her life for ever. Is it too late for them, or can Nathan and Annie have a second chance at love?

It is wonderful to be back in my fictional world of Strathlochan again, catching up with old friends and making new ones. I hope you will enjoy Nathan and Annie's story...and return to visit the folk in Strathlochan again very soon.

Love

Margaret

www.margaretmcdonagh.com

THE EMERGENCY DOCTOR CLAIMS HIS WIFE

BY

MARGARET McDONAGH



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To Christina Jones and Maggie Kingsley —my deadline buddies— thank you for all the support and encouragement

And to Dr Nick Edwards—thanks for your help and for your wonderful book, *In Stitches*, which is funny, moving and thought-provoking

CHAPTER ONE

‘HAVE you seen him yet, Annie?’

Dr Annie Webster glanced round in response to the question and stifled a groan at the hungry anticipation on Olivia Barr’s heavily made-up face. The trauma nurse— famous for her short attention span and her even shorter skirts—was staring out of the ground floor staffroom window which overlooked the car park outside the casualty department at Strathlochan Hospital. Accustomed to her ways, the handful of other staff present paid Olivia no mind.

‘Seen who?’ Annie queried, feigning interest as she poured herself a fortifying cup of coffee which she just had time to savour before her shift in A and E began.

‘The new doctor. He started yesterday. But you were off then, weren’t you?’ Thickly kohled brown eyes glittered as Olivia assessed her for a moment before dismissing her. She teased artfully placed strands of short, bleached blonde hair across her forehead and resumed her watch from the window. ‘Here comes his car now. Oh, yes! Talk about sexy. Wait until you see the body on this man!’

Annie expected the woman to start drooling any moment. As one of the other nurses nearby rolled her eyes behind Olivia’s back, Annie stifled a laugh. Olivia’s reputation as a man eater was well earned, and she went after anyone who took her fancy with frightening zest. Olivia might have her moments as a good trauma nurse, but Annie disapproved of her obvious, often embarrassing crushes on male visitors and colleagues. Fortunately for all concerned these never lasted long—her interest rarely being reciprocated—before she moved on to the next man to catch her eye. Unfortunately these distractions often affected her concentration and, worst of all, her patient care—something Annie could not ignore or forgive.

‘I’ve found out he’s not married but I know precious little else about him...yet.’ Olivia’s scarlet-painted mouth set in an unattractive sulky moue of displeasure. ‘So far he’s been difficult to pin down and has refused to answer my questions.’

Annie didn’t blame the guy. Clearly this new doctor had his wits about him if he had summed Olivia up on day one and managed to maintain his distance. The woman was nothing if not persistent in pursuit of what she wanted.

‘I don’t plan to let this one slip through my fingers. He’s something else.’ Olivia rubbed her hands together, looking for all the world like a predator in pursuit of its prey and preparing an imminent ambush.

Shaking her head, Annie cupped her coffee mug, warming her hands as she crossed the room, curiosity drawing her to peep out of the window to see the new man who was the latest to capture Olivia’s attention. It was a cold, grey January day, and a misty drizzle coated the landscape. Low cloud blocked out the hills and the view of the loch in the valley below, around two banks of which the expanding town of Strathlochan sprawled. Although there had been much less snow than last winter,

frosty nights were following wet days and the subsequent icy conditions kept the A and E department busy, dealing with injuries from both road accidents and fallen pedestrians.

Annie's attention returned to the car outside as a blatantly male figure emerged. An inexplicable shiver of unease tingled down her spine. The man had his back to them as he locked the driver's door, his athletically muscled frame encased in jeans and a well-worn leather jacket. As he walked towards the building with a loose-limbed stride, his warm breath vapourising in the frigid air, the wind teased his dark hair and he turned his head, raising a hand to brush the wayward strands back from his face, giving Annie her first proper glimpse of him.

Shocked, she stepped back from the window, struggling to contain her horrified gasp as recognition slammed into her. The disturbingly familiar body and the patrician profile were unforgettable.

For a breathless moment Annie was sure she had to be hallucinating. A tremor rippled through her. No! No way could Nathan Shepherd be here. Not at her hospital. It was a trick of the light or some unaccountable blip in her imagination. It wasn't true. Nathan was *not* in Strathlochan.

Trying to steady her breathing and ignore the way her heart was thudding wildly in her chest, she turned away, deaf to Olivia's excited appraisal and the chatty greetings as more staff arrived for their shifts.

With shaky fingers Annie set down her still-full mug, her need for caffeine forgotten, and left the staffroom. She walked partway down the corridor and stopped to peer round the corner. The transparent Plexiglas panels in the rubber swing doors leading to the busy A and E department allowed her a better view of the man who now stood at the reception counter.

There was no mistaking that strong, handsome face and sexy body. Nathan *was* in Strathlochan. And, judging by the way he was looking over a set of notes and giving advice to one of the nurses, and the official ID tag hanging around his neck, it was true he was here to work. In her department! Hell and damnation. Every part of her quivering with shock and alarm, Annie leaned against the wall, her breath locked in her throat, her fingers clenched into fists at her sides. What was she going to do?

'Annie, are you all right?' An older nurse, in the process of bringing a patient in a wheelchair back from the radiology department, if the large envelope containing X-ray images was any guide, paused at the swing doors.

'Sorry?' Annie blinked, focusing on the matronly woman's concerned face. 'Um, yes. I'm fine, Gail.' She flinched at the lie, knowing she was anything but fine. 'Thanks.'

Gail smiled and nodded towards the bustling reception area. 'Quite something, isn't he?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Our new doctor. Nathan Shepherd. He's taken over while Trevor Wilkinson is on long-term sick leave. Started yesterday. He's quite reserved but an excellent doctor. And *very* easy on the eyes! He made a real impact with both staff and patients. Especially Olivia...but that doesn't surprise anyone!' Gail grinned conspiratorially before pushing through the doors and wheeling her charge towards the plaster room.

The sound of Gail's footsteps and the noisy hum of the department receded as the doors closed, but it took Annie a moment to move. Oh, God! Battling a fresh wave of shock, she hurried to the ladies' restroom, went into a cubicle and shut the door, needing privacy. In a daze, she sat down. This wasn't a dream from which she was about to wake up. It was a nightmare. And far, far too real.

'No! No, no, no...' Annie bent forward and buried her face in her hands. 'This cannot be happening. How can fate be so cruel?'

Nathan was here and she was going to have to see him, talk to him, work with him. Sitting back, she closed her eyes and pressed the heel of one hand to the pain that now gripped her chest. Nathan Shepherd. The man she had expected to marry. The man she had determined would be the father of her children. The man she had loved more than she had imagined it was possible to love anyone. The man who had rejected her and broken her heart five years ago.

Now he had reappeared unexpectedly in her life, and one brief sight of him gave the lie to any belief that she had forgotten about him—had recovered from him. One look had brought back all the pain, all the love, all the hurt, all the memories. It was as if the years had been stripped away and every feeling, every nerve-ending, was exposed and raw again. She realised with sick despair that there had been nothing but a temporary sticking plaster masking her wounds, lulling her into a false sense of security. In one unguarded moment the covering had been cruelly ripped off to reveal how little she had healed, leaving her open, hurting, vulnerable.

Nathan's arrival in Strathlochan was a disaster of unimaginable proportions. Annie wrapped her arms around her midriff, seeking comfort as wave after wave of memories washed over her in an unstoppable tide. When she heard the outer door open, to admit a couple of laughing women, she clamped one hand over her mouth to stifle the moan of anguish her recollections had produced.

Nathan...

Shaking, she sat in silence, anxious not to be discovered, breathing a sigh of relief as the two women shut off the water taps, finished whatever they were doing and left the cloakroom. The door closed on more of their carefree laughter. Annie doubted she would ever feel so light-hearted again.

The hours of her shift stretched ahead like the worst kind of punishment, and she wished she could hide out in this cubicle until it was time to go home. But she couldn't shirk her responsibilities. Patients needed her. Colleagues depended on her. She wouldn't let them down. And she could not allow Nathan's presence in the department to turn her back into the broken person she had been when she had arrived in Strathlochan after their break-up. A break-up that had followed just a few months after the sudden and unexpected death of her beloved father, when she had already been so vulnerable. She was stronger now—more confident, more mature, successful in her career. It had been a hard slog, but she had done it. Whatever it cost her, Nathan would not take that progress away from her as he had taken away her dreams.

Knowing that someone else could come into the restroom at any moment, Annie forced herself to move. Her heart thudded against her ribs as she left the cubicle and checked her appearance in the mirror. She was determined to maintain a cool façade, despite the nerves that were tangling inside her, making her feel sick and unsteady. But Nathan would never know what seeing him again did to her. Somehow she would survive this shift, and then she would decide what to do. For once she gave thanks for Olivia's excesses. The nurse had unwittingly alerted her to Nathan's presence, giving her some time to prepare. Better this than the shock of coming face to face with him without prior warning.

Glancing at her watch, she groaned. It was time for the shift hand-over. Unable to linger indefinitely, she sucked in a deep, steadying breath, raised her chin in defiance, then opened the door and walked down the short corridor to confront her past.

Despite her good intentions, her steps faltered when she spotted Nathan on the far side of the group of staff gathered around senior consultant Robert Mowbray. Nathan had changed into the customary green scrubs worn by doctors in the department. A stethoscope was looped around his neck over his photo ID badge, drawing attention to his strong shoulders and broad chest. Thankful to hang back, sheltered from Nathan's view by a crush of other colleagues, Annie endeavoured to concentrate as members of the previous shift detailed the patients still being cared for within the department.

Unsettled, she adjusted her position until she was able to observe Nathan without him being aware of her. Her chest tightened and her heart gave an irregular and worrisome flip as she assessed her former lover, taking in his familiar stance and the intentness of his expression as he jotted down some notes. She was unsurprised by his thoroughness. Nathan had always been dedicated to patient care. It was one of the many things she had admired... loved...about him. The pain inside her intensified. Her traitorous gaze drank him in, as if needing to quench an endless and long-endured thirst.

His dark brown hair was as rakish as ever—untamed and in need of a cut. She remembered what it had been like to sink her fingers into that hair, could almost feel again the luxuriant silken thickness

of it against her skin. As she watched, he raised a hand and absently brushed a fallen lock back from his brow. Strong, capable hands. Hands that could heal. Hands that could bring unimaginable pleasure. Another shiver rippled through her as she remembered the caress of those hands on her body, the brush and stroke of those clever fingers over super-sensitive skin.

She remembered, too, how slumberous dark eyes framed by impossibly long lashes had turned almost black with hot passion when he'd made love to her. And, oh, *how* he had made love to her! Intensely, wickedly, gloriously, end-lessly...with generosity, fire, sinful inventiveness and a single-minded dedication to meet her every need and leave her boneless, breathless and deliciously satisfied. Every feminine part of her tightened, a desperate ache of want lodging deep inside her. She closed her eyes, trying to fight back the erotic memories. But it didn't help. They were impinging on her brain for ever, and even five years of separation and determined efforts to forget him had not worked.

Nathan was the same, yet different. He had always been impressive to look at, but the past years had seen his six-foot-two-inch body harden and mature even more, while his face appeared leaner, more angular, but just as devastatingly arresting. He had a presence, a latent sexuality that was impossible to ignore, and he was way too handsome and compelling for her peace of mind. Yet he had also been quiet and reserved, mysterious, unapproachable, allowing few people close enough to glimpse the real man hidden inside. A caring man, dedicated to his job, serious and watchful, with a smile all the more heart-stopping for its recipient because of its rarity. At least that was how she had felt. And at one time those special smiles and all that intensity had been for her and her alone—until the fateful moment it had all blown up in her face and their relationship had been over.

Smarting with fresh pain, Annie wondered how Nathan would feel when he discovered she was here. Thankfully, she had the advantage of knowing what was to come. Would he be as shocked and disturbed as she had been at her first sight of him? Would his body feel the unwanted yet instinctive reaction to her presence as hers did to his? Would he feel anything after five years? He'd rejected her, after all.

She had no more time to ponder on her questions as the consultant chose that moment to dismiss the group and her musings were curtailed. He looked up, saw her, and beckoned for her to join him.

'Annie, could you stay back a moment, please?' Robert Mowbray requested, earning her a fulminating, envious glare from Olivia as the nurse flounced away.

As the other staff dispersed, to tend to their assigned patients and assist the new ones arriving all the time, Annie fought a fresh welling of panic and reluctantly walked forward. If she had been in trouble before, meeting Nathan's dark gaze set off an internal earthquake, way off the Richter scale, rocking her to her foundations. She felt weak, shaken, challenged. Immediately she realised she did not have the upper hand at all. Nathan looked far from surprised to see her. He watched her, silent, unreadable, in control. A barely there, secret smile tipped one corner of his sensual mouth, stirring her blood, tangling her nerves into knots and making her feel in imminent danger of losing her senses. Deliberately she looked away and focused on Robert, desperate for something—anything—to ground her back in reality.

'Nathan, this is Dr Annie Webster—one of our specialist registrars.' As the consultant, short, stocky and approaching retirement age, introduced them, Annie was relieved that he appeared unaware of any past history between Nathan and herself. 'Annie, meet our new Senior House Officer, Nathan Shepherd.'

Surprise held her silent for several moments. Surprise because, whatever else had passed between them on a personal level, she knew that Nathan was an amazing doctor. Not only was he academically brilliant—she had achieved far more in medical school thanks to Nathan's help with her studies than she ever would have alone—but he was also someone who had a natural empathy with patients. They trusted him and, however awkward and aloof he seemed in social settings, he had an innate ability to set those in his care at ease.

Knowing he was a vastly better doctor than she could ever hope to be, he should be way ahead of her in qualifications by now. Especially as he had been so focused, so dedicated. Wasn't that why he had not wanted to commit to her or to their relationship? It didn't make sense that she had recently achieved her specialist registrar status while he was still an SHO. Why? What had happened to hold him back? Not that it was any of her business. She didn't want to know, she assured herself. But still...

A discreet cough from Robert Mowbray brought her mind back to the present uncomfortable situation. 'Annie?'

'Yes.' She battled to maintain her composure. 'I remember Dr Shepherd. We knew of each other some years ago, when we were training.'

Proud of herself for remaining outwardly calm, she smiled politely as she extended her hand for a swift shake, hastily withdrawing it before the full force of the electric current that zapped along her nerve-endings could reduce her to mush. *Damn it.* She had hoped to feel nothing. Far from it. Every atom of her being was alive with sensation.

'Annie.'

Just one word, delivered in that no-nonsense Lancastrian voice, rough-edged and seductive in tone, shook her to the core—again—overloading her with memories. Memories of long hours of loving, of Nathan's constant support and encouragement, of the way he had helped her study, keeping her supplied with her favourite apple and toffee doughnuts from the local bakery, of the private Nathan, relaxed and laughing...and of the searing pain of their furious parting.

Her gaze flicked to Nathan's, then skittered away in alarm. She knew she had to say something, to respond in welcome, but... Behind her back she knotted her hands together, then drew in a lungful of air, trying to centre herself. She could do this. She could pretend his presence here didn't matter, that he didn't affect her as she apparently didn't affect him.

'How pleasant to see you again, Nathan. It's good of you to step in like this and help out on a temporary basis.'

Pleasant? Temporary? They had known each other when they were training?

A muscle pulsed along Nathan's jaw as he fought to keep his emotions in check. Annie could dismiss all they had once shared with those coolly formal words? He hadn't been sure what to expect when they met again, and he had been glad to have yesterday to settle in, acquaint himself with his new colleagues and learn the lie of the land at the hospital before coming face to face with Annie. The department had been busy, the work varied and involving, and if he hadn't been so gut-wrenchingly nervous about seeing Annie some time soon he would have enjoyed himself. As much as he had enjoyed anything without her in his life.

Since deciding to take this post in Strathlochan he had spent a ridiculous amount of time wondering what Annie would say and do, how it would feel to see her again, if she would be welcoming or displeased to see him. Now it was clear she was neither. Apparently she felt nothing at all—and her casual indifference hurt more than anything. She was treating him like some barely remembered inconsequential acquaintance, rather than the lover she had professed to adore beyond reason.

Their row that last dreadful day, and the way she had left him, had broken his heart, destroyed the hopes and dreams he had dared to believe in since meeting her. Now he looked at her, stunned at the dismissive uninterest in those amazing blue eyes. He might not have expected her to greet him with open arms—had even anticipated a few moments of characteristic temper and stubbornness—but he hadn't been prepared for her cool unconcern.

The pain in his gut intensified. He had thought she might have grown up in five years, hoped she would have mellowed, matured, reasoned things out...understood that he hadn't been the bad guy. She had been the one to end it, after all—to throw away everything they had on a whim, indulging in a customary tantrum because she hadn't got her own way. But clearly Annie had not changed. Old hurts and the smart of injustice fired anew within him.

Practised at hiding his inner feelings, he took a few moments to study her. It was hardly possible, but she looked even more beautiful than ever—as if she had grown into herself during the intervening years. Above average height, her slender figure had a feminine lushness, firing his erotic fantasies, and the shapeless green scrubs hid a body he knew as intimately as his own. A body that was all woman, with long, toned limbs and mouthwatering curves. He knew every hollow, every freckle, every dip and rise, knew the silky-soft feel of her skin, the honey-sweet taste of her, knew her sensuous jasmine fragrance. Knew, too, just where to touch, kiss, lick and suck to keep her on the brink, before shooting her into the stratosphere with pleasure. And he knew the sounds she made achieving the peak of ecstasy.

Her skin was creamy and translucent, her eyes a rich, dark blue, and her ebony hair was as glossy but shorter than it had been, now brushing her shoulders in tousled waves. She didn't look a day older, but there was a new poise and confidence about her, a new drive and ambition. He'd heard how respected she was in the department, what a good doctor she had become. He was proud of her and her achievements, the way she had fast attained her specialist registrar status, but he also knew a moment of surprise that she now appeared the single-minded career woman. Annie had always been caring and warm, dedicated to her patients, but she had been carefree and impish too—quirky, with a zest for living, desperate to combine being a doctor with having fun...and a family of her own.

How much of that side of her remained? he wondered now, watching her unsmiling face, her shuttered expression, trying to banish the rush of mixed emotions that seeing her again had evoked in him. Not because he hadn't expected it—she was why he was here, after all—but because of her response to him. Or her lack of one. Annie seemed not to care a damn about his sudden presence in Strathlochan.

'I hope you enjoy your stay with us, Nathan,' she murmured, her voice cool, more refined, yet still carrying a recognisable thread of her Yorkshire upbringing.

Scared his plans were going to hell in a handcart, he somehow managed a polite nod and kept his own voice composed. 'Thank you.' He needed to regroup, to reevaluate his mission here.

'The fact that you are old friends makes my decision an easy one.' Robert Mowbray's words drew Nathan's attention, and he turned to face the older man. 'Annie, I want you to be Nathan's support while he settles in here,' the consultant continued, apparently unaware of the tension crackling around them. 'I'll make sure your shifts are scheduled together for the time being.'

Nathan heard Annie's indrawn hiss of breath, and when he glanced at her he saw the momentary spark of horrified panic in her eyes. Maybe she wasn't as calm and unaffected as she wanted him to think. Interesting.

'Nathan's reputation as a trauma doctor precedes him, and I worked alongside him yesterday so I know his skills first-hand. He won't need babysitting, Annie, but the plan is for him to make up to specialist registrar grade while he's here. We'll do all we can to ensure that happens. Were it not for his time outside a hospital environment he would be well ahead of you on the career ladder.'

Nathan frowned. He would sooner Robert Mowbray kept any additional details to himself. Another glance at Annie revealed a spark of curiosity flickering in her eyes—one he had not expected to see. In all their time together they had been as physically intimate as it was possible to be, but she had never shown any deeper interest in his background, for which he had been relieved and thankful. The fact that Annie had never asked questions, that she'd been so open and had lived only for the moment, had been amongst the many things that had drawn him to her in the first place. She'd been different from anyone he had ever known, a refreshing change after his dour home-life laden with problems, disappointments and the heavy weight of unwanted responsibility.

He was jolted from his thoughts as a nurse bustled up to them. Matronly, with greying hair and smiling hazel eyes, Nathan remembered her name was Gail.

'Excuse me interrupting, but we have two ambulances on the way in,' she informed them. 'There was a collision in town. It's believed an elderly woman had a heart attack at the wheel. Her car mounted

the pavement and hit a gentleman shopper. He is reported to have multiple leg fractures. Both were said to be serious but stable at the scene.'

Robert snapped to attention. 'Right. Thank you, Gail. I'll take the woman with heart problems. Annie, you and Nathan attend to the man with fractures. Gail, ask the on-call radiographer to come down, please. And we'll need people from both Cardiology and Orthopaedics.'

As Gail hurried off to carry out her duties, Robert went into a resus bay to organise his team. Nathan followed Annie into another. Pulling on a lead apron with "Team Leader" written on the back, she briefed the staff who had gathered, each of whom were donning their own lead aprons as well as gloves and eye protection—standard safety devices used in the department.

'Nathan will be designated Doctor 1 and Gus Doctor 2,' she clarified, checking to see that the nurses were set and that the room was prepared for the patient's arrival. 'Holly will work with Nathan, Gail with Gus, and Carolyn will act as scribe and complete the Trauma Sheet. The anaesthetist is here, and a radiographer is on the way. Everyone ready?'

A chorus of agreement greeted her question as each member of staff set about their appointed tasks. Noting that junior doctor Gus Buchanan was seeing to the blood bottles and forms, Gail was preparing warm fluids, and Holly was phoning the lab and writing up details on the white board on the wall, Nathan headed out with Annie towards the outer doors of the casualty department, where they joined the wait for the ambulances with Robert and his head nurse.

The familiar charge of adrenalin hit him. He remained painfully aware of Annie's presence, and her antipathy, but he had to try and force thoughts of her out of his mind for the moment. It wasn't easy, however. She had haunted his every waking moment and his every dream at night for five long years—ever since the moment she had shattered his heart and his reason for being.

The silence, the loneliness, the darkness of his time without her had cut deep. He had loved her...truly, deeply, completely. She had brought fun and sunshine into his otherwise grey, joyless life. A life that had returned to being colourless and dull without her effervescent presence and the warmth of her love. The light had gone when she had left him and had never returned. Now with the other responsibilities that had burdened his life for so long in some kind of order, he had needed to find Annie again, to bring closure to a part of his life that felt unfinished.

Part of him had hoped he would see Annie and feel nothing—that the love would have gone and he would be set free, released from the prison he'd been in for five years. A prison in which he had been in solitary confinement and to which only Annie held the key to release him. Then perhaps he could put the past behind and move on with his life without Annie haunting him. But it wasn't to be. The second he had seen her again he had known with a mix of excitement and despair that the love and desire was still there and the craving had not gone away. Being near her again was overwhelming his senses. Annie still held his emotions in a stranglehold.

It would be far better for him if he did feel nothing. Yet one look and he knew he still cared for her with everything in him. Despite what she had done, despite the hurt she had caused him running away as she had, he still wanted her, needed her, loved her. Which made his life horribly complicated and uncertain. Given her reception of him, the chance that they could reconcile the past, let alone re-establish any kind of relationship, was seeming less and less likely. Once again he was opening himself up to inevitable heartbreak and rejection, and he wasn't sure he could survive that a second time.

The sound of sirens drew him from his troubled thoughts, and he watched the flashing blue lights of the two ambulances come closer as they moved up the hill through the lingering mist and turned in at the hospital entrance. As the first backed into the bay, Robert moved forward to hurry the elderly woman through to Resus.

When the back doors of the second ambulance opened moments later, Nathan and Annie helped the paramedics manoeuvre the stretcher out, ready to speed the badly injured patient inside. One of the paramedics was keeping pressure on an open wound in the man's right thigh, temporarily stemming what Nathan could see was a bad bleed.

As Annie led the way to Resus, she looked at him, and he recognised in her the same charge of adrenalin and call to duty that sang in his own veins. Then her dark blue eyes narrowed briefly, and her voice was cool and professional.

‘Right, Nathan, let’s see how good a doctor you still are.’

‘Be careful issuing challenges, Annie,’ he murmured, keeping his voice low, so no one else could hear, seeing the surprise and alarm on her face as she hesitated. ‘In the days and weeks ahead I plan to show you what you walked away from and what you are missing out on. And I’m not just talking about my medical skills.’

Aware he had shaken her, he left Annie to mull over his words. Snapping back into professional mode as the paramedics wheeled the stretcher inside the designated resus bay, and the patient was transferred to the trolley bed, his focus was now solely on the man who needed the team’s attention and medical know-how.

Dealing with Annie—and confronting their past—would have to wait a little longer.

CHAPTER TWO

ANNIE was shaking as she followed Nathan inside Resus Bay Two. If only she hadn’t been foolish enough to issue that meaningless challenge. Now she fretted over his words, worried about what he had meant. Surely he didn’t think there could be anything left between them? Anxiety tightened inside her, and she cursed herself for allowing him to fluster her, derail her. The last thing she needed was to have to work closely with Nathan in the days ahead.

‘This is Len Gordon. Age fifty-nine. Multiple lower limb fractures, plus femoral break and bleed. Query possible damage to his pelvis. He’s in shock and his blood pressure is low.’

Annie forced herself to set her private concerns aside, and listened as the paramedics finished their report on the patient’s condition, running through GCS score, level of consciousness at the scene and since, BP, respiration, pulse rate and oxygen saturation, plus details of the fluids and drugs already given. Her job as Team Leader was to coordinate rather than be hands-on, so she stood back and watched as the trauma team swung smoothly into action, each focusing on their individual role yet combining as one unit. Once the initial examination had been made, she would be called upon to make decisions about what to do next.

The department’s resus teams were well prepared, and the best Annie had worked with. While the anaesthetic nurse was calming and reassuring the patient, getting what details she could from the distressed, confused man and keeping him informed about what was going on, the anaesthetist concentrated on securing Len’s airway, breathing and circulation.

Annie checked the ECG and vital function monitors one of the nurses was attaching to the patient. She listened carefully as Len’s clothes were cut off and Nathan carried out his primary survey, with each member of the team calling out necessary information. The designated scribe recorded everything on the Trauma Sheet, including relevant timings, plus drugs, fluids and treatments given.

‘Airway clear, bilateral air entry...both lungs sound fine. Pupils normal and reactive. No sign of any upper body, neck or spinal injuries.’

Annie acknowledged the information, gathering updates on Len’s blood pressure, pulse, sats and respiration rate. Gus, aided by Gail, had gained additional IV access, and was administering the fluids Annie had requested to counteract Len’s shock and blood loss. Gus had also drawn up blood for cross-matching and for the tests she asked for, including full blood count, urea and electrolyte concentrations, as well as blood gases. A nurse runner was ready to go to the lab for those tests not able to be done in Resus, to request the cross-matching and order units of blood.

‘Gus, can you see to a urinary catheter next?’ Annie asked.

The young doctor nodded, accepting the items he needed from the trolley Gail had made ready before the patient’s arrival. ‘I’m on it now.’

‘Thanks.’

‘We’re going to need that orthopod down here.’

The sound of Nathan's voice caused a ripple of awareness to run through her, but Annie fought against her reaction to him. 'What have you got?' she asked, moving closer as he delivered his verdict on the patient's lower limb injuries.

'Open tib and fib fractures of both lower legs, dislocation of the right patella, and the right femur is broken...probably in two places. X-rays will confirm the extent of the damage. We also need an idea of any pelvic injury before he can go up to surgery, but first I need to stem the femoral bleed at the site of this deep laceration,' Nathan informed her, concentrating on his task to halt the haemorrhage in the man's right thigh.

Annie couldn't help but admire Nathan's skill and calm composure. He was just as special a doctor as she remembered, always unflappable, whatever the extent and urgency of the crisis. She trusted him completely in terms of his clinical judgement, technique and treatment of patients. It was his treatment of her heart that had been so lacking. Thrusting that painful thought aside, she ensured that the replacement fluids were running correctly, then checked the stats and the time elapsed since the patient had been under their care.

'How's the bleed?'

'Under control now. I just need to get this tied off. Thanks, Holly,' Nathan added, as the competent young staff nurse assisted him. 'Len's going to need a lot of work in Theatre.' He glanced up, and her breath caught for a second as she met his gaze. 'I'd recommend a femoral nerve block.'

'Yes, I agree. Then we can get his legs splinted before X-ray.'

Nathan accepted the syringe Holly handed him, checked the dosage, then deftly inserted the needle, injecting lidocaine in a fan pattern in the thigh. 'Any idea how long the radiographer will be, Annie?'

'I'm here,' a voice announced, and Francesca Scott strode into the resus bay, pulling on her protective lead apron.

Tall and athletic, a riot of red corkscrew curls somehow constrained in the thick plait that fell to her waist, Francesca was unfairly dubbed the Ice Maiden by some of the hospital staff. Annie had always got on well with the other woman, however, and admired her friend's skill and kindness to her patients.

Despite her more senior role, Annie remained silent and allowed Nathan to outline the extent of Len's injuries. Once the femoral block had done its job, and splints had been fitted, Francesca went to work using the overhead emergency X-ray equipment now in use in the A and E department. As well as the standard precautionary lateral cervical spine and frontal chest images, she took specific pictures of Len's pelvis and legs.

'Can you scan his abdomen and pelvic region, too?' Annie asked. 'We're querying any internal blood loss.'

Using the portable ultrasound, Francesca complied with the request, and within minutes the X-ray and scan images came up on the diagnostic screen.

'The leg fractures are clear and extensive. But there's no sign of pelvic fracture or internal bleeding, and no free fluids in the abdominal cavity. I think it's just bruising,' Francesca suggested, moving aside so that Annie and Nathan could assess the various images for themselves.

Annie frowned. The X-rays were pretty gruesome. One fibula had jagged splits and fragments in several places, while the other, and both tibias, had multiple but thankfully cleaner breaks. As Nathan had predicted, the right femur had snapped in two places—mid-shaft and just above the knee that had dislocated, its patella misplaced high and to one side, the joint swollen and distorted.

Annie was acutely aware of Nathan close to her. For an unguarded moment she found herself leaning in to inhale his unique and subtle musky aroma, masculine, sensuous and once so familiar. Horrified at her weakness, she straightened and struggled to concentrate on her job. She studiously watched the monitor readings, calling for more blood units as Len was slow to respond to the fluids he'd been given.

Thankfully, the orthopaedic registrar arrived then, tutting over the X-rays. 'We'll operate straight away,' he said, before setting off with copies of the notes and images to brief his department's senior consultant.

'OK,' Annie called, organising her team for their final duties. 'Let's get ready to transfer Len up to surgery. Thanks, Francesca. Good job, everyone.'

A further flurry of activity ensued before Len, stable but serious, was on his way to the theatre team, who would take over his care and do all they could to repair the damage to his legs.

Having taken off her protective clothing, Annie went with Holly to see the family, to explain what had happened and what was going to be done during surgery. She left Holly to escort the anxious relatives upstairs to the waiting area in the surgical suite, while she returned to Resus, noting that the first bay was still occupied. Robert and his team were still battling to save the elderly woman whose heart problems had led to the accident.

Her own team had already dispersed, to deal with less serious casualties in the main department, while a nurse remained to ensure Resus Bay Two was prepared for the next emergency. Annie paused a moment, unsettled by her feelings as she looked at Nathan. He was sitting on a stool, finishing his notes, but he smiled when he saw her, causing an uncomfortable knot to form in her chest.

'It's only my second day here, but already I am very impressed by the whole department.'

'We're a close-knit unit,' she agreed, pleased for her colleagues at Nathan's praise.

She scanned the notes he handed her and signed off on them, clutching the folder to her like a shield as she took a step backwards, aware that they were now alone.

'It was like old times working with you, Annie. You've developed into one hell of a doctor.' The husky edge to his voice sent a tingle down her spine. 'And we haven't lost that natural understanding.'

She had always enjoyed being teamed with Nathan in the past. He was naturally talented, never losing his cool in any situation, and always maintaining his compassion for the patient and his generosity towards the staff working with him. Despite her painful awareness of him, for a while there, engrossed in meeting Len's needs, it was as if the years apart had never happened. Working in tandem, displaying the kind of instinctive understanding that only grew with trust and time, she and Nathan had been attuned to each other's thoughts and actions. And that had been scary. She couldn't allow Nathan to ease back into her life as if nothing had happened. It had hurt too much last time. Bare minutes after seeing him again and she was already vulnerable. She had to do whatever was necessary to protect herself, because no way could she risk her heart taking a second beating.

In consequence, she kept her voice controlled when she replied. 'All that was a long time ago. I'm surprised you're not a hotshot consultant by now, Nathan. I thought that was all you wanted,' she added, unable to keep the bitter edge from her voice, but regretting her challenge as the friendliness faded from Nathan's expression, his eyes turning hard and shuttered.

'You had no idea what I wanted, Annie. You never shared my hopes and dreams and fears because you weren't interested in anything but what *you* wanted.'

'That's not fair.'

'Really?' One eyebrow lifted sardonically. 'What do you know about me? What do you know about my life, my goals, my feelings?'

Alarmed, wishing she had never begun this awful conversation, Annie focused on her own years of hurt. 'So why did you put up with me then, if I was so selfish?'

'Because I loved you. Apparently that wasn't good enough. It had to be your way or no way.'

She stared at him, speechless with shock, both at the pain-laden softness of his words and the fact that he so clearly believed what he'd said. But he *hadn't* loved her, an inner voice cried in agonised remembrance. Had he? Tears stung her eyes. If it *was* true, why had he rejected her? A wave of indignation swelled within her, only to vie with a disconcerting flicker of doubt. Enough doubt that she swallowed the rush of argumentative words that fought for freedom... words she would once have been unable to contain. She was older now. She had a responsible position. She wasn't going to lower

herself by reacting childishly. Squaring her shoulders, she took a steadying breath and refused to respond further, all too worried that Nathan's accusations would play on her mind in the days ahead.

'We're clearly not going to agree, and rehashing things serves no purpose,' she stated, proud of the coolness she'd managed to inject into her voice, betraying no sign of the way she was shaking inside. 'I suggest we get back to work. We have other patients to see.'

Eager to put distance between herself and Nathan, she left Resus and returned Len's case folder to its proper place, so the Trauma Sheet could be photocopied for the in-house notes. She was grateful that the department was so busy, hoping she could lose herself in work and ignore her confused thoughts about Nathan's troubling reappearance in her life...not to mention his very different recollection about their time together and their distressing parting.

In truth, she had been on edge since Frazer and Callie's wedding. A doctor and paramedic respectively, on the local air ambulance crew, her friends had married at Strathlochan Castle on Christmas Eve, with Annie as maid of honour. The day had ended with Callie's bridal bouquet flying through the air and landing squarely in Annie's reluctant arms. A shiver ran through her as she relived the moment. At the time she had felt uneasy, as if it was a bad omen instead of the good luck tradition proclaimed. Now, three weeks later, Nathan had shown up, confirming her premonition.

Whilst Annie had been thrilled at her friends' happiness, their wedding had brought back memories, making her wonder what her own life would have been like had things turned out differently. The reality was that she was now unlikely ever to marry and have the family she had always longed for. Nathan had stolen her dreams when he'd broken her heart, and she would never trust another man again.

Maybe things had happened for the best. She'd certainly progressed much further in her career than she had expected, because she had used hard work as an escape, a comfort, a protection against the pain. The kind of debilitating pain she never wanted to experience again. Even now it hurt too much to think of what could have been—what *should* have been, had Nathan loved her as much as she had loved him. As much as he now claimed to have done. She had to remember old hurts and be wise to the lessons of the past, lest she fall for Nathan's charm all over again.

Conscious of him watching her, she made her way to Reception, collected information on the next patient waiting to be seen and called her through from the crowded waiting area. Focusing on the young child—who had somehow managed to wedge a couple of polystyrene packing chips up her nose, where they were well and truly stuck—Annie determined to set the problem of Nathan from her mind. At least for the time being. Unfortunately, though, however much she might wish it, she didn't think he was going to go away any time soon.

Consumed with frustration, Nathan watched Annie draw a curtain around the cubicle into which she had shown a worried mother with a tearful young daughter.

Every time he was close to Annie his heart started hammering in his chest, his breath felt trapped in his lungs, and his palms dampened. Let alone what happened further south, his body tightening and hardening in an instinctive reaction to her presence. She still aroused in him equal parts physical, gut-tingling desire and crippling emotional uncertainty, just as in the past.

Five years on they still had a connection, and worked well together on a professional basis, but it was clear he was going to have a difficult time making any headway with Annie personally. It had been a mistake to be drawn into a disagreement so soon. He shouldn't have let her rile him. But her stubbornness and her inability to see another point of view drove him to distraction.

Sucking in a breath, he struggled for calm. There was so much he and Annie needed to talk about, to resolve. That they were far apart in their perception of the events of the past was obvious, and it was not going to be easy to get her to listen. However, he had to try. If he ever hoped to move on, with or without her, he needed to settle things in his head...and his heart...once and for all. But none of that was going to happen immediately. Until he could get Annie alone, away from the hospital, he needed to focus on the job and devote his full attention to the patients who needed him.

The next few hours sped by, as he worked through the assorted cases assigned to him. A series of common and familiar complaints, such as infections, angina, sprains, fractures, cuts and an asthma attack, were interspersed with two further calls on him to join the resus team. The first was a serious road accident, involving several cars on the motorway, which brought the A and E department almost to breaking point. The second serious incident involved a twenty-year-old man who had suffered a worrying head injury in a fall from some scaffolding. As soon as he was stable enough, he had been transferred by air ambulance to the neurological unit in Glasgow.

Nathan was well aware that Annie was avoiding him. He doubted she would have voluntarily worked with him at all had it not been for the resus emergencies and Robert Mowbray's directive that she help him settle in. He didn't need a minder, but anything that placed him around Annie was good. Her reaction to the consultant's decision and her sharp words after they had treated Len Gordon had been the only hints of weakness, the only signs that his presence here disturbed her in any way and she was not as indifferent as she would have him believe.

It was early afternoon by the time he had a chance for a break to grab a quick lunch. His stomach rumbled. Breakfast seemed a lifetime ago, and then he'd only managed a banana and a glass of fruit smoothie because he'd been so churned up about seeing Annie again. Annie was nowhere in sight in the department, or in the staffroom, so he decided to try the canteen in the hope of catching up with her there. Seeing Olivia Barr waiting by the lifts, Nathan pushed open a door marked 'staff only' and slipped into the seldom-used rear stairway, determined to avoid the predatory nurse and her unwelcome attentions.

Aside from the fact that Olivia hadn't let an opportunity go by in the last two days to come on to him, he had doubts about her as a nurse. During his short time in the department he had seen that although she had good clinical skills—when she focused on her tasks—she wasn't a team player. And the way she spoke to and interacted with some patients left a great deal to be desired. On a personal level he had rejected several advances, making it clear that he was not interested and that if she persisted he would have no choice but to be blunt. Olivia represented everything he found unattractive in a woman, from her vampish flirting and sly insincerity to her falsely pouting lips, heavy makeup and silicone-enhanced breasts. Annie, by contrast, was the embodiment of everything that was natural and feminine, with no artificiality about her.

Annie...

As if he had conjured her up from his thoughts, he had just reached the landing of the floor that housed the canteen when the door opened, forcing him to step back, and Annie emerged into the otherwise deserted stairway. He noted her startled expression when she saw him, her nervousness apparent as the door closed behind her and she realised they were alone. She glanced around, clearly searching for some avenue of escape, but he wasn't about to allow it. Who knew when he'd have another chance to catch her attention?

As she backed up against the door, he slowly closed the distance between them. 'You've been avoiding me, Annie.'

Her chin lifted in defiance at his challenge, but she wouldn't meet his gaze. 'I've been doing my job—not thinking about you at all.'

'Right.' Stepping closer, he flattened both his hands on the door, one either side of her head. 'So there's nothing to stop you spending some time with me now?'

'I have to get back to the department. You know how crazy it is today,' she excused, the unsteady note in her voice betraying her unease.

'Meet with me later, then.'

'I can't.' He saw the irregular beat of her pulse at the hollow of her throat, noted the bloom of colour warm her ivory skin. 'There's no point in this, Nathan.'

He couldn't resist leaning closer, so he could savour her tantalising jasmine scent. 'There's every point,' he argued, everything in him craving a taste of her, something he had been denied and had yearned for for five long years.

'Nathan...'

'We need to talk, Annie,' he insisted, not prepared to be fobbed off this time.

Her own palms flattened on his chest and he revelled in the contact, even though it was meant to hold him at bay. 'No!'

'Yes.' He refused to allow her to ignore reality. 'We have to face the past...if only to move on.'

'I've already moved on, Nathan,' she insisted, but to him her words lacked conviction.

'Have you? Really?' She might *think* she believed that, but he didn't—no matter what she said to the contrary. 'All we had together must have meant little to you if you could throw it away with such cavalier disregard.' And care so little for its loss, he added silently. He leaned in closer, seeing anxiety darken her blue eyes, feeling the increasing pressure of her hands on his chest as she tried to keep distance between them. 'I haven't moved on, Annie. I don't think you have any idea what you leaving like that did to me, or what kind of hell I've been in for five years. Maybe you tell yourself you don't even care. You've invented your own version of reality to help justify to yourself the fact that you tossed us aside. But your perception of events is very different from mine. Well, reality bites, sweetheart, and the time has come for us to settle this.'

As if Nathan's words were not enough to panic her, Annie froze as he moved one hand. His palm cupped her cheek, the caress of his fingers sending a trail of heat across her skin and firing every nerve-ending to zinging awareness. His thumb under her chin tilted her face up until she could no longer avoid his gaze. Robbed of speech by the intense expression in his dark eyes, she couldn't form a single protest. Nor could she look away. He stared down at her, brooding and mysterious, his closeness making her pulse race and preventing her dragging enough air into parched lungs.

'How is it possible that you are even more beautiful than ever?'

His husky words sent waves of arousal washing through her, tightening her insides and speeding her pulse. Terrified of her reaction to him, she fruitlessly endeavoured to hold him off, to create some more space to breathe, to think. Every part of her was on red alert—his touch, his nearness, his musky male scent all combining to rob her of common sense and strip away her resistance.

'Nathan...'

Her warning stalled, his name escaping on a whisper of breath rather than sounding like the denial she had intended. And when the pad of his thumb grazed across the swell of her lower lip she couldn't maintain coherent thought. As he closed the remaining centimetres between them, his fingers sliding back to fist in her hair and hold her still, she forgot every reason why they shouldn't do this. Instead, her traitorous lips were already parted in eager anticipation when his own brushed across them. She responded instinctively as his mouth captured hers, demanding, needy, plunging her back into the once familiar abyss of heady excitement and unquenchable desire.

Annie had forgotten how incredible Nathan's seductive, erotic kisses were. No, that was wrong. She hadn't forgotten...she had blanked the memories out, because they caused her so much pain and hopeless longing. But her body remembered his taste, the perfection of his touch, the earth-shattering pleasure only he brought her. For an endless moment she ignored everything but the here and now. Unable to help herself, she moved in closer still, craving tighter contact, feeling the delicious jolt as her breasts pressed against the wall of his chest, stimulating the hardened peaks of her nipples. A moan escaped as Nathan's free hand cupped her rear and drew her against him. His hips rocked into her, making her all too conscious of the hard length of his arousal, and an answering hollow knot tightened deep inside her in response. She rubbed herself over him, desperate to assuage the empty ache of need.

The hungry kiss deepened, turning almost feral in its urgent intensity. Their raging passion was immediately rekindled, flaring hotter than ever. Annie met and matched Nathan's every move,

every stroke, every suck... her teeth nipping, her tongue duelling, twining and teasing with his. She wallowed in the sense of being reborn, of coming home, her body primed, begging for the fulfilment only he could give her.

Then, somewhere below them, the sound of a door closing reverberated in the stillness. Footsteps echoed on the concrete stairs, snapping Annie back to the reality of where she was, what she was doing and *who* she was doing it with. With a cry of distress she wrenched away, fighting against Nathan's hold.

'Stop!' she gasped.

She couldn't do this. Couldn't allow Nathan's potent sex appeal to sweep away all the pain, anger and despair of the last five years as if nothing had happened. It was over. It *was*! As Nathan reluctantly released her she stepped away, her legs feeling too weak and rubbery to hold her up. She'd chosen to take the back stairs in an attempt to avoid him, yet had only succeeded in trapping herself alone with him in a secluded spot for long enough to forget every powerful reason she must keep him at a distance.

'There's unfinished business between us, Annie. Somehow, somewhere, we are going to deal with it,' he warned her.

His intent was clear, and it scared her, because she couldn't handle seeing him or raking up the past, knowing she was still vulnerable to him.

'You didn't want—'

'You have no idea what I wanted...you never did,' he interrupted heatedly, dragging a hand through his wayward hair. 'And you certainly didn't stay around long enough that last day to listen to my point of view. Then you refused to see or speak to me. I loved you, but you ripped out my heart and stomped all over it, turning your back on everything we were to each other, tossing it away as if it was nothing.'

Tears filled her eyes and she held up a hand, backing away. 'You're wrong!'

'No, I'm not.' His tone was uncompromising and he refused to allow her retreat, despite the footsteps coming closer up the stairs. 'I deserve my say—you owe me that much at least.'

'I have to go,' she insisted, shaking her head, denying his words, anxiety tying her nerves into knots.

'I'm not letting you run this time, Annie.'

But that was just what she did. Ran from him. Shaking, scared and confused, she pushed past him and rushed down the stairs as fast as her wobbly legs could carry her, deaf to the greeting of the admin assistant she passed on the flight below. The woman's presence had brought a much-needed return of sanity, preventing her from something even more reckless than the explosive kiss. She had to get away from Nathan—had to have some time alone to regroup and restore her shattered equilibrium.

With one touch, one kiss, the barriers she had thought impenetrable had been rent asunder. Despite everything that had happened, all the pain he had caused her, Nathan still brought her to her knees and sent her hormones crazy with insatiable desire. She had to do something to prevent herself from falling for him and being hurt all over again.

Slipping unnoticed through a side fire exit, Annie hurried outside the hospital building, moving around the corner out of sight of anyone coming and going from the car park, the A and E department, or the separate building nearby that housed the maternity unit.

Oblivious to the cold, she leaned against the wall, her whole body trembling. As she drew in several deep breaths in an effort to compose herself the fingers of one hand strayed to her mouth. Her lips, puffy and sensitised from the wildness of the kiss, still tingled in reaction, and she could still savour Nathan's taste on her tongue. Closing her eyes, she groaned, reliving the last few minutes in Technicolor detail.

Dear heaven, what had she done?

And what on earth was she going to do now?

All she could think about was the urgent need to protect herself against Nathan's potent effect on her. He had stormed back into her life and clearly planned to turn it upside down, demanding that they confront their painful past. Why now? What did he hope to achieve? And why couldn't she put his accusations that *she* had broken *his* heart out of her mind? There had been no denying the hurt in his eyes. And his suggestion that she had never given him the chance to explain his point of view nagged at her. She squared her shoulders, struggling to maintain her own sense of being wronged. What was there to explain? Nathan hadn't wanted her. He'd made that obvious when he'd rejected her. How could he now try to turn it around and imply *she* was at fault?

But he had—and he was here for reasons of his own, refusing to let it go.

Somehow she had to erect a façade that even Nathan couldn't penetrate. It was the only way she could survive. There certainly couldn't be a repeat of what had just happened on the stairs. Her instant surrender to his kiss had proved just how vulnerable she was to him.

But what could she do?

A sudden plan came to mind.

Desperate, she pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket, turned it on and sent an SOS message to the one person she could trust to save her from herself and stop her from making a monumental mistake.

CHAPTER THREE

'IS THE damage very bad, Doctor?'

Nathan looked up from his examination of the burns on the elderly woman's hand, hoping to ease the pain and anxiety reflected in her cloudy blue eyes. 'You did the right thing getting your hand under cold water straight away, Mrs Mooney, and wrapping it in clingfilm before coming to the hospital gave further protection against infection. Not doing so could have made the resulting injuries worse.'

'Lucky I took note of all those television programmes,' she offered with a brave smile.

'You did well. Aside from the blisters, there are a couple of partial thickness burns, but nothing that appears to be deeper,' he reassured her, gently turning the injured hand over again and reassessing the situation, carefully checking between the fingers. 'We'll give you some pain relief, then we'll clean things up and remove any dead skin, drain the blisters, and put on some cream before dressing the hand. Do you have someone at home with you?' he asked, concerned that the woman wouldn't manage alone.

'Yes, I live with my daughter and her children.'

'Then you'll be able to go home when we're done.' He gave her non-injured hand a squeeze. 'But you'll need to come back to the outpatient clinic tomorrow, to have the dressing changed and the hand reassessed. After that your GP surgery will be able to manage your aftercare. Is your tetanus cover up to date?'

Mrs Mooney's lined face creased further as she frowned. 'Goodness, I can't remember when I last had a vaccination.'

'Don't worry. We'll give you another injection to be sure. Could you take care of that please, Holly?' he requested, glancing up at the quietly efficient young staff nurse.

'Of course, Dr Shepherd. No problem.'

The pretty blonde manoeuvred a trolley next to him, on which she had laid out all the items he required to treat and dress Mrs Mooney's hand. 'Thanks.'

'Your grandchildren are quite a handful, are they, Mrs Mooney?'

Nathan heard Holly's question, grateful to her for keeping the worried patient's mind occupied as he checked that the pain relief had done its job so he could begin to clean and dress her wounds. Concentrating on his task, he listened with half an ear as Mrs Mooney responded to Holly's calm friendliness.

‘Yes, indeed, Nurse.’ She gave a raspy chuckle. ‘You need eyes in the back of your head with those boys. That’s how this happened. I only turned away for a moment to pick up the youngest, who had fallen on the floor. When I looked round his brother had climbed onto a kitchen chair and was pulling the kettle towards him.’

Mrs Mooney’s hand trembled at the memory, and Nathan paused until she settled again before inserting the needle to aspirate the first of the blisters, drawing fluid into the syringe.

‘Anyway,’ she continued, ‘I set the baby down, rushed to the counter and managed to pull Johnny aside before he hurt himself. Unfortunately my other arm caught the kettle, spilling the boiling water on my hand.’

‘Ouch.’ Holly tutted in sympathy.

‘I’m just glad the children weren’t burned. I didn’t even think what I was doing. I just acted on instinct and couldn’t help myself. Do you know what I mean, Doctor?’

As he finished cleaning, aspirating and debriding the damaged areas of the hand, Nathan nodded. ‘I do, Mrs Mooney.’

Hadn’t he done the very same thing himself a few hours ago? Despite knowing the timing was wrong, he’d kissed Annie with all the desperation and urgency clamouring within him. He’d been unable to stop, even though he’d known it was too soon to push her to face what remained between them. It had been foolish, but inevitable. And he’d been burned in a very different kind of way, succeeding only in spooking Annie, causing her to strengthen the barriers she had erected against him.

But the need and longing to touch her and taste her had tormented him for five years. When presented with the opportunity, after being deprived of her for so long, the temptation had been too great for him to resist. Now he had set his cause back even further, making the goal he had come here to achieve harder than ever.

Smothering a sigh, he glanced up at the clock on the cubicle wall. His shift had officially ended half an hour ago, but he’d never been one to clock off to time. His presence was determined by his patients’ needs. A few doctors and nurses might walk off and hand their patient over to another member of staff coming on duty, but that had never been his way. The nature of accident and emergency medicine involved a rapid turnaround of multiple patients, but within that he believed in giving the best continuity of care possible, and he tried to see each case through to the end.

Annie had held the same philosophy. He could only hope that hadn’t changed, and that he would still have a chance to catch up with her before she left for home. Seeing her was a necessity—as was pinning her down so they could talk away from the lack of privacy and the pressures of the hospital.

Returning his attention to Mrs Mooney, grateful that she appeared less distressed, and knowing that was as much due to Holly’s expert care as anything else, Nathan applied some silver sulphadiazine cream to the injured hand before using sterile non-adherent dressings and covering the whole hand with a special glove which was secured around the wrist. That done, he stripped off his surgical gloves and tossed them in the bin.

After prescribing some analgesia and anti-inflammatory medication for her to take at home for any pain, and a precautionary antibiotic to stem any infection, he left Holly tidying the cubicle and escorted Mrs Mooney out. Her worried daughter waited with the two boisterous boys. Nathan gave them some reassurance, and a few last-minute instructions for her care, then returned to finish up the notes and have a word with Holly before leaving.

‘You’ve been great, Holly...thanks for all your help today.’

Surprise and gratitude were evident in the young woman’s expression. ‘Thank you, Nathan.’

Her shy smile failed to lift the lingering sadness that shadowed her eyes, and he paused a moment, unsure whether to say anything more. Several times during the day he had sensed tension between Holly and junior doctor Gus Buchanan, and he had wondered what the story was. He hated to see anyone unhappy, but at the same time didn’t feel he had been in the department long enough to intrude—not without knowing more about the dynamics, anyway. Shaking his head, he said goodnight

and made his way towards the staffroom. He'd keep an eye on Holly just in case. Being there for other people was the story of his life—something he had long resented when it had been forced upon him, but a trait he was unwilling to break when it came to patients, colleagues and friends. Right now, however, he had enough problems of his own to sort out, and for once he had to put himself first.

There were several people in the staffroom. Thankfully, the predatory Olivia Barr was not one of them, but then neither was Annie. He'd checked when returning the notes on his final patient and knew she was only minutes ahead of him. A few discreet queries and he discovered she was in the women's locker room, changing. Feeling nervous and uncomfortable, he loitered in the corridor, pretending to read the messages pinned higgledy-piggledy on the staff noticeboard. Knowing he couldn't give Annie too much time to think and harden her heart even further against him, he was determined to catch her before she left the hospital.

As he waited, he thought back to the moment he had first seen Annie. He would never forget it.

By the time he had negotiated a temporary escape from the ties of home and managed to get to medical school he had found himself a few years older than the other students in his intake. Having always felt alone, never having connected with or been part of a group, he had approached those early days at medical school with a mix of intense apprehension and an unbelievable sense of freedom. At last he had been doing what *he*

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