Medical Romance™

# ANNE FRASER

## Mistletoe, Midwife... Miracle Baby

Anne Fraser

# Mistletoe, Midwife...Miracle Baby

«HarperCollins»

**Fraser A.**

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# About the Author

**ANNE FRASER** was born in Scotland, but brought up in South Africa. After she left school she returned to the birthplace of her parents, the remote Western Islands of Scotland. She left there to train as a nurse, before going on to university to study English Literature. After the birth of her first child she and her doctor husband travelled the world, working in rural Africa, Australia and Northern Canada. Anne still works in the health sector. To relax, she enjoys spending time with her family, reading, walking and travelling.

# CHAPTER ONE

ELLEN stopped her car at the top of the steep drive and surveyed the icy track to her grandmother's house with dismay. Even if she could navigate the car down the slope she would never be able to reverse it back up without the danger of sliding into the deep ditches on either side.

She climbed out of the driver's seat and into the bitter wind and lightly falling snow. She'd been driving solidly for over ten hours and every muscle ached from hunching over the steering wheel as she'd raced north in an attempt to beat the snow that was predicted to engulf Scotland. Huddling into her ski jacket and cursing the high heels of her leather boots, she decided to leave her large suitcases in the boot for later and to walk down the drive.

Taking a deep breath, she filled her lungs with the sharp, fresh air of the Highlands and felt some of her exhaustion and doubt slip away. She had been right to come. This is where she needed to be right now—the only place she had ever truly known as home.

The farmhouse roof peeked above the tops of evergreen pine and elder, smoke from the chimney curling into the grey afternoon sky. Ellen could already visualise Gran stoking up the fire, a batch of scones or bread rising in the oven, the kettle on the stove ever ready to make a warming cup of tea. A twist of anxiety knotted in Ellen's ribs and for a second she faltered. Was she being selfish coming back? She hadn't told Gran the true reason why she was coming to stay, only that she had been ill and needed time to get her strength back. If Gran knew the truth it would only upset her and she couldn't bear to do that to the woman who meant the world to her.

Puffing out her cheeks, Ellen swallowed hard. Her emotions were still all over the place; for a moment—a split second—she would forget, then the reality of her situation would hit her again, threatening to crush her.

Needing a few moments to compose herself, Ellen thrust her hands in her parka pockets, her eyes straying over the countryside until she picked out the Jamieson house. Memories rushed back: sitting in their large farmhouse kitchen drinking in the atmosphere of laughter and love pretending, if only for a short while, that she was part of a large and caring family. But the Jamiesons had moved away. And so had Sean. Where was he now? Gran had said that he planned to renovate the house his parents had left behind. Why? Was he planning to put down roots? Had he met someone and was preparing a home for them to share? Maybe even start a family?

Something she would never have.

Grabbing her overnight bag, she set off down the track, picking her way carefully in her three-inch-heel boots. Twice she nearly went over on her ankle, and twice she just managed to stay on her feet. Breaking a leg was the last thing she needed right now. Ellen suppressed a wave of self-pity that threatened to crush her. There was no point giving in to it. She had to look to the future—however bleak it seemed right now.

She was halfway down the drive when she became aware of a rhythmic banging noise cutting through the air. Glancing in the direction of the sound, to the side and rear of her grandmother's house, she saw a tall figure swinging an axe, making short work of splitting logs. For goodness' sake, whoever it was had to be freezing. He was wearing only a T-shirt and jeans in the sub-zero temperatures as he swung the axe over his shoulder.

There was something primitive about the way he worked, his muscles bunching with each lift of the axe, that made her pause to watch him. He seemed lost in his own world, oblivious to the snow falling around him, settling on his dark head.

Suddenly, as Ellen moved off again, her legs went completely from beneath her. She had been so intent on the figure in front of her, she'd taken her eyes off the slippery track. She yelped as she struggled to remain upright and the man turned. For a second their eyes held and then she was hitting the ground with a thump that forced the breath from her lungs. Even as she lay there, staring up at

the sky, wet snow sneaking down the collar of her jacket, Ellen couldn't help thinking that there was something achingly familiar about those clear, pale eyes.

She heard footsteps crunching towards her and as she tipped her head back, squinting at the figure towering over her, the suspicion grew into certainty.

Sean!

Sean was here! Her already pumping heart beat faster. She had always wondered how she would feel when she saw him again, but in her imagination that meeting had been on neutral ground with her dressed to impress and coolly dismissive. Not in a crumpled heap at his feet after an exhausting and tense drive and looking like a wrung-out dishcloth.

Oh, damn it! And he looked even more devastatingly handsome than she remembered. Or was that because she was looking at him upside down?

Mortified, Ellen tried to get back up but in her panic her high-heeled boots couldn't get purchase on the ice. Just great! She was scrabbling around on the ground like some sort of flapping fish that had just been landed.

A hand reached down and before she knew it she was back on her feet.

'Are you okay?'

His voice still gave her goosebumps. After all this time?

Sean stood back, keeping a grip on her elbow, and whistled under his breath. 'Ellen Nicholson? If Maggie hadn't told me you were coming to stay, I would never have recognised you. You've changed.' He studied her with amusement. 'Or, then again, maybe not.'

His only-too-well-remembered grin made something in her chest squeeze. If she had changed, so had he. The last time she had seen him, and the memory made her cheeks burn, he had been tall and gangly. Somewhere along the way he had filled out. And in impressive style.

Flustered, Ellen wiped the snow off her jacket and the back of her trousers. Of course she'd changed. The last time he'd seen her she'd been a scrawny teenager with attitude and a terrible crush. Eight years later she was a grown woman with a death sentence hanging over her. Her past and present selves couldn't be more different. She had a sudden intense longing to be that old Ellen who still believed that miracles happened and that the world and life were simply waiting to give her everything she desired.

She could have done without bumping into Sean Jamieson right now. Just the sight of him had been enough to bring the memories of how she'd felt about him tumbling back. Suddenly she was that seventeen-year-old again, the one who had worshipped the ground this man had walked on.

Ellen pushed snow-dampened hair off her cheeks, trying desperately to regain a modicum of self-assurance. 'Oh, hello, Sean. Nice to see you again.'

Wow, had that come out as gauche as it had sounded to her own ears? 'Not that I expected to see you here. I mean I thought you were away somewhere.' Great. Now she was babbling.

'Are you okay?' he asked. 'Did you hurt yourself?'

'Not at all. I'm perfectly fine, thanks.' And to prove it she took a step forward. Rather too quickly as it transpired. To her horror, she found herself once more flat on her back and staring up at the snow-darkened sky.

'I think I'll just stay down here till the snow melts,' she mumbled, mortified.

Sean bent down on his haunches next to her and grinned. The way his smile still made her insides turn to mush dismayed her.

'You could be out here for a while you know. Can I bring you anything?'

Despite her ridiculous situation and the crazy sensations ricocheting around inside her, she smiled. 'A cup of tea would be nice and perhaps a hot-water bottle.'

'Scone?'

'Mmm. Jam and cream.'

And now she was laughing along with him.

This time she held out her hand for him to pull her to her feet. It was as if the years had melted away and they were back to the way they always used to be all those years ago.

Sean kissed her lightly on her cheek and something sizzled below her skin, making her flustered all over again.

'Still getting into scrapes?' he asked, still smiling. 'Looks like some things haven't changed. Would you like me to have a look at your ankle?'

No, she damn well wouldn't. The last thing she wanted was for him to peel off her boots. She hadn't shaved her legs for days. Heavens, what was she thinking? Unshaved legs were the least of her problems.

'What *are* you doing here?' she asked. 'I thought you were working in Glasgow, or Australia?' He should be in Glasgow. Or Australia. Yes, Australia was better. As far away from her grandmother's home as was physically possible. Aware she sounded annoyed with him, she softened her tone. 'Are you here on holiday? I mean, Gran mentioned you were going to renovate your old family home, but I suppose I thought you'd wait until the summer to get started.'

Even better. Not. Now she was letting him know that she had been thinking about him, talking about him.

His smile widened. 'Which one of your questions would you like me to answer first?'

'Take your pick!' She smiled breezily. At least she hoped that was the way it appeared to him.

'I am renovating the house but it's had to be completely gutted and is uninhabitable at the moment.' He brushed flakes of snow and mulched leaves from her jacket and it took every ounce of willpower not to jump away from his touch. 'Maggie's letting me use the old gatehouse in the meantime.'

The gatehouse? The one on the perimeter of her gran's land? The one that was barely a stone's throw from where they were standing? The knowledge dismayed Ellen. The biggest advantage of coming here to be with Gran was that she could hide herself away and not have anything to do with anyone. Damn, damn, damn. Why did Sean have to come back into her life? And now of all times?

'So you're renovating while you're home on holiday, then?' Ellen asked hopefully.

Sean looked puzzled.

'No, I'm here permanently. Or as permanently as I stay anywhere. I plan to move into the old house as soon as it's ready.' He looked back at the pile of chopped wood in front of him. 'Your grandmother needed some logs. I had some extras from my own delivery so I said I'd split some for her.'

Ellen shivered. It wasn't just from the cold, although the ice on her trousers was beginning to melt, seeping through her clothes and freezing her skin. It was a shock, seeing him. Almost as much of a shock as falling on her backside.

'Look,' Sean said, 'Maggie's been like a cat on a hot tin roof all morning, waiting for you. If we don't get you inside she'll come looking for you. We can catch up once you've said hello and you're out of these wet clothes.'

As usual he was right. In that respect he hadn't changed. He was still the honorary older brother looking out for her. It was ridiculous to stay out in the cold and wet, particularly seeing as she'd recently been so ill. Not that he could or would know about that. Not ever.

He picked up her bag and, still holding on to her elbow, steered her towards the door.

A face appeared at the window and the next moment the door was swung open and her grandmother was standing there, gathering her up in her arms. Ellen inhaled the familiar sweetness of her gran's perfume and wished she could stay closeted in her soft, warm and safe embrace for ever.

'Ellen, child. You're soaked!' her grandmother said. 'Come away in to the fire and get warmed up. You too, Sean. I'll never know how you youngsters put up with being outside with hardly anything on. Don't you know you can catch your deaths? And you, Ellen, you should be taking more care. Especially after being ill.'

Her words made Ellen wince, but she forced a smile to her lips. It was wonderful to see Gran again. Even if her fussing made her want to break down and spill out the horror of these past couple of weeks. But she forced her emotions back down. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't burden Gran and she would keep that promise, however tempting the need to share her secret.

'Ill?' Sean frowned at her. 'With what, Ellen?'

Slipping off her jacket and scarf, Ellen took her time shaking them out and hanging them up on the coat hooks by the door. The last thing she needed right now was their concerned looks. Or Sean ever finding out about her illness. She didn't want people's pity or their well-meaning concern —how would she be able to carry on as normal then? But she'd have to be very careful around Sean —she knew from past experience those penetrating blue eyes of his missed very little.

She shrugged. 'Nothing really—a chest infection, that's all. I'm fine now.'

'I'll leave you two to catch up, then,' Sean replied. 'I want to get these logs finished before it gets dark.'

'Yes, thank you. Please don't let us keep you back,' Ellen said quickly. She wanted time to recover after seeing him. Time to transform herself back into the cool, calm and collected woman she wanted to be. At the very least, she still had her pride.

'Come in for a cup of tea before you go back to the gatehouse,' Maggie said, with a frown at Ellen.

Sean sniffed the air and grinned. 'Is that scones I can smell? In that case, I'll be back as soon as I've finished the last pile of logs. It shouldn't take me long.'

As the door closed behind him, Maggie ushered Ellen into the kitchen and the well-worn chair in front of the stove. Sean had guessed correctly and there was a tray of scones cooling on the rack on the kitchen table. The large farmhouse kitchen with the solid-fuel range was the same one that had always been there. The scrubbed pine table was the same one Ellen had sat at to have her meals during the long summer holidays. The over-stuffed sofa that she had bounced on as a child was there too, though showing signs of age, and this woman was the same one who had bandaged her knees and wiped away her tears whenever she had hurt herself. If only what had happened to her this time could be so easily sorted. Ellen felt the never-far-away tears prick behind her lids. Being here, in this house, with the only woman, apart from Sean's mother, who had ever shown her real affection was almost too much.

Ellen took a deep breath, suddenly thankful that Sean was just outside. Otherwise she had no doubt that in her tired and overwrought condition she would have given in and told her grandmother everything.

'So remind me, Ellen,' her grandmother was saying as she poured a cup of strong tea for her granddaughter, 'where is your mother now?'

Ellen wrapped icy hands around her mug. 'In the US. Lecturing. Before that she was in Australia for four months. I'm not sure when she'll be back. You know how she is.'

Maggie tutted disapprovingly. 'Leaving you on your own for Christmas! Again. I wish you had come to me. Maybe you wouldn't have got sick. You young women just don't look after yourselves properly.'

Nothing would have stopped her getting sick. It hadn't been that kind of illness.

'I didn't mind,' Ellen protested. 'I was working over Christmas. It's kind of wonderful being around to deliver babies at that time.'

It had been wonderful. There was something extra-special and magical about Christmas babies. Everyone looked forward to the first baby to be born on Christmas Day. Ellen smiled. Four babies had made their entrance on her shift. Four perfect babies, four delighted sets of parents. A stab of pain lanced through her. Last Christmas she had been sure that babies were part of her future. And then two short weeks ago that dream had come crashing down. When the consultant had given her the diagnosis, he'd told her that there was a serious risk should she fall pregnant.

‘I have to tell you, Ellen, that a pregnancy could kill you,’ he’d warned. ‘The extra demands on your heart and circulatory system will make the condition much worse. I have to recommend that you think about being sterilised. The Pill is contraindicated in women with your condition, so it’s the only sure way of preventing a pregnancy.’

The words on top of her diagnosis had crushed her. All her life she’d longed for a family. A real family where there was love and approval and laughter. Could she bear to work as a midwife again, knowing that she would never hold her own baby in her arms? She didn’t know. All she could think of at the moment was the need to be with her grandmother. Like a wounded animal, she’d come looking to find shelter and comfort while she found a way to deal with the terror that filled her life.

Ellen forced herself back to the present. ‘Mum will never change, Gran. We both know that.’

‘Aye, but I can’t help hoping that one day she’ll realise what a wonderful daughter she has in you and how much she’s missing out on.’ Maggie sighed and touched Ellen on the shoulder. ‘Maybe I’m hoping for a miracle.’

Ellen took Maggie’s hand and squeezed it. ‘It’s okay, Gran. I accepted Mum’s career would always come first a long time ago. But she’s still my mother and I love her, whatever her faults. And anyway, I’ve got you. You’ve always been around for me.’

The two women shared a smile.

Ellen changed the subject. ‘But tell me about you. How’s the hip?’ Her grandmother’s joints had been giving her trouble, but so far she had refused point blank to go to the doctor. She had told Ellen that a few aches and pains were only to be expected, given her age.

Maggie dismissed her question with a shake of her head. ‘With Sean here to do the heavy stuff, I manage fine.’

Ellen suppressed a smile. Good old Gran. Never one to complain. Being with her was exactly what she needed right now.

‘When did he come back? Why didn’t you tell me he was here? All you said was that he was renovating his family home. You might have told me he was living in the gatehouse, and planning to stay.’

Maggie buttered a scone and placed it in front of Ellen. ‘And if I’d told you, would you have come?’

The soft words stopped Ellen in mid-bite.

‘What do you mean?’ Ellen concentrated on her tea, avoiding her grandmother’s searching look.

‘Because over the last eight years, if I mentioned Sean was here on holiday, you’d suddenly change your mind about coming to stay. You may have thought you were subtle about it but, well, you weren’t. I know how you felt about him when you were younger, Ellen. You were never very good at hiding your feelings. At least not from me.’

Ellen’s cheeks were burning. Had her feelings really been so obvious?

‘I did have a crush on him but that was a long time ago,’ Ellen retorted. ‘I’m a different person now and so, I imagine, is he.’

‘Well, that’s a shame. I think you two would make a lovely couple. That man needs someone to settle him down.’

‘He must have a girlfriend, surely?’ Ellen tried to ignore the surge of pleasure she felt at the realisation that Sean wasn’t married.

‘Oh, he’s had women. Plenty of them as far as I can tell. But none that seem to last.’

Gran looked at Ellen, a small smile playing on her lips. ‘And your crush on Sean has nothing to do with the fact *you’ve* never had a serious relationship?’

‘I’ve never had a serious relationship, Gran, because I’ve not met the right person yet. Besides, my work keeps me busy. I have friends, my hobbies, a whole life that I love …’ She tailed off as it hit her again that she didn’t know for how much longer she would have any of it. Whether Sean was

in a relationship or not was immaterial, *she* wasn't exactly in the market for a long-term relationship. A lump was forming in her throat and she swallowed hard. 'So how long has Sean been here?'

'For someone who's not very interested, you sure ask a lot of questions!' Maggie said with a smile of satisfaction. 'Sean came back a few months ago. Took a post at the Royal Highland in the city. Said he wants to make his home here so he can be close to his beloved mountains. He's the doctor with the Mountain Rescue Team, you know.' Maggie sounded as proud as she would have been had Sean been her grandchild too.

Ellen hadn't known that Sean was working here. Although she had thought about Sean a lot since that summer eight years ago when he had kissed her, she'd never expected to see him again. In fact, as her Gran had guessed, she'd done her best to avoid him. It all seemed so silly now.

Just then the door opened with a gust of wind and Sean strode in to the kitchen. He indicated to Maggie to stay sitting and walked over to the range and helped himself to a cup of tea before grabbing a scone from the table and wolfing it down in two bites. He was clearly at home here.

'I've stacked the logs under cover and brought in a couple of baskets. Just give me a shout when you need more, Maggie.'

He eased his tall frame into a chair by the stove and eyed Ellen thoughtfully. 'I hear you're working as a midwife in London,' he said.

'I was. I mean I am. I'm taking a bit of a break for a few months.'

Sean frowned at her. 'A break? For a few months? Why?'

It was a perfectly reasonable question. Just one she didn't want to answer.

'Personal reasons,' she said tightly. She didn't owe this man any explanations.

Getting to her feet, she forced a smile. 'If you don't mind, Gran, I think I'll go upstairs and unpack. I'll bring in the rest of my bags later. I didn't want to risk not being able to get the car back out of the drive.'

Sean was on his feet almost before she'd finished speaking. 'Don't worry, I'll do that for you. Can't have you lying around in the snow again.'

He cocked an eyebrow at her and the glint in his eye sent more shock waves through her body. Damn. Was her body going to behave like this every time she was near him?

'Would you? I'd appreciate that. It's been a long day.' A wave of tiredness washed over her and she swayed slightly. Almost without seeing him move, she felt a steadying hand at her elbow. She looked up to find quizzical blue eyes staring intently into hers.

'Are you sure you're okay?' Cool fingers were surreptitiously feeling the pulse at her wrist. He frowned and glanced at Maggie, but she had turned away to stack the dishes in the sink. 'Pulse is fine.' His hand moved to her forehead. 'No temperature, but you are pale.'

'Nothing a good night's sleep won't sort out,' Ellen said brusquely.

Sean looked unconvinced but let his hands drop to his sides. 'You're probably right. I'll look in on you later.'

It was the last thing she wanted. She had the uneasy feeling nothing much escaped him, and she was far away from letting anyone know her secret. Not when she could barely acknowledge the truth to herself.

She forced another smile, hoping that this one would be more successful. 'Honestly. There is no need. Thank you anyway. Am I in my old room, Gran?'

'Yes, darling. I aired the bed for you and put on a fire so you should be cosy enough.'

'I'll make us supper when I've had a rest,' Ellen promised, and on legs that felt as if they were filled with liquid rather than bones, she left the room.

'I'd better be going too, Maggie. I'll reverse Ellen's car down and bring in her bags first, though.'

'What would I do without you, Sean?'

'You'd manage fine. They don't make them as tough as you any more. And now you have Ellen for company.'

Sean saw a flicker of worry in Maggie's eyes. It wasn't there for long, but it was enough. There was something going on here that wasn't quite right.

'Is Ellen okay? She looks … different … somehow,' he asked.

'It's a long time since you saw her, Sean. What? Seven years?'

'Eight.'

Not that he'd been counting. Ellen had been the pesky kid from next door who had hung around with him and his pals despite their best attempts to shake her. But, boy, she had changed. Eight years ago she had been all bones, an impish smile and red mop of wayward hair. She'd also had a disconcerting habit of getting into difficulty. If he remembered right, that last summer he'd had to fish her out of a pub when she'd got involved with some less than salubrious locals. And—the memories came thick and fast—ten years before that he'd had to jump into a stream to pull her out when she'd decided to try and mimic him and his friends as they'd used a rope to swing from one side to another. He'd had no idea she'd been following them. An hour earlier she'd been furious when he'd ordered her home and unbeknownst to him had followed at a distance. The memory made him smile. She'd been impossible, but he'd always secretly admired her courage and gumption.

But she *had* changed. Somewhere along the way she had become almost unrecognisable. Her prettiness had turned into an almost ethereal beauty. She was so pale her skin was almost translucent, and she was so slight, it seemed as if a strong blizzard would blow her away. It wasn't just that, though. There was no light in her eyes, no spark of mischief, no smile, no look as if she were about to dissolve in a fit of giggles. And apart from that, she'd seemed almost cool towards him. He was only too aware of the crush she'd had on him; their last meeting eight years ago had left him in no doubt of that. Of course he wouldn't expect her still to have feelings, but this nothingness? It wasn't what he'd expected either.

'Sean?' He suddenly became aware that Maggie was watching him curiously. He gave himself a mental shake. The mystery of Ellen, if there was one, would have to wait. He was due back at the hospital for a ward round, he still had Ellen's car to shift, and, after his earlier exertions, was in need of a shower. Ellen wasn't going anywhere for the next couple of weeks at least, so he would have plenty of time to satisfy his curiosity.

Ellen stood a little back from the window, watching as Sean expertly reversed her small car down the driveway. She wondered if he remembered the last time they had seen each other. She hoped to hell not. Her cheeks still burned every time she recalled what an idiot she'd made of herself. She had practically thrown herself at him, virtually begging him to kiss her. And he had, but then, as she'd leaned into him, wanting more, he'd gently disentangled her arms from around his neck. She remembered every second of that kiss. Before it, she'd been waiting so many years for him to notice that she'd grown up. She had dreamt so many girlish dreams of what it would be like to have Sean Jamieson kiss her. It had been her last chance. He had been going to Glasgow to complete his training and she had been going to London to start hers. What an idiot he must have thought her. How cringe-makingly embarrassing, her gauche and increasingly desperate attempts to get him to notice her. Then she'd made up that stupid story and he had kissed her, and that had made her fall in love with him even more, if that was possible. When he'd removed himself from her arms, she had wanted to die from mortification. Not that he had laughed, although she was certain she'd seen laughter lurking in his eyes, or even suggested by word or gesture that he'd known how she'd felt about him, but he had been too much of a man of the world not to have noticed.

But that was a long time ago. What did it matter that once, eight years ago, she had made a fool of herself? These days it was hard to care about anything. Over these past weeks, all she'd felt was numb. Numb and frightened. So frightened some nights she could hardly sleep. Maybe instead of coming here to Gran, she should have gone to her mother? Maybe under these desperate circumstances Mum would have been able to comfort her, be the mother to her she'd never been when she was a child. Mother loved her. She just wasn't able to invest any of her considerable energy into

parenting her. She had always known that and until now it hadn't mattered. She'd always had Gran. Gran had more than filled any gaps left by her mother. But Gran couldn't fix this. No one could.

Ellen's head was spinning. She had to stop thinking that anyone could help her. She had to pull herself together. Work out how she was going to live the rest of her life.

She looked out of the window. Sean had driven her car down the drive and was removing her suitcases from the boot. He disappeared from view and she could hear his deep voice coming from downstairs. She sighed. There was something so vital and solid about him that still drew her. As a child she'd always felt Sean was invincible and anyone in his sphere was automatically included in that invincibility. But she was no longer a child. And her problems were certainly of no interest to him.

As he stepped out of the door, something made him look up at her window. For a moment their eyes locked and everything spun into the distance. Breathless, she stepped back. Her heart was beating like a bass drum. Why? Any feelings for Sean Jamieson had disappeared with the girl she used to be. And even if there was something still hidden there, she was in no position to be even contemplating a love affair. That part of her life was over, *finito.* Not even a remote possibility.

With a sigh, she turned away from the window and set about finishing her unpacking.

# CHAPTER TWO

A COUPLE of days later, Ellen came down to breakfast to find Sean sitting with his feet propped up on the range, munching on a bacon sandwich.

He stood up and grinned at her.

'Good morning. I'm afraid I've been taking advantage of Maggie again.'

'Wheesh now, Sean. You do more than enough for me, a wee sandwich is nothing.' Maggie turned to Ellen. 'Sean's just got back from a night on the mountains. I happen to know he doesn't keep much in that larder of his so I told him that he wasn't going home until I had fed him.'

Ellen helped herself to tea from the pot and took a slice of toast from a heaped plate. She wasn't hungry but if she didn't have something Maggie's suspicions would be aroused and she would give her no peace until she had wheedled information out of her. As it was, her grandmother had spent the past couple of days trying to tempt Ellen with home baking, complaining that women weren't meant to be so thin.

'What happened?' Ellen asked Sean.

'We had a climber with a broken leg about halfway up the mountain. We found him easily enough but the rescue 'copter couldn't land because of poor visibility. These boys take chances and they nearly came to grief trying to get a winch down, but in the end they had to back off. It took the six of us almost eight hours to get the stretcher down the mountain.'

It was all said matter-of-factly but Ellen knew that conditions must have been horrendous. It hadn't stopped snowing since she'd arrived and last night there had been strong winds too. However, looking at Sean, no one would have guessed he'd been out all night. Apart from a five o'clock shadow, which Ellen decided suited him, he looked more refreshed than she felt.

'Is the casualty going to be okay?'

'I expect the hospital will discharge him later today once they've put him in plaster,' Sean said. 'My biggest worry was hypothermia, but we managed to keep him warm enough.'

Sean stood up and stretched lazily. As he did so, his sweater rode up, revealing the dark hairs on his lower abdomen. To her dismay, Ellen felt a strange buzzing sensation go through her. Wasn't her crush on him well and truly a thing of the past and didn't she have enough on her plate without reacting to Sean Jamieson? On the other hand, after the past two weeks, when she hadn't been able to think of anything except her illness, it was a welcome relief to realise she was still functioning as part of the human race and that she could still feel *something*.

'I should go into town and get some supplies,' Sean said. 'I can see from the way your car is hidden by the snow, Ellen, that you haven't been anywhere. You could come with me if you like.'

'Thank you, but no.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, child, you haven't been out of the house these last two days,' Maggie scolded. 'As long as you wrap up, a bit of fresh air will put some colour in those cheeks. And, besides, we do need some things from the shop. If the snow carries on like this we may well be snowed in and I'm not sure we have enough in the larder to keep us going.'

'But Sean must be tired,' Ellen protested. 'And what about work?'

'I'm used to doing without sleep. I'm on call tonight so I have the morning off.'

'Okay, then,' she said reluctantly. She didn't want to be alone with Sean but she could hardly refuse to get some shopping for her grandmother.

Sean and her grandmother shared a look. Ellen realised she had sounded rude and ungrateful. Sean was only being polite. He wasn't to know that she didn't trust herself to spend any more time with him than was strictly necessary.

She made herself smile. 'Thanks for the offer, Sean. I really don't fancy having to dig my car out.'

‘Good. I want to check up on one of my patients, though. If you don’t mind, perhaps we can call in at the hospital on the way back? It’s sort of on our way.’

Alarm spiralled down Ellen’s spine. She didn’t want to go into the hospital. She most certainly didn’t want to go to the maternity ward. She simply wasn’t ready yet. She forced the panic away. She could stay in the car. He couldn’t make her go inside. She was getting het up over nothing.

‘If you give me a couple of minutes,’ she said, knowing she didn’t have the energy to argue with both Sean and her grandmother, ‘I’ll go and change into something warmer.’

‘So how long do you think you’ll be staying?’ Sean asked as they drove along the narrow roads made even narrower by the drifting snow piled up on either side. Her grandmother’s croft house was around ten miles from the city centre and all the major supermarkets. Although there was a village within walking distance, it only stocked the basics.

Ellen looked out of the window. She had no idea how long she was going to stay. She hadn’t thought that far. The need to come to her grandmother’s house had been overpowering and instinctive. She had asked for and been granted three months’ leave by the hospital where she worked. One day she’d have to decide what she was going to do, she certainly couldn’t live with her grandmother indefinitely, at least not without working, but every time she thought about going back to her empty flat in London and the midwifery unit, a sick feeling washed over her. Perhaps she could get a job in the village? In one of the shops maybe?

‘I’m not sure. A few weeks, maybe longer. I haven’t made up my mind.’

The look Sean shot her was full of curiosity. She didn’t want him to ask her any more questions, so she changed the subject. ‘How is your family?’

‘Mary and Louise moved to Ireland so my parents sold up and bought a house there. Patricia’s in Australia with her husband. My mother hates not being near my siblings, especially now that they have children of their own,’ Sean said. ‘She and my father go out to Australia for three months every winter—they’re there at the moment, in fact. My mother has six grandchildren now, so she’s blissfully happy.’

‘Gran told me that they’d moved to Ireland.’ Mary, Louise and Patricia were Sean’s sisters. Ellen wasn’t surprised his parents had followed their children to Ireland. The Jamiesons had always been a close family unit. The opposite from her family in every way possible. ‘It seems strange not to be going straight over to your mum’s house to say hello, like I always did.’

‘What about your mother?’ Sean asked. ‘I read articles by her in the *British Medical Journal* almost all the time. She has quite an international reputation. You must be proud of her.’

‘I am,’ Ellen said simply.

‘And she must be proud of you.’

Ellen smiled wryly. ‘I wouldn’t go as far as that. Mum wasn’t exactly happy when I told her I wanted to be a midwife. She thought my choice of career was second best and that with my grades I should be studying medicine. Now *that* would have made her proud.’

Sean sent her another sharp look. He wasn’t to know that it was her hero-worship of him that had given her the idea to pursue a career in maternity. She’d loved hearing his stories of drama in the maternity unit when he was a trainee. But it wasn’t hero worship that had kept her in the job. She knew she had found her vocation from the first moment she’d stepped onto the midwifery unit and, when she’d delivered her first baby, it had only strengthened that conviction. Now she didn’t know if she would ever be able to bring herself to return to the job she had once loved and she despised the weakness in herself.

‘If your mother knew you at all, she wouldn’t have wasted her breath trying to persuade you to change your mind. It was obvious to everyone, apart from her, that you were a determined kid.’ The smile on his face made Ellen wonder if he was remembering the time down by the river.

Before Ellen could think of a response to this, Sean's phone rang and he pulled over to answer it. Forced to listen to his side of the conversation, it only took her a few moments to realise something was wrong.

'I'll be right there,' Sean said, and disconnected. He turned to Ellen. 'I'm sorry, but the trip to the shops is going to have to wait. That was the labour ward. They've had a call from one of our patients. She's in labour but can't get to the hospital. She lives in a croft house way off the beaten track and with the recent snow, the ambulance hasn't a chance in hell of getting to the house.' He rubbed a hand across his chin. 'They've called in the RAF but they might not be able to get there in time. Besides, we're closer and this vehicle can handle most conditions.' While he was talking he had turned the car back in the direction they'd come. 'I'm afraid you're going to have to come along for the ride. Come to think of it, it's good you're here. I might need help.'

A bubble of panic rose in Ellen's chest. He had no idea what he was asking of her. How could she tell him that there was no way she could help deliver his patient's baby? She was barely holding it together as it was, how would she manage if she had to hold a baby in her arms? But what other option did she have?

She tucked her shaking hands under her thighs lest Sean notice. So this was it. Before she was ready and before she had a chance to prepare herself, she was going to have to deal with a baby.

There was no way she could refuse. Not when someone was in trouble.

'Is this her first?' she asked, pleased her voice didn't betray her anxiety. 'What's the problem?'

'Yes, it's her first. She was due to be admitted for an elective section next week. Her baby is breech. We tried to turn it around at 37 weeks, but failed. Damn. Perhaps I should have insisted that she come in earlier but she was determined to stay at home for as long as possible. On top of that, her husband works on the oil rigs and hasn't been able to get home because of the weather. To cap it all, she has an elderly mother with early Alzheimer's and she didn't want to leave her on her own for too long.'

Ellen felt a pang of sympathy. It seemed she wasn't the only one whose life had been turned upside down. Maybe concentrating on someone else's problems was just what she needed. *Oh, God, please give her the strength to cope with the next few hours.*

'Can you ask the ward to patch us through to her? I could take some details over the phone while we're driving.' Ellen focussed her mind, trying to think ahead. A breech delivery could get complicated.

Sean did as she suggested, switching the phone to speaker, and within minutes a frightened voice came over the line.

'Dr Jamieson. Thank goodness! The nurses on the ward said you were coming to help me. Are you near? When will you get to me?'

'Marie, everything is going to be fine,' Sean said calmly. 'I hope to be with you in about ten minutes. I have a midwife in the car with me and she's going to talk to you as we drive. You don't know her but she's very experienced. Her name is Ellen.'

'Hello, Marie.' Ellen took over the call. It was good that Sean had a speaker phone. This way she wouldn't have to keep breaking off to update him and he could concentrate on navigating the icy roads. If anything, the snow had started to fall harder since they had left the house and visibility was down to a few metres. Ellen knew that they couldn't rely on the RAF helicopter being able to put down any time soon. 'Ellen here. I'm the midwife Sean was telling you about. Can you tell me how far apart your contractions are?'

'No! I don't know how to do that. All I know is that it hurts!'

'Okay. Just listen to my voice. I'm going to tell you exactly what you need to do. Every time there is a big pain and it goes away look at your watch and count the minutes until the pain comes back. Can you do that?'

‘I’ll try.’ Marie’s voice rose as another contraction hit her. Ellen looked at her watch. ‘Tell me when it eases off, Marie, and I’ll count with you.’

Having something to concentrate on seemed to help Marie’s panic. It seemed that the contractions were four minutes apart. Not so good.

‘I’m just turning in at the end of the road to your croft, Marie,’ Sean said. ‘Hopefully I can make it down the track. If not, we’ll walk. One way or another we’ll be with you in a few minutes. You just keep counting those contractions for us.’

Sure enough, as soon as they pulled up at the gate of Marie’s croft it was obvious that there was no way even Sean’s four-by-four would make it down the snow-covered track.

Ellen thought of the high heels she was wearing. Not so great for trudging through waist-high snow.

Sean seemed to read her mind. ‘I have spare boots in the back. They may be a few sizes too big but if we have to walk they’ll keep your feet warm and dry.’

A few sizes too big was optimistic. Sean was tall.

‘Do we have anything with us?’ Ellen asked. ‘I’m assuming we might have to deliver the baby here.’ She chewed on her lip. ‘It’s some time since I had to do a home delivery.’

Sean’s answering smile was tight. ‘Me too. And the answer is no. I have some surgical gloves and a very basic medical kit with some morphine in the boot that I keep in case I’m called out to a rescue, but that’s it, I’m afraid. We’re just going to have to do the best we can.’

It took them five minutes to walk down the drive, every minute taking Ellen closer to the delivery.

They let themselves in the door, calling out as they shrugged off their jackets. After the freezing conditions outside the house was pleasantly warm.

‘I’m up here.’ Marie’s voice came from a room at the top of the stairs. Sean headed upstairs, taking the steps two at a time, but Ellen had noticed a frail old lady in the kitchen. Judging by the look of fear on her face, Marie’s mother had no idea who they were or what they were doing there.

‘Are you Marie’s mum?’ Ellen asked.

‘Yes. But Marie’s at school. What are you doing in my house?’ Her voice gathered strength. ‘You must leave, or I will call the police.’

No wonder Marie was reluctant to leave her mother. The old lady was clearly very confused.

‘Why don’t you take a seat in the living room?’ Ellen suggested calmly. ‘My name’s Ellen and I’m a nurse. The man who went upstairs is Dr Sean Jamieson. Your daughter is going to have a baby and we’re here to help her. I need to go and see how she is but if you could stay down here and listen for the phone, that would be a big help.’

The old lady’s face cleared for a moment. ‘Yes. Of course, silly me. Marie is having a baby. My memory isn’t what it used to be, dear. Sometimes I get a bit mixed up.’

Ellen led her into the sitting room and switched the television on. Judging by the number of cushions on the chair in front of the set, and the side table laden with reading glasses and bottles of pills, this was a favourite place for the old lady. With a bit of luck the cookery programme would keep Marie’s mother distracted long enough for them to deliver the baby.

Upstairs Sean was examining Marie.

‘Nine centimetres dilated,’ he said. ‘Even if the RAF manages to land soon, and I very much doubt that they’ll even be able to take off in this weather, this baby isn’t going to wait.’ He smiled reassuringly at Marie. ‘Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine. I’ve delivered lots of breech births in my time and they’re all doing well.’

Ellen introduced herself.

‘Okay, Marie,’ Ellen said. ‘As Dr Jamieson said, everything is going to be just fine. I’ve left your mother watching television. Dr Jamieson will stay with you while I wash up. Where can I find some clean towels?’

‘In the cupboard next to the bathroom,’ Marie said, her words tailing off in a cry of pain.

‘And scissors? Do you have a pair of kitchen scissors? We’ll need them to cut the cord.’

‘In the kitchen. The drawer next to the sink.’

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can. You just hang on in there. Try and relax between contractions. I know it’s hard but it will help you conserve energy for when you start pushing.’

Ellen ran down the stairs and back to the kitchen, glancing into the sitting room on her way to check on Marie’s mother. Happily she seemed to have dozed off in front of the television. Ellen put the kettle on to boil, found the kitchen scissors and scrubbed her hands. Then she placed the pan on the stove to boil the scissors. After that she ran back upstairs, found some towels and went back into the bedroom. To her dismay even the small bit of effort involved had made her breathless. It was an untimely reminder of her own medical condition. One that she didn’t need right now.

Sean looked up and noticed that she was puffing as if she’d run a half marathon. ‘You need to get to the gym more often.’ He grinned. ‘That’s what happens to city girls, Marie.’

Over the top of Marie’s head, he winked at her. Ellen knew he was trying to keep the mood light, but for a moment she felt like socking him.

‘Contractions now coming two minutes apart,’ Sean continued.

At this rate they had only minutes before it was time for Marie to push. They exchanged a glance and Ellen found herself relaxing. Everything was going to be okay.

After she’d placed several towels underneath Marie she ran back downstairs to fetch the pan with the scissors. She’d leave them cooling in the water. That way she wouldn’t have to touch them until she was ready.

Ellen placed her hands on Marie’s abdomen. The contractions were regular and strong. The difficulty would be when she started to push the baby out. Sometimes with a breech delivery, the baby’s head got stuck. That was the critical time. With the rest of the body and the cord outside the birth canal the baby would try to breathe but be starved of oxygen. They had to stop that from happening.

Suddenly Marie cried out. ‘It’s coming. Oh, God, I have to push.’ She drew her legs up instinctively and Ellen could just see the first signs of the baby appearing and a greenish discharge as well. *Meconium.* Ellen looked at Sean and raised one eyebrow in silent query about whether they *should be worried.*

‘Meconium is normal with breech babies.’ Sean answered the unspoken question. ‘Your baby is going to be here soon, Marie.’

It was good that Marie didn’t know that Ellen’s heart was still pounding almost as fast as her patient’s. If Sean was worried at all, and he must be, he was keeping it well hidden.

‘It’s coming again,’ Marie gasped.

‘Draw up your knees, take a big breath and push hard into your bottom. Your baby is almost here now,’ Ellen encouraged.

Suddenly, the baby’s bottom slid into view, followed by the torso and thighs. Sean grasped the baby’s trunk and turned the shoulders uppermost.

‘Another push, Marie. You’re doing fantastically well,’ Ellen said.

Sean used his fingers to ease the baby’s arms across the tiny chest, before guiding the shoulders through the birth canal.

So far so good. The baby’s chest moved as it took a gasp. And again. They needed to get the rest of the baby out—and quickly.

‘What’s happening?’ Marie asked, panic in her voice.

‘We need to wait for the next contraction then you must give the biggest push of all, Marie,’ Ellen said, trying to sound as calm as possible. It seemed like minutes had passed. Where had the contractions gone?

‘I’ll support Marie’s legs, Ellen, while you deliver the baby,’ Sean said. ‘Just lift up baby’s feet and support the chin and cheeks with your right hand and the baby will come.’

Ellen knew that Sean wasn’t talking to her so much as to the mother. Ellen had attended breech births in her time, but that had always been with a full paediatric team in attendance.

Sure enough, with the next contraction the baby’s face and forehead eased out and Ellen was suddenly holding the limp baby boy by the feet. Her heart hammered against her ribs. They needed to get the baby breathing. Ellen placed the tiny infant on the clean towels she had laid on the bed.

‘Why isn’t my baby crying? Why is he so quiet? Is he all right?’ Marie was scrambling onto her elbows, desperate to see her child.

‘They are often a little stunned when they come out bottom first,’ Sean explained. He wiped baby’s face and body vigorously with the towel then held two fingers against his tiny chest.

‘Heart rate’s good.’ Although he smiled, Ellen could see the tension in his eyes. ‘Come on, baby, time to breathe,’ he murmured under his breath.

If only they had some oxygen to give the baby. Or a neonatal face mask.

Just as Ellen began to fear the worst, the baby gave a huge gasp followed by a soft whimpering sound. Thank God! Ellen looked up at Sean, and he gave her a slow smile.

‘Congratulations, Marie. You have a baby boy,’ Ellen announced.

Later, after mother and baby were settled, Ellen and Sean stepped to the side to give them some time alone. Now that the adrenaline was seeping away, Ellen felt shaky.

Sean smiled at her. ‘Well done. We make a good team.’

And they had.

‘I’d hate to think what would have happened if we hadn’t been able to get here,’ she said. ‘It could have had a very different outcome.’

‘I guess that’s why we do what we do. There’s no feeling quite like delivering a healthy baby when the odds are stacked against it.’

They looked across to Marie, who was murmuring to her baby as he suckled. Under the satisfaction and pleasure Ellen felt at the sight was a deep sadness. Now that the emergency was over she allowed herself to look properly at the baby they had just delivered. He had the cutest bow lips and snub nose and a smattering of fine blond hair on his head. Tiny fingers reached out to his mother as he fed, and, as his tiny legs kicked with pleasure, Ellen’s heart cracked a little.

She would never know what it was like to hold her baby in her arms. She would never feel her child’s skin against hers, never know what it was like to love and be loved unconditionally. Never know the joy and the pain, and she knew there was always pain when it came to loving, of bringing up a child. She forced the thought away. There was nothing to be gained in thinking like that.

At least she’d been able to cope with seeing a baby born without breaking down. Up until this moment she hadn’t been sure that she could. Now she knew that eventually she would be able to go back to being a midwife and the knowledge was a huge relief. Being able to help other women achieve what she never could, would give her life purpose again. If her time on this earth was limited, at least she was making a difference to someone else’s life. It was the first step towards a future.

‘I’m going to call him Sean,’ Marie said, looking up from her feeding baby. ‘If he’d been a girl I would have called her Ellen.’

‘Great choice of name,’ Sean said with a grin.

‘Ideally we should take you to the hospital,’ Ellen told Marie. ‘But that would mean taking baby Sean into the cold as well as taking your mother with us. I’m guessing that she wouldn’t cope with being left on her own? So, if you like, you could remain here and I’ll stay with you.’

Marie’s eyes lit up. ‘Could we? My sister was going to come to be with Mum but of course, with the baby being a bit early she’s not here. I did phone her as soon as I knew I was in labour and she said she’d set off as soon as she could. She lives in Glasgow so I don’t know how long it will take her, or even if the roads are passable. Would you really stay with me? Don’t you have somewhere else to be?’

Ellen shook her head. ‘Right now there is nowhere I need or want to be more than here.’

# CHAPTER THREE

THE next day, Sean came to collect her from Marie's. The snow had turned to rain through the night. The roads had been cleared and the track leading down to Marie's croft was slushy rather than icy. A couple of hours earlier, Marie's sister had arrived along with a load of shopping. Ellen was relieved that the sisters' mother seemed to recognise her. It had been a difficult night spent between the baby and the old lady, and Ellen longed for a bath and a few hours in bed. Sean told them that he had arranged for one of the midwives to come and see mother and baby the next day.

Sean admired the baby again and had a word with Marie before they left. Inside the car he looked intently at Ellen.

'You look different somehow. Tired … but different.'

'Thanks a lot, Sean. No woman likes to be told she looks tired, even if it is true. It usually means she looks terrible.'

The look Sean gave her was unfathomable. 'I don't think you could look anything but beautiful.'

A shiver ran down her spine. Was Sean beginning to see her as a grown woman at last? Why now? When it was too late?

'Why, thank you, kind sir,' she said lightly. 'But, I have to admit, I'm looking forward to a shower and change of clothes.'

'Why did you give up working as a midwife?' Sean asked suddenly. 'Anyone can see that you love what you do. It's such a waste.'

Ellen thought rapidly. What could she tell him that would make him stop pressing her for answers she didn't have or want to give?

'I haven't given up being a midwife. I'll be going back in a while. I just wanted a break. I planned to take some time out to …' She stopped. She didn't want to explain about the aborted trip to India. That would lead to more questions she didn't want to answer. Everything seemed to lead back to her illness. '.to think about some stuff.' She changed the subject 'What about you? What are your plans? I thought someone with your reputation would be working in a large teaching hospital.'

'I like it here. I love being close to the mountains and I like being part of the Mountain Rescue Team. Living here suits me. The hospital has a first-class reputation, which is continuing to grow. They wanted someone with expertise in high-risk pregnancies to develop the service, so they asked me.'

It was as if someone had thrown ice cubes down the back of Ellen's blouse. It was ironic. For a second, but only for a second, she was tempted to ask him whether he'd ever had a patient with pulmonary hypertension. Instead, she changed the conversation.

'What about girlfriends?' Although Gran had said there wasn't one, Ellen found herself wanting to be sure. There could be someone Gran didn't know about.

Sean shot her a look. 'No one permanent. I'm happy with my life exactly how it is.'

Ellen felt a surge of relief. Which was dumb. It wasn't as if she had any aspirations as far as Sean Jamieson was concerned. It was just that she couldn't stop remembering how she'd once felt about him. She needed to remember that he wasn't the same person she had known as a child—and neither was she. Nevertheless, it felt good to have him back in her life. If being with him unsettled her, at least it was a diversion from her own morbid thoughts.

Ellen closed her eyes as a wave of tiredness washed over her. Spending the night in a chair in between checking up on baby Sean and Marie's mother hadn't been conducive to a good night's sleep. 'Wake me up when we get home,' she said, and closed her eyes.

Sean slid a glance in Ellen's direction. Home. It was funny, the way she'd said that. Almost as if they were a married couple returning to their home after a night out. And even odder that it felt right somehow.

He was going crazy. He had to be. Ellen hadn't been back in his life for much longer than a few days and already he felt as if she'd never left.

The image of her lifting her face to his to be kissed came rushing back as if it had only been eight weeks ago instead of eight years. If only she'd known how tempted he'd been back then to carry on kissing her, to take her to bed, to take up the promise in her eyes. But, thank God, at the last minute reason had come rushing back. He was older than her and so much more experienced. Not only that. He'd known that she'd thought herself in love with him and there had been no way he could take advantage of her feelings. He had been fond of her, in the way he was fond of his youngest sister, too fond to risk breaking her heart.

He smiled. His first memory of Ellen was when he had been ten and she had been five. A little girl with a round stomach and bright red curls, she had formed an instant devotion to him, following behind him and his friends whenever she could.

And so it had continued. Every year she'd arrive to stay with Maggie for the summer, and every summer she would insist on pursuing him and his pals whenever she could keep up. It had irritated the hell out of them all but he'd felt responsible for her. More often than not he would glance back, when his friends weren't looking, just to check that she hadn't hurt herself or got lost. There had been that incident by the river when she had been eight and he thirteen. If he hadn't been keeping an eye on her she could have drowned, so great had been her determination to do exactly as he'd done, even if she had been about a foot smaller and the river had covered her head when it had only come up to his armpits. He grinned as he recalled a face red with fury and mortification, small fists banging on his chest as she'd demanded to be let go. She had been a little tiger.

And so the summers had gone on. She'd hung about his house with his sisters and parents, happy to sit by the fire and listen while he and his noisy family had laughed and argued. Even then he had sensed a deep loneliness in her. He couldn't understand why she hadn't spent the summers with her mother. As she'd got older, she'd stopped following him and started spending more time with his sisters, pretending—and he didn't know how he knew this—to share their interest in make-up and clothes. Maybe it was because she'd always worn the same rolled-up jeans and thick cotton checked shirt. Come to think of it, that was the kind of clothes he'd always worn too.

There had been a gap of a couple of years when he hadn't seen her—he'd been at medical school and had spent his holidays travelling in Europe—but when she'd been sixteen he'd been back, and he'd barely recognised the coltish beauty who had turned up at his house.

He sneaked another glance at her. She was still beautiful, but most of the light had gone out of her. What had changed her from the daredevil, energetic girl she had been to this cool, almost reticent woman? Why had she stopped working? Especially when it had been clear from the look on her face when she had helped during Marie's labour that being a midwife was what she was born to do. And then there had been that odd look on her face when she'd held the baby in her arms. For a moment she had seemed to hesitate before she had taken the newborn. That wasn't in keeping with someone who was used to delivering babies. This Ellen was a mystery. Was she running away from something, and, if so, what? He shook his head. Underneath the closed-off facade he was sure the Ellen he had once known still lurked, and somewhere inside him there was that same protective feeling. If Ellen was in trouble, he wanted to know.

Later that day, once Ellen had had some sleep, Sean came by the house again.

'We never did make it to the shops. I'm going now. Would you like to join me?'

She hesitated. There was no need for them to go together now that the snow had melted.

'I'd also like to show you the hospital. There's a patient I promised to see. Come on, what do you say?'

She said no. But only on the inside. Somehow her mouth was saying yes.

The shopping was easily managed. Ellen couldn't prevent herself from glancing in Sean's basket and she wasn't altogether surprised to find a fair number of frozen microwave meals along with a reasonable helping of fruit and vegetables.

To her embarrassment Sean caught her in the act and pretended to be shocked.

'Ellen! Has no one ever told you that it's rude to stare?'

Once again, she felt fourteen years old and her cheeks reddened. Would Sean always treat her as if she were his little sister?

'And has no one told you that ready-made meals are bad for your health?' Ellen responded.

'They're only for emergencies,' Sean protested. 'I'm not much of a cook and I eat at the hospital a lot. That way I can use all my spare time to work on the house. And on my days off, Maggie usually insists that I have something with her. She's definitely where you got your obstinate streak from.'

Back in the car, Sean headed for the hospital. Ellen's curiosity got the better of her. 'Who is this patient you're going to see? What's wrong with her?'

'She's one of my gynae patients who came to see me with a large fibroid growth. Normally we would have done a hysterectomy, but she's only thirty-four and wanted children. So we agreed that we would try and shrink the fibroids. Luckily it worked and she fell pregnant almost as soon as treatment stopped. The hospital phoned to let me know she's in labour and I promised her that I would look in. Once I've seen her, I'll show you around. Last year the hospital was extended to include a special care nursery and more delivery beds. It's pretty much state of the art and I'm sure you'll find it interesting.'

Once again panic threatened to engulf Ellen. She took a deep breath to force it away. It wasn't as if she would be on duty. She wouldn't have to go into the delivery room if she didn't want to and no one would be passing her a baby to hold. Besides, if she insisted on staying in the car, Sean's curiosity would be well and truly aroused. She could see that already he was finding her behaviour strange, to say the least. And although holding Marie's baby had been difficult at first, she had coped. More than coped. The baby in her arms had been a reminder that life went on and that life and death were linked in a continuous cycle. If her time on this earth was limited, what better way to spend it than helping others into the world? Perhaps she should go back to London and her job? Keeping busy would distract her from her own problems and might even help her come to terms with what had happened. Plus, she couldn't stay with Gran for ever. Besides, from the way she kept getting goosebumps whenever she was in Sean's company, perhaps living so close to him wasn't a good idea either.

But she wasn't ready to leave. She wasn't strong enough yet to deal with whatever she had to on her own. She needed more time.

'Okay. If you're sure the midwives won't mind,' she said. 'I'd like that.'

The distinctive smell of the labour ward hit her the moment she walked in and her heart leapt. This was where she belonged. This was where she felt the most confident. The labour ward had always felt as if it was her home from home. One of the midwives came over to them as soon as she spotted Sean. But not before she gave Ellen a searching look.

'Sean. Fiona has been asking for you. She's almost fully dilated and was really hoping you'd be the one to deliver her baby.'

'Jessie, this is Ellen Nicholson,' Sean introduced Ellen. 'She's a midwife from London … and a friend.' This time there was no mistaking the acid look from the young and pretty midwife. 'I said I'd show her around, but seeing as Fiona's determined I am to deliver her baby, I wonder if you would mind showing Ellen around yourself?'

Jessie looked less than pleased. 'Sorry, Sean. No can do. We're really short-staffed. Half the ward's off with swine flu.' Jessie flashed Ellen a tight smile. Perhaps she was simply harassed, Ellen thought. She of all people knew how stressful an understaffed labour suite could be.

'I'll be fine,' Ellen said. 'If you could point me to the staff lounge, I'll keep out of your way.'

Jessie studied her thoughtfully. 'A trained midwife, eh?'

Ellen's guessed what was coming. 'I'm on leave,' she said.

'Damn,' Jessie said forcefully. 'We really could do with an extra pair of hands.' Jessie gave Sean a playful tap on the shoulder. 'You'd better get into scrubs, Sean. I'll show Ellen where she can wait and then I'll let Fiona know that you're here.'

Ellen was thumbing a magazine when the door opened and an older woman with bright blue eyes and a worried frown came into the room.

'Jessie told me I'd find you here. I'm Lena McPherson, Midwifery Manager.'

Ellen shook the extended hand wondering, but already guessing, what the woman wanted with her.

'I know you're a midwife,' Lena said. 'And Jessie did tell me that you are only here on holiday, but I did wonder if you would consider joining our bank of midwives. We're desperately short-staffed because of the flu. If we don't have enough midwives we may well have to start sending our high-risk pregnancies to Glasgow and we'd really rather not. Our mothers want to have their babies here where they know and trust us and the doctors. Any travelling is an added stress they don't need.'

Talk about coming straight to the point. And emotional blackmail. However, perhaps this was exactly what she needed? She could work and have something to take her mind off her own problems and still have some time with her grandmother before going back to London. It would only be for a couple of months at the most.

'When would you like me to start?' Ellen said.

# CHAPTER FOUR

ON SATURDAY, Ellen got up early and, taking her coffee, wandered outside. It had snowed again overnight and the hills in the distance looked spectacular with their blankets of snow. Maybe later she would go for a walk down to the loch that was hidden in one of the hollows. Up until today she hadn't really felt up to exercising—part of her was worried that she might trigger an attack of breathlessness despite the fact that she knew she could become ill any time. Whether she exercised or not had nothing to do with it. In fact, as her physician had explained, the better physical shape she was in the better chance she would have of surviving an attack. Her consultant was right. She had two options. She could continue to feel sorry for herself and hide away or she could pick up the pieces and live every moment of her life as she'd always done—to the full. And the first step would be getting back to work. She had agreed to start on Monday and knew she had made the right decision.

Since she'd come back some of the terrible weight had begun to slip from her shoulders. Whether it was being with her beloved grandmother again, or knowing that she had the mental strength to continue with a job she loved, she didn't know.

Or maybe it had something to do with being around Sean, a small voice whispered. Maybe being around him makes you feel brave?

As if thinking about him had made him appear, Sean stepped out of his house, holding a mug of coffee. The realisation that they liked to do the same thing in the morning made Ellen smile. Sean was wearing faded jeans and a thick, black cashmere sweater that emphasised the breadth of his chest and arms. He looked as rugged and as elemental as the mountains behind him and Ellen's stomach lurched. She still found him disturbingly sexy.

He placed his coffee on the bench outside his front door and stretched. Then he picked up the mountain bike that was propped up next to his door and hefted it over his shoulder.

Ellen walked over to him. The crunch of her boots on the hard snow made him look round. When he saw it was her he grinned broadly, his even white teeth contrasting with his weather-tanned skin, and Ellen could almost hear her heart pounding against her ribs.

'An early riser too,' he said.

Ellen glanced at her watch. Although it was just after seven, the sun had only recently lifted above the horizon.

'Time is too precious to waste lying in bed,' she said. Perhaps it was the tone of her voice more than her words but Sean looked at her sharply.

'I mean.' she added hastily. 'Who wouldn't want to make the most of a beautiful day like this?'

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