AMBER McKENZIE

The Surgeon's Baby Secret

MEDICAL ROMANCE™

Amber McKenzie
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Аннотация

Her baby’s daddy… Surgeon Erin Madden never expected to be able to have a baby! And she certainly never expected to fall pregnant from her whirlwind and totally unforgettable romance with Dr Ryan Callum! But her precious little daughter Jennie is proof that dreams can come true…Two years later, and Erin is shocked that Ryan has started work at the same hospital. Things might have ended badly between them, but he still sets Erin’s heart racing! And now it’s only a matter of time before Ryan discovers her baby secret…

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She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't ready for Ryan.

Why now? Except she couldn't really begrudge his arrival in her life, because without him there was the possibility she wouldn't be alive. Could she trust him? Her instincts said yes, but

she had been so wrong before that the person she really couldn't trust was herself.

"I don't know what to think about any of this."

"What does your gut tell you?"

Her gut told her that she wanted more. More of Ryan and more of the feelings he was bringing out in her. What would be the harm in spending more time together? Indulging in the feelings he brought out in her? Her first fling, and then in less than a week they would go their separate ways. At best he would become a beautiful memory to carry with her as she carved out her new life.

At worst—well, really, what *couldn't* she face after everything she had already been through …?

AMBER McKENZIE's love of romance and all the drama a good romance entails began in her teenage years. After a lengthy university career, multiple degrees and one formal English class, she found herself happily employed as a physician and happily married to her medical school sweetheart.

She rekindled her passion for romance during her residency and began thinking of the perfect story. She quickly decided that the only thing sexier than a man in scrubs was a woman in scrubs. After finishing training and starting her practice she started writing her first novel. Harlequin's *So You Think You Can Write* contest came at a perfect time, and after a few good edits from her wildlife biologist childhood best friend the manuscript was submitted. The rest is history!

Amber currently lives in Canada with her husband. She does her best to juggle her full-time medical practice with her love of writing and reading and other pursuits—from long-distance running to domestic goddess activities like cooking and quilting. Multitasking has become an art form and a way of life.

The Surgeon's Baby Secret

Amber McKenzie

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To all my female physician friends. Heather, Kate, Jaclyn, KP, Erin, Allison, Rebecca and Kristen, it has been amazing being your friend and colleague. Thank you for sharing your lives and friendship with me. You are all both talented and beautiful, like the perfect romance novel heroine.

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CHAPTER ONE

WAS SHE RUNNING away from her problems? Yes—and who could blame her? Erin thought as she ventured farther up the hills that comprised Arthur's Seat. Was it working? No. Her trip across the Atlantic to Edinburgh had done nothing to change her circumstances or block the thoughts and feelings that had been tormenting her. The message that had awaited her at hotel check-in had confirmed that.

She looked around her at the lush greenery of the hills, the blue of the sky and the distant sparkle of the ocean. It was breathtaking, even with the signs warning of the dangers of severe wind gusts. She wished everything in life could come with such warnings. Then maybe she would have seen the hidden danger that had been disguised as her dreams coming true.

Erin stopped to catch her breath and smiled ruefully to herself. She felt as if she spent every day running from one delivery to another as an obstetrics resident, but maybe she wasn't as fit as she'd thought, as she took in another deep breath. She looked up the path and saw a bench and made her way toward it. Maybe this hadn't been her best idea. She hadn't even dressed for a hike, her gray blazer and heeled boots a poor choice for any athletic pursuit. But this hadn't been her plan. Nothing had been her plan. But another message from her now ex-husband had pushed her into the open air before she had even set sight on her hotel room.

She felt another wave of anger pass through her just as another gust of cold wind hit. She wanted to still be angry with him. Anger, indignation, hurt, she had felt them all when the truth had first come out, but now all those emotions she had once felt toward Kevin Dufour, her newly ex-husband, had long ago burnt out and had been replaced by disappointment in herself.

She reached back into the pocket of her blazer and pulled out the printed message that had interrupted her attempt at escape.

Erin—Divorce finalized. I think we can agree that you don't belong at Boston General. Kevin

Was he right? Was it worth having to deal with the aftermath of Kevin to stay where she loved to work? Damn, she was doing it again, letting someone else make her doubt herself. Why was she so weak? How had she been so naive?

She felt the gust as she watched the note slip from her hands and tumble down the slope. Instinctively she lunged for it, not wanting Kevin's cruel words to sully the beauty of the landscape surrounding her.

He watched, as if in slow motion, as the woman jumped from the steep hilltop over the edge. For a split second he froze before he sprinted to the spot where he'd last seen her. In the short time before he got there he prepared himself for what he might find and felt relief at the sight of her holding onto the last small outcropping of rock before the hill's cliff. He couldn't make out much of her face as she hugged her body close to the almost vertical ground beneath it, but he saw her tremble with fear.

“Don’t move,” he yelled down to her.

But she did move, her head tilted only slightly to look back up at him, and once again he felt shock at what he was seeing. She was both young and beautiful. Her shoulder-length dark blond hair was being flung around her face as the wind continued to battle with her. Through the wisps of hair he could make out the beautiful large eyes that stood out even more against the pallor of her complexion. He was sure that he would never forget the way this woman was looking at him right now, at this moment.

“Stay still,” he reminded her, not wanting to be a distraction to her.

“I’m scared,” a small voice came back to him.

He wasn’t surprised. Even though he had watched her willingly throw herself from the hilltop it was normal to have last-minute regrets. He needed to keep her calm and establish trust between them. “I know. I’m going to get you out of there. What’s your name?”

“Erin.”

“Okay, Erin. My name is Ryan and I’m going to help you.”

How could he appear so calm and confident? She was literally on a ledge, facing death. Just as she had been reaching for the message a large gust of wind had blown it—and her—over the cliff. If she had thought she had hit rock bottom before, she had been wrong. This was truly it. She had let Kevin’s words literally drive her over the edge, and for what? What did it matter? What did he matter? Nothing that had come before this moment

mattered except she had never wanted a second chance more than she wanted one now.

She looked up again toward the reassuring voice from above. The sun was shining brightly and she was too afraid to move any further, so all she could take in was the man's muscular silhouetted outline. It immediately instilled confidence in her and she felt some of her fear dissipate. If anyone could help her it was this man.

She watched as he lowered himself to the ground, lying prone, hanging his head and shoulders over the cliff's edge. He extended one long muscular arm toward her. "Erin, when you are ready I want you to reach up and take my hand."

"I can't." The idea of letting go of any of her grip on the limited ground beneath her was impossible.

"Yes, you can, Erin. Trust me."

It was an even more impossible request. She didn't trust anyone, not even herself. "I can't."

"You can't stay where you are forever. Reach up and take my hand."

He was right. She had no options. Still, she couldn't help but marvel at the complete lack of frustration in his voice. When was the last time someone had been patient with her? Or even acknowledged her feelings? Trust? She had sworn against that. But right now she had little more to lose so she took a deep breath and reached out her hand. The moment her arm was fully extended she felt his hand pass hers and grip strongly around

her wrist; instinctively she did the same. Then, as if she weighed nothing, she was being lifted until he could grasp her under her shoulders and they both went tumbling toward the ground.

But instead of the ground, she landed on him and felt herself being raised and lowered with his breath, her body lax against his firmness. She was too dazed to move as she took in everything that had just happened. He had saved her, this man, Ryan. Ryan, who appeared to have Herculean strength. Ryan, who smelled like a combination of sunshine and sweat. Ryan, whose whole body she was in contact with.

She rolled herself to his side and for the first time got a good look at the man who had saved her. He was more impressive up close. He was tall and there was no muscle on his body that wasn't defined. His black tech running shirt and blue shorts showed off the golden bronze of his skin. His hair was a light brown and he had a scar that extended from above his deep blue eyes toward his thick cropped hair. She could see at least one tattoo revealing itself from the short sleeve of his left arm.

"Are you okay?" His voice cut through her mental inventory of his assets.

Was she? No, but that wasn't what she wanted to say and likely not what her hero wanted to hear. "Yes."

"Are you disappointed?" he asked, his voice softer than before.

Disappointed? Had he sensed her evaluation? Truth be told, he was the first man she had felt attracted to in over a year and his

raw sex appeal and heroism left little room for disappointment.

"No," she answered, embarrassed.

"Good," he replied, appearing relieved. He deftly sprang to his feet and then reached out a hand, which she took, and he helped her do the same. He was tall, her head coming up only to the top of his shoulders as she had to tilt upward to look at him.

"Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't saved me." She heard her voice tremble at the end, the direness of her previous circumstance even more apparent now that she was out of it.

"I'm just happy you wanted to be saved. Now, let's get out of here before the wind picks up."

She was shocked when he reached out to take her hand. So shocked that she didn't pull away, not that she could have even if she had wanted to. His grip was as tight as it had been when he had pulled her up. It was as if he was locking her beside him and didn't want her to get away. She should have felt fear. This man, Ryan, was a stranger, but instead she felt taken care of. It was a feeling she hadn't felt in a very long time and she was in no hurry to lose it. So instead she followed his lead and walked with him toward the base of the hillside.

"You're American." He finally broke their silence after several minutes.

"Yes." And she realized from his accent that he must be, too.

"What brings you to Scotland?"

"I'm running away from the disaster my life has become.

You?" She almost gasped as she realized the answer that had run through her mind at high speed had also escaped from her mouth.

"Work." He answered as though her response had been completely normal and she welcomed his tact.

"What do you do?"

"I'm in the military."

"That explains it." She covered her mouth with her free hand. What was wrong with her? What was it about this man that made her lose her ability to filter? She turned her focus from the path ahead to look at him and was met with a similar appraisal.

"Explains what?" He had stopped and she felt his blue eyes question her more strongly than his words had.

"I just meant that …" Was it that he was the only man with scars and a tattoo that she had ever found sexy? Or that his bravery and strength in saving her had seemed so effortless it wasn't surprising he was a professional hero?

"It's okay, you don't need to explain yourself." He began walking again and she followed, still linked with him. Time went by as they made their way toward the hill's base and she marveled at how comfortable the silence was between them.

"It's a beautiful country." His words finally broke through.

"Yes, it is," she agreed, more comfortable with the neutral territory their conversation had achieved.

"Have you ever been here before?"

"No, but I feel like I have. My father grew up here and when I was little he would tell me stories from his childhood or

sometimes just about this faraway country with princess castles and green grass and blue ocean as far as the eye could see."

"I'm not sure the Scottish would take well to having a strong part of their heritage referred to as 'princess castles.'" She looked back toward him and he was smiling. If she had thought he was handsome before, now he was devastating. She was shocked by the powerful wave of attraction his smile evoked and had to check herself against those feelings. Fortunately they had reached the end of the path, a natural place to say goodbye. She let go of his hand and was surprised by the feeling of loss. All the more reason to get away now before she let her attraction make her life more complicated.

"Thank you again."

"I'll walk you back to your hotel."

She wanted him to, but knew better. "Thanks. But I'm okay from here. I can find my way."

She knew he was going to argue with her so she didn't give him the chance. Instead she turned and headed toward her hotel and never looked back at the kindest, most handsome man she had talked to in years.

She looked nothing like Sabrina but she reminded him of her nonetheless. Both women were beautiful, but that wasn't the similarity that was troubling him. It was the look in her eyes that brought back familiar haunting memories. At first those large round eyes that he'd later learned were a deep blue had just seemed scared, but after she had been returned to safety their

depth of emotion had changed from fear to sadness. A sadness he had seen in his sister Sabrina's eyes years ago and which had set off warning bells in his head—not that she hadn't already rung those bells hard by leaping off the hill's edge. What would she have done if he hadn't been there? Would she have followed through with her intention and let go?

He physically recoiled at the thought of losing her and stopped in his tracks. How could he already feel a connection to this woman he barely knew? Most people would blame the dramatic nature of their encounter, but truthfully, to him, that drama had been minor. He was a military trained physician and for the past five years had had a decorated career as a trauma specialist. Pulling a beautiful woman to safety was a nice day at the office compared to the horrors he had witnessed.

It must be the emotional resemblance to Sabrina. The first time he'd seen that look in Sabrina he had missed it. He had been away for too long and hadn't noticed the sadness in his little sister's eyes. His role as a big brother had circumvented his role as a physician and he'd missed all the warning signs of depression his sister had been experiencing. She had been thinner than he'd remembered, with dark rings of fatigue under her eyes. She had rarely smiled and when he had tried to arrange activities to cheer her up, she had gotten no pleasure out of things that had previously made her happy.

Classic depression, and he, her big brother, the physician, had missed it and had just thought she'd been heartbroken and would

get over it. That she had been better off. But in the end that hadn't mattered. Instead, Sabrina had suffered for over a year before she'd hit rock bottom and he had never stopped blaming himself. He should have been there for her. He should have recognized the signs and gotten help for her earlier. He had failed her. He hadn't protected her from the man who had broken her heart and he hadn't realized how badly she'd needed help to be put back together.

The thought monologue snapped him back to Erin. She had thanked him for saving her. He wished that it was enough to reassure him. Hadn't Sabrina always smiled politely through her pain? The one thing he was certain of was that this was not their last encounter. Was it a sense of responsibility he felt to her? Intrigue at the cause of her sadness? Or the fact that she smelled of wildflowers and had felt soft and right pressed against him. At this point it didn't matter, his mind was made up. This was not the end of their story, it was merely the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

ERIN SPOONED ANOTHER morsel of the warm decadent bread pudding into her mouth and let both the food and the ambiance overwhelm her senses. The local pub she had ventured to for dinner had been everything she'd been looking for; the noise and activity were a perfect distraction from the constant replay of her own thoughts. She had almost died today. She might have died had Ryan not saved her. The worst part was it would have been a stupid reason to die.

She needed to take responsibility for inadvertent actions. For her constant ability to let people, mainly her now ex-husband, manipulate her. But today it stopped. When she'd got back to her hotel room, she had torn up the new messages that awaited her and instead lounged in a hot bath and thought about what she wanted in life. She wanted to make a difference to the lives of others, just as Ryan had done for her today. The best way to do that was through her work as an obstetrician-gynecologist. So there was no way she was going to leave her training at Boston General, no matter what demands her ex made.

"Is this seat taken?" A deep voice interrupted her repetition of the earlier inner pep talk. She looked up and saw Ryan. He had changed from his running clothes and was flawless in a button-down navy collared shirt and charcoal-gray dark denim. How was it possible in a city of five hundred thousand people she would

run into Ryan again? Attraction followed by fear coursed through her. She wanted to say yes and protect herself from once again being swayed by a handsome man, but how could she? Ryan had saved her life. The least she could do was agree to let him join her table.

"No, go ahead," she agreed, gesturing to the single chair opposite her.

"Are you staying nearby?"

"Yes. You?"

"At the Glasshouse." She felt her eyebrows rise and her eyes widen as he named her hotel. It felt as if they were being drawn together and that was a tough feeling to reconcile in the face of her newfound decision to take charge of her own life.

"How long are you going to be in Edinburgh?" Maybe he would be gone before she had to worry about her feelings toward him.

"A few days. You?"

"The same." Of course, she thought to herself. She took a long sip of the local rhubarb cider she had nursed throughout her meal.

"So you are not running away from your life permanently?"

She looked up to meet his eyes, surprised that he had raised her impulsive comment. "No, I'm afraid that is not an option."

"Glad to hear it." The waitress arrived at their table and took Ryan's order. She was a gorgeous Scottish redhead, tall with a body as luxurious as her hair. She waited for Ryan to notice but he was polite and otherwise unconcerned with the other woman.

“I hope you don’t mind sticking around for a bit. It’s been a long time since I’ve had good company.”

“How do you know I’ll be good company?”

“Because you’re beautiful to look at and you speak your mind, making you interesting to talk to. It’s a rare but highly sought-after combination.”

He thought she was beautiful. When had she last heard that? She tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear before finally looking up to meet his eyes. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything, Erin. That’s the benefit of having dinner with a stranger. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I think I owe you a lot,” she acknowledged.

“So tell me something about yourself and we’ll call it even.”

She thought of all the things she could tell him. She was a physician. She worked at the same hospital as her stepfather and ex-husband. She was recently divorced from the only man she had ever been in a serious relationship with. None of those topics she wanted to discuss. “I was born in Scotland.”

“You don’t sound Scottish.” He was smiling at her and she couldn’t help but feel a sense of warmth from him.

“We moved when I was one. This is my first time back.”

“Your father never brought you here when you were growing up?”

“No. My father died when I was ten.”

He reached across the table and rested his hand on hers. “I’m sorry.”

This was where she normally said “That’s okay” as casually as she could muster, but something about Ryan changed her response. “Thank you.”

His hand lingered on hers until the waitress returned with his dark draft beer. “So tell me something about yourself,” she said, genuinely interested in the man before her.

“What do you want to know?”

“Am I the first woman you have ever pulled off a hillside?”

“First, and hopefully last. What else?” He leaned back in his chair and looked completely relaxed with opening his life up to her questions.

“Where are you stationed?”

“I’ve been mainly in combat zones in the Middle East for the past five years.”

“Do you like it?”

“Combat?”

“Being in the military.”

“Yes. I originally joined to help pay for school but found myself drawn to the hard work ethic and structure. When I finished school I decided to stay for the challenge.”

“You like a challenge?” She was surprised to hear her own voice almost coy, teasing him.

“I’ve found that everything in life worth having you have to work for.” The smile that followed was enough to make her heart begin to race. Was he flirting with her? A second later a horrible thought flashed through her mind and in a moment it also left

her mouth.

"Are you married?" She alternated her gaze between the look in his eyes during his response and an examination of his left hand, looking for any hint of an outline of a ring.

"No, never have been." It seemed as if he was telling the truth, but would she know if he wasn't? He didn't seem at all disturbed by her question. "Are you?"

She thought about her new label, hating the way it made her relive all her mistakes every time the label was used. She took another sip of her cider and rested the glass back on the table before answering. "Divorced."

"That bothers you."

"You're observant," she acknowledged.

"I've built my career around paying attention to the subtle clues people give me."

"Then you're lucky. I'm so naive that I miss even the most obvious of signs people give me."

"You don't strike me as naive."

"I'm not anymore." Or that was her new resolve anyway. She still needed to prove it to herself.

"I get the feeling there is a story behind that."

He was more than observant, he was perceptive and he was right. There was a long story behind the loss of her innocence, but not one that she felt like sharing—especially with Ryan. It had been years since she had been a stranger to anyone and she enjoyed the freedom of talking to someone who wasn't privy to

the backstory of her life. “Are you always this inquisitive with women you have barely met?”

“No. But considering how we met I think we’re already beyond the superficial, don’t you?”

It wasn’t his words that implied an intimacy between them. It was the way he was looking at her. She again took in the man sitting before her. He was as handsome as he was confident and, as silly as it felt, it felt as if he was on her side. She wasn’t sure which feature she found most attractive but attraction was definitely coursing through her body.

“Yes,” she answered. “What exactly are we doing here, Ryan?”

She was direct. He’d known that already but he still wasn’t prepared for her question, because he didn’t know the answer. He had thought about little other than her since they had last parted. Relief had been just one of the emotions he had felt when he’d seen her tonight. If it had only been relief he would have just been happy to see that she was all right and left her alone, but more than relief he felt a complete fascination with the woman he had spotted the moment he’d entered the restaurant.

She looked more mature and somehow more desirable than she had on the hillside. Gone was the young frightened girl and instead, walking past him, was a confident woman. Her blond hair appeared freshly washed and accented perfectly against the blue silk of her shirt. She once again wore heeled boots to add to her height and they clung to her legs in the same fashion as her flesh-hugging gray denim.

Once in the pub he waited for over an hour before he ventured to her table and now he was being asked point-blank about his intentions. Intentions he still didn't even know or understand.

"I'm getting to know a person who has captured my attention and I hope you're doing the same."

He watched as her flush spread from the valley between her breasts that her shirt exposed upward toward her face. She reached this time for her iced water and he watched her bide her time before answering.

"You have definitely captured my attention. But I'm not sure about why we're bothering to get to know each other."

"You really know how to flatter a man." If he'd thought she'd turned red earlier, she had darkened two shades with his last comment.

"What I meant was that neither of us lives here. We may never even see each other again after tonight."

"Do you want to see me again?"

Another long pause before he heard the small sigh escape her lips before she answered. "I've learned the hard way it doesn't matter what I want."

"It matters to me." And it did. He hated seeing the look of defeat in her eyes and felt as if he would do anything to make it go away.

"And if I did want to see you again?"

"Then we would want the same thing."

He waited for her response, or more so her verbal response.

He didn't miss the way her pupils dilated or the slight tremble in her response to him. "I want to see you again. I just don't know if it is a good idea."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because things I thought were right for me in the past have been anything but."

"You don't think you can trust me?"

She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't ready for Ryan. Why now? Except she couldn't really begrudge his arrival in her life, because without him there was the possibility she wouldn't be alive. Could she trust him? Her instincts said yes, but she had been so wrong before that the person she really couldn't trust was herself.

"I don't know what to think about any of this."

"What does your gut tell you?"

Her gut told her that she wanted more. More of Ryan and more of the feelings he was bringing out in her. That even talking to him felt so different from her beginnings with Kevin. She didn't feel that sense of being charmed and swept off her feet, which ironically felt better. Ryan made her feel as if this was less about him and more about her and him liking what he saw in her. What would be the harm in spending more time together? To indulge in the feelings he brought out in her? Her first fling and in less than a week they would go their separate ways, and at best he would become a beautiful memory to carry with her as she carved out her new life. At worst, well, really, what couldn't

she face after everything she had already been through?

"It's getting late and it's pretty dark out. Would you mind walking me back to the hotel?"

"I think I can do that."

He signaled to the waitress and paid their bill, silencing her objections to his generosity. She also wasn't able to slip past his gallantry as he helped her put on her jacket and held the door for her as they ventured into the slightly cooled night air.

"It is beautiful here, both day and night," she remarked, feeling relaxation take hold of her for the first time since arriving earlier that day. A yawn escaped her as the jet lag she had been waiting for did the same.

"Careful, these roads are charming but a bit uneven." His words were followed by his arm brushing past hers to take hold of her hand. It was the second time she had felt held to him and she allowed herself to enjoy it.

They walked the few blocks toward the hotel and her mind began to quiet as she enjoyed the evening and her time with Ryan. "It's nice to have someone to look out for me," she thought and said simultaneously.

The hand that had so strongly held hers pulled her toward him as they stopped still in the darkness a few meters from the hotel's entrance. "I wish I could say that all I want to do is look out for you." His voice, sounding slightly anguished, made the short voyage to her ears.

"What do you want to do with me?" she asked, surprised, with

no essence of the "come-hither" that question would normally hold.

"This," he answered, as his hands moved even closer to hold her against him as his lips descended on hers. His lips were hard yet so soft against her own and she welcomed the contact. She reached up, letting her hands rest against his chest, loving the feel of his firm chest as much as she enjoyed the pressure of his kiss. She felt his desire for more and she wanted the same, opening her mouth to his for him to explore. She wasn't sure how long they stood like that, in the night, kissing, but she was certain that she had never been kissed like that before.

When they finally broke apart she felt breathless and dizzy, both in a very good way. "Thank you," she murmured against him.

"Thank you?" he said, puzzled.

"I needed to be kissed like that."

"I'd be happy to do it again."

She laughed and she enjoyed the sound echoing through the night.

"Really, Erin. I have full intentions of kissing you again," he stated outright, and she had no doubt of his plans.

"Can you meet me tomorrow?" she asked with a little hesitancy, hoping for the response she realized she desperately wanted.

"Yes."

"Then I have no doubt you will make good on your promise.

Good night. I'll see you in the morning." This time she initiated the kiss as she closed the gap between them once again and softly pressed her lips to his, before breaking away and moving through the hotel courtyard to the entrance. He didn't follow her, which was good as she wasn't sure she would be able to resist any further advances.

Ryan walked onto the balcony of his suite, which in the daytime gave him both a clear view of old Edinburgh and the sea. He sipped from a short glass of Scotch and tried to organize his thoughts and motivations.

He could no longer pretend that he was spending time with Erin to protect her from herself. Did she have a hint of sadness to her—yes. But after tonight he couldn't make the argument that she was depressed and needed saving from herself. Maybe he had misinterpreted what had happened on Arthur's Seat. What he hadn't misinterpreted was his attraction to her. Tonight in the restaurant with every word that had come from her perfectly formed lips and every small move of her body toward him he'd felt a pull toward her. He had meant what he'd said to her—she was beautiful and she said what she meant, and he valued both qualities equally. So much so that he had kissed her and now wanted more.

He looked out into the night and had to blink before he believed what his eyes were showing him. On the balcony a few rooms away he saw Erin. She had changed into a dark-colored nightshirt that seemed to come just to the tops of her

bare legs. It was loose on her but between the V-shaped cut of the neckline, its short length and the way a mild wind was pressing it against her he thought it was the sexiest bedtime apparel he had ever seen on a woman. He watched her, half mesmerized by her appearance and half concerned about her choice of location. What was she doing on the balcony? He exhaled a sigh of relief as she reached for a large blanket and wrapped her body in it before taking a seat in one of the balcony chairs, where she stayed staring out into the night.

Ryan, Erin thought, was she ready for Ryan? She had only said goodbye to him a few minutes ago and she already missed him, a man she just met. It was hard to reconcile all the feelings she was experiencing. One of the emotions she had felt during her divorce had been fear. Fear that outside her relationship with Kevin she had no experience with other men. Would another man find her attractive one day? And would she ever trust another man enough? And even if he did and she did, would she ever want the man she loved to suffer the same cruel fate she had been dealt? No.

But Ryan. Did she trust Ryan—yes. But were they ever going to be in a relationship—no. This was a brief and fleeting opportunity and one she didn't feel she could turn away. Because she liked Ryan and the way he made her feel and because she was not going to let Kevin take one more thing from her.

Kevin had been a mistake from the beginning. She had just been too young and naive to see it. She had been a medical

student on her first clinical rotation in Orthopedics when she'd met him. She had been nervous and excited, wearing her white clinical jacket for the first time and being called student intern. Everyone had seemed more important than her—the nurses, the residents, the staff physicians—and all she had wanted to do was to impress.

Then she'd met Kevin, or Dr. Dufour, her supervising resident, and he had seemed godlike in comparison to her lowly medical student ranking. He would single her out from her colleagues, giving her more opportunities and one-on-one time than any of the other students on the rotation. At first she had been flattered and had done her best to impress him, going that extra mile to stay late and check bloodwork or making food runs to bring to him in the operating room in between cases. Looking back on it, she had been more his slave than his student, but she had been so in awe of everything he'd represented.

Then his attention had become more personal than professional. Subtle touches, comments on her appearance, and she'd continued to be flattered. She had never been involved with anyone older than her and the attention of an older accomplished man had been absorbing. And he'd been a charmer, a snake charmer, really. It hadn't been long before she'd fallen for him and he'd been making late-night appearances at her apartment. She had been in love with the man she'd thought he was and he had been willing to take advantage.

Until—until she'd become pregnant. And until he'd realized

that while her last name was the same as her birth father's, Madden, her stepfather was Dr. Williamson, the hospital's chief of staff. That had been when she'd started getting glimpses of the man he really was, but she had been so overwhelmed with concern over her own life and how the pregnancy was going to affect her career that she'd pushed them to the back of her mind.

The same was done with her hesitancy over getting married. Her parents had made it clear that she had already disappointed them and it had been crushing knowledge, so she'd gone along with their demands, thinking that once Kevin got used to the idea of their upcoming family he would settle into their life together.

She had been so wrong. Once they'd married he'd become resentful and disinterested and she'd become trapped and alone. He hadn't even been there when she'd almost died from complications from her miscarriage. To him it had been the final nail in the coffin that was his marriage. He'd felt unable to leave her now, not if he wanted his career. So he'd stayed. She had tried to make him happy. Tried to regain what they had lost, spending months—years—trying to conceive again, but she couldn't.

Then had come the women. She'd met his first girlfriend shortly after they'd married, learning that he had been involved with the other woman at the same time as her up until their wedding. When she'd confronted him he'd told her what she'd wanted to hear and had promised his fidelity. Soon she had been too caught up in her own pain from her pregnancy loss to care whether he was telling the truth.

But as she had risen from her grief and begun to face her reality, she couldn't hide the signs. By then she had graduated medical school and was now the resident at Boston General and Kevin was a staff orthopedic surgeon. When she walked the halls she would notice people taking more notice of her than was normal. When she entered the emergency department she would see nurses turn and speak quietly to one another. Then finally after three years of marriage she received a written note in her locker from "a friend" who wanted her to know that her husband was sleeping with one of the hospital pharmacists.

He didn't even deny it. Instead he blamed his infidelity on her inadequacies as a wife. In some ways Kevin still won in their divorce. She filed for divorce citing irreconcilable differences, too embarrassed to have her husband's cheating and her deficiencies aired publically. His professional reputation remained intact and he was able to carry on at Boston General as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile, she was struggling to gain her own reputation outside her infamous failed marriage and position as the chief of staff's stepdaughter.

Kevin wanted her gone, completely, and communicated more with her postdivorce with his badgering than he had in the year prior to their ultimate divorce. And it would be easier for her just to leave and start over somewhere new with all her baggage left behind, but there was something about Boston General that felt like home and she wasn't ready to give up anything else in her life.

The wind picked up again and she felt the corners of the

blanket lift. It was time to try to sleep, to force herself onto Scottish time. She rose from her chair and peered into the night, instinctively turning to her right, looking away from the ocean and at one of the neighboring balconies. She recognized Ryan. The backlighting of his suite and the darkness of the balcony created the same effect as when she had first seen him and the image of masculine perfection was unchanged. They were too far apart for words, so instead she pressed her hand to her lips and extended it toward him before walking back into her suite and closing the balcony door.

CHAPTER THREE

NERVOUS ANTICIPATION FILLED her as Erin dressed for the unknown in the day ahead. Somehow in the heat of her moment with Ryan they had not made true plans for today, she had just asked him to meet her. When? Where? She had no idea, but she had complete faith that she would see him.

She ran her fingers through her hair, deciding to leave it down, and took a look at her appearance in the mirror. It had felt great that morning, getting ready and knowing that there was someone waiting for her who would be appreciative of her effort. Her cream tunic top had a crocheted design that while it covered her it also revealed her shape beneath. The same went for her gray slim-fit summer pants that ended a few inches above her ankles. She had small slip-on shoes that matched and would be perfect for exploring Edinburgh. She hoped she would see Ryan sooner rather than later.

He was waiting in the hotel lobby when the elevator doors opened. He looked up and smiled, sipping from a takeaway cup of coffee. He looked as good as when she had twice previously seen him. He was freshly washed and shaved and the V-neck of his red polo shirt revealed the hint of another tattoo on his chest. She walked toward him and he rose to greet her, and before she could wish him good morning his lips were against hers. The kiss was brief but no less exciting. “I’ve been waiting to do that.”

“I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long.”

“You’re worth waiting for. I brought you a coffee. I hope you drink coffee.”

“I live on it, thanks.”

“So what is your plan for the day?” he asked.

“My plan?” Her only plan had been to be with Ryan.

“Well, my plan was to be with you, which I have now accomplished, so now we move on to your plan.”

She knew she was smiling like a fool, but still couldn’t change the way she felt. “Ah. Okay, then. Today is my only free day and my plan was to explore Edinburgh. I would be very pleased if you joined me.”

“Lead on.”

With a genuine smile she led them back outside the hotel, where Ryan took her hand. “Let me guess, we’re going to the princess castle.”

“Of course,” she replied, and felt by the time the day was done her whole face was going to hurt from the happiness Ryan seemed to be able to bring out in her. “But don’t worry, the princess castle also contains the military museum, which should appease you.”

They made their way through the irregular streets toward the Edinburgh Castle entrance. She knew not to object as Ryan paid their entrance fee and they passed through the castle gate. “Look up,” he instructed.

Above them was a spiked portcullis designed to protect the

castle against siege. “Not exactly a fairytale castle feature,” he added.

“I don’t believe in fairy tales.”

“Another thing we have in common, because neither do I.”

Ryan held her hand as they passed in and out of the buildings that made up Edinburgh Castle. She had always enjoyed history and was happy that Ryan also seemed fascinated by the depth of history within the castle walls. They took their time exploring the National War Museum and she was impressed with his knowledge as he took the time to explain to her the nuances of past wars. At the end of the museum was a new exhibit dedicated to war veterans with amputations and the use of prosthetics.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Ryan remarked, as they examined the cabinet filled with examples of modern bionic limbs.

“It is.”

“I should have been an orthopedic surgeon,” he remarked, not knowing the effect his words would have on her.

“No, you shouldn’t have been,” she blurted, not able to censor herself yet again.

“Why not?” he asked, confused by the shift in her demeanor.

“Because I like you just the way you are,” she answered, trying to cover the real meaning behind her remark.

“Why do I feel like there is something you are not saying?”

She sighed, realizing that her deflection hadn’t worked and she was going to have to bring her past into what was already the best day she’d had in years.

“Because there is. My ex-husband is an orthopedic surgeon and I would like to think that you have nothing in common.”

“Ah. So you have a thing against doctors?” She could tell he was testing her and she hoped she didn’t sound like a bitter, scorned woman.

“That would make my life very hard, considering I am one. I’ve just learned the hard way about the dangers of mixing personal and professional lives and would never risk that again.” She watched him, waiting for his reaction, and didn’t miss the conflict in his face. Was he so surprised that she was a physician or was he just as bothered as she was that her ex had entered into their time together. She wanted to go back and take away her comment. “Besides, the only type of man I could now ever imagine being attracted to is one in the military.”

She smiled, and her smile only grew as he smiled back at her.

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely and completely.”

“So doctors are not your type?”

“Nope, I only have eyes for ruggedly handsome soldiers who save my life and come with no strings attached.” As the words left her lips even she didn’t doubt her sincerity. Ryan was the complete opposite of Kevin and the possibility of something between them felt more and more right with every moment they spent together. He was what she needed, a couple of days of abandon to restore everything her failed marriage had taken away from her.

The way he looked at her she had no doubt he was feeling the same attraction she was. “Well, Dr. Erin, I think we are both fortunate that you have equally opened my eyes to the appeal of female physicians. So I take it you are not in orthopedics. What do you do?”

“Obstetrics and gynecology.”

“That would be the opposite of orthopedics,” he remarked, and she appreciated that he, too, was trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s less complicated than taking care of men.” She laughed.

“Ouch.” He feigned injury.

“It is actually amazing helping women and being there for one of the most special times in their lives.”

“Did you know that Mary Queen of Scots gave birth in this castle?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then let’s go check out the birth chamber of James VI.” He once again connected his hand with hers and she marveled at how the same action brought even more excitement each time he touched her.

She had been right. Her face hurt from smiling. As they toured the entire castle she felt completely at peace and in her element, learning about Scottish history and with a man she respected and whose company she enjoyed. Not to mention an attraction that was growing exponentially. Every time he reached for her hand it felt as if they were connecting and throughout the day she was holding her breath, waiting for the moment when he would kiss

her again.

She felt the first drop hit her shoulder as they once again passed through the castle gates. Then the second, then the third. Within seconds the sky had opened and rain was pouring down on both of them. She felt a tug on her hand as he pulled her into the protection of a narrow corridor between the old brick buildings. The small space necessitated being pressed together and any thoughts she had of being cold immediately vanished. Ryan's hand swept her wet bangs from her forehead before his lips came down on hers.

Finally, she thought as she met him with equal passion. His lips were wet with the rain and added to the freshness of his taste. She opened her mouth to him, wanting more, and was rewarded by his response. His tongue met hers until she didn't know where he ended and she began. At the same time his hands trailed from his initial position on her face along the sides of her body until she felt them on her bare back underneath the dampness of her shirt. Another point of heat between them.

She wanted more. Wanted him to move his hands over her and caress her aching breasts. Wanted to feel the ultimate fulfillment that the rigidity pressed into her abdomen promised.

"Not here," he murmured into her ear, when they finally broke apart.

She looked into the pouring rain. "Want to make a run for it?"

"Yes," he agreed with the same smile she had become accustomed to.

She kissed him once more, pressing her lips to his with the firm passion that had ignited inside her, before they broke apart and made their start on the sprint back to the hotel. It took them ten minutes but on arrival in the hotel's lobby she was completely soaked through and panting from the exertion of their run.

She followed Ryan's lead and they said nothing to each other, the understanding already present between them as they entered the elevator and Ryan pressed the button for his floor. As soon as the door closed they were once again wrapped around each other. His lips were on hers. His hands were covering her body. And she was burning up despite the cold, wet clothing covering them both.

As the doors opened they broke apart and with one mutual look their sprint continued hand in hand. One swipe of Ryan's key and they were tumbling into his room. They reunited in their embrace, but this time there were no restrictions from being in a public place to hold them back. She watched as he pulled away from their kiss and peeled his soaked shirt from his body. It felt like an unveiling as she got to see firsthand what lay beneath.

Nothing disappointed. Every muscle on his body was defined. The tattoo she had seen hints of on his chest was a serpent entwined on a single rod along his right pectoral muscle. It reminded her of the caduceus, the symbol she recognized for medicine, but it was slightly different. Encircling his right biceps was another design. Either way she had never considered tattoos attractive but on Ryan they were explosive.

Before she could enjoy him any further she felt herself being stripped of her drenched top. She had previously been shy about her body, but not with Ryan. The minute she was exposed she wasn't because he pressed back against her. His mouth rejoined hers but it wasn't long before he was trailing his lips down her neck to her shoulder. She threaded her fingers through his wet hair and felt her body melting into his.

His hands skimmed her back before she felt the clasp of her bra release and the weight of her breasts released from their confines. Yes, she thought, this was what she wanted. He stepped back from her and she was rewarded by the look in his eye and the knowledge that he was every bit as enthralled as she was. With painstaking precision he eased the garment from her shoulders, down her arms and completely off, before he skimmed her breasts with the back of his hand. It was seduction at its finest. Then without pause he was against her, lifting her, his hands cupping her bottom before resting her on the dresser's edge. The move had made up for their foot difference in height and she felt even closer to him.

She was finally rewarded with the feel of both of his hands, each cupping a breast and causing electric shocks of want to course through her body to her core. His hands gently caressed her as his mouth returned to her neck, his thumbs occasionally brushing against the peaks of her rigid nipples. She loved every touch, welcomed it as she felt the anticipation of what was still to come.

He paused his tactile exploration and she opened her eyes to see why he'd stopped. His hand was able to completely cover her own tattoo, a small willow tree on her lower left hip. She blinked hard, thinking about what it represented, not wanting to explain its significance, especially now.

"You're beautiful."

And she believed him. "Thank you."

A weeping willow, he thought to himself, and instantly the memory of her vulnerability on the hillside played in his mind. What was he doing? He thought to himself. He wanted her, desperately, but was this fair to her? When he knew she was vulnerable? No, it wasn't fair to her, and from what he had learned about her so far she both needed, and deserved, someone to be on her side.

"I think we should slow down." The words were torn from him because it was what his rational thought wanted but not what his body wanted.

"What?" she said. Her eyes dilated in both passion and disbelief.

He couldn't repeat himself so instead he reached into one of the nearby dressers and pulled out a T-shirt, which he proceeded to cover her with. He needed to cover the temptation she represented—it didn't work. She still turned him on and now she looked hurt and that was the last thing he wanted.

"I don't want us to do anything you are going to regret."

"Why would I regret this?"

He wanted to be as honest as she had been. Because he was a physician and she didn't know. Because maybe her deeply hidden sadness was making her vulnerable to him. "Because I'm worried I'm taking advantage of you."

He watched as her arms crossed protectively across her chest and she ran a hand through her hair, which had become wild as it dried from the rain. "In what way?"

"In that I saved your life and maybe you feel indebted to me."

"I don't. I'm grateful, but I don't."

"Okay, but what about the fact that you admitted you were running away from a disaster in your life?"

"I think that's for me to worry about."

"Not just you, Erin."

"I think I should go."

He instinctively lifted her down from the dresser he had perched her on and backed away. He watched as she looked at the wet heap that was her shirt and bra on the floor before deciding to leave it and making her way to the door.

She shut the door of her room and collapsed against the back of it before sinking down on the floor. He hadn't stopped her and he hadn't followed her, and how she had wanted him to. The worst part was that she believed him and understood why he had stopped.

Ryan saw her as fragile and he didn't want to take advantage of her. Where had he been three years ago? And how she wished he had been wrong, but the truth was she was still vulnerable. And

maybe she would always have that vulnerability that had been born from being broken.

Was she making a good decision with Ryan? She knew she wanted him and wished he hadn't stopped what had been the most sensual encounter she had ever experienced. But she also couldn't deny that she wasn't in a good position emotionally to be making major life choices. But was Ryan that? She had convinced herself last night that he was a holiday indulgence to be enjoyed but after today he felt like more. And what was worse, she actually respected and trusted him more for turning her away. So where did that leave them now?

CHAPTER FOUR

A KNOCK AT HER hotel room door roused her from the late-afternoon nap she had been indulging in. After she had lifted herself from the room's floor and showered the chill from her body she curled up in the hotel-provided terry-toweling robe, thinking of all the questions she had no answers for.

She fastened the robe's sash tightly and then made her way to the door. She opened the door slightly to see Ryan, who also looked drier than the last time she had seen him. She opened the door wider and stepped aside to allow him inside. Both her eyes and her nose spotted the bag of food he was carrying.

"I thought I would bring dinner to you."

She glanced at the room's clock and realized that her late-afternoon nap had spread well into the evening and it was past eight.

"Thank you," she said cautiously, not knowing where they stood. "How did you know which room I was in?"

"I saw you last night on your balcony and you're welcome." He went ahead and set up his offering on the round table adjacent to the glass balcony doors and she took the seat intended for her.

"Smells delicious," she remarked, trying to keep their conversation neutral but realizing she was more than happy at his reappearance.

"It's nice to see you smile. I was worried I had ruined things

between us."

His confession brought out an instant relaxation in her and the awkwardness of the aftermath of the previous encounter dissolved.

"You haven't."

"I hope you like traditional Scottish fare. It was what the restaurant recommended and it seemed fitting. Plus they had the bread pudding that you seemed very fond of last night." He was smiling to accompany the gentle familiarity of his teasing.

"You know what they say about holidays—it's the time to indulge."

"Yes." His voice had changed and contained a masculine huskiness as she realized the other meanings of her words. It was clear that, whatever had happened between them, he still wanted her, too.

"So what are your plans?" she asked, trying to shift the focus from their almost sexual encounter.

He choked on the glass of water he had been sipping from. "Excuse me?"

"For the rest of your time in Scotland," she amended, realizing he'd thought she had been asking about his plans for her.

"I have a commitment the day after tomorrow and then I have to return to the base. What are your plans, Erin?"

"Today was my last free day."

"I refuse to accept that."

"I'm afraid it's true. I have two days of meetings then I'm

flying back to the States the next morning."

"But your nights are free?"

"That depends. Why did you stop earlier?" She needed to know. She wasn't prepared to spend more time torturing herself by being with Ryan and wondering how he felt about her and what his intentions were.

"I thought we had covered that."

"What if I wanted to readdress it?"

"Your tattoo."

"What?" She didn't understand his comment.

"Your tattoo."

"Considering your own ink, I'm surprised you have a problem with a woman having a tattoo."

"I don't. I actually think it's beautiful. You can tell that you had it placed for only you to see."

"I did." How did this man read her so well?

"It's a weeping willow, and it reminded me that the one thing I don't want to do is hurt you."

"So don't." She was rewarded with his smile. "Did you know weeping willows are known for their tenacious roots that continue life, but the trees themselves are also a symbol of compassion? My tattoo symbolizes tenacity and compassion, both qualities of the weeping willow and both qualities I strive to possess."

"You don't think you already do?"

"I think, to be the person I want to be and the physician I want

to be, I need to work on both."

"I like you the way you are."

It was what she needed to hear after years of being not enough for a husband who hadn't valued or loved her. Ryan's words empowered her. "Thank you. I feel the same way about you. What if I told you you were what I needed? Would that change your mind?"

"Explain." She saw him shifting in his chair and knew she had gotten through to him.

"Maybe what I need is time with a man I respect and who actually renews my faith in men and maybe myself."

"I'm a soldier, first and foremost. I couldn't promise you anything."

"I don't want you to promise me anything. I've been promised the world by a man and it didn't work out. So you don't need to worry about not giving me a promise for forever because even if you did I wouldn't accept it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He stood from his chair opposite her and she took a deep breath of anticipation until he started walking away from her. "If you are still sure tomorrow then I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow night. If you change your mind, please just stand me up so that I don't try to change it back."

She watched mutely as he walked away and then was surprised when he suddenly turned back. She felt him lift her from her

chair and gather her in his arms before his lips made contact with hers. It was hot, it was hard and it was every bit as passionate as she wanted. When he broke away she was gasping for air but still not wanting it to have ended.

"Just in case you needed a reminder. Good night, sleep tight."

How was she ever going to make it until seven tonight? A restless night, thinking of the possibilities, had left her completely devoid of sleep. Added to that, she seemed to have forgotten the skill of being able to sit through hours of seminars and she had no ability to focus on the lectures being presented. The International Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology conference had been her original reason for the trip to Scotland but now it was the furthest thing from her mind.

She had been elected to sit on a discussion panel throughout the conference to provide a perspective on both the American experience and the experience of the younger generation of obstetricians and gynecologists. At the time it had been an honor, but now all she could think of was Ryan.

"Dr. Dufour." A voice cut into her thoughts and she instantly recoiled inwardly. She had registered for the conference before her name had legally returned to her maiden name of Madden.

"Yes," she answered reluctantly.

"What has been your experience in the States with single embryo transfers to reduce the rates of multiple births in infertile couples?"

She did her best to shift her focus away from the nervous

anticipation of the upcoming night and back to her original purpose for being in Scotland. She needed to focus on her work, particularly as infertility was her area of interest and she was looking for a fellowship in that area after graduation.

She straightened her navy blazer and took a sip of water before turning on the power to the microphone in front of her. “The single embryo transfer program is a much better option for women whose treatment cycles are funded through government insurance programs. In the United States women still pay out of their own pockets for their cycles, most of the time taking on significant debt for the chance at a baby. Given those circumstances, it is hard to convince them to transfer just one embryo.”

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