



JUDY CAMPBELL

Return of
Dr Maguire



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Judy Campbell

Return of Dr Maguire

Аннотация

When flying doctor Lachlan Maguire returns to Scotland to claim the surgery left to him by his mother, it offers a whole load of challenges...including fiery redhead GP Christa Lennox! After one hot, unforgettable night, Lachlan can't stop thinking about Christa. But her past holds a secret – one that involves him...and promises to change their lives for ever!

Dear Reader

Sometimes our first impressions of people are wrong! I have jumped to conclusions too soon about people I've met in the past, and I thought it would be interesting to explore my heroine's initial response to Lachlan and her gradual understanding of his character because of his past history.

I've set this story, as I do many of my books, in Scotland—a place I love—and I hope you like the setting. It was fun to write—I hope you enjoy it too!

Best wishes

Judy

Return of Dr Maguire

Judy Campbell



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Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

‘I JUST DO not believe it!’ muttered Christa Lennox. ‘What the hell is that man doing?’

Titan, the Border terrier, lying at the foot of Christa’s desk, sprang up and looked at her enquiringly with head cocked to one side.

‘Don’t bark, Titan!’ she warned him sternly.

She opened the window and leaned forward to get a better view of the opposite wall, squinting through the dancing shadows of the trees nearby. Her gaze was riveted on a man perched precariously at the top of a ladder, hacking away at the guttering and filling a sack suspended from a rung.

Yet another thieving toerag trying to take what he could—and in broad daylight too! Well, she’d darned well show him he wasn’t going to get away with it—two burglaries in a fortnight were two too many! On top of the tragedy of dear Isobel dying so suddenly three weeks ago, it was just all too much...

Christa swung away from the surgery window and raced through Reception, closely followed by Titan. She ran towards the ladder at the side of the car park, her auburn hair escaping from its clips and springing out in a mad bob. No point in ringing the police on a Sunday—it would take hours for them to come.

She and Titan skidded to a halt at the bottom of the ladder.

‘If you’re trying to nick lead from the roof, you’re too late—it’s all gone!’ she yelled up at the man. ‘Get down now, or I’ll call the police!’

Titan joined in by barking ferociously and adding an extra growl or two for good measure. The man twisted round and looked down, frowning. He had tied a large handkerchief round his lower face so that only his eyes were visible. Trying to remain anonymous, thought Christa scornfully. ‘Titan! Titan! Be quiet!’ she commanded.

The dog lay down, panting with its tongue lolling out, and watched her adoringly. The man's glance flicked over to Christa, slowly taking in her angry upturned face and sweeping over her indignant figure.

There was a pause before he said rather irritably, 'Well—what is it?'

Christa, put her hands on her hips. 'I want to know what on earth you're doing up there!'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Excuse me?'

'Could you tell me why you're on the roof?'

The man leaned on the ladder, a flash of annoyance in the clear blue eyes that met hers, then whipped the handkerchief from his face, revealing tanned good looks and an irritated expression.

'Not that it's anything to do with you, but I'm examining the guttering—it looks as if it's on its last legs.'

Christa wasn't to be put off. 'Examining the guttering, my foot!' she said angrily. 'Come down now!' she ordered. 'I can't carry on a conversation when you're up there!'

He shrugged, half-amused. 'Oh, for God's sake...of all the bossy women...' He descended the ladder, leaping lightly down the last three rungs, and the little dog sprang up and would have thrown himself at the man's legs if Christa hadn't grabbed his collar.

'Don't worry, Titan—I can handle this...'

Titan sank back unwillingly and Christa turned back to the man and demanded peremptorily, 'Well? What have you got to

say for yourself?’

He leaned against the wall in front of her with hands stuffed into his pockets, his eyes narrowed, ranging coolly over her. ‘Do you always sound like a headmistress? Now just what’s bugging you?’

A moment’s doubt—could this guy really be a thief? He seemed so assured, so...brazen. Surely a thief would have taken off by now? He stared at her boldly, and she decided that he was just bluffing it out, conning her into thinking he was a legitimate builder.

Christa drew herself up to her full five feet six inches and said majestically, ‘I want to know what excuse you’ve got to give for this daylight robbery—taking a chance because it’s a Sunday and the place is empty, I’ll bet!’

He laughed out loud and Christa blinked. He didn’t seem a whit worried by her threat to call the police or her accusation—in fact, he looked totally relaxed, in charge of the situation, no sign of being intimidated. She glared at him, looking him straight in the eye, and he stared impudently back at her, making fun of her. The cheeky bastard!

She shouldn’t have looked at his eyes—massive error! She was taken aback by their compelling shade of deep, clear blue, fringed with black lashes and...well, they were incredibly unusual...even sexy—which, of course, was nothing to do with the situation whatsoever, she thought irritably.

The man had a tall, spare figure, dressed in faded shorts and

a ripped shirt, revealing a muscled torso. He could have got a job playing the lead in a James Bond movie or doing ads for some exotic men's shaving lotion, reflected Christa... And for a split nanosecond she felt an unexpected flutter of excitement somewhere in the region of her stomach.

It took her unawares, made her cross because after her experience with Colin Maitland, she was off all men for a very long time, wasn't she? She crushed the desolate, empty feeling that seemed to be a reflex action whenever she thought of that unmitigated rat, and told herself to stop reacting like a teenager being turned on by some celebrity just because the man in front of her was reasonably good looking.

She cleared her throat and said sternly, 'If you're not pinching lead, who gave you permission to look at the guttering—if that's what you were doing?'

'I don't have to ask anyone's permission—I own the house.'

She stared at him witheringly. 'You own the house? Don't be ridiculous! How can it belong to you? Dr Maguire only died three weeks ago and probate can't have been granted yet.'

He said quietly and without apparent emotion, 'Isobel Maguire was my mother. She left me Ardenleigh in her will.'

'Oh, my God...' Christa's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with embarrassment. 'I'm really sorry—I didn't realise...' Her voice faltered, and she gazed at him in a stunned way. So this was the mysterious son, Lachlan, that Isobel had rarely mentioned, and who, as far as she was aware, had never visited

his mother...

‘Perhaps you should make sure of your facts before making accusations,’ the man suggested coldly, an edge of sarcasm to his voice.

‘I had no idea who you were. If you’d let us know you were coming I wouldn’t have leaped to conclusions when I saw you with a handkerchief over your face on the roof,’ she protested, slightly stung that he was putting all the blame on her for not knowing who he was. ‘We’ve had such a spate of burglaries I thought you were yet another thief.’

He nodded rather wearily, pushing his spikily cut thick hair back from his forehead. ‘The handkerchief was to protect my lungs from the showers of dirt I was disturbing—but, yes, I guess you’re right. I should have told the practice I was coming. It’s all been a bit of a rush.’

Her tone softened. ‘We knew Isobel had a son, but we had no idea where you lived...’

‘I flew in from Australia on Friday and came up from Heathrow yesterday. I stayed in a pub last night, but tonight I’ll stay here if there’s a habitable room.’

‘You couldn’t make it to her funeral?’

‘No,’ he said curtly. ‘It was too late by the time I was contacted by her solicitor—I didn’t even know she’d died until a few days ago.’

Christa bit her lip. How could she have been so tactless? It was shocking that no one had known how to find him to tell him

about his mother. He must feel terrible about that.

‘I’m so sorry...’ she repeated, and her voice trailed off, but the man had turned his attention back to the building. Christa looked at him more closely. Now she knew who he was, she saw the family resemblance to his mother, who had also been tall and with those clear blue eyes. There was no doubt he had inherited the good looks that ran in the Maguire family.

The man looked sadly at the vast untidy lawn, the dense undergrowth beneath the trees at the end of the garden. ‘Everywhere looks very neglected... When I was young the garden was always immaculate, and that little copse well managed. I guess my mother had no interest in the place.’

‘She was too busy,’ said Christa defensively. ‘Isobel’s work meant everything to her—and being on her own, of course, it can’t have been easy, having to look after everything.’

‘I don’t suppose it was easy, but frankly it looks as if it’s falling down. I can’t believe she left it in such a state...’

‘I know she kept meaning to have things done. There never seemed to be time...’

‘A great pity,’ observed the man with some asperity.

He didn’t seem to have much sympathy for his mother, reflected Christa, even though Isobel had been alone and had worked so damned hard that it had probably contributed to her death. There was something rather...well, callous about his attitude.

‘It may have been that latterly she wasn’t feeling very well and

hadn't the energy to turn to domestic matters,' suggested Christa rather coldly.

Lachlan nodded. 'Maybe you're right,' he conceded. 'But just look at the state of those windows and woodwork... I used to escape through that window when I was a kid and was about to get a belting for something I'd done—I think it would fall out now if I opened it!' He turned and held out his hand, saying briskly, 'Anyway, it's about time we introduced ourselves. I'm Lachlan Maguire...and you are...?'

'I'm Christa Lennox, and I am...or rather was...your mother's colleague, her junior partner in the practice.'

The expression on Lachlan's face changed subtly from pleasant to wary, the blue eyes widening slightly. He repeated tersely, 'Christa Lennox? You worked with my mother?'

'Why, yes...' Christa looked at Lachlan, puzzled. 'Is there something wrong?'

'No...no, of course not.' Then he added casually after a pause, 'I used to know a man called Angus Lennox—are you a relation, by any chance?'

A look of wry amusement flickered across Christa's face. 'Ah...the black sheep of the family...wicked Uncle Angus,' she remarked. 'How did you know him?'

Lachlan idly kicked a stone away from his foot. 'Oh...he used to come to the house sometimes...' He looked up at Christa, a spark of curiosity in those clear blue eyes. 'And do you know what he did to deserve that reputation?'

Christa shrugged. ‘Oh, I don’t know all the details and it’s a tragic story. I know that he left his wife and child and my father was so outraged by his behaviour he wouldn’t speak about him, then Angus was killed in a car crash—a long time ago now.’

Lachlan nodded sombrely. ‘I remember that happening...as you say, it was a long time ago.’ He smiled. ‘Anyway, enough about your wicked uncle—tell me how you came to work with my mother.’

‘My own mother was ill some years ago and I was desperate to get a job here as my father had died, and Isobel offered me one. I loved your mother very much—she was a sweet woman and was extremely kind to me over so many things...’ Christa’s voice faltered slightly and she swallowed hard. ‘I was devastated when Isobel collapsed and died so suddenly—I couldn’t believe it. It’ll be very difficult to find someone to replace her—we shall all miss her so much.’

Lachlan took a rag out of his pocket and wiping his filthy hands remarked, ‘You won’t have to look far if I take on this place.’

‘What do you mean?’

For the first time a fleeting look of sadness crossed Lachlan’s strong features. ‘My mother left me a letter—you will have known from the post-mortem that her heart had been very damaged, and I think she knew she was on borrowed time. Amongst other things, she wanted me to take over the practice, and it’s something I will have to think about very carefully. It’s a

big decision to make. The house needs such a lot doing to it, and the surgery at the side is rather the worse for wear—it's going to eat up money.'

Christa only heard the first part of his reply and stared at him with her mouth open in astonishment and shock.

'I beg your pardon? You would take over the practice?'

'My mother obviously wanted me to—and, anyway, what would be the point of having the house without a job up here?'

'And did she have any other wishes I should know about?' asked Christa tartly. 'You say she mentioned other things in this letter?'

Lachlan Maguire hesitated then said crisply, 'Nothing of consequence.'

Christa took a deep breath and swallowed hard, trying to compose herself. 'I suppose it had never occurred to me that I wouldn't become the senior partner after Isobel retired—we'd never really discussed it. Perhaps having worked here six years I assumed I'd earned that right...'

Lachlan looked thoughtfully at Christa. 'It must be a shock, but having started the practice and built it up, perhaps she had the right to say whom she would like to succeed her.'

'Isobel didn't build the practice up on her own—I think other people came into it too,' said Christa sharply, a slight flush of anger on her cheeks. 'I rather take exception to someone just waltzing into the practice without any discussion and...'

Lachlan held his hand up. 'Whoa! Keep your hair on! I haven't

decided to take it all on yet—it's a big decision, leaving my job in Australia.' He flicked a quick glance at her flushed face and said lightly, 'Perhaps we can discuss this over a drink and not in the car park?'

She nodded coolly. 'A good idea—when do you suggest?'

'This evening about six? Come to the house and I'll see what's been left in the drinks cabinet.'

'Come on, then, Titan, we'll be going.' Christa bent down to ruffle the dog's head, and he leaped up and trotted at her heels towards the little terraced house she owned on the village green.

Lachlan watched her slim figure striding away and grimaced. Of all the people his mother had had to choose to be her colleague, he could hardly believe that it should be Angus Lennox's niece! It was extraordinary that Isobel should have picked Christa, of all people, to work with her. And now there was this poignant letter, Isobel's dying request...

Lachlan felt his throat constrict as he reread it in his mind's eye, urging him to take over the practice. That was a reasonable enough wish and one that left him with a mixture of emotions—a poignant regret that they hadn't talked about it before her death, and pride and relief that Isobel must still have loved him enough to want him to carry on her work.

It was her other bizarre suggestion that had floored him—it was ridiculous, almost cheeky! Perhaps it was even a joke—but for some reason he was pretty sure his mother had meant every word, he could even hear her voice with that soft hint of

determination in it.

He shook his head tiredly. He couldn't think about it now, his brain was a jumble of contrasting thoughts. Lachlan turned abruptly back towards the house and went in, slamming the door irritably behind him.

* * *

'How could she do this to me—never warning me that Lachlan was her preferred choice for senior partner?' muttered Christa angrily, as she opened her front door and went into the kitchen to make a cup of restorative tea.

A torrent of aggrieved feelings had been building up inside her as she'd walked home, a bitter sense of injustice mixed with bewilderment that a good friend like Isobel should apparently want a son she hadn't seen for years to take over the practice. Isobel had always said how she hoped that Christa would remain there when she retired, and from that Christa had assumed that she would take the surgery over. How wrong she'd been, she thought sadly.

Christa gazed out of the window at the people crossing the green towards the church, a peaceful scene in the mellow late afternoon light, and gradually she began to calm down. She didn't want to allow this to colour her view of Isobel, who had been so incredibly kind to her, not only when her mother had been ill but also when Christa's affair with Colin had disintegrated. Whatever had happened, Isobel had shown Christa that there was life after a broken heart, and had encouraged her to seek new interests,

given her more responsibility in the practice. Christa would be forever grateful for that.

And after all, it was natural for Isobel to leave the house to her son despite their distant relationship—she must still have loved him very much and maybe she felt the job went with the house. Even so, Christa wasn't about to hand control of the practice to this Lachlan—she didn't know him, didn't have an idea of his work or how they'd get on with each other. And one question that persisted—why had he never been to see his mother or, to Christa's knowledge, had any contact with her for so many years? It was a very hard thing to understand—Christa couldn't imagine severing contact with a mother, however difficult relations between them might be.

A sudden image of Lachlan's strong face and unusual eyes floated into Christa's head—he had a tough, rather exacting look about him, a look that indicated he wouldn't suffer fools gladly. The kind of man who got what he wanted. She imagined that he could be manipulative—just like many a good-looking man—and probably thought he could talk Christa round to anything with his flattering tongue and celebrity looks.

Well, she was prepared and she'd jolly well show him she wouldn't be pushed around by another man in a hurry! She certainly deserved just as much say in the running of things, having worked for Isobel for six years.

She scribbled down some bullet points that she would put to him—she wouldn't simply step meekly aside.

‘I’ve got to be firm, Titan,’ she informed the dog.

Titan looked up from his comfortable basket and thumped his tail sleepily in agreement.

* * *

Lachlan Maguire towelled himself down vigorously after his shower in the tepid water, the hottest temperature he could raise from Ardenleigh’s antiquated boiler. The whole place needed gutting—a fortune would have to be spent on it. He looked round at the cracked plaster and suspicion of damp on the walls, the stained bath and peeling lino floor. It was basically a handsome house, but where to start?

Years ago, before he’d left home, the house had been beautifully kept—light, bright chintzes in the sitting room, an airy dining room with lovely old furniture and a huge bay window that looked over the garden. Now there was an unkempt and uncared-for feel about the place—it felt sad and neglected.

Lachlan wound the towel round his waist and started to shave, peering into the dim mirror, and his bleak reflection stared back at him. A mixture of regret and sadness washed over him as he thought of the naïve judgemental youth he’d been, blaming his parents totally on the break-up of his family, impulsively moving as far away as he could.

Once he’d loved them dearly—a love that over the years he’d thought had turned to hate. Even now, years later, he could feel the resentment and despair he’d felt as a young lad when his world had seemed to collapse around him.

What an irony it was, therefore, that Isobel had left him the house—and perhaps by way of an apology, or some form of restitution, written that emotional letter, hoping Lachlan would take over her beloved practice. His mother had shown him that she still loved him, and had had faith in him. With a sudden and overwhelming feeling of guilt and sorrow, he realised that it was too late now to tell her that, despite everything, he had still loved her, had still missed her and had often longed to come home and see her again. How stupid he'd been to let his pride get in the way!

Could Lachlan fulfil his mother's last requests? Surely a sense of obligation at least would mean that he should take over the house and the practice. But the other bizarre wish? That might be more difficult to contemplate! Then he grinned wryly as he splashed cold water on his face and patted it dry with one of the cardboard-like towels he'd found in a cupboard. He considered the situation.

Lachlan flicked a hand through his thick, spiky hair to try and tame it and dabbed at a cut on his chin with the towel. He did have some sympathy with Christa—he would probably have felt a good deal of resentment if a strange guy had appeared out of the blue to take over the practice.

She wasn't the kind of girl to accept things meekly, he reflected. He recalled her angry-looking figure at the bottom of the ladder that afternoon, commanding him to come down! He grinned. For some reason he'd rather enjoyed seeing her sherry-coloured eyes snap and sparkle at him when she'd been annoyed.

Christa had no idea of the connection between their two families—and perhaps it was better to keep it that way, although the truth had a habit of coming out when you least expected it.

Then suddenly a wave of exhaustion overcame him. He stretched and yawned. The last few days had been a complete blur. The time from learning that his mother had died to getting a plane from Sydney to London and then eventually arriving in Inverness had seemed endless. When he'd finally arrived in Errin Bridge and seen the solicitor, jet-lag had begun to catch up on him.

Lachlan wandered into one of the bedrooms, stuffed with heavy dark furniture and a huge sagging bedstead. In his exhausted state it looked quite inviting and he flung himself onto it. Just a little kip for a quarter of an hour would do him the world of good. He lay back on the musty pillow and fell into a deep slumber.

* * *

Through a fog of sleep Lachlan heard the doorbell ring. He stirred restlessly, trying to ignore it, then heard a dog barking. With a muffled oath he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The doorbell rang again—whoever it was couldn't wait.

He padded downstairs wearily and opened the front door, realising too late that he was still only dressed in a small towel wrapped round his waist. Christa was standing there, with Titan standing guard by her side.

They stared at each other, his eyes sweeping over her slim

figure, elegant in jeans, long black boots and a warm, close-fitting red biker jacket with a black scarf casually looped round her neck. He clapped a hand to his forehead.

‘Oh, God! Sorry! I fell asleep after my shower...forgot you were coming.’ His austere expression changed to a wry grin. ‘I’d have put something on to hide my modesty if I’d known it was you.’

Christa flicked a glance over the lean and athletic body before her. Good God, was ever a man in such superb shape! She wondered crossly why the sight of his bare chest should affect her when it was something she saw routinely in the surgery—but, then, of course, not many of her patients had torsos like Lachlan Maguire!

She tore her glance away and said blandly, ‘Don’t worry, I’ve seen it all before... If it’s inconvenient, I’ll come back another time.’

‘No time like the present...’ He held the door open and motioned her in. ‘If you’ll wait in the kitchen I’ll put some clothes on—won’t be a minute.’

He stepped away as Christa passed him and she caught the faint fresh smell of soap and shaving lotion. She watched as he bounded up the stairs, holding onto the towel, and grimaced to herself when she remembered the way she’d harangued him about being nothing but the scum of the earth! That was the last thing he looked...he had to be the sexiest male on two legs that she’d seen for a very long time. Not, she reminded

herself sharply, that she was at all interested in sexy males—they were too sure of themselves, too confident by half and far too duplicitous.

She sat down in the ramshackle kitchen with Titan curled up on an old rug under the window. There were ancient cupboards with broken hinges, an old-fashioned stove on four cast-iron legs and a few dusty shelves with bottles and jam jars jostling for space. Isobel had been a lonely person, living on her own in this big house, and patently had had no interest in cooking if the look of the kitchen was anything to go by. It was almost shocking that she had allowed the house to get into this state—odd, too, when she had been a well-organised and efficient doctor.

If Lachlan was married and came to live in Errin Bridge, how would his wife take to living in a time warp like this? Indeed, would she relish the thought of leaving Australia and coming up to a Scottish backwater?

Engrossed in her thoughts, Christa didn't notice Lachlan at first when he appeared at the door. She was gazing out of the window, her shiny bob of auburn hair framing a profile of a determined little chin and a tip-tilted nose. She was feisty with decided opinions—rather like he was, he acknowledged. He guessed she wasn't about to defer to him in any discussion about the practice.

'I've looked in the drinks cupboard,' he said from the doorway. 'All I can find is whisky and more whisky... Would that be OK?'

Christa jumped with surprise and looked round at him,

relieved to see that he was now more modestly attired in jeans and a T-shirt under a corduroy jerkin. 'Yes, please, with a splash of water.'

She watched him as he poured out the drink, his movements neat, unfussy. He handed her a tumbler and she twirled the amber liquid around in her glass, watching the light catch it, and then looked at him warily.

'So. When are you going to decide on whether or not to follow your mother's wishes?'

'I've almost decided, although I do have some matters to discuss with the solicitor,' he admitted. 'If those matters can be resolved and I can find a way to pay for the repairs to the house, then I'm tempted to come back.'

'That's a big decision—to give up your life in Australia,' commented Christa. 'Did you like it there?'

'Certainly I did...' A slight change in expression flickered across his face. 'But I've been there a good while and perhaps it's time to come back to my roots.' He looked across the rolling fields to the side of the house and the sea beyond, lacy with white breakers, and smiled. 'Who wouldn't want to live in the beautiful surroundings of Errin Bridge?'

'And are you married—would your wife mind you moving away from Australia?'

Lachlan laughed. 'No—I've no ties, I'm entirely free... And you? Are you someone's wife or mother?'

Christa took a gulp of the whisky and it trailed fire down her

throat. ‘Oh, no,’ she said airily. ‘I’m not into commitment—far too much to do with my life first.’

‘How very wise,’ he murmured.

Christa changed the subject abruptly—she certainly didn’t want to dwell on the past, especially her relationship with Colin Maitland. She drew out her list of bullet points from her bag and looked at Lachlan challengingly.

‘Now, can we get down to business? I have to say bluntly I’m not happy that you can just leap into the practice here as senior partner—I can’t believe that Isobel wouldn’t understand how I’d feel about it all.’

Lachlan put his hands up. ‘Hey! Not so fast! You have a habit of jumping to conclusions, don’t you? I’m certainly not proposing to leap into anything, but if I’m to have full responsibility for the buildings, I need to have at least an equal say.’

‘Fair enough...but, to be blunt, I’d like to know what experience you have. I know nothing about you.’

‘Of course!’ The austere face broke into a grin. ‘I’ve been with the Flying Doctor service in Australia for a few years, and I’m quite brilliant at small ops...a dab hand at dealing with every imaginable situation, from snake bites and childbirth to extracting teeth and acute dehydration...’

Christa couldn’t resist smiling at him, her cheeks dimpling. He certainly had all the Maguire charm of persuasion, and underneath that sometimes dour expression he seemed to have a sense of humour. But there were still questions as to why he’d

leave his life in Australia so easily.

‘You have an interesting job there—why give it all up, even if your mother has left you Ardenleigh?’ she asked curiously.

He swirled the whisky round in his glass, the smile fading from his face. ‘Time to move on, I guess. I’d been thinking of leaving for some time—it was a great life, but it wasn’t Errin Bridge. I think I always hoped to come back here some day.’

But not while your mother was alive, thought Christa, puzzled as to why that should be. She tapped her fingers on the table thoughtfully. ‘We’d have to get on with each other...’

A raised eyebrow. ‘You’re bound to be able to get on with an easygoing guy like me!’

She looked at Lachlan sardonically. ‘You think? Suppose we don’t, and incredibly I find you’re impossible to work with? I’m certainly not going to be the one leaving the practice.’

‘Let’s give it six months—if the incredible happens and you find you can’t work with me, then I shall go!’ He took another swig of his drink. ‘I’ll give you the e-mail address of my boss near Sydney—I can guarantee he’ll give me a good reference.’

Christa nodded coolly. She wasn’t about to go overboard and welcome him with open arms yet. ‘I imagine it will be very different from the Australian Outback. You ought to know something about the practice here...’

‘People still have the same illnesses, I suppose. What about local hospitals?’

‘St Luke’s, about eight miles away, is the nearest, but we have

a small cottage hospital in the town, mostly for post-operative use when patients living in outlying districts have no one to look after them. And we have a minor injuries unit at the surgery.'

'Sounds good. Anything else?'

'You'd have to be good at walking up mountains. We're the back-up team if things go wrong up there—and you'd be amazed how often that happens in the summer with the tourists.'

He raised an impressed eyebrow. 'You're a Jill of all trades, then. I remember going out to help before I went to medical school. I enjoyed it, so you can count me in.'

'You sound as if you've made up your mind!'

'I suppose I have,' he said cautiously. 'A germ of an idea came to me when I was resting upstairs about how I might raise some money to restore Ardenleigh House—and that makes me feel quite excited about the future here.'

'So that's a yes, is it?'

He nodded and smiled. 'Probably. As I said, there are just one or two things I need to clarify, but I think they can be resolved.'

'Then we'll need to hammer out some sort of an agreement for the partnership...' A moment's misgiving as Christa flicked a glance at his self-assertive face—she could imagine he'd want his own way on quite a few matters, and she certainly wouldn't give in easily! 'When can you start? How much notice do you have to give?'

'I'm due a few weeks' holiday—I'll use that in lieu of notice.'

'What about your stuff—won't you have to go back and pack?'

He shrugged. 'I travel light so I've brought all I need. I've a friend who'll arrange to have things shipped out if I need them.'

Christa bit her lip. Was she being foolish, leaping into work with someone she knew nothing about? Then she gave a mental shrug. The man was here and available and she was desperate for help, and in any case how could she stop him? She'd just have to hope he was efficient.

'I'll see you, then, in a week, with the proviso of a six months' probationary period to see if it works, and that we'll be equal partners. I'll put it in writing.' She looked at her watch and stood up. 'I've got to fly and see my mother. I usually pop in on a Sunday evening.'

'Your mother still lives in the area?'

'Oh, yes. She has a little flat near me and she loves it there. She's made a good life for herself since my father died.'

Christa got up and Lachlan went with her to the door. It was getting dark now and the courtyard light made deep shadows against the walls. Drops of rain had started to fall, and there was a soft, sweet smell of damp earth on the cool air. Autumn was on its way, and soon the soft purple heather and greens of the glens would be replaced by sparkling frost and snow on the hills.

He'd missed those definitive seasons, and although he'd had a ball in Australia, there had been times when a certain tune, the waft of scent of the sea, or a Scottish voice passing him on the street, would stir a longing in him to be back in Errin Bridge. He should have come back before, he thought sadly, and not allowed

his stubborn nature to dictate his life.

Titan, standing beside Christa, suddenly stiffened, the hackles on his neck rising. Then he gave a low growl before breaking into a cacophony of barking.

‘What is it, old boy? Calm down...’

Titan took no notice and suddenly darted across the yard, still barking at full pitch.

‘There’s someone there,’ said Lachlan in a low voice, putting a restraining hand on Christa’s arm. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if this turns out to be one of your pesky thieves.’

CHAPTER TWO

THEY STOOD FOR a moment on the doorstep, looking towards the barns, the outside light from the surgery casting a beam across the courtyard and the ladder that Lachlan had been using. It was raining heavily now and the sound of it drummed on the roof and made huge puddles across the yard.

Then above that sound there was a muffled crash as if something heavy had fallen. A scream came from one of the outbuildings, and a hooded youth ran out into the beam of light, the raindrops silver as they landed on his frightened face. He looked wildly around and then darted back into the building. Titan barked excitedly and rushed after him.

Christa drew in a sharp breath. ‘I know that boy—it’s Carl Burton. He’s a patient! What’s he doing in the barn?’

‘I’m not waiting to find out,’ growled Lachlan. ‘Is there a torch anywhere?’

He ran quickly across the yard and Christa flew to the surgery, scrabbling round in a drawer to find a torch, and instinct telling her to grab the emergency medical bag she kept locked in a cupboard by her desk. She was back in the barn inside two minutes.

The light in the outbuilding was dim, but in the torch's beam they saw a boy lying on the floor, ominously still, his legs splayed at an awkward angle. His face was so pale that the large gash over his forehead looked as if it had been painted on. A piece of wood had fallen from the roof and was wedged above him at an angle. Carl Burton crouched by the victim's side and he looked up at Christa and Lachlan with a mixture of fear and bravado on his face.

'Bloody hell,' muttered Lachlan, darting forward and pushing Carl out of the way. 'Let me see what the damage is.'

Carl backed away from the victim. 'Is he dead?' he said, his voice cracking. 'Has he been killed?'

Lachlan put his fingers on the boy's neck to feel his carotid artery. He raised his eyes to Christa's questioning look and nodded. 'He's still with us...better get some help, PDQ.'

'It wasn't my fault,' Carl blurted out. 'Greg saw that ladder. I told him not to climb on the roof, but he did. He was being stupid, standing on one foot and waving his arms about. Then he...he...dropped, like a stone...' He stopped, putting his hands over his face.

'That's why he's got to be treated as quickly as possible.'

Lachlan's voice was brusque. 'It's lucky we were here.'

Christa pulled her mobile out of her pocket and flicked it open, punching out numbers. She walked over to the doorway as she spoke, glancing back at Lachlan bent over the victim's body. Christa felt an almighty surge of thankfulness that she wasn't alone in having to cope with things.

'Ambulance and the police services, please—Dr Lennox here from the Ardenleigh Practice in Errin Bridge. I need the air ambulance for a serious leg, head and possible spinal injury to a youth who's fallen from a roof just by the practice. My colleague and I will try and stabilise him, but he needs hospitalisation without delay. If you could inform St Luke's to have an orthopaedic surgeon and anaesthetist on standby, please.'

'We'll have to do our best until they get here,' observed Lachlan. He pulled back the upper lids of the boy's eyes. 'Pupils dilated,' he murmured to himself, then examined the victim's body, checking his head and other visible injuries. 'He's not bleeding too much from this head wound...'

'That's good, isn't it?' Carl looked up at Lachlan hopefully.

'I'm afraid it's not the same as just banging your head on a cupboard. Hitting your head at speed can give rise to arterial bleeding, and he's had a tremendous crack to his forehead, besides his possible back and neck injuries and a broken leg.'

Christa bit her lip. Had the boy's spine survived the impact of falling from the roof? Could they keep him alive until the paramedics arrived with their specialist equipment? She looked

closely at the young boy's face, where a bruise was developing around the gash on his forehead.

She drew in her breath. 'Oh, God, I know this guy too...he's Gregory Marsh, aged about sixteen.' Her eyes met Lachlan's. 'Are you thinking acute subdural haematoma?'

He nodded and bent low over the boy, saying clearly, 'Do you know where you are, Gregory?'

After a few seconds the boy whispered, 'I'm in the barn, aren't I?'

'That's right, Gregory, well done. Now, where does it hurt? Can you tell us?'

The boy's eyes fluttered open, his breath rasping, his face contorted with pain. 'My leg...bloody hell, it's my leg,' he muttered.

'You can feel your leg, then?' A measure of relief in Christa's voice.

'Of course I can feel my effing leg...' he croaked. 'It's agony...'

'Let's look at this leg,' said Lachlan briskly. 'Can you cut his jeans?'

Christa used a pair of scissors from the bag to cut the leg of the jeans very gently from the distorted leg. They both looked down at the limb, which was gashed and swollen. Protruding through the gash was a white piece of bone.

Christa grimaced. 'A compound fracture, not very nice...'

'Poor blighter—it needs splinting.'

'That's OK. We've got some we use for the mountain rescue

work. I'll get them.'

'Give me your bag of tricks and I'll put some sterile dressings on these open wounds, and give him a ten-mil shot of morphine for the pain.' Lachlan looked down reassuringly at Gregory and laid a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. It was a gesture not lost on Christa. Physical touch was an incredibly important and soothing thing, and reassurance could reduce the severity of shock—it was as important a medical tool as any conventional treatment.

'Don't worry, Gregory, you're in good hands and we'll soon have you in hospital.'

Christa went to get the collapsible splints and returned swiftly, snapping the splint joints into place and laying them out. The two doctors worked as gently as possible to immobilise the leg by strapping the limb to the splint, but Lachlan kept flicking a wary look at the beam above them, jammed across most of Gregory's body. Christa heard him suck in his breath.

'Bloody hell—can you hear that beam creaking?' he muttered. 'The whole damn thing could fall on top of us. It has to be moved.'

'I don't know how...' began Christa.

He turned to Carl, watching them mutely, his face as white as a ghost's. 'I tell you what, Carl—you can help me try and push it out of the way.'

'Don't even think of doing that!' Christa's voice was sharp. 'The helicopter will be here soon—'

'And that could be too late. If I could get underneath it, I could

lift it out of that gap in the wall and with Carl's support we could push it to one side.'

She stared crossly at Lachlan. 'Suppose you get crushed?'

'If we wait for that damned air ambulance to come, the boy will need more than a spinal brace and a leg splint.'

Christa got up from Greg's side and pulled at Lachlan's arm. 'Do you want there to be two casualties, for heaven's sake?'

He shook her arm away irritably. 'I'll be OK. We haven't got a choice—look, it's swaying again...'

For a second they looked at each other stubbornly then Christa shrugged, acknowledging that Lachlan was right. They couldn't just ignore the situation—something had to be attempted. She looked around the barn desperately. There were some old packing cases and dust sheets by the wall near Carl. She began dragging them across to Gregory and shouted to Carl.

'Come on! Help me get these over Gregory to protect him before you start tampering with the damn beam—put the sheets over him and then the packing cases like a cage. It might just take the shock if the beam falls.'

'Why can't we just pull him away from it?' asked Carl.

'Because,' said Christa in a low voice, 'we don't know what damage Gregory's done to his spine. If he's damaged it in the fall, we could sever it.'

They worked feverishly to construct some sort of barrier between Gregory and the chunk of wood wedged over him, then Lachlan slid his body underneath it to the side of the injured boy,

so that he could try and shift the beam from where it was so precariously perched. There was a tense silence: Gregory's eyes fluttered open again and he focussed them on Christa.

‘What’s happening?’ he whispered.

Christa's voice was calm. ‘Nothing to worry about, Gregory, just making sure the beam's secure. Everything's under control.’

She hoped devoutly that that was the case, and indeed something told her that if anyone could handle an emergency like this, Lachlan Maguire could. She watched him tensely as he manoeuvred the beam, calm but concentrated, no sign of panic. Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised by his competence—someone who worked with the Flying Doctor service had to be able to think on his feet, quite an asset for someone she was going to work with.

Lachlan pulled the rag from his pocket and wound it round his hand to try and get more purchase. ‘Come on, Carl—I know you're in shock, but you've got to help me, for your mate's sake.’ His voice was tough, uncompromising. ‘Give me a hand to try and shift this. While I push it up, get your arms round it to pull.’

Both men grunted with the effort of trying to shift the wood away from over Gregory's body, and eventually, with a final push and a shout of warning from Lachlan, it fell harmlessly to one side.

‘Thank God,’ whispered Christa, blowing out her cheeks and closing her eyes in relief. Lachlan climbed stiffly to his feet with a relieved grin and dusted his hands together.

‘There you are—nothing to it!’ He went across to Carl. ‘Thank you for helping there,’ he said quietly. ‘I couldn’t have done it without you. Now, tell me how all this started.’

Carl hung his head and muttered, ‘We...we were trying to get at the guttering—we saw the ladder and Greg thought it would be easy. I told him not to, but he started pretending he was a high-wire act and just fell from the beam up there.’

‘Were you trying to nick the lead?’

‘We didn’t think nobody would miss it. We didn’t mean any harm, we just needed a bit of cash...’ The boy started to shake at the memory of the accident, wrapping his arms round his thin body, rocking slightly on his heels.

Lachlan looked at Carl’s white face. ‘You feel all right?’

The boy shook his head helplessly as if unable to express just how he felt. ‘I...I just can’t believe it... Seeing it happen...’

His voice petered out, not equal to describing what he’d just seen, and Lachlan nodded, recognising all the signs of violent emotional shock in the boy. What Carl had witnessed had happened with appalling swiftness, with no time for him to prepare or adjust to the situation. His senses were stunned by the events and Lachlan recognised all the signs of ‘onlooker reaction’. He put his arm round Carl’s shoulder and drew him to the wall.

‘I want you to sit down here. Your body’s got a touch of shock, just as much as if you’d had a physical injury. After a nice hot cup of sweet tea you’ll feel much better.’

The boy’s face relaxed slightly. He hadn’t been expecting any

kind words, but they helped to calm him, bring back something of normality to his fractured emotional state. There'd be plenty of condemnation later, thought Lachlan wryly.

Christa attached an oximeter peg to Gregory's finger to get a readout of his vital signs.

'What's it like?' said Lachlan.

Christa grimaced and murmured, 'BP's low, eighty over fifty. Not surprising, and his pulse is thready. How's the pain, Greg?'

The boy stirred slightly but didn't speak, and Lachlan looked at his watch.

'How long are they going to be?' he growled.

Then through the beating of the rain on the roof there was the sudden clatter of a helicopter's rotors overhead, the sound increasing in volume as it descended somewhere near the surgery. Christa sent up a silent prayer—they'd arrived just in the nick of time.

'Where will they land?' asked Lachlan, as he and Christa exchanged relieved glances.

'There's a field beyond the woods at the end of the garden, they'll put down there. It'll only take them a few minutes to get here now.'

Lachlan got to his feet and went to the door to meet them, and very soon three men in bright orange outfits and luminous jerkins with 'Doctor' and 'Paramedic' labels across them came running across the courtyard. Lachlan gave a quick résumé of Gregory's visible injuries and what he and Christa had done so

far to stabilise him.

‘He’ll get a full body scan, and the theatre’s on standby,’ said the doctor accompanying them. ‘He was damn lucky that he had you two near him when he decided to do his sky-walking exploits.’

The paramedics set up a drip and strapped a spinal board on Gregory, with an oxygen mask over his face, and Carl started to sidle surreptitiously towards the door. One of the paramedics stopped him, looking at his pale face and trembling hands.

‘Have you hurt yourself?’ he enquired.

‘No. I’m OK.’ The voice was sullen, uncooperative.

‘Why don’t you come with us for a check-up, eh?’

A vehement shake of the head. ‘I’m OK, I tell you. I’m going home.’ He jerked his head in Gregory’s direction. ‘He’ll be OK now, won’t he? You don’t need me.’

‘Oh, yes, we do, my friend.’ A burly policeman had appeared at the barn door and stood in front of the boy. ‘We need a few names and addresses, young man. A little bit of information as to how this happened, if you please.’

He led Carl out of the building. The boy looked pathetic, shoulders drooping, and his jeans hung so low around his hips they were barely able to stay up. He looked back at Lachlan and muttered, ‘Will Greg be all right?’

‘Hopefully, but he won’t be climbing around on roofs for a while,’ remarked Lachlan drily.

* * *

The emergency services had gone and it had stopped raining as Christa and Lachlan walked back across the yard, Titan trotting proudly beside them, as if aware that he had been the first to alert them to the emergency. Lachlan stretched, flexing his stiff lower back, which had taken the strain of him pushing the beam away, and took a deep breath of the clear air. The velvety night sky had cleared of cloud and was twinkling with a tapestry of stars. In the distance was the sound of the sea, whooshing in and out on the beach.

‘God, that smells good. How I’ve missed that special Highland tang,’ he murmured. ‘I’d forgotten just how intoxicating the air can be in this little corner of the world.’

‘How many years since you’ve been here, then?’

A short silence, then he said roughly, ‘Too many...but it’s good to be back.’

Christa looked at the bleak expression on his face, and felt a moment’s impatience. If he had missed home so much, why hadn’t he come back occasionally to see his mother, a woman on her own? Christa was tempted to ask outright what had kept him away, but she sensed that that would be a question too far at the moment.

She pushed that thought to the back of her mind. So much had happened in the last hour and she should have felt drained, but instead she felt the kick of adrenalin after a job well done. Together they’d managed to keep Gregory alive, to retrieve a situation that had looked almost impossible.

She was profoundly grateful that Lachlan Maguire had been there—almost unwillingly she admitted that he'd been pretty impressive, efficient and reliable. Just the kind of person one would want in an emergency. She flicked a glance at his tall figure beside her—perhaps, after all, she was prepared to believe that he was as good as he said he was at his job!

'I...I'm glad you were here. In fact, if you hadn't been, I think the ending could have been very different. Thank you,' she said.

'Do you think our young friends are the culprits who've been nicking stuff from here?' he said.

'Could be... They're both patients but I haven't seen them for ages. From his odd behaviour on the roof I wonder if Gregory's on something. Anyway, they'll do plenty of tests at St Luke's.' Christa sighed. 'I'll bet his parents don't know what he's up to—or are turning a blind eye to the situation.'

'They're going to find out soon,' said Lachlan grimly.

'God—it was a bit scary, like being back in A and E again. I thought we'd lost him, and he had so many injuries...' Then she puffed out her cheeks, laughing up at Lachlan, her amber eyes dancing with relief. 'But it was a great feeling that we kept him going till the paramedics came, wasn't it?'

He looked down at Christa's dust-covered face turned up to his, and a feeling of affinity with a colleague after a job well done intensified into something else—the treacherous flare of sexual attraction. For a second his eyes roamed over her heart-shaped face and wide eyes, as if seeing her properly for the first

time, and he sucked in his breath. Good God, she was absolutely ravishing...and desirable.

Almost absent-mindedly he touched her cheek, wiping away some mud and allowing his finger to trail down her jaw. He smiled at her, then without warning he bent his head down and brushed her lips with his, slowly, deliberately, fiercely.

‘You shouldn’t look so bloody beautiful,’ he whispered against her ear.

Christa remained motionless for a second then touched her lips where his had been. They felt full, tingling and soft, and for a second she was bewildered. Where the hell had that come from, or had she just imagined it?

Then a feeling of outrage swept through her—Lachlan Maguire had the cheek of the devil!

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ she demanded icily.

He laughed. ‘Come on—you’ve got your headmistress look on your face again! It was just an expression of thanks for a job well done. Am I to sit on the naughty step?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘We seemed to work rather well together, that’s all! A spur-of-the-moment thing!’

‘You took a damn liberty!’

He looked rather penitent, but his blue eyes danced at her mischievously, and he gave his most disarming grin. ‘It was just a little gesture of, er, thanks,’ he protested. ‘I didn’t mean to offend you—it was a sort of compliment!’

Christa opened her mouth to say something cutting then shut it again because for a minute Lachlan looked so like a naughty schoolboy that, despite herself, she felt an urge to giggle. Obviously the impulsive kiss that had sent her reeling meant absolutely nothing to him—just a bit of fun.

And yet, she admitted to herself, the truth was that every single nerve in her body had seemed to respond with a longing for something more, something much more intimate, something that would repeat the fireworks that had seemed to explode so suddenly around her as his mouth had plundered hers. It was as if a switch had been thrown, and something that hadn't worked for a long time had been kicked into action.

She pushed these thoughts to the back of her mind and decided the best response was to try and treat the episode with dignified aversion.

She buttoned up her jacket, and said rather pompously, 'Don't expect a repeat performance, Lachlan—I took you on as a work colleague, not a rake!'

He burst into laughter. 'Come on...it doesn't suit you to take life so seriously, Dr Lennox! I thought you secretly wanted to press your lovely body close to mine...'

This was a little too near the truth. Christa flushed and said indignantly, 'Don't be silly!'

Lachlan assumed a more contrite expression. 'Don't be cross. I'm sorry if I took you by surprise, but I know we'll make a very good partnership.'

Those amazing eyes danced winningly into Christa's, almost like a caress in itself, and although she was really mad at him, she couldn't help smiling back. They were going to have to work together amicably, she told herself, so there was no point in maintaining a frigid atmosphere. She'd just have to be on her guard in the future. After all, wasn't it typical of some males to take relationships as casually as picking sweets from a jar?

Then, dangerously, the thought echoed in her mind that if one kiss could practically send her into orbit, making her heart clatter in her chest and a thousand butterflies seem as if they were fluttering somewhere around in her stomach, what would it be like if they made real, proper love?

Titan whimpered and Christa bent down to ruffle the little dog's head, grateful of the distraction to her thoughts. 'Poor old Titan, you want your supper. In all the fuss I'd forgotten that. Come on, then—home time now.' She turned to Lachlan and said lightly, 'See you soon.'

As she walked home through the still night Christa's heart beat a tattoo against her ribs, and even her legs felt slightly wobbly. It had been so long since any man had caressed her or kissed her—so long since she'd fancied anyone enough to do so. But out of the blue, out of nowhere, had come a man she didn't know at all, sending her into a spin! She came to her front door and her hand trembled slightly as she tried to put the key in the lock.

'What's the matter with me, Titan?' she asked the little dog. 'Have I gone completely mad?'

* * *

Lachlan closed the door, leaning against the wall for a minute, and took a deep breath, reflecting on the effect two soft full lips could have on a man when they were pressed to his mouth. He hadn't expected his body to respond so urgently, and wondered what on earth had possessed him to kiss Christa after a mere afternoon's acquaintance. Then he grinned to himself—because she was so damned beautiful, of course, and didn't the thought of shocking that rather prim, headmistressy personality rather appeal?

He was used to casual relationships—never commit yourself because they never lasted, was his mantra. Take your pleasure where you could. He wasn't going to make the same mistake his parents had—get married, supposedly for life, and then destroy the family with a bitter and cruel break-up.

Perhaps he'd gone a step too far with Christa Lennox, expecting her to take his kiss as casually as he had—but life was for living and having fun, wasn't it? Except, of course, he'd forgotten that one person he should keep at arm's length was someone from the Lennox family. And neither had he bargained for the fierce longing he now had to kiss Christa again—and more.

* * *

'Isobel's son? I don't believe it!' Alice Smith's large blue eyes looked at Christa in amazement, and she paused in mid-action as she pulled open a filing-cabinet drawer. 'He's a bit late, isn't

he? Isobel's funeral was a week ago!'

'Nobody knew where he was, and he only heard she'd died a few days ago,' explained Christa.

Christa and the two receptionists, Alice Smith and Ginny Calder, were having a quick cup of coffee before the Monday morning surgery, and Christa had been regaling them with the previous day's events in the barn. Both girls goggled in disbelief at Christa.

'Where's he been, then, all these years?' asked Ginny, the elder of the two receptionists, her eyes popping with surprise behind her thick-lensed glasses.

'He's been working in Australia—it took a time to find out where he was.'

Alice stuffed some papers into the files and said thoughtfully, 'It was sad, wasn't it—to stay away as long as he did. I wonder what happened.'

'I remember him,' recalled Ginny. 'He was a handsome lad, and I know he was the apple of his mother's eye. She was so proud of him.'

'Well, what went wrong?' asked Alice bluntly. 'How come she never spoke about him?'

Ginny shook her head. 'No one knows, except that Isobel's husband left her around the time that Lachlan went off to college—and, of course, Lachlan was never seen again. How long's he staying?'

Christa put her cup of coffee down on the desk. 'Actually,

it's not just a flying visit—he's going to work here permanently. Isobel left him a letter saying that she wanted him to take over the practice. And he's decided to do that. She's left the house to him.'

'What?' Alice closed the filing-cabinet drawer with a crash and turned to her in amazement. 'But...but I thought you would be taking over... It doesn't seem fair.'

'It's OK, Alice. We've talked it over, and he's coming in as an equal partner. He understands that, at least for a trial of six months. And anyway we need another doctor, that's for sure. Even before Isobel died we were pretty stretched.'

'Since Colin Maitland left, I suppose... I hope Lachlan's nothing like him,' said Ginny sharply, then watching Christa's face she grimaced and clapped her hand over her mouth. 'Oh, I'm sorry, love, I shouldn't have brought up the subject. But you're over Colin now, aren't you?'

Christa smiled brightly. 'Of course I'm over him,' she said robustly. 'I can assure you I won't be taken in by any other con men, however charming!'

'And is he charming, this mysterious Lachlan?'

Christa shrugged, trying to look as casual as possible. 'He wasn't so charming when I thought he was a burglar—he was up on the roof inspecting the gutter, and I shouted at him. I got a frosty reception, I can tell you!'

'We want more information than that!' protested Alice. 'Is he single or married, good looking?'

'Now, why do you want to know that?' teased Christa. 'You've

got a lovely boyfriend. But for general information, yes, he says he's single, and I suppose some people would say he's not bad looking. Not that I find him attractive,' she lied.

Of course the truth was that she'd found it difficult to get that mind-blowing kiss from the night before out of her head. To him it had been just a casual brush of flesh on flesh, but in her imagination she could still feel the imprint of that sensual mouth on hers, and the feeling of exploding stars and fireworks it had produced! She took a deep slurp of coffee, hoping the girls wouldn't notice the blush she was sure was spreading over her cheeks.

'Ah!' Alice said with satisfaction, her eyes meeting Ginny's with meaning.

'What do you mean, "Ah"?' Christa looked sternly at Alice and Ginny. 'I can assure you both I'm off men for good, however eligible. I can promise you that if George Clooney were to go down on bended knee and give me a million pounds to marry him, I'd send him off with a flea in his ear! I've no ambition to have a wedding ring on my finger!'

A discreet cough from the doorway and they all whirled round. Lachlan was standing there, a suspicion of laughter in his startling blue eyes, but the expression on his face was impassive.

Christa's cheeks crimsoned, and she jumped up in a flustered way, swallowing whole the biscuit she was eating. Had the darned man heard her inane comment about marriage as he'd stood there?

‘Sorry to interrupt you all,’ he said smoothly. ‘I know I’m not starting work until next week, but I just wanted to know if you’d had any word about how that young boy is from last night’s accident...’

Christa rearranged her features quickly from shock to welcome. ‘Oh, Lachlan, it’s you!’ She turned to Alice and Ginny and cleared her throat. ‘This is Lachlan Maguire—Isobel’s son. Alice and Ginny are the backbone of the practice, Lachlan. We couldn’t work without them.’

He looked like someone out of central casting for the lead in a medical drama, she thought, noting irritably how Alice goggled at him with frank admiration. He unleashed a charming smile.

‘Then I must keep on the right side of them!’

‘I was telling them what happened yesterday,’ she explained, then felt her heart begin to race as she remembered just what had happened between them after attending the accident.

Lachlan grinned, his eyes holding hers rather too long. ‘Plenty happened, that’s for sure! I was pushed in at the deep end all right.’

Christa looked away hastily and added some more sugar to her coffee, stirring it vigorously. Alice looked at Lachlan rather like a puppy given a special treat.

‘I believe you’re going to be working here with us permanently,’ she enthused.

‘Yes, that’s right. I know it’ll be a steep learning curve, but I’ll do my best. I look forward to getting to know you all.’

He smiled urbanely at them, and Christa could see Alice melting under his easy charm, although Ginny looked more wary. Perhaps, thought Christa, she was a little more cynical than Alice, wondering just why a son should lose touch with a lovely woman like Isobel, then suddenly appear out of the blue after she'd died.

'A cup of coffee?' enquired Alice, still staring at him as if mesmerised.

'Thank you, just a quick one. I guess you're pretty busy and I don't want to hold you up. As I say, I just wanted to find out about the young lad who was injured last night.'

Christa nodded. 'I rang the hospital a few minutes ago. He's injured vertebrae in his back, and he's being operated on this morning for his leg—he'll pull through, though.'

'That's the good news I was hoping to hear before I see the builders this morning. There is one more thing, however. I wondered if it would help if I started on a part-time basis this week—I could get to know the ropes, and if I came with you on one or two visits it would familiarise me with the area again, after so long away.'

Of course it would help. Christa had been sleepless for many nights, wondering how she could cope with the work that was piling up. But she wasn't so sure that being close to Lachlan Maguire was a good thing so soon after her experience with him the night before. She'd rather have liked that episode to fade into the past.

'Oh, I don't think there's any need to—'

‘I think that’s a great idea,’ interrupted Ginny. ‘You’ve been working yourself to a frazzle over the past weeks, Christa. You accept any help that’s offered!’ She turned to Lachlan. ‘Visits are usually done around midday to two o’clock after morning surgery.’

Dear Ginny—she was like a mother hen where she, Christa, was concerned, and she’d been marvellous when Isobel had died, staying late to reorganise surgeries, bringing Christa meals to eat at the surgery. But sometimes she was just a little too fussy!

‘Right!’ Lachlan said briskly. ‘I’ll be back, then. See you later.’

When he’d gone, Alice turned to Christa and said accusingly, ‘You misled us there! You said he wasn’t bad looking...’

‘Well?’ asked Christa innocently.

‘You ought to go for an eye test...he’s absolutely gorgeous!’

‘Beauty,’ said Christa grimly, as she picked up a pile of blood results and went towards the door, ‘is in the eye of the beholder!’

‘Quite so,’ agreed Ginny tersely, as she reached out to answer the phone.

‘Will you listen to yourselves?’ demanded Alice in disbelief. ‘I can tell you, that man’s made my pulse go into overdrive! You two must be made of stone!’

* * *

Lachlan stood for a moment before he got into the car and looked back towards the surgery, amusement flickering across his face. So Christa Lennox wouldn’t get married for a million pounds—even to George Clooney! What the hell had brought

that on, a bad experience perhaps?

He grinned to himself. It was a delicious irony that she should say that she wouldn't marry at any price, when one of his mother's ridiculous suggestions in her letter to him had been that he should get married. And that, of all people, Christa Lennox should be the bride!

Well, that was one proposition that wouldn't be fulfilled! He was damned if he'd be manipulated by his mother from beyond the grave, however much he regretted her death and wanted to atone for his quarrel with her.

CHAPTER THREE

'COME ON, TITAN! In you get!'

Titan sprang into the boot of the car and stood up with his front paws on the back seat, looking around eagerly.

'He seems to enjoy going out on visits,' remarked Lachlan as he folded himself up to fit in Christa's little car.

'Oh, he's spoilt rotten—all my regulars seem to love him, especially at our first port of call. Fred was a shepherd and misses his sheepdog dreadfully. She died only a few months ago, so he loves to spoil Titan.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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