



Karin Baine



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

‘Can I help you, Elsie?’ Ruthie held out her hand as another of her elderly travellers stepped down.

‘We’re fine.’ Tom hustled out of the bus beside her and helped his mother down the steps.

Ruthie sighed. As the manageress of Rose Hall, it was her job to care for the residents of the nursing home but Tom Ross seemed to resent her very presence. She’d done nothing since Elsie arrived a few weeks ago except provide her full-time care, yet he was always there, watching over her shoulder. He may as well move in he spent so much time with them. Although that would bring complications to her life that she didn’t need.

Despite thinking she couldn’t carry out her duties adequately, she had to admit the doctor was a handsome man. She hadn’t been in the company of a male under seventy for a while but Tom’s brown eyes, dark curly hair and soft lips were the stuff of romantic daydreams.

Her job wasn’t conducive to long term relationships; she knew that from the trail of ex-boyfriends who’d grown jealous of the attention not fully bestowed upon them. That didn’t stop her shaking her hair from its usual ponytail, donning some make-up and swapping her uniform for skinny jeans and a tailored shirt at the prospect of spending the day with him.

He’d volunteered along with some other relatives to help out on their day trip. This time they’d chosen Northern Ireland’s famous Giant’s Causeway for their picnic.

They made their way towards the interlocking basalt columns, each volunteer and staff member ensuring those unsteady on their feet had support.

‘It’s an amazing sight, isn’t it?’ There was just something magical about these hexagonal pillars which made her want to believe the Finn McCool legend.

‘Beautiful.’ Tom’s response drew her attention back from thoughts of duelling giants. Only to find him staring at her rather than the geological wonder around him.

The heat in her cheeks was nothing to do with the sunshine they’d been blessed with today. His lop-sided smile would suggest he was interested in her but even knowledge that this could be a mutual attraction couldn’t alter their circumstances.

He was family to one of her residents and she knew how this played out. A couple of cancelled dates and interrupted dinners when she was called back to Rose Hall and he’d resent her. Break-ups were painful enough without having to see him every time he visited his mum and her job was the only place she was happy. She wouldn’t compromise that for anyone, which was why she had to remain terminally single.

‘Tom?’

‘Hmm?’ He peeled his gaze away from Rose Hall’s best asset, finally admitting to himself there was more than one reason he couldn’t tear himself away from the place.

‘I said I’d like to walk a little further down. Unless you’re not finished sight-seeing here?’ His mother glanced between him and Ruthie.

It was his turn to blush. She’d love to see him married with kids, yet that seemed unlikely when all his time was spent with her and his patients. His mum had done so much to make sure he’d been provided for and now he wanted to return the favour. He couldn’t help feel guilty that he’d had to engage someone else to look after her. There was no alternative when he had to work to support them both.

‘I’m done. Let’s go.’ There was no point mooning over Ruthie when they’d probably never be able to co-ordinate schedules to find time together anyway. Besides, Rose Hall and Ruthie were supposed to benefit his mum, not him.

‘Ruthie, could you take my other arm? These stones are amazing but they’re also a little uneven to walk on.’

‘Would you like one of us to get a wheelchair from the visitor’s centre for you?’

Ruthie immediately sprang to her side to escort her.

‘Ach, there’s no need for that when I’ve got my personal bodyguards to make sure I don’t come to any harm.’

They set off arm-in-arm and seemingly joined together for the remainder of the afternoon. He’d have to speak to Ruthie or she’d think him rude, not that her efficiency left him tongue-tied and feeling useless now his mum had her to lean on.

‘It was good of you to organise this. I can’t remember the last time I even had a day out.’

‘It’s an excuse for me to play hooky from work.’ Her pale green eyes were sparkling with mischief.

‘You’ve put a lot of time into organising this. You deserve some time out too.’ She was certainly more relaxed here with the dark waves of her hair blowing in the breeze and her figure-hugging casual wear a departure from her drab uniform. Down time suited her.

‘I’d like a few moments to myself too. Why don’t you two go off and explore?’

‘I can’t leave you here on your own, Elsie.’ Ruthie was horrified by the suggestion, not least because it would mean being alone with Tom with no buffer against the attraction developing towards him.

Elsie waved them away and took a seat on the nearby wooden bench. ‘I like to sit and watch the world go by.’

‘I suppose the others are on their way down...’ The merry band were slowly following the same path they’d taken but she turned to Tom in case he objected.

He shrugged. ‘I guess if that’s what you want, Mum.’

‘It is,’ she insisted.

Ruthie resigned herself to this enforced time out with Tom and promised they wouldn’t stray too far away.

‘She’s stubborn when she wants to be.’ Tom’s laugh such a tummy-flipping sound, Ruthie lost her balance on the stones and almost plunged her foot into a rock pool.

He caught her hand in time, but his firm grip made her feel as though she was still falling. She spent every day in contact with people but she’d never experienced such a shock of awareness in one brief, electric touch.

‘A family trait I think,’ she teased to relieve some of the tension zinging between them.

He arched an eyebrow at her but didn’t let go of her hand and she was happy to remain in his possession. If only to keep upright.

‘I know I’ve been a pain but I’m eaten up with guilt about leaving mum in care. I should be the one looking after her.’ His honesty was almost as devastating to her equilibrium as his melted-chocolate gaze on her, so full of unnecessary guilt.

‘There’s no need to be sorry. The love between you two is so obvious. I had that same relationship with my grandparents and took care of them until they died. My advice is to stop beating yourself up over things beyond your control and enjoy this time with her.’

They were staring at one another, something dangerous happening between them. Something so exciting Ruthie would’ve followed him to the ends of the earth in that moment if he’d asked.

Instead, they climbed over the rise and fall of the causeway together, content in each other’s company.

It was a cry for help which jolted them out of their reverie to hurry back, a crowd gathering and blocking the bench where they’d left Elsie.

‘I’m a doctor.’ Tom took command of the scene, pushing his way through to the man lying on the ground.

Ruthie’s relief it wasn’t anyone they knew was short-lived when she saw the distress of the woman kneeling beside him. ‘He just fell...said he felt out of breath, then went down.’

‘What’s his name?’ Ruthie pushed for some information as she took a place opposite Tom on the ground.

‘Ken.’

‘Does Ken have any medical conditions we should be aware of? Is he on any medication?’

‘No.’

‘Ken, can you hear me?’ Tom tilted his head back and listened for signs of breathing.
‘Someone phone an ambulance. I think he’s in cardiac arrest.’

A few of the younger tourists assembled ran off to find help but this wasn’t an unusual scenario for Ruthie. She’d had to administer CPR herself on occasion but it wasn’t something she’d ever get used to. She knew that lonely feeling of having someone’s life in your hands and was glad there was two of them here to deal with it.

‘I can do the rescue breaths if you want to continue with the compressions?’

‘Sure. Thanks.’ Tom continued to manually keep the blood pumping around Ken’s body until the ambulance arrived. Ruthie pinched Ken’s nose and sealed her mouth around his, administering a couple of breaths for every set of compressions and checking for signs of life.

Even on a day out Tom was reminded he was never completely off duty. He’d gone from having a possible romance straight into a life or death situation. For once though, his responsibilities hadn’t pushed away the woman he wanted in his life. She was here, helping. It was a long time since he’d had this kind of support and it was comforting.

Eventually he could see the shallow rise and fall of Ken’s chest as he fought to breathe on his own with the sound of sirens in the not too far distance. “Hang in there, mate.”

Only when the ambulance was on the way to the hospital did Tom feel as though he could breathe again too.

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‘That was intense,’ Ruthie stated when the crowd dispersed, excitement over.

‘A little. How are you?’

‘Okay but we should probably head home,’ Ruthie suggested.

‘Nonsense. We’re not going to let all this food go to waste, are we?’ His mum fired her fellow travellers into insisting they go ahead with their picnic as planned.

‘In that case, I think we’ll take ours over here.’ Not only did Ruthie want to remove herself from the scene where they’d fought to save Kens’ life, she wanted some alone time with Tom. He’d shown her she didn’t have to do everything on her own and it couldn’t hurt to get to know him better.

They took their flask of tea, sandwiches and traybakes she’d assembled this morning, never imagining she’d be sharing it with Tom.

Before they’d taken the first bite he broke into her thoughts with some of his own. ‘I like you, Ruthie but I’ve got so much going on in my life...I wouldn’t want you to feel neglected.’

She knew that guilt so well and that common ground was the very reason she thought it would be worth the risk. ‘We’re both devoted to our jobs and patients but I’m sure we could make this work if we both really try.’

She laced her fingers through his and showed him they were in this together.

‘Who knows, maybe I could set up a clinic in Rose Hall on my time off so we get to see each other.’ He was probably joking but at least he was already thinking of ways they could spend time together.

‘I’ll settle for a kiss right now.’ She was feeling bold now and after the near-death drama she didn’t want to waste any more time when she knew what she wanted.

‘Now that, I can do.’ Tom leaned in, cupped her cheek in his palm and placed a delicate kiss on her lips, a brief promise of more to come.

Their first kiss on the causeway played out against the distant sound of the waves and cheers from the Rose Hall residents.

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