
Chapter 1

When Callum agreed to take Julie's twenty-four-hour shift, he'd been thinking more of being kind to a single mother who was somehow also completing training as a doctor than the fact that he would now be working two back-to-back on-call shifts. The hospital was running with perhaps a quarter of its usual efficiency because they were trying to restructure function around the influx of coronavirus cases, and every patient he saw seemed convinced that their cough was, without doubt, a sign that they were infected. It meant a lot more people needlessly showing up at Emergency, a lot more frustrated doctors, and, at least on Cal's part, a whole lot less patience by this point in the shift. Which was unfortunate, because while he'd already been on his feet for over seventeen hours, he had more than thirty still to go before he was finished.

By this point in his shift, he could usually assuage his waning patience and growing fatigue with an extra-large coffee from the all-night café down the road—frantically obtained between patients—and a stern reminder to himself that he was now three-quarters of the way through his shift. Not this time. The ED was full to bursting, so there was no way he'd be able to sneak away

between patients long enough to grab a coffee, and with the warnings from the WHO about viral communication, everything had to be sanitised twice over, extending the time taken to see each patient even more.

He replaced the patient file in which he had been updating the notes and looked to Lucy, the nurse who had guided him through his first few shifts in Emergency. She was sharp-featured and steel-haired, in her mid-sixties, with more experience than anyone else he'd ever met and a knife-edged tongue to back it up. They had met during his first ED shift, when he'd barely found his way into the department through the convoluted internal geography of the hospital. She had looked him over, noting his hospital ID card, and asked her partner in crime, Harrison, "Who's the fresh meat?"

"Baby doctor," Harrison said dismissively.

"I'm Callum Hargraves," Cal had said, unsure. "How can I help?"

It was that question that had broken through Lucy's barriers. She'd cracked a smile. "Already know who holds the reins, do you, baby doctor?"

"First lesson they teach you on placement," Cal had replied. "Nurses know everything. Do what they tell you."

"He can stay," Harrison had said after a moment, with a grin, and gone back to whatever mysterious tasks he did as Nursing Unit Manager.

"Come on; I'll show you around," Lucy had said sharply and walked away without waiting for him. From there, she had shepherded him around enough that he didn't look too foolish as he learnt how the department functioned.

"Who's next?" he asked her now, seeing that she was consulting the intake paperwork.

"Twenty-five-year-old female. Laceration of the hand." She gestured to one of the chairs they'd put in the walkway, since the

number of beds they had couldn't keep up with the number of people coming in to be tested for the virus.

He had taken half a step towards her when he realised who it was—brass-coloured hair curling over her shoulders, blue eyes fixed vaguely into the middle distance. The mouth that had entranced him when he'd seen her that night in the bar—constantly in motion, smiling, frowning, scrunched up as she aimed her shot across the pool table—was pinched in discomfort. Her posture as she waited in the chair in the walkway was far from the girl he'd felt so drawn to the moment he'd laid eyes on her in the pub, though. Far from her easily confident, hip-swaying walk, she now sat bolt upright in the chair, like she was trying to keep on the alert for something. A bloodstained tea towel was wrapped around her hand. He was suddenly struck by the desire to wrap his arms around her and carry her somewhere she could sleep.

It was this urge that snapped him back to reality. What was she doing here? The one night they'd spent together had been back when he was finishing his internship, in a different hospital, in a different *city*—how could she be here now?

And more importantly, was she all right?

A loud noise from the TV, which was playing reruns of *Married At First Sight* and consequently, he was sure, lowering the IQ of the entire waiting room, reminded him that he was supposed to be a doctor here, not the lovestruck man who had been dreaming of this woman for, what was it, ten and a half months now. Not that he was counting. He walked over to her, trying desperately to look like he knew what he was doing, and stood beside the chair facing hers.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Hargraves," he managed, and when she looked up, he saw the exact moment that she realised it was really him.

She sucked in a breath of air. "Callum," she breathed, and pink rushed to her cheeks so sweetly, he wanted to wrap her in his arms all over again, wanted to claim that mouth with his own.

Heat ran through him in a wave and he had to remind himself what the hell he was actually meant to be doing here.

"Nina," he said. Her name tasted sweet on his tongue. When was the last time he'd said it? When he'd had her underneath him? When she'd kissed him goodnight, before he woke up and she was gone?

The reminder of waking up, not to the warmth of her body but rather to a cold, empty bed, was enough to bring him back to himself. "I understand you've got a bit of a cut," he said, taking the seat and trying desperately to remember what exactly he was meant to be doing. Because it felt like every moment he spent not pulling her back into his arms, was a moment wasted, no matter how angry he was at the way she'd disappeared that morning.

"Yes," Nina said quietly, and then she blinked and seemed to come back to herself the same way he had to keep doing. "Yes, I have. I was cutting a watermelon. I was trying to be careful, but I must have shifted my grip without realising, and I'd just had my knives sharpened, and... well. What happened is pretty obvious, I guess." She unwound the tea towel to show him the deep slice in her hand, which stretched across her palm.

He forced himself to focus on her as a patient, not on his sudden desperate desire to remove the misery from the soft pout of her mouth. "All right," he said and grabbed a pair of gloves from the box on the bench. "Can you stretch out your fingers for me? It might be a little uncomfortable." The cut started to bleed more as the move pulled it open, and she dabbed at it with the tea towel. "Now pull them back in for me, like you're trying to make a fist. Good work. All right, now close your eyes for me, I want you to tell me when you feel me touch your fingers." He profoundly resented the latex between his skin and hers as he tested the integrity of her nerves despite the injury. All of them were intact, so the cut had clearly not severed anything—a relief, since otherwise she'd need to go to the hand surgery team, and surgery wasn't exactly a priority in the current coronavirus-

riddled climate. More than that, it meant she still had sensation in all the regions of her hand, and he couldn't stand the idea of Nina touching something—touching *him*, said a disloyal little voice in the back of his head—and not being able to feel it.

Before he could ask another question, there was a wild laugh from one of the beds alongside them, and the curtains between them were flung back. The man who stood there had the wild, wide-eyed look of someone in the grip of psychosis, a look Cal recognised from his psychiatry rotation. He coughed loudly, directing it towards them before Callum could even lift his hands to shield either of them from the spray of spit. He saw Nina flinch and instinctively lift her injured hand to wipe her face clean. Blood dripped on to the tea towel, and she flinched and changed hands.

"If I have to have it," he announced loudly, "you all do too. You all can have it too!" He raced down towards the waiting room and started coughing on as many people as he could. Many of them had masks on, but the ones who didn't flinched away or leaped to their feet, and for a moment, Cal thought there was going to be some kind of riot.

A burly nurse grabbed the man and wrestled him to the ground, carefully keeping himself out of the line of fire of the man's persistent coughing. "You all can have it!" he was crying gleefully. "All of you! All of you!"

Cal turned to see that Lucy had frozen a few steps away from him. She looked more concerned than he had ever seen her.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, knowing he was being too sharp but unable to stop himself. What had Nina just been exposed to?

"He's psychotic," Lucy said, as though that wasn't clear. "He was supposed to be restrained until we could move him to Psychiatric Emergency, but he must have gotten out of them."

"That's not supposed to be possible!" Cal protested.

"You think I don't know that?" she snapped. "You're not the

only one here with a degree, Callum." She looked frightened, and that frightened him. He'd never seen Lucy look anything but determined and, regularly, exasperated.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked in consternation, reining in his anger at Nina being potentially exposed to whatever this man had, especially in the current climate. "He was just being crazy, right? He wasn't actually—"

"Coronavirus positive," Lucy confirmed, and her look of fear did not abate. "Cal, that means you've been exposed."

"Surely not," he said, trying for a laugh. He tried not to take notice of Nina's stricken look in the corner of his eye. "He didn't get near us."

"He coughed all over you," Lucy said. "She wiped his spit off her face. You have it on your shirt."

He looked down. She was right.

"Luce—" he started.

"Isolation," Lucy interrupted him. "We'll need to keep you in isolation."

"There's no space in this hospital to keep us," Cal protested. "They're low on beds as it is."

"We have a whole isolation *ward*," Lucy corrected him. "What did you think they were clearing Level Four for? Anyone who's exposed in the hospital—it's to keep them from moving through the community to get home."

"Are you telling me I'm going to be trapped on Level Four for two weeks?" Callum snapped.

"Are you telling me *I'm* going to be stuck in here for two weeks?" Nina asked, speaking for the first time since the coughing assault.

Lucy shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what else to say to you," she said. "I'll get the paperwork, but we're going to have to admit you both. It's the only safe thing to do." She fixed Callum with a steely glare. "You know how important it is that we avoid

exposing anyone to this. You know how important isolation is to keeping people safe."

"Yes, but—" he cut himself off before he could say what he'd been thinking. *That's for other people to deal with. I never thought it would apply to me.*

"I can't do that," Nina cut in. "I have a job. I'm working from home, but that's where all my stuff is. That's where my *life* is. I need...I need..." she trailed off, looking horror-struck. "You can't keep me here," she managed after a momentary pause.

"But if you don't stay, think about the people you might be exposing," Lucy said evenly. Apparently, she had recovered her equilibrium. "The grandmother in the lift. The person with asthma who passes you on the street. Whoever touches the latch on your gate after you. Isolation isn't just to protect us. It's to protect everyone who's more vulnerable than we are from being exposed."

"I know that," Nina protested. "I just—" She broke off and heaved a sigh. "All right. I understand. I understand." She swallowed and took a deep breath. "I guess I just wait here until you're ready to admit me, then? I'll try not to touch anything. But I guess that doesn't matter so much, since that guy already coughed everywhere." She cracked the weakest possible smile, and Callum realised what this would mean.

Two weeks. Two weeks in the company of the woman who had captivated him so profoundly, they'd talked until the bar staff actually asked them to leave so they could close then found their way back to his house. And then, when he hadn't been able to keep his hands off her any longer, he'd taken her to bed and she'd rocked his goddamn world, only to disappear before he woke up the next morning. He hadn't thought to ask for her number or even her last name while they were talking. He'd been too busy being enamoured of her. And then she was gone, and he had no way of finding her.

Until now. Or maybe more appropriately, she'd found him.

Of all the Emergency Departments in all the hospitals in all the world, she walked into mine, he found himself thinking then cut himself off before he could get any more ridiculous. This situation *was* ridiculous, but what could he do? Treat her appropriately, endure two weeks in close proximity, and send her on her way without begging for answers as to why she had seemed as enraptured by him as he was by her for all those hours when they were together, only to disappear without a trace.

He could do this.

He had to be able to do this.