

# THE MIDWIFE'S LITTLE MIRACLE

Fiona McArthur



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# **Fiona McArthur**

## **The Midwife's Little Miracle**

### **Аннотация**

Tiny baby: father needed! Finding she was pregnant was the best moment of midwife Montana's life. But days later she was widowed. Now nine months have passed, she has a tiny infant, and she knows it's time to make a fresh start. Dr Andy Buchanan has offered Montana a job at Lyrebird Lake because it's the perfect place to build a new life. Her courage impresses him. And he just can't get the beautiful new mum out of his mind...Every time Montana sees her baby in Andy's arms her resolve not to get involved crumbles. He's the perfect father. And he makes Montana's life feel complete once again...Lyrebird Lake Maternity Every day brings a miracle...

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THE MIDWIFE'S LITTLE MIRACLE

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## **‘How did you remember it was Dawn’s birthday?’**

Andy shook his head, denying it had been hard. ‘Forget the day you and Dawn came into my life?’ Andy looked across at her baby, dozing now on her mother’s lap. ‘Forget the magic on the mountain on New Year’s Day?’ he said softly, and his words brought back the serenity of that morning.

Then he leant across and kissed her cheek, and she could see he really did remember that day with emotion. ‘You were amazing.’

She found herself leaning towards him, and his long fingers stroked her jaw and drew her nearer. Just the feel of his warm strength splayed across her cheek and the caress of his thumb sent sensations tumbling into her stomach and chest, and she couldn’t help but close her eyes. She didn’t see his mouth coming, but she’d known it would happen. Wanted it to happen.

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Every day brings a miracle...

It’s time for these midwives

to become mothers themselves!

This month meet single mum Montana Browne in...

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*Montana’s found a new home in Lyrebird Lake, and just maybe the perfect father for her baby!*

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A mother to five sons, **Fiona McArthur** is an Australian midwife who loves to write. Medical™ Romance gives Fiona the scope to write about all the wonderful aspects of adventure, romance, medicine and midwifery that she feels so passionate about—as well as an excuse to travel! So now that the boys are older, her husband Ian and youngest son Rory are off with Fiona to meet new people, see new places, and have wonderful adventures. Fiona's website is at [www.fionamcarthur.com](http://www.fionamcarthur.com)

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# THE MIDWIFE'S LITTLE MIRACLE

BY

FIONA McARTHUR



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Dedicated to Flora May Simpson.

The best mother-in-law,  
who just laughs at the mess in my house.

## CHAPTER ONE

NEW YEAR's morning began with the faintest hint of grey shimmer on the horizon and Montana gently stroked her fingers across her swollen stomach.

This had been the first New Year's morning without her husband and the last she would spend at the mountain house before the new owners moved in.

The sea was a long way off, somewhere below the white fluffy quilt thrown over the mountains, shrouded like the future she couldn't see but did have faith in.

Eagle's Nest Retreat sat so high and wild that it overlooked

everything and Douglas had loved it when he'd painted here.

The sky had lightened only enough to illuminate the deep drifts of mist in all the lower valleys across from the house, and she sat symbolically alone, and accepted it would always be so.

The first contraction squeezed gently, like the tendrils of dewed spider webs that stretched the tops of the stumpy grass, and she nodded when she felt the mysterious child within herald her intentions.

Montana had agreed with her two best friends that, for her child's sake not her own, it would be safer to avoid the mountains for the last two weeks of her pregnancy.

So it wasn't Montana's fault her baby had decided to come earlier.

She closed the house and gathered her shawl and water bottle and, grasping the rail on the stairs, made her way slowly down to her vehicle. To actually climb into the four-wheel drive proved much more difficult than she'd expected and she chewed her lip as she started the engine.

The chug from the diesel engine scared a flock of lorikeets into flight, a little like the flutter of apprehension she fought down while she waited for the engine to warm up. Two more waves of pain came and went in that time.

As the contractions grew closer and fiercer a tiny frown puckered her forehead. It might not be as easy as she'd thought to drive the truck for two hours in early labour.

After thirty minutes of careful navigation down the misty

mountain sweat beaded her forehead and Montana's breath fogged the windscreen with the force of the pain. Though still focussed on what lay around the next corner she found it more difficult to divide her thoughts between road and birth.

The dirt track twisted and turned like the journey her baby would make within her and on an outflung clearing overlooking the mist-covered valley she had to pull over to rest and shore up her reserves.

A pale grey wallaby and her pint-sized joey stood at the edge of the clearing and their dark pointy faces twitched with fascination at her arrival.

Montana's labour gathered force and she glanced with despair at the distance to the valley floor. It was impossible to descend the mountain safely when she couldn't concentrate on the road and suddenly the tension drained from her shoulders as she slumped back.

So be it.

When the pain eased she slid from the truck and spread a rug on the damp grass and tucked her shawl and water beside her. She eased herself down and sat with her arms behind her to watch the deepening of the horizon from coral to pink to cerise as the sun threatened to rise through the cloud below.

When the next surge had dissolved she sighed and gazed skywards. Maybe he was looking down.

'You should be here, Douglas.' A single tear held her loss that still pierced so keenly.

She felt the whisper of cool breeze brush the dampness on her cheek and suddenly she was not alone and she didn't care if she imagined him because the next pain was upon her and she needed his strength with her own to stay pliant on the waves of the contractions.

*I am here, the wind whispered. You are safe.*

*I love you, she heard, and then she listened to the nuances of her body and in her mind she watched the descent of her baby and squeezed her husband's hand and the waves changed in tempo and direction and strength and suddenly the urge was upon her to ease her baby out into the world.*

The sun cascaded through like the gush of water, her baby's head glistening round and hard and hot in her hands, and then the next pain was upon her. Her baby's head rotated towards her leg and the released shoulder slid down and through to follow.

In long, slow seconds, her baby's body eased into the world until, in a waterfall rush, legs and feet followed and in a tangle of cord and water and fresh broken sunlight, her baby was born.

The unmistakable sound of a newborn's first cry startled the birds as Montana reached down and gathered her daughter to her, forgetting the cord that joined them, and she laughed at the tug that reminded her that all umbilical cords were not long.

A daughter. Douglas's daughter. She turned, not expecting to see him yet so grateful she had imagined him in her time of greatest need.

The clearing was empty save for the mother wallaby and her

skittish joey, and like the last of the night tendrils they too disappeared silently as the fog rolled away.

She shivered.

\* \* \*

‘You must be Montana?’ His voice was different from Douglas’s, not as deep or careful with enunciation, but the same timbre of quiet authority and caring drifted over her and that must have been why she didn’t jump.

She wound down the window and saw the darkest auburn hair and green eyes that proclaimed his relationship to her friend. So this was Misty’s big brother from Queensland. He towered over her door.

It seemed almost normal that Misty’s four-wheel drive had pulled up next to hers in the morning light and have this man stand beside her car door to look in.

He had to bend down quite a bit to her level and she smiled to herself at the trials of tall men. ‘Yes, I’m Montana. I gather Misty sent you?’

He nodded. ‘I’m Andy.’ He looked across at the top of her baby’s head snuggled into her chest with blankets over both of them in a big mound, and he smiled.

To Andy they both seemed so peaceful despite the absolute isolation in which they’d met. There was something so tranquil about the mother and daughter in this isolated spot that it was difficult to grasp she had given birth without support. ‘And who is this?’

Montana smiled and he felt the curve of her lips and the softening of her eyes right down to his combat boots and back up again where heat flickered in his chest like a hot coal from an outback campfire.

‘This is my daughter, Dawn,’ she said, and her serene voice wrapped around him like the fog he’d just passed through to get here.

‘Hello, Dawn.’ He smiled at the thatch of dark hair against Montana and the baby snuffled as if in answer. ‘I can guess what time she arrived.’

His smile faded and his training reminded him this woman had been without assistance. He framed the question as delicately as he could. ‘Any problems you need help with?’

She glanced at him and he felt the humour behind her voice more than he heard it when she spoke, and the observation confused him. Since when had he picked up fine distinctions in tone from unknown women?

‘No, thank you, Doctor,’ she said. ‘Third stage complete and I’m not bleeding or damaged. My baby has fed.’

He didn’t like the way he was so conscious of his sister’s friend but maybe that was because he felt for her recent loss.

He knew he avoided emotions these days, had done for three years. It was the way he’d decided to stay and he empathised with her journey. But, actually, he was more than conscious of her.

They were on the side of a mountain, for heaven’s sake, and she’d just had a baby.

He concentrated on the things he was good at. ‘Right, then. Let’s get you out of here.’ He glanced around to decide where to reverse the vehicle.

Montana’s voice was gentle, as if explaining to a child—and a slow one at that. ‘We have to wait for the fog on the road to clear further down before we go.’

He could feel himself frown but what could she expect? He hadn’t predicted resistance to rescue. ‘I managed to get here.’

‘That’s lovely.’ And she smiled that damn schoolmistress smile again that made his neck prickle under his collar.

She went on. ‘I’m not risking my daughter in a drive down the mountain with a man I don’t know until the mist is gone completely, even if the man driving does rescue for a living.’

The inflexible set of her chin and the tilt of her fine-boned face should have exasperated him but inexplicably he could feel himself bend like a reed to her wishes. So be it. ‘Fine. We’ll wait.’

He paused while they both pondered how long that would be. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

He saw her eyes widen as her taste buds responded and his own smile twitched as he tried to contain his amusement. Ha!

Deadpan, he gave the choices as he watched her face. ‘Earl Grey, breakfast, peppermint or jasmine tea?’

A tiny frown marred her forehead as if she wasn’t sure if he was joking. ‘Jasmine?’

‘Fine. I’ll rustle that up shortly.’ He pulled the hot water bottle his sister had slipped into the car from the pocket of his doctor’s

bag and showed it to her.

‘Misty sent this.’ He touched the handle of her car door and raised his brows again. ‘May I?’

When she nodded he tucked the warm rubber bottle under the blanket against her feet.

He couldn’t help noticing she had little feet. Slim, shapely ankles, too, but he liked her feet. He heard her sigh with the warmth as he stepped back, and that dragged his mind away from her toes. Now he had a foot fetish? What was wrong with him this morning?

The air seemed colder now that he’d moved back away from her. ‘Sure you’re warm enough? I have a great heater in the car.’

She tugged the blanket closer around her neck. ‘That seems sensible. Perhaps you could heat your car first and then I could hand you Dawn to keep snug while I do a bit of a tidy with myself?’

Nurses. Obsessed with being tidy, he thought. He grinned. ‘I’ll be right back.’

She watched him walk away. A tall, lean man, even taller than Douglas. She really had to stop comparing people to her darling Douglas. Andy resembled his sister uncannily but there was no doubt he held the Y chromosome. It had been kind of him to come, unnecessary but kind.

No doubt Misty and Mia had panicked when she hadn’t arrived last night but she’d wanted one more night on the mountain before she had to move out to start afresh.

The most important night, as it turned out, and she smiled down at her daughter.

Minutes drifted peacefully and then he was back. ‘The car is heated. Shall I take Dawn?’

He held out his arms and she saw he’d unwrapped a small blanket and a tiny warm beanie from another hot-water bottle.

It didn’t surprise her any more about his sister’s intuition. Misty was known for her premonitions. ‘Misty must have been pretty sure Dawn would arrive.’

Andy nodded. ‘She rang me at five this morning in a state and I’ve learnt to believe her when she “feels” something.’

‘Is it a family trait?’ Montana could see he was proud of his fey sister. She’d found another thing she liked about him.

He smiled crookedly and the way he curved his firm mouth made him more a real person and less Misty’s brother. ‘Sometimes I’m accused of uncanny intuition if we’re searching for someone, but not with the precision and clarity of Misty.’

He pulled the soft bonnet over Dawn’s hair as if he’d beanieed a baby many times and then rolled her little body in the blanket as he peeled her away from Montana’s skin so that the cold air wouldn’t distress her. Dawn didn’t even whimper.

Montana was quietly impressed with his confidence with her newborn daughter—even Douglas, an obstetrician, hadn’t been that adept at handling babies. The thought was diverted by a sneaky eddy of cold air that had whispered against her own skin like a blast from the refrigerator, and she pulled the blanket in

tight and hugged it with a shudder.

Andy wrapped Dawn in another warm shawl and tucked her against his chest as he flattened the blanket back firmly around Montana with his other hand. He must have seen her shiver.

Dawn whimpered and he whispered softly to her. His cheek rested against her tiny head with his skin on hers to comfort her while he carried her to the warmth of the car.

Montana frowned at how at ease they looked together and decided she'd had enough huddling to keep warm while she waited for the mist to lift.

Her heated feet felt good and she slipped the bottle up to tuck into her now loose trousers and keep her stomach warm as she pulled her shirt together where she'd opened it to keep her daughter snug against her skin.

The sheer bliss of hot water to wash her face and hands made her smile and after she'd communed with nature she crossed to Andy's car and her daughter.

Andy had the cup holders out on the dashboard and each held a steaming cup of tea that caused puffs of condensation on the windshield above each mug.

Dawn dozed quite happily tucked into Andy's arm and Montana stilled him with a raised hand as he went to lean across to open the passenger door.

She slid in. 'Don't move. She's settled.' He looked remarkably at ease for a big man with a newborn in his arms.

She inhaled the aroma. 'The tea smells wonderful,' she said,

and gathered the cup in both hands to divert her mind away from him. The heated comfort infused into her hands like the flavour had into the water.

How brilliant that Andy had instinctively known not to fuss. Even Douglas would have flapped and scolded at the thought of Dawn's arrival here on the mountain, and Montana sipped her tea slowly and relaxed.

They sat silently for many minutes and Montana may even have dozed.

When she opened her eyes again he was looking at her. Not staring, just an appraisal to see if she was fine. She couldn't remember when she'd felt so comfortable in a stranger's company.

'Were you frightened?' His words were soft and acknowledged something powerful and amazing had happened on the mountain that morning and she took pleasure in his lack of censure. She smiled at the bundle that was her daughter and shook her head.

Suddenly it was important he understand that she wasn't reckless with her daughter's life. 'It was the most serene dawn. I couldn't drive any more, not safely anyway, and when I stopped it all happened as it should.'

She paused thoughtfully and then went on. 'I won't say I was lucky it all went well—because I have always believed a woman is designed to give birth without complications. I was just not unlucky, as some women are.'

Andy pondered her statement. That seemed a bit simplistic

for him but it wasn't his job to dispute her views and instead he flattened his chin against his chest and squinted at the baby snuggled like a possum into him. 'What do you think Dawn weighs?'

Montana looked proudly across at her daughter and smiled again. 'Maybe six pounds. Say two and a half thousand grams. She's three weeks early but she's vigorous.'

'She's perfect.' Like her mother. The glow that infused him with that thought surprised him but he refused to examine the reasons. The occasion was special enough for odd feelings.

'I know,' she said. They smiled at each other in mutual admiration for Montana's baby. This time Montana was the first to look away and he wondered if she too had become aware of that ease between them, which was unexpected.

He reached over the back of the seat and lifted a small lunch holder. He needed to be practical, not fanciful. 'Would you like some sandwiches? Misty made some with egg and some with ham. We could put them together and pretend it's a Sunday breakfast.'

'Actually, I'm starving.' Her face lit up and he enjoyed her eagerness for food. No doubt his pleasure came from a primitive male-provider thing but he could fix her hunger when he'd let her down by not being there half an hour earlier.

She unwrapped the sandwich and bit into it with small white teeth and with obvious relish. Labour must be hungry work, he thought, and the glow inside him flared a little more.

‘Is there anything you don’t have?’ she said just before the next bite, and the words were strangely prophetic.

Someone like you, perhaps? Whoa, there boy. He was getting way out of his depth here and he needed to pull back urgently. He looked out at the mist below them in the valley.

His voice came out a little more brusquely than he’d intended but he couldn’t help that. ‘I don’t have a trailer to bring your truck down with us—but I’ll come back and get it later for you.’

She saw the mist had begun to dissipate lower down the mountain.

Soon this interlude would be over, she’d be tucked up in a ward bed with Misty and Mia fussing over her, and everything would be as it should be, except Douglas wouldn’t be there.

All the things she hadn’t said and now couldn’t share with Douglas were irretrievable and she needed to accept that. But she dreaded each day in her normal environment, which had become so entrenched in loss and memories.

Her husband wouldn’t be in the maternity ward where she’d first seen him. Wouldn’t be in any of the familiar places where they’d both spent the last years of his life.

How did one cope with this feeling of desolation? Or of the guilt-ridden feeling that Douglas had let her down somehow by dying? What of the fact that a stranger had been the first man to see Dawn and not Douglas?

Her eyes stung and a tear rolled down her cheek. ‘I don’t want to go to the hospital. Actually, I don’t ever want to go back there.’

I don't even want to go back to my house in town, which is ridiculous as I don't have the energy to organise a clean break. I have no idea how I am ever going to go back to work there.'

She bit her lip and then shook her head. 'This is not like me. I'm sorry. I have no option. Ignore what I just said.'

The understanding in his green eyes nearly triggered the tears again. 'Anyone would think you'd had a big morning,' he said, and the compassion in his voice told her he understood. He really did understand.

Andy slid his arm across the seat and around her shoulder and it was as if he encased her in empathy. Despite the fact that she didn't know him, it felt good to be hugged. Incredibly good.

'It must be hard without your husband,' he said. 'I felt the same when my wife died.'

He saw she knew his story. Misty would have told her. He hoped she hadn't told her how he'd almost gone off the rails.

'It's harder than anything in the world,' she said, 'and sometimes I'm almost angry with him for leaving.' Montana lifted her face to his. Her eyes shimmered with loss and he remembered that too.

'I remember that feeling,' he said.

He squeezed the fine-boned shoulder under his hand and she responded to his understanding and told him.

'The first of May. It was an aneurysm. There was no warning. Douglas went to bed smiling and never woke up. He was thirty-five and didn't even know he would be a father.'

Andy didn't rush in with condolences because when his wife had died he'd hated that. The silence lengthened as they both reflected on their losses.

Finally he said, 'It was a tragedy. Though he has given you a beautiful daughter and he will live on through her.'

She nodded. 'I know. But I don't ever want to hurt like that again.'

Andy sighed. Amen to that. Time was a great healer—he knew that from bitter experience—but the early years were painful and something he'd promised himself he'd never do again. She had to do it with a daily reminder in a child.

It was good he had a direction in life with the hospital now. She needed something like that.

Andy squeezed Montana's shoulders once more and then let his arm drop. 'I'll get your things and put them in my car.'

'I want to go home. Not to the hospital.' The pain was stark in her voice.

He'd suspected that was coming. 'Fine. I'm sure your own personal midwives will arrive as soon as they hear you are home.'

He smiled and Montana found she could smile back. He was right. Of course she didn't have to go to the hospital. Mia and Misty would make sure she was fine.

## CHAPTER TWO

ANDY spent the week of his holidays doing three things.

First, he accumulated extra operating hours as a locum surgeon for the occasional disaster that cropped up at the lake

to ensure his skills remained current. You never knew when a casualty would arrive without time for transfer to the base hospital.

Second, he lost no opportunity to promote the idea of transfer to Lyrebird Lake for any health professional who would listen and might be remotely interested in relocating.

The Lake needed staff if it was to move into the new era the mine would bring, and this was a great opportunity to scout for potential colleagues.

Andy had sworn he would do his best to help find staff. If he didn't, the hospital would be downgraded even further and the funding diverted to the base hospital eighty kilometres away.

That would happen over his dead body.

And the third thing he did was try not to think about Montana Browne.

His was a busman's holiday that allowed him to catch up with his only sister once a year and not intended for relaxation or dalliance.

Since Montana's baby had arrived early he'd spent a lot of time in and out of Misty's friend's house after work because Misty had taken on the cooking and shopping role for Montana in some pre-arranged, pre-birth deal the girls had going.

The other friend, Mia, had been assigned washing and garden work so Andy had offered to mow the lawns before he left.

He didn't mind. It gave him a chance to watch Montana, a pastime he suspected he could become captivated by.

Something wasn't right with Montana today.

It was a typical three-women-and-extra-brother afternoon at Montana's house and he found it all strangely poignant that it was the last he would be present at.

Misty stroked Dawn's downy cheek as she whispered to the tiny baby in her arms. 'You are beautiful. Yes you are.'

Andy heard his sister's crooning but his attention was on Montana as she rested back in the lounge with the cup of jasmine tea he'd made for her and fielded the barrage of questions Mia seemed obsessed with.

'You sure you didn't mean to have Dawn up there in the mountains all the time? You must have known you were going into labour? Didn't you have a premonition?'

'No premonition. I leave that to Misty.' Montana's quiet voice drifted across to him and he saw her glance at him but she didn't smile.

Why did he need her to smile? 'And to Andy,' she finished, and he savoured the way she said his name.

He should go. Get out of this hens' party and think about packing to head home. He still had a heap of shopping to do before he flew back tomorrow morning and if he went back to the Lake without the special ingredients Louisa, their housekeeper, had requested, he was a dead man.

He just couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from Montana today—though that was nothing new. The day he'd met her replayed like a favourite movie in his brain.

He could still see her alone in an isolated clearing on the side of a mountain surrounded by mist—a woman as calm and tranquil as a Tibetan monk—after giving birth alone.

She'd declined hospital assessment even though he admitted she had two willing experts in his sister and Mia.

Here in her own home, even with her new baby, he'd never seen her succumb to any sort of anxiety, until now.

He kept remembering how serene she'd been when he'd first arrived to bring her back. That serenity was missing, and he didn't think it was just the fact that Mia was hounding her again, but maybe it was.

'Mia, leave her alone.' Although he said it quietly, his voice cut across the room and the three women turned towards him.

Dawn began to cry and Misty carried her across to her mother as she glared at her brother. Andy smiled.

All three women could indicate displeasure with their eyes but his sister won hands down. Their mother had been the same but Misty would have been too young to remember that.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to startle everyone. Forget it.' His sister would flay him for upsetting the baby but he was more worried about upsetting Montana.

Maybe his sister could help. 'Can I see you for a minute, Misty, please?'

Misty shrugged and Montana raised one eyebrow mockingly as if to say he'd picked the wrong household to assert his authority, but he could see she was fine with him at least.

Misty approached with that militant look in her eye and he turned away with her so the other two couldn't see their faces.

'Sorry.' Diversion might be a useful deflection. 'Just wanted to ask you if you think it's a good thing Montana stays here when it obviously makes her so sad.'

As a spur-of-the-moment diversion it had come with a lot of thought.

Misty frowned and tilted her head as if to peer inside his brain. He hated it when she did that because a lot of the time she could guess what he was thinking, and he didn't even know what he was thinking himself.

'What choice does she have?' She spoke slowly as she watched him and he tried his own attempt at peering. She probably thought he was interested in Montana. Well, he was—but not like that!

He'd been there when Montana had said she didn't want to come back to this house, this town, anywhere near the hospital.

'Montana could come back to Lyrebird Lake with me and work in the hospital when she's ready. She said she didn't want to go back to Westside. We're still looking for a midwife and an evening supervisor. Maybe she could fill those positions until she decides what she wants to do.'

Misty was still peering. 'You'd have to talk to her about that yourself. And how would you get her there? She hates small planes.'

He didn't like the scepticism in Misty's voice but she didn't

seem as negative the more she thought about it.

She shook her head but again not as convincingly. 'I can't imagine Montana wanting to uproot herself from Douglas's house and head to the back of beyond with a new baby.'

It wasn't that dumb an idea. He frowned as he watched his sister consider the idea.

Too bad if she didn't agree. It was Montana he needed to convince. 'People in South East Queensland live there with babies. There's no strangeness in that,' he said.

Misty screwed her face up in disbelief that he could be so obtuse. 'There is the problem of leaving everyone you know at a time you need them most.'

He'd be there for her and so would the others. 'She'd know me. There's a town full of people who would help.'

'Strangers!' Misty's scorn came out a little forced and he began to hope she'd seen some advantage for Montana in his suggestion.

He lowered his voice. 'Maybe that's what she needs right now.'

Montana drifted across the room towards them and he watched her approach. Misty looked pointedly at her brother. 'Ask her.'

He grimaced. It wasn't how he would have chosen to broach the subject but something told him Montana had got the gist of their discussion anyway and maybe postponing this wasn't helping. Even from the beginning he'd never doubted her powers of observation.

At least her expression could be construed as interested, not

wary. Here goes, he thought. ‘I wondered if you might like a change of scene, Montana. Maybe a job when you’re ready, up my way. We have vacancies we can’t fill at the cottage hospital.’

She watched his face as he spoke and he hoped he made sense. ‘I think I’ve mentioned I live in a rambling old house with tons of room. There’s another semi-retired doctor plus any locums that can come for a week or two to give us relief.’

He glanced briefly at the bassinet by the window, where Dawn now slept. ‘You and Dawn could share with us for as long as you like, or even have your own cottage as there are a few on the hospital grounds if that would suit you better.’

She looked more receptive than he’d hoped for so he went on. ‘We’re looking for another midwife and an evening supervisor. Misty told me you have a management certificate and I thought you might be interested in a fresh start.’

‘Don’t blame me,’ Misty said, but both of them ignored her as Montana considered the idea.

Obviously Misty expected Montana to turn him down but if he wasn’t mistaken he’d say Montana actually looked relieved he’d asked her.

She certainly seemed interested. ‘I’ve heard you say you don’t deliver babies at the Lake,’ she said quietly, and raised her finely arched brows. ‘Is that hospital policy or just because of the lack of midwives?’

‘Occasionally we have babies. There’s myself and Ned, the semi-retired GP I live with, but we only have one midwife on

staff with any obstetric experience. We catch unexpected babies when we have to but send on the rest to the regional hospital because that's where the skill base is.'

Of course that would be where her interest would lie, he thought, and wondered how he could turn that to his advantage.

'That is something we expect might have to change as the town grows.' He shrugged and grinned. 'So if you can convince a few of your friends to migrate north, that would be good, too.'

He picked up on her interest and began to experience the exhilaration he usually only felt when he'd accomplished a difficult surgery or diagnosed an elusive condition. Or landed a beautiful fish.

'A midwifery-led clinic and case load, you mean?' Her head was up and he could feel her intensity.

He just might have her. 'Perhaps, though you'd have to explain caseload midwifery more fully to me some time. I know you've been involved with the stand-alone centre at Westside.'

She nodded. 'Women-centred care is springing up more commonly now since women consumers have documented what they want. I would be happy to clarify the concepts for you.'

She chewed her bottom lip. 'How long would I have to stay if I came out and just had a look?'

She was still cagey but he could feel she was close to considering his offer and he pressed his advantage, unable to believe his luck.

'No ties.' He didn't want to scare her off, for a variety of

reasons. Once she'd seen the place and the potential he'd seen, she'd be hooked. He hoped. She had a lot to offer and Matron would be delighted.

'We could say you're visiting, if you like, then if you decided to go home no one would be any wiser.'

'A freeloader?' She wasn't happy with that and he doubted she'd ever taken anything for nothing.

'With a view to helping us out in the future. That's not freeloading. Rest for as long as you need. A month or two at least. Lots of things run on a barter system at the Lake. We'll sort something out. It's not easy to get staff so if you stayed to work short or long term, we'd be fine with that.'

'Babysitting?' She'd changed. He couldn't pick when it had happened, but she'd lost the anxious look she'd had all morning. Now she was efficient and focussed. He could see that and he liked it. It was beginning to feel as if they were the only two in the room and he liked that as well—perhaps a bit too much.

He thought of Louisa, his housekeeper, and how much she'd adore Dawn. 'Our housekeeper is a grandmother whose grandkids live away. She'd be in seventh heaven with Dawn and would happily look after her when you needed her to.'

Overall, after his explanations, Montana appeared relieved, if anything, and he began to believe it could possibly happen. Why did it matter so much that this woman would come when others he'd been philosophical about hadn't?

'Thank you for asking me,' was all she said. 'I'd like to think

about it.’

He watched her exchange a look with Misty and his sister frowned. Was that a good look or a bad look?

He opted to give them time to talk in case he went backwards from here. He’d done all he could. He nodded and moved across to apologise to Mia.

Montana watched his progress across the room before she turned to Misty.

She needed this. The memories everywhere she looked were crushing her. ‘I’d like to go with your brother to Lyrebird Lake.’

Misty frowned. ‘You made that decision fast.’ But the lack of surprise in her friend’s voice made Montana smile.

She sighed ruefully. ‘I’ve been a mess, trying to decide whether to ask him all morning. I knew they had staffing problems but it will be weeks before I’ll want to think about work. With somewhere to stay, it’s the perfect answer.’

‘Perfect answer to what?’ Misty said.

Montana heard the censure and could see Misty did not understand her rationale.

‘You have everything here,’ Misty went on. She included Mia in an encompassing gesture. ‘You have us.’

Too true, Montana thought, and that part would be hard. ‘I love you guys, and I will miss you, and that will be the hardest part, but there’s too much here.’

She met Misty’s eyes. ‘I need to get away and start life afresh with Dawn. I’m not looking to replace Douglas, just looking

for somewhere everyone doesn't panic about what to say to me in case they upset me. I'll never forget Douglas, can't imagine being with another man, but I need to be a whole person for my daughter, and I can't do that here.'

'Fair enough, but don't decide immediately.' Misty hugged her. 'He leaves tomorrow. It's going to happen fast and you might wake up and wonder what you've done.'

Montana looked across at Andy, where he was laughing with Mia. He made her laugh too, and that wasn't an easy thing to do. 'I know. But that's a risk I have to take. I would be in safe hands. Will you help me?'

'Of course.' Misty sighed and glanced at her watch as she tried to calculate how much time they had. 'You never know. I might turn up for a visit there one day by myself.'

'You'd have to bring Mia, and her boyfriend wouldn't like that—he'd have to cook for himself. But we'd have fun.' The two women smiled.

When they left the next day it took Montana a while to come to grips with the fact that not only did Andy own the plane but he would be the pilot if she wanted to avoid a two-day car trip with a newborn.

She'd always had a reluctance to fly and the idea of a tiny two-seater plane with her daughter was right up there in nightmare territory. If she hadn't had that unexpected confidence in Andy that she'd felt from the first moment she'd seen him, she would have pulled out.

She eased herself stiffly into the cramped seat, quickly breathed in and out a couple of times and tried to secure her seat belt, but it wouldn't latch into place. Her fingers fumbled with it.

She could do this. She tried again one-handed with Dawn against her chest and then again with slightly more desperation until the door beside her opened and the woody aftershave she'd begun to associate with Andy drifted past her nose.

'May I?' He looked down at her with a reassuring smile and she remembered why she'd decided to go with this man.

She sighed and relaxed, and at her nod Andy clicked her belt and then secured the tiny strap around Dawn that threaded between mother and daughter like a leather umbilical cord for emergencies.

It meant she was joined again to her daughter and she liked the idea for the flight.

She wondered who would be drawing reassurance from whom in the coming flight. Thank God Andy was there to look after both of them.

Then Andy climbed into the other side of the plane and squeezed his big frame down next to her, and she could feel the warmth from his body like a soothing shield. She enjoyed feeling slightly safer until she remembered his presence meant they were close to take-off.

Oh, boy, she thought grimly, and concentrated on his strong hands as they caressed the controls. An unexpected wish to feel those fingers squeeze her hand in comfort made her twist to stare

out the window.

‘You OK?’ She heard his voice and she turned back and hoped her face at least appeared calm.

‘Fine,’ she lied, and he looked across at her and grinned.

He nodded and resumed his flight preparations. She chewed her lip while he talked to the flight control tower and then it was too late to change her mind because the little Cessna had begun to taxi in an ungainly rattle down the runway.

Another small plane in front of them awaited take-off and she watched in sick fascination as it lined up and then hurtled away from them down the runway before it climbed precariously away into the sky. She swallowed the fear in her throat. Their plane would have to do that.

She wished irrationally that Dawn would be less settled and whimper or do something to distract her, but her daughter snoozed on regardless.

Andy positioned the plane and the engine built in noise until it seemed to scream—a little like the noise Montana wanted to make but couldn’t—and her nerves stretched.

He looked across at her and flashed his white teeth in the joy of the moment before take-off. Pretty impressive dentistry, she acknowledged, by grimacing back, then she returned to the only thing she could do as she breathed in and out. She prayed.

Breathing was a good thing and improved the lightness in her head at least, and praying could be helpful if divine intervention was required.

He released the brakes and the plane began its thunder down the runway and when she risked a look the tarmac beside her blurred. Suddenly the noise changed and her stomach plummeted and she realised they were in the air as the ground dropped woozily below her window.

*OhmyGod.* She turned her head away and closed her eyes.

Obviously Dawn travelled better than her mother. She was asleep. Montana tried to think of something different that rhymed with doom and gloom and boom. She moistened her lips and risked opening one eye.

They'd levelled out and Andy looked pretty relaxed. She opened her other eye.

She'd talk about the weather. 'So, do you have emergency supplies in this thing and a homing beacon?' That wasn't what she'd meant to say.

Andy smiled. 'GPS tracker and, yes, we have basic emergency supplies. Today we even have English muffins, ginger marmalade and Norfolk punch as extras for my housekeeper and jasmine tea for you. But despite the size of the plane, we're safe.'

He glanced at her sleeping daughter. 'Dawn isn't worried.'

Montana looked down at her. 'Hmm. She has less imagination than I have.'

'Wimp.'

His eyes danced and she noticed he had little brown flecks through the green of his irises, then she frowned at the unfairness of the comment.

‘Hey, if I was a wimp, I wouldn’t be here.’

The hundred-watt smile he sent her way warmed the ice around her heart and made her forget she and Dawn were in a fragile capsule a mile above the earth. Now it felt more like she floated in the air without support amongst the clouds outside her window. Heady stuff. Probably oxygen deprivation.

‘That’s true. You are not a wimp. Well done.’ His words continued to warm that cold spot she’d had in her chest for far too long, though it was probably just reactionary euphoria that they hadn’t died on take-off.

He changed the subject and began to recite anecdotes about the older doctor he lived with, and by the time they were nearly there she had acclimatised to the concept of flight, with Andy at least.

Montana’s first sight of Lyrebird Lake was as they broke through the low cloud and saw it lying ahead.

The grey of the water on the lake reflected the grey of the clouds that had dogged most of their journey and suddenly it suited her mood and her spirits plummeted.

She didn’t know anyone in this town except Andy. No doubt this sudden low feeling was helped by residual pregnancy hormones, but what had she been thinking of to leave everything she knew behind and literally take off with her week-old baby and a man she’d barely met? Even if he was the most restful man she’d ever known?

What if it didn’t work out? What if Dawn cried every night and

kept the whole household awake? What if she lost this rapport with Andy that she relied on so much?

### CHAPTER THREE

‘YOU still with me?’

Andy could feel the change in Montana even though she tried to hide it.

He was way too aware of this woman but everything he’d done to try and change that awareness hadn’t worked and he did need to ensure he had a safety line to draw between him and her.

He was more than happy to help when he could, but it didn’t mean he had to try and fix all her problems.

It could be just her distrust of flying—lots of people weren’t comfortable in small planes—and he admired the way she’d overcome that fear without fuss or demands. But he had an idea it was more than that.

She was independent, he was that way himself so that shouldn’t bother him, but he wanted her to know he was available as a shoulder to lean on. As a brother, of course.

Actually, he wanted to reach over and squeeze her hand and reassure her that everything would work out but despite the way his sister and her friends hugged each other, he didn’t feel at ease in the touchy-feely set. Not platonically anyway.

Then there was the suspicion that once he’d touched Montana it might be hard to stop, and Andy struggled with that idea of touching another woman after Catherine.

He’d brought Montana here for a job—he really did respect

all the things she'd achieved in the past if what Misty said was true—and it was her administrative skills he needed.

He was better unencumbered with love and family and he didn't doubt Montana could be the whole package—if he let her, which he wasn't going to. He was better alone. He'd promised himself that and he had too much baggage to inflict on someone else.

He watched her slender fingers slide gently over Dawn's hair and wondered who drew comfort from whom as she cuddled her baby close.

'I'm OK,' she said. 'I just had a minute of panic.'

She stared out the window at the expanse of water below and he leant across to point things out because it directed his thoughts away from this uncomfortable space he was in at the moment.

Besides, he'd always loved this view and he hoped she could see the beauty below despite the scar of new development near the lake.

A scattering of established houses along the shore added to the town which nestled under a set of hills. 'See the hills and the lookout. We have great bush walks and even a waterfall up there.'

Then the hospital came into view. 'That's all in the hospital grounds.' He pointed out the largest tin-roofed building and a scattering of smaller buildings spreading out from it. 'The one across the park is our house.'

Montana inclined her head towards the town below. 'The town is smaller than I anticipated.' Her voice seemed smaller than

before, too, and a moment's panic had him hoping she didn't want to turn around and go home.

'It's tiny compared to Westside but it's a full of good people in a good town.' He wanted her to feel comfortable and realise the potential he saw in the area himself. The hospital needed her. She had nothing to do with his own needs.

'We have a large feeder district but anyone with a complicated medical condition would still be shipped out. Admissions to the hospital are fairly simple and mostly brief. Same goes for births. If it's not simple, it's gone. But if we expand our services, that would change with the needs of the mine population.'

She nodded. 'Lyrebird Lake is an unusual name. Is it because of the shape of the lake or because you have lyrebirds?'

He'd never seen a lyrebird. 'I guess it's the shape of the lake. We're pretty far north as a habitat. There's not much rainforest around here, though we do have some patches of wet forest which would make it possible.'

She nodded. 'They are supposed to look like a small turkey with a tail. Has anyone ever seen one here?'

'Not that I know of.' He shook his head. 'I've heard some pretty strange noises in the bush so I guess I could have heard one. Apparently the lyrebird can copy another bird's song, or an animal, or even man-made noises like chainsaws and crying babies.'

She smiled. 'That would be a mother's nightmare. One crying baby is enough.'

‘Ned says there’s a local myth that those who have suffered will be rewarded when the lyrebird visits. No visitations for me in the three years I’ve been here, and I think he’s pulling my leg.’

She smiled at his sceptical amusement. ‘So why are you here?’

He shrugged. ‘Lyrebird or not, the Lake healed me, and I think it could help you too.’ He looked across at her and hoped she realised he genuinely believed that and not just because he could use an extra midwife in the hospital.

‘The people are legitimate, as is their need, and you can’t stay immune to their warmth,’ he said. ‘I appreciate that after living in the city.’

She nodded so maybe she did understand. ‘Which hospital did you work in?’ she asked, and for the first time in a long time he didn’t mind answering.

‘The year after my wife died I spent in the emergency department at Sydney General. U and O they called it—understaffed and overwhelmed.’

His voice lowered as he remembered. ‘You know what it’s like. Extremely long hours, no emotional involvement with patients, just save them or lose them. I was happy to do that as I built up a big wall to hide behind. I couldn’t see myself becoming more clinical and distanced from humanity.’ He shook his head.

‘Misty, and the friends I had alienated, saw it.’ Rueful grin there at the memory of how taciturn he’d been since his wife had died. ‘They ganged up on me and suggested I resign. Then told me about Ned, the Lake’s retired GP, and how he needed help

for a few months. He's got degenerative vision failure and I've been here ever since.'

He thought back over the last couple of years and how his mindset had altered for the better. 'I've grown to love it here and I'm committed to providing the medical needs of the community. If those needs adjust then the hospital will darned well adjust too.'

He pointed to the north. 'It made things interesting when the mine opened up twenty kilometres away and now the farmland is selling faster than the local government can subdivide. We have our first restaurant in town.'

'A real restaurant in town? Very flash.' She smiled, probably at the pride in his voice, and he laughed.

'It is for us.' He'd take her there one day. Angelo would love Montana.

He went on. 'The hospital will get busier and the idea of a midwifery-led unit is not as far-fetched as you might imagine. There is a core of women in town who are very progressive and well read on their rights. They'd love women-centred care.'

She tilted her head. 'And I thought you were just saying that to tempt me.'

He smiled and tried not to think about who was tempting whom, because that wasn't part of the plan. 'Now, why would I do that?'

She looked at him thoughtfully. 'I don't know. Perhaps you recognised my symptoms from your own past or maybe...' She paused and considered him. 'You just wanted someone else to

have the headache of setting up a new service.'

He grinned. 'Bingo! We could be a good team.' He adjusted the flaps on the wing. 'You ready? We're going in.'

The noise of the plane engine changed and the little cabin tilted as they began their circling descent.

Dawn squirmed against her mother as her ears blocked from the altitude change. Montana slipped her little finger into her daughter's mouth so she would suck and swallow and pop her ears.

As a diversion from the risks of landing small aircraft, Montana mulled over what Andy had said.

He seemed a little obsessed with the hospital and the town, and he lived with an older doctor and his housekeeper. Obviously he'd been devastated at the loss of his wife and now devoted himself to his work.

But what about friends? Or other women?

Didn't he have a life?

Did he expect she'd be as committed as he was because she'd lost her husband too? Was that why he'd been so keen to have her come?

Maybe he'd planned to staff the hospital with bereaved doctors and nurses.

All good questions, she told herself.

She had to smile at her fanciful meanderings but they were coming in and the thoughts helped to divert her mind away from the ground looming up at her.

She hadn't guaranteed she'd stay at the Lake and she might not feel the same next week. 'I hope this works out as you plan. That Dawn and I can settle for a while.'

In the few seconds before he answered Montana realised that as the pilot he was responsible for the safety of their descent.

What was she thinking? Now was not the smartest time to distract the pilot.

'Please, ignore me and concentrate.' There was a squeak of sheer terror in her voice and he looked across at her and smiled reassuringly.

'I've done this hundreds of times.'

She grimaced at him. 'Why does that not reassure me? You only have to blow it once in a plane.' She'd tried for lightness and she wasn't sure she'd pulled it off, but he returned to her previous statement and his relaxed example helped her hands unclench.

'I know there are no guarantees you'll love the Lake like I do,' he said. 'That's understandable. We'll see what the next few weeks bring.'

They landed smoothly and taxied up to park near a tin shed that proclaimed a welcome to Queensland and Lyrebird Lake, and Montana thought how she would have felt welcome anywhere that had firm earth beneath her feet.

As they waited for the propeller to stop revolving Andy slid his hands onto his strongly muscled thighs and turned to grin at her. 'Well, you survived your flight and here we are.'

'Thank you for getting us here safely.' Her comment was

heartfelt. ‘Interesting airport.’ She looked around at the deserted tarmac, though there did seem to be some activity in a hangar across the grass.

Andy followed her gaze. ‘There are great people in the flying club out here. I’ll have to bring you out to one of their barbeques. It’s a fun evening under the stars with a bunch of larrikins.’

He inclined his head towards the hangar. ‘Though they do take their flying seriously and I can’t beat one of them in the flour bombing.’

The propeller swung on its last rotation and Andy flicked the last of his switches and then climbed out to come around to her side.

He opened her door and warm air rushed in and wrapped around her like welcoming arms. She hoped it was prophetic. She hadn’t expected to feel like that about the new town.

Andy reached in to undo the strap around Dawn and Montana’s seat belt, and the release of the restraint seemed almost symbolic of her new life.

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