

THE MIDWIFE'S NEW-FOUND FAMILY

Fiona McArthur



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Fiona McArthur

The Midwife's New-found Family

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The single dad's midwife bride When Misty saved the life of Dr Ben Moore she knew she would never forget the brooding single dad and the moment of tenderness they shared. So the midwife locks their brief encounter away in her daydreams and sets off for a new life in Lyrebird Lake, where she meets the new locum... and looks into familiar blue eyes! Struggling to cope with his daughter alone, Ben has also moved to Lyrebird for a fresh start. In this magical setting Misty and Ben rekindle that brief special moment they once had – something they wish they could hold on to for ever... And together they make Ben's family complete. Lyrebird Lake Maternity Every day brings a miracle...

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He turned and dropped a gentle kiss, warm and fleeting, on her lips. It was over before she could begin to avoid it—unlike the impact. Her lips seemed to vibrate with the memory, and she mashed them together as if to blot the imprint out, because the thrumming continued in decreasing waves.

She felt suspended in time and his voice floated over her. ‘Thank you for saving my life, Misty.’ She could do nothing but stare back at him. His eyes were as blue as the sea he’d come from, and his gaze roamed her face at will. She could feel the heat beneath her skin under his scrutiny, and suddenly there was a clawing tumble of unbidden thoughts.

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THE MIDWIFE’S NEW-FOUND FAMILY

Lyrebird Lake is famous for bringing people together. Single dad doctor Ben is ready to claim Misty as his own—she’ll be the perfect mother and bride!

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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! Now that her boys are older, Fiona and her husband Ian are off to meet new people, see new places, and have wonderful adventures. Fiona’s website is at www.fionamcarthur.com

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THE MIDWIFE'S NEW-FOUND FAMILY

BY

FIONA McARTHUR



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To midwives and mothers everywhere.

You continue to inspire me.

CHAPTER ONE

OUT of the mist she saw a man and a circle of shells.

Misty Buchanan knew it was the future and not a dream because she'd come to recognise the difference over the years. She hadn't expected a premonition while beach fishing on this deserted coastline because she'd been so caught up in the pleasure of the salty breeze in her face.

Her sight shimmered and dimmed and she accepted she had no choice but to watch as she closed her eyes ...

He balanced on a jumbled spit of rocks beside some seagulls, and even in the haze of time his torso looked spectacular against the backdrop of the ocean as he cradled the bird against him to unwind the twine. She couldn't see his face but there was something about his concern for the tangled gull that felt familiar on a different level.

When Misty had been younger it had frightened her to see people and situations with such clarity with her eyes shut, but now she accepted it as part of her life, albeit a small part, for only rarely did the future affect her present.

Though this gift brought responsibility with it and her heart thumped with the double-edged sword of what could be revealed.

The bird in his hand was suddenly free and he stepped back out of the way.

Misty frowned as she lost the sight and then the mists cleared again. She drew her breath in sharply.

His head smashed against the rocks as he fell and then his body rolled into a green wave to float without direction away from the rocks.

The vision dissipated and she knew it was useless to attempt to retrieve it. She had been shown all she would be.

Misty spun and her fingers clenched on her beach rod and bucket as she raced towards her Jeep. Once there she tossed them into the back haphazardly as her gaze scanned the distance for clues.

The Southern Queensland beach stretched for miles both ways and each ended with a rocky outcrop into the ocean.

In the distance a flock of gulls soared above a tall white lighthouse that overlooked the water like a guardian.

The visions never came without the opportunity to somehow influence the course of events so she'd have to trust to instinct as she slewed the vehicle with reckless speed through the sand towards the lighthouse.

Misty's vehicle slid to a halt and she threw open her door. She grabbed the boogie board she kept for belly surfing and the hot sand squeaked in protest as she tore across the beach and onto the grainy boulders of the outcrop. All she could do was pray this was the correct headland.

Her stomach plummeted as she gazed into the choppy green water between the swells. Nothing. It had to be the wrong headland!

As she turned to race back to the car her final glance caught the roll of a long brown arm and then she saw his lifeless body as he slid face down along the back of a wave.

‘Help,’ she muttered unhappily as she looked at the rocks that broke the swells as they drove in.

‘Big breath,’ she encouraged herself out loud, then scrambled inelegantly to the water’s edge and dived into the next wave with the board under her. Her breath sucked in as the cold water splashed around her and dormant resuscitation drills pounded into her mind as she paddled furiously towards her target.

The occasional swell washed over her face and she spat out salty water as she tried to calculate how long he would have been unconscious.

That first touch when she grasped his arm gave her a rush of relief that at least she’d made it out to him. His skin was warm even in the water and she heaved his arm and shoulder over until he rolled half over the board and she could tread water beside him. By default his head rose from the water. She sank below the surface to push his other armpit onto the boogie board and his weight came off her so she could rest.

‘Hello. Wake up. Open your eyes.’ But there was no response when she shook his arm. Twice she blew into his cold lips and twice he didn’t respond.

Another wave washed over both of them. She needed to get him to shore. ‘Stay with me, friend,’ she urged into his ear as she dragged the board around to face the beach. She steered him sideways away from the rocks as the desperate urgency of his condition propelled her through the water faster than she would have dreamed possible.

Twice more she blew into his mouth between swells and then a larger swell closed in on them and she angled the board so that they were lifted swiftly towards the beach. Another big swell carried them until a sudden wave swept them forward and tumbled them in an ungainly pile in the shallow water. She spat out seawater as she twisted on her side to hang onto him.

The wave that had been powerful enough to throw them there seemed intent on proving it could pull them back. He began to slip and she knew she didn’t have the strength to return to the water after him.

‘Come on,’ she gritted out between her teeth, and she yanked him towards her with a desperate heave and he slid across the sand. The wave receded and it was then she noticed the tiny rivulets of his blood that went with it.

Her heart pounded noisily in her ears as she dragged in welcome air before she rolled him over and pulled him an extra foot away from the reach of the next wave.

His eyes were open, blue like his lips, and his white face was as unmoving as his chest as the water drained away from around him.

It was too late!

She bent to lay her ear against his battered chest. Thump... Thump... Thump... She could hear it. He had a heartbeat. It was slow, less than forty beats a minute probably, but so much better than no heartbeat at all.

She pushed him until he rolled onto his side and water trickled from his mouth, but he didn’t move.

She shook him and he rolled back onto his back. ‘Hey. Wake up, you!’ Misty tilted his head and after a quick glance to check his airway was clear she breathed another two quick breaths into his lungs as she watched his chest rise. Yes. Out of the water now she could tell there was chest movement.

She pushed rhythmically on the lower third of his sternum to compress his ribcage and prayed cardiac massage would speed his sluggish heart. Thirty quick depressions, then Misty pinched his nose and blew into his mouth again.

After several desperate cycles he twitched and finally stirred, his chest moved of its own volition, and he gurgled a bubbling stream of sea water as he instinctively rolled onto his side.

Misty sat back and drew deep panting breaths of her own as the stranger coughed and wheezed his way to life.

Her shoulders began to shake in earnest and she wrapped her arms around her chest in comfort as she stared down at him. Hot tears trickled unchecked down her cheeks along with a strangled sob of mixed euphoria and horror. She sucked in a big breath to calm herself and squeezed her arms around her body harder.

Focus. Don't fall to pieces yet. She could hardly believe it.

He was alive.

She glanced out at the ocean in incredulity and her pretty pink boogie board bobbed merrily in the swells as it drifted out to sea.

She'd done it.

She glanced down at the broken strap on her wrist and strained to remember when it had sheared.

Who cared? Someone would enjoy the board.

Ben Moore hovered in a beam of light and stared down at his body as it floated in the water. He dreamed in flashes that defined his life.

Each flash contained an ocean of memories. His daughter's birth, his wife's death, a patient's family hugging him, a baby's first breath, a mermaid with long auburn hair and green eyes holding out her hand.

He smiled at her beauty. He was definitely dying. Something jolted him and he felt himself fall.

The other pictures faded away until only her vivid emerald eyes remained, and they came closer as she kissed him. Then he was coughing and retching and reality crashed in on him along with the fire in his lungs and the pain in his pounding head.

When the fit settled he took another tearing breath and hoped to avoid the painful mix of seawater and air, but it was not to be. When that convulsion died down he eased his shoulders from the gritty sand on which he was lying and ran his hands over his lacerated chest.

The surging waves lapped his feet and above him knelt the mermaid in person—except she had the most beautiful thighs in tattered denim shorts and long gorgeous legs—definitely not a mermaid, he thought fuzzily.

He glanced at her fine boned arms and the slender frame that was clearly outlined in the singlet top plastered to her skin. How on earth had she dragged him above the level of the waves?

As if she knew what he was thinking her voice washed over him, warm and reassuring, and the fact that he could hear the sound from her lips meant he really had survived.

'We rode a wave in and I pulled you the rest of the way,' she said. 'You've hit your head and torn your skin on the rocks.'

Her long red hair was tied in a limp ponytail that dripped silver rivulets of seawater between her breasts and she flipped it over to her back, which helped the thin singlet to plaster itself to her breasts even more.

He sucked his breath in with disastrous results and, when that spasm passed, the air in his lungs finally began to feel less like lava and more like the cooler gravel he needed to survive. 'Thank you.' His cracked words finally emerged.

He inhaled gingerly again. 'What happened?' Amazing how much energy just a few words took.

'Don't talk yet.' She winced at his obvious discomfort and her hand slid down over his wrist, smooth and cool and very practised as she palpated his pulse. 'I guess you fell into the water and hit your head. You nearly drowned.'

She was looking at him as if he might not understand but he understood all right. She'd saved his life and put her own very much at risk to do it.

He just couldn't think of anything to say at that moment.

She went on and he closed his eyes as he listened to her talk more to herself than to him. 'I need to get you to a hospital for observation. Salt water can cause delayed pulmonary oedema in your lungs.'

He'd have to move or she'd think he couldn't and he didn't want her having to spend more energy than she already had on him. He eased himself into a sitting position but even that hurt.

Ben rocked his head gently and couldn't help the tiny groan that escaped at the pain from his skull. It hurt like hell but he didn't need a hospital. He needed his bed.

'Thank you.' He paused for breath. 'Just my shack.' He paused again. 'I'll be fine.'

He watched her roll her eyes and it amused him in a ridiculous, semi-hysterical way. No doubt it was the euphoria of having been snatched from the jaws of death.

'You need a good check-up,' she said. 'Does your head swim?'

He put his hand up for her to grasp so he could stand. 'Better than my body does when I'm knocked out, apparently.'

'A joker,' she muttered. 'Just what I need.' Misty took his hand and shared his weight as he rose, but still he swayed against her before he could steady himself, and she knew he was hanging on to his balance by sheer willpower.

The feel of his strong hand left hers bizarrely energised and she looked down at his fingers curled around her own. She frowned at the strangeness of a connection that shouldn't even have registered then shrugged the thought away. At this moment she needed to help him stagger to her vehicle and that was enough to contend with.

When at last she had him there she didn't like the way his head lolled against the seat as if he could barely support its weight.

'You OK?' she asked as she reached across and buckled his seat belt.

He mumbled something she didn't catch and Misty stared anxiously into his shadowed face as she leaned back into her own seat. The strong line of his jaw and angled cheeks were softened by the fact he hadn't shaved that day. Funny how that darkened stubble in no way detracted from his rugged good looks. He'd become even more attractive with the passing of time. Even more attractive? Ouch! Mind on job, she admonished herself silently.

That was if he survived. 'Hello? Wake up.' She rested her hand on his damp shoulder. 'I need directions if you want me to take you home.'

She was definitely having second thoughts about leaving him alone in a beach house to die. If he started to look worse than he did now she'd ring her brother at Lyrebird Lake and ask what to do, even though Andy's hospital was hours away, his advice would help.

'I'm sorry.' He didn't open his eyes but his apology emerged clearly this time and she felt the building tension ease from the tautness in her neck.

He paused as if it hurt to talk, and she realised it probably did.

'Name's Ben Moore. My beach house.' He paused again. 'There's a side road past the camping ground on the left.' Without opening his eyes, he said, 'You can drive around the gate instead of opening it.' He coughed again. 'The shack's about two kilometres along.'

Benmore. 'Like the beautiful gardens in Scotland?' She asked absently as she steered the vehicle across the sand. He didn't answer.

Misty concentrated on navigating the thick sand of the track onto the road and even then her four-wheel-drive slewed sideways over the mounds made by other off-road vehicles.

Once she hit the hard dirt the noise from the tyres reverberated through the cab. She'd have to remember to fill them with air when she passed the next gas station but the deflation had made a huge difference in the soft sand.

She turned her Jeep left at the campsite, spotted the entrance he'd mentioned, and drove around the locked gate onto another dirt road. She'd had no idea the track was there and it wound through the seaside scrub parallel to the beach until they climbed a grass-covered knoll.

On top and surrounded by smaller sand dunes stood a solid beach house made of sand-coloured wood. Because of the height of the knoll it overlooked the beach in both directions and tufts of coarse beach grass and wind-bent coastal shrubs ringed it.

The house was sturdily built on stilts and a lot larger than Misty's idea of a shack. A wide, shaded veranda looked out over the vista below and she parked the car in the shade beside a late model Range Rover and some steep steps.

Ben's eyes were still shut and she touched his arm. 'Will you be able to get inside, Ben?'

'I'm fine,' he said, and his eyes opened slowly to reveal the aqua irises she'd only glimpsed at the beach. His next words made her smile.

'You OK?' His concern was sweet but unfortunately the brightness of his eyes made his pale cheeks even more concerning.

'I'll be better when you have a bit of colour in your face.' She shivered and the memory of him floating face down in the water hit her. How she'd almost been unable to hold him before the wave dragged them back made her shake her head.

She recalled those vital few seconds when he'd not been breathing and she'd urged him to wake up, and then he'd moved and coughed as he returned to life.

She still couldn't believe she'd managed it. This flesh-and-blood, breathing human being would be dead if she hadn't been there. That thought left her with a deep nausea that rose out of nowhere and couldn't be denied.

'Excuse me,' she gulped, and wrenched open her door to throw herself on the ground where at least she was out of sight to be ingloriously sick.

'I'm sorry.' Soft words full of self-reproach floated around her as Ben appeared beside her. He scooped her ponytail from her face and held it behind her head while she completed the job. For the moment she was too unwell to care.

'Poor brave mermaid,' he said soothingly, and his warm hand cupped her forehead in comfort. She could feel the prick of tears in her eyes as the nausea passed. She wasn't brave. She'd been terrified.

'I'm sorry.' She allowed him to help her to her feet and then she backed away from him as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and schooled any expression from her face. Weakness in front of this man made her feel like a self-conscious teenager and she was supposed to be in charge.

She banished any thought of what had just happened and changed the subject. 'I'm supposed to be nursing you.'

'I'm fine.' When she didn't look convinced he shrugged and gestured wearily to the stairs. 'You can check me out now you're feeling better.'

She could see he'd shifted his concern from himself to her and she felt the undeniable pull that shimmered around Ben as if her heart was telling her something her head had to disbelieve.

'Come with me,' he said, and the cadence, those simple words, caught her heart as his long fingers caught her other hand.

There it was. That recognition she'd noticed before. It was as if his whole arm pulled her along not so much by his strength but by magnetic attraction between them that shouldn't be there.

Weakly, with her inner voice quietly insisting she leave, she followed him up the steps and into his house. She'd just see that he was OK.

CHAPTER TWO

INSIDE the house dark lacquered wood floors showcased several glowing rugs that screamed of ancient Persia and threw glorious splashes of colour against the darkness. Bizarrely, she felt strangely at home.

Odd-shaped chairs constructed from driftwood stood around the walls and a huge, ancient seaman's chest used as a table was covered with books.

The glassed circular centre of the house had three other rooms leading off it. Ben drew her into a sunlit bathroom furnished like a shiny capsule from a luxury motor yacht complete with a huge round tub on one side that looked over the beach, then he finally let her go.

She looked down at her hand, and incredibly her fingers looked normal. So why did they pulse with the sensation of being held by this man? She'd expected her skin where he'd touched to at least glow.

No such fanciful complaint seemed to bother him as he passed her a fresh facecloth and towel. 'There's a new toothbrush in the drawer. I'll leave you to it.' Then he closed the door behind him as he left.

She stared into the oval mirror that someone had surrounded incongruously with a circle of inexpertly glued shells. Were these the shells from the vision? Her pale and strained face stared back at her. So she was meant to be here?

OK. So she'd made a fool out of herself by throwing up. But it wasn't every day you came across a man face down in the water.

She tried not to think of what would have happened if she hadn't had the premonition, but she would never again even hint that she regretted the oddness of her occasional second sight.

That gift had saved this man's life, and she would be forever grateful.

The cold water helped restore normality as it splashed against her heated cheeks, and as she brushed her teeth Misty glanced once more at her reflection.

A little colour had crept back into her face and she couldn't subdue the tiny flutter of ridiculous satisfaction that all the years of her nurse's training had stood by her on the beach.

She'd saved a life.

Here she stood, alone with a handsome stranger in his beach house, and she couldn't deny there was a delectable magnetism about the man that had her intrigued.

As long as she remembered this was a moment out of time and not the real world.

When she opened the bathroom door the central room proved empty, and as she glanced around the worry returned that maybe Ben wasn't as well as he'd seemed a few minutes ago.

'In here.' His voice sounded infinitely fatigued and her step quickened.

Ben sat on the edge of a wide white bed with a towel around his waist. She pulled her eyes and thoughts back from considering what lay underneath that towel—what on earth was she thinking?—and looked at his face.

The profile she recognised from the vision now seemed indelible in her mind. His chest showed lines of angry abrasions and her sensible side returned as she crossed the room quickly.

She sank to her knees beside the bed in front of him and looked up into his face. She examined his eyes as well as she could in the dim room. Both pupils seemed equal and reactive when she shaded the light.

'How is your head?' She ran her fingers lightly over the spongy swelling under his hairline and he winced.

'Ouch,' she said in sympathy, but didn't pause as she continued her check. He'd have to put up with the discomfort because she needed to know if there was something worse to find.

'I can tell you're in the medical profession,' he murmured.

She grinned and palpated his scalp to ensure the bone didn't feel displaced underneath. The bump seemed slightly smaller already than when she'd first checked it.

Her hand slid around the base of his skull to check for further injury and his ink-black hair felt soft and springy, and curled around her fingers as if welcoming her touch. It seemed so long since she'd done that, she'd forgotten the sensation of running her fingers through a man's hair.

'It seems OK,' she said as she forced her fingers to untangle themselves from a warm and welcoming place they didn't want to leave.

‘My head is improving all the time, especially when you stroke it.’ His voice held a whisper of weary teasing and her hand bounced away as if scalded.

When she met his eyes he smiled wryly at her reaction. ‘I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’m cold and headachy. But I am curious to know your name.’

‘Misty.’ She nodded at his chest and looked at him for tacit permission before she touched it. The jagged scratches were red and welted but she couldn’t see any pieces of shell in the wound. She rested her hand over the wounds and felt the heat of inflammation.

‘Look at your poor chest.’ A sudden mad impulse to kiss her fingertips and pat his wounds better made her straighten away from him. What on earth was the matter with her? This man was an unknown entity and after today she’d never meet him again. She glanced at the blood on her fingers and admonished herself.

She stood and nodded towards the en suite she could see across the room. ‘May I use that?’

‘Of course. And there’s antibiotic powder on the shelf we could use.’

After washing her hands, she used a small clean towel to blot the blood from his chest and then puffed the powder onto his wounds. She stood back and tried to think what else she could do for him, but her mind was suddenly blank so she returned the towel and the powder to the tiny bathroom. When she returned at least she’d thought of something. ‘Is your tetanus booster up to date?’

‘Yes,’ he said quietly, ‘and scratches are a small price to pay.’ He patted the bed next to him.

Seconds later Misty found herself sitting hip to hip with him and she had no idea how she’d got there as he slipped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer in mutual comfort. They sat there side by side, contemplating his lucky escape.

It did seem weirdly appropriate to hold each other at the memory of the event and surprisingly she drew the comfort he had intended from the gesture.

Suddenly she felt at ease with this man whose life had hung so precariously in the balance that very afternoon, and with the heat of his skin against hers came the reinforcement of the knowledge of his survival. The satisfaction grew that this man was here safe and solidly warm against her, and the other world outside the house seemed a million miles away.

He turned and dropped a gentle kiss, warm and fleeting, on her lips, and it was over before she could begin to avoid it, unlike the impact. Her lips seemed to vibrate with the memory and she mashed them together as if to blot the imprint out because the thrumming continued in decreasing waves.

She felt suspended in time and his voice floated over her. ‘Thank you for saving my life, Misty.’ She could do nothing but stare back at him. His eyes were as blue as the ocean he’d come from and his gaze roamed her face. She could feel heat beneath her skin under his scrutiny and suddenly there was a clawing tumble of unbidden sensations in her belly.

She blinked and broke eye contact as she looked away. ‘Let me see your back.’

Ben closed his eyes and twisted his body so she could see.

He sighed. At least one of them had their feet firmly on the ground. Perhaps it was his concussion but he was having difficulty concentrating on anything else but her beautiful mouth and luscious body pressed against his. This was a damn inappropriate time to start dreaming about what she would look like with her shirt off.

Then she touched his back with those slender mermaid’s fingers of hers, and not being able to see her hands on him made it more erotic than it should have been. He could imagine her leaving luminous trails on his skin, like lines in the water at night.

He shifted uncomfortably as desire stirred beneath the towel and he turned and reached across to capture her hand to still her fingers.

He looked down at her hand. Such long fingers as they lay in his. Such invisible strength within them. She must have a heart as strong as a lioness’s. He had no doubt that was her secret.

There was something pure and golden and unselfish about Misty that shone so brightly even someone as jaded as he could see her worth.

His grip tightened and unconsciously he inched her back to face him until their sides touched again. And then he froze. What was he doing?

His head ached, his chest hurt and he'd nearly died. And he owed his survival to this woman.

All the more reason to act on the moment, his inner demon suggested unhelpfully.

He did not need another complication in his life and from the little he'd seen of her he had no doubt this woman could be extremely complicating.

There seemed a certain naiveté about her that warned him he was the much more experienced of the two of them, but it also unmanned him.

'Thank you, Misty. I think you'd better go.'

Her eyes widened and he saw the moment she realised what he meant. Heat dusted her cheeks and she stood up quickly and looked around the room as if she'd forgotten where the exit was.

He smiled at her disorientation even as it showed him more than anything that he'd done the right thing. So she could feel it too, he thought.

He stood to follow her to the door when without warning the room tilted away from him like the deck of a ship.

A rush of cold doused him and then nothing as he fell backwards.

Misty managed to reach out and guide him sideways and back onto the bed, but even lifting his muscled legs reminded her of the struggle she'd had to get him out of the water.

She bent to lift his lids but his eyes flickered open again and he blinked groggily as he tried to sit up.

His face shone like alabaster even in the dim room. 'What happened?'

'You fainted. I think you should stay down, Ben. I'll call an ambulance so they can check you out at the hospital.'

He lifted his hand and rested it over his eyes. 'I don't need a hospital. It would be a wasted trip for emergency services when they could be saving someone else.'

Misty stilled. 'That's ridiculous.' She ticked off his symptoms on her fingers. 'You've lost consciousness twice from a head injury, had a respiratory arrest, and are probably brewing pneumonia. You need to be observed.'

Ben rubbed his forehead. 'I'm fine. I just need to sleep.'

Misty couldn't help her hands going to her hips and she stood over him and glared. The man was exasperating. 'You might never wake up.'

He didn't look like he cared and she felt the sting of tears behind her eyes. 'Imagine the waste of energy today for me.'

Ben sighed. 'I'm sorry, Misty. You're a darling. But I'm not going anywhere. Especially to a hospital!' Finality rang in the last four words.

Misty stamped her foot and he winced at the noise. Then she felt guilty. Her voice dropped to nurse-speak. 'Come on, Ben. Be sensible. I can't just leave you.'

He sighed. 'So observe me for another hour, or the four required, and then when you feel satisfied you can go. Or stay in a spare room and leave in the morning.'

Misty glanced at her watch. Four hours. It would be dark by the time she left but what choice did she have? She did *not* want to read in the paper about a man found dead in his beach house.

She could stay until she was sure he was fine. She wasn't expected until tomorrow and would at least know he was going to be OK before she departed. She looked around but there wasn't a chair in the room, which left only the bed. She'd drag in a chair from somewhere.

Ben had moved while she'd been going over her options. 'So how did you stumble across me in my hour of need? The beach is usually deserted.'

Misty rarely spoke about her gift and she hesitated at sharing such a personal subject with a stranger. Now was not the time to get into a discussion that would probably end with Ben thinking her fanciful.

‘Just luck. I’ll get a chair.’

Ben lifted his arm and pulled a pillow across from the pile at the top of the bed and put it by his side. His weary eyes twinkled despite his exhaustion.

‘Here. Lie down next to me. I’ll put a wall up so I don’t attack you.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Misty said, and went to explore the house to find a seat. There was a huge old recliner in the next room that looked incredibly comfortable but it would never fit through the door into Ben’s room.

Then there were the driftwood chairs on the verandah that looked fabulous but when she sat on them they were like bony park benches with knobs and bends in uncomfortable places. She couldn’t lounge on them for four hours.

The kitchen had high-backed bar stools and she sighed as she carried one through.

‘That looks comfortable,’ Ben said conversationally, but then he shook his head. ‘I’ll get up. I can’t stand the thought of you perched up there just because you’re a good Samaritan. It’s really not been a good day for good Samaritans all round. I wouldn’t have nearly drowned if I hadn’t been trying to save a bird. It’s a step too far for you to suffer further on my account.’

He was either incredibly well mannered or incredibly sneaky but she really had no choice if he threatened to get up.

‘For goodness’ sake, I’ll lie down next to you. But don’t blame me if I go to sleep. I’ve been driving since early this morning and spent a couple of hours in the sun this afternoon.’

‘Perfect. We’ll both sleep.’ He closed his eyes briefly, as if they stung.

She was glad to see his eyelids droop but then he began to speak again.

‘My luck must have changed,’ he said with his eyes still shut. Then they opened and he said quite seriously, ‘You have a way of making me forget all reason in the most disconcerting way.’

She wasn’t quite sure what to do with that statement because it came just as she lowered herself onto the bed as far away as possible from him.

He smiled across at her, and it changed him into a much younger man, a less world-weary one, and for a moment her knees trembled and she was pathetically grateful she was lying and not standing because she might have collapsed, boneless, on top of him.

Then he looked away and she managed to draw a discreet steadying breath and edge an inch further away from him.

He wasn’t having that. He lifted his shoulder and slid across the bed until their shoulders were touching, and then slid his arm under and around her shoulders. Ben’s hand was cool against her but insidiously heat rose up her body like black ink soaking into white chalk.

And once there the heat wasn’t going anywhere. It just got warmer and warmer.

‘So where have you driven from today and where are you going?’

Misty tried to focus on what he’d said. Anything to move her mind away from the slow combustion going on inside her.

Focus on the real world. That’s a novel idea, she mocked herself, and organised her thoughts to where they should be.

‘I’m moving to Lyrebird Lake to work in a birth centre with my brother and sister-in-law.’

Ben’s interest seemed genuine. ‘What does your brother do?’

‘Andy? He’s the GP running the bush hospital, but doesn’t have much to do with the birthing side. He married my best friend and they’re expecting a new baby. The unit’s for women-centred care. The absolute best place to have a baby.’

He frowned, and Misty could see he was unfamiliar with the term. ‘Women-centred care. Define that?’

This was a wonderful diversion from the heat in her stomach. Misty could talk about this gladly. ‘Each midwife has her own caseload of clients in order to better meet the needs of the woman. It gives more satisfaction all round.’ She couldn’t help the excitement even she could hear in her voice.

‘The idea is to give each woman holistic care that can cover all the facets of being pregnant from antenatal education, mental status, breastfeeding and, of course, caring for baby when he or she comes home.’

Ben stared at her as if he didn’t get it. ‘I know obstetrics but it sounds like nothing I’ve ever had contact with.’ His voice held an extra dimension she couldn’t quite place but he went on quickly as if speeding away from the topic he’d started and now regretted.

His voice dropped. ‘Babies. New life.’

Ben turned his head to stare at the ceiling. ‘I wonder if what happened today means my slate is clean? Can I begin a new life because I so nearly lost the old one?’

The nuance of despair could have been imagined but something in his profile tugged at Misty.

She memorised the contours of his face for the time soon when she’d have to leave. ‘I believe anyone can start a new life if they are determined.’

He turned to look at her and there was a glow in his eyes that made her catch her breath. ‘Maybe *you* are destined to change my life.’

Impossible dream. She lifted her hand and peered at her watch as if to remind herself she needed to leave. Not that the fish would mind if she never went back to the beach to catch them. ‘I’m planning on doing a bit more with my life than running around dragging you out of life-threatening situations, Ben.’

His arms tightened. Even his aura seemed to drift around her like the sea that had almost claimed him. ‘But you saved my life so beautifully,’ he said.

The memories rushed back and she shivered. ‘Don’t joke about it, Ben, please. Today was very close.’

He stilled and then squeezed her shoulder in comfort and regret for upsetting her again. ‘Resuscitation is always frightening. I’m sorry you had to do that, Misty.’

She forced her mind away from those indelible pictures and closed the subject with finality. ‘I think I’ll get up.’

He ignored her statement and tightened his arm around her and lowered his voice so she’d have to strain to hear him. ‘So you’re a midwife. That would explain the mothering you’ve been doing.’

Her neck ached from the strain of wanting to sink into his arm and she gave up. She rested her head back and stared rigidly at the ceiling.

She blinked. He had stars glued in constellations on the roof. It was amazing, and she imagined they would glow fabulously at night. It would have taken days to create. She frowned. He had too much time on his hands, she thought as she tried to remember what he’d said while she tried to identify the star signs. Oh, yes, midwives and mothering.

‘Known a few midwives, have you?’ she said.

He gave a short mirthless laugh and she was jolted out of her contemplation of his ceiling.

‘In my time.’ His voice held self-contempt and she frowned at the disruption to the ambience in the room.

‘I worked in that environment but nothing like you’ve spoken about,’ he said. ‘It was in another lifetime and I don’t think I could ever go back to that.’

‘You’re an obstetrician, then?’ That would explain his midwife comment.

‘Was.’

She let the word lie between them because something told her she’d been privileged to hear even that information. It seemed she’d done the right thing because he went on as if the words were forced out of him.

‘Never going back.’

She couldn’t help it. ‘Why?’

He breathed deeply. 'In our job, sad things occasionally happen and everyone has bad runs. It's funny how something you would normally accept as a tragedy of nature can overwhelm you unexpectedly. That's all.'

Misty had seen her fair share of sadness but, then, she'd always felt that dealing with loss in midwifery was a privilege to share with the parents. 'I guess it depends on your own life experience how things can affect you.'

'You don't know how true that is,' he said, and the way the words dragged out of him she decided she wouldn't offer any more comments in case she caused more damage.

The silence stretched and Misty didn't know whether to change the subject or just wait. After what seemed like an eternity she eased her fingers into his palm and wrapped her hand around his to at least let him know she was aware of his pain.

At her tentative offer of comfort his fingers stiffened in surprise and then, very slowly, his fingers relaxed in hers. She was glad he hadn't rebuffed her. She sensed he wasn't used to people offering him comfort and it made her want to pull his head down onto her chest and say it was all OK. But she couldn't do that. She didn't even know this man.

Ben raised his head and laughed softly if somewhat sardonically at his hand in Misty's. 'Imagine you wanting to comfort me.'

'I don't find that amusing,' Misty said quietly.

He turned his head and looked at her. His smile softened. 'No, you wouldn't. Because you, dear Misty, are a real person, and I haven't seen your like for a very long time.'

She let go of his hand. 'Probably because you live in a beach house on a deserted beach,' she said dryly. 'You haven't seen any people. You should get out more.'

'Actually, I've done all I need to do with my life. I've written a text on postnatal depression and achieved all I was going to achieve. You should probably have left me to drown.'

Misty felt his words like a vicious jab to the stomach and she drew in a breath. 'Don't ever speak like that again,' she said fiercely.

She leaned up on one elbow and stared down into his face and glared ferociously, suddenly livid with him. He looked world-wearily amused but she didn't care. This was important.

'Every life is precious. It is sad not all patients can be saved—but you have been! By me, and that gives me some rights to tell you so. There is a desperate need for skills like yours out in this world. How dare you just fritter them away like a wastrel in your beach house?'

She barely drew breath she was so angry. 'You were given a new chance on life today, a chance you nearly didn't have. One of the mysteries of the universe is how I found you.' She poked him in the chest. 'I could have drowned trying to save you so don't you even think of letting me down.'

Misty subsided but she could feel her heart pounding with the agitation of her emotions. She didn't know this man, this person she'd just lectured like some prissy know-it-all, but maybe saving his life did give her some rights because it had needed saying—but now it was horrible because she felt the tears welling as she tried to calm down.

Ben sighed. 'I'm sorry, Misty. I was being irresponsibly flippant. Everything you say is right. It was a glib and silly comment and I do regret upsetting you.'

It was his turn to rise on one elbow and look down into her face. She hoped he couldn't see the tears at the corners of her eyes because suddenly she felt weepy and miserable, no doubt from the huge emotions of the day, but it was embarrassing nonetheless.

Ben noticed. He turned her towards him and gathered her close to encircle her body with his arms. 'I'm sorry, mermaid.'

He pulled her even closer until their cold noses were touching. She could feel his heat between them from her breasts to her hips and again at the knees and his eyes stared into hers, intense and questioning.

‘Where have you come from?’ Their noses rubbed. ‘Why couldn’t I have met you when I was young and idealistic, like you?’ He frowned as if it was all beyond his understanding. ‘How can there be such emotion and connection between two strangers?’

She knew just what he meant. ‘I don’t know,’ she whispered as she watched him shake his head and then wince at the discomfort.

His deep tones caressed her. ‘I don’t understand, Misty, but I’m very, very grateful. Thank you for saving my life, and putting your precious life at risk to do that. I will always value your gift. Now, hush. It’s OK.’

He kissed away the dampness from her cheeks, feather-touched the end of her nose with his mouth, and finally settled his firm lips on hers. And then it all merged.

It was there, that destined connection she’d only dreamt of in her bed late at night, and there was no doubting it was a gift he hadn’t expected either.

He pulled back to stare, perplexed and startled, into her face and then his breath merged seamlessly with hers again as he kissed her until his very soul touched a place she’d known she had but had never dared to open.

He drew her even closer until through the mutual rise and fall of their chests she could feel his heart pound in time to hers. His eyes never left hers as he drew away.

‘Rest. We’ll both rest,’ he said, then he lay back and stared at the ceiling. ‘It’s been a big day.’

What was he doing? Back off, Ben admonished himself as he rested his head back on the pillow. She’d saved his life and here he was trying to ruin hers. How low could he go?

But what the hell had just happened?

CHAPTER THREE

SURPRISINGLY they both slept. When Ben woke up it was dark outside and Misty lay spooned against him like a kitten. He felt enormously better compared to when he’d gone to sleep, and disturbingly aroused.

When he sat up and glanced back at Misty’s sleeping face he felt a spasm in his heart that had nothing to do with almost losing his life. They must have turned at some time in their sleep like an old married couple—but an old married couple who’d never consummated their marriage. He grinned in the darkness. Well, that was a first.

He slid from the bed before his body got more bright ideas and he slipped into the en suite before she woke up and enticed him beyond reason. She wouldn’t have to do much.

He planted his hands on the sink and stared into the mirror. His eyes stared back sardonically. Down, boy.

When he ran his hand over the bump on his head he could tell the swelling had almost gone. His chest looked angry in interesting strips but dry from the antibiotic powder Misty had put on.

When he peered into his eyes his pupils seemed equal and he wasted a couple of seconds trying to see the dilation response before he frowned at the hopelessness of trying to catch a pupil reaction on his own face. Idiot. Of course he couldn’t. But anything to stop his mind wandering back into the bedroom next door.

‘Are you OK, Ben?’ Misty’s voice came through the door and he looked into the mirror to warn himself to behave.

‘Fine, thanks. Be out in a sec,’ he said. ‘Right after the cold shower,’ he finished under his breath.

When he opened the bathroom door five minutes later she’d straightened the bed and disappeared.

He found her on the veranda, gazing out over the beach. The moon hadn’t risen yet but the sky was lightening on the horizon where it would emerge.

‘It’s beautiful when the moon rises out of the sea,’ he said as he stopped beside her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. Her neck was taut under his hand and as he rubbed that tender curve he noticed the nervousness she seemed suddenly afflicted with.

She was having second thoughts on her decision to stay. Well, that was fair enough. Very wise of her.

Reluctantly, his arm slid from her shoulders and he stepped back. So how could he still feel her warmth against his body as if he still held her? Because he wanted her back against him, that's how.

She cupped her hands over her upper arms as if to warm herself, and he forced himself not to pull her back into his arms. No doubt she had some boyfriend to rush off to, or she could even be married with a dozen children.

He smiled to himself at that. Her body hadn't seen a dozen children and she wore no ring. He'd checked those things while holding her as they'd drifted off to sleep. Now, why had he done that?

He needed space between them or he'd initiate something they'd both regret. 'Would you like a drink?'

She seemed ridiculously glad he'd asked, making him realise the strain was on both sides, and he felt her follow him back into the house. 'Do you have juice?' she said.

Even though she walked behind him he could pinpoint her position by how sensitive his skin was. It had never been like that before. Ever.

This fey, amazing young woman, who had captured his imagination when he'd least expected it, might prove rather difficult to forget.

'Your "shack" is impressive,' she said in that warm and wonderful voice of hers, but there was a fragile brightness to hide her awareness of the loss of their closeness and he sighed with regret.

Enough. Stop being self-indulgent, he mocked himself, and forced his voice to lightness. He'd give her a drink and send her on her way. 'If you want to see something really impressive, come and see my refrigerator. It's magnificent. What type of juice would you like?'

She peered at the selection like a kid in an icecream parlour, and he enjoyed watching her while she hesitated.

He couldn't help the smile in his voice. 'You could have two different juices if you really wanted.'

Unconsciously his hand lifted to feel the warmth in her cheeks and she darted a startled look at him, embarrassed. So her pale skin still blushed easily. A natural redhead. God, her cheek was like silk under his fingers, just like the rest of her.

'Mango juice, thanks,' she said quickly. She took the bottle and turned away from him so that his hand fell.

Ben sighed and closed the wall-sized chrome door, and leaned his forehead against the cold steel for a moment. What was he doing?

Don't touch her again, you idiot, he thought as he closed his eyes because he couldn't bear to hurt someone again and his life was as complicated as ever.

He had to tell her to go. That he'd be fine. That it would be better for her if she left. He opened his eyes and turned to face her.

She wasn't there. The room was empty and the juice stood unopened on the sea chest.

He walked through to the veranda. She wasn't there either, and he glanced down the stairs. The unmistakable sound of her vehicle door as it closed echoed the emptiness he hadn't realised she'd leave behind. He'd always had that emptiness but it hadn't mattered before. Could he be alone again?

Suddenly he didn't think he could.

The diesel engine came to life and he had no control over his feet as they turned to the stairs. The next thing he knew he was beside her Jeep window.

'Be with me,' he said, and he saw the moment she began to think about accepting and he swore to himself he wouldn't let her down. Please, don't let me hurt her, he prayed, and he couldn't believe that he'd dared to dream again.

His fingers reached through the window of their own accord and turned the key. The engine died.

Silence surrounded them, except for the waves on the shore and the gulls overhead...and the pounding in his heart.

She looked at him with those glorious witch's eyes of hers and he could feel himself drowning, which was ironic considering what the day had held.

He held out his hand. 'Come with me. Please.'

She saw there in his eyes the quiet hope that made her wish to be as daring as he was, as positive as he was, that this wouldn't end in futile regrets.

Misty raised her hand towards his and then stopped.

What was she doing? She knew what would happen if she went back into the house with him. She wanted it to happen but she needed to think sensibly about this. Safely and non-emotionally after one of the most emotional days she'd ever had. And realized she was terrified. This interlude would end. She longed to burn boats, jump off the cliff to uncertainty and yet they had barely talked. Just felt...and kissed.

It was an impossible dream. They both had lives, and commitments, and uncertainties, and they'd met this once by the merest chance. She needed to leave before he imprinted himself further on her soul.

She lifted her fingers to the ignition and the metal felt cold and hard as she turned the key. 'I don't think so. Take care, Ben.' She glanced once more at his face and the expression suddenly stripped from his features as if someone had turned off a light.

Right decision, she thought, and forced herself to drive away.

Right decision, Ben thought. Sensible girl.

She was gone and Ben lay alone in his big bed with just the scent of her skin on the pillow beside him and emptiness in his heart as he said goodbye. Sensible, sensible girl.

The sound of a ringtone filled the room.

His phone.

His breath shuddered in his throat as he sat up, and he shook his head at the person on the other end. 'I'll come,' he said into his phone.

He looked out the window at the rolling ocean and his chin lifted. Impossible dream, he thought, uncannily echoing Misty as he shut his phone and reached for his shirt.

CHAPTER FOUR

MISTY didn't remember much about the drive to Lyrebird Lake. The memory of Ben in her rear-view mirror watching her go just seemed to get bigger the further away from Ben that she drove. Had she missed the opportunity to experience life and love with someone who could have been the one man for her?

She'd never be sure and he didn't even know her last name.

She stayed the night at a motel, she couldn't even remember which town, and it had been hard to get up that morning and drive further west. But now, as she drove through the wide and tree-lined streets of Lyrebird Lake, her spirits lifted.

It was time for her to start her new life. Just like Ben needed to. She hoped he would find happiness.

The car turned into the driveway of her brother's house and she sighed and reached over to turn off the engine. She'd done the right thing. She had.

'Welcome to Lyrebird Lake.' Misty heard the words and accepted the hug Montana offered. She ignored the feeling that her heart would probably never speak to her again.

It was wonderful to see her best friend again but there was no doubt the excitement of her new home had dimmed and she hoped Montana didn't notice the effort it took to smile.

'I bet you didn't see this in our future.' Andy laughed as he also hugged her.

Her big brother's arms were just what she needed to make her feel strong again. 'There were a lot of things I didn't see,' she said, and tried to smile.

Andy put her away from him and frowned at her searchingly. 'What's happened to you?'

'Shh, love,' Montana said, and Misty watched with wry amusement as her friend rested her hand on Andy's arm. 'Let your sister get her breath. We have plenty of time.'

'Assuming the phone doesn't ring and I don't get called out,' Andy muttered, as he carried Misty's bags into their house and she followed with her arm hooked in Montana's.

They shared a glance and smiled. Men, the look said, but they both loved his care. 'He's still looking for a locum to share the workload because he won't let me out of his sight until I have this baby,' Montana whispered.

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