



Fiona McArthur

Healed by the
MIDWIFE'S KISS



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

Fiona McArthur

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McArthur F.

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Finn can't imagine loving anyone again.....but can one woman change that for ever?After Dr Finn Foley's wife abandoned him and their adorable baby daughter he threw himself into being a father. But when he meets a kindred spirit in widowed midwife Catrina Thomas he can't resist getting to know her better. One sizzling kiss later, the happiness Finn has been searching for finally seems within his grasp...if only he's willing to claim it!

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FIONA MCARTHUR is an Australian midwife who lives in the country and loves to dream. Writing Medical Romance gives Fiona the scope to write about all the wonderful aspects of romance, adventure, medicine and the midwifery she feels so passionate about. When she's not catching babies, Fiona is with her husband, Ian, off to meet new people, see new places and have wonderful adventures. Drop in and say hi at Fiona's website: Fionamcarthurauthor.com.

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Dedicated to Finn, author Kelly Hunter's legend of a four-legged friend, who went to doggy heaven while I was writing this book.

It just seemed right to say there are Finn heroes everywhere.

Vale Finn.

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[PROLOGUE](#)

AT SIX A.M. on a Thursday, Lighthouse Bay's maternity ward held its breath. Midwife Catrina Thomas leaned forward and rubbed the newborn firmly with a warmed towel. The limp infant flexed and wriggled his purple limbs and finally took a gasping indignant lungful.

The baby curled his hands into fists as his now tense body suffused with pink. 'Yours now, Craig. Take him.' She gestured to the nervous dad beside her and mimed what to do as she encouraged

Craig's big callused hands to gently lift the precious bundle. One huge splashing silver tear dropped to the sheet from his stubbled cheek as he placed his new son on his wife's warm bare stomach.

Craig released a strangled sob and his wife, leaning back on the bed in relief, half laughed in triumph, then closed her hands over her child and her husband's hands and pulled both upwards to lie between her breasts.

For Catrina, it was this moment. This snapshot in time she identified as her driver, the reason she felt she could be a midwife for ever—this and every other birth moment that had come before. It gave her piercing joy when she'd thought she'd lost all gladness, and it gave her bittersweet regret for the dreams she'd lost. But mostly, definitely, it gave her joy.

An hour later Catrina hugged her boss awkwardly, because Ellie's big pregnant belly bulged in the way as they came together, but no less enthusiastically because she would miss seeing her friend in the morning before she finished her shift. 'I can't believe it's your last day.' She rolled her eyes. 'Or my last night shift tomorrow.'

'Neither can I.' Ellie's brilliant smile lit the room even more than the sunlight streaming in through the maternity ward windows.

Trina marvelled at the pure happiness that radiated from a woman who had blossomed, and not just in belly size but in every way in just one year of marriage. Another reason Trina needed to change her life and move on. She wanted what Ellie had.

A family and a life outside work. She would have the latter next week when she took on Ellie's job as Midwifery Unit Manager for Ellie's year of maternity leave.

She'd have daylight hours to see the world and evenings to think about going out for dinner with the not infrequent men who had asked her. The excuse of night shift would be taken out of her grasp. Which was a good thing. She'd hidden for two years and the time to be brave had arrived.

She stepped back from Ellie, picked up her bag and blew her a kiss. 'Happy last day. I'll see you at your lunch tomorrow.' Then she lifted her chin and stepped out of the door into the cool morning.

The tangy morning breeze promised a shower later, and pattering rain on the roof on a cool day made diving into bed in the daylight hours oh, so much more attractive than the usual sunny weather of Lighthouse Bay. Summer turning to autumn was her favourite time of year. Trina turned her face into the salty spray from the sea as she walked down towards the beach.

She slept better if she walked before going up the hill to her croft cottage, even if just a quick dash along the breakwall path that ran at right angles to the beach.

Especially after a birth. Her teeth clenched as she sucked in the salty air and tried not to dwell on the resting mother lying snug and content in the ward with her brand-new pink-faced baby.

Trina looked ahead to the curved crescent of the beach as she swung down the path from the hospital. The sapphire blue of the ocean stretching out to the horizon where the water met the sky, her favourite contemplation, and, closer, the rolling waves crashing and turning into fur-like foam edges that raced across the footprint-free sand to sink in and disappear.

Every day the small creek flowing into the ocean changed, the sandbars shifting and melding with the tides. The granite boulders like big seals set into the creek bed, lying lazily and oblivious to the shifting sand around them. Like life, Trina thought whimsically. You could fight against life until you realised that the past was gone and you needed to wait to see what the next tide brought. If only you could let go.

Ahead she saw that solitary dad. The one with his little girl in the backpack, striding along the beach with those long powerful strides as he covered the distance from headland to headland. Just like he had every morning she'd walked for the last four weeks. A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired man with a swift stride.

Sometimes the two were draped in raincoats, sometimes his daughter wore a cheery little hat with pom-poms. Sometimes, like today, they both wore beanies and a scarf.

Trina shivered. She could have done with a scarf. When she was tired it was easy to feel the cold. It would be good to move to day shifts after almost two bleak years on nights, but falling into bed exhausted in the daytime had been preferable to the dread of lying lonely and alone in the small dark hours.

She focused on the couple coming towards her. The little girl must have been around twelve months old, and seemed to be always gurgling with laughter, her crinkled eyes, waving fists and gap-toothed smile a delight to start the day with. The father, on the other hand, smiled with his mouth only when he barely lifted his hand but his storm-blue eyes glittered distant and broken beneath the dark brows. Trina didn't need to soak in anyone else's grief.

They all guessed about his story because, for once, nobody had gleaned any information and shared it with the inhabitants of Lighthouse Bay.

They drew closer and passed. 'Morning,' Trina inclined her head and waved at the little girl who, delightfully, waved back with a toothy chuckle.

'Morning,' the father said and lifted the corner of his lips before he passed.

And that was that for another day. Trina guessed she knew exactly how he felt. But she was changing.

CHAPTER ONE

Finn

AT SEVEN-THIRTY A.M. on the golden sands of Lighthouse Bay Beach Finlay Foley grimaced at the girl as she went past. Always in the purple scrubs so he knew she was one of the midwives from the hospital. A midwife. Last person he wanted to talk to.

It had been a midwife, one who put her face close to his and stared at him suspiciously, who told him his wife had left their baby and him behind, and ran away.

But the dark-haired girl with golden glints in her hair never invaded his space. She exuded a gentle warmth and empathy that had begun to brush over him lightly like a consistent warm beam of sunlight through leaves. Or like that soft shaft of light that reached into a corner of his cottage from the lighthouse on the cliff by some bizarre refraction. And always that feather-stroke of compassion without pity in her brown-eyed glance that thawed his frozen soul a little more each day when they passed.

She always smiled and so did he. But neither of them stopped. Thank goodness.

Piper gurgled behind his ear and he tilted his head to catch her words. 'Did you say something, Piper?'

'Mum, Mum, Mum, Mum.'

Finn felt the tightness crunch his sternum as if someone had grabbed his shirt and dug their nails into his chest. Guilt. Because he hadn't found her. He closed his eyes for a second. Nothing should be this hard. 'Try Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad,' he said past the tightness in his throat.

Obediently Piper chanted in her musical little voice, 'Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad.'

'Clever girl.' His mouth lifted this time and he felt a brief piercing of warmth from another beam of light in his cave-like existence.

Which was why he'd moved here. To make himself shift into the light. For Piper. And it did seem to be working. Something about this place, this haven of ocean and sand and cliffs and smiling people like the morning midwife soothed his ragged nerves and restored his faith in finding a way into the future.

A future he needed to create for Piper. Always the jolliest baby, now giggling toddler and all-round ray of puppy-like delight, Piper had kept him sane mainly because he had to greet each day to meet her needs.

His sister had said Piper had begun to look sad. Suspected she wasn't happy in the busy day care. Didn't see enough of her dad when he worked long hours. And he'd lifted his head and seen what his sister had seen.

Piper had been clingy. Harder to leave when he dropped her off at the busy centre. Drooping as he dressed her for 'school' in the morning. Quiet when he picked her up ten hours later.

Of course he needed to get a life and smile for his daughter. So he'd listened when his sister suggested he take a break from the paediatric practice where he'd continued as if on autopilot. Maybe escape to a place one of her friends had visited recently, where he knew no one, and heal for a week or two, or even a month for his daughter's sake. Maybe go back part-time for a while and spend more time with Piper. So he'd come. Here. To Lighthouse Bay.

Even on the first day it had felt right, just a glimmer of a breakthrough in the darkness, and he'd known it had been a good move.

The first morning in the guesthouse, when he'd walked the beach with Piper on his back, he'd felt a stirring of the peace he had found so elusive in his empty, echoing, accusing house. Saw the girl with the smile. Said, 'Good morning.'

After a few days he'd rented a cottage just above the beach for a week to avoid the other boisterous guests—happy families and young lovers he didn't need to talk to at breakfast—and moved to a place more private and offering solitude, but the inactivity of a rented house had been the exact opposite to what he needed.

Serendipitously, the cottage next door to that had come up for sale—Would suit handyman—which he'd never been. He was not even close to handy. Impulsively, after he'd discussed it with Piper, who had smiled and nodded and gurgled away his lack of handyman skills with great enthusiasm, he'd bought it. Then and there. The bonus of vacant possession meant an immediate move in even before the papers were signed.

He had a holiday house at the very least and a home if he never moved back to his old life. Radical stuff for a single parent, escaped paediatrician, failed husband, and one who had been used to the conveniences of a large town.

The first part of the one big room he'd clumsily beautified was Piper's corner and she didn't mind the smudges here and there and the chaos of spackle and paint tins and drip sheets and brushes.

Finally, he'd stood back with his daughter in his arms and considered he might survive the next week and maybe even the one after that. The first truly positive achievement he'd accomplished since Clancy left.

Clancy left.

How many times had he tried to grasp that fact? His wife of less than a year had walked away. Run, really. Left him, left her day-old daughter, and disappeared. With another man, if the private investigator had been correct. But still a missing person. Someone who in almost twelve months had never turned up in a hospital, or a morgue, or on her credit card. He had even had the PI check if she was working somewhere but that answer had come back as a no. And his sister, who had introduced them, couldn't find her either.

Because of the note she'd given the midwives, the police had only been mildly interested. Hence the PI.

Look after Piper. She's yours. Don't try to find me. I'm never coming back.

That was what the note had said. The gossip had been less direct. He suspected what the questions had been. Imagined what the midwives had thought. Why did his wife leave him? What did he do to her? It must have been bad if she left her baby behind...

The ones who knew him well shook their heads and said, She'd liked her freedom too much, that one.

At first he'd been in deep shock. Then denial. She'd come back. A moment's madness. She'd done it before. Left for days. With the reality of a demanding newborn and his worry making it hard for him to sleep at all, his work had suffered. But his largest concern had been the spectre of Clancy with an undiagnosed postnatal depression. Or, worse, the peril of a postnatal psychosis. What other reason could she have for leaving so suddenly so soon after the birth?

Hence he'd paid the private investigator, because there were no forensic leads—the police were inundated with more important affairs than flighty wives. But still no word. All he could do was pray she was safe, at least.

So life had gone on. One painful questioning new morning after another. Day after day with no relief. He hadn't been able to do his job as well as he should have and he'd needed a break from it all.

Buying the cottage had been a good move. Piper stood and cheered him on in her cot when he was doing something tricky, something that didn't need to have a lively little octopus climb all over him while he did it, and she waved her fists and gurgled and encouraged him as he learnt to be a painter. Or a carpenter. Or a tiler.

Or a cook. Or a cleaner. Or a dad.

He was doing okay.

He threw a last look out over the beach towards the grey sea and turned for home. 'That's our walk done for this morning, chicken. Let's go in and have breakfast. Then you can have a sleep and Daddy will grout those tiles in the shower so we can stop having bird baths in the sink.'

Piper loved the shower. Finn did too. When he held her soft, squirming satin baby skin against his chest, the water making her belly laugh as she ducked her head in and out of the stream always made him smile. Sometimes even made him laugh.

So he'd spent extra time on the shower. Adding tiles with animals, starfish, moon shapes and flowers, things they could talk about and keep it a happy place for Piper. And he'd made a square-tiled base with a plug. Soon she could have a little bath. One she could splash in even though it was only the size of the shower.

Doing things for Piper kept him sane. He didn't need the psychologist his sister said he did, or the medication his brother-in-law recommended. Just until he'd climbed out of the hole he'd dug himself to hide in, he would stay here. In Lighthouse Bay. Where nobody pointed or pitied him and every corner didn't hold a memory that scraped like fingernails on the chalkboard of his heavy heart.

Except that around the next corner his heart froze for a millisecond to see the morning midwife crouched on the path in front of him.

He quickened his pace. 'Are you okay?'

She turned to look up at him, cradling something brightly coloured against her chest, and with the shift of her shoulders he saw the bird cupped in her hands. 'She flew into that window and knocked herself out.'

The lorikeet, blue-headed with a red and yellow chest, lay limp with lime-green wings folded back in her hands. A most flaccid bird.

Still, the red beak and chest shuddered gently so it wasn't dead. 'How do you know it's a girl?' He couldn't believe he'd just said that. But he'd actually thought it was her that had been hurt and relief had made him stupid.

She must have thought he was stupid too. 'I didn't actually lift her legs and look. Not really of major importance, is it?'

Just a little bit of impatience and, surprisingly, it was good to be at the receiving end of a bit of healthy sarcasm. So much better than unending sympathy.

He held up his hands in surrender and Piper's voice floated over both of them from his back. 'Dad, Dad, Dad!'

The girl sucked in her breath and he could see her swan-like neck was tinged with pink. 'Sorry. Night duty ill temper.'

'My bad. All mine. Stupid thing to say. Can you stand up? It's tricky to crouch down with Piper on my back. Let's have a look at her.'

The morning midwife rose fluidly, calves of steel obviously; even he was impressed with her grace—must be all those uphill walks she did. 'She's not fluttering her wings,' she said, empathy lacing a voice that, had it not been agitated, would have soothed the bird. He shook himself. She

was just being a typical midwife. That was how most of them had spoken to him when Clancy had disappeared.

‘Still breathing.’ He stroked the soft feathers as the bird lay in her small hands. ‘She’s limp, but I think if you put her in a box for a couple of hours in the dark, she’ll rouse when she’s had a sleep to get over the shock.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I do. She’s not bleeding. Just cover the box with a light cloth so she can let you know she can fly away when she’s ready.’

‘Do I have to put food or water in there?’

‘Not food. A little water as long as she doesn’t fall into it and drown.’ He grimaced at another stupid comment.

She grinned at him and suddenly the day was much brighter than it had been. ‘Are you a vet?’

‘No.’

‘Just a bird wrangler?’

She was a stunner. He stepped back. ‘One of my many talents. I’ll leave you to it.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Bye.’

She looked at him oddly. Not surprising. He was odd. He walked on up the hill.

Her voice followed him. ‘Bye, Piper.’ He heard Piper chuckle.

CHAPTER TWO

Trina

TRINA FINISHED HER night shift at seven a.m. on Friday and picked up her mini-tote to sling it on her shoulder. Her last night done, except for emergencies, and she did a little skip as she came out of the door. At first, she’d been reluctant to take the night shift to day shift change that Ellie had offered her because change could be scary, but it had started the whole paradigm inversion that her life had needed. Look out daylight. Here she comes.

Yes. She’d come a long way in almost two years since Ed had died.

Not just because on Monday morning she’d return as acting Midwifery Unit Manager, an unexpected positive career move for Trina at Lighthouse Bay Maternity.

But things had changed.

Her grief stayed internal, or only rarely escaped under her pillow when she was alone in her croft on the cliff.

And since Ellie’s wedding last year she’d begun to think that maybe, some time in the future, she too could look at being friends with a man. If the right one came along.

Not a relationship yet. That idea had been so terrifying, almost like PTSD—the fear of imagining what if history repeated itself; what if that immense pain of loss and grief hit her again? What then?

She’d been catatonic with that thought and to divert herself she’d begun to think of all the other things that terrified her. She’d decided to strengthen her Be Brave muscle.

Last week she’d had her first scuba lesson. Something that had fascinated but petrified her since she’d watched the movie Finding Nemo with the daughter of a friend. And in the sparkling cove around the corner from Lighthouse Bay the kindly instructor had been so reassuring, so patient, well... Maybe she’d go back on Saturday for another lesson.

And when she’d mastered that she was going out on a day of deep-sea fishing. The captain’s wife had not long delivered a late-in-life baby and Trina had been the midwife. Even though he’d fainted again, he’d promised her a day of deep-sea fishing when he felt better. She’d bought seasickness bands and stored them in her drawer just in case.

She wasn't sure about the parachuting. The girls at work had all joined the idea factory and brochures and social media tags of extreme sports and adventure holidays appeared like magic in her pigeonhole and on her private page. Parachuting? She didn't think so but she'd worry about that later.

Her aim to do one challenge a month seemed possible to allay the fear that she was relying on work to be her whole world. Though not too adventurous—she didn't want to kill herself. Not now.

Her friends were cheering. Thinking of the midwives of Lighthouse Bay...well, that made her whole world warm into a rosy glow. A fiercely loyal flotsam of women tossed here by the fickle cruelty of life, forging into a circle of hands supporting birthing women and each other. All acutely aware of how fortunate they were to have found the magic of the bay.

There was something healing about that crescent of sand that led to the cliffs.

A mystical benevolence about the soaring white lighthouse on the tallest point that looked benignly over the tiny hamlet of coloured houses and shone reassuring light.

And the pretty pastel abodes like a quaint European seaside town were a delight, a new trend that had taken off with the gentle crayon façades dipping in colour like playful toes into the sea.

Crazy coloured houses, and if she could do all those crazy-coloured feats of bravery then just maybe she could be brave enough to begin a real conversation with a man. Like yesterday. She'd almost forgotten the handsome dad was a man when she'd snapped at him. They'd almost had a whole conversation. She wouldn't mind another one so he didn't think she was a short-tempered shrew but she had been concerned about the bird. The one that had flown away two hours later, just like he said it would.

If she could talk to a man she could try again to go out with one. At least once. She'd been turning them down for six months now. None of them had been Ed.

Now there were more midwives around to lessen the on-call restrictions. Four new midwives had come on board to swell their ranks with the shift to a midwife-led unit. They still had old Dr Southwell in the hospital for non-maternity patients and maternity emergencies, but all the midwives had moved to four days of ten-hour shifts and caring for a caseload of women, so suddenly there was more time for life with an extra day free and people to cover you if needed. And she'd scored the admin side Monday to Thursday, daylight hours, for a year. Starting Monday. Imagine.

So she'd better get out there and grab that exciting life before it drifted past in a haze of regrets. She lifted her head and sucked in a pure lungful of gorgeous sea air.

Without realising it her feet had followed the well-beaten path down to the beach and just as she turned to start her morning breakwall walk she saw the dad and his little girl come up off the beach.

He looked happier today. Nice. It made her smile warmer. 'Beautiful morning.'

He looked startled for a minute. 'Yes, it is.' Almost as if he was surprised. 'Good morning—how is your bird?'

'Flew away two hours later. Didn't look any worse for wear.'

He gave her the first real smile she'd seen. 'That's good.'

Then he was past. Trina turned her head to glance back and the little fair-haired girl waved.

Trina smiled and yawned. She should go to bed and get a couple of hours' sleep before Ellie's farewell lunch. Just a quick walk.

CHAPTER THREE

Finn

THE EARLY-MORNING BREEZE off the ocean seemed cooler. The water had taken till now to shine like a jewel. She'd been late this morning. Finn had waited a minute, hoping she wouldn't see him do it, and strangely the minute seemed to take for ever, then he'd looked back. He'd been thinking of her last night. Wondering if she were sad about a dead bird or happy when it flew away.

He thought back to her response. Now that was a smile. He could see it in his retina like a glance at the sun. Warm and glowing. Saw her walking quite a way in the distance—she'd moved fast. He'd

noticed that before, that her pace ran to brisk rather than dawdling. Nurses often did walk briskly. Couldn't seem to slow themselves enough to meander even on a seaside walk. He tore his eyes away.

He'd done the breakwall walk she did a couple of times when he'd first come here but he liked the effort of walking through the sand with Piper on his back. If nothing else he'd become fit and tanned and physically healthier here in a month. And Piper too had sun-kissed limbs and sparkling eyes that exuded health.

His sister would be pleased when she came today. His first visitor. He shied away from that intrusion into his safe world and thought again of the young midwife. Maybe not so young because he'd seen the signs of loss and life in her big coffee eyes—even in those brief glances they'd shot at each other. For the first time he wondered if other people had suffered as much as he had? Well, that at least seemed a positive sign that he could reconnect with his inherent compassion that he'd seemed to have lost.

The thought made him wonder what it would be like to talk to someone who could actually begin to understand his hell, and then called himself crazy for making up a past about someone he didn't know. Poor woman probably had never had a sad day in her life. But something told him otherwise.

* * *

Just before one p.m. his sister stepped out of her red convertible and through his front gate. 'It's beautiful, Finn. I can't believe you've done all this yourself!' Her perfectly pencilled brows were raised as she gazed at the pale pink external walls of the house and the rose-red door.

He'd been a little surprised himself. And the front path bordered by pansies and baby's breath looked as if it belonged to some older lady with a green thumb—not a guilt-deranged paediatrician running from life.

She rocked her head slowly. He'd expected disbelief but not this patent incredulity. He felt strangely offended. 'I didn't even know you like to garden!'

He shrugged, urging her towards the door. 'Neither did I. But Piper loves being outside and we needed to do something while we're out here.'

Frances rubbernecked her way up the path, nice and slow for the neighbours, he thought dryly, and sighed while she gushed. She gushed when she didn't know what to say, though what the problem was he had no idea.

'And the house. Freshly painted? You actually painted?' She glanced around. 'Pastel like the others in the street. It's gorgeous.'

Finn looked at the stucco walls. They'd been a pain to paint. 'Piper chose the colour. I would have preferred a blue but, given the choice, she went for pink every time. Never thought I'd have a stereotypical daughter.'

Frances laughed and waved her hand dismissively. 'Piper's too young to choose.'

'No, she's not,' he said mildly. 'How can you say it's not her choice if I give her four colours and she keeps choosing pink?'

Frances looked at him as if he needed a big dose of sympathy for his feeble brain. 'You didn't pretend she was choosing?'

'Who else was I going to ask?' He heard the edge in his voice. And his sister shut up. So then he felt mean.

It was always like this. On and on until he shut her down. She meant well, but for heaven's sake. He wanted her gone already.

They finally made it to the front door.

In an attempt to lighten the mood he stopped to show her something else. 'Piper helped everywhere.' He kissed the top of his daughter's head as she perched on his hip. Quiet for a change because she hadn't quite found her ease with her aunt. Or maybe she was picking up Finn's nervous vibes. Either way she leaned into him, unusually subdued.

He pointed to a handprint on the front step that he'd finished with instant cement. Using a layer of cling wrap over the wet surface, he'd pressed her starfish hand into the step on each side while holding her clamped to his side. The little palm prints made him smile every time he opened the door.

'Come in.' He heard the pride in his voice and mocked himself. Finn the decorator. 'There's still the kitchen and laundry, but I've finished Piper's corner, the bathroom and the floating boards on the floor because she'll need a solid surface to learn to walk on.'

Frances rotated her neck, as if stuck to the step and that was the only part of her body she could move. 'It's tiny.'

He frowned. 'Yes. It's a beach cottage. Not a mansion.'

She blinked. Shifted uneasily. 'Oh, yes. Of course. But your other beautiful house...'

'Is on the market.'

Now the shock was real. Frances had approved mightily of his imposing residence on top of the hill. Two hills over from her imposing residence. He'd only liked it because Clancy, his missing wife, had loved it.

Frances spluttered, 'You're buying a new house?'

'I've bought a new house.' He put out one hand and gestured. 'This house. I'm staying here.'

'I... I thought you'd done this for the owners. That you rented?'

'I am the owner.' A little too fierce, Finn, he chided himself.

Frances leaned towards him pleadingly. 'But your work?'

'Will be here too when I'm ready. One of the GPs here has offered me a place in his practice when I'm ready. I'll specialise in children but do all the GP stuff I've almost forgotten. It'll be good.' He wasn't sure who he was convincing, Frances or himself. 'It won't be yet because I'm in no hurry.'

'But...'

'But what?'

His sister turned worried eyes on his. 'You were only supposed to come here for a few weeks and then come back. Come home.'

'Home to where, Frances? To what? To an empty castle on a hill full of ghosts and pain. To a clinic with not enough hours in the day so I had to keep my daughter in long day care?'

Frances looked stricken and he leaned in and shared a hug with her, Piper still a limpet on his other hip. Frances meant well and she truly loved him. And now that Mum was gone she was all the family he had. Of course she'd never understood him with the ten-year age difference. Frances hadn't understood Mum either, if they were being honest. 'It's okay. This is a magic place to live and for Piper and me this is the right place at the right time. We're staying.'

Frances almost wrung her hands. 'You won't meet any eligible women here.'

He could feel his mood slip further. His irritation rise. His disappointment deepen. His sister didn't understand his guilt couldn't be fixed by an eligible woman. 'Eligible for what, Frances? I'm no good for any woman at the moment and won't be...' he didn't say ever '...for a very long time.'

He decided not to demonstrate the shower. Or point anything else out. Ditched the plans to take a picnic to the beach.

Instead he took Frances to the most expensive restaurant in town, where Piper slept in her stroller beside the table despite the noise of conversations and laughter all around, and listened to her stories of droll people and dire events in her husband's practice.

In the corner of the restaurant he noticed a very attractive brunette. She nodded at him and he realised it was his morning midwife, elegantly dressed—sans scrubs—and made-up like a model, her brown hair blow-dried and shining, the glints catching the sun. Looking like a million bucks. Other men were looking at her. He preferred the windblown version.

She sat, a little isolated, in a lively group of people, all chinking champagne flutes to celebrate. Frances would approve of the clientele, he thought dryly, but recognised the older doctor he'd mentioned to his sister, and noted the stylish older woman next to him who leant into his shoulder,

probably his wife. Another young woman he hadn't seen around was chatting to the vibrantly glowing woman in the latter stages of pregnancy who drank water, and next to her a man hovered protectively, obviously the doting father-to-be.

He wished him better luck than he'd had. Finn felt his heart twist in self-disgust. He'd tried that. A lot of good that had done him.

'Finn?'

His sister's voice called him back to the present and he jerked his face away from them. 'Sorry. You were telling me about Gerry's partner?'

Frances hovered over being cross for a moment and thankfully decided to forgive graciously. 'I was saying she has no idea how a doctor's wife should dress.'

The lunch dragged on until finally Piper woke up and gave him an excuse to pay the bill.

They waved Frances goodbye after lunch with much relief. 'Seriously, Piper. Your aunt is getting worse. We're lucky to be so far away.'

They took the sand buckets and spade back down to the beach in the afternoon because Piper's routine had been disrupted and she needed to get some play time in and wear herself out before bedtime.

To his surprise, and with a seagull-like swoop of uplifting spirits, the morning midwife sat there on the breakwall, back in beach clothes and mussed by the wind. He smiled at her like a long-lost friend. After the visit from his sister he felt as if he needed a pal.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trina

TRINA SAT SWINGING her legs on the breakwall down on the beach and breathed in the salt. The sea air blew strands into her eyes but it felt too good to worry about that. She saw him before he saw her and a deep, slashing frown marred his forehead. Different to this morning. Then his expression changed as he saw her, the etched lines disappeared and an unexpected, ridiculously sexy, warmly welcoming smile curved in a big sweep. Goodness. What had she done to deserve that?

'Lovely afternoon,' he said and the little girl waved.

Trina's mouth twitched as she waved back. 'Beautiful. I saw you at lunch. That's three times in a day.'

'A new world record,' he agreed and she blushed. No idea why.

He paused beside her, another world record, and looked down from far too high. Up close and stationary, told herself again, he would be a very good-looking man—to other women. She studied him almost dispassionately. Long lashes framed those brilliant blue eyes and his dark brown wavy hair curled a tad too long over his ears. His chin was set firm and his cheekbones bordered on harsh in the bright light. She could see his effort to be social cost him. She knew the feeling.

'I'm Catrina Thomas.' She didn't enlarge. He could ask if he was interested, but something told her he wasn't so much interested as in need of a friend. Which suited her perfectly.

'Finlay Foley. And you've met Piper. My daughter.' The little girl bounced in the backpack.

You could do nothing but smile at Piper. 'Piper looks like she wants to get down amongst the sand.'

'Piper is happiest when she's caked in sand.' His hand lifted to stroke the wiggling little leg at his chest. Strong brown fingers tickling a plump golden baby ankle. 'We're going to build sandcastles. Piper is going to play hard and long and get extremely tired so she will sleep all night.' Trina wasn't sure if he was telling her or telling Piper. She suspected the latter.

'Nice theory,' Trina agreed judiciously. 'I see you have it all worked out.'

He began to fiddle with the straps as he extricated his daughter from the backpack and clinically she watched the muscle play as man power pulled his loose white shirt tight. His thick dark hair tousled in the wind and drew her eyes until she was distracted again by the wiggling child. Finlay popped her down in the sand on her bottom and put a spade and bucket beside her.

‘There, miss.’ He glanced up at Trina. ‘Her aunt came today and she’s ruined our sleep routine.’ He paused at that. ‘Speaking of routines, this is late in the day for you to be on the beach.’

‘Nice of you to notice.’ She wasn’t sure if it was. There had been a suspicious lift of her spirits when she’d realised the woman he’d shared lunch with was his sister. What was that? She didn’t have expectations and he wouldn’t either—not that she supposed he would have. She wasn’t ready for that. ‘Don’t get ideas or I’ll have to leave.’ Almost a joke. But she explained.

‘Today is my first official Friday off for a long time. I’m off nights and on day shifts for the next year. Monday to Thursday.’ She looked around at the little groups and families on the beach and under the trees at the park. Pulled a mock frowning face. ‘I’ll have to talk to people and socialise, I guess.’

‘I know. Sucks, doesn’t it.’ The underlying truth made them both stop and consider. And smile a little sheepishly at each other.

Another urge to be truthful came out of nowhere. ‘I’m a widow and not that keen on pretending to be a social butterfly. Hence the last two years on night duty.’

He said more slowly, as if he wasn’t sure why he was following suit either, ‘My wife left us when Piper was born. A day later. I’ve morphed into antisocial and now I’m hiding here.’

Died? Or left? How could his wife leave when their daughter was born? She closed her mouth with a snap. Not normal. Something told her Piper’s mum hadn’t died, though she didn’t know why. Postnatal depression then? A chilling thought. Not domestic violence?

As if he read her thoughts, he added, ‘I think she left with another man.’ He seemed to take a perverse pleasure in her disbelief. ‘I need to start thinking about going back to work soon. Learn to stop trying to guess what happened. To have adult conversations.’

He shrugged those impressive shoulders. Glanced around at the white sand and waves. ‘I’m talking to Piper’s dolls now.’

Still bemused by the first statement, the second took a second to sink in. Surprisingly, Trina giggled. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d giggled like a schoolgirl.

He smiled and then sobered. ‘Which means Piper and her dolls must go into day care if I go back to work.’

‘That’s hard,’ Trina agreed but wondered what sort of work he could ‘start thinking about going back to’. Not that there were screeds of choices around here. ‘Maybe part-time?’

‘I think so.’

‘Are you a builder? The house looks good.’

He laughed at that. ‘No. Far from it. Piper’s taught me everything I know.’

Trina giggled again. Stop it. She sounded like a twit. But he was funny. ‘I didn’t have you pegged as a comedian.’

His half-laugh held a hint of derision at himself. ‘Not usually. Remember? Antisocial.’

She nodded with solemn agreement. ‘You’re safe with me. If you need a protected space to tell your latest doll story you can find me.’ She waited until his eyes met hers. ‘But that’s all.’

‘Handy to know. Where do I find you? You know where I live.’ Then he turned away as if he regretted asking.

‘Of course I know where you live. It’s a small town and single men with babies are rare.’ Trina looked at him. ‘I meant...find me here. But I’ll think about it. I’m happy to have a male friend but not a stalker.’

She felt like an idiot saying that but thankfully he just looked relieved. ‘Hallelujah. And I promise I will never, ever turn up uninvited.’

‘We have that sorted.’ She glanced at Piper, who sat on the sand licking white granules off her fingers, and bit back a grin. ‘It’s good when children will eat anything.’

Finn focused instantly on his daughter and scooped her up. Trina could see him mentally chastising himself. She imagined something like, See what happens when you don’t concentrate on

your daughter, and she knew he'd forgotten her. Was happy for the breathing space because, speaking of breathing, she was having a little trouble.

She heard his voice from a long way away. 'Sand is for playing—not eating, missy.' He scooped the grains from her mouth and brushed her lips. His quick glance brushed over Trina as well as he began to move away. 'Better go wash her mouth out and concentrate. Nice to meet you, Catrina.'

'You too,' she said, suddenly needing to bolt home and shut her door.

* * *

Ten minutes later the lock clunked home solidly and she leant back against the wood. Another scary challenge achieved.

Not that she'd been in danger—just a little more challenged than she'd been ready for. And she had been remarkably loose with her tongue. Told him she was a widow. About her job. The hours she worked. What had got into her? That was a worry. So much so that it did feel incredibly comforting to be home. Though, now that she looked around, it seemed dark inside. She frowned. Didn't just seem dark.

Her home was dark.

And just a little dismal. She frowned and then hurried to reassure herself. Not tragically so, more efficiently gloomy for a person who slept through a lot of the daylight hours. She pulled the cord on the kitchen blind and it rolled up obediently and light flooded in from the front, where the little dead-end road finished next door.

She moved to the side windows and thinned the bunching of the white curtains so she could see through them. Maybe she could open those curtains too. Now that she'd be awake in the daytime. Moving out of the dark, physically and figuratively.

So, she'd better see to lightening it up. Maybe a few bright cushions on her grey lounge suite; even a bright rug on the floor would be nice. She stared down at the grey and black swirled rug she'd bought in a monotone furnishing package when she moved in. Decided she didn't like the lack of colour.

She crossed the room and threw open the heavy curtains that blocked the view. Unlocking the double glass doors and pushing them slowly open, she stepped out onto her patio to look out over the glittering expanse of ocean that lay before her like a big blue shot-thread quilt as far as the eye could see. She didn't look down to the beach, though she wanted to. Better not see if there was the figure of a man and a little girl playing in the waves.

Instead she glanced at the little croft to her right where Ellie and Sam lived while Sam built the big house on the headland for their growing family. She wondered if they would keep the croft, as they said they would. It would be strange to have new neighbours on top of everything else.

The three crofts sat like seabirds perched on a branch of the headland, the thick walls painted white like the lighthouse across the bay and from the same solid stone blocks. Trina's veranda had a little awning over the deck the others lacked. A thick green evergreen hedge separated the buildings to shoulder height.

On the other side of her house lay Myra's croft. Originally from Paddington in Sydney, stylish Myra ran the coffee shop at the hospital and had recently married the older Dr Southwell—her boss. Ellie's father-in-law.

Two brides in two months, living each side of her, and maybe that had jolted her out of her apathy as much as anything else. Surrounded by people jumping bravely into new relationships and new lives had to make a woman think.

She stepped out and crossed to the two-person swing seat she'd tussled with for hours to assemble. Her last purchase as a flat-pack. Last ever, she promised herself.

She'd never seen so many screws and bolts and instructions in one flat-pack. Then she'd been left with a contraption that had to be dragged inside when it got too windy here on top of the cliffs

because it banged and rattled and made her nervous that it would fly into the ocean on a gust. It wasn't really that she thought about the fact it needed a second person. Not at all.

She stepped back inside, glanced around then picked up the sewing basket and dug in it for the ribbons she'd put away. Went back to the double doors and tied back the curtains so they were right off the windows. Not that she was getting visitors—her mind shied away from the mental picture of a man and his baby daughter.

No. She'd lighten it because now she didn't need to exclude the light to help her sleep. She was a day-shift person. She was brave. And tomorrow she'd scuba again, and maybe talk to Finlay and Piper if she saw them because she was resurrecting her social skills and stepping forward. Carefully.

CHAPTER FIVE

Finn

FINN GLANCED BACK to the rocky breakwall once, to the spot where Catrina—nice name—had disappeared, as he crouched with Piper at the edge of the water to rinse her mouth of sand. It seemed other people did hurt like he did. And were left with scars that impacted hugely on how they lived their lives.

Two years working on night duty. He shuddered but could see the logic. Side-stepping the cold space beside you in the bed at night and avoiding that feeling of loss being the first thing you noticed in the day. Maybe he should have given that a go.

But the way she'd said she hadn't pegged him as a comedian surprised him out of his usual lethargy. He'd made her laugh twice—that was pretty stellar. Apart from his daughter, whose sense of humour ran to very simple slapstick, he hadn't made anyone giggle for a long time. He could almost hear her again. Such a delicious giggle. More of a gurgle really.

So—a widow? Lost like him, for a different reason. He wondered how her husband had died but in the end it didn't really change her pain. He was gone. For ever. Unlike the uncertainty he lived with.

Would Clancy ever come back? In a year. In ten years? Was she even alive? But, most of all, what would he tell Piper when she grew up? How could he say her mother loved her when she'd walked away and never asked about her again? The pain for Piper's future angst had grown larger than his own loss and he had no desire to rush the explanations.

Milestones with Piper never passed without him singeing himself with bitterness that Clancy wasn't there to see them. First tooth. First word. First step last week—though she still spent most of her time on her bottom. And on Sunday—first birthday. He felt his jaw stiffen. That would be the day he said enough. Enough holding his breath, expecting Clancy to walk through the door.

A milestone he'd never thought he'd get to. He hadn't decided whether to stay in Lighthouse Bay for the day with their usual routine; he was leaning towards taking Piper shopping, something he loathed, so that the logistics of strollers and car parking and crowd managing with a toddler drowned out the reminders of the best day of his life twelve months ago that had changed so soon after.

He wondered suddenly if he could ask Catrina to come. As a diversion, a pseudo-mother for the day, and then found himself swamped by such intense anger at Clancy for leaving their daughter he almost moaned. Piper clutched his hand and he looked down to see his daughter's eyes staring up at him as if she could sense his pain.

He scooped her up and hugged her, felt the lump in his chest and willed it away. Whatever they did, he needed to remember it was a celebration of this angel in his arms, not of the woman who'd left them.

'I'll always love you, darling.' The words came out thickly. 'What would you like to do on Sunday, Piper?'

'Mum, Mum, Mum, Mum.'

He groaned and buried his face in her shimmering golden cloud of hair. Fine mist-like hair that floated in the breeze and tangled if he didn't tie it back but he couldn't bring himself to get it cut. His gorgeous little buttercup with her fine-spun headache of hair.

'Mum, Mum, Mum,' Piper chirped.

The last thing he needed to hear at this moment. 'Oh, baby, don't. Please.'

She squirmed and the baby voice drifted up to him. Uncertain. 'Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad?'

Pull yourself together. He lifted his head and looked into the soft dimpled face so close to his. 'Yes. Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad.' He carried her into the waves to dangle her feet and she wriggled happily. He concentrated on his fingers holding her as he swept her ankles through the waves and the foam ran up her knees as she squealed in delight. Guilt swamped him all over again. 'You can say Mum, Mum, Mum any time, my darling. Of course you can. Daddy's being silly.' Stupid!

Piper gurgled with laughter. 'Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad.' Finn could feel his heart shattering into a million pieces again and any lingering thoughts of Catrina the midwife washed into the sea with the grains of sand stuck to Piper's feet.

CHAPTER SIX

Trina

THE EARLY-MORNING SUNBEAM poked Trina in the eye with an unfamiliar exuberance and she groaned and threw her hand up to cover her face. Who left the curtains open? Only one answer to that. The twinge of morning memory and loss made her breath hitch and she forced herself to breathe calmly.

Saturday morning. Scuba lesson. She groaned again and all the doubts and fears from last week came rushing back to twist her stomach. Why had she said she wanted to do this again? Why the need to push herself to extremes she didn't feel comfortable with?

She flung the bedclothes back and swung her legs. The floor was warmed a little under her feet from the sun. That too seemed different.

Okay. Why was she fighting this? This was a new chapter in her life. Same book. She wasn't removing any of the pages—just going forward.

She squinted at the morning beams painting the inside of her one-room croft in golden stripes and decided they were quite lovely. Not worth groaning about at all.

She padded across to the uncurtained double doors looking out over the ocean and decided the light streaming in shone still a little too bright until she'd made an Earl Grey to start the day and turned her back.

As she busied herself in the tiny kitchen nook, she pondered on yesterday and the advances she'd made towards holding a sensible conversation with an eligible male. Though technically she guessed he wasn't eligible. But probably safe to practise on, as long as he was okay with it.

Not that she had any long-term intentions but she'd done all right. Beaten the bogeyman, and so had he. That made it a little easier. And no doubt different for him, as his wife had chosen to go. How on earth could a woman leave her baby? And why would she leave Finlay? That too was a teensy worry.

Trina thought back to where she'd been a year ago. Still in a black fog with a bright shiny mask on her face for work.

She didn't believe that time healed all wounds, but maybe it scabbed over some of the deeper lacerations. The problem with losing your true love was they were never really gone, always hovering, a comfort, and an ache that flared into pain that burned right through you.

Boy, did she recognise the symptoms of reluctantly dipping a toe into the real world after the misty haze of deep grief. There were some aspects of her loss of Ed that would never disappear but in other ways she could, and would, live a happy life. She didn't think that Finlay Foley had reached that stage yet. Which was a tiny shame.

But she'd better get on and prepare for her scuba lesson. She'd eat when she came back.

By the time Trina left her croft on the cliff she knew she'd be late if she didn't hurry and her steps skipped as she descended to the beach with her towel and specially fitted snorkelling mask. That

was one good thing about living right on the beach—she didn't need to carry much because home was always a few steps away.

The path stopped at the sand and Trina began walking quickly around the headland. She'd glanced once towards the curve of the bay but no Finlay and Piper there, no sign of him, so tall and broad and unmistakable, so no golden-haired Piper on his back either, and fancifully it felt strange to be hurrying away without seeing them.

She forced herself to look forward again and concentrated on the scuba lessons she'd learnt last week from old Tom, running through the procedures.

'Nice even breathing through the mouthpiece; no holding your breath. This is how to replace a regulator in your mouth if it gets knocked out. This is how to control the speed of your ascent and descent by letting air in and out via the buoyancy control, so your ears don't hurt. Nothing to be nervous about. We'll go as slow as you need.'

Two hours later as she walked home in a much more desultory fashion a glow of pride warmed her as she remembered old Tom's quiet pleasure in her. 'You're a natural,' he'd told her.

A natural scuba diver? Who would have known? But today he'd taken her to the little island just off the beach and they'd dived slowly around the tiny inlets and rocks and seen colourful fish, delicate submarine plant life that swayed with the rhythm of the ocean, once a small stingray and one slightly larger shark, and it had all been Technicolor brilliant. Exciting. And, to her absolute delight, she'd loved it.

Her mind danced with snapshots of the morning and she didn't see the man and little girl sitting in a shallow rock pool under the cliff until she was almost upon them.

'Oh. You. Hello,' she stammered as she was jerked out of her happy reveries.

'Good morning, Catrina,' Finlay said. Though how on earth he could remain nonchalant while sitting in a sandy-bottom indent in the rock where the water barely covered his outstretched legs, she had no idea. 'You look very pleased with yourself.'

She regarded them. She liked the way they looked—so calm and happy, Piper dressed in her frilly pink swimsuit that covered her arms and legs. And she liked the way he called her Catrina. Ed had always called her Trina and she wasn't ready for another man to shorten her name. 'Good morning to you, Finlay.'

'Finn. Please. I'm usually Finn. Don't know why I was so formal yesterday.'

'Finn.' She nodded and smiled down at Piper. 'Hello, Piper. What can you see in the rock pool?'

The little girl turned her big green eyes back to the water. Pointed one plump finger. 'Fiss,' Piper said and Finn's eyes widened.

His mouth opened and closed just like the word his daughter had almost mouthed.

'She said fish!' His eyes were alight with wonder and the huge smile on his face made Trina want to hug him to celebrate the moment of pure joy untinged by bitterness. 'I can't believe she said fish.'

'Clever girl,' Trina said and battled not to laugh out loud. She'd thought it had been more like a mumbled fiss. But she was sure her father knew better. Her mouth struggled to remain serious. In the end she giggled. Giggled? Again? What the heck?

She'd never been a giggler but this guy made her smiles turn into noises she cringed at.

To hide her idiotic response she said, 'I've seen fish too, Piper.'

Finn glanced at her mask. 'You've been snorkelling?'

Trina spread her arms and said with solemn pride, almost dramatically, 'I have been scuba diving.'

'Have you? Go you. I used to love to scuba.' He glanced around. 'Would you like to join us in our pool? There's no lifeguard except me but if you promise not to run or dive we'll let you share.'

Trina scanned the area too. Nobody she knew. She'd look ridiculous, though a voice inside her head said he looked anything but ridiculous in his skin-tight blue rash shirt and board shorts that left not one gorgeous muscle top or bottom unaccounted for.

She put down her mask and the sandals she carried, folded her towel to sit on, hiked up her sundress so it didn't drag in the water and eased herself down at the edge of the pool and put her feet in. The water felt deliciously cool against her suddenly warmer skin.

Finn watched her and she tried not to be aware of that. Then Piper splashed him and the mood broke into something more relaxed. 'So where did you go to scuba?'

She glanced the way she'd come. 'Have you been around the headland?'

He nodded. 'Around the next two until Piper started to feel like a bag of cement on my back.'

Trina laughed. She could so imagine that. She smiled at him. 'The next bay is called Island Bay and the little rocky island that's about four hundred metres out is called Bay Island.'

He laughed. 'Creative people around here.'

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