



FIONA MCARTHUR

A Month to Marry
the Midwife



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



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Аннотация

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The kiss had been an apology. A dangerous one. Kissing Sam had been a mistake, because when he kissed her back driving him away was the last thing on her mind.

Somehow Ellie was on his lap, both her arms were around his hard shoulders and he was holding her mouth against him with a firm palm to the back of her head.

Inhaling his scent, his taste, his maleness was glorious. The kiss went on and on, even though it was only a minute. His mouth was a whole subterranean world of wonder. In heated waves he kissed her, and she kissed him back in time to the crash of the ocean below. Rising and falling, sometimes peaking in a crest and then drawing her down into a swirling world Ellie was lost in...one she hadn't visited before.

Until the phone rang.

It took a few moments for the sound to penetrate and then she felt his hand ease back. He pulled away, but his eyes were dark and hot as he watched her blink. She raised her trembling fingers

to her lips.

His voice was deep, too damn sexy, and he smiled at her in a way that made her blush.

‘Your phone is ringing.’

Dear Reader,

Lighthouse Bay is the best place to find caring and spirited midwives, fabulous townspeople, and the most gorgeous docs around. I love lighthouses, I adore mums and babies, and I thrive on strong women and men who make me laugh.

In this first of three books set in Lighthouse Bay, midwife Ellie Swift has been told the ultimate lie and has now vowed to dedicate herself to her love of midwifery and the nurturing of her friends. She won't be trusting a young man any time soon.

Obstetrician Sam Southwell, a man dealing with the loss of his wife and babies, doesn't plan on staying in Lighthouse Bay—he's just doing his dad a favour. But then he meets Ellie...

The Midwives of Lighthouse Bay series is the place to come when your heart needs healing and your soul needs restoring. You just might find true love.

I wish you, dear reader, as much emotion and fun reading about Ellie and Sam as I had writing their story. Then you can look forward to Trina's and Faith's stories, too. We have some hot twin brother Italian docs who have no idea what these feisty Aussie midwives have in store for them under the guiding beam of the lighthouse.

I can't wait to share those stories with you and would love to

hear from you as we celebrate love in Lighthouse Bay.

Fi McArthur xx

FionaMcArthurAuthor.com

A Month to Marry the Midwife

Fiona McArthur



www.millsandboon.co.uk

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 and her husband, Ian, are off to meet new people, see new places and have wonderful adventures. Drop in and say hi at Fiona's website: FionaMcArthurAuthor.com.

Books by Fiona McArthur

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Midwife's Christmas Proposal

Midwife's Mistletoe Baby

A Doctor, A Fling & A Wedding Ring

The Prince Who Charmed Her

Gold Coast Angels: Two Tiny Heartbeats

Christmas with Her Ex

Visit the Author Profile page at millsandboon.co.uk for more titles.

Dedicated to Rosie, who sprinted with me on this one, Trish, who walked the beach with me, and Flo, who rode the new wave and kept me afloat.

What a fab journey with awesome friends.

[Praise for Fiona McArthur](#)

‘You do not want to miss this poignant love story. I have read it twice in twenty-four hours and it is fantastic!’

—Goodreads on

Midwife’s Mistletoe Baby

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Praise](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

THE WHITE SAND curved away in a crescent as Ellie Swift descended to Lighthouse Bay Beach and turned towards the bluff. When she stepped onto the beach the luscious crush of cool, fine sand under her toes made her suck in her breath with a grin and the ocean breeze tasted salty against her lips. Ellie set off at a brisk pace towards the edge of the waves to walk the bay to the headland and back before she needed to dress for work.

‘Ellie!’

She spun, startled, away from the creamy waves now washing her feet, and saw a man limping towards her. He waved again. Jeff, from the surf club. Ellie knew Jeff, the local prawn-trawler captain and chief lifesaver. She’d delivered his second son. Jeff had fainted and Ellie tried not to remind him of that every time she saw him.

She waved back but already suspected the call wasn’t social.

She turned and sped up to meet him.

‘We’ve got an old guy down on the rocks under the lighthouse, a surfer, says he’s your doctor from the hospital. We think he’s busted his arm, and maybe a leg.’

Ellie turned her head to look towards the headland Jeff had come from.

Jeff waved his hand towards the huddle of people in the distance. ‘He won’t let anybody touch him until you come. The ambulance is on the way but I reckon we might have to chopper him out from here.’

Ellie worked all over the hospital so it wasn’t unusual that she was who people asked for. An old guy and a surfer. That was Dr Southwell. She sighed.

* * *

Ten minutes later Ellie was kneeling beside the good doctor, guarding his wrinkled neck in a brace as she watched the two ambulance women and two burly lifesavers carefully shift him onto the rescue frame. Then it was done. Just a small groan escaped his gritted teeth as he closed his eyes and let the pain from the movement slowly subside.

Ellie glanced at the ocean, lying aqua and innocent, as if to say, it wasn’t my fault, and suspected Dr Southwell would doggedly heal and return to surfing with renewed vigour as soon as he could. The tide was on the way out and the waves weren’t reaching the sloping plateau at the base of the cliffs any more where the lifesavers had secured their casualty. The spot was

popular with intrepid surfers to climb on and off their boards and paddle into the warm swell and out to the waves.

‘Thanks for coming, Ellie.’ Dr Southwell was looking much more comfortable and a trifle sheepish. ‘Sorry to leave you in the lurch on the ward.’

She smiled at him. He’d always been sweet. ‘Don’t you worry about us. Look after you. They’ll get you sorted once you’ve landed. Get well soon.’

The older man closed his eyes briefly. Then he winked at Ellie. ‘I’ll be back. As soon as I can.’

Ellie smiled and shook her head. He’d gone surfing every morning before his clinic, the athletic spring to his step contradicting his white hair and weathered face, a tall, thin gentleman who must have been a real catch fifty years ago. They’d splinted his arm against his body, didn’t think the leg was broken, but they were treating it as such and had administered morphine, having cleared it with the helicopter flight nurse on route via mobile phone.

In the distance the thwump-thwump of the helicopter rotor could be heard approaching. Ellie knew how efficient the rescue team was. He’d be on his way very shortly.

Ellie glanced at the sweeping bay on the other side from where they crouched—the white sand that curved like a new moon around the bay, the rushing of the tide through the fish-filled creek back into the sea—and could understand why he’d want to return.

This place had stopped her wandering too. She lifted her chin. Lighthouse Bay held her future and she had plans for the hospital.

She looked down at the man, a gentle man in the true sense of the word, who had fitted so beautifully into the calm pace of the bay. 'We'll look forward to you coming back. As soon as you're well.' She glanced at the enormous Malibu surfboard the lifesavers had propped up against the cliff face. 'I'll get one of the guys to drop your board at my house and it will be there waiting for you.'

Ellie tried very hard not to think about the next few days. Damn. Now they didn't have an on-call doctor and the labouring women would have to be transferred to the base hospital until another locum arrived. She needed to move quickly on those plans to make her maternity ward a midwifery group practice.

CHAPTER ONE

FOUR DAYS LATER, outside Ellie's office at the maternity ward at Lighthouse Bay Hospital, a frog croaked. It was very close outside her window. She shuddered as she assembled the emergency locum-doctor's welcome pack. Head down, she concentrated on continuing the task and pretended not to see the tremor in her fingers as she gathered the papers. She was a professional in charge of a hospital, for goodness' sake. Her ears strained for a repeat of the dreaded noise and hoped like heck she wouldn't hear it. She strained...but thankfully silence ensued.

'Concentrate on the task,' she muttered. She included a local map, which after the first day they wouldn't need because the

town was so small, but it covered everywhere they could eat.

A list of the hours they were required to man the tiny doctor's clinic—just two in total on the other side of the hospital on each day of the week they were here. Then, in a month, hand over to the other local doctor who had threatened to leave if he didn't get holidays.

She couldn't blame him or his wife—they deserved a life! It was getting busier. Dr Rodgers, an elderly bachelor, had done the call-outs before he'd become ill. She hummed loudly to drown out the sound of the little voice that suggested she should have a life too, and of course to drown out the frogs. Ellie concentrated as she printed out the remuneration package.

The idea that any low-risk woman who went into labour would have to be transferred to the large hospital an hour away from her family just because no locum doctor could come was wrong. Especially when she'd had all her antenatal care with Ellie over the last few months. So the locum doctors were a necessary evil. It wasn't an onerous workload for them, in fact, because the midwives did all the maternity work, and the main hospital was run as a triage station with a nurse practitioner, as they did in the Outback, so actually the locums only covered the hospital for emergencies and recovering inpatient needs.

Ellie dreamed of the day their maternity unit was fully self-sufficient. She quite happily played with the idea that she could devote her whole life to the project, get a nurse manager and finally step away from general nursing.

She could employ more midwives like her friend and neighbour Trina, who lived in one of the cliff houses. The young widowed midwife from the perfect marriage who preferred night duty so she didn't lie awake at night alone in her bed.

She was the complete opposite to Ellie, who'd had the marriage from hell that hadn't turned out to be a marriage at all.

Then there was Faith who did the evening shifts, the young mum who lived with her aunt and her three-year-old son. Faith was their eternal optimist. She hadn't found a man to practise heartbreak on yet. Just had an unfortunate one-night stand with a charismatic drifter. Ellie sighed. Three diverse women with a mutual dream. Lighthouse Bay Mothers and Babies. A gentle place for families to discover birth with midwives.

Back to the real world. For the moment they needed the championship of at least one GP/OB.

Most new mums stayed between one and three nights and, as they always had, women post-caesarean birth transferred back from the base hospital to recover. So a ward round in maternity and the general part of the hospital each morning by the VMO was asked to keep the doors open.

The tense set of her shoulders gradually relaxed as she distracted herself with the chore she'd previously completed six times since old Dr Rodgers had had his stroke.

The first two locums had been young and bored, patently here for the surf, and had both tried to make advances towards Ellie, as if she were part of the locum package. She'd had no problem

freezing them both back into line but now the agency took on board her preferences for mature medical practitioners.

Most replacements had been well into retirement age since then, though there had also been some disadvantages with their advanced age. The semi-bald doctor definitely had been grumpy, which had been a bit of a disappointment, because Dr Rodgers had always had a kind word for everyone.

The next had been terrified that a woman would give birth and he'd have to do something about it because he hadn't been near a baby's delivery for twenty years. Ellie hadn't been able to promise one wouldn't happen so he'd declined to come back.

Lighthouse Bay was a service for low-risk pregnant women so Ellie couldn't see what the concern was. Birth was a perfectly normal, natural event and the women weren't sick. But there would always be those occasional precipitous and out-of-the-ordinary labours that seemed to happen more since Ellie had arrived. She'd proven well equal to the task of catching impatient babies but a decent back-up made sense. So, obstetric confidence was a second factor she requested now from the locums.

The next three locums had been either difficult to contact when she'd needed them or had driven her mad by sitting and talking all day so she hadn't been able to get anything done, so she hadn't asked them back. But the last locum had finally proved a golden one.

Dr Southwell, the elderly widower and retired GP with his obstetric diploma and years of gentle experience, had been a real

card.

The postnatal women had loved him, as had every other marriageable woman above forty in town.

Especially Myra, Ellie's other neighbour, a retired chef who donated two hours a day to the hospital café between morning tea and lunch, and used to run a patisserie in Double Bay in Sydney. Myra and Old Dr Southwell had often been found laughing together.

Ellie had thought the hospital had struck the jackpot when he'd enquired about a more permanent position and had stayed full-time for an extra month when the last local GP had asked for an extended holiday. Ellie had really appreciated the break from trying to understand each new doctor's little pet hates.

Not that Dr Southwell seemed to have any foible Ellie had had to grow accustomed to at all. Except his love of surfing. She sighed.

They'd already sent one woman away in the last two days because she'd come to the hospital having gone into early labour. Ellie had had to say they had no locum coverage and she should drive to the base hospital.

Croak... There it was again. A long-drawn-out, guttural echo promising buckets of slime... She sucked in air through her nose and forced herself to breathe the constricted air out. She had to fight the resistance because her lungs seemed to have shrunk back onto her ribcage.

Croak... And then the cruk-cruk of the mate. She glanced

at the clock and estimated she had an hour at least before the new doctor arrived so she reached over, turned on the CD player and allowed her favourite country singer to protect her from the noise as he belted out a southern ballad that drowned out the neighbours. Thankfully, today, her only maternity patient had brought her the latest CD from the large town an hour away where she'd gone for her repeat Caesarean birth.

It was only rarely, after prolonged rain, that the frogs gave her such a hard time. They'd had a week of downpours. Of course frogs were about. They'd stop soon. The rain had probably washed away the solution of salt water she'd sprayed around the outside of the ward window, so she'd do it again this afternoon.

One of the bonuses of her tiny croft cottage on top of the cliff was that, up there, the salt-laden spray from waves crashing against the rocks below drove the amphibians away.

She knew it was ridiculous to have a phobia about frogs, but she had suffered with it since she was little. It was inextricably connected to the time not long after her mother had died. She knew perfectly well it was irrational.

She had listened to the tapes, seen the psychologist, had even been transported by hypnosis to the causative events in an attempt to reprogram her response. That had actually made it worse, because now she had the childhood nightmares back that hadn't plagued her for years.

Basically slimy, web-footed frogs with fat throats that ballooned hideously when they croaked made her palms sweat

and her heart beat like a drum in her chest. And the nightmares made her weep with grief in her sleep.

Unfortunately, down in the hollow where the old hospital nestled among well-grown shrubs and an enticing tinge of dampness after rain, the frogs were very happy to congregate. Her only snake in Eden. Actually, she could do with a big, quiet carpet snake that enjoyed green entrées. That could be the answer. She had no phobia of snakes.

But those frogs that slipped insidiously into the hand basin in the ladies' rest room—no way! Or those that croaked outside the door so that when she arrived as she had this morning, running a little late, a little incautiously intent on getting to work, a green tree frog had jumped at her as she'd stepped through the door. Thank goodness he'd missed his aim.

She still hadn't recovered from that traumatic start to her day. Now they were outside her window... Her hero sang on and she determined to stop thinking about it. She did not have time for this.

* * *

Samuel Southwell parked his now dusty Lexus outside the cottage hospital. His immaculate silver machine had never been off the bitumen before, and he frowned at the rim of dust that clung to the base of the windscreen.

He noted with a feeling of unreality, the single Reserved for Doctor spot in the car park, and his hand hovered as he hesitated to stop the engine. Doctor. Not plural. Just one spot for the one

doctor. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been without a cloud of registrars, residents and med students trailing behind him.

What if they wanted him to look at a toenail or someone had a heart attack? He was a consultant obstetrician and medical researcher, for heaven's sake.

At that thought his mouth finally quirked. Surely his knowledge of general medicine was buried miraculously in his brain underneath the uteruses? He sincerely hoped so or he'd have to refresh his knowledge of whatever ailment stumped him. Online medical journals could be accessed. According to his father it shouldn't be a problem—he was 'supposed to be smart'!

Maybe the old man was right and it would do him good. Either way, he'd agreed, mainly because his dad never asked him to do anything and he'd been strangely persistent about this favour. This little place had less than sixty low-risk births a year. And he was only here for the next four weeks. He would manage.

It would be vastly different from the peaks of drama skimmed from thousands of women and babies passing through the doors of Brisbane Mothers and Babies Hospital. Different being away from his research work that drove him at nights and weekends. He'd probably get more sleep as well. He admired his father but at the moment he was a little impatient with him for this assignment.

'It'll be a good-will mission,' Dr Reginald Southwell had decreed, with a twinkle in his eye that his son had supposedly

inherited but that his father had insisted he'd lost. 'See how the other half live. Step out of your world of work, work, work for a month, for goodness' sake. You can take off a month for the first time in who knows how long. I promised the matron I'd return and don't want to leave them in the lurch.'

He'd grinned at that. Poor old Dad. It dated him well in the past, calling her a matron. The senior nurses were all 'managers' now.

Unfortunate Dad, the poor fellow laid back with his broken arm and his twisted knee. It had been an accident waiting to happen for his father, a man of his advanced age taking random locum destinations while he surfed. But Sam understood perfectly well why he did it.

Sam sighed and turned off the ignition. Too late to back out. He was here now. He climbed out and stretched the kinks from his shoulders. The blue expanse of ocean reminded him how far from home he really was.

Above him towered a lonely white lighthouse silhouetted against the sapphire-blue sky on the big hill behind the hospital. He listened for traffic noise but all he could hear was the crash of the waves on the cliff below and faint beats from a song. Edge of Nowhere. Not surprising someone was playing country music somewhere. They should be playing the theme song from Deliverance.

He'd told his colleagues he had to help his dad out with his arm and knee. Everyone assumed Sam was living with him while

he recuperated. That had felt easier than explaining this.

Lighthouse Bay, a small hamlet on the north coast of New South Wales at the end of a bad road. The locum do-everything doctor. Good grief.

* * *

Ellie jumped at the rap on her door frame and turned her face to the noise. She reached out and switched her heroic balladeer off mid-song. The silence seemed to hum as she stared at the face of a stranger.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.’ A deep, even voice, quite in keeping with the broad shoulders and impeccable suit jacket, but not in keeping with the tiny, casual seaside hospital he’d dropped into.

Drug reps didn’t usually get out this far. That deeply masculine resonance in his cultured voice vibrated against her skin in an unfamiliar way. It made her face prickle with a warmth she wasn’t used to and unconsciously her hand lifted and she checked the top button of her shirt. Phew. Force field secure.

Then her confidence rushed back. ‘Can I help you?’ She stood up, thinking there was something faintly familiar... But after she’d examined him thoroughly she thought, no, he wasn’t recognisable. She hadn’t seen this man before and she was sure she’d have remembered him.

The man took one step through the doorway but couldn’t go any further. Her office drew the line at two chairs and two people. It had always been small but somehow the space seemed to have

shrunk to ridiculous tininess in the last few seconds. There was a hint of humour about his silver-blue eyes that almost penetrated the barrier she'd erected but stopped at the gate. Ellie was a good gatekeeper. She didn't want any complications.

Ellie, who had always thought herself tall for a woman, unexpectedly felt a little overshadowed and the hairs on the back of her neck rose gently—in a languorous way, not in fright—which was ridiculous. Really, she was very busy for the next hour until the elderly locum consultant arrived.

'Are you the matron?' He rolled his eyes, as if a private thought piqued him, then corrected himself. 'Director of Nursing?' Smooth as silk with a thread of command.

'Acting. Yes. Ellie Swift. I'm afraid you have the advantage of me.'

The tall man raised his eyebrows. 'I'm Samuel Southwell.' She heard the slight mocking note in his voice. 'The locum medical officer here for the next month.' He glanced at his watch as if he couldn't believe she'd forgotten he was coming. 'Am I early?'

'Ah...'

Ellie winced. Not a drug rep. The doctor. Oops.

'Sorry. Time zones. No Daylight Saving for you northerners from Brisbane. Of course. You're only early on our side of the border. I was clearing the decks for your arrival.' She muttered more to herself, 'Or someone's arrival...' then looked up. 'The agency had said they'd filled the temporary position with a Queenslander. I should have picked up the time difference.'

Then the name sank in. ‘Southwell?’ A pleasant surprise. She smiled with real warmth. ‘Are you related to Dr Southwell who had the accident?’ At the man’s quick nod, Ellie asked, ‘How is he?’ She’d been worried.

‘My father,’ he said dryly, ‘is as well as can be expected for a man too old to be surfing.’ He spoke as if his parent were a recalcitrant child and Ellie felt a little spurt of protectiveness for the absent octogenarian. Then she remembered she had to work with this man for the next month. She also remembered Dr Southwell had two children, and his only son was a consultant obstetrician at Brisbane Mothers and Babies. A workaholic, apparently.

Well, she certainly had someone with obstetric experience for a month. It would be just her luck that they wouldn’t have a baby the whole time he was here. Ellie took a breath and plastered on a smile.

First the green frog jumping at her from the door, then the ones croaking outside the window and now the Frog Prince, city-slicker locum who wasn’t almost retired, like locums were supposed to be.

‘Welcome. Perhaps you’d like to sit down.’ She gestured at the only other chair jammed between the storage cupboard and the door frame. She wasn’t really sure his legs would fit if he tried to fold into the space.

He didn’t attempt to sit and it was probably a good choice.

There was still something about his behaviour that was a

little...odd. Did he feel they didn't want him? 'Dr Southwell, your presence here is very much appreciated.'

It took him a couple of seconds to answer and she used them to centre herself. This was her world. No need to be nervous. 'We were very relieved when someone accepted the locum position for the month.'

He didn't look flattered—too flash just to be referred to as 'someone', perhaps?

Ellie stepped forward. Bit back the sigh and the grumbles to herself about how much she liked the old ones. 'Anyway, welcome to Lighthouse Bay. Most people call me Swift, because it's my name and I move fast. I'm the DON, the midwife, emergency resource person and mediator between the medical staff and the nursing staff.' She held out her hand. He looked at her blankly. What? Perhaps a sense of humour was too much to hope for.

His expression slowly changed to one of polite query. 'Do they need mediation?' He didn't take her hand and she lowered it slowly. Strange, strange man. Ellie stifled another sigh. Being on the back foot already like this was not a good sign.

'It was a joke, sorry.' She didn't say, 'J. O. K. E.,' though she was beginning to think he might need it spelled out for him. She switched to her best professional mode. The experience of fitting in at out-of-the-way little hospitals had dispatched any pretensions she might have had that a matron was anyone but the person who did all the things other people didn't want to do. It

had also taught her to be all things to all people.

Ellie usually enjoyed meeting new staff. It wasn't something that happened too often at their small hospital until Dr Rodgers had retired.

Lighthouse Bay was a place more suited to farming on the hills and in the ocean, where the inhabitants retreated from society, though there were some very trendy boutique industries popping up. Little coffee plantations. Lavender farms. Online boutiques run by corporate women retreating from the cities looking for a sea change.

Which was where Ellie's new clientele for Maternity rose from. Women with considered ideas on how and where they wanted to have their babies. But the town's reliable weekend doctor had needed to move indefinitely for medical treatment and Ellie was trying to hold it all together.

The local farming families and small niche businesses were salt-of-the-earth friendly. She was renovating her tiny one-roomed cottage that perched with two other similar crofts like a flock of seabirds on the cliff overlooking the bay. She'd found the perfect place to forget what a fool she'd been and perfect also for avoiding such a disaster again.

Ellie dreamed of dispensing with the need for doctors at all. But at the moment she needed one supporting GP obstetrician at least to call on for emergencies. Maybe she could pick this guy's brains for ways to circumvent that.

She glanced at the man in front of her—experience in a

suit. But not big on conversation. Still, she was tenacious when there was something she wanted, and she'd drag it out of him. Eventually.

In the scheme of things Lighthouse Bay Maternity needed a shake up and maybe she could use him. He'd be totally abreast of the latest best-practice trends, a leader in safe maternity care. He should be a golden opportunity to sway the sticklers to listen to the mothers instead of the easy fix of sending women away.

But, if he wasn't going to sit down then she would deal with him outside the confines of her office. She stood and slipped determinedly past him. It was a squeeze and required body contact. She'd just have to deal with it. 'Would you like a tour?'

* * *

Lemon verbena. He knew the scent because at the last conference he'd presented at, all the wives had been raving about the free hotel amenities and they'd made him smell it. It hadn't resonated with him then as it did now. Sam Southwell breathed it in and his visceral response set off rampant alarm bells. He was floundering to find his brain. There was something about the way her buttoned-to-the-neck, long-sleeved white shirt had launched a missile straight to the core of him and exploded, and now the scent of her knocked him sideways as she brushed past.

The way her chin lifted and her cool, grey eyes assessed him and found him wanting, giving him the ultimate hands-off warning when he hadn't even thought about hands on—hadn't for a long time until now—impressed him. Obviously a woman who

made up her own mind. She wasn't overawed by him in the least and that was a good thing.

He stared at the wall where 'Swift' had stood a second ago and used all of his concentration to ram the feelings of sheer confusion and lust back down into the cave he used for later thought, and tried to sound at least present for the conversation. She must be thinking he was an arrogant sod, but his brain was gasping, struggling, stumped by the reaction he was having to her.

She was right. Being jammed in this shoebox of an office wasn't helping. What an ironic joke that his father had thought this isolated community would help him return to normal when in fact he'd just fallen off a Lighthouse Bay cliff. His stomach lurched.

He turned slowly to face her as she waited, not quite tapping her foot. He began to feel better. Impatience wasn't a turn-on.

'Yes. A tour would be excellent,' he said evenly. She must think he was the most complete idiot but he was working to find headspace to fit it all in. And he could work fast.

The place he could handle. Heck, he could do it in his sleep. He had no idea why he was so het up about it. But this woman? His reaction to her? A damnably different kettle of fish. Disturbing. As in, deeply and diabolically disturbing.

'How many beds do you have here?' A sudden picture of Ellie Swift on a bed popped into his head and arrested him. She'd have him arrested, more likely, he thought wryly. He was actually having a breakdown. His dad was right. He did need to learn to

breathe.

CHAPTER TWO

SAM HADN'T SLEPT with a woman for years. Not since his wife had died. He hadn't wanted to and in fact, since he'd used work to bury grief and guilt, with all the extra input, his career had actually taken off. Hence, he hadn't had the time to think about sex, let alone act on it.

Now his brain had dropped to somewhere past his waistline, a nether region that had been asleep for years and had just inconveniently roared into life like an express train, totally inappropriate and unwelcome. Good grief. He closed his eyes tightly to try and clear the pictures filling his head. He was an adolescent schoolboy again.

'Are you okay?' Her voice intruded and he snapped his lids open.

'Sorry.' What could he say? He only knew what he couldn't say. Please don't look down at my trousers! Instead he managed, 'I think I need coffee.'

She stopped. Dropped her guard. And as if by magic he felt the midwife morph from her as she switched to nurture mode in an instant. No other profession he knew did it as comprehensively as midwives.

'You poor thing. Of course. Follow me. We'll start in the coffee shop. Though Myra isn't here yet. Didn't you stop on the way? You probably rushed to get here.' She shook her head disapprovingly and didn't wait for an answer but hustled him into

a small side room that blossomed out into an empty coffee shop with a huge bay window overlooking the gardens.

She nudged him into a seat. Patted his shoulder. ‘Tea or coffee?’ It had all happened very fast and now his head really was spinning.

‘Coffee—double-shot espresso, hot milk on the side,’ he said automatically, and she stopped and looked at him.

Then she laughed. Her face opened like a sunburst, her eyes sparkled and her beautiful mouth curved with huge amusement. She laughed and snorted, and he was smitten. Just like that. A goner.

She pulled herself together, mouth still twitching. ‘Sorry. Myra could fix that but not me. But I’ll see what I can do.’

Sam stared after her. She was at least twelve feet away now and he gave himself a stern talking-to. Have coffee, and then be normal. He would try. No—he would succeed.

* * *

Poor man. Ellie glanced at the silent, mysterious coffee machine that Myra worked like a maestro and tried to work out how much instant coffee from the jar under the sink, where it had been pushed in disgrace, would equate to a double shot of coffee. She didn’t drink instant coffee. Just the weak, milky ones Myra made for her from the machine under protest. Maybe three teaspoons?

He’d looked so cosmopolitan and handsome as he’d said it—something he said every day. She bit back another snuffle of

laughter. Classic. Welcome to Lighthouse Bay. Boy, were they gonna have fun.

She glanced back and decided he wasn't too worthy of sympathy because it was unfair for a man to have shoulders like that, not to mention a decidedly sinful mouth. And she hadn't thought about sinful for a while. In fact she couldn't quite believe she was thinking about it now. She'd thought the whole devastation of the cruelty of men had completely cured her of that foolishness.

She was going to have to spend the next month with this man reappearing on the ward. Day and night if they were both called out. The idea was more unsettling than she'd bargained for and was nothing to do with the way the ward was run.

The jug boiled and she mixed the potent brew. Best not to think of that now. She needed him awake. She scooped up two Anzac biscuits from the jar with a napkin.

'Here you go.' Ellie put the black liquid down in front of him and a small glass of hot milk she'd heated in the microwave.

He looked at it. Then at her. She watched fascinated as he poured a little hot milk into the mug with an inch of black coffee at the bottom.

He sipped, threw down the lot and then set it down. No expression. No clues. She was trying really hard not to stare. It must be an acquired taste.

His voice was conversational. 'Probably the most horrible coffee I've ever had.' He looked up at her. 'But I do appreciate

the effort. I wasn't thinking.' He pushed the cup away. Grimaced dramatically. Shook his whole upper body like a dog shedding water. 'Thank God I brought my machine.'

She wasn't sure what she could say to that. 'Wow. Guess it's going to be a change for you here, away from the big city.'

'Hmm...' he murmured noncommittally. 'But I do feel better after the shock of that.'

She grinned. Couldn't help herself. 'So you're ready for the walk around now?'

He stood up, picked up the biscuits in the napkin, folded them carefully and slipped them into his pocket. 'Let's do it.'

Ellie decided it was the first time he'd looked normal since he'd arrived. She'd remember that coffee trick for next time.

'So this is the ward. We have five beds. One single room and two doubles, though usually we'd only have one woman in each room, even if it's really busy.'

Really busy with five beds? Sam glanced around. Empty rooms. Now they were in with the one woman in the single room and her two-day-old infant. Why wasn't she going home?

'This is Renee Jones.'

'Hello, Renee.' He smiled at the mother and then at the infant. 'Congratulations. I'm Dr Southwell. Everything okay?'

'Yes, thank you, doctor. I'm hoping to stay until Friday, if that's okay. There's four others at home and I'm in no rush.'

He blinked. Four more days staying in hospital after a caesarean delivery? Why? He glanced at Matron Swift, who

apparently was unworried. She smiled and nodded at the woman.

‘That’s fine, Renee, you deserve the rest.’

‘Only rest I get,’ Renee agreed. ‘Though, if you don’t mind, could you do the new-born check today, doc, just in case my husband has a crisis and I have to go at short notice?’

New-born check? Examine a baby...himself? He glanced at the midwife. Who did that? A paediatrician, he would have thought. She met his eyes and didn’t dispute it so he smiled and nodded. ‘We’ll sort that.’

Hopefully. His father would be chortling. He could feel Ellie’s presence behind him as they left the room and he walked down to the little nurses’ alcove and leaned against the desk. It had been too many years since he’d checked a new-born’s hips and heart. Not that he couldn’t—he imagined. But even his registrars didn’t do that. They left it to Paediatrics while the O&G guys did the pregnancy and labour things.

‘Is there someone else to do the new-born checks on babies?’

‘Sorry.’ She shook her head. ‘You’re it.’

He might have a quick read before he did it, then. He narrowed his eyes at the suspicious quirk of her lips. ‘What about you?’

Her hair swished from side to side. He’d never really had a thing for pony tails but it sat well on her. Pretty. Made him smile when it swayed. He’d faded out again.

‘I said,’ she repeated, ‘I did the online course for well-baby examination but have never been signed off on it. One of those things I’ve been meaning to do and never got around to.’

Ha. She thought she was safe. ‘Excellent. Then perhaps we’d better do the examinations together, and at least by the time I leave we’ll both be good at them. Then I can sign you off.’

She didn’t appear concerned. She even laughed. He could get used to the way she laughed. It was really more of a chortle. Smile-inducing.

The sound of a car pulling up outside made them both pause. After a searching appraisal of the couple climbing out, she said, ‘The charts are in that filing cabinet if the ladies have booked in. Can you grab Josie Mills, please?’

When he looked back from the filing cabinet to the door he could hear the groans but Swift was already there with her smile.

He hadn’t seen her move and glanced to where she’d stood a minute ago to check there weren’t two of her. Nope. She was disappearing up the hallway with the pregnant woman and her male support as if they were all on one of those airport travellers and he guessed he’d better find the chart.

Which he did, and followed them up the hall.

Josie hadn’t made it onto the bed. She was standing beside it and from her efforts it was plain that, apart from him, there’d be an extra person in the room in seconds.

Swift must have grabbed a towel and a pair of gloves as she came through the door, both of which were still lying on the bed, because she was distracted as she tried to help the frantic young woman remove her shorts.

In Sam’s opinion the baby seemed to be trying to escape into

his mother's underwear but Swift was equal to the task. She deftly encouraged one of the mother's legs out and whipped the towel off the bed and put it between the mother's legs, where the baby seemed to unfold into it in a swan dive and was pushed between the mother's knees into Swift's waiting hands. The baby spluttered his displeasure on the end of the purple cord after his rapid ejection into a towel.

'Good extrication,' Sam murmured with a little fillip of unexpected excitement as he pulled on a pair of gloves from the dispenser at the door. Could that be the first ghost of emotion he'd felt at a birth for a long while? With a sinking dismay it dawned on him that he hadn't even noticed it had been missing.

He crossed the room to assess the infant, who'd stopped crying and was slowly turning purple, which nobody seemed to notice as they all laughed and crowed at the rapid birth and helped the woman up on the bed to lie down.

'Would you like me to attend to third stage or the baby?' he enquired quietly.

He saw Swift glance at the baby, adjust the towel and rub the infant briskly. 'Need you to cut the cord now, John,' she said to the husband. 'Your little rocket is a bit stunned.'

The parents disentangled their locked gazes and Sam heard their indrawn breaths. The father jerked up the scissors Ellie had put instantly into his hand and she directed him between the two clamps as she went on calmly. 'It happens when they fly out.' A few nervous sawing snips from Dad with the big scissors and the

cord was cut. Done.

‘Dr Southwell will sort you, Josie, while we sort the baby.’ Swift said it prosaically and they swapped places as the baby was bundled and she carried him to the resuscitation trolley. ‘Come on, John.’ She gestured for the father to follow her. ‘Talk to your daughter.’

The compressed air hissed as she turned it on and Sam could hear her talking to the dad behind him as automatically he smiled at the mother. ‘Well done. Congratulations.’

The baby cried and they both smiled. ‘It all happened very fast,’ the mother said as she craned her neck toward the baby and, reassured that Swift and her husband were smiling, she settled back. ‘A bit too fast.’

He nodded as a small gush of blood signalled the third stage was about to arrive. Seconds later it was done, the bleeding settled, and he tidied the sheet under her and dropped it in the linen bag behind him. He couldn’t help a smile to himself at having done a tidying job he’d watched countless times but couldn’t actually remember doing himself. ‘Always nice to have your underwear off first, I imagine.’

The mother laughed as she craned her neck again and by her smile he guessed they were coming back. ‘Easier.’

‘Here we go.’ Swift lifted the mother’s T-shirt and crop top and nestled the baby skin-to-skin between her bare breasts. She turned the baby’s head sideways so his cheek was against his mother. ‘Just watch her colour, especially the lips. Her being

against your skin will warm her like toast.’

Sam stood back and watched. He saw the adjustments Ellie made, calmly ensuring mother and baby were comfortable—including the dad, with a word here and there, even asking for the father’s mobile phone to take a few pictures of the brand new baby and parents. She glanced at the clock. He hadn’t thought of looking at the clock once. She had it all under control.

Sam stepped back further and peeled off his gloves. He went to the basin to wash his hands and his mind kept replaying the scene. He realised why it was different. The lack of people milling around.

Swift pushed the silver trolley with the equipment and scissors towards the door. He stopped her. ‘Do you always do this on your own?’

She pointed to a green call button. ‘Usually I ring and one of the nurses comes from the main hospital to be on hand if needed until the GP arrives. But it happened fast today and you were here.’ She flashed him a smile. ‘Back in a minute. Watch her, will you? Physiological third stage.’ Then she sailed away.

He hadn’t thought about the injection they usually gave to reduce risk of bleeding after the birth. He’d somehow assumed it had already been given, but realised there weren’t enough hands to have done it, although he could have done it if someone had mentioned it. Someone.

As far as he knew all women were given the injection at his hospital unless they’d expressly requested not to have it.

Research backed that up. It reduced post-partum haemorrhage. He'd mention it.

His eyes fell on Josie's notes, which were lying on the table top where he'd dropped them, and he snicked the little wheeled stool out from under the bench with his foot and sat there to read through the medical records. The last month's antenatal care had been shared between his father and 'E Swift'. He glanced up every minute or so to check that both mother and baby were well but nothing happened before 'E Swift' returned.

* * *

An hour later Sam had been escorted around the hospital by a nurse who'd been summoned by phone and found himself deposited back in the little maternity wing. The five-minute cottage hospital tour had taken an hour because the infected great toenail he'd been fearing had found him and he'd had to deal with it, and the pain the poor sufferer was in.

Apparently he still remembered how to treat phalanges and the patient had seemed satisfied. He assumed Ellie would be still with the new maternity patient, but he was wrong.

Ellie sat, staring at the nurses' station window in a strangely rigid hunch, her hand clutching her pen six inches above the medical records, and he paused and turned his head to see what had attracted her attention.

He couldn't see anything. When he listened, all he could hear were frogs and the distant sound of the sea.

'You okay?' He'd thought his voice was quiet when he asked

but she jumped as though he'd fired a gun past her ear. The pen dropped as her hand went to her chest, as if to push her heart back in with her lungs. His own pulse rate sped up. Good grief! He'd thought it was too good to be true that this place would be relaxing.

'You're back?' she said, stating the obvious with a blank look on her face.

He picked up the underlying stutter in her voice. Something had really upset her and he glanced around again, expecting to see a masked intruder at least. She glanced at him and then the window. 'Can you do me a favour?'

'Sure.' She looked like she could do with a favour.

'There's a green tree frog behind that plant in front of the window.' He could hear the effort she was putting in to enunciate clearly and began to suspect this was an issue of mammoth proportions.

'Yes?'

'Take it away!'

'Ranidaphobia?'

She looked at him and, as he studied her, a little of the colour crept back into her face. She even laughed shakily. 'How many people know that word?'

He smiled at her, trying to install some normality in the fraught atmosphere. 'I'm guessing everyone who's frightened of frogs.' He glanced up the hallway. 'I imagine Josie is in one of the ward rooms. Why don't you go check on her while I sort out the

uninvited guest?'

She stood up so fast it would have been funny if he didn't think she'd kill him for laughing. He maintained a poker face as she walked hurriedly away and then his smile couldn't be restrained. He walked over to the pot plant, shifted it from the wall and saw the small green frog, almost a froglet, clinging by his tiny round pads to the wall.

Sam bent down and scooped the little creature into his palm carefully and felt the coldness of the clammy body flutter as he put his other hand over the top to keep it from jumping. A quick detour to the automatic door and he stepped out, tossing the invader into the garden.

Sam shook his head and walked back inside to the wall sink to wash his hands. A precipitous human baby jammed in a bikini bottom didn't faze her but a tiny green frog did? It was a crazy world.

He heard her come back as he dried his hands.

'Thank you,' she said to his back. He turned. She looked as composed and competent as she had when he'd first met her. As if he'd imagined the wild-eyed woman of three minutes ago.

* * *

He probably thought she was mad but there wasn't a lot she could do about that now. Ellie really just wanted him to go so she could put her head in her hands and scream with frustration. And then check every other blasted plant pot that she'd now ask to be removed.

Instead she said, ‘So you’ve seen the hospital and your rooms. Did they explain the doctor’s routine?’

He shook his head so she went on. ‘I have a welcome pack in my office. I’ll get it.’

She turned to get it but as she walked away something made her suspect he was staring after her. He probably wasn’t used to dealing with officious nursing staff or mad ones. They probably swarmed all over him in Brisbane—the big consultant. She glanced back. He was watching her and he was smiling. She narrowed her eyes.

Then she was back and diving in where she’d left off. ‘The plan is you come to the clinic two hours in the morning during the week, starting at eight after your ward round here at seven forty-five. Then you’re on call if we need you for emergencies, but most things we handle ourselves. It’s a window of access to a doctor for locals. We only call you out for emergencies.’

‘So do you do on-call when you’re off duty?’ He glanced at her. ‘You do have off-duty time?’

Ellie blinked, her train of thought interrupted. ‘I share the workload with the two other midwives, Trina and Faith. I do the days, Faith does the afternoons and Trina does the nights. We cover each other for on-call, and two midwives from the base hospital come in and relieve us for forty-eight hours on the weekends. We have a little flexibility between us for special occasions.’

‘And what do you do on your days off?’ She had the feeling

he was trying to help her relax but asking about her private life wasn't the way to do that.

She deliberately kept it brief. Hopefully he'd take the hint. 'I enjoy my solitary life.'

She saw him accept the rebuke and fleetingly felt mean. He was just trying to be friendly. It wasn't his fault she didn't trust any man under sixty, but that was the way it was.

She saw his focus shift and his brows draw together, as if he'd just remembered something. 'Syntocinon after birth— isn't giving that normal practice in all hospitals?'

It was a conversation she had with most locums when they arrived—especially the obstetricians like him. 'It's not routine here. We're low risk. Surprisingly, here we're assuming the mother's body has bleeding under control if we leave her well enough alone. Our haemorrhage rate per birth is less than two percent.'

His brows went up again. 'One in fifty. Ours is one in fifteen with active management. Interesting.' He nodded. 'Before I go we'd better check this baby in case your patient wants to go home. I borrowed the computer in the emergency ward and read over the new-born baby check. Don't worry. It all came back to me as I read it.'

He put his hand in his pocket and she heard keys jingle and wondered if it was a habit or he was keen to leave. Maybe he was one of those locums who tried to do as little as possible. It was disconcerting how disappointed she felt. Why would that be?

Abruptly she wanted him to go. 'I can do it if you like.'

'No.' He smiled brilliantly at her and she almost stumbled, certainly feeling like reaching for her sunnies. That was some wattage.

Then he said blithely, 'We will practise together.' He picked up a stethoscope and indicated she should get one too.

Ellie could do nothing but follow his brisk pace down the corridor to Renee's room. So he was going to make her copy him. Served her right for telling him she'd done the course.

In Renee's room when he lifted back the sheet, baby Jones lay like a plump, rosy-cheeked sleeping princess all dressed in pink down to her fluffy bloomers. Ellie suppressed a smile. 'Mum's first girl after four boys.'

'What fun,' he murmured.

He started with the baby's chest, listening to both sides of her chest and then her heart. Ellie remembered the advice from the course to start there, because once your examination woke the baby up she might not lie so quietly.

Dr Southwell stepped back and indicated she do the same. Ellie listened to the lub-dub, lub-dub of a normal organ, the in-and-out breaths that were equal in both lungs, nodded and stood back.

He was right. She'd been putting off asking someone to sign her off on this. Before Wayne, she would have been gung-ho about adding neonatal checks to her repertoire. A silly lack of confidence meant she'd been waiting around for someone else to

do it when she should really just have done this instead. After all, when she had the independent midwifery service this would be one of her roles.

By the time they'd run their hands over the little girl, checked her hips didn't click or clunk when tested, that her hand creases, toes and ears were all fine, Ellie was quite pleased with herself.

As they walked away she had the feeling that Dr Southwell knew exactly what she was feeling.

'Easy,' he said and grinned at her, and she grinned back. He wasn't so bad after all. In fact, he was delightful.

Then it hit her. It had been an action-packed two hours since he'd walked in the door. This physically attractive male had gone from being a stranger standing in her office, to coffee victim, to birth assistant, to frog remover, to midwife's best friend in a couple of hours and she was grinning back at him like a smitten fool. As if she'd found a friend and was happy that he liked her.

Just as Wayne had bowled her over when they'd first met. She'd been a goner in less than an evening. He'd twisted her around his finger and she'd followed him blindly until he'd begun his campaign of breaking her. She'd never suspected the lies.

Oh, yes. Next came the friendly sharing of history, all the warm and fuzzy excitement of mutual attraction, pleasant sex and then bam! She'd be hooked. The smile fell off her face.

Not this little black duck.

Ellie dragged the stethoscope from around her neck and fiercely wiped it over with a disposable cleaning cloth. Without

looking at Sam, she held out her hand for his stethoscope. She felt it land and glanced at him. ‘Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow, then, Dr Southwell.’

She watched his smile fade. Hers had completely disappeared as she’d looked up at him with the same expression she’d met him with this morning. Polite enquiry. He straightened his shoulders and jammed his hand back in his pocket to jingle his keys again.

‘Right,’ he said evenly. ‘I’ll go check into my guesthouse.’ Without another word, he strode away to the front door and she sagged with relief.

Lucky she’d noticed what she’d been doing before it had gone too far. But at this precise moment she didn’t feel lucky. She felt disheartened that she couldn’t just enjoy a smile from a good-looking man without getting all bitter, twisted and suspicious about it. Wayne had a lot to answer for.

She did what she always did when her thoughts turned to her horrific marriage that really hadn’t been a marriage—she needed to find work to do and maybe Josie or her baby could give it to her.

CHAPTER THREE

THREE NIGHTS LATER, alone in her big oak bed on top of the cliff, Ellie twisted the sheets under her fingers as the dream dragged her back in time. Dragged her all the way back to primary school.

Her respirations deepened with the beginning of panic. The older Ellie knew what the dream Ellie didn’t. Her skin dampened.

Then she was back.

To the last day of compulsory swimming lessons she'd used to love. Now school and swimming lessons made her heart hurt. Mummy had loved helping at swimming lessons, had even taught Ellie's class the first two years, but now all they did was remind young Ellie how much she'd lost, because Mummy wasn't there anymore. Daddy had said Mummy would be sad that Ellie didn't like swimming now, but it made her heart ache.

And some of the big boys in primary school were mean to her. They laughed when she cried.

But today was the last day, the last afternoon she'd see the grey toilet block at the swimming pool for this year, and she pushed off her wet swimming costume with relief and it plopped to the floor. When she reached for her towel she thought for a minute that it moved. Silly. She shook her head and grabbed for it again so she could dry and get dressed quickly, or she'd be last in line again and those boys would tease her.

Something moved out of the corner of her eye and then she felt the cold shock as a big, green frog leaped towards her and landed on her bare chest. She screamed, grabbed the clammy bulk of it off her slimy skin and threw it off her chest in mindless revulsion, then fought with the lock on the change-room door to escape.

The lock jammed halfway. Ellie kept screaming, then somehow her fingers opened the catch and she ran out of the cubicle, through the washroom and outside through the door

—into a long line of stunned primary school boys who stared and then laughed at the crying, naked young Ellie until she was swooped on by a scolding teacher and bundled into a towel.

She wanted her mummy. Why couldn't she have her mummy? It should be her mummy holding her tight and soothing her sobs. She cried harder, and her racking sobs seemed to come from her belly, even silencing the laughing boys...

Ellie sat bolt upright in bed, the sob still caught in her throat, and shuddered. She didn't know why frogs were so linked with her mother's death. Maybe it was something she'd heard about her mother's car accident, coupled with her childhood's overwhelming sense of loss and grief—and of course that incident at the swimming baths hadn't helped—but she couldn't hear a frog without having that loneliness well back up in her again. It had become the spectre of grief. All through her childhood, whenever she'd been lonely and missed her mother, she'd had the frog nightmare. She'd eventually grown out of it. But, after Wayne, it had started again.

She hadn't had the dream for a while. Not once since she'd moved here a year ago—and she hoped like heck she wasn't going to start having it repeatedly again.

She glanced at the window. It was almost light. She'd have time for a quick walk on the beach before she'd have to come back and shower for work. Find inner peace before the day.

Then she remembered the new doctor. Sam. Day four. One more day and then she'd have the weekend off and wouldn't have

to see him. Was that why she'd had the dream? The problem was she liked him. And every day she liked him more. He was lovely to the women. Great with the staff. Sweet to her. And Myra thought the sun shone out of him.

Ellie didn't want to like Sam. Because she'd liked the look of Wayne too, and look where that had ended up.

* * *

Of course when she went down to the beach the first person she saw was Dr Sam. Funny how she knew it was him—even from the spectacular rear. Thankfully he didn't see her because he was doing what his father had done—watching the ocean. Sam's broad back faced her as he watched the swells and decided on where to swim. Then he strode into the water.

She walked swiftly along the beach, her flip flops in her hand, waves washing over her toes while she tried not to look as his strong arms paddled out to catch the long run of waves into the shore that delighted the surfers.

She couldn't even find peace on 'her' beach. She stomped up the curve of sand and back again faster than usual, deliberately staring directly in front of her. If she hadn't been so stubborn she would have seen that he was coming in on a wave and would intercept her before she could escape.

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