



Fiona McArthur

The Midwife's

SECRET CHILD



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

The Midwives of Lighthouse Bay

Fiona McArthur

The Midwife's Secret Child

«HarperCollins»

McArthur F.

The Midwife's Secret Child / F. McArthur — «HarperCollins»,
— (The Midwives of Lighthouse Bay)

Torn apart by circumstance... Reunited by their child... When doctor Raimondo Salvaneli was forced to walk out of her life, midwife Faith Fetherstone was heartbroken and, unknowingly, pregnant! Her letter to tell him went unanswered, so she dedicated herself to being the best mom. Now, Raimondo has returned having finally discovered he's a dad! He so wants to be part of their lives, but can he convince Faith to trust him with their daughter's heart – and her own?

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Torn apart by circumstance...

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When doctor Raimondo Salvaneli was forced to walk out of her life, midwife Faith Fetherstone was heartbroken and, unknowingly, pregnant! Her letter to tell him went unanswered, so she dedicated herself to being the best mom she could be. Now Raimondo has returned, having finally discovered he's a dad! He so wants to be part of their lives, but can he convince Faith to trust him with their daughter's heart—and her own?

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.

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The Midwife's Secret Child

Fiona McArthur

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ISBN: 978-0-008-90204-9

THE MIDWIFE'S SECRET CHILD

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Published in Great Britain 2019

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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Version: 2020-03-02

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To Dianne Latham, who won the name in the book competition, and the Lilli Pilli Ladies of the Macleay Valley, who raise money for those being treated for cancer, towards their comfort, and all the wonderful people who support LPL's fab fundraising days. You rock.

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday

FAITH FETHERSTONE TAPPED her watch as she stood under the meeting point for the Binimirr Underground Complex. Outside in the car park gravel scattered with a late arrival and the vehicle's throaty rumble deepened then silenced as the newcomer pulled in and stopped. The butcher birds, previously revelling in the bush sunshine, ceased their song as a lone cloud passed over the sun and Faith shivered.

The caves kiosk, which held all the caving equipment as well as promoting the cave-themed mementos of the area, straddled the entrance to the labyrinth which stood tucked into the hill ten kilometres south of Lighthouse Bay.

Faith, today's cave guide, tugged down her 'Ultimate Caving Adventure' T-shirt, which clung too tightly, and thought that perhaps her decision to tumble-dry it on hot when she was running late this morning had been less than wise.

She shrugged. It might stretch later and everyone would be looking at the caves not at her. She tucked away the hair that had escaped her ponytail to surreptitiously study the varied group of adults assembled inside the tourist shop, ready for her tour.

Dianne behind the cash register held up one finger. So, one still to arrive; hopefully that had been his car outside. So far her only concern seemed the quiet man in his twenties who chewed his nails and glanced towards the entrance to the caves with an intense frown. She'd watch for symptoms of claustrophobia down in the labyrinth.

The most striking group member at the moment had to be the thin, twinkling-eyed older gentleman in an iridescent orange buttoned shirt and matching shoes, an outfit that Faith thought just might glow in the dark once they turned out the lights.

Barney Burrows, proudly seventy years young, had caved in his youth, and chatted to the short, solid woman in her forties, while her two taller teenage sons conversed with a young backpacker couple.

The backpackers had smiling, animated faces and Eastern European accents but their excellent grasp of English reassured Faith they would understand her if she needed to give instructions fast.

Sudden movement at the door made Faith's head turn, her welcome extinguished like a billy of water dumped on a campfire.

A dark-haired, well-muscled man with his haughty Roman nose angled her way loomed in the doorway. A full-lipped sensuous mouth, a mouth she'd never quite been able to forget, unfortunately, held a definite hint of hardness she'd not noticed the last time.

But that had been a long time ago. Those halcyon days had ended after that cryptic phone call from his family back across the world and had removed him from her side.

This man had sworn he could never, ever come back to Lighthouse Bay. Yet here he was. Returned? The prickle on her skin as his glance captured hers was a heated reminder of a limited infatuation of a few intense days, but mammoth proportions. Lordy, she'd been naive, about twenty, and he a worldly twenty-eight.

Almost six years ago.

Raimondo Salvaneli, here?

The man who'd orchestrated her personal Shakespearean tragedy and the guilty party who'd exited stage left to return to Italy and instantly marry another woman.

She might regret her infatuation but never, ever the consequences of the ribbon of time that had changed her life.

She'd even fairly rapidly come to terms with Raimondo's inevitable absence, accepting they'd not been destined for happily ever after. Just an Italian doctor who didn't practise as a doctor and an Australian midwife, passing in the night.

Actually, several nights.

He'd said he wasn't coming back.

Um. So why was he here?

Worse, had he brought his Italian wife for the cave tour and she'd be right in behind him? No. She couldn't see that happening. Besides, her boss had only held up one finger.

The slight hysteria in the last thought resolved and Faith lifted her chin.

She looked again—and accepted that her daughter's father really had arrived and was going to be crawling around behind her in the dark for the next hour or so. Without any premonition on her part or warning on his. Excellent. Not.

To her disgust, she'd never found a man who could hold her attention quite so effortlessly. Apparently, that inevitable fascination was still the same.

An immense man, and harshly handsome, with that mouth she only remembered for its humorous and sexy slant. Now there was grimness—which, unfairly, didn't detract from the picture as much as it should—hence the reason to watch him with the wary fascination she'd have if he were a magnificently coloured red-bellied black snake on a bush path.

Apart from his dark, dark eyes and his way too sexy lips she could see her daughter in him, something she'd always wondered about and a fact that perusal of the newspaper photographs had hidden.

Chloe's dad was here. Holy freakin' cow. And why now?

What did this mean for Chloe? Or Faith?

What made Raimondo present today when he hadn't responded when she'd written of her pregnancy?

He had been equally silent to her brief note after Chloe's birth. No reply by mail or any form of correspondence. Not even to enquire if they were both well, which had shown a coldness she hadn't predicted.

Well, the silence had been unexpected but understood. Sort of. After that phone call from his brother that had ended everything, Raimondo had announced he'd been going home to marry another woman. Hence the never coming back. Or responding to mail either, apparently.

Yet she'd planned to send another note when Chloe started school next year. And perhaps another when her daughter began her senior years.

She'd fought against allowing his disregard to inflame her because she should still pave the way if Chloe wished to pursue meeting her father in the future.

This had never been about Faith—it was about Chloe.

All about Chloe.

But now he was here. Raimondo's dark eyes travelled slowly over her and, surprisingly, they narrowed, as did his mouth. Even as the eternal optimist, Faith could see something was wrong.

Well, whatever it was, she knew it wasn't her fault. She lifted her chin higher.

The possible implications of Raimondo revisiting her life opened like an unexpectedly dark flower in front of her and sent a flutter of maternal panic to quicken her breath.

He had rights.

She'd confirmed his claim in letters.

His name on the birth certificate, something she'd considered long and hard, saw to that as well.

She frowned and looked away in out-of-character confusion until accidentally glimpsing Dianne, her caving mentor, her caring friend and also her silver-haired boss, at the counter gesturing to Raimondo and the clock. The tour owner's hands were making exuberant waving motions as she encouraged Faith to commence the tour.

Faith glanced guiltily at the time. Five past ten already. The group peered her way expectantly. All who had paid, including the man at the door, had arrived and it was time to leave. Good grief. It felt like too much to switch brains to tour guide after the shockwave of Raimondo's arrival. Compartments.

Faith could do compartments.

Faith would have to do emergency situation compartments. Navigating herself and other people through life challenges was her bread and butter in her real profession as a midwife and she'd just have to drag that skill across to caving tours with the man she'd thought she'd never see again.

She could do that.

Mentally she clanked shut doors and boxes in her brain like a theme park gate keeper—clang, bolt, lock until all darting terrors were mostly inside... But Raimondo still loomed across the room. The man who was never coming back. And with a scowl as if he'd been the one left holding the baby.

Faith moistened her suddenly dry lips and cleared her throat.

Later. It would have to be later. 'Good morning. My name is Faith.' She remembered the way his soft vowels had caressed her name and, darn it, she could feel the heat on her cheeks but she pushed on and smiled more determinedly. 'I hope you're all as excited as I am to enjoy the glories of Binimirr Cave this morning.'

Her gaze swept over the others, avoiding the tall, overwhelming presence of the Italian man who'd positioned himself to the back of the group. With a tinge of tour guide unease she hoped his shoulders would fit through one particular narrow opening she could think of in the labyrinth ahead, but reassured herself he'd managed last time. When she'd given him the private tour all those years ago.

Her gaze refocused on the other participants, realised belatedly that the backpackers were in shorts and shook her head. She should have seen that earlier. Every time she crawled through the labyrinth she came home with scratches on her knees and she always wore jeans.

She said gently to everyone, 'This isn't your normal ramble through the paths and steps of a tourist cave. This adventure tour you've signed up for is off the level track and through rough confines. Which means you have to crawl over rough gravel on your knees, squeezing your shoulders and balancing on uneven rocks.'

Faith smiled, admittedly a little blindly, as her brain batted at her like a bat outside a window trying to comprehend why Raimondo would come back when he'd explained very gently five years ago why he never could or would.

Stop it. Clang. Stay locked.

She rubbed her own elbows and knees. 'Unless you're okay with losing your skin I'm very happy to give you a few minutes to pull some jeans on or buy some knee and elbow guards.'

Most of the participants had arrived on the dusty bus parked outside the shop and the scantily clad young couple peeled off from the group and headed for the tour bus at a fast jog. They were very sweet to be so eager. The quiet, nervous man crossed to the inexpensive knee supports and selected a set to purchase.

From the corner of her eyes she could see Raimondo standing to the back like a dark predator, motionless, an ability she suddenly remembered and had admired then, as others shifted and chatted, and against her will she slowly turned her face his way. Their eyes locked, his cocoa irises merging with the pupils, eyes so dark and turbulent with unexpected questions. And hers too, seeking answers and maybe reassurance as well.

Until the flare of connecting heat that she remembered from their first ever shared glance, all that time ago, hit her like a blast from a furnace. The flush of warmth low in her belly jumped into life and warned that despite her attempts at blocking out the past she 'knew' this man. In the biblical sense. Knew him too many passionate, mind-blowing times in that brief window of craziness.

A hot cascade of visceral memories flashed over her skin the way it had when he'd explored her with his hands. So long ago.

Heat scorched suddenly sensitive skin and molten memories surged with a thrust of explicit detail in her mind until she tore her eyes away, her breathing fast and her mouth dry. Like falling into a hot spring. Good grief.

How was she going to stay sane for the next ninety minutes, having him there, behind her, the whole way around the tour?

She glanced at Dianne but her boss was taking money at the till. Dianne couldn't help. Shouldn't help. It was Faith's problem. No. She'd do it. And when this cave trip was over she'd find out what this was all about because she'd done nothing wrong.

As usual, it only took a couple of brief wardrobe adjustments until the adventurers were ready—shame it had felt like hours—and she was glad Raimondo hadn't chosen this moment of waiting to approach. She told herself she was relieved. Very relieved.

Because she would do this on her terms.

Finally, the party reassembled and she directed everyone to the wall hung with helmets and headlamps, where she picked up a large and small helmet from the wall and two headlamps on elastic headbands. 'Grab a light and find a helmet your size—they're grouped small, medium and large—and I'll check your straps and talk about using your lights before we leave here.'

Then she lifted her head and walked steadily over to Raimondo. Practising the words in her head. *This is unexpected. How unexpected. What a surprise.*

'Raimondo.' She handed him the helmet.

'Faith.' Just his smooth utterance of her name with his delicious Italian accent made the gooseflesh lift on her arms—unfortunately her hands were too full to rub the irritation.

'This is unexpected.' That had sounded too breathless and she reined in her control. 'As you can see—' she gestured with the helmet at the group just out of earshot '—it's my responsibility to return all these people safely to the surface.' That came out much more firmly. 'I can't have distractions so we can talk later, if that's why you are here.'

She waited.

'Certainly.'

She nodded. Get away now. 'I hope you enjoy the tour.'

He inclined his dark head. 'I enjoyed it last time.' The 'with you' remained unsaid. She spun away from him and began to check every other person's chin strap except his—she couldn't quite come at that—until everyone was helmeted, including herself.

After the usual jokes and selfie photos, and some fast Snapchat posting by the teens, they left the tourist shop to cross the dry grass in an enthusiastic crocodile of intrepid cavers.

She chewed her lip, a habit she'd tried to break when she was nervous, though it certainly wasn't the cave Faith was worried about. It was Raimondo and her own lack of concentration caused by the tall brooding man at the rear of the line.

She needed to remain focused on the safety of sometimes unwittingly careless people, and of course the safety of the delicate structures and ecosystem of the caverns, and she prided herself on her safety record. Over two hundred successful tours. Which was why she wanted to stay attentive while doing her job.

One tour nearly every week for the last six years. Except for the months of her pregnancy. She glanced back and wished she could have asked Raimondo *not* to join the tour but it was too late for that now.

They gathered at the entrance to the cave. She plastered her game face on. 'You might enjoy knowing a little of the history as you crawl through so you can imagine the past. We'll stop here just for a minute so I can set the scene for you. And don't forget to ask any questions as we go.'

Raimondo smiled grimly and her gut clenched. She had to concentrate.

‘Binimirr Caves. Binimirr is an Aboriginal word, in one particular Indigenous dialect, for long hole, and those clans knew of this cave for perhaps thousands of years.’ She smiled blindly at the assembled group and launched into her spiel. ‘As far as European settlers’ history goes, a lone horseman first discovered this limestone ridge and then the caves in 1899. He thought them so spectacular that he told others and they came to see them, despite the lack of roads to Lighthouse Bay at the time. They became very popular.’

There were some nods.

‘These intrepid people climbed down with ropes and candles and discovered a cathedral of stalactites and stalagmites and even though it was before roads came here they still felt they could market the caverns for tourism.’ She pointed back towards the bus. ‘That’s what it’s like now so you can imagine how rough it was more than a hundred years ago.’

One of the teenage boys murmured a ‘Wow’ and Faith smiled at him.

‘Thirty years after the caves were discovered, these early day entrepreneurs built a stately manor with huge picture windows overlooking the sea, to use as accommodation and enticement for visitors. You can see the ornate gates and driveway to the left when you first enter the car park. Maybe that was why it was honeymooners of the early nineteen-hundreds who were attracted by the mysterious caves, though others still came to celebrate the majestic setting. Later, that lovely old building closed to the public and became a private residence. We have a few old photos of what it used to be like in the kiosk if you are interested.’

She had a sudden forlorn thought of how she would have liked a honeymoon in that old mansion and, despite herself, her glance slid to Raimondo.

If it hadn’t been for him making the standard so high she might have been married by now!

Faith shook her thoughts away and looked at the eager faces. Best only to look at them. ‘Getting inside the cavern and caves is much easier today than it was then.’ She gestured to the railed path. ‘For them, after days of jolting rides they finally arrived and lowered each other down on ropes tied to the pepper trees, dressed in suits and hats, women in hoops and skirts.’

She waited for the oohs and ahhs to subside as the group imagined the potential wardrobe malfunctions. ‘It took those plucky cavers ten hours of clambering, and no doubt countless torn flounces, to crawl through the caves that now take you an hour to circumnavigate when you use the stairs and boardwalks of twentieth century safety.’

She smiled again and it was getting easier to ignore the man at the back. This was her spiel, her forte, sharing this passion. ‘In those days there were no pretty electric lights to backdrop the most magnificent of these natural wonders so far below the surface. Just lamps and candles.’ She straightened her helmet. ‘Okay. We’ll enjoy the views you get today when we return to the gentle paths. But first we’ll do some rough terrain ourselves and go deeper than the average tourist gets to see.’

‘Ready?’ At their nods she moved forward to the entrance. ‘I’ll go first and point to where we’re exiting the boardwalk. We slip under the rail to seek out the more remote and unusual areas of the cave. When we return you can take your time once you’re back on the boardwalk and really savour the lighted areas of the larger caves.’

She looked around for the most nervous faces. ‘Anyone who’s feeling a little unsure—you should come up here next to me, with the most confident of you at the back.’ The quiet man moved diffidently forward and Faith smiled at him. ‘It’s worth the effort,’ she reassured him.

She noted Raimondo had stayed back and she felt the muscles in her shoulders relax a notch. Okay then. He wouldn’t be breathing down her neck. Just watching her the whole time. Not great but better.

She went on. ‘When you’re traversing the cave please remember to use three points of contact to give you balance. Safety is the most important part of stepping off the boardwalk. As you know, we’re heading for the dry riverbed which is more than forty metres below the surface and there’s no lights down there.’

A few murmurs greeted that. 'If your heart does start to pound—' she slowed so everyone could hear '—if you can feel yourself becoming anxious, take a couple of deep breaths and remember...' They were all listening. She grinned. 'This is fun and there are more of these tours every week and we haven't lost one person yet.'

A ripple of relieved laughter eased the tension. 'Let's go.' Faith ducked her head and stepped down onto the sloping boardwalk. The air temperature cooled as she moved ahead, not too fast, because she could still remember the first time she'd entered the cavern and her open-mouthed awe of the ceilings and floors, but fast enough to encourage people not to stop until she made the point where they left the wooden planks.

A few minutes later she counted eight adults. 'Right then.' She crouched down, slid under the rail and put her weight on the uneven rocks off the main path, the stones like familiar friends under her feet. Then she slid sideways through a crevice, down an incline, and stopped to point out a particularly wobbly rock and let everyone catch up. 'Try to plant your weight on the big rocks—not into the holes.' She heard the crack of a helmet behind her as someone bumped their forehead. Bless the helmets.

'Now sit down on your bottom to slide off this small drop into the darkness below.' A stifled gasp from right behind her suggested someone had sat down too quickly and hit the wet spot on the cavern floor.

She raised her voice a little. 'It might be time to turn that headlamp on. Shine it on your feet, not into the eyes of the person in front, or into their faces behind you when you turn your head.'

This was all the fun stuff but she knew that most of the tourists behind her would be stamping down the claustrophobia of being in a small tunnel space underground with someone in front and someone following them.

It was lucky Raimondo was at the back because the others might forget how much space he took up. Not something Faith could forget, though for a different reason.

She paused at a fork in the path and waited for everyone to catch up, then pointed at a magnificent curtain of rock.

'That veil of rock is where hundreds of years of dripping water have formed a bacon-rind-shaped rim of curved ice that divides the ceiling.' She remembered enthusing about that to Raimondo all those years ago.

She shook the thought off. The beauty truly did make her astonished every time. Lifting her chin, she pulled her imaginary cloak of confidence tightly around her again. 'Ahead are more joined stalactites to reach towards stalagmites and if you look over here there's a magnificent column that stretches from floor to ceiling. What a gift of nature—that took thousands of years.'

The reverence was back in her own voice because, despite the man at the end of the line of tourists, every time she came down here she shook her head in wonder. Which was why she still marvelled that Dianne actually paid her to savour this subterranean cathedral she loved so much.

They'd come to one of the tricky spots. 'This opening's narrow—be careful not to scrape yourself here.' This was the point she had wondered if Raimondo would have difficulty with sliding through.

He seemed even bigger than when she'd met him before. Hard to imagine but true. More wedge-shaped. Toughened and toned. Muscled and honed. Hopefully not so broad that he'd jam in the crevice like a cork in a bottle—but she had a contingency plan for the others if he did. Not so much for him. She stifled an evil grin. Tsk, Faith, she admonished herself.

Still, there was another, less accessible exit for emergencies, and nobody had ever really been stuck.

Yet.

She waited.

Tried not to hold her breath.

Her heart rate picked up as she heard the subtle crunch of rock fragments in a long agonising squeeze, then he pushed through into the small cavern they were all standing in with a slight rush. Close fit.

Her breath puffed out.

He was fine. Bet that made the sweat stand out on his manly brow though. She smiled.

Then frowned at herself.

Another tsk. Not nice, Faith.

This was unlike her and a measure of how much that grim visage of his had affected her equilibrium.

Stop thinking about him.

‘We’ll edge down this rock face now. The path narrows so please don’t touch that glistening rock there,’ She shone her headlamp at the shimmering silver wall. ‘It has beautiful fragile crystals so you can take photos and admire it, but it will become disfigured if you accidentally touch it.’ She watched them and saw with satisfaction how they all leaned the other way to protect the wall.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured. ‘Almost there.’ There were a few Hail Marys behind her and she stifled a laugh. The shy quiet man had turned out to be a Catholic comedian. You had to love him.

Finally, after another ten minutes of winding and uneven descent, she stepped into an opening with a sloping floor. It spread out into a wide cavern and she heard the sighs of relief to be able to spread out a little. The distance narrowed between roof and floor and she resisted the urge to duck her head. Enough of that soon enough.

‘If you shine your lights down towards your shoes you’ll see you’re standing on red sandy soil.’

All lights tilted downwards and there were some comments of, ‘All the way down here. Wow.’

‘So, we’re here. You’re standing on the bed of a river from thousands of years ago, stretching away in two directions.’

She let that statement sit in the silence as the others thought about that and shone their headlamps around. ‘As you can see with your lights...’ and that was all they could see with, as no other light could penetrate this far into the cave ‘...there’s a line of white rocks marking off a section of the cave. Also, in front of us, a circle of the same stones to protect an area of new stalactite formation.’

She crouched down and even now she could feel the excitement as her heart rate sped up with the wonder of all this subterranean world so far below the surface. ‘See this—’ She pointed out the new holes burrowing into the dirt in the centre of the circle.

‘Every drop is making the hole larger and eventually it will form a pencil of creation.’

She breathed out and those standing next to her murmured their own awe. This was why she loved these tours. When she felt the connection from others at the opportunity to see something so few people had.

‘If you look across from us—’ she angled her head and the light shone on the roof ‘—hanging from the low roof like eyelashes, those are thin tendrils of tree roots that are searching for the water that left eons ago, but the moisture remains and even though the roots don’t touch any water the filaments absorb moisture from the air.’

Someone said, ‘Amazing.’ She smiled in their direction.

‘There’s no natural light—the creatures who live here are small, without eyes, their bodies are see-through, almost like albino slaters.’ She crouched down and drew an example the size of a cat in the red dirt with her finger.

Her comedian said in the darkness, ‘That looks too big for comfort,’ and laughed nervously. Several other voices murmured.

Faith grinned. ‘Not drawn to scale.’ She pointed out a tiny white beetle-like creature on a tree root. ‘But if you see one of them in front of you when you’re crawling, please scoop up a handful of dirt and shift him aside.’

The young woman next to Faith who'd changed into jeans said in a small voice, 'You say we are crawling?'

'Yep, we're sliding under that overhang on our stomachs, using our elbows, for about thirty metres, but it opens into a small cavern after that.'

'Perhaps,' she said in her lilting accent, 'I can stay here and mind the bags?'

Faith looked at her and noted her pinched nostrils and darting eyes. 'Perfectly fine. We'll only be about ten minutes' crawl away, though you mightn't hear us because the riverbed bends a little. Then it opens into another cavern where we can sit up. We'll be gone for about thirty minutes by the time we spend ten minutes there as well as crawling there and back. Will you be fine with that?'

She laughed nervously. 'I find it very peaceful here.'

'I'll stay with her,' one of the teenage boys offered with pretended resignation. It was so obviously what he wanted to do that everyone laughed.

Faith nodded. 'The rest of us can drop all our extra stuff, like cameras and jumpers, here. Too hard to crawl on your belly dragging a drink bottle or camera.'

There was a small wave of tense laughter as people dropped surplus bits and crouched down. The black semi-circular opening above the red sandy floor looked about three feet high and maybe ten feet wide, based with the red sand of the ancient river. A little too much like a mouth that would eat them, Faith had thought the first time, and she guessed a few of the others now thought the same.

'I'll go belly down into the damp dirt first so you know I'm ahead, but I need a volunteer to go last. Someone needs to make sure we all keep going.'

'I will go last.' Raimondo spoke quietly, his thick accent rolling calmly around the tiny space. When the others expelled breaths of relief he said, 'I have been on this tour before and have no concerns.'

Faith knew this last stretch tested the first timers' resolve as they slithered forward in the dark, seeing the backside and feet of the person in front, the circle of light from the person behind washing over them, the roof closing in over their helmeted head. She'd had the occasional talk down of a panicked group member at this part but in the end they all agreed the challenge was worth it.

Faith knelt down until she was lying on the damp sand and glanced at Raimondo, looming above her. He nodded calmly and with a last flashing grin at the rest of the group she propelled herself forward along the riverbed, the circle of her headlamp piercing the darkness ahead with its warm glow.

She heard them behind her and the flicker of the others' lights occasionally shone past until she'd crawled all the way to the cavern.

She sat up and waited, watching the circles of light approach one by one as each crawled out of the hole and into the circle of the cavern.

'You can sit up now. There's a good foot over your head.'

'Gee, thanks,' the first arrival, the other of the solid woman's sons, muttered mock complainingly, and she grinned in his direction.

'Just shimmy around so the next person can sit up and move next to you until we have a circle.' It didn't take long for all of them to arrive and she wasn't sure how Raimondo ended up sitting next to her, but she doubted it was by accident.

Faith cleared her throat. She couldn't change the next bit and he probably knew it. 'We're going to turn out all our lights and just sit here, in the belly of Mother Earth, in the dark, and soak in the wonder of what we are experiencing.'

The same smart Alec said, 'Why not?' But everyone laughed. Except Raimondo.

There was a murmur of further surprise and then slowly, as they all began to feel the magic of the space, she could feel the agreement.

She pushed on. 'And we'll sit in silence for a minute or two just to soak it in—where we are, how long this cavern has been here, and how amazing you all are to do this and still be having fun.'

A few murmurs of pride.

‘After the silence I’ll share an Aboriginal legend I was told about a good spirit from the ocean and a bad spirit from the cave, and how these caves were formed.’

Like good children, one by one they turned out the lights until the darkness fell like a blindfold over them.

Faith closed her eyes. She always found this moment, this silence, incredibly peaceful. The air she breathed felt moist on her nose and throat as she inhaled and she dug her fingers into the damp earth and collected two handfuls of the sleeping riverbed and held them with her eyes shut tight—not that it made any difference, open or shut, in the total dark.

She always felt blessed to have been given this moment in time to embrace the idea of being a part of this river under the earth. Breathing in and out quietly as the silence stretched for several minutes. Nobody fidgeted or spoke until she judged enough time had passed. Then she began to tell the story of the battle of the ancients.

CHAPTER TWO

RAIMONDO BRUNO SALVANELLI closed his eyes as Faith's lilting voice rose from the darkness beside him. He allowed her words to flow over and through him because he'd heard the cave story before, privately, and he wanted to find the peace she'd once told him she found here—for himself.

So, instead of listening to the story, he savoured the cadence of her voice and the reality that she had still been exactly where he'd left her so long ago. Again, he inhaled the oh, so subtle scent of her herbal shampoo and welcomed the warmth in the air from her body so close to his.

The sudden rush of possessiveness he'd felt when he'd first seen her from the tourist shop door had shocked him. An emotion he had no right to, a stranger very briefly in her life almost six years ago, a stranger still, and one who had told her he would never return after he had broken her heart.

That first time had been Sydney Airport where he'd caught her eye, she'd smiled, and he'd instantly invited her to join him when he'd seen her flight had been postponed along with his.

Then, hours later, because still he wasn't ready to lose his new companion, they'd shared dinner in an airport bar, jostled by other stranded passengers yet alone in their own world of discovery, and she had captivated him. He'd watched her mobile face as she'd described her beautiful Lighthouse Bay. Her work as a midwife, her hobby of cave tours and her love of life.

Their flights had been rescheduled again and they'd spent the night stranded, and then, imprudently, tangled together making love in an airport hotel, lost to the wild weather outside that had grounded their aircraft.

The crazy urgency had grown until he'd done something so out of character, so reckless and impulsive, even years later he was still surprised. He'd changed his flight to match her re-booked one, delayed his return to Italy for two days, followed her home to the house on the cliff for the one night and two days he hadn't scheduled and found himself lost in unsophisticated and trusting arms.

This was a world of tenderness he hadn't known since he'd been a child and his parents had been alive.

When she'd taken him the next morning for a personal cave tour before he'd left he'd been captivated again by her passion for the natural wonders she'd shared. Had silently begun to plan to return and see where this craziness between them might lead.

Then the return to sanity from the craziness that had come upon him with Faith. He could have vanished into it for ever if not for that call from his brother—his grandfather lay dying, the man who had raised them since he was seven. The news had been a deluge of cold water that had dashed his dreams and dragged him home to filial duty and deathbed requests. His brother had warned him what lay in store so he had said goodbye to Faith with finality.

Never to return because they were from different worlds. Because of the commitment he'd made to his dying grandfather—one he would never have broken until it had self-destructed—his fault, his ex-wife's fault and also partly this woman's fault because his heart had not been available. His new wife had seen that and hardened her own heart even more. Then his twin brother's tragedy and the need for Raimondo to shoulder the leader's role until Dominico could recover.

At the time, returning to Australia had seemed impossible. His brother had agreed that the woman he'd had so brief a liaison with would have married by now, then the years had slipped by so fast after his marriage had dissolved—his new direction into a general practice for the needy, and the occasional international aid work, placating his feelings of failure and he didn't have the time to fly across the world on a whim.

There had never seemed a future, with Faith settled here and him a son of Italy for ever. Had he been wrong?



He would never have come back except for the news he'd heard.

News he hadn't believed.

News he hadn't been able to risk not investigating.

It had been the mention of a place called Lighthouse Bay in Australia, in a discussion of a wedding one of his colleagues had attended before she'd returned to Florence.

Raimondo had been drawn like a moth to the flame of that conversation.

'So, you have seen Lighthouse Bay?' he'd asked, unable to stop himself.

'Yes, I have been to two weddings there, now. This wedding in the church and one on the beach. Both very beautiful.'

His colleague had appeared mildly curious that he too had seen the place. Again unable to help himself, he had asked about Faith and the answer had stunned him.

'Yes, I met many people. And yes!' There had been an amused glance. 'In fact, I remember Faith, the bridesmaid, and her little girl—so cute.'

He had not known she had a daughter. 'So, she's married then?'

'No, Mr Puritan. She has a daughter without a husband. The child looked about four or five.'

So he'd come.

And on his first sight of Faith, the woman he'd never forgotten but whose charisma had endured as if she were a distant enchanted dream, he'd felt the swell of an emotion he shouldn't have. Here he was, sitting on the sandy bed of an ancient river, forty-five metres below the earth's surface, listening to her so-charming voice as it caressed his ears and wishing he had never left.

That voice was still as restful and as calming. She was as beautiful as he remembered, with her slim but curved body poured into that ridiculous T-shirt and so tight jeans. It proved difficult to resist the urge to slide his fingers through the damp earth and find her hand to take in his, as he had when she'd brought him on a private tour of this place.

His empty hand could even remember the warmth and softness of her small fingers interlaced with his from all that time ago. How could that be? He didn't know. What he did know was that he had not planned well.

A week would not be long enough.

He knew that now from his first sight of her, the way his whole being had come alive from what felt like a deep sleep. And that was without the added possibility that they shared a child.

Faith. He'd lost her and her conviction in the goodness of others and perhaps he would find both again in this place of dark caves and far oceans. He'd forgotten so much about her and he wanted to learn it all over again.

Which would require some negotiation with the life he'd left behind. And his need to encourage his twin brother away from his obsessive focus on the business after losing his family. Raimondo's busy life suddenly seemed far less important than it should, compared to what was happening at Lighthouse Bay.

But that was for later.

He realised the story had finished, the cave silent for those few seconds after a well-told tale, and then soft questions broke out.

Faith answered them quietly then concluded, 'Okay then. Lights on. Those nearest the entrance can start to crawl back and congregate in the next cavern. I'm sure those waiting will be glad to see us. When we make our way back to the main paths and under the rail again, I'll do one more head count then you're free to wander. Just drop your helmets and headlamps back at the shop when you're finished.'

'What if we get lost?' The comedian.

‘You’ll be on the main path. And they’ll switch the spotlights on and off in the cave when it’s shutting, so you’ll know when we are about to close. In about four hours.’ There was a smile in her voice, one he remembered too clearly, and the group laughed.

‘I’m used to the dark now,’ someone said and the person next to them snorted.

He waited. He knew she would be the last to leave this cavern deep in the earth in case someone became lost or panicked. So he waited with her. As he should have waited before.

Six years! She’d been so young, beautiful, excited and as attracted to him as he’d been to her—the two of them like two silly moths mesmerised by the moment—grounded in an airport cocoon of wild weather and overwhelming fascination increased by the improbability of any future. Once he’d finished his business in Sydney he’d be flying home to Italy, her back to her seaside town and her beloved midwifery. She’d been barely twenty and he eight years senior and should have known better.

But they’d talked until their mouths were dry. Been amazed by the rapport that had sprung between them as if reunited friends from childhood. How could that be? From opposite sides of the world?

From a past life, Faith had said, and he’d hugged her to him for the endearing ridiculousness of that statement.

Though, once she’d laid her head against his chest, it was then that everything had spun out of control. For two full days until his brother had grounded him with familial duty, then he knew their love castles were built on dreams he couldn’t follow. Could never follow. A truth he’d left her with. But was that all he’d left her with?

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