

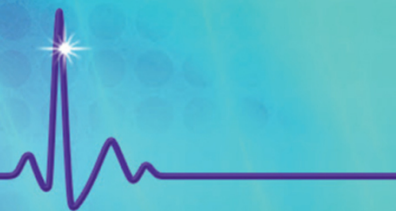


FIONA McARTHUR

Midwife's
Mistletoe Baby



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Mills & Boon Medical

Fiona McArthur

Midwife's Mistletoe Baby

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It's Christmas in Lyrebird Lake, but nine months after midwife Maeve's magical night with Rayne Walters she's preparing for the birth of her baby – alone. Rayne's arrest the morning-after-the-night-before left Maeve reeling, but now he's back... and shocked to discover that Maeve is pregnant – with his baby! Can Rayne convince Maeve he's here to stay? Christmas in Lyrebird Lake: where Christmas miracles can happen...

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Praise for Fiona McArthur:

‘CHRISTMAS WITH HER EX is everything a good medical romance should be, and it tells a story which resonates with everything Christmas stands for.’

—*HarlequinJunkie*

‘McArthur does full justice to an intensely emotional scene of the delivery of a stillborn baby—one that marks a turning point in both the characters’ outlooks. The entire story is liberally spiced with drama, heartfelt emotion and just a touch of humour.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on SURVIVAL GUIDE TO DATING YOUR BOSS

‘MIDWIFE IN A MILLION by Fiona McArthur will leave readers full of exhilaration. Ms McArthur has created characters that any reader could fall in love with.’

—*CataRomance*

Midwife's Mistletoe Baby

Fiona McArthur



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Dear Reader

Welcome to Rayne and Maeve in Lyrebird Lake at Christmas time.

Wow. I hope you have fun with this. I was grinning all the way through. Rayne and Maeve wrote their story and I was just trying to keep up with them—two people with *sooo* much sexual chemistry between them, and both of them such determined people in their own right, with really tough dilemmas.

Most of my heroes and heroines are pretty private, and they prefer it if I leave the bedroom door firmly closed—but, while still avoiding anatomical explanations, Rayne and Maeve are so aware of the physical in each other they just can't keep their hands off and sometimes forget to shut the door. But it's still sweet.

So it's not surprising that after an explosive first night, right at the beginning, Maeve falls pregnant. As Rayne says, 'If there was one night when, no matter how many precautions were used, a determined sperm would get through *that* was the night.'

Fast forward nine months and Rayne returns, unaware that Maeve is about to have his baby—and as a guy emotionally scarred by his childhood and with no male role model he can't see how he can become the kind of father Maeve's baby deserves.

Maeve has to come to terms with the fact that Rayne walked away, didn't answer her letters, and let her down in her pregnancy. But he's here now—exactly what she so desperately wanted for Christmas—and after the first day with him back she believes in him ... believes that Rayne has the potential to share the love he's never had a chance to share. She just has to help him to see it, and hopefully he'll become a believer before she has this baby. Thankfully she's in Lyrebird Lake, and with all the people she needs around her this is the place to do it.

I'd really love to hear what you think of Rayne and Maeve's journey.

Warmest wishes

Fi

PS I really loved Simon giving Tara, from the previous book, Russian dolls for Christmas!

Dedication

Dedicated to my darling husband, Ian.

Because I love you

xx Fiona

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PROLOGUE

March

RAYNE WALTERS BREATHED a sigh of relief as he passed through immigration and then customs at Sydney airport, deftly texted—I'm through—and walked swiftly towards the exit. Simon would be quick to pick him up. Very efficient was Simon.

He'd had that feeling of disaster closing in since the hiccup at LA when he'd thought he'd left it too late. But the customs officers had just hesitated and then frowned at him and waved him through.

He needed to get to Simon, the one person he wanted to know the truth, before it all exploded in his face. Hopefully not until he made it back to the States. Though they were the same age, and the same height, Simon was like a brother and mentor when he'd needed to make life choices for good rather than fast decisions.

But this choice was already made. He just wanted it not to come as a shock to the one other person whose good opinion mattered. He wasn't looking forward to Simon's reaction, and there would be anger, but the steps were already in motion.

A silver car swung towards him. There he was. He lifted his hand and he could see Simon's smile as he pulled over.

'Good to see you, mate.'

'You too.' They'd never been demonstrative, Rayne had found it too hard—but their friendship in Simon's formative years had been such a light in his grey days, and a few hilarious hell-bent nights, so that just seeing Simon made him feel better.

They pulled out into the traffic and his friend spoke without looking at him. 'So what's so urgent you need to fly halfway around the world you couldn't tell me on the phone? I can't believe you're going back tomorrow morning.'

Rayne glanced at the heavy traffic and decided this mightn't be a good time to distract Simon with his own impending disaster. Or was that just an excuse to put off the moment? 'Can we wait till we get to your place?'

He watched Simon frown and then nod. 'Sure. Though Maeve's there. She's just had a break-up so I hope a sister in my house won't cramp your style.'

Maeve. Little Maeve, Geez. It was good to think of someone other than himself for a minute. She'd been hot as a teenager and he could imagine she'd be drop-dead gorgeous by now. All of Simon's sisters were but he'd always had a soft spot for Maeve, the youngest. He'd bet, didn't know why, that Maeve had a big front of confidence when, in fact, he'd suspected she was a lot softer than the rest of the strong females in the house.

Though there'd been a few tricky moments when she'd made sure he knew she fancied him—not politic when you were years older than her. He'd got pretty good at not leaving Simon's side while Maeve had been around. 'I haven't seen Maeve for maybe ten years. She was probably about fifteen and a self-assured little miss then.'

'Most of the time she is. Still a marshmallow underneath, though. But she makes me laugh.'

She'd made Rayne laugh too, but he'd never mentioned his avoidance techniques to Simon. He doubted Simon would have laughed at that. Rayne knew Simon thrived on protecting his sisters. It had never been said but the *Keep away from my sisters* sign was clearly planted between them. And Rayne respected that.

'How are your parents?' It was always odd, asking, because he'd only had his mum, and Simon had two sets of parents. Simon's father, who Rayne had known as a kid, had turned out to be Simon's stepdad and he remembered very well how bitter Simon had been about all the lies. Bitter enough to change his last name.

But Simon's mum had chosen to go with someone she'd thought could give her accidental child the life she wanted him to have, and had been very happy with Simon's wealthy stepdad. Simon's birth father hadn't known of his son's existence until Simon had accidentally found out and gone looking for him.

No such fairy-tale for himself. 'Your father is dead and not worth crying over,' was all his mother had ever said.

'You know Dad and Mum moved to Boston?' Simon's voice broke into his thoughts. 'Dad's bypass went well and Mum's keeping us posted.'

'Good stuff.' Rayne glanced at his friend and enjoyed the smile that lit Simon's face. Funnily, he'd never been jealous of Simon's solid family background. Just glad that he could count this man as his friend and know he wouldn't be judged. Except maybe in the next half-hour when he broke the news.

Simon went on. 'And Angus and the Lyrebird Lake contingent are great. I saw them all at Christmas.' More smiles. He was glad it had all worked out for Simon.

Then the question Rayne didn't want. 'And your mum? She been better since you moved her out to live with you?' Another glance his way and he felt his face freeze as Simon looked at him.

'Fine.' If he started there then the whole thing would come out in the car and he just needed a few more minutes of soaking up the good vibes.

Instead, they talked about work.

About Simon's antenatal breech clinic he was running at Sydney Central. He'd uncovered a passion for helping women avoid unnecessary Caesareans for breech babies when possible and was becoming one of the leaders in re-establishing the practice of experienced care for normal breech births.

'So how's your job going?' Simon looked across. 'Still the dream job, making fistloads of money doing what you love?'

'Santa Monica's great. The house is finished and looking great.' Funny how unimportant that was in the big picture. 'My boss wants me to think about becoming one of the directors on the board.' That wouldn't happen now. He shook that thought off for later.

'The operating rooms there are state-of-the-art and we're developing a new procedure for cleft pallet repair that's healing twice as fast.'

'You still doing the community work on Friday down at South Central?'

'Yep. The kids are great, and we're slipping in one case a week as a teaching case into the OR in Santa Monica.' He didn't even want to think about letting the kids down there but he did have a very promising registrar he was hoping he could talk to, and who could possibly take over, before it all went down.

They turned off the airport link road and in less than five minutes were driving into Simon's garage. Simon lived across the road from the huge expanse of Botany Bay Rayne had just flown in over. He felt his gut kick with impending doom. Another huge jet flew overhead as the automatic garage door descended and that wasn't all that was about to go down.

He'd be on one of those jets heading back to America tomorrow morning. Nearly thirty hours' flying for one conversation. But, then, he'd have plenty of time to sit around when he got back.

Simon ushered him into the house and through into the den as he called out to his sister. 'We're back.'

Her voice floated down the stairs. 'Getting dressed.' Traces of the voice he remembered with a definite womanly depth to it and the melody of it made him smile.

'Drink?' Simon pointed to the tray with whisky glass and decanter and Rayne nodded. He'd had two on the plane. Mostly he'd avoided alcohol since med school but he felt the need for a shot to stiffen his spine for the conversation ahead.

‘Thanks.’ He crossed the room and poured a finger depth. Waved the bottle in Simon’s direction. ‘You?’

‘Nope. I’m not technically on call but my next breech mum is due any day now. I’ll have the soda water to keep you company.’ Rayne poured him a glass of the sparkling water from the bar fridge.

They sat down. Rayne lifted his glass. ‘Good seeing you.’ And it was all about to change.

‘You too. Now, what’s this about?’

Rayne opened his mouth just as Simon’s mobile phone vibrated with an incoming call. Damn. Instead, he took a big swallow of his drink.

Simon frowned at him. Looked at the caller, shrugged his inability to ignore it, and stood up to take the call.

Rayne knew if it hadn’t been important he wouldn’t have answered. Stared down into the dregs of the amber fluid in his glass. Things happened. Shame it had to happen now. That was his life.

‘Sorry, Rayne. I have to go. That’s my patient with the breech baby. I said I’d be there. Back as soon as I can.’ He glanced at the glass. ‘Go easy. I’ll still be your mate, no matter what it is.’

Rayne put the glass down. ‘Good luck.’ With that! He had no doubt about Simon’s professional skill. But he doubted he’d be happy with his friend when he knew.

Rayne watched Simon walk from the room and he was still staring pensively at the door two minutes later when the woman of his dreams sashayed in and the world changed for ever.

One moment. That was all it took. Nothing could have warned him what was about to happen or have prevented him, after one shell-shocked moment, standing up. Not all the disasters in the universe mattered as he walked towards the vision little Maeve had become.

A siren. Calling him without the need for actual words. Her hair loose, thick black waves dancing on her shoulders, and she wore some floating, shimmering, soft shift of apricot that allowed a tantalising glimpse of amazing porcelain cleavage—and no bra, he was pretty sure. A flash of delicious thigh, and then covered again in deceptive modesty. He could feel his heart pound in his throat. Tried to bring it all back to normality but he couldn’t. Poleaxed by not-so-little Maeve.

Maeve paused before entering the room. Drew a breath. She’d spent the day getting ready for this moment. Hair. Nails. Last-minute beauty appointments that had filled the day nicely. When Simon had told her yesterday that Rayne was coming she’d felt her spirits lift miraculously. Gone was the lethargy of self-recriminations from the last month. She really needed to get over that ridiculous inferiority complex she couldn’t seem to shake as the youngest of four high achieving girls.

Here was one man who had never disappointed her. Even though she’d been embarrassingly eager to pester him as a gawky teenager, he’d always made her feel like a princess, and she wanted to look her best. Feel good about herself. Get on with her life after the last fiasco and drop all those stupid regrets that were doing her head in.

She hoped he hadn’t changed. She’d hero-worshiped the guy since the day he’d picked up the lunch box she’d dropped the first time she’d seen him. Her parents’ reservations about Rayne’s background and bad-boy status had only made him more irresistible. At fifteen, twenty had been way out of her reach in age.

Well, things should be different this time and she was going to make sure they were at least on an even footing!

Maybe that’s where the trill of excitement was coming from and she could feel the smile on her face from anticipation as she stepped into view.

That was the last sane thought. A glance across a room, a searing moment of connection that had her pinned in the doorway so that she stopped and leant against the architrave, suddenly in need of support—a premonition that maybe she’d be biting off more than she could chew even flirting with Rayne. This black-shirted, open-collared hunk was no pretty boy she could order around. And yet it was still Rayne.

He rose and stepped towards her, a head taller than her, shoulders like a front-row forward, and those eyes. Black pools of definite appreciation as he crossed the room in that distinctive prowl of a walk he'd always had until he stood beside her.

A long slow smile. 'Are you here to ruin my life even more?'

God. That voice. Her skin prickled. Could feel her eyebrows lift. Taking in the glory of him. 'Maybe. Maybe I'm the kind of ruin you've been searching for?'

Goodness knew where those words had come from but they slid from her mouth the way her lunch box had dropped from her fingers around ten years ago. The guy was jaw-droppingly gorgeous. And sexy as all get-out!

'My, my. Look at little Maeve.'

And look at big Rayne. Her girl parts quivered.

'Wow!' His voice was low, amused and definitely admiring—and who didn't like someone admiring?—and the pleasure in the word tickled her skin like he'd brushed her all over. Felt impending kismet again. Felt his eyes glide, not missing a thing.

She looked up. Mesmerised. Skidded away from the eyes—too amazing, instead appreciated the black-as-night hair, that strong nose and determined jaw, and those shoulders that blocked her vision of the world. A shiver ran through her. She was like a lamb beckoning to the wolf.

Another long slow smile that could have melted her bra straps if she'd had one on, then he grew sexy-serious. 'Haven't you grown into a beautiful woman? I think we should meet all over again.' A tilt of those sculpted lips and he held out his hand. 'I'm Rayne. And you are?'

Moistened her lips. 'Maeve.' Pretended her throat wasn't as dry as a desert. Held out her own hand and he took her fingers and kissed above her knuckles smoothly so that she sucked her breath in.

Then he allowed her hand to fall. 'Maeve.' The way he said it raised the hair on her arms again. Like ballet dancers *en pointe*. 'Did you know your name means *she who intoxicates*? I read that somewhere, but not until this moment did I believe it.'

She should have laughed and told him he was corny but she was still shaking like a starstruck mute. Finally she retaliated. 'Rain. As in wet?'

He laughed. 'Rayne as in R.A.Y.N.E. My mother hated me.'

'How is your mother?'

His eyes flickered. 'Fine.' Then he seemed to shake off whatever had distracted him and his smile was slow and lethal. 'Would you like to have a drink with me?'

And of course she said, 'Yes!'

She watched him cross the room to Simon's bar and that made her think, only for a millisecond, about her brother. 'Where's Simon?' Thank goodness her brother hadn't seen that explosion of instant lust between them or he'd be playing bomb demolition expert as soon as he cottoned on.

'His breech lady has gone into labour and he's meeting her at the hospital.'

Maeve ticked that obstacle out of the way. A good hour at least but most probably four. She was still languid with residual oxytocin from the Rayne storm as she sank onto the lounge. Then realised she probably should have sat in Simon's favourite chair, opposite, because if Rayne sat next to her here she doubted she'd be able to keep her hands off him.

He sat down next to her and the force field between them glowed like the lights on the runway across the bay. He handed her a quarter-glass of whisky and toasted her with his own. Their fingers touched and sizzled and their eyes clashed as they sipped.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' he drawled, and smiled full into her face.

OMG. She licked her lips again and he leaned and took her glass from her hand again and put it down on the coffee table. 'You really shouldn't do that.' Then lifted his finger and gently brushed her bottom lip with aching slowness as he murmured, 'I've been remiss.'

He was coming closer. 'In what way?' *Who owned that breathy whisper?*

'I didn't kiss my old friend hello.' And his face filled her vision and she didn't make any protest before his lips touched, returned and then scorched hers.

In those first few seconds of connection she could feel a leashed desperation about him that she didn't understand, because they had plenty of time, an hour at least, but then all thoughts fled as sensation swamped her.

Rayne's mouth was like no other mouth she'd ever known. Hadn't even dreamt about. Like velvet steel, smoothly tempered with a suede finish, and the crescendo was deceptively gradual as it steered them both in a sensual duel of lips and tongue and inhalation of whisky breath into a world that beckoned like a light at the end of the tunnel. She hadn't even known there was a tunnel!

Everything she'd imagined could be out there beckoned and promised so much more. She wanted more, desperately needed more, and lifted her hands to clasp the back of his head, revel in his thick wavy hair sliding through her fingers as she pulled him even closer.

His hands slid down her ribs, across her belly and up under and then circling her breasts through the thin fabric of her silk overshirt. His fingers tightened in deliciously powerful appreciation then he pulled away reluctantly.

'Silk? I'd hate to spoil this so I'd better stop.'

'I'll buy another one,' she murmured against his lips.

Rayne forced his hands to draw back. It was supposed to be a hello kiss. Holy hell, what was he doing? He'd barely spoken to the woman in ten years and his next stop was definitely lower down. They'd be naked on the floor before he realised it if he didn't watch out. 'Maybe we should draw a breath?'

She sat back with a little moue of disappointment, followed by one of those delicious tip-of-the-tongue lip-checks that drove him wild. He was very tempted to throw caution to the winds, and her to the floor, and have his wicked way with the siren. Then he saw Simon's glass of sparkling water sitting forlornly on the table and remembered his unspoken promise. Forced himself to sit back. He'd be better having a cold glass of water himself.

'I'm starving!' He wasn't, but appealing to a woman's need to feed a man was always a good ploy to slow the world down.

She shrugged and he wanted to laugh out loud. Still a princess. Gloriously a princess. 'Kitchen's through there.' A languid hand in vague direction. 'I'm not much of a cook but you could make yourself something.'

Observed her eyes skid away from his. Decided she was lying. 'Don't you know the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?'

'And the way to a woman's heart is more of that hello kissing.' She sighed and stood up. 'But come on, I'll feed you. And then I'm going to kiss you again before my brother comes home. You'll owe me.'

He did laugh at that. 'I'll pay what I have to pay.' And he thought, I am not sleeping with this woman but thank God I brought condoms.

* * *

Maeve had lied about not being able to cook. She'd done French, Italian and Spanish culinary courses, could make anything out of nothing, and Simon's fridge was definitely not made up of nothing. 'Spanish omelette, French salad and garlic pizza bread?'

'Hold the garlic pizza bread.'

She grinned at him, starting to come down from the deluge of sensations that had saturated her brain. She'd planned on being admired, building her self-esteem with a safe yet sexy target, not ending up in bed with the guy. 'Good choice.' Heard the words and decided they applied to herself as well. It would be a good choice not to end up in bed either.

Then set about achieving a beautifully presented light meal perfect for a world traveller just off a plane.

'Oh, my.' He glanced down at his plate in awe. 'She cooks well.'

'Only when I feel like it.' And spun away, but he caught her wrist. Lifted it to his mouth and kissed the delicate inside skin once, twice, three times, and Maeve thought she was going to swoon. She tugged her hand free because she needed to think and she hadn't stopped *feeling* since she'd seen this man. She mimicked him. 'He kisses well.'

He winked at her. 'Only when he feels like it.'

She leaned into him. 'We'll work on that. Eat your dinner like a good boy.' *While I get some distance, fan my face and figure out why I'm acting like he's my chance at salvation. Or is that damnation?*

Five minutes later Rayne sat back from his empty plate. He had been hungry. Or the food was too good to possibly leave. 'Thank you.'

He needed a strategy of space between him and this woman. What the heck was going on to cause this onslaught of attraction between them? His own dire circumstances? The thought that she might be the last beautiful thing he would see or touch for a long time?

And her? Well, she was vulnerable. Simon had suggested that. But vulnerable wasn't the word he would have used. Stunning, intoxicating, black-widow dangerous?

He stood up and put his plate in the sink. Rinsed it, like he always did because he'd been responsible for any cleaning he'd wanted done for a long time, and internally he smiled because she didn't say, *Leave that, I'll do it*, like most women would have. She leant on the doorframe and watched him do it.

'Simon said you've just finished a relationship?' Seemed like his subconscious wanted to get to the bottom of it because his conscious mind hadn't been going to ask that question.

'Hmm. It didn't end well, and I've been a dishrag poor Simon had to put up with for the last month. You've no idea the lift I got when Simon said you were coming.'

No subterfuge there. He had the feeling she didn't know the meaning of the word. 'Thank you. But you know I'm here only for one night. I fly back tomorrow.'

She turned her head to look at him. 'Do you have to?'

That was ironic. 'No choice.' Literally. 'And I won't be back for a long time.' A very long time maybe.

She nodded. 'Then we'd best make the most of tonight.'

He choked back a laugh. 'What on earth can you mean?'

'Catch up on what we've both been doing, of course. Before Simon monopolises you.' She was saying one thing but her body was saying something else as she sashayed into the lounge again, and he may as well have had a leash around his neck because he followed her with indecent haste and growing fatalism.

'Simon will be back soon.' A brief attempt to return to reality but she was standing in the centre of the room looking suddenly unsure, and that brief fragility pierced him like no other reaction could have. Before he knew it he had his arms around her, cradling her against his chest, soothing the black hair away from her face. Silk skin, glorious cheekbones, a determined little chin. And she felt so damn perfect in his arms as she snuggled into him.

'Take me to bed, Rayne. Make me feel like a woman again.'

'That would be too easy.' He kissed her forehead. 'I don't think that's a good idea, sweetheart.'

'I'm a big girl, Rayne. Covered for contraception. Unattached and in sound mind. Do I have to beg?'

He looked at her, squeezed her to him. Thought about the near future and how he would never get this chance again because things would never be the same. He would never be the same. Searched her face for any change of mind. No. Bloody hell. She didn't have to beg.

So he picked her up in his arms, and she lifted her hands to clasp him around his neck, and he kissed her gorgeous mouth and they lost a few more minutes in a hazy dream of connection. Finally he got the words out. ‘So which bedroom is yours?’

She laughed. ‘Up two flights of stairs. Want me to walk?’

‘Much as I have enjoyed watching you walk, I’d prefer to carry you.’

And with impressive ease he did. Maeve rested her head back on that solid shoulder and gazed up at the chiselled features and strong nose. And those sinful lips. OMG, did she know what she was doing? Well, there was no way she wanted this to stop. This chemistry had been building since that first searing glance that had jerked and stunned them both like two people on the same elastic. She tightened her hands around his neck.

He felt so powerful—not pretty and perfect like Sean had been—but she didn’t want to think about Sean. About the pale comparison of a man she’d wasted her heart on when she should have always known Rayne would stand head and shoulders above any other man.

Speaking of shoulders, he used one to push open the door she indicated, knocked it shut with his foot, and strode across the room to the big double bed she thought he would toss her onto, but he smiled, glanced around the room and lowered her gently until her feet were on the floor.

His breathing hadn’t changed and he looked as if he could have done it all again without working a sweat.

Ooh la la. ‘I’m impressed.’

He raised his brows quizzically and freed the French drapes until they floated down to cover the double window in a flounced bat of their lacy eyelids and the room dimmed to a rosy glow from the streetlights outside. Slid his wallet out of his pocket and put it on the windowsill after retrieving a small foil packet.

Then he pulled her towards him and spun her until her spine was against the wall and her breasts were pressed into his hardness. Shook his head and smiled full into her eyes. Felt her knees knock as he said, ‘You are the sexiest woman I have ever seen.’

She thought, *And you are the sexiest man*, as she lifted her lips to his, and thank goodness he didn’t wait to be asked twice. Like falling into a swirling maelstrom of luscious sensation, Maeve felt reality disappear like a leaf sucked into a drainpipe then she heard him say something. Realised he’d created physical distance between them. Her mind struggled to process sound to speech.

‘Miss Maeve, are you sure you want to proceed?’

It was a jolting and slightly disappointing thing to say in the bubble of sensuality he’d created and she looked up at him. Surprised a look of anguish she hadn’t expected. ‘Are you trying to spoil this for a particular reason?’

A distance she didn’t like flashed in his eyes. ‘Maybe.’

She pulled his head forward with her hands in his hair. ‘Well, don’t!’

Rayne shrugged, smiled that lethal smile of his, and instead he lifted her silk shift over her head in a slow sexy exposure, leaving the covering camisole and the dark shadow of her breasts plainly visible through it.

He trailed the backs of his fingers up the sides of her chest and she shivered, wanted him to rip it off so she could feel his hands on her skin. And he knew it.

This time the backs of his fingers trailed down and caught the hem of the camisole, catching the final layer, leaving her top half naked to the air on her sensitised skin.

She heard him suck in his breath, heard it catch in his throat as he glimpsed her body for the first time—and the tiny peach G-string that was all that was left.

Her turn. He had way too many clothes on and she needed to look and feel his skin with a sudden hunger she had no control over.

She reached up and danced her fingers swiftly down the fastening of his black shirt, as if unbuttoning for the Olympics way ahead of any other competitor, because she’d never felt such

urgency to slip her hands inside a man's shirt. Never wanted to connect as badly as now with the taut skin-covered muscle and bone of a man. The man.

This was Rayne. The Rayne. And he felt as fabulous as she'd known he would and the faster she did this the faster he would kiss her again. Her fingers seemed to glow wherever she touched and she loved the heat between them like a shivering woman loved a fire.

While her fingers were gliding with relish he'd unzipped and was kicking away his trousers. They stood there, glued together, two layers of mist-like fabric between their groins, two flimsy, ineffectual barriers that only inflamed them more, and his mouth recommenced its onslaught and she was lost.

Until he shifted. Moved that wicked mouth and tongue lower, a salutation of her chin, her neck, her collarbone, a slow, languorous, teasing circle around her breast and exquisite tantalising pleasure she'd never imagined engulfed her as he took the rosy peak and flicked it with delicate precision.

She gasped.

His hands encircled her ribs, the strong thumbs pushing her breasts into perky attention for his favours. Peaks of sensitive supplication and he took advantage until she was writhing, aching for him, helpless against the wall at her back, unable to be silent.

She. Could. Not. Get. Enough.

Rayne lifted his head, heard the moan of a woman enthralled, saw the wildness in her eyes, felt his own need soar to meet hers, dropped his hands to the lace around her hips and slid those wicked panties slowly down her legs, savoured the silk of her skin, the tautness of her thighs under his fingers, and then the scrap of material fell in a ridiculously tiny heap at her feet. There was something so incredibly sinful about that fluttering puddle of fabric, and he'd bet he'd think about it later, many times, as he reached for the condom and dropped his own briefs swiftly.

Then his hands slid back to her buttocks. Those round globes of perfection that fitted his hands perfectly. Felt the weight of her, lifted, supported her body in his hands, and the power of that feeling expanded with the strain in his arms and exultantly, slowly, her back slid up the wall and she rose to meet him.

Rayne slowly and relentlessly pinned her with his body and she wrapped her legs around him the way he had known, instinctively, she would, and it felt as incredible as he'd also known it could be, except it was more. So much more. And they began to dance the ancient dance of well-matched mates.

The rising sun striped the curtains with a golden beam of new light and Maeve awoke in love. Some time in the night it had come to her and it was as indestructible as a glittering diamond in her chest. How had that happened?

Obviously she'd always loved him.

And it was nothing like the feelings she'd had for other men. This was one hundred per cent 'you light my fire, I know you would cherish me if you loved me back, I want to have babies with you' love. So it looked like she'd have to pack her bags and follow the man to the States.

At least her mother lived there.

But Rayne was gone from their tumbled bed and someone was talking loudly downstairs.

Maeve sat up amidst the pillows he'd packed around her, realised she was naked and slightly stiff, began to smile and then realised the loud voice downstairs was Simon's.

A minute later she'd thrown a robe over her nakedness and hurried into Simon's study, where two burly federal policemen had Rayne in ... handcuffs?

The breath jammed in her throat and she leant against the doorframe that had supported her last night. Needed it even more now.

Simon was saying, 'What the hell? Rayne? This has to be a mistake.'

'No mistake. Just didn't get time to explain.' Rayne glanced across as Maeve entered and shut his eyes for a moment as if seeing her just made everything worse. Not how she wanted to be remembered by him.

Then his thick lashes lifted as he stared. 'Bye, Maeve,' looked right through her and then away. Simon glanced between the two, dawning suspicion followed swiftly by disbelief and then anger. 'So you knew they'd come and you ...' He couldn't finish the sentence. Sent Maeve an, 'I'll talk to you later' look, but the federal policemen were already nudging Rayne towards the door.

Simon was still in the clothes he'd left in last night so he hadn't been home long. Rayne was fully dressed, again in sexy black, and shaved, had his small cabin bag, so it looked like he'd been downstairs, waiting. She would never know if it was for Simon or the police.

She wondered whether the police hadn't come he would have woken her to say goodbye. The obvious negative left her feeling incredibly cold in the belly after the conflagration they'd shared last night and her epiphany this morning.

He'd said he was going and wouldn't be back for a while but she'd never imagined this scenario. Then he really was gone and Simon was shaking his head.

CHAPTER ONE

Nine months later.

Looking for Maeve.

RAYNE'S MOTHER DIED of a heroin overdose on the fifteenth of December. He was released from prison the day after, when the posted envelope of papers arrived at the Santa Monica police station, and he put his head in his hands at his inability to save her. The authorities hadn't been apologetic—he should have proclaimed his innocence, but he'd just refused to speak.

Her last written words to him ...

My Rayne

I love you. You are my shining star. I would never have survived in prison but it seems I can't survive on the outside either with you in there. I'm so sorry it took me so long to fix it.

With the other letter and proof of her guilt she'd kept, the charges on Rayne were dropped and he buried her a week later in Santa Monica. It had been the only place she'd known some happiness, and it was fine to leave her there in peace.

He had detoured to see his old boss, who had been devastated by the charges against him, explained briefly that he'd known she wouldn't survive in jail, and the man promised to start proceedings for the restoration of his licence to practise. Undo what damage he could, and as he'd been able to keep most of the sensation out of the papers, that was no mean offer.

Then Rayne gave all his mother's clothes and belongings to the Goodwill Society and ordered her the biggest monumental angel he could for the top of her grave. It would have made her smile.

Then he put the house up for sale and bought a ticket for Australia and Maeve. The woman he couldn't forget after just one night. Not because he was looking for happily ever after but because he owed it to her and Simon to explain. And if he was going to start a new life he had to know what was left of his old one. If anything.

All he knew was the man he was now was no fit partner for Maeve and he had no doubt Simon would say the same.

On arrival it had taken him two days of dogged investigation before he'd traced Maeve to Lyrebird Lake and he would have thought of it earlier if he'd allowed himself to think of Simon first.

Simon's birth father lived there and Simon often spent Christmas with them—he should have remembered that. With Maeve's mother in the US it made sense she was with her brother.

Who knew if she'd say yes to seeing him after the way he'd left, if either of them would? He guessed he couldn't blame them when they didn't know the facts, but he had to know they were both all right. Maybe he should have opened the letters Maeve had sent and not refused the phone calls Simon had tried, but staying isolated from others and keeping the outside world out of his head had been the only way he'd got through it.

Looked down at the wad of letters in his hand and decided against opening the letters now in case she refused to see him in writing.

Two hundred miles away from Lyrebird Lake, and driving just over the legal speed limit, Rayne pressed a little harder on the accelerator pedal. The black Chev, a souped-up version of his first car from years ago, throttled back with a throaty grumble.

He didn't even know if Maeve had a partner, had maybe even married, but he had to find out. She would refuse to see him. It was ridiculous to be propelled on with great urgency when it had been so long, but he was. He should wait until after the holiday season but he couldn't.

The picture in his head of her leaning against the doorframe as he'd been led away had tortured him since that night. The fact that he'd finally discovered the woman he needed to make him whole had been there all the time in his past, and he'd let her down in the most cowardly way by not telling her what would happen.

He couldn't forgive himself so how did he think that Maeve and her brother would forgive him? All he just knew was he had to find her and explain. Try to explain.

So clearly he remembered her vulnerability before he'd carried her up those stairs. Blindingly he saw her need to see herself the way he saw her. Perhaps it was too late.

If she had moved on, then he would have to go, but he needed her to know the fault was all his before they said a final goodbye. It wasn't too late to at least tell her she couldn't have been more perfect on that night all those months ago.

A police highway patrol car passed in the opposite direction. The officer glanced across at him and Rayne slowed. Stupid. To arrive minutes later after nine months wouldn't make the difference but if he was pulled over for speeding then the whole catastrophe could start again. International drivers licence. Passports. He didn't want the hassle.

It was lucky the salesman had filled the fuel tank last night because he'd only just realised it was early Christmas morning. Every fuel stop was shut. He had no food or drinks except the water he'd brought with him. Big deal except he was gatecrashing Simon's family at a time visitors didn't usually drop in. Hopefully the rest of the family weren't assembled when he arrived.

It wasn't the first time he'd done this. He remembered Simon taking him home to his other parents' one year while they'd been in high school. Rayne's mother had ended up in rehab over the holiday break, it had always been the hardest time of the year for her to stay straight, and his friend, Simon, had come to check on him.

He'd been sixteen and sitting quietly watching television when Simon had knocked at the door, scolded him for not letting him know, and dragged him reluctantly back to his house for the best Christmas he'd ever had.

Simon's parents had ensured he'd had a small Christmas sack at the end of his bed on Christmas morning and Maeve had made him a card and given him a Cellophane bag of coconut ice she'd made for everyone that year. He'd loved the confectionary ever since.

Well, here he was again, gatecrashing. Unwanted.

It was anything but funny. The truly ridiculous part was that in his head he'd had an unwilling relationship with Maeve for the last nine months. She'd made an irreversible imprint on him in those hours he'd held her in his arms. Blown him away, and he was still in pieces from it. He'd kept telling himself they'd only connected in his last desperate attempt to hold onto someone good before the bad came but he had no doubt she would always hold a sacred piece of his heart.

In prison he'd separated his old life out of his head. Had kept it from being contaminated by his present. Refused any visitors and stored the mail. But when his defences had been down, when he'd drifted off to sleep, Maeve had slid in beside him, been with him in the morning when he'd woken up, and at night when he'd dreamt. He'd had no control over that.

But he'd changed. Hardened. Couldn't help being affected by the experience, and she didn't need a man like he'd become—so he doubted he'd stay. Just explain and then head back to Sydney to sort out his life. Start fresh when he could find some momentum for beginning. Wasn't even sure he would return to paediatrics. Felt the need for something physical. Something to use up the coil of explosive energy he'd been accumulating over the last nine months.

So maybe he'd go somewhere in between for a while where he could just soak up nature and the great outdoors now that he had the freedom to enjoy it.

Funny how things were never as important until you couldn't have them. He'd lusted after a timeless rainforest, or a deserted mountain stream, or a lighthouse with endless ocean to soothe his soul.

Or Maeve, a voice whispered. No.

CHAPTER TWO

Maeve

MAEVE PATTED HER round and rolling belly to soothe the child within. Christmas in Lyrebird Lake. She should have been ecstatic and excited about the imminent birth of her baby.

Ecstatic about the fact that only yesterday Simon had declared his love to Tara and was engaged to a woman she couldn't wait to call her sister. She put her fingers over the small muscle at the corner of her eye, which was twitching. But instead she was a mess.

Her only brother, or half-brother, she supposed she should acknowledge that, seeing she was living in Lyrebird Lake where his birth father lived, was engaged to be married. That was very exciting news.

And it wasn't like Simon's family hadn't made her welcome. But it wasn't normal to land on people who didn't know you for one of the biggest moments of your life even if Simon had always raved about Lyrebird Lake.

The place was worth raving about. She'd never been so instantly received for who she was, even in her own family, she thought with a tinge of uneasy disloyalty, but that explained why Simon had always been the least judgemental of all her siblings.

Until she'd slept with Rayne, that was.

Simon's other family didn't know the meaning of the word judgmental. Certainly less than her mother, but that was the way mum was, and she accepted that.

And she and Simon had re-established some of their previous closeness, mostly thanks to Tara.

The fabulous Tara. Her new friend and personal midwife was a doll and she couldn't imagine anyone she would rather have in the family.

She, Maeve, was an absolute bitch to be depressed by the news but it was so hard to see them so happy when she was so miserable.

She gave herself a little mental shake. Stop it.

Glanced out the window to the manger on the lawn. It was Christmas morning, and after nearly four weeks of settling in there was no place more welcoming or peaceful to have her baby.

So what was wrong with her?

It was all very well being a midwife, knowing what was coming, but she had this mental vision of her hand being held and it wasn't going to be Simon's. Have her brother, in the room while she laboured? Not happening, even if he was an obstetrician.

No. It would be Tara's hand that steadied her, which was good but not what she'd secretly and hopelessly dreamt of.

That scene she'd replayed over in her head a thousand times, him crossing the floor to her after that first glance, and later the feel of his arms around her as he'd carried her so easily up the stairs, the absolutely incredible dominance yet tenderness of his lovemaking. Gooseflesh shimmered on her arms.

She shook her head. The birth would be fine. It was okay.

She tried to shake the thought of needing Rayne to get through labour from her mind but it clung like a burr and refused to budge as if caught in the whorls of her cerebral convolutions.

Which was ridiculous because the fact was Rayne didn't want her.

He'd refused to answer her letters or take the call the one time she'd tried to call the prison, had had to go through the horror of finding out his prison number, been transferred to another section, the interminable wait and then the coldness of his refusal to speak to her.

Obviously he didn't want her!

Simon had told her he'd found out he would be in prison for at least two years, maybe even five, and that the charges had been drug related. She, for one, still didn't believe it.

But she hated the fact Rayne didn't want to see her.

Her belly tightened mildly in sympathy, like it had been tightening for the last couple of weeks every now and then, and she patted the taut, round bulge. *It's okay, baby. Mummy will be sensible. She'll get over your father one day.* But that wasn't going to happen if she stayed here mooning.

Maeve sat up and eased her legs out of the bed until her feet were on the floor. Grunted quietly with the effort and then smiled ruefully at herself for the noisy exertion of late pregnancy.

She needed to go for a walk. Free her mind outside the room. Stay fit for the most strenuous exertion of her life.

It was time to greet Christmas morning with a smile and a gentle, ambling welcome in the morning air before the Queensland heat glued her to the cool chair under the tree in the back yard. The tables were ready to be set for breakfast and later lunch with Simon's family and she would put on a smiling face.

She wondered if Tara was up yet. Her friend had come in late last night with Simon, she'd heard them laughing quietly and the thought made her smile. Two gorgeous people in love. The smile slipped from her face and she dressed as fast as she could in her unbalanced awkwardness and for once didn't worry about make-up.

Self-pity was weak and she needed to get over herself. She was the lucky one, having a baby when lots of women ached for the chance, and she couldn't wait.

It wasn't as if she didn't have a family who loved her, even if her mum was in the States.

But she had dear Louisa, Simon's tiny but sprightly grandmother, spoiling them all with her old-fashioned country hospitality and simple joy in kinfolk. She, Maeve, was twenty-five and needed to grow up and enjoy simple pleasures like Louisa did.

Once outside, she set off towards the town and the air was still refreshingly cool. Normally she would have walked around the lake but it was Sunday, and Simon liked the Sunday papers. Did they print newspapers on Christmas Day? Would the shop even be open? She hadn't thought of that before she'd left but if it didn't then that was okay.

It was easier not to think in the fresh air and distractions of walking with a watermelon-sized belly out front cleared the self-absorption.

Maeve saw the black, low-to-the-ground, old-fashioned utility as it turned into the main street and smiled. A hot rod like you saw at car shows with wide silver wheels and those long red bench seats in the front designed for drive-in movies. It growled down the road like something out of *Happy Days*, she thought to herself. The square lines and rumbling motor made it stand out from the more family-orientated vehicles she usually saw. Something about it piqued her curiosity.

She stared at the profile of the man driving and then her whole world tilted. Shock had her clutching her throat with her fingers and then their eyes met. Her heart suddenly thumped like the engine of the black beast and the utility swerved to the edge of the road and pulled up. The engine stopped and so did her breath—then her chest bumped and she swayed with the shock.

It was Maeve! The connection was instantaneous. Like the first time. But she was different. He blinked. Pregnant! Very pregnant!

Rayne was out of the car and beside her in seconds, saw the colour drain from her face, saw her eyes roll back. He reached her just as she began to crumple. Thank God. She slumped into his arms and he caught her urgently and lifted her back against his chest, felt and smelt the pure sweetness of her hair against his face as he turned, noticed the extra weight of her belly with a grimace as he struggled with the door catch without dropping her. Finally he eased her backwards onto the passenger seat and laid her head gently back along the seat.

He stared at the porcelain beauty of the woman he'd dreamed about throughout that long horrible time of incarceration.

Maeve.

Pregnant by someone else. The hollow bitterness of envy. The swell of fierce emotion and the wish it had been him. He patted her hands, patted her cheek, and slowly she stirred.

Unable to help the impossible dream, he began to count dates in his head. He frowned. Pushed away a sudden, piercing joy, worked out the dates again. But they'd both used contraception. It couldn't be ...

She groaned. Stirred more vigorously. Her glorious long eyelashes fluttered and she opened her eyes. They widened with recognition.

Then she gagged and he reached in and lifted her shoulders so she was sitting on the seat and could gag out the door. She didn't look at him again. Just sat with her shoulders bowed and her head in her hands.

He reached past her to the glove box and removed a small packet of tissues. Nudged her fingers and put them into her hand. She took them, but even after she'd finished wiping her mouth she still didn't look at him and he glanced around the street to see if anyone had noticed. Thank God for quiet Sunday mornings. Quiet Christmas morning, actually.

Well, that was unexpected. Something going right!

Seeing Maeve outside and alone. So unplanned. Looking down at her, he couldn't believe she was here in front of him. His eyes were drawn to the fragile V of the nape of her neck, the black hair falling forward away from the smoothness of her ivory skin, and he realised his heart was thumping like a piston in his chest. Like he'd run a marathon. Like he'd seen a vision of the future that was so bright he was blinded. Fool.

It felt like a dream. A stupid, infantile, Christmas fantasy ... In reality, though, the woman of his dreams had, in fact, fainted and then thrown up at the very sight of him! He needed to get a grip.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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