MILLS & BOON®

MIDWIFE IN A MILLION

Fiona McArthur

MEDICAL™

Fiona McArthur
Midwife in a Million

Аннотация

To save a baby's life, they must find the love they once had!Ten years ago paramedic Rory McIver left home, promising childhood sweetheart Kate Onslow he'd return to make her his bride. But Kate abruptly called off their engagement, and Rory, devastated, stayed away. Now he's back to ask the woman who broke his heart one simple question – why?When a medical emergency forces them together, the passion between them re-ignites! Their gruelling race against time across the rugged Outback to save a patient's unborn child challenges Kate and Rory physically and emotionally – they must confront their past if they are to finally make a future – together…

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Excerpt

‘When does Lucy have to leave?’

‘Today. Now. As soon as I can arrange it.’ And that was when Kate realised the implications. By ambulance. The usual driver, Charlie, had retired and just left on his lifetime trip. There was no one else with any training to come with her, and she really needed some back-up for this trip…There was no one with any medical knowledge—except the man from her past who’d flown in this morning to see her.

Rory was the last person she wanted to spend twenty-four hours locked in an ambulance truck with.

She turned away and looked into the room where Lucy lay. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad. Maybe what she’d felt for him when she’d been sweet sixteen and besotted enough to practically force him to make love to her would be different.

Of course it would. He was ten years older now. That made him twenty-eight, and with his job the life experiences would age anyone, so he’d probably have changed, put on city weight, look a lot older. She’d be fine.

But when the driver’s door opened and Rory climbed in behind the wheel—all six feet four of him—Kate had to shake her head at her preposterous predictions. There was no doubt the guy was a serious hunk, with a wicked twinkle a long way from surly.

She couldn't help the flare in her stomach, or the illicit pleasure of just looking for a long, slow heartbeat at him.

No wonder she hadn't been able to forget him.

A mother to five sons, **Fiona McArthur** is an Australian midwife who loves to write. Mills & Boon® Medical™ Romance gives Fiona the scope to write about all the wonderful aspects of adventure, romance, medicine and midwifery that she feels so passionate about—as well as an excuse to travel! So, now that the boys are older, her husband Ian and youngest son Rory are off with Fiona to meet new people, see new places, and have wonderful adventures. Fiona's website is at www.fionamcarthur.com

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THEIR SPECIAL-CARE BABY

Midwife in a Million

By

Fiona McArthur

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Dedicated to my husband, Ian, my caring and compassionate paramedic, and my own true hero.

Chapter One

RORY MCIVER stepped thankfully from the RFDS aircraft he'd hitched a ride with. It hadn't been one of the smoothest flights he'd ever been on. Maybe he should have driven from Perth but it had been such a hectic couple of weeks that the idea of driving three thousand kilometres on a whim didn't do it for him.

He bent to scoop a little of the red earth he'd watched pass below his window for hours, let it run through his fingers, then allowed the wind to blow the soil from his palm. He looked around. He never thought he'd return.

Even early in the morning on the airstrip the hot wind wrapped around him like an electric blanket on high, that all enveloping heat that only Western Australia's Kimberley could offer, a heat he hadn't felt for ten years and savoured now.

He touched his shirt pocket and gripped the bulkiness of his wallet in that habit he'd acquired since she'd sent the damn letter all that time ago. Enough!

As the plane bumped away on the dirt strip a cattle dog barked and the dog's lanky owner tipped his finger under his hat in greeting. 'G'day, Rory. Long time, no see.'

Here was a person who hadn't changed. 'Smiley.' Rory nodded to the cowboy leaning against the battered truck. 'Good of you to meet me.' They shook hands and Rory threw his swag in the back

where a cloud of red soil smothered it as it landed. He smiled wryly and opened the passenger door against the wind. When the spinning top of a whirly wind tried to climb in with him he wondered about the implications of the strong breeze.

Smiley pushed himself off the truck and slid behind the wheel to start the engine. 'I wondered how long it would take you after Kate turned up,' Smiley drawled in that remembered way and drew a smile from Rory until the words sank in.

Rory grimaced. Well, apparently not long. 'I read in the newspaper that her father's sick. So she's been gone a long time, too?'

'Hmm. Left the same year as you. Went to school in Perth.' Smiley grunted and let off the handbrake. 'She's back to spend time with him but flies down to the station township a few days a week to relieve Sophie.'

Smiley glanced at a small four-wheel drive vehicle under a lean-to in the corner of the paddock and Rory gathered it was Kate's. 'She works at the clinic, and delivers the babies that drop in from the camps, as well as emergencies.' Smiley shook his head. 'I hear the old man isn't happy she's working here at all.'

Seems Lyle Onslow hadn't changed then. Malignant old sod.

'Her father was never happy.'

'He's dying.' Smiley turned to look at him and they both thought about that. Lyle was a hard man, and not always fair, but no doubt Saint Peter would sort that one out shortly.

Smiley shrugged the old man's problems away and slipped

another matchstick into his mouth to chew. His lips barely moved but the matchstick danced at the edge of his lips in a skill passed down from Smiley's father. It brought back the good memories for Rory and there'd been many of those.

'So you told her you're coming?' Smiley said around the match.

No, Rory thought. He closed his eyes and the sleepless night he'd spent trying to work out how to do that hung heavily behind his lids. 'Try and keep a damper on that news, mate, until I get a chance.'

Smiley snorted, the closest he came to a laugh. 'Keep a damper on it? Here?' Smiley took the matchstick out and pointed it at Rory. 'The airwaves've been hummin' since your plane left Perth.'

Rory supposed he'd known that—just blocked it out—and he'd have to deal with the fact that he'd broken his promise when he saw her.

When he saw her. He didn't know how he felt about seeing the woman who'd dumped him after promising to wait. Had never answered his letters. Had apparently been the cause of heartbreak and suffering for his parents, who had shown her nothing but kindness when her mother died.

He needed more time, or would there never be enough time between them? Now he'd almost achieved his life's goal he'd finally realised he couldn't move on until he'd settled the past.

'How's Sophie?'

Smiley's sister was the antithesis of her brother. Bubbly and extrovert, she bossed Smiley mercilessly and her dour brother just shrugged. There'd been a time the four of them had done everything together out on the sprawling million acres of Jabiru Station—another thing Kate's father hadn't liked, his daughter knocking about with the hired help.

'Nagging as usual,' Smiley said but there was pride in his voice and he elaborated, unusual for him, as if he sensed Rory's need for a change of subject. 'Now she's working at the clinic with…' He shot him a quick glance.

…with Kate, Rory completed in his mind.

'Anyway, having help means Sophie gets some time off for a change,' Smiley went on. 'So she's good. She's getting tips on baby-catching, she calls it, and thinkin' of doing her midwifery.' He looked back at the road. 'When do you go back?'

Kate the teacher for Sophie? Of course she'd changed. What did he expect? That she'd still think he, Rory, held the answers to the universe?

'I've a week off. I'll stay over at the Hilton until RFDS can pick me up in a couple of days.'

The Hilton was the town's tongue-in-cheek name for the extremely run down boarding house presided over by a tough ex-army nurse, Betty Shultz. Shultzie swore she'd never leave Jabiru Township, then again, Shultzie swore, loudly and often, all the time.

Her Hilton was nothing like the chain of exclusive hotels of

the same name; her establishment was bare minimum and held together by pieces of wood nailed over the top of other pieces of wood.

'How was Charlie's retirement party?'

'Good food,' Smiley said. 'Don't suppose you'd want his job?'

After flogging himself to higher and higher levels until last month's appointment? Volunteer ambulance in the bush instead of Deputy Commissioner of the entire state? Actually, it held some attraction. Back on the road instead of budget meetings and troubleshooting.

'No. Afraid not.'

They didn't speak again until they drove past the huge cattle yards on the outskirts and pulled up opposite the rundown hotel in the main street of Jabiru Township, population a hundred and fifty through the week, three hundred—mostly ringers and cowboys—on the weekend. Town, sweet town.

He looked around. A big change from Perth city.

Another whirly wind scooted past Rory as he lifted his swag out of the back and he glanced at the pale sky for the first streaks of cloud. Not yet.

He thumped the roof and Smiley lifted his hand and drove away. Rory watched the truck until it disappeared in a ball of dust and wondered if he could change his mind and ride it back out to the airstrip.

He'd never run from a challenge before. Funny how attractive that thought was right now, but only for a moment.

Well, he'd arrived. He needed to stop making such a big deal of a visit home. It wasn't as if he had family here any more. He squashed that bitterness away too. The rest—meaning his reaction to Kate—would have to take care of itself.

He looked at the mostly boarded shops in the deserted street. It wasn't like Kate's father's homestead and the home station where he'd grown up, but in the years since he'd been to the commercial part of Jabiru not much had changed.

Except the collateral damage he'd caused to his family by his liaison with Kate.

Kate Onslow was born into the pilot's seat of an aeroplane; luckily, because it made the distance she needed to cover so ridiculously easy.

The two-hour drive between Jabiru Homestead and Jabiru Township was dust all the way and to fly cut the distance down to twenty minutes. Her great-grandfather had settled on the station a hundred years ago and when the township had grown exponentially her grandfather had built a new homestead away from the madding crowds. Though a hundred people didn't seem 'madding' to Kate, she could understand the improvement in position for the family headquarters.

The new Jabiru Homestead, many-gabled, encircled by verandas and sprawled over an acre, nestled below a range of ochre mountains that bordered the Timor Sea; the peaks gave water and provided glorious waterholes and a lush rainforest pocket, and all only a short distance from the sparseness around

the house.

The old homestead at Jabiru Township that she could see in the distance now from the air, held the hospital clinic, the pharmacy, the one-roomed library of donated books and the garage for the town's only four-wheel drive ambulance truck.

As she closed in on her destination Kate saw the Royal Flying Doctor plane take off from the town strip and her heart rate dropped in a swoop as if she'd flown through a sudden wind shift, something her aircraft had been doing all flight, but this internal updraught made her sick to the stomach.

She'd had three radio calls already to tell her Rory McIver was coming to town to see her.

Last month it had been hard enough to come back and face her belligerent father and the reality of his illness but that paled in comparison with Rory's unexpected visit.

She'd been able to face the idea of coming home because she'd known her father would never change her mind about anything again. But Rory? Once he'd been the world to her.

She would just have to survive this too. Her independence would help her survive it. The sudden sting of threatening tears she ignored—they never came to anything. She hadn't cried since all that had happened ten years ago and the lies. But the emotional turbulence had started and she hadn't even seen him. She was a big girl now and not some needy teenager with an adolescent crush on the manager's son.

Kate took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Too

many years she'd spent telling herself she needed to stand on her own, rely on herself, be strong, and that determination would not be undermined by a man who had been out of her life for a long time. What did he want to see her for now, anyway?

Kate stripped Rory's intrusion from her mind and concentrated on her descent because that was her strength. Single-minded concentration on what needed to be done. But, as soon as the plane grounded, as soon as room for distraction arrived, the thoughts returned to stick like the plane's wheels to the ruts on the strip.

She gritted her teeth and secured her aircraft but the worry nagged at her all the way to town in her vehicle. Nagged her through the first half hour at work, right up until sixteen-year-old Lucy Bolton presented with the worst case of indigestion she'd had in her life.

Jabiru Township Clinic serviced the small town set in the baked earth at the edge of the station's southern mountain ranges, a place that hid lush waterholes and settlements, plus far-flung aboriginal communities and out camps for the station. If the situation was dire, the doctor might be able to fly in once a week —unfortunately he'd been in yesterday.

Kate took one look at Lucy and put her to bed in the four bed ward. 'Under those covers, young lady. No arguments. Where's your mother?'

Lucy was a big-boned, hardworking girl whose mother leased one of the four pubs in town from Kate's father. Usually happy-

go-lucky and fun, Kate knew Lucy wasn't one to complain. They bred them tough out here—had to—it was a long way to twentieth century medicine.

'Mum's tired.' Lucy sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and kicked off her shoes. 'There was a big outfit in town yesterday and I didn't want to wake her.' Lucy sighed as she rested her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. 'The queer thing is, Kate,' she whispered, 'I haven't eaten a thing 'cause I feel so rotten, so how can I have indigestion?'

'That's not good.' Kate stared down at the young girl and in a swirl of memories saw herself. 'Poor you.' She stroked her hair. She saw the slight puffiness around the eyes, the tiredness, that protective maternal hand that crept over her stomach. Her voice dropped. 'Any chance you're pregnant, Luce?'

Lucy's eyes flew open and the sudden fear in the young girl's face was enough confirmation. Kate sighed under her breath for the loss of youth coming Lucy's way and a smidgen for the prick of envy. She wished she'd had the sense to ask for help like Lucy had.

Though in Kate's day Mrs Schulz mightn't have been as easy to approach as Kate or Sophie would be, even if Kate had been able to get all the way to the township from the home station.

She stroked Lucy's shoulder. 'Everything will be fine. I'll just take your blood pressure, poppet. You don't look well to me either.'

By the time Kate had done a full physical assessment the

window shutters were banging against the walls outside and the howl of the wind was clearly audible. Kate barely noticed it as her concern grew for the young woman in front of her.

The flying doctor would have to come back and pick her up because there was no way she could manage Lucy here. And there was no way she wanted to because she knew what it could cost.

The pregnancy test proved positive but Kate hadn't needed that; she could clearly hear the heartbeat from Lucy's little passenger inside and she was more worried about the dangerously high levels of protein she found in the specimen of Lucy's urine.

Lucy's uterus could be felt midway between her belly button and the bottom of her sternum, which meant she'd been hiding her secret for about seven months. Around eight weeks too early to birth, if the baby was growing well. Eight weeks to go!

Kate closed her eyes against the memories that wanted to surface. Right when the trouble had hit her all those years ago. She shook the unwanted thoughts away, not least because she didn't want to jinx Lucy.

Unless Kate was mistaken, Lucy's blood pressure would ensure labour happened soon anyway, and Kate knew how fragile premmie babies were. Not standard procedure around here, three thousand kilometres from Perth.

That was, of course, if Lucy wasn't in labour already and didn't know it. 'You're not having any tummy pains are you, Luce?'

Lucy shook her head carefully. 'Just this headache and rotten indigestion that's killing me.'

It isn't indigestion, Kate thought—it's your body telling you something is very wrong. At least Lucy had listened. Kate poured a small tumbler of antacid, more for comfort, and gave it to her. 'Sip on this, Luce. I need to talk to the doctor on the radio.'

Five minutes later Kate lifted the headphones from her ears and looked at them. No way could they do that. She settled the pads on her ears again and, strangely, the action had calmed her nerves. 'Say again,' she said, but there was little hope it would sound different this time.

'Medication and transfer. If I were you I'd transfer her today. The storm's a big one. The only way to transport is on the ground. If you decide to go you'll have to take her out by road before it rains again and we'll fly her from Derby. Or you could sit on her for another twenty-four hours with those symptoms and pray.'

Kate closed her eyes. 'It's six hundred kilometres of corrugations. What if she gets worse on the trip?' Kate had another, more practical thought and her eyes widened. 'What if she goes into labour?'

'You could hope she doesn't deliver.' Mac Dawson had been obstetric registrar when Kate had been a newly graduated midwife at Perth General. Now an obstetrician in Perth, Mac respected her knowledge and she knew he cared about her predicament. But he couldn't do anything about their options. There was nothing else he could suggest. 'You should have stayed with me in Perth.'

Kate rolled her eyes, glad he couldn't see her. He'd asked her

out a couple of times and Kate knew he'd have liked to have pursued their relationship if she'd been interested. She should have been but wasn't. Mac's pursuit had been a factor in her choice to work at one of the smaller hospitals in the suburbs of Perth after graduation.

Mac went on. 'Her first baby, Kate. It's your call but I'm sure you'd prefer early labour to an eclampsia out there while you wait for the storm to pass. The weather could set in for days and your strip will wash out. It'll get tricky if she's as unstable as you think and the roads are cut.'

Mac was right. She'd just needed to hear it twice. Road it was then. 'Thanks for that, Mac. I'll get back to you when I talk to her parents.'

'Hear from you soon, then. Don't forget to give me a ring when you get in so I can be sure you made it.'

Kate pulled the earphones from her head slowly and walked back to her patient via the drug cupboard. She reached for what she needed, along with the tray of intravenous cannulas, and set it down on the table beside the bed.

Lucy had fallen into an uneasy doze and every now and then her arm twitched in her sleep. Kate rechecked her blood pressure and the figures made her wince.

'Lucy.' Kate held the girl's wrist as she counted her pulse. Lucy's eyes flickered open. 'I have to put a drip in your arm, poppet, and give you some drugs to bring your blood pressure down. Then I'll ring your mum. The doctor says you have to go

to Derby at least. Probably Perth.'

Lucy's eyes opened wide and the apprehension in them made Kate squeeze her hand again. She looked so frightened. Kate had been frightened too.

'It's okay, I'll come with you most of the way but you'll have to stay there until after your baby is born.'

'Mum doesn't know I'm having a baby.' They both looked down at Lucy's difficult to distinguish stomach.

Kate remembered this all too well except she hadn't had a mother. Just a ranting, wild-eyed father who'd bundled her off to strangers before anyone else found out.

'We'll have to tell her, but no one else needs to know just yet. This is serious, Luce. You could get really sick and so could your baby. I'm worried about you so we have no choice.'

Lucy slumped back in the bed and closed her eyes and two big silver tears slid down her cheeks. 'I understand. Will you tell Mum?'

Kate looked down at Lucy's soft round cheeks and her hand lifted and smoothed the limp hair back off her forehead. Poor Lucy. 'If you want me to. Of course I will.'

The next half an hour made Kate wonder how some people could be so lucky. Lucy's mother sagged at the news but straightened with a determined glint in her eye. 'My poor baby. To think she'd been worrying about upsetting me when I'd be more worried about her. Here was me thinking all sorts of terrible things when now I can see why she's been so quiet lately.

And you say she's sick?' Mary Bolton stared at Kate hard. 'How sick?'

'It used to be called toxemia of pregnancy. Her blood pressure's high and dangerous, for both her and her baby. I'm worried she could have a fit if it gets too high. They want her flown to Perth.'

Mary stared out of the window and then back at Kate. 'I had that 'clampsia thing. Scared the pants off the old man when he woke up and the bed was shaking, with me staring at him like a stunned rabbit unable to speak.' Mary shrugged. 'Or so he said—that was just before Lucy was born,' Mary said matter-of-factly and Kate's stomach dropped. Maternal history of eclampsia as well? So her mother had progressed to fitting. Kate closed her eyes. More risk for Lucy.

Mary glanced out of the window and frowned. 'But the Flying Doctor won't be able to fly in this weather.'

Kate looked out of the window to see what she already knew. The sky was heavy and purpling now. 'I know. We'll have to take her by road to Derby. Unless the weather clears further west and they can fly in and meet us at one of the stations along the way.'

Mary looked down at her daughter, then at Kate. 'You must be worried, Kate, if you can't wait here a day or two.'

'I am.'

Mary grimaced. 'We're lucky you're here. I'll have to arrange for someone to take over the pub and mind the other kids, then I'll follow. My sister lives in Derby. When does Lucy have to go?'

‘Today. Now. As soon as I can arrange it.’And that was when Kate realised the implications. By ambulance. The usual driver, Charlie, had retired and just left on his lifetime dream holiday. There was no one else with any training to come with her, and she really needed some bac-kup for this trip…

Sophie would be needed here and there was no one with any medical knowledge except—the second highest qualified paramedic in the state—she’d heard he’d got the Deputy job. The man from her past who’d flown in this morning to see her.

Rory was the last person she wanted to spend twenty-four hours locked in an ambulance truck with.

She turned away and looked into the room where Lucy lay. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad. Maybe what she’d felt for him when she’d been sweet sixteen and besotted enough to practically force him to make love to her would be different.

Of course it would. He was ten years older now—that made him twenty-eight. With his job the onroad experiences would age anyone, so he’d probably have changed, put on city weight, look a lot older. She’d be fine.

The call came in just as Rory finished unpacking. Betty knocked like a machine gun on his door and Rory flinched from too many sudden call situations in the city. Maybe he did need this break away from work.

Betty in a battledress shirt and viciously creased trousers was a scary thing as she stood ramrod-straight outside his door, and he wondered if he should salute her.

He opened the door wider, but gingerly, because the handle felt as if it was going to come off in his hand. The place was falling apart.

The fierce expression on Shultzie's face made him wonder if he was going to be put through an emergency fire drill. 'Yes, ma'am?'

'Kate Onslow's on the phone for you. Best take it in the hall quick smart.'

He moved fast enough even for Shultzie to be satisfied.

Chapter Two

RORY parked the ambulance outside the front door of the clinic and climbed the steps to the wooden veranda. His boots clunked across the dusty wood as the wind whipped his shirt against his body.

He could remember riding out to one of the station fences in weather like this to shift cattle with his father, a big man then that no horse could throw, with the gusty wind in their faces and the sky a cauldron above their heads. He could remember them eyeing the forks of lightning on the horizon with respect. And he remembered his father telling him to forget about any future with Kate Onslow. That it wasn't his place. She was out of his league.

His feeling of betrayal that his own father hadn't thought him good enough for Kate either had remained until his dad had been fired not long after Rory had left, after twenty years of hard work, and his dad's motive became clearer.

Lyle Onslow had a lot to answer for. The problem was Rory had always loved Kate. Not just because she'd hero-worshipped him since she'd started at the tiny station school but because he could see the flame inside her that her own father had wanted to stamp out.

He understood the insecurities she'd fought against and how she refused to be cold and callous like Lyle Onslow. She'd been a brave but lonely little girl with a real kindness for those less

fortunate that never tipped into pity and her father had hated her for it.

It wasn't healthy or Christian, but Rory hoped Kate's father suffered a bit before the end. He shoved the bitter thoughts back into the dark place they belonged, along with the guilt that he'd caused his parents' misfortunes.

No wonder he'd never wanted to come back after Kate's letter. Kate, who hadn't needed him for what seemed a lifetime but needed him now.

The lightning flickered and a few drops of rain began to form circular puffs of dust in the road. 'Lovely weather for ducks,' he muttered out loud—his mother's favourite saying and one he hadn't said for years—to shake off the gloomy thoughts that sat like icy water on his soul.

He pushed open the door and walked down the hall to the clinic.

Rory's first sight of Kate winded him as if he'd run into one of those shutters banging in the street on the way.

He'd tried to picture this moment so many times on the way but she looked so different from what he'd imagined and a whole lot more distant.

She was dressed in fitted tan trousers that hugged her slim hips and thighs above soft-skinned riding boots. The white buttoned shirt just brushed her trim waist and an elusive curve of full breast peeped from the shifting vee of her neckline and then disappeared, a bit like his breath, as she turned to face him. He

lifted his gaze.

Thick dark hair still pulled back in a ponytail, no sign yet of grey, but ten years had added a definition to her beauty —womanly beauty—yet the set of her chin was tougher and steadier and she'd probably reach his chin now so she didn't look as fragile as he'd remembered.

Lord, she was beautiful.

He'd have liked to have sat somewhere out of sight and just studied her to see the changes and nuances of this Kate he didn't know. Breathe in the truth that he was here, beside her, and acknowledge she still touched him on a level no other woman had reached. But his training kicked in. There'd be time for that later.

'Rory,' she said but she was talking to the wall behind his head, which was a shame because he ached with real hunger for her to look at him. 'Thank you for offering to help.' She barely paused for breath, as if to eliminate any possibility of other topics. 'I'm worried about Lucy and the sooner we leave the better.'

Her voice was calm, unhurried, unlike his heart as he struggled for an equal composure. 'I've fuelled the truck and packed emergency supplies,' he said. She nodded but still wouldn't meet his eyes again and suddenly it was impossible to continue until she did. 'Kate?'

'What?'

How could she keep talking to the wall?

'Look at me.'

Finally she did, chin up, her beautiful grey eyes staring straight

into his with a guarded challenge that dared him to try and break through her barriers. There was no doubt he'd love to do that. But he knew he had no right to even try.

In that brief moment when she looked at him he saw something behind her eyes, something that hinted about places in her that were even more vulnerable than the delicate young princess he'd left behind, or maybe he was imagining it.

Either way, he wouldn't delve because he wanted to close doors on this trip, not open them. 'For the next twelve hours I'll drive, you care for your patient and I'll get you both to Derby safely.' Then he'd say his piece and leave. 'So we'll talk on the way back.'

She blinked and he could sense the loosening of the tension in the air around her. Sense it with what? How could he sense things like that about a woman he'd not seen since they were both teenagers and yet not be able to sense anything about others more recent? It wasn't logical.

'Of course.' Her glance collided with his for a long, slow moment before she looked at the clock. 'Thank you, Rory.'

When she turned away, Rory swore he could feel physical pain from that loss of eye contact like tape ripping off his face. There you go. He still had it bad and, to make it worse, he doubted she felt anything. But that was his problem, not hers. He looked through the door to the patient on the bed. They needed to go.

To Kate's relief, Rory had them ready to leave within minutes and she couldn't think of anything else she might need to take

with her. Except maybe her brain.

The grey matter seemed to have slowed to about one tenth speed since Rory McIver had walked in and Kate found her eyes drawn repeatedly to his easy movements as he settled Lucy in the back with extra pillows. He didn't look at Kate again, which was good, because Lord knew what expression she had on her face.

Her friend Sophie had come in to man the clinic. 'Don't worry if you don't get back for a couple of days. We'll be fine.' Sophie hugged Kate.

A couple of days with Rory? Kate shuddered. She'd never survive.

Sophie was still talking. 'I'll ring the housekeeper about your dad while you're away and drive up to the home station after work if needed. Okay?' Sophie frowned and Kate knew she could see the worry on her face. 'Just go.'

Kate nodded again and cast one anguished look at Sophie. Kate was the only midwife. She had to go.

She focused on her patient. Lucy's blood pressure had settled marginally with the antihypertensives and Kate had packed as many emergency items as she could think of, including what she could for the birth. Kate just prayed she wouldn't need any of it.

Even better, Rory had spoken to Lucy and her mum and by the time he'd shut the rear door to the truck Lucy was looking more relaxed, which was a good thing. Kate doubted it was all to do with the drugs she'd been loaded with and a lot to do with the handsome man promising to get them through.

As much as Kate dreaded the trip with Rory, she could only be secretly thankful that he'd been here. Otherwise, with Charlie gone, she'd be embarking on this dash with the elderly mechanic due for his own retirement soon. Old Bob would have been little help in a real emergency, with his flaring arthritis and his hearing aid that never worked.

The driver's door opened and Rory climbed in behind the wheel—all six feet four of him—and Kate had to shake her head at her preposterous predictions this morning. So much for expecting Rory to be unfit from too many late night doughnuts and morose from his work; there was no doubt this guy was still seriously gorgeous, with a wicked twinkle a long way from surly.

Suddenly Kate was glad she had to stay in the back with Lucy because Rory's broad shoulders seemed to stretch halfway across the seat in the front and no doubt she would have been clinging to the passenger door to avoid brushing against him.

When he turned his head for one last check to see they were settled, his teeth showed white like a damn toothpaste commercial, Kate thought sourly, when he smiled at their patient. He didn't smile at Kate. 'You ready for your Kimberley Grand Tour, Lucy?'

The bronzed muscles in his neck tightened and his strong arms corded as he twisted, and Kate couldn't help the flare in her stomach or the illicit pleasure of just looking for a long slow heartbeat at this man from her past. No wonder she hadn't been able to forget him.

What she had forgotten was how aware she'd always been of Rory's presence and now, unfortunately, he'd hardened into a lean and lethal heart-breaker of a man who'd be even harder to forget. She wished he'd never come back.

She sank into her seat, glad of the dimness in the back to hide her momentary weakness, but even there she could pick up the faint teasing scent of some expensive aftershave, something the Rory she'd known would never have owned. The cologne slid insidiously past her defences and unconsciously she leaned forward again to try to identify the notes.

He looked at Kate. 'Did you get a chance—' he frowned at the startled look on her face and hesitated, then went on '—to let them know at the homestead you'd be away?'

The slow motion ballet of his mouth as he spoke ridiculously entranced her and, after another of those prolonged thumps from her chest, her hearing finally caught up. She blinked as his words registered. Stupid weakness.

'Yes.' That'd been a staccato answer so she softened the one word with a quick explanation in case he thought her unnecessarily terse. 'I said I'd be at least a day late coming back, if not two. They'll tell my father.'

She looked away from him and decided then and there that it would be best if she didn't look directly at the source of her weakness again. *Don't look at Rory.*

Her teeth nibbled at dry lips as she pondered her worst fear out loud. 'That would be as long as we don't get more rain and

end up flooded somewhere along the track for a night.'

The road they were about to hit was known as the last great driving adventure in Australia. It was enough of an adventure just being on it with Rory, let alone if they got caught up in the middle of a flood.

He nodded. 'It's a possibility. Let me know if you want me to stop more often so you can check Lucy out. I don't expect to get much speed up or you'll both be thrown all over the truck.'

He turned back to face the front. 'We'll drive until after the first major crossing…' he paused as if he was going to say something but then went on as if he'd changed his mind '…and stretch our legs.' He started the engine.

'Sounds fine.' But all she could think of was how much she wanted to get going so this agonising exposure to Rory could be over with.

Kate checked Lucy's stretcher safety belt, forced a smile for her sleepy patient and buckled her own belt. She'd take it one hour at a time and not think about that talk she'd have to have on the way home. But it was hard when she had to decide what and how much to tell him.

Maybe she could leave him in Derby and drive the truck back herself. The idea had merit but, unless Rory had changed more than she expected, he'd be unwilling to send her off on her own.

The wind whipped the scrubby grass and stunted gums at the side of the road as they drove towards the distant ochre ranges and lifted the red dust they stirred into the now grey-black sky

behind them.

At least the wind would shift the dust cloud more quickly when the road trains drove past, Kate mused, and, as if conjured, Rory slowed their vehicle and pulled close to the edge of the road to widen the distance between them and an oncoming mammoth truck.

The unsealed road was an important transport access for the huge cattle stations that lay between the infrequent dots of civilisation.

Road trains were three and four trailer cattle trucks that thundered backward and forward across vast distances. These road monsters didn't have a chance of stopping if you pulled out in front of them.

Even overtaking a road train going in the same direction was difficult because the dust they stirred was so thick that visibility was never clear enough to ensure there wasn't other traffic heading your way, and the risk far outweighed the advantages.

Kate remembered pulling over and brewing a cuppa instead of following one heading towards Derby in the past. She was thankful this one was travelling in the opposite direction.

This truck sported a huge red bull bar that flashed past Kate's opposite window and three steel-sided pens filled with tawny cattle rattled after it. She sighed with relief when the dust was blown away by the ever-building wind and they could move on.

An hour and a half of corrugations later, they came to the first of the major rivers they'd have to cross, the Pentecost. There was

barely any water over the road, a mere eighteen inches, but that would change as soon as the storm hit. Then they'd be stuck on the other side until it went down.

Kate caught a glimpse of a silver splash from the bank ten metres back from the road and shivered.

Thank goodness the height of water was easy to see because Kate had no desire to watch Rory walk the Pentecost to check the level.

Not that anyone walked across here. The Pentecost was populated with wildlife and a saltwater croc might just decide it fancied a roll with him. The name saltwater crocodile didn't mean these creatures needed to be near the sea. They were quite happy to eat you a couple of hundred kilometres inland in freshwater. Even with her dread of the 'talk', that wasn't how she wanted to avoid Rory's company.

Rory slowed the truck for the descent into the river bed, changed into low range and then chugged into washed gravel to crawl though the wide expanse of water. Once across, they steadily climbed out the other side until back on the road and trails of water followed them as the truck shed the water they'd collected.

She looked up front through the windshield to where they'd stop. Her stomach dropped. Not here!

Ten years ago, Rory and Kate had set up a picnic at sunset out here to enjoy the glory of the Pentecost River and the distant ranges. That night before Rory left he'd wanted a place that

wasn't her father's land and this was where they'd come. A point on the triangle of vast distances people thought nothing of travelling.

The memory was etched indelibly and Kate felt the soft whoosh of time as she remembered. That sunset had been as deeply coloured as a ripe peach with the magnificent sandstone escarpment of the Cockburn Range in the distance. She blushed red-ripe herself at that memory because that evening she'd set out to seduce the diffident Rory and they'd both got more than they'd bargained for.

That was their round-bellied boab up ahead. She just hoped Rory would have more delicacy than to pull in there.

The truck slowed and turned off the road into the lay-by. She glanced around for an alternative. Trouble was, theirs was the only decent sized parking area clear of the road and their boab was part of it. She sighed.

Grow up, she admonished herself. She needed to check Lucy's blood pressure and her baby's heart rate but the memories of this place all those years ago crowded her mind as she waited for Rory to open the door.

Kate remembered the night before Rory left ten years ago and unfortunately it was as clear as yesterday.

'So you are leaving?' Kate couldn't believe it. Rory gone? What would she do without Rory? He stood tall and lean and somehow distant, as if he had to be aloof to say what he needed. This wasn't her Rory.

Safe in his arms was the one place she felt loved for herself. He was the one person who understood how lonely she'd been since her mother had died, the person who could make her laugh at life and made her complete.

'I'm leaving tomorrow morning. With the cattle on the road train,' he said and the words fell like stones against her ears. How would she bear it? How could he?

He went on, 'I can start my paramedic degree in two weeks. I have that. When I asked to marry you we both knew he'd fire me.'

He paused and looked away from her and she knew it was to hide his shame. He had nothing to be ashamed of. Kate wanted to hug the memories away from him. She knew what had happened. She'd overheard her father flay the pride from Rory as if he was a criminal.

She'd tried not to listen to the threats and abuse but if her father had thought she would think less of Rory from that exhibition then he was wrong. She was ashamed that she had Lyle Onslow's blood in her own veins.

'I'm sorry for my father, Rory.'

His eyes stared at the distant hills with a determination she'd never seen before. 'It doesn't matter.'He reached into his pocket. 'I have something for you.' He snapped open the box. 'Will you wear this until I come back?' he said, and pulled the ring free. She recognised it as a tiny pink diamond from the mines behind Jabiru —a token she had no idea how he'd managed to pay for—and slid it on her finger, where it sat, winking prettily at both of them.

No matter that her father had refused permission.

She looked at the ring—Rory's ring—it could have been the largest diamond in the world and it wouldn't have been any more precious, but most of all she wanted to comfort Rory. Apologise for her father, show him how much she loved him. All she could do was pull Rory's face down to hers and kiss him. They were alone under the vastness that would soon turn to night. Their last night together.

'I want to marry you. I do,' she said. For the first time she dared to gently ease the tip of her tongue into his mouth, awkwardly but with all her heart and soul in that one timid adventure, and suddenly they had entered a whole new dimension that sent spears of heat flicking from her through to Rory.

He groaned and kissed her back, answering her challenge, each emboldened by the other, enticed by the danger until both were mindless with the desperation his leaving had ignited between them.

She needed to feel his skin, hear his heart and she fumbled open his shirt and slid her hands against his solid warmth, up and down, not really sure what she should do but needing to feel and mould the hard planes of his chest—a chest she wouldn't have near to lean on if he went.

She could feel the shudder in his body as he sucked in the air he needed for control, groaned with what she did to him, and she rested her hand over his heart and soaked in the pounding of his life force.

That was when she realised she had power. She could move him and make him lose a little of that tightly leashed control he'd always had. Push him to the edge and maybe he'd take her with him over to a place they'd always pulled back from.

He tried to put her away from him but she wouldn't let him, flung herself back against him, pulling his hands up to caress her in return. Then it changed; she wasn't the one in charge.

Suddenly she was in his arms, carried to the blanket she'd set up for their picnic, laid gently on the grass and he was beside her.

'Are you sure?' His whisper over her ear.

'Yes.' No second thought. 'Kiss me.'

Then they were unbuttoning, discovering the places they'd left secret, venturing with her murmurs of pleasure and encouragement to seal their pact once they'd fumbled with their inexpert attempt at protection.

Kate realised she had her hand on her throat and the pulse beneath her fingers rushed with memories. The truck had stopped and she dragged her thoughts back to the present with a shiver.

They'd be gone from here soon and so would the memories that clung to her in this place like entangling cobwebs. She'd only need a minute or two to check Lucy and hear what she couldn't as they rattled over the corrugations.

Still sleepy, Lucy stirred and opened her eyes. 'Where are we?'

Kate laid her hand on her arm. 'It's okay. Pentecost River. How're you feeling?'

Lucy blinked like an owl. 'I can hardly keep my eyes open.'

'It's the drugs for your blood pressure. Just doze as you can. I need to listen to your baby and check your observations while we're stopped.'

Lucy nodded sleepily and Kate slipped her stethoscope into her ears to listen for Lucy's blood pressure. All the while she was aware that Rory was walking around the truck towards the rear doors and any minute now she'd have to face him. That wasn't going to be as easy as it should be with those intimate memories so vivid in her mind.

Lucy slipped back under her sheet when Kate had finished.

Rory arrived, opened the back doors and waited to hear the verdict. 'Lucy okay?' His bulk blocked some of the light that spilled in with the open air and Kate was glad of the dimness because the heat had rushed into her cheeks and, uncomfortably, into other places too.

She licked dry lips. 'Better. Blood pressure's one forty on ninety. Much improved. I'm happy if it's still sitting at ninety diastolic.'Kate eased her cramped knee and sighed. She'd have to get out and stretch. It was crazy not to walk around the vehicle to move her legs for a minute before they set off again. She just hoped he'd move and she wouldn't have to squeeze past him.

As if he read her mind, he stepped away and, once out, it was hard to stifle the urge to catch a glimpse and see if their initials were still engraved on that tree.

She looked away to the river and realised Rory had moved up

beside her, not touching but watching her. That was the worst thing. He didn't have to touch her—she could feel his aura and there was nothing she could do about the tide of heat that again ran up her neck. Or the aching desire to just lift her hand and rest it on his cheek. Where had everything gone so wrong between them?

'Our initials are still there, on the tree,' he said.

Kate's heart thumped at him reading her so easily. She was twenty-six, for goodness' sake, too old to be self-conscious about adolescent romanticisms. It would be horribly awkward if he saw how weak she was.

She stepped past and thankfully her breathing became easier. Away from him.

Rory didn't know what to say. The memories were there for him, bombarded him here, and he hated the way she threw an offhand glance at the tree. As if it meant nothing.

'We were vandals,' she said, and he winced at the unexpected pain her comment caused. 'You'd get fined for that nowadays.'

She was so cold, Rory thought, and more like her father than he'd ever thought.

She pointed to the river, no doubt to change the subject. 'I stitched up a traveller two weeks ago from down there.' They both looked. 'The croc only nicked his fingers when he bent down to fill his water bottle.'

Rory whistled through his teeth. 'Now that's one lucky man.'

Kate smiled grimly. 'Tell me about it.'

No. He wanted her to tell him about what had happened ten years ago. Why she'd changed so dramatically. Why she'd broken her promise and said she didn't love him. Sent the ring back.

Had her father made her? Had Rory's own parents had something to do with it? Now there was only Kate to ask.

Why had Lyle Onslow victimised Rory's father? Why fire him for no reason, stop his mother working anywhere on the station until they'd had to leave? Had the old man really been so afraid that Kate could love someone socially inferior like Rory?

Rory opened his mouth and then closed it. He sighed. 'I'll top up the diesel with the jerrycans while it's not raining.' He walked away.

It wasn't what he'd been going to say. Kate knew that. That was the problem. They'd always had an intuition about what the other was thinking and it seemed she hadn't lost hers either. She gazed out over the plains with the serpentine swathe of the river and the thick dark clouds almost obscuring the base of the ranges they'd watched that evening.

The day she'd become a woman. A day that would affect her for ever. And Rory didn't know. Would he understand? Would he hate her? Blame her? Feel sorry for her?

'You right to go?'

'Absolutely ready to go,' she said, and they both knew that was exactly what she was thinking.

Lucy had dropped into an uneasy doze and didn't wake when the truck started again. Kate watched her patient's flushed cheeks

and a tiny niggle of fresh worry teased at her brain, pushing away thoughts of Rory.

'It was a beautiful sunset that day.' Rory's voice was quiet and she knew it wasn't only the sunset he was saying had been beautiful for them.

Not now. Not with the memories so fresh in her mind. She felt the tears sting and she waited for them to form but of course it didn't happen. She couldn't go there.

Thinking about that time of her life would open up all the wounds and grief and anger she'd bottled up for so long and she wasn't sure what would ensue if she let them out. She was used to being frozen now. It was safe.

Her glance rested on the young girl opposite her. With Lucy so sick, now was the time to be focused on her patient.

'I don't remember.' She met his eyes briefly in the mirror and shrugged before she busied herself with writing down Lucy's observations.

Rory didn't comment but, strangely, not once in the next hour did she feel his glance in the mirror as she had since Jabiru Township.

When Lucy moaned softly in her sleep Kate narrowed her gaze on the bulge of Lucy's stomach. She eased her hand down to gently rest on the top of Lucy's uterus through the sheet. As she'd suspected, Lucy's belly was firm and contracted beneath her fingers but, thankfully, after only seconds, the tightness loosened and her uterus relaxed.

It was probably a Braxton Hicks contraction and not the real thing, Kate reassured herself, but the fact that Lucy had felt it even when half asleep was a worry.

Kate glanced at her watch to note the exact time. She hoped Lucy didn't take up regular moaning because then she'd have to start thinking the unthinkable.

Please. She didn't want a premature baby born hours away from hospital in the back of an ambulance truck.

Closer to Derby might be okay. For about half an hour even the tiniest babies usually managed with warmth from the mum, and she could offer oxygen, but longer than that they had a tendency to crash. The risks increased dramatically for breathing difficulties, let alone all the other things that could go wrong.

She'd never enjoyed her stints in the special care nursery, no doubt because it had been too close to her own skeletons in the closet, and she knew premature babies became ill from lots of things. She knew that sometimes they didn't make it.

Like hers. Like the child she'd never even seen, for all those reasons she'd never been given, and the memories she didn't have that she'd blocked out successfully until now, until Rory had returned and allowed them to crowd her mind again.

Kate chewed her lip. 'How long do you think the trip's going to take?' She had a fair idea of the answer; she just needed to ask it out loud and to share the anxiety that was building as she jammed the untimely images from the past back into their hidden cave.

'Five hundred kilometres to go, at say fifty an hour is ten hours

plus stops and moments of unusual interest. We've done two.' Rory looked up for the first time in a long time and caught her eye in the rear-vision mirror. 'I can shorten it by an hour but the ride will be rougher. Getting nervous, Kate?'

Understatement. Not about the labour—just the baby. 'Maybe we should have stayed at the clinic and had Lucy's baby there. At least we'd have electricity and more hands.'

'But they said ship her out.'

'I know. The problem is there's a real risk if Lucy's blood pressure continues to climb.'

Not to mention the haemorrhage risk, Kate thought, but didn't say it out loud in case Lucy woke up. Already placental vessels would be damaged and weakening from the constant high pressure of blood. If one of the vessels burst it would pour blood between the placenta and the uterus, then mother and baby would be in big trouble. Like Kate had been. She'd have to watch Lucy for pain that didn't come and go.

'I think she's starting to contract,' she said quietly to Rory. 'Still irregularly, but the Nifedipine doesn't seem to be holding her.'

Rory frowned. 'Are you saying nature wants that baby out and she might go into labour?'

'Most likely. I'm all for that.' Kate grimaced. 'Just not on the road.'

Rory looked up at her again through the mirror and, while his face remained serious, his sincerity shone through. 'That's why you're with her. I've got faith in you. And I bet Lucy does too.

Everything will be fine.'

It was a platitude. An attempt to ease her strain. He was a very experienced paramedic and ambulance officer, a professional at calming people in stressful and extreme situations.

And it was the phrase he'd said to her many times over the years in her hours of need.

That first day at school…As the boss's daughter, she'd been left alone and lonely until big Rory McIver from Year Two took her hand and showed her where she could sit. 'Everything will be fine,' he said and something in his eyes and the caring tone of his voice allowed her to believe him.

That week her mother and stillborn baby brother died…When everyone else avoided her, not knowing what to say. When her father banned her from a final farewell at the funeral and Rory sought her out and held her and helped her make a special garden with a wooden cross where she would go to talk to her mother that no one else knew about. 'Everything will be fine,' he said.

Rory, listening the hundreds of times she was upset by her father's uncompromising stand on her behaviour and mixing with the hired help. He was always able to reassure her. Big things became manageable when she told Rory.

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