



**FIONA MCARTHUR**  
The Midwife's Baby



**MEDICAL  
ROMANCE™**



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**Аннотация**

Eight months pregnant and a bridesmaid isn't midwife Georgia Winton's ideal situation...Especially when she goes into labour during the ceremony and the only person who can save her and her baby is the groom – gorgeous consultant Max Beresford!

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His gaze locked with hers. ‘I’d rather tell you that I have enjoyed the last four months with you more than any I can remember.’

Georgia’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. ‘Sure,’ she said. ‘It must have been a hoot for you. You’ve enjoyed being woken up by a colicky baby ten times a night, and having a grumpy, sleep-deprived flatmate to live with.’ Why on earth would he?

‘Absolutely.’ The tilt of his lips confirmed that he had only pleasant memories, and though he spoke quietly his tone of voice sounded the truth. ‘I became acquainted with Elsa, and she’s gorgeous—like her mother.’

Georgia tilted her head. ‘Same temperament, you mean?’

Max nodded. ‘She’s determined and independent, yes.’

They were teasing each other, and she was beginning to enjoy it too much. This was far too dangerous for her peace of mind, and she tried to steer the topic away into more general waters. Maybe he did have an agenda with her after all—or he’d managed to beam in on one of her fantasies.

‘It is a glorious night,’ she said.

Max wouldn’t be diverted. ‘I’ve appreciated each and every vision of you at night since Elsa was born.’

A mother to five sons, FIONA MCARTHUR is an Australian midwife who loves to write. 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](http://www.fionamcarthur.com)

The Midwife's Baby

Fiona McArthur



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TO THE MAYTONE GIRLS, FRIENDS INDEED, WHO  
INSPIRE ME.

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# CHAPTER ONE

THE chapel floated like a snowflake against the backdrop of the lush Hunter Valley Gardens and the string quartet drifted silvery notes out over the waiting guests.

Max Beresford stood tall and straight at the front of the church and realised that despite the romantic venue he'd condemned himself to the type of loveless marriage his parents had.

Give me a sign, God. Am I a fool for going through with this?

The procession music started. Too late.

Max tilted his chin slightly as he watched the matron of honour walk haltingly towards him in some screechingly fashionable apricot material.

There was something about the dogged yet vulnerable expression on the woman's face that aroused his sympathy because he'd approached the altar with just such a halting advance.

Max frowned. Was there a problem or was his new cousin-in-law-to-be unbearably nervous? Embarrassed didn't make sense because she looked gorgeous—fertile with her baby bump bulging beneath the shiny fabric—but gorgeous nonetheless.

She paused again and seemed to suck air in through gritted teeth before she raised her chin and resumed her approach.

Max knew Tayla had been reluctant to include her midwife cousin, Georgia, in the wedding party but he'd thought that had

been because of Georgia's unfashionable pregnancy and some vague hint that she was depressed. Maybe there were other reasons.

Before he could ruminate on that thought his non-blushing bride staged her spectacular entry and the gasps from the congregation drew Max's eyes towards his future wife.

Max could do nothing but stare as feathers rippled and parted in the breeze and held him spellbound.

He blinked in disbelief. Tayla seemed to have been devoured by a white duck.

Framed against the door for an extended moment, his bride's shapely arms and legs stretched from beneath a strapless froth of feathers that only just covered her thighs at the front and fell in a frothy tail to the floor at the back.

A large apricot bow around her tiny waist matched the rose in her father's lapel.

Good grief, Max thought, and suppressed a smile. He'd fallen into Swan Lake and he had never felt less like a prince.

His bride floated up beside him, as did one of the feathers that had come unstuck and drifted just ahead of her in an eddy, and went to hand her feathered fan to the matron of honour.

Cousin Georgia was not having a good day as she missed the one cue she'd been assigned. He could see Tayla remained seriously unimpressed with her attendant.

For Georgia Winton, being matron of honour had assumed the nightmare proportions she had hoped it wouldn't.

The first unexpected labour contraction had hit her as she'd entered the church at the precise moment the whole congregation had noticed her entrance.

The next contraction had grown to such intensity she almost dropped the bouquet as her cousin handed it to her.

When she was able to, Georgia offered an apologetic glance at the bride and groom, which neither acknowledged. Tayla had tossed her head in disgust and Max had continued to stare, bemused, at Tayla's dress.

Georgia clutched the bouquet like the dead duck it resembled and forced her shoulders to drop as the pain eased away. Distraction, distraction, distraction, she reminded herself. There was plenty of that.

Max Beresford, the groom, was pretty distracting. She'd known of him, but until now not by sight as he'd missed rehearsals because of some crisis at the hospital.

The real Max was tall, broad-shouldered and far too handsome for his own good, but his kind eyes had surprised her with their warmth.

Though younger than she'd expected, he looked every inch the new department head of obstetrics for the North Coast Region of Hospitals—a position he was taking up after Tayla's and his honeymoon—and she was surprised how much she instinctively felt that Tayla had chosen well.

After her baby was born, Max would apparently find her a midwife's position in the region, so she really did hope she

wouldn't ruin his wedding.

Max's brother, Paul, who had played groom each time they'd practised the wedding service, seemed pleasant enough but not a warm person and he stood beside Max now as a paler shade of his brother.

Unfortunately Paul's eyes were fixed a little too intently on his brother's wife-to-be.

Meanwhile Tayla, gloriously aware of everyone's attention, proceeded to lift her eyes theatrically towards the stained-glass window and shimmy her feathers.

Georgia could see no softness or devotion or anything redeeming from her cousin despite the perfect setting and the man beside her. Though she had adamantly said to Georgia that of course she loved Max.

On the groom's part, even the smile Max gave his fiancée seemed strained and disconnected.

Georgia ached with disappointment. Weddings shouldn't be like this. What was wrong with everybody? Except for her parents, who had remained blissfully in love until their deaths, she had begun to despair that all marriages were destined to be travesties.

Tayla she could understand. Tayla had always wanted the extravagant white wedding and the rich husband, topped off by the bridal magazine shoot currently in progress.

While her cousin would enjoy being married to a handsome consultant as she flew in to join Max briefly for social occasions

in whatever city or town he visited, Tayla didn't intend that her marriage would markedly change her life.

A tiny worry line drew Max's thick black brows together even further and Georgia glared at him for not savouring the moment. Didn't he realise the sacredness of marriage?

What was in it for Max if he didn't have some affection for his bride?

Romantically, Georgia had hoped this wedding would restore her faith in true love. She'd hoped there would be a incandescent joy between these two as they stood before God and declared their troth.

Then the third contraction gripped her belly and all else was forgotten as the searing pain snatched her breath at the peak. This time the intensity drew a stifled gasp she couldn't contain. Even the minister looked across at her with raised eyebrows.

It wasn't fair. Labour was supposed to start with gentle regular contractions, gradually increasing in intensity. She should have been supported by her midwife friends at home, with birdsong playing. Not the Wedding March.

The only thing bird-like about these pains were that they flew straight to a pain score of ten.

When the contraction finally eased she accepted that it was likely the wedding would go on without her.

Georgia chewed her bottom lip and tried to focus on the glorious blue-green stained-glass window until the minister began to speak again. In the lull before the next pain, she could

almost believe she could wait at least until the man-and-wife part of the service.

Tayla was going to kill her and when she looked at the bride she wanted to cry. Pregnancy hormones, of course—but, then Tayla had always made her want to cry.

She tried to concentrate on the ballet of the shooting fountains in the artificial lake below—surely the next contraction would be further apart—until a tiny clicking pop sent the trickle of warm fluid down her leg and forced her to call it a day.

‘Excuse me,’ she whispered to the minister as she edged away from the altar towards the side door of the church.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ Tayla hissed, but this time Georgia didn’t hear.

Please, God, she prayed silently, don’t let anyone notice the tiny rivulets of fluid in her wake. She could feel the eyes of the congregation on her back.

Suddenly the trickle became a gush and her baby kicked and squirmed in an agitated dance that evicted any thought of who was watching and sent prickles of unease down Georgia’s spine.

This didn’t feel right and her baby’s panic was communicated to Georgia even though she had never experienced labour before. At work she’d seen labour go wrong and she tried not to allow those memories to intrude.

She remembered the words of her Calmbirth midwife—listen to your body. Listen to your instincts. Her belly heaved as her baby twisted again. Her instinct said she needed to go to the

hospital and her baby demanded speed.

She lifted her eyes in panic. She needed help, and suddenly help was there. The steady gaze of Max grounded her panic with calmness and a strong, reassuring hand on her shoulder.

She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat. The last time she'd seen him he'd been at the altar with Tayla. She darted a look to the front of the church and her cousin glared with real menace towards both of them.

'Your waters have broken?'

She nodded, still stunned that Max had left his bride. Georgia didn't have the mental space to go there. Tayla would have to get used to being married to a doctor, but not yet—at least not until after the wedding.

'You've been having contractions.' His voice was gentle and she looked back at him because it was better than looking at the gaping assembly.

Her baby twisted and turned like a fish on a hook and she cupped her stomach and grabbed his hand as the next contraction squeezed.

'Hard and fast. Something's wrong.' It was difficult to get the words out through the pain. 'Something else came out with the water. I'm thinking cord prolapse.'

Cord prolapse was one of the true obstetric emergencies and they both knew it.

If a baby hadn't 'dropped' or engaged its head in the pelvis, a loop of cord could fall between the baby's head and the bottom

of the uterus when the waters broke. With four weeks to go in Georgia's pregnancy her baby hadn't dropped yet so it was dreadfully possible.

Any contractions she had after that could force the hard head of the baby onto the presenting cord and cut off the flow of oxygen from mother to baby. With no oxygen her baby would die.

If that was the case they needed to try to keep Georgia's baby's head from coming down onto the umbilical cord. Minutes counted.

'I'm scared, Max.' She'd never met this man in her life and suddenly it felt OK to call him Max.

His eyes softened and he nodded once. 'I know. We need to get you to the hospital ASAP.'

He flipped open his phone and spoke briefly into it. 'Let's get you outside to the car. An ambulance can meet us on the road if we don't beat them there.'

He scooped her up in his arms and she cringed. 'Your beautiful suit.'

'It's only a suit.' He grinned down at her and incredibly his eyes were golden and caring and she suddenly felt her baby had a chance, even though the odds were stacked against them.

Another contraction coiled viciously through her and she moaned. This was terrifying.

Max carried her swiftly to his black limousine. White ribbons fluttered on the long bonnet and the JUST MARRIED placard

sat proudly on the boot.

Georgia shifted in his arms as she twisted her neck to see. ‘Not this car, Max. The seats.’

‘To hell with the seats. At least we have room and the windows are tinted.’

Max’s chauffeur’s usually impassive expression faltered as Max deposited the wrong woman in the wedding car.

‘Newcastle Hospital ASAP. I’ll pay the speeding fines,’ Max said over his shoulder as he climbed in after her. He pulled shut the door before he sat opposite Georgia and shrugged out of his jacket.

The car accelerated away from the kerb and Georgia fell back in a heap. Max leaned across from the facing seat to help her balance.

‘Can you check and tell me if you can feel the umbilical cord?’ He smiled sympathetically at her and suddenly it was OK. They were a team working together to help save a baby—her baby.

With difficulty she knelt on the soft leather seat, closed her eyes mortified as a rivulet of pink fluid disappeared down the back of the seat, and hitched up the wet satin creation designed by a leading Sydney fashion house.

That morning, when she’d struggled with clipping her thigh-high stockings to the garter belt, she’d thought it a shame no one would see the pretty lace of the belt. What a joke. Once she got to the hospital, everyone would be looking at her.

As she slipped her hand down into her panties she knew what

she would find—she could feel it beating like her own heartbeat except slower. Sure enough, a loop of umbilical cord fell into her hand.

Before she could confirm her finding to Max, the next contraction was on top of her and with this pain the urge to push was overpowering. It couldn't happen this quick! They were supposed to stop the labour until they could get her to operating theatre and do a Caesarean section to save her baby.

'Ma-ax,' she wailed and she grabbed his hand, put her chin on her chest and pushed, unable to stop herself.

Still calm, his voice was kind. 'There's no time for modesty. You know that, don't you, Georgia? Let me see.'

Max's face was composed but in that moment she saw the stressed beat of the vein in his temple and she knew he doubted her baby's chances despite his calm voice.

The look of surprise on his face made a tiny shaft of hope slice through the pain to imprint on Georgia's thoughts.

'First baby?' His eyes met hers in question.

'Absolutely. Probably last,' she gasped.

He smiled at that and sat back. 'Well, your baby is ready to come and is almost here. Let nature finish the job, Georgia.'

That was all she needed to find the rest of her strength and with the next pain fast on the heels of the last she concentrated from deep within herself and willed her baby to fly out into the world before the lack of oxygen from the compression of the cord could take away her life.

When she opened her eyes Max was unwinding the cord from around the baby's neck and lifting her towards Georgia, and incredibly a miniature angry red face screwed up to emit a bellow that almost lifted the roof off the car.

Max laughed and she blinked and looked again at this tiny roaring child of immense determination and began to shake in shock.

'My God.' Max wiped his eyes on his upper arm and then grabbed his suit jacket and rubbed her baby dry before he leant forward to slip the bodice strap off Georgia's shoulder to allow one side of her dress to fall to expose her skin. 'Here, keep her warm.'

Still chuckling, he placed the baby against Georgia's bare skin, flipped the jacket over to the dry side and tucked it around them both.

'Congratulations,' he said, and shook his head in disbelief. 'I'm afraid her father missed her arrival.'

Georgia shuddered. 'We didn't miss him.' Her baby was still slightly wet and slippery and still roaring her head off and Georgia soothed her little round head that hadn't even had time to change shape for the journey through her pelvis.

'Poor baby.' She ducked her head and kissed her downy cheek. 'Do you have a headache from your quick trip?'

Max listened to the soft maternal whispers from a woman he barely knew and felt incredibly touched by a scene he'd seen so many times in so many circumstances—but never like this.

‘I think you might be right about her headache.’ Max shook his head again and the smile on his face felt bigger than any he’d had in the last few years. This birth brought back the notion that there could still be immense satisfaction in his chosen profession.

He’d known he needed to get back to the grass roots of it all and away from the consultancy, and board meetings, the constant demand for more hightech medical apparatus and the financial headaches and heartaches that being head of the obstetric department left him with.

This new position promised exposure to the real world of obstetrics again. While a percentage of his duties would remain administrative, there was an expectation he would work in each hospital to gain insight into the obstetric viability of each facility.

If he was honest, that was the carrot that had got him into this marriage mess in the first place. This moment in time had proved how much more rewarding hands-on obstetrics was for him but he’d have time to think of that later.

Georgia’s baby finally quietened and after a quick glance to ensure all was well he suggested to his driver that he slow the car to a reasonable pace as they finished the forty-minute drive to the hospital.

This Georgia, she was something special to have come through this with a calmness and serenity that should have been shattered, especially as, being a midwife, she’d known the complications that could ensue.

Unexpectedly the loud sound of rhythmic sucking could be

heard and Max felt the smile widen on his face again.

‘Umm. Isn’t breastfeeding supposed to be noiseless or does this child of yours do everything spectacularly and with high volume?’

‘I think she’s loud. I should call her Thor—or Thoreen.’

‘Speaking of “thor”, are you?’

‘Very funny.’ She shook her head at him and for the first time in many years he felt like a child rebuked by an adult and his lips twitched.

She got over it quickly, though. ‘Now you mention it, what are we going to do with the disaster down here ruining your upholstery? I don’t suppose you have two cord clamps and a pair of scissors?’

He stripped off his elegant neckpiece. ‘I do have a cord tie.’

She giggled and then covered her mouth. ‘I’m sorry. I’m feeling light-headed with relief and I’m being silly.’

He pulled a snowy white teatowel from the bottle compartment and folded it. ‘Pop this between your legs.’ He handed the towel to her. ‘Let’s just settle for that one knot in the cord with the tie and we’ll bundle it all up still connected and they can sort it out at the hospital. Are you bleeding?’

She shook her head. ‘Not since she started to feed.’

He marvelled at the wonders of nature without the usual drugs given at the end of labour. ‘Thor looks about five pounds. How early is she by your dates?’

‘Four weeks and two days.’ He’d hazard a guess she was

counting days from conception.

‘Did ultrasounds confirm those dates?’

She lifted her chin at him. ‘Ever the doctor. Why do so many obstetricians think ultrasounds know more than the mother?’

He chuckled at that. ‘True. Sometimes ultrasounds can cloud issues that don’t need clouding. And other times an ultrasound can clarify things.’

‘Hmmpf,’ Georgia said. ‘You can’t beat good clinical skills. Technology is one of the things I won’t get bogged down in when I start to practise again.’

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard someone hmmpf. ‘We won’t get into that discussion or maybe we’ll save it till later.’

‘And my baby’s name is not Thor.’

‘Wowser.’ He settled back into the seat as all the chores that could be done had been done. The rest could wait.

He was a mess and her dress had seen better days too. His shirt was unbuttoned at the neck from when he’d pulled his tie off. The long sleeves had been hiked unevenly up to his elbows and he cupped his hands on one knee and decided he’d definitely have to throw out the suit.

He looked across at her. Actually, she looked pretty good. ‘So what are you going to call her?’

She laughed at that and he loved the way she threw her whole face into the laugh. No attempt to save on laughter lines and she did have a lot to be thankful for.

‘What do you call a child that arrived like this and roared so vigorously at birth?’ She looked down at the now content baby. ‘I could call her Maxine.’

She was delightful and with a thud he remembered he was almost married. ‘That would really set the cat among the pigeons,’ he drawled.

He saw the moment she remembered Tayla. ‘Oh, my God. Your wedding. I’m so sorry.’

‘Later. It will be a drama in due time. No use thinking about it now.’

## CHAPTER TWO

TAYLA'S wild eyes were slitted shafts of fury in her narrow face as she stormed into Georgia's hospital room. Anger vibrated off her in waves and even the baby stirred in her sleep with the malevolence emanating from Tayla.

Max thought it all lost a little credibility with the feathers.

Normally Tayla was a very attractive woman but in this instance he decided he might have had a lucky escape. He stayed motionless, leaning up against the wall with his arms crossed, and waited for his fiancée to see her cousin was not alone.

Tayla saw no one except Georgia. 'You had to do it. Had to ruin everything. If anyone could do it, it would be you! I knew you shouldn't have been my matron of honour but my father had to have his way. Well I'm not the only one who's a laughing stock. Serves him right.'

'I'm so sorry, Tayla.' Georgia wilted against the pillows and closed her eyes, and Max realised that the ridiculous behaviour of Tayla was upsetting the new mother.

'You will be!' Tayla spat, and Max stepped away from the wall.

'That's enough.' His voice was very quiet but sliced off Tayla's words as if he'd swathed his arm through the air like a conductor. Tayla froze before turning slowly to face him.

'Max?' She stamped her foot and another tiny white feather puffed into the air. 'I knew you must have stayed with her.'

‘Obviously,’ he drawled, and then regretted his provocativeness for Georgia’s sake. Outside work interference it was probably the first time he’d made the effort to check Tayla. Maybe he had let everything slide too much in his obsession to land this job.

‘Look at your suit!’ Tayla was slow to see the dangerous glint in Max’s eye. ‘And why did you have to be the one to go with her? There were half a dozen obstetricians there but, no, you had to leave me at the altar like a fool.’

Max glanced across at Georgia and the sleeping baby. ‘I’m sorry about your wedding, Tayla,’ he said. ‘But perhaps in private and later.’

Tayla faltered and stretched her face into a smile, finally connecting Max’s displeasure. ‘It was your wedding, too.’ The plaintive note sounded clearly. ‘And the magazine was there taking photos. No wonder we couldn’t find you when the ambulance turned up. When it was called off my father searched everywhere for you.’

‘Your father would have done better to spend his time checking on his new great-niece.’ Max raised his eyebrows. ‘I’m sure you, too, were concerned that Georgia’s baby almost lost her life.’

Tayla glanced at the baby in Georgia’s arms with barely concealed disinterest. ‘Of course.’ She dragged her arm across her face. ‘It’s been such a horrible morning. I think they will still print the photos from the church but as a disaster now. I’ve been

quite distraught.’ And quietly she began to sob.

Max dropped his jaw in amazement and Georgia shifted her baby up to her shoulder and slid to the edge of the bed.

In sudden clarity Max realised if he didn’t step in Georgia would rise from her bed to comfort her cousin and take all the blame for something that no one could have prevented.

‘Stay there, Georgia. Rest. You’ve had a big morning, too. I’ll take Tayla away and calm her down.’

Tayla lifted her head and he admitted she cried very prettily but some of the sterling reasons he’d had for marrying her had strangely seeped away.

‘Come on, Tayla,’ he said more gently. She really had been excited about the magazine shoot and he needed to be more patient. ‘I’ll make you a coffee in the consultants’ tearoom and we can talk.’ He turned her towards the door and glanced over his shoulder at the woman in the bed.

‘Look after Thor.’

The sweetness of his smile made the lump of tears in Georgia’s chest swell even more and she nodded stupidly and watched him leave.

She’d have to name her daughter or she’d begun to think of her as Thor. The problem was she’d only chosen boys names. More reason to dislike the inaccuracy of ultrasounds.

Actually, she would like to call her Maxine but no doubt the affinity she felt towards a certain obstetrician would pass. She was never falling for that again.

She wouldn't be calling her daughter after her father because the memories of Sol's dangerous possessiveness left her quivering in her bed. She shuddered and forced her mind back to the present.

Her daughter was like a little lioness with her roar and her power and her aggressive hold on life. No man would try to run her life. She should call her Elsa after the lioness in Born Free. Actually, she liked that. She liked it a lot.

'Hello, Elsa.' Elsa opened one dark blue eye and glared at her mother before thick black lashes fluttered down again and she drifted back to sleep.

Well, that was settled. She looked up as a knock sounded at the door and her uncle poked his head around it.

'You available for visitors?'

'Come in, Harry.' She gestured to the seat beside the bed and her nearest living relative sank onto the hard plastic with relief. He peered at the baby in her arms.

'So she's well? No ill effects from her dramatic entry into the world?' He lifted one finger and stroked the baby's soft hair.

'The paediatrician said she'll be fine. Because Elsa was so vigorous at birth, we're sure she coped with whatever fall in oxygen she suffered.'

Harry raised his bushy white eyebrows. 'Elsa. Strong name. Still, you must have been terrified. I'm glad you're both well. I gather Max did a great job.'

'He was very calm and caught her beautifully.' She leaned

towards her uncle. ‘I’m so sorry about Tayla’s wedding.’

‘Water under the bridge.’ He looked at her and they both smiled at the poor pun. ‘Tayla threw hysterics in the church when the limo drove off. I was glad to get out of there.’

Georgia bit her lip. She felt too guilty to smile at her uncle’s dry amusement. ‘She’s with Max now. I’m sure he’ll calm her down.’

‘She’d better show a more attractive side than I saw this morning or it won’t matter how much he needs a wife.’ Her uncle looked at Georgia quickly and then away.

‘I did not say that.’ Distressed, he rubbed his gnarled hands together. He was a self-made success and proud of his hands, but he wasn’t proud of that slip. ‘I’m an old man and get mixed up sometimes.’

He looked around the room—anywhere but at Georgia. ‘You look after young Elsa here and I’ll see you soon.’ Harry bent down and kissed her cheek before he lumbered out of the room as fast as he could.

Georgia stared after him. ‘Good grief,’ she said out loud. ‘What do you make of that, Elsa?’

‘So you’ve named her?’ Max spoke from the door. Georgia looked serene and competent with the baby nestled in her arms, and he stifled the pang of pain he’d thought he’d got over about not having children.

Imagine someone like her to come home to after work. During his engagement Max had eventually realised that at best Tayla

would fly to visit him every few weeks and he'd accepted she would continue with her life as charity social queen.

At the time it had seemed enough because he could never offer a maternal woman a family and Tayla made no secret of the fact that she didn't want children. A realistic Tayla was better than the beauties who had chorused that IVF would do the trick.

Imagine if it had been possible to marry someone like Georgia? They could have even worked together and he'd have a real insight into the care the women were receiving.

Enough. He wouldn't be searching for another wife. One close shave was enough. Maybe he could run his disastrous day past the board and they'd consider his circumstances against the fact he wasn't married. He'd sort something out.

He frowned at the strange expression on Georgia's face and he wondered what new complication had arisen.

For Georgia, after the first quick glance, she didn't know where to look. Perhaps she'd caught her uncle's affliction of avoiding eye contact, but this was a bit awkward after hearing Max needed a wife.

She flicked another peek at him and away again. 'Harry just left.'

'Yes, I know.' Max frowned. 'I saw him but he seemed in a bit of a hurry. I'm not sure he's speaking to me after I failed so dismally as a son-in-law.'

Georgia winced and looked down as Elsa slept contentedly in her arms. That was definitely her fault. She wished her daughter

would wake up and yell. At least she could avoid conversation then. Her brain was spinning from Harry's bombshell. Max just didn't seem the type to need a wife.

The guy had everything. Looks, money, fabulous career. A sliver of ice slid down her back. Maybe he wanted to own a trophy wife, like Sol had.

'How is Tayla?' It was all she could think of to say.

'Unengaged. She doesn't want to marry me any more.' Max dropped the words into the room like an afterthought. 'But she'll be fine. I've sent her home with my brother. I think they will do very well together. We don't normally get on but Paul's been a godsend this week.'

Georgia frowned and played back his comment in her mind. Unengaged. Needed a wife. 'Did you say the wedding is off?'

'Definitely. I couldn't guarantee to her I would never rush off like that again and she said it wasn't good enough.'

'She's a fool.' Georgia had thought the words and somehow they slipped quietly into the room for Max to hear.

'I think so—but there you have it.' He was irrepressible and she couldn't help smiling. They both grinned at each other and the camaraderie was back.

Georgia decided she must have misunderstood Uncle Harry. Max didn't seem too upset for someone who needed to have a wife. She would go with her instincts and her instincts said Max Beresford could be trusted.

'So why were you marrying Tayla if you didn't love her?'

He sighed and sat down. She realised he was dressed in theatre garb so he must have changed out of his soiled suit at some time. He pulled his hand over his strong chin as she watched him gather his thoughts.

‘The board of directors for the new job were adamant. They wanted me but no wife, no job. Tayla seemed like a good idea at the time.’

Georgia felt disappointment lodge in her throat. She was a damn poor judge of character. The man was shallow. ‘Not a good reason to tie yourself to one person for the rest of your life.’

‘It was only for a year if it didn’t work out.’ He looked up at her and smiled sympathetically. ‘I gather your foray into married life wasn’t a roaring success either.’

She wasn’t the one who needed the sympathy. ‘I believed in commitment when I took my vows.’

‘And how was your marriage?’ The gentle tone in which he asked the question made her eyes sting with sudden tears.

She did not want to go there. ‘None of your business.’

‘That bad, eh?’ He pressed his lips together as if holding back further comment, and suddenly she could at least admit how bad it had been to herself.

It was her turn to sigh. ‘Worse. How did you know?’

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. ‘From something you said when you were in labour about not missing Elsa’s father.’

The limo ride came back to her in Technicolor and she shuddered. ‘Labour. Could you call that labour? That horrific few

minutes when I thought I would lose my baby?'

She shook her head. 'That was like being hit by a truck.' She couldn't begin to imagine the desolation she would be going through now if Elsa hadn't survived. 'I haven't thanked you for being there when I needed someone.'

Max smiled. 'And I haven't thanked you for saving me from Tayla. So now we have that out of the way, let's forget the others. What are you going to do now?'

Georgia tilted her head. 'My situation is fine. I'm free. I have a healthy baby, a home and a nanny arranged for the future when I go back to work.'

He looked a little taken aback at her well-laid plans. What had he expected?

'I can see you are organised.' He stood up. 'And you must be tired. I'll go. Congratulations on your beautiful daughter. My best wishes to both of you. Good bye.' He smiled and left.

She watched him go, watched him walk out after all they had been through, and now she really was alone. Well, what had she expected? He wasn't even her cousin-in-law now so she probably wouldn't ever see him again.

Of course, she couldn't sleep after that.

Elsa woke and gratefully Georgia fed her and stroked her hair and began to feel the peace she'd dreamt of when her child was safely born.

She tried to imagine how she would have felt if Max hadn't been there and she'd been alone when Elsa had been born. If Elsa

hadn't been fine. It didn't bear thinking about.

Then the cold ice of fear in the base of her stomach reminded her there were other things to be afraid of. What if Sol came back and tried to take Elsa, as he'd threatened? Could she keep her baby safe? Could Max help her keep her baby safe? It was a dangerous thought.

The next morning Dr Sol Winton stepped out of the lifts on the maternity floor and no one tried to stop him. The quality of his suit and the half-exposed stethoscope poking out of his pocket ensured that nobody questioned he belonged there.

He inclined his head at two nurses and his slow smile brought the colour to both their cheeks. The gilt-ribboned chocolate boxes screamed money and he placed one box on the nurse's desk and kept one in his hand.

'I'm looking for my wife. Georgia Winton?'

'Certainly, Doctor. She's in room four, down the corridor on the left.'

'Thank you. Enjoy the chocolates.'

He set off as if sure of his welcome. A tall, well-dressed, charming man, who drew the eyes of women and exuded authority.

When he entered the room only the baby was there wrapped up in a bunny rug in the Perspex cot. A name card tucked into the end read, 'Elsa, baby of Georgia, five pounds two ounces.'

He reached across and stroked the baby's cheek and her downy skin was silky soft beneath his finger.

## CHAPTER THREE

MAX FROWNED and strode quickly down the corridor as he saw the man enter Georgia's room.

He knew most of the consultants across the hospital but not this one. Some latent protective instinct raised the hairs on the back of his neck and all he could think about was that Georgia might need him.

His suspicions firmed at the sight of the man bent over Elsa's cot.

Max loomed in the doorway. His voice came out low and hard. 'Can I help you?'

Sol straightened slowly and he lifted his chin. 'No. I don't think so. Thank you.'

The man smiled but something about his phoney amusement increased Max's own wariness and disquiet.

Max moved to one side of the doorway to allow a free exit from the room—though only if the man left Elsa in her cot.

'Are you a friend of Georgia's?' Max enquired politely, yet the hint of steel suggested it wasn't a frivolous question and he required an answer.

'I'm more than that.' Sol smiled gently. 'Are you her doctor?'

'You could say that.' Max looked up as Georgia opened the bathroom door and his instincts firmed as her eyes widened and then closed for a second as if her worst nightmare had come true.

Her hand hovered over her mouth. ‘Sol?’ She shook her head but no further words came.

‘My dear wife.’ Sol smiled.

Georgia shook her head again and the words burst out in a vehement whisper. ‘I’m not your wife.’

Sol smiled again, and from the outside he looked quite pleasant yet something made Max take a step closer to Georgia in support.

Sol ignored him. ‘You’ll always be my wife. But I do see this is not a good time so I’ll leave you. Our daughter is beautiful.’ He placed the chocolates squarely on the bedside table.

‘Good day.’ He turned nonchalantly and sauntered away.

Georgia belted the robe as she rushed to Elsa to check she was fine. ‘Thank God you were here.’

Fighting back tears, she looked at Max. ‘Did he try to take her?’ She lifted and hugged Elsa to her as she sank onto the bed as if unable to support the weight on her legs. Her hands shook violently.

Max didn’t know what to do to comfort her.

‘No. He didn’t pick Elsa up. He just looked at her.’ What the hell was all that about? Max thought, and he glanced at the door through which Sol had disappeared. He’d love to ask the sleaze but he’d gone and Georgia needed him.

Max sat down beside Georgia on the bed and slid his arm around her shoulders. She quivered under his arm like a new lamb.

‘I’ll put safeguards in place. Your ex-husband won’t be able to get to you if that’s what you want.’

She shook her head and shuddered as she wrapped her arms around her baby. ‘I don’t want to stay here.’

Max squeezed her shoulders. ‘Where do you want to go?’ Her distress affected him in a way he hadn’t expected and he’d like to have shaken the truth out of the other man.

Georgia’s free hand was at her throat. She could barely speak because of the panic she was trying to control. ‘I was afraid this would happen. There is something I need to explain. Something I haven’t told anybody.’

She hesitated with reluctance to dwell on the whole distressing nightmare but it had to be spoken of. Her reluctance had almost cost the ultimate price. Elsa.

Sol would take her baby if he possibly could. He’d threatened her in those silky tones of his and the thought terrified her, made her sick to her stomach, and now it grew to epic proportions, like a phobia about spiders—except her phobia was all about Sol.

Even what he had done to her before was nothing to this fear that he might take her baby, and even though a tiny spark deep in her brain whispered she was being irrational, she had no control over the dread that was rising in her throat.

Georgia drew a deep breath and her voice sounded weak and strained even to her own ears.

No wonder Sol could smile.

And no doubt Max would hear the paranoia too but there was

nothing she could do about that except try and master it at a later time when she had time to regroup. At this moment she just needed Max to understand.

She hadn't progressed to why that seemed so important at this moment.

'Before I met Sol I was happy in my work, a senior midwife in my unit and studying for my master's in midwifery.'

Max nodded. 'Harry said you were well respected and then you became sick—is that right?'

'In the end I began to think I was sick. I need to start the story before then.'

She closed her eyes for a second to gather her thoughts. 'I met my husband, the new senior consultant at our hospital, Sol Winton, and he swept me off my feet. He promised nothing would change, and marriage would only enhance my full life, and that he couldn't live without me.'

She laughed without amusement. 'I was flattered. I'd passed thirty waiting for Mr Right. I'm no raving beauty and he was distinguished, handsome, and I'd begun to think I'd missed out on love and marriage and children. He caught me at a vulnerable time and I thought I loved him.'

'In truth I was married for two years to a man who wanted to own me, body and soul, and rule my life down to the smallest degree.'

'In the beginning I believed his excessive protectiveness was because he treasured me but I soon realised it was because he

felt I was his prized possession and he was training me to jump.'

Georgia drew a shuddering breath and her shoulders shook until Max edged back closer and leant against her. 'You OK?'

The tremor stopped and she nodded. 'I don't like to go over it but I have to so that you'll understand.'

Max shook his head. 'Not if you don't want to.'

'I have to,' she said with resolve.

'OK.' Max pressed harder against her as if he knew she needed that support.

She felt strangely safer with Max's hip and shoulders touching hers, which was ridiculous but it helped her to go on. 'I tried to make Sol see that marriage wasn't a power game and I needed to be my own person, but my charming ex-husband, the highly esteemed obstetrician, informed everyone I was a paranoid depressive. That's not an easy thing to dispute if you have reason to be unhappy.'

'That would explain what Harry said about your marriage getting you down.'

'Harry mentioned it, did he?'

She saw the look on Max's face and sighed. 'This is what I meant about disputing people's opinions. Sol made it seem I protested too much.'

Max frowned. 'It's OK. I believe you. Go on.'

'I was a professional woman with a career and friends before Sol. But he became more and more demanding. He isolated me from my friends and began to dictate my daily routine. He would

change it at a whim.’ She clutched Elsa to her as she remembered.

‘He cancelled my appointments with my uni, pulled my shifts so that when I turned up, cases had been replaced by another midwife, and that was when I realised people had begun to talk. He’d arranged a visit to a psychiatrist and circulated that I suffered from an anxiety-driven mental illness. The saddest thing was that I almost began to believe him, but I kept telling myself it was his problem, not mine, and refused to take medication. Finally I left him.’

‘Leaving was a good thing.’ Max nodded.

‘I left him for a year but I had to stay at the hospital because they were paying for my master’s. The day the divorce papers hit Sol’s desk he upped his campaign to win me back but I knew I would never go back to him. That was when he finally realised it wasn’t just another extended game.’

She laughed without humour. ‘Sol wanted me back, and had everyone at work on his side, and then he threatened my best friend’s credibility over a drug order that he’d tampered with. He’d moved on to blackmail.’

‘So prove it.’

‘It was her word and mine against Sol’s, and he said he’d drop his case if I went back to him.’

‘You went back?’ Max leaned forward incredulously.

‘I thought I had it all worked out. I prepared safeguards against any problems. I was going to stay with him until she was safe. Stay only until she couldn’t be charged.’

She looked away so he couldn't read her face. She didn't mention the horror of what Sol had forced her to endure and that she doubted she'd ever want to make love with a man again.

She didn't mention the fact that she woke up at night in a lather of sweat and a pounding heart. Or that now she had an even bigger fear. 'Well, in the end, she wasn't charged. I left again. Later I found out I was pregnant.'

Max raised his eyebrows. 'Why didn't you discredit him?'

'Sol is a powerful man. People believe him.' Georgia could feel palpitations in her chest and unconsciously she rested her hand there. He'd said he would take her baby at birth. He'd said he would if she didn't come back.

All the old fears and uncertainties and even unreasonable guilt that she'd heaped on herself began to surface and she fought to keep them away. She needed to conquer this. Elsa needed her to conquer this. 'It seemed easier just to leave and never go back.'

Max muttered an oath under his breath.

She went on because the sooner she did so, the sooner she could stop thinking about those horrible few weeks.

'Sol had been here to tell Harry I was depressed and paranoid. He covered himself in case I told them what he was really like. He is very plausible and dangerous.'

'When Harry suggested I move in with them, I decided it would be good for my baby to know family because she would never know her father if I could help it.' She kissed the top of her daughter's head.

She could see Max was trying to understand and at least he was trying. It was more than a lot of other people did.

Max squeezed her shoulder. 'We'll all help you feel safe again.'

She looked at him and he read the disbelief in her face. 'A month ago I received a repeated threat on my mobile phone against my unborn child. He would find a way to take her if I didn't come back to him,' she whispered.

That wiped the smile off Max's face and he felt his hand tighten protectively over her shoulder. 'Mongrel.'

She sighed under his arm. 'The police said nothing could be proved because Sol had used a public phone to make the call. All I could do was change my number.'

Max shook his head. 'He's put you through hell. I wish I'd known when I had him here.'

She shuddered. 'He's seen her now. I'm losing control of my life again. I left Sol because I needed to get control back.' She looked at him with determination in her eyes. 'And I will. I am. Just.

'I decided to move here and start again because I need family for my baby and I can make a good life for myself and my daughter. But now I'm scared again.'

He could help her. He felt the shift. She needed help and his gut tightened. He barely knew the woman but suddenly it all felt ordained. No doubt there would be flak along the way and the ex-husband sounded like a loony, but suddenly all that was unimportant if he could protect her. There was something about

Georgia that he truly admired and was irresistibly drawn to.

Now their closeness during Elsa's dramatic birth and today's near abduction made him realise that she probably needed him more than he needed her.

Win-win situation.

It was a strangely satisfying feeling for Max that had nothing to do with suddenly being eligible for the job again if she agreed. That he could protect Georgia was paramount. 'We could help each other.'

Georgia looked up at him. 'How?'

'Your divorce was finalized, wasn't it?' He tilted his head hopefully.

'Yes. I made sure that happened.' She frowned. 'Why?' The guy bounced all over the place and she couldn't keep up. 'I'm beginning to think Tayla had a lucky escape.'

He shrugged. 'Tayla was getting exactly what she wanted. An indulgent life with me to parade every now and then at her charity functions, and I had a wife I needed for my job. Neither of us planned on having children.'

No children, no living together, all for the sake of a job. What was wrong with these people? 'Wrong era,' she said, with barely concealed distaste. 'Employers can't make you marry any more.'

Max shrugged. 'The directors wanted a married man because they've had so many problems with people leaving the role. The last one ran off and eloped when he was most needed. The powers that choose knew of my impending marriage and that

gave me the edge.’

He shrugged. ‘Unfortunately, the idea of living with Tayla just won’t gel any more for me either.’ He said the words as if he he’d decided to change his brand of deodorant.

‘And you’re telling me this because...?’ She couldn’t keep the disappointment out of her voice. She’d liked him and he wasn’t worthy of that. Despite everything, she still believed true love was out there for most people, and Max cheapened it when he talked like that.

He lifted his head and captured her gaze with his own as if he sensed her disapproval and it mattered to him. His golden eyes warmed. ‘I’d been having second thoughts about marrying Tayla earlier. Even before your water broke.’

Georgia winced at the memory of that time in the church. That certainly wouldn’t go down as a highlight of her life!

He grinned. ‘Don’t be squeamish. You’re a midwife. As an obstetrician I think labour is great, as long as your baby is due.’

She watched him pull himself back to the topic, and she had to smile as he went on.

‘You’ve made me realise how close I’d been to disaster with Tayla. I can see now I want more in a wife than convenient paperwork.’

How had they started this conversation? Now she was confused at a time when she most needed clarity. ‘You want to tell me what you want in a wife?’ Suddenly she felt like crying. She knew what she didn’t need in a husband.

He went on and she tried to blink away her tears before he could see them.

Max was getting to the point. He just hoped she saw it the way he did. ‘Ah. Yes. The big question. Now I want a partner. Someone who understands what I do and even has a passion for it. I can’t fight Tayla every time someone has a baby out of hours or obstetrics have an emergency.’

He noticed the way her hand tightened over her baby and he couldn’t begin to imagine how she must feel to have been so close to losing her daughter a second time.

Maybe he had stumbled on someone he could come home to or meet at work and bounce problems off. Someone who had a social conscience and a warm heart. Someone like Georgia.

He couldn’t help the glimmer of hope that maybe the last twenty-four hours had all worked out the way they had for a reason—or with divine intervention, as requested.

No doubt he was mad, but the idea he’d just had wouldn’t leave. He could even salvage the job from something Georgia had said if he played up the business aspect, but suddenly that wasn’t as important as protecting Georgia from the creep. He paused and looked at her again. ‘You could marry me.’

She held up her hand. ‘You don’t know me.’

He sat forward. ‘I know enough. I’m sure you are a sensible woman and wouldn’t normally entertain the idea. That’s why I’m pursuing you now when your guard is down.’

She huffed humourlessly. ‘My guard isn’t down that much. I’ve

just seen my ex-husband and my protective instinct hormones are surging. I don't need to waste another couple of years of my life finding out if the next guy I marry is a jerk, or worse.'

She had a point, but Max didn't believe he was a jerk. 'What about a temporary marriage with, say, a year's contract? You save me and I'll protect you.' He frowned with concentration as he marshalled his best arguments.

'I'm serious, Georgia. I need to be married and after today I only have one week left. I've a friend I can get a dispensation form to get a licence in forty-eight hours, and you would be out of your ex's reach until you are stronger.'

He sat back a little in case he was crowding her. 'It doesn't look like I will fall madly in love at my age and I like you. I like you a lot. I need a temporary wife and Harry said you were looking for a job after the baby. You could work with me when you're ready.'

'It all sounds so coldly clinical.'

'We could warm it up.' He saw her face close and he backed off quickly. 'I'm sorry. Joking. We won't go there.' He paused and risked a lighter comment. 'Especially as you've just given birth.'

She had to smile and he knew it. But he was intrigued.

'Would it help if I told you I think we would deal very well together? Much better than expected?'

'Much better than whom?' She shook her head. 'You and Tayla? Two selfish, immature, rich people who think marriage is a sham or an excuse to wear feathers?'

He held up his hands. 'The feathers were not my idea. In fact,

a condition of marrying me is that you are not allowed to wear feathers.’

‘I’m not marrying you, Max.’ She turned her shoulder on him. ‘I’m not even sure I like you after this conversation. And I can’t believe that Harry was a part of this whole sell-my-daughter-to-aloveless-marriage thing.’

‘Harry wanted to have Tayla safely married before he was much older.’

He saw the moment she understood, and the sudden sadness in her eyes as she sat back against him, all else forgotten. ‘Why the urgency?’

‘That’s for Harry to tell, not me.’ It was Harry’s secret, not his. ‘Poor Uncle Harry.’

He squeezed her shoulder. ‘Leave it. He is dealing with this in his own way.’

She stared and shook her head. ‘So that’s why Harry agreed?’

‘One of the reasons.’ He smiled sympathetically and then went off at a tangent again. ‘I do have one burning question that’s puzzled me.’

She raised her eyebrows and his arm slid away from her shoulder so he could look at her fully.

‘Did you want a place in the wedding party or did Harry lean on you?’

She grimaced. ‘Who wants to be a pregnant matron of honour? Harry was so pleased that Tayla was settling down, and he wanted to see that, as cousins, his daughter and I were friends. Knowing

he's unwell explains why he was so insistent. I wanted to please Harry and the idea that I did have a family was comforting.'

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