

# *Living with Abi*

## *Chapter One*

A thick fog lingered in Abi's head. The high ceiling and pale green walls didn't look right. Where were her paintings, her books? Oh yes, she had checked into the hospital yesterday - immediately after she saw Dr. Cook. He wouldn't let her go home, birthday or not. This morning before dawn, a nurse apologized for waking her, not that Abi had slept, so somebody else could shortly put her back to sleep. On the way to surgery, the nurse who pushed her trolley commented on the oddity of Dr. Cook scheduling a surgery so early in the morning.

Movements at her side made Abi gaze at the three people she loved most in the world. They stood next to each other, nervously grinning at her.

"*Kia Ora. Tena koutou tamariki ma,*" Moa asked, giving her a Maori greeting and inquiring after her health, which was not good, but how bad she did not know.

Abi flopped a deadweight hand toward Moa, her nine-year-old son, Takahe, her best friend, a tall, dark-skinned Maori, and Colin, the sailor who had rescued her and Moa and brought them to New Zealand from the States. Takahe, rubbed her nose against Abi's in a traditional New Zealand greeting.

Abi chuckled, which awakened the newly sutured muscles of her abdomen. Takahe had welcomed her to Birdsong Inn, a bed and breakfast in New Zealand, with that same gesture when Abi still carried Morgan in her arms, before Takahe dubbed him Moa, before she took them in and treated them like family.

Through parched lips, Abi whispered, "Have you talked to the doctor yet?"

Takahe moved her face from side to side, shaking her dark, wavy hair, now prominently streaked with gray. “The nurse said he would be around soon.” She poured a glass of water and held it to Abi’s mouth.

It helped, although the dryness in her mouth felt permanent.

“We brought your sketch pad like you asked and a surprise.” Gripping her fingers, Moa pointed to a chair where a cake sat. Something Abi couldn’t read from her perspective had been written in the icing. She attempted to raise her head, but shooting pain stopped her.

“You picked a hell of a way to celebrate your fortieth birthday,” Colin said.

Abi held his calloused hand. “That was yesterday. You missed the party.” Since bringing her to New Zealand, Colin had drifted in and out of their lives, pursuing his love of the sea, but always returning to Birdsong Inn for short visits.

“Afraid you’re the one who wasn’t there.” His broad, tanned face broke into a mischievous grin. “So we had to celebrate without you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She kissed his scarred knuckles.

The door opened, and Dr. Cook walked in, his expression more grim than yesterday when he spoke of possible ways to put this cancerous growth in check. Takahe and Colin introduced themselves and Moa.

Dr. Cook, American by birth, shook hands with everyone, ending with Moa, who was small for his age. Bending over, his head was level with the boy’s. “What grade are you in?”

“I’m not, sir. Me mum teaches me at home,” Moa answered.

“And why is that?” Dr. Cook asked.

“There aren’t very many children in our village. ‘Sides, we can’t find a teacher to come to Jacob’s Springs,” Moa said. “I don’t know why. It’s the best place in the world.”

The doctor chuckled affably as he straightened. Takahe and Colin followed suit while Moa looked pleased with himself. Moa was everything to her, absolutely everything.

Abi stroked Moa’s mop of curly, golden brown hair. By the thickness of the folder under Dr. Cook’s arm and his seriousness masked by forced

pleasantries, Abi suspected the worst. “Colin, would you mind taking Moa for a walk while Takahe and I talk to Dr. Cook?”

“Not a problem.” Colin wrapped an arm around Moa’s shoulders and guided him out the door.

Moa poked his head back in, his green eyes glimmering. “We’ll make it our mission to get milk to go with the cake.”

“Good idea.” Abi blew him a kiss.

He caught it, high and outside, exactly where she had thrown it. Clutching it to his heart, he disappeared.

“He’s a fine young man,” Dr. Cook stated, his somber tone asking what would become of him when the awful thing that had invaded her body had run its course.

“Give it to me straight.” Abi braced herself.

Her request seemed to catch her doctor off guard. “I wish you had come earlier, when you first started feeling the pain.” He had expressed this sentiment several times yesterday when he was evaluating the test results.

“So you didn’t get it all?” she asked, avoiding the dreaded term for the demon that slowly consumed her.

“You have to remember it’s the eighties. Advancements in treating cancer are being made every day. A colleague of mine in Houston, Texas is showing amazing results in arresting ovarian cancer. Since you’re from Texas, perhaps you’d like to go there and. . .”

“No,” Abi snapped. Dr. Cook had no idea what had forced her to flee Texas, but that didn’t stop Abi from remaining terrified at the prospect of ever going back.

Dr. Cook’s brow wrinkled, and his mouth gathered in a pout.

“But I don’t have *just* ovarian cancer, do I?” she observed.

“No, you don’t. Chemotherapy is still an option. While I can’t make promises for a full recovery, we can slow it down.”

“You mean prolong my death.”

“Give you more time—with your son and your friends.” He glanced at Takahe’s grave face. “You’ll need to get your affairs in order, determine a guardian for your son, make sure your will is up to date, all of that.

Maybe spend some time with your mother. You said you hadn't seen her in a while."

"How long do I have?" Abi asked, drained by the prospect of putting a timeline on her remaining days.

"A year at the most—with treatments," he replied.

"And without?" she prodded.

He glanced at his closed folder as if he might see the answer on the cover. "It's hard to say. Six months, perhaps more. There's no way of knowing."

Loud footsteps slapped on the tile floor outside, Moa's tennis shoes. He never went anywhere quietly.

Before he had time to charge back inside, Abi pasted on a smile and touched Dr. Cook's sleeve. "Thanks. You've done all you could. I prefer to proceed without intervention." Her words sounded so rational, like she knew what she would do with Moa, like she had a goddamn plan.

"You don't have to decide now. Think about it," Dr. Cook urged.

"I have," Abi assured him. She had also thought about the fact that Moa's father, who didn't know Moa existed, was married and already had a son. Worse than that, as far as she knew, he still lived in Texas, a big state, but obviously not big enough for Abi to get away from Vince, the monster Abi had been married to. When Moa was only a few weeks old, Abi had made the mistake of calling her mother and telling her she lived in Austin. Before Abi could get off the phone, Morgan started crying. Mama must have put two and two together and came up with a grandchild, which she sent Vince to find.

When Abi started feeling abdominal pain three months ago, she tried to ignore it. That didn't work, so she willed it to go away. After that, she prayed and bargained with God. Now she must face it—and what to do with her nine-year-old son.

Garrett blinked and tried to focus on the red digital numbers of the clock that sat at the far side of his office desk. His damp forehead rested on the blotter. He felt wet all over. After he passed out, he must have started sweating. He dragged his arm that felt like it had weights tied to it toward his face, feeling for the negatives of Abi that he had been examining. The narrow strips of plastic, his only concrete proof that Abi had existed were still there. Thank God he had thought to lock his door before he pulled them out and lined them up on his desk, an insane, yet compulsive habit he had acquired in recent days. Delthea, his wife, would die if she walked in and saw them lying there.

How long had passed since he blacked out? He couldn't remember what time it had been when he couldn't hold up his head any longer, and he had felt himself collapsing onto his desk, much like a child falling asleep in his highchair. When he began feeling drowsy, he wondered if it had something to do with the constant discomfort in his gut that had gradually intensified over the last three months.

When he regained consciousness, he still felt bad, although his abdominal area felt semi-numb like the sensation that remains for hours after getting a tooth filled. It was nice to lack sensation in the area that usually pained him, but while he was unconscious, he had emptied his bladder and his bowels, so he needed to get cleaned up — if he could muster the strength to do so. Luckily, Judy, his secretary, and Delthea, his co-therapist and wife, were leaving him alone. Delthea probably told Judy not to disturb him since he had been listless yesterday when he arrived back in Houston after a month long book tour. By now his wife had left the office to prepare for his birthday party.

She wanted to surprise him, and he had played along, never mentioning the messages he heard on their home answering machine when he called from hotel rooms and checked it. He had not given Bud Anderson his home phone since he dared not let Delthea know he had hired a private eye to find Abi. Bud was touted as an individual who pulled information out of thin air, things like phone numbers. Supposedly, he could find anyone, even a mistress who had disappeared ten years ago.

Delthea glanced at her watch. Then she tossed a roll of black crepe paper to her sister who stood on top of a stepladder. "Can you move a little faster? We've still got balloons to blow up and posters to hang. Garrett will be home in less than an hour, and the guests will be here any minute."

"Don't get your panties in a wad, Deli," Elaine drawled while she fiddled with a roll of tape. She had an infuriating habit of moving at a snail's pace, yet somehow working circles around Delthea.

Frustrated from a day full of setbacks and delays, Delthea threw her arms in the air and marched into the kitchen. Even though the caterer had spelled Garrett with one 't' on the cake and brought the wrong brand of champagne, he *had* arrived. She couldn't say as much for the piano player who had promised to come an hour early and warm up on the newly tuned baby grand. Neither Delthea nor Garrett was musical, so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to actually utilize an extravagance bought simply to fill that corner of the living room.

While Elaine puffed on balloons, Delthea emptied the refrigerator of serving platters piled with a variety of cheeses, boiled shrimp, and vegetables and fruit cut into decorative pieces and assembled into recognizable shapes like birds and fish. She laid out her china, silverware, and linen napkins, none of that paper stuff for this special occasion.

When people responded to the invitation, they said how eager they were to see Garrett since he had been away so much promoting his book. Delthea hoped his schedule had finally slowed down some. At the beginning of their relationship, Garrett delayed marriage until they both finished their doctoral degree in psychology. When they finally married, Delthea was ready to start a family, but on their wedding night, Garrett convinced her to help him manifest his dream of a successful counseling practice before they had a child. As soon as their business had taken off, her dear, sweet husband plunged into writing a book. Now it was her turn. More than anything Delthea wanted a baby.

Garrett looked and sounded so tired last night. He fell asleep wearing his traveling clothes. Jet lag, she supposed. Who wouldn't be tired after

thirty cities in as many days? He didn't have another book tour on his calendar. At last, they could finally enjoy being together. She had turned down several speaking engagements in lieu of spending time with her absentee husband, preferably in bed.

After finding the perfect spot for a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses, Delthea glanced out the window of their fifth floor condominium and noted the profusion of pink azaleas.

March in Houston. Spring came earlier, and it got hotter here faster than any place she had ever lived. Still it was a lucrative city, and if you didn't go see your shrink once a week, you had "not arrived." Delthea hoped those with disposable income, continued to think that way. She had sacrificed her most fertile years to help Garrett start a practice and then to keep it all going while he followed yet another of his dreams. Now he could see their patients while she took time off.

Oliver Matthew's car pulled into the drive. He had been compulsively punctual since the day she and Garrett both showed up to start interning at his psychology clinic nearly ten years ago. From the very beginning, Delthea fell in love with Garrett's green eyes, his short, muscular frame, his caring demeanor, his confidence, wit, humor, everything—except his marital status. Neither ethical nor prudent nor wise, Delthea had hopelessly fallen in love with a married man.

Although Garrett openly admitted that he remained with his wife out of obligation, having brought her and their child from Vietnam, he was indeed taken and a father to boot. On top of that, Garrett was recuperating from a failed affair. His mistress, Abi, had disappeared about the same time Delthea met Garrett. A year later, Garrett seemed to be coping with losing Abi when his wife and child died in a car accident. Delthea's willingness to listen and comfort Garrett through both ordeals eventually brought them together.

The phone rang and Delthea answered it. She told Milton, the doorman, to admit Oliver and anyone who mentioned they were here for Garrett's birthday party. She asked Milton to give her a warning call

when Garrett arrived. As she hung up the phone, she shouted to Elaine, “The first guest is on his way up. Let’s change our clothes.”

She prayed Elaine didn’t plan to put on that purple dress she had worn to Garrett’s first book signing. What little there was of it fit too snugly in what Elaine would consider all the right places. Elaine was well endowed; Delthea couldn’t argue that, but she was also thirty pounds overweight.

Soon the apartment teemed with friends and colleagues. Delthea, now wearing a long, black evening gown, circulated among them, smiling, offering more wine, and periodically checking her watch. Noting the phone remained disturbingly quiet, she picked it up to make sure it had a dial tone.

Oliver cornered Delthea and asked if she still planned to cover for him in October. At first she drew a blank. Then she remembered their telephone conversation about his inadvertently booking two speaking engagements for the same night, one in Austin with the Cattlemen Convention and the other in Houston with a group of dermatologist. Once she assured him that she wouldn’t think of letting him down, he asked her which she preferred. She opted for Houston since hopefully Garrett would be home. Besides, she doubted her ability to meaningfully engage a herd of cowboys.

An hour after she expected Garrett, Delthea sought out their secretary and pulled Judy aside. “Was Garrett at the office when you left?”

“Yes, he said through the door that he was going home soon.” She winked at Delthea. “I nearly said I’d see him when he got here—of course, I didn’t.”

Good thing Garrett had been out of the office most of the last month. Judy used no discretion about saying things on the telephone loud enough for anyone to hear or leaving notes on her desk about so and so RSVPing.

Across the room, Elaine chatted with a group of prospects for husband number three, their enraptured faces all spellbound by her skimpy, purple dress and candid stories of life as a nurse in the ER. Invariably she



repeated that hideous story about the three-hundred-pound woman who was dropped off wearing nothing but a gee-string. Delthea hated to see Elaine embarrass herself with junior high humor, not to mention how her behavior reflected on Delthea. When Elaine paused for air, Delthea grabbed her elbow and guided her to the kitchen.

“Hey, Deli, what’s the big idea? I was just getting warmed up?” Elaine protested too loudly.

Delthea pulled her sister toward the pantry, out of sight and earshot of the crowd. “I need you to drive to my office and see if Garrett is still there.”

“You go. I’m having a good time.” She shrugged off Delthea’s hold on her. “Anyway, I’ve drunk too much. I can’t drive.”

“I thought you were doing a night shift later.” Elaine had agreed to help with the party but made it clear she must leave by nine to go by and check on her sons before she went to work. “What about Kent and David?” Delthea reminded her.

“Who’s that?” Elaine laughed and tipped her empty glass to her lips. “Call Garrett and tell him to get his butt home.”

Delthea grabbed the wall phone and punched in the office number, certainly not because Elaine had told her to. It was simply the most logical thing to do. The phone rang until the machine answered. Yes, she had an emergency, but the number the recording said to dial wasn’t going to help her find Garrett. She slammed the receiver back onto the cradle.

“I’m driving over there,” she announced to Elaine who looked none too steady. “Make some coffee and sober up.”

“Maybe he had an accident,” Elaine offered grimly, probably reflecting on what she saw wheeled into the ER every night.

Delthea grabbed her purse from the pantry. “Call the office again in a few minutes. Garrett might have gone to the john. If anyone asks, tell them I’ve run out for ice.”

“Right,” Elaine affirmed with little enthusiasm. “And if I reach Garrett, should I tell him there’s a house full of people here waiting to celebrate his fortieth birthday?”

“No, just—just tell him to get his butt home.” Delthea rushed out the door, ignoring the questioning gazes that followed her, the woman who had planned a party for three months but had failed to make sure the guest of honor would show up.

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