



*Medical
Romance™*

FIONA MCARTHUR

Midwife, Mother...

Italian's Wife



Fiona McArthur

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Dear Reader,

Tammy was never going to be anyone's wife. Wife meant 'love for ever', and she didn't believe in for ever, and then there was that 'obey' word. She'd always had issues with authority. Plus she had her son—the only man she needed in her life.

Then she met Leonardo Bonmarito—tall, gorgeous, a brooding Italian doctor who was never going to settle in Lyrebird

Lake, and who would never allow her the freedom she thrived on. And his son placed her own in danger. So what was she doing with her hands inside his shirt?

It makes you wonder if there's anything the magical Lyrebird Lake can do for these two strong and proud people who don't know how to let go of the past.

I adored this book. There's a bit of intrigue, a bit of action, the joy of birth, and of course a love story. I loved Tammy, I loved Leon, and I loved the boys—and they all made me smile down to my toes when they interacted with each other.

While this book stands alone, I hope you enjoy your return to the setting of Lyrebird Lake, which has become a very special place for me, and that Tammy and Leon's story warms you too.

I wish you happy reading.

Fiona

About the Author

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! Now that her boys are older, Fiona and her husband Ian are off to meet new people, see new places, and have wonderful adventures. Fiona's website is at www.fionamcarthur.com

Dedication:

For Rosie and Carol, my fabulous friends,
who put up with those phone calls when I'm stuck.

CHAPTER ONE

AS A reluctant best man, Leonardo Durante Bonmarito caught the unashamed adoration on the groom's face as he circled the room with his new bride, and knew his own earlier arrival in Australia would have made no difference.

Leon's intention of stopping this wedding had faltered at the first sight of Gianni at the airport because nothing would have prevented his brother from marrying this woman.

Such happiness made Leon's chest hurt and he'd never liked wedding feasts. It was even harder when he felt insulated from the joy and gaiety around him by the fact he still hadn't had a chance to talk to Gianni properly since arriving.

'Not a big fan of weddings?' The words were mild enough but the tone held a hint of quiet rebuke. Tammy Moore, chief bridesmaid and for tonight his partner, spoke at his shoulder and Leon returned to the present with a jolt. She went on, 'We're supposed to join them on the floor now.'

'Sí. Of course. My apologies.' Automatically he glanced around and down and unexpectedly his vision was filled with the delightful valley between her breasts.

He swept his eyes upwards and her dark brows tilted at the flicker of a smile he couldn't help.

It was a problem but what was a man to do with a bodice just under eye level? It would be strange dancing with a woman

willow-slim in body and almost as tall as himself. She felt twice the height of his late wife.

He wondered if others might think they looked good together. Little did observers know their rapport had been anything but cordial, because he feared he hadn't endeared himself to her.

Leon repressed a sigh. He'd barely talked, in fact, it seemed he'd forgotten how to be at ease with a young woman, but in his defence, his mind had been torn between the recent danger to Paulo and when he could discuss it with his brother.

Tammy tapped her foot with the music, surely not with impatience, as she waited for them to join the bride and groom on the floor and he'd best concentrate. He hoped it would not be too much of a disaster because his heart wasn't in it. 'You are very good to remind me,' he said by way of apology, but she didn't comment, just held out one slender hand for him to take so the guests could join in after the official party was on the floor.

The music wheezed around them with great gusto if not great skill, like a jolly asthmatic between inhaler puffs, and Leon took her fingers in his and held them. Her hand lay small and slim, and somehow vulnerable, in his clasp, and suddenly he wasn't thinking of much except the way she unexpectedly fitted perfectly into his arms, her small breasts soft against his chest, and her hair smooth against his face.

In fact, her hip swung against his in seamless timing as if they'd danced together to a breathless piano accordion since birth.

Such precision and magical cadence took him from this place—and his swirling, painful thoughts—to a strange mist of curative tranquillity he'd craved since not just yesterday but from the haze of time in his youth.

Where was the awkwardness that'd always seemed to dog him and his late wife whenever they'd danced? The concept deepened the guilt in his heart and also the frown across his brows.

'You sway like a reed in my arms.' He tilted his head in reluctant approval. 'You must dance often.'

He thought he heard, 'Nearly as often as you frown, you great thundercloud.' The unexpected words were quiet, spoken to his feet, and he must have heard wrong because she followed that with, 'Yes, we love dancing here.'

He decided he was mistaken, but the humility in her expression had a certain facade of mock innocence, and made his suspicions deepen with amused insight. Then he caught his son's eye as they swept past, and Leon raised his eyebrows at the flower girl standing beside him.

Paulo glanced at the young girl and then back at his father, nodded and took her hand to lead her into the dance. Tammy followed his gaze and smiled stiffly, something, he realised guiltily, she'd been doing for a couple of hours now.

She slanted a glance at him. 'Does your son dance as well as his father?'

They both turned their heads to watch the children waltz and Leon felt the warmth of pride. Paulo did well and it had not been

an easy few days for him. 'I hope so. He has been taught. A man must be able to lead.'

'Emma's daughter can hold her own,' she murmured, and he bent his head closer to catch her words. Did the woman talk to him or to herself? An elusive scent, perfectly heated by the satin skin of her ridiculously long neck, curled around his senses with an unexpectedly potent assault. Without thought he closed his eyes and inhaled more deeply. This scent was a siren's weapon, yet she portrayed none of the siren's tricks.

He realised with delay that she'd continued the conversation. 'We have a bring-a-plate country dance once a month in the old hall. The children enjoy it as much as the adults.'

Leon eased back, he hoped unobtrusively, to clear the opulent fog from his mind but his voice came out deeper than he expected—deeper, lower, almost a caress. 'So dance nights are common in Australia?' What was happening? His brain seemed to have slowed to half speed as if he'd been drugged. Perhaps she did have tricks he was unaware of.

He lifted his head higher and sought out his son. The most important reason he needed his wits about him. Whatever spell she'd cast over him, he did not want it.

No doubt she'd sensed the change in him. He could only hope he'd left her as confused as she'd left him. 'To hold a dance is not unusual in a country town.' Her dark brows drew together in a glower such as she'd accused him of.

'Of course.' Thankfully, this time, his voice emerged

normally, though he wondered if she could hear the ironic twist under the words. 'My brother is full of the virtues of your Lyrebird Lake.' And its incredibly fertile qualities, but he wouldn't go there.

She lifted her chin high and stared into his eyes as if suspicious of his tone and the implication he might disparage her hometown. Her irises were a startling blue and reminded him of the glorious sea on the Amalfi Coast, disturbingly attractive, yet with little waves of tempest not quite concealed and a danger that could not be underestimated. He knew all about that.

She went on in that confident voice of hers that managed to raise the dominant side of him like hairs on his neck. 'Lyrebird Lake has everything I need,' she stated, almost a dare to contradict.

He bit back the bitter laugh he felt churn in his chest. A fortunate woman. 'To have everything you want is a rarity. You are to be congratulated. Even if it seems a little unrealistic for such a young woman with no husband.'

Tammy smiled between gritted teeth. This man had created havoc in her usual calm state since the first moment she'd seen him. Too tall, too darkly handsome with sensually heavy features and so arrogant, so sure of his international power. Fancifully she'd decided he'd surveyed them all as if they were bush flies under an empty Vegemite jar.

One more dance and she was done. She felt like tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for the music to start again now

the guests and not just the wedding party filled the floor.

It had been as if he'd barely got time for this frivolity of weddings, such an imposition to him, but she'd stayed civil because of Emma, and Gianni, obviously the much nicer brother of the two. But soon this last dance would be over, then everyone else would not notice her slip away. The official responsibilities she'd held would be complete apart from helping the bride to change.

No more being nice to Leonardo Bonmarito.

Though Tammy did feel sorry for Paulo Bonmarito, a handsome but quiet and no doubt downtrodden child, and she'd asked her own son to look after him. Nobody could call her Jack downtrodden.

As if conjured by the thought, eight-year-old Jack Moore, another young man resplendent in his miniature wedding tuxedo, walked up to Paulo. They looked almost like brothers, both dark-haired, olive-skinned boys with the occasional awkwardness of prepubescence. Then Jack tapped the young Italian boy on the shoulder as he and Grace waited to begin again. 'My dance now, I think.'

That wasn't what she'd envisaged when she'd said watch out for Paulo. Leon's back was to the children and Tammy frowned as she strained to hear as they stood waiting.

'You said you weren't dancing,' she heard Grace say, and the girl looked unimpressed with swapping for a boy she always danced with.

Jack shrugged as he waited for Paulo to relinquish his partner. 'Changed my mind.'

Without looking at Jack, Paulo bowed over Grace's hand, kissed her fingers in the continental way with practised ease and shrugged. '*Non importa. Grazie,*' he said, and turned with head high and walked away.

The music started and the dance floor shifted like a sleepy animal awakening. Leon's son leaned with seeming nonchalance against a flower-decked pole and watched Grace being swung around easily by Jack. Like his father, his face remained expressionless and Tammy wondered if Paulo was used to disappointment.

When the dance was over, Tammy eased her hand out of Leon's firm grip as unobtrusively as she could and stepped back. She only just prevented herself from wiping her hand down the side of her bridesmaid dress to try and diffuse the stupid buzz of connection she could still feel.

The contact hadn't been what she expected and the dancing had increased her need to distance herself from this haughty stranger even more. It had been ridiculous the way they'd danced together as if they'd spent years, not seconds, training to synchronise. Not a common occurrence with her local partners but maybe she was imagining it just because he was taller and stronger, and decidedly more masterful, than most men she danced with.

Or maybe the strength of her disquiet about him had made

her more aware. Either way she wasn't interested and needed to get away from him to her friends.

'Thank you.' She didn't meet his eyes and instead glanced around at the crowded dance floor. 'Everyone seems to be up now. If you'll excuse me?'

Leon raised one sardonic eyebrow at her apparent haste. 'You have somewhere you need to run off to?'

She opened her mouth to fabricate an excuse when the glowing bride, her best friend, Emma, dragged her smiling new husband across to his brother. 'Tammy! You and Leon dance wonderfully together.' She beamed at her husband, and the look that passed between them made Tammy glance away with a twist of ridiculous wistfulness.

'Almost as good as us,' Emma went on. 'Isn't my wedding beautiful?'

'Truly magnificent,' Leon said, and glanced at Gianni. 'Your organisational skills exceed even what I expected.'

'Nothing is too perfect for my wife.' Gianni, tall and solid like his brother, stroked Emma's cheek, and then looked across at Tammy. He smiled. 'And your partner for tonight?' He kissed his fingers. *Bellissimo*. You, too, are blessed, brother. Tammy is another of the midwives here. Has she told you?'

'We've had little time for discussion.' Leon leaned forward and unexpectedly took Tammy's hand in his large one again. He held it firmly and the wicked glint in his eyes when he looked at her said he knew she wouldn't quibble in front of her friend. 'I was

just going to find us a drink and sit down for a chat.'

Dear Emma looked so delighted Tammy didn't have the heart to snatch her fingers free, so she smiled, ignored the restart of the buzz in her fingers and wondered bitterly if her teeth would ache tonight from all the clenching she'd done today.

The music started and Gianni held out his hand to his wife. Emma nodded. 'I'll see you back at the bridal table, Tammy, after this dance. I want to tell you something.' Then Emma smiled blithely at them, sighed into her husband's arms and danced away.

Tammy looked around for escape but there was none. Trapped by her friend. Great. Leon held firmly on to her hand and steered her off the floor towards the official table. Unobtrusively Tammy tugged at her fingers and finally he let her hand free. She leaned towards him with a grim smile and, barely moving her lips, let him have it. 'Don't ever do that again or you will get more than you bargained for.'

'Tut. Temper.' He glanced down at her, amused rather than chastened by her warning, which made her more cross.

She grimaced a smile again and muttered, 'You have no idea,' as he pulled her chair out. She slipped into the chair and shifted it slightly so that it faced towards the dance floor and her shoulder tilted away from him.

When he returned with two tiny champagne flutes Leon was fairly sure she didn't realise the angle she gave him lent a delightful view of her long neck and the cleft below the hollow of her throat... and there was that incredible drift of scent again.

He controlled his urge to move closer. This woman had invaded his senses on many unexpected levels and here he was toying with games he hadn't played since his amorous youth.

'Drink your wine,' he said.

She turned to him and her eyes narrowed blue fire at him. 'Were you born this arrogant or did you grow into it?'

So, her temper remained unimproved. She amused him. He shrugged and baited her. 'Bonmaritos have been in Portofino for six generations. My family are very wealthy.'

She lifted one elegant shoulder in imitation. 'Big deal. So were mine and my childhood was less than ideal.'

'And you are not arrogant?' To his surprise she looked at him and then smiled at his comment. And then to his utter astonishment she threw back her head and laughed. A throaty chortle that had his own mouth curve in appreciation.

Her whole face had softened. 'Actually, I've been told I am.'

When she laughed she changed from being a very attractive but moody woman into a delightful seductress he could not take his eyes off, and when she shuffled her chair back and studied him for a change, he felt the shift in their rapport like a fresh breeze. A dangerous, whimsical, warning breeze that he should flee from.

He shifted closer. 'So tell me, Tammy, is this your full name?'

'Tamara Delilah Moore, but nobody calls me that.'

'Delilah I believe. Tamara?' He rolled the name off his tongue as if sampling it, found the taste delightful and he nodded.

That suited her better. 'There was a famous noblewoman called Tamara in Roman mythology. She, too, was tall and apparently rather arrogant. How ironic.'

'Really?' She raised those stern eyebrows of hers and Leon realised he liked the way she responded fearlessly to his bait. 'What if I say you're making that up?'

The music lilted around them playfully and helped the mood stay light. 'I would have to defend myself.'

She glanced down at her hands and spread them to look at her fingertips as if absorbed in her French manicure. He almost missed her comment. 'You nearly had to defend yourself in a more physical way earlier.'

So. More fire. He straightened and met her eyes with a challenge. 'I had the utmost faith in your control. You'd exhibited control all day. It's a wonder your teeth aren't aching.'

She blinked, glanced at him with an arrested expression and then laughed again. He felt the smile on his face. A deeper more genuine smile than he'd had for a long time. It felt surprisingly good to make her laugh.

Not something he'd been known for much in the past but her amusement warmed him in a place that had been cold for too long. 'Of course I also have a slight weight advantage.'

'And I have a black belt in karate.' She picked up one of the biscotti favours from a plate on the table and unconsciously broke a piece off, weighing it in her hand before putting it to her mouth. That curved and perfect mouth he'd been trying not to look at

for the past ten minutes.

Karate. He searched for an image of sweating women in tracksuits he could call to mind, or the name of the white pyjamalike uniform people wore for martial arts, anything to take his mind off the sight of her lips parting as she absently turned him on.

‘How long are you staying before you head back to Italy?’ she said carelessly as she raised the biscuit shard. His gaze followed her fingers, drawn by invisible fields of magnetism and, unconsciously, he held his breath. Gi. The uniform was called gi.

Her lips opened and she slid the fragment in and licked the tips of her fingers, oblivious to his fascinated attention as she glanced at the dancers. His breath eased out and his body stirred and stretched in a way it hadn’t in a long time.

Then she glanced back at him and he had to gather his scattered wits. When was he leaving? Perhaps sooner than he intended if this was how tempted he’d already become. ‘Gianni and Emma are away for the first few days of their honeymoon, and then Paulo and I will join them at the airport before we all return to Italy.’ He was rambling.

He focused on the plans he’d finalised before he left for Italy. ‘We were held up.’ He paused. His grip tightened unconsciously on the glass in his hand and he looked away from her—that brought him back to earth. There was no time for this when the real world required constant and alert attention.

He shook his head and went on. ‘We were held up on the way

over and arrived later than expected. It will give Paulo a few days to get over the “excitement” before we have to return.’ She nodded.

Jack appeared at her side and tugged on her dress. ‘Excuse me, Mum. Can we go and play spotlight?’

Tammy looked away from this suddenly much more attractive man to her son and the world started again. What was she thinking? She blinked again to clear her head and swallowed the last of the biscuit. ‘Who with?’ she asked Jack, and looked beyond him to the milling group of young boys and girls.

‘Dawn and Grace, and Peta and Nicky. And some of the older kids as well.’ He glanced at Leon. ‘And Paulo if he wants to?’

Leon frowned and looked across to where his son was talking to Grace and another girl. ‘What is this “spotlight”?’

Tammy shrugged. ‘Hide-and-seek in the dark and the seeker has a handheld torch or spotlight. The children play it all the time here when parties like this stretch into evening.’

Leon’s frown didn’t lighten. ‘Even young girls? Without parents supervising?’

‘They won’t go far.’ She looked at Paulo, who pretended he didn’t expect his father to say no. ‘Let him go. He’ll be fine.’

Leon hesitated, and she wondered if he’d been this protective since the boy’s mother had died. Overprotecting children made her impatient but she held her tongue, if not her expression, and then finally he nodded.

‘Perhaps for a short while.’ He tilted his head at his son and

Paulo approached them. He spoke in Italian and Tammy looked away but she couldn't help overhearing.

She had no trouble interpreting Leon's discussion with his son. She'd been able to speak Italian since her teenage years in a dingy Italian coffee shop in Sydney, dark with dangerous men and a tall Italian youth she hadn't seen since but wasn't allowed to forget. Those memories reminded her why she wasn't attracted to Leonardo Bonmarito.

'Do you wish to play this game?' Leon said to his son.

'Sì,' said Paulo, and he looked away to the other children.

'Be aware of your safety,' Leon continued in his native language, and Tammy frowned at the tablecloth in front of her. It seemed a strange thing to say at his brother's wedding in a country town.

'Sì, *Padre*, of course,' Paulo said again, and when his father nodded he ran off to join the children. Tammy hoped she wiped the expression from her face before she glanced back at Leon. Listening to Leon talk to his son brought back many memories and it had surprised her how easily she slipped back into recognising the words.

'Your son has beautiful manners. Is he allowed to play with other children much?'

It was her turn to be frowned on. 'Of course.' No doubt she'd offended him. Oops, she thought without remorse.

Leon went on in a low, steely voice that made her eyebrows rise. 'He attends school. And your Jack? He appears very

confident.’ His eyes travelled over her. ‘Like his mother.’

She shrugged. Tough if he had a problem with that. ‘There’s only been Jack and me together, although my father and my stepmother have always been very much a part of his life since he was born. They live next door.’

She saw his gaze drift to his brother and the planes of his angular face softened as he nodded. ‘Family is important. Especially when one’s family is smaller than God intended.’

There seemed a story there. She wasn’t quite sure what he was getting at. Did he have plans to enlarge his family? Was he here to convince his brother to take his wife back to Italy for good? Perhaps it would be better to know one’s enemy, as good as an excuse as any for plain old nosiness, but she had to admit to herself he intrigued her. ‘So, both your parents are gone?’

‘Si’. *Reluctance in the answer.* ‘They died when we were young.’

She should stop the questions, but maybe now a silence would be even more awkward, or that’s what she told herself as she asked the next. ‘To lose a parent is hard, to lose both would be devastating. Especially as I believe you are the eldest of the two of you?’

He shrugged and his voice had cooled. ‘By four years. It was my responsibility to be the head of the family.’

At how old? she wondered. ‘No other relatives to look after you?’

He answered almost absently as his attention was distracted by

the calls and laughter of the children. ‘An elderly widowed aunt who has since passed away.’ He frowned again as Paulo ducked with a grin behind a dark bush.

He really did have issues with Paulo playing with the other children, Tammy decided. ‘And Emma says you lost your wife last year?’

His gaze snapped back to her and this time he raised haughty brows at her. ‘*Molto curioso*,’ he said.

Yes, she couldn’t deny she was curious. She looked at him blandly as if she had no idea what he said, until he inclined his head and continued on a different topic. ‘It is good to see Paulo with a smile on his face. They have been too rare in the past year.’

The pang of sympathy for both of them reminded her of the past as well. ‘And now your own son has lost his mother. It’s hard to lose your mother.’

Now that brought back memories she’d rather forget but felt obliged to share as she’d been so nosy. ‘Even difficult mothers. I was fifteen when I lost mine. Went to live with my mother’s mother.’ She laughed with little amusement. ‘Who said my living there made her feel too old. Such a silly woman.’

‘Perhaps it is my turn to be curious?’ It seemed Leon waited for her to enlarge on the topic. Not a hope in Hades.

She said the first thing she could think of to avoid a discussion of her ridiculous past. ‘Would you like to dance again?’ She discovered as she waited for his answer the idea held definite appeal.

His mouth tilted and she knew he was aware of her sudden change of subject. 'I would like that very much.'

The palpitations came out of nowhere. Just started to thump in her chest as he stood—and from where she sat he filled her vision; he truly was magnificent—then drew her up, with that strong hand of his closing on hers. She felt weightless, like a feather, and a little airy like a feather too, which wasn't like her as she drifted across to the floor where the piano accordion was valiantly attempting to play a waltz.

It was okay to enjoy a dance. With a skilled partner. Nothing wrong with that. His arms came around her and she closed her eyes, giving in to the moment for once, not fighting the magic that had surprised her earlier in the evening. This was what dancing was for. She just hadn't realised she'd been searching for the right partner.

CHAPTER TWO

TAMMY missed the moment when the music stopped until Leon's arm drifted down her back to her hip and he angled her towards the bridal table. The tiny, secret smile on her face fell away with her trance. How embarrassing.

His fingers were warm on her skin through the thin material of her bridesmaid dress as he led her back to her chair.

Both of them were silent. And that serves me right for letting my guard down, Tammy thought, as she tried to think of something to say that would dispel the myth she'd been lost in his arms.

In the end she was saved by the bride. 'You two seem to be getting along *very* well.' A glowing Emma grinned at them as she and Gianni approached the table. When her husband held her chair for her Emma sank thankfully down and fanned her face. She looked from one to the other but neither spoke.

Leon murmured his thanks as he lifted his hand in a 'spare me a moment' gesture to his brother. Then he slanted a glance at Tammy, his face serious as he caught her eye, before he and his brother walked off just a few paces.

Tammy saw Leon's glance flick to the boys as they disappeared around the corner of the building but her attention was brought back to the table by Emma's excitement. 'The dancing is such fun.' Emma waved her hand some more as she

tried to stir the warm air. 'Did you have a good chat with Leon before the dance? I wondered if you'd find much to talk about.'

'We talked about the boys,' Tammy said, and then she heard Leon ask Gianni, in Italian, if he thought the spotlight game was safe enough. He was back to that.

Tammy strained her ears for Gianni's answer, his affirmative clear, but then something Leon said very quietly made Gianni stop suddenly and stare and the two men moved further out of earshot, both bristling, and she had the sudden ridiculous thought that they were like a pair of wolves hunting in the night.

The darkness of a black shadow ran icy fingers over her neck and she shook the feeling off mostly because she didn't do premonitions, and secondly because it wasn't a happy wedding-day vibration at all and a far cry from the heady bubble of the dance floor.

She turned to Emma and worked to dispel the unease that lingered despite her efforts to banish it. 'So what were you so anxious to tell me that I had to sit beside your brother-in-law and wait with bated breath?'

'Poor you. Was he such a hardship?' Emma teased.

Tammy glanced towards the spot where the men had disappeared. 'It's been a long day,' she said cryptically, 'but perhaps he might not be as bad as I thought.'

Emma's brows crinkled. 'Good.' Though now there was a trace of doubt in her voice. 'Because I want everyone to get on well.' Emma looked for the men too, and back at Tammy. Then all the

excitement caught up with her again and Tammy vowed to be more careful not to blemish her friend's day.

'My news?' She smiled happily. 'Well, first Leon's talking to your father about some project in Rome so he and Paulo are not flying back immediately.'

Tammy knew that, and didn't see much there to be excited about. She didn't like the uncomfortable feeling the man left her with.

Emma bubbled on. 'So Leon and Paulo are staying here until after we come back from our mini honeymoon and then we're going to Italy for a month's holiday. Gianni asked if in a couple of weeks you and Jack might like to come over and be with me while he has to sort out work commitments with his brother.'

Tammy raised her eyebrows and her friend went on. 'So Grace and I won't get bored?' Emma looked at her expectantly. 'What do you think?'

What did she think? That this was the last thing she'd expected. Did she want to go to Italy? While she could admit Emma's new husband had turned out to be a delightful and doting husband, initially she hadn't been overly impressed with his brother.

And now it was more the effect he had on her that had her squirming to find a matching excitement her friend would like. 'I guess I'd have to think about it. See if Montana has enough staff to cover at the birth centre, work out which of my birthing women are due.'

She shook her head. 'Take Jack overseas? I don't know.' To Italy of all places.

Emma nodded her understanding. 'Think about it. Oh, and I gave Leon your mobile number. Hope you don't mind. In case we're out of range and he needs something.' Emma seemed to think it was no great moment. She was still focused on the Italian trip. 'It's just an idea but I love the sound of both of us in Italy.'

Tammy could see she did. And normally she'd like the idea too. Overseas travel was something she'd done a lot of in her early teens with her parents and she'd been to Italy once. Maybe that had been the start of her attraction to Italians. She tried not to think of him having her number and then decided he didn't look like a stalker. He only had a few days to stalk anyway.

The men came back, both faces too angled and sombre for a wedding feast, though Gianni smiled at his wife when he reached her side. He held out his hand. 'Do you still wish to circulate through the guests, *cara*? I believe a few of the older guests are starting to leave.'

Emma allowed herself to be drawn up and against her husband's chest for a brief hug, as if the two of them had spent a day apart and not a few minutes, and Tammy couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever have such a love as that. She damped down the almost irresistible urge to sneak a glance at Leon's face to see what he was thinking. When she did he was looking at her and for some bizarre reason her face flamed.

Thankfully, her friend seemed oblivious to Tammy's own

embarrassment as she stepped, pink-cheeked, back out of her husband's arms. 'I haven't spent much time with Louisa. Shall we see her before she goes?'

'Indeed.' Gianni smiled warmly. 'I will inquire if she thinks my brother can be as excellent a guest as when I stayed with her.'

They walked away and Leon sat down. She saw him again seek the boys out in the shadows. 'Everything okay?' Tammy searched his face but the mask he'd arrived with earlier in the day was firmly back in place. She could read nothing and it irritated her for no good reason.

He inclined his head. 'Of course.'

'So you and Paulo have settled into the old doctor's residence with Louisa for a few days?'

'She has made us very welcome.' This time he did smile and the sudden warmth in his eyes did strange, unsettling things to her stomach. Things she hadn't had a problem with for nearly ten years. Maybe she was hungry. Though that seemed unlikely as the wedding feast had more choices than a country fete.

The thought came out of nowhere. What would he be like to kiss? Her belly twisted. Great, she'd bet. He had amazing lips, like sculptured marble on a work of art. Good grief. She checked out her nails again, to hide her eyes.

He went on. 'Paulo has never had so many affectionate embraces and we have only been there since last night.'

'Louisa loves a cuddle.' It was amazing she could carry on a conversation and be so focused on his mouth. She risked a glance.

‘She’s a recent widow.’ Yep, they still looked good.

Leon concentrated on Louisa, whom he could see behind the dancers, the little woman who’d made his son so welcome, and thankfully the tension eased. He wasn’t sure where it came from but he’d felt the sudden rise between them. ‘My brother told me of her loss. And that is why he asked we stay there. It is no hardship.’

He kept his eyes on his brother and his wife across the floor. In fact, even this wedding had become no hardship. It was surprising how resigned he’d become to his brother’s fate. And in a few short hours, partly because no one could doubt the true bond between the newlyweds, and partly because all of the people he’d met here tonight had exuded such warmth and generosity towards him and his son.

Except this woman.

The thought made him smile for some reason, as if the challenge for supremacy between them had taken on a new urgency. He fought the errant concept away. No. Perhaps it had been too long since he had set aside time to share intimacy with a woman. The chance of a brief liaison with this Tamara was tantalising but remote. Too much was happening.

And she would be the last to welcome him. The thought made him smile again. He’d somehow offended her, and he searched his memory for that ridiculous saying he’d heard today—he’d got up her nose. And such a delightful nose it was. He smiled again. She was not showing a warm or generous side to him at all but

he perceived she had one, which in fact was lucky, because he became more intrigued every minute he spent with her.

Tammy saw him smile at the thought of Louisa. So he did have a soft spot for elderly widows. The idea dangerously thawed a little more of her reserve and she reached for another unwanted biscuit to distract her concentration from this handsome, brooding man beside her.

She felt his attention and when she glanced at him there was a sudden darkening of his eyes that arrowed that sharp sensation of hunger right back through her midsection. She felt the wave of heat between them like a furnace door opening.

‘Not again,’ he murmured. And then more strongly, ‘If you delicately consume another biscotti I will not be responsible for my actions.’ His voice was very quiet, and she realised they were alone at the table—in fact, alone at their side of the dance floor. The children shrieked with laughter in the distance just in view, Emma and Gianni were across talking to Louisa, and suddenly she couldn’t look away from him. Her stomach kicked again. She got the message.

She wasn’t sure what to do now with the biscuit she didn’t want, but blowed if she’d let him know he’d rocked her.

Did she look away and nonchalantly put it down or did she pull the tiger’s tail? There was no choice really.

Unhurriedly, with great deliberation, Emma raised the shard of almond to her mouth. With her eyes on his she parted her lips with seductive exaggeration and slid it slowly in, and chewed. It

was hard to swallow with a dry mouth but she did. Choking would have ruined the impact. To drive home her point she calmly licked the sugar from her finger. One raised eyebrow left him in no doubt of her message. *Don't dare me.*

Leon stood, took the arm that reached towards him—surely she hadn't asked her fingers to do that—and Tammy found herself whisked back into the shadows with her hand in his. In an instant she was in his arms and his body felt warm and inflexible against hers. It had all happened so fast she doubted anyone had noticed she'd been abducted.

His eyes glittered in the low light. 'You do not follow orders well, I think.' She barely heard him over the thumping in her chest as he stared down at her, and there was something primal about the tree branch casting shadows across his face. 'This night has been filled with intriguing moments. I cannot allow it to conclude without this.' He bent his dark head towards her with such intent she froze as he brushed her neck with his lips. She shivered and all the hair on her arms whooshed into an upright position on little mountains of goose flesh.

'Your scent has been driving me wild all night.' His words hummed against her ear and thrummed down her throat as his lips travelled the sensitive skin around her jaw. She'd never felt exposed and vulnerable and yet starving for more.

His mouth took flight across her cheek like a hot moth that dusted both eyes before homing in on her mouth. Every nerve in her skin seemed to lean his way for attention, drawn to the

light like a kamikaze insect, and she shuddered at the delicious sensations his whispered caress invoked.

Somehow her arms had wound themselves round his neck and she could feel the sinew and muscle in his shoulders, rock hard beneath her fingers. He had the power to snap her in two and they both knew it.

Then his mouth found hers, her stomach jolted and she swayed against him suddenly weak at the knees like an old-fashioned heroine. She'd never believed this would happen to her. A swoon from a man kissing her. It was ridiculous, and crazy, and...

'It was a funny wedding,' Jack said as he drove home with his mother.

'Funny in what way?' Tammy said extremely absently as she turned along the sweeping driveway out of the lakeside complex. When Leon had kissed her Tammy realised what she'd been missing for too many years. She'd kissed a few men, more to reassure herself she could get a man to the point, but never been enamoured enough to want to repeat the experience.

With Leonardo Bonmarito she'd wanted to do more than repeat it. She wanted next verse. Next chapter. The whole darn book and she knew where that could leave her. She prayed he hadn't realised because she'd managed to step back before she'd dragged the buttons from his shirt. But only just. So she'd stepped away further, called her son and left fairly quickly after that.

'Just different.' The childish voice beside her reminded her why she'd stepped away. 'And that kid's different too.'

‘Paulo? I imagine they’d be saying the same thing about you if you turned up at a wedding in Italy.’

She glanced at Jack. Her miniature man in the house, whom she adored but had no blinkers about. ‘Which reminds me, you were impolite to push into that dance with Grace and Paulo.’

He looked away from her and squirmed a little. ‘She didn’t want to dance with him.’

‘That’s not what I saw.’

Jack sniffed and avoided his mother’s glance. ‘She danced with him later anyway,’ he muttered.

Tammy dimmed her lights for a passing car. ‘I wouldn’t like to think you were rude or acting the bully to a visitor, Jack.’

‘I don’t like him.’ More muttering.

Tammy frowned. Jealous brat. ‘Even more reason to be nice to him.’

Jack sniffed again. ‘Like you were nice to his father?’

Now where had that come from? Thank goodness it was dark and he couldn’t see the pink flooding her neck. Little ankle biter. She certainly wasn’t going there. Of course the children hadn’t seen. ‘Yes.’ She took the easy way out. ‘Did you all have fun playing spotlight?’

She caught the movement of his shoulder beside her as he shrugged. ‘He was scared half the time.’

The dark cloud of uneasiness slid new tendrils through her mind. Tammy glanced at her son and then back at the road. ‘Why do you think he was scared?’

Jack swivelled and she could tell without turning her head that he was looking at her. ‘What would you do if a man tried to kidnap me?’

Tammy blinked at the unexpected question and her hands tightened until they were almost white on the wheel. Someone take her son? Harm Jack? Threaten to kill him? ‘Tear him limb from limb.’ She shook the power of the unexpected passion off. Good grief, there’d been some emotional roller-coasters tonight. ‘What made you ask that?’

Such a little voice from the darkness. ‘He said it sometimes happens in Italy for ransom money.’

‘Who? Paulo?’ She’d read of it but didn’t want to think about such a crime actually happening. Europe was a long way from Lyrebird Lake. ‘Well, let’s hope someone doesn’t want to ransom you.’

Then he said it. Explained it. Let loose the cloud that turned from dark to black. ‘Just before they left to come to Australia somebody tried to take Paulo. That’s why they didn’t get here till yesterday.’

That couldn’t be true. ‘What do you mean? Who did?’ She slowed the car, then slowed it some more, which didn’t really matter because there wasn’t that much traffic around Lyrebird Lake. It would be better if she didn’t run into anyone.

‘They don’t know. His father caught them before they could get away but they put a bag over Paulo’s head and knocked him out.’

Tammy's heart thumped under her ribs and she shivered at the thought of someone attempting to steal a child. Any child. Her child.

Then she remembered how she'd been less than diplomatic about Leon's reluctance with the children's game and she winced. Every instinct urged her to turn the car around and apologise to Leon for her ill judgement. Poor Paulo, poor Leon. And the kidnappers had struck a child. 'Paulo told you this?'

Jack was losing interest. 'No, Grace did. Paulo told her.'

Good grief. No wonder Leon hadn't wanted him to play spotlight. It was amazing he'd let his son out of his sight at all. She glanced at Jack. 'If that's true, even you should understand why he was scared in spotlight.'

'I guess.' He looked at his mother. 'You'd find me, wouldn't you, Mum?'

She stretched her arm across and ruffled his hair with her fingers. The strands were fine and fragile beneath the skin of her fingertips and the sheer fragment of the concept of losing him tightened a ball of fear in her chest. 'I wouldn't rest until I did.'

Jack snuggled down in his seat. 'I thought so,' he said, and yawned loudly.

Tammy was glad to get to work the next morning. The night had been a sheet-crunching wrestle for peace that she'd only snatched moments of and this morning a rush to get a tired and cross Jack through the fence to Misty's house.

Leon Bonmarito had a lot to answer for. She'd walked straight

into a birth and thankfully hadn't given the man a thought for the past three hours.

Tammy wrapped the squirming newborn infant in a fluffy white towel and tucked him under her arm like a football. Little dark eyes blinked up at her out of the swathe and one starfish hand escaped to wave at her. She tucked the tiny fingers in again and ran the water over his head as she brushed the matted curls clean. She grinned at his mother. 'I haven't seen such thick hair for a long time.'

Jennifer Ross watched with adoration as the little face squinted and frowned at the sensation in his scalp. 'He's gorgeous.' She sighed and rubbed her stomach and her son turned his head in her direction.

'Thanks for rinsing his hair for me, Tammy. I'm just not up to it.' Even in the dimly lit corner of the room where the sink nestled Tammy could see him try to focus on the familiar sound of his mother's voice.

'We'll just use water today. We'll bath Felix properly tomorrow so we don't overload his poor nose with baby bath perfume.' Tammy combed a little curl onto his forehead and smiled. 'He needs to feel secure, with your skin and his smelling the same as he remembers from inside you. It all helps with establishing breastfeeding. Like the way you waited for him to find the breast and didn't push him on for that first feed.'

'I can't believe he moved there himself.' Jen's face was soft with wonder.

‘He’ll do it again too. That’s why it’s better not to wash your own hair with shampoo the first twenty-four hours. A strong scent like shampoo has can confuse and even upset his nose during that time.’

‘I’ll let Ken’s mum know when I ring her. She likes a heavy perfume but she’s a sweetie. She’ll give it a miss if I ask.’ Jen reached out and touched his little hand that had escaped again. ‘I remember when you told my sister only Mum and Dad should snuggle babies for the first twenty-four hours. She swears her second baby is much more settled.’

‘Best practice. But sometimes it’s hard to manage when everyone wants a hold.’

Jen rubbed her stomach again. ‘Better to do it right. If the after pains get much worse I might not have a third one,’ Jen said with a rueful smile.

‘Have a lie-down. You’ve had a big day and there’s a warm wheat pack on your bed. I’ll bring Felix in when I’ve dressed him and check your tummy.’ She cast her eye over the mum and decided she looked okay. ‘Let me know if you start to bleed more heavily.’

‘Thanks, I’ll do that.’ Jen smiled and turned gingerly with her hand holding her stomach. ‘I’m looking forward to that wheat pack. Ken’s so disappointed he wasn’t home for the birth. And I have to ring his mother and sister as well.’

‘Since when do babies wait for truck-driving daddies? Ken will just be glad you’re both well. Off you go. I’ll be in soon.’

She narrowed her gaze as the other woman hobbled out. Tammy wished Ken could have made it too. She wanted every mother's birth to be perfect for them but sometimes babies just didn't wait.

When Ben brought Leon in to see the unit Tammy had just towelled Felix's hair dry. She was laughing down at him as she tried to capture the wriggling limbs and they'd moved to the sunny side of the room as she began to dress him. The early-afternoon sunlight dusted her dark hair with shafts of dancing light and her skin glowed.

For Leon, suddenly the day was brighter and even more interesting, although his tour of the facilities had captured his attention until now. Strangely all thoughts of bed numbers, ward structure and layout seemed lower in his priorities than watching the expressions cross this woman's face. And brought back the delightful memory of a kiss that had haunted him long into the night in his lonely bed.

'Hi, there, Tam,' Ben said as he crossed the room. Tammy looked up at her father and smiled. Then she looked at Leon and the smile fell away. He watched it fall and inexplicably the room dimmed.

'Hi, Dad. Leon.' She looked at her father. Or perhaps she was avoiding looking at him, Leon surmised, and began another mind waltz of piqued interest that this woman seemed to kick off in him. 'What are you men up to?'

'I'm showing Leon the facilities. His board's been thinking of adding maternity wards to their children's hospitals and I

thought you might like to hint him towards a more woman-friendly concept.'

Leon watched the ignition of sharper concentration and the flare of captured interest. She couldn't hide the blue intensity in her eyes and silently he thanked Ben for knowing his daughter so well. So, Leon mulled to himself, he'd suddenly become a much more interesting person?

'Really?' She tossed it over her shoulder, as if only a little involved, but she couldn't fool him—he was learning to read her like a conspiracy plot in a movie, one fragmented clue at a time.

She dressed the baby with an absentminded deftness that reassured the infant so much he lay compliant under her hands. Mentally Leon nodded with approval. To handle infants a rapport was essential and he was pleased she had the knack, though it was ridiculous that such a thing should matter to him.

When the newborn was fully clothed she nestled him across her breasts and Leon had a sudden unbidden picture of her with her own child, a Madonnalike expression on her face, and a soft smile that quickened his heart. More foolishness and he shook his head at the distraction the fleeting vision had caused.

Tammy tilted her determined chin his way and Madonna faded away with a pop. 'I'll just take this little bundle into his mother and come back.'

He watched her leave the room, the boyish yet confident walk of an athletic woman, not a hint of the shrinking violet or diffident underling, and he was still watching the door when she

returned. That confidence he'd first seen was there in spades. She owned the room. It seemed he activated her assertiveness mechanism. He couldn't help the smile when she returned.

She saw it and blushed. Just a little but enough to give him the satisfaction of discomfiting her and he felt a tinge of his awareness that he'd felt the need to do so.

She looked away to her father and then back at him. 'What sort of unit were you looking at?'

Enough games. 'Small. One floor of the building. Midwife run and similar to what your father has explained happens here, though with an obstetrician and paediatrician on call because we have that luxury in the city.'

He went on when her interest continued. 'It would be situated in a wing of the private children's hospital we run now. The medical personnel cover is available already, as are consulting rooms and theatres.'

She nodded as if satisfied with his motives and he felt ridiculously pleased. 'We promote natural birth here and caseload midwifery. Do the women in your demographic want that sort of service? What's your caesarean rate, because ours is the lowest in Australia.' She was defiant this morning. Raising barriers that hardened the delicate planes of her face and kept her eyes from his. He began to wonder why she, too, felt the need. *Molto curioso.*

'I'm not sure of the caesarean rate—obstetrics is not my area—but in my country most of our maternity units are more

in the medical model and busy. Often so understaffed and underfinanced that the families provide most of the care for the women after birth.'

Tammy nodded and spoke to her father. 'I'd heard that. One of my friends had a baby in Rome. She said the nurses were lovely but very busy.'

He wanted her to look back at him. 'That is true of a lot of hospitals. This model would be more midwifery led for low-risk women.' He paused, deliberately, before he went on, and she did bring her gaze back his way. Satisfied, he continued. 'Of course, my new sister-in-law, Emma, is also interested and I believe there is a small chance you and your son could come to Italy in a few weeks?' He lifted the end of the sentence in a question. 'Perhaps the two of you could discuss what is needed and what would work in my country that is similar to what you have here.'

Tammy intercepted the sudden interest from her father and she shook her head at Ben. 'I haven't even thought much about the chance of travelling in Italy.' Liar. The idea had circled in her head for most of the night. 'I won't say your idea of setting up midwife-led units isn't exciting.' *But that's all that's exciting and you're the main drawback.* She repeated the last part of the sentence to herself. 'But thanks for thinking of me.'

He shrugged those amazing shoulders of his, the memory of which she'd felt under her hands more than once through the night despite her attempts to banish the weakness, and she frowned at him more heavily.

‘It is for my own benefit after all,’ he said.

She remembered Jack’s disclosure, and the idea she’d had to apologise if she saw him, but it wasn’t that easy. All the time they talked, at the back of her mind, she wanted to ask about Paulo, about the truth in Jack’s revelation, and to admit she hadn’t understood his reserve and his protectiveness. But it didn’t seem right with her father there just in case Leon didn’t wish to discuss it. Or she could just let it go.

She owed him an apology. ‘Maybe we could meet for lunch and talk more about your idea,’ she offered, though so reluctantly it seemed as if the words were teased out of her like chewing gum stuck on a shoe. He must have thought so because there was amusement in his voice as he declined.

‘Lunch, no. I’m away with your father for the rest of the day but perhaps tonight, for dinner?’ His amusement was clearer. ‘If I pick you up? My brother and I share a taste in fast cars and we could go for a drive somewhere to eat out.’

She did not want to drive somewhere with this guy. A car. Close confines. Him in control. ‘No, thank you.’ Besides. It was her invitation and her place to say where they met. ‘You could come to my house, it’s easier. Bring Paulo if he’d like to come and he can play with Jack.’

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