



# *Medical Romance™*

FIONA MCARTHUR

Midwife in the

Family Way



Fiona McArthur

**Midwife in the Family Way**

«HarperCollins»

## **McArthur F.**

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Sweet, loving midwife Emma has built a beautiful life for herself and her little girl. Living by gorgeous Lyrebird Lake, working in her dream midwifery job...hiding from a shadow that hangs over her future. Tall, dark, handsome Italian! Gianni has come to the lake for a whistlestop tour, but is soon enchanted by the beautiful Emma. Of course he can't stay – he has a home in Italy! But will it change matters if he finds out that Emma is expecting? And what if there's another secret she's hiding...one that could affect their unborn child...? Lyrebird Lake Maternity Every day brings a miracle...

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**‘Why are you here, Gianni?’**

‘Why?’ He tried to understand her mood. The mixed signals she sent and the emotions in her blue eyes. He realised that reading unspoken sentiment from women was not something he was skilled at. ‘Because something is wrong. Why are you afraid of seeing me? Talking to me? Afraid of me?’

She lifted her hand and held her throat. ‘I’m not afraid of you, Gianni. At times when I’m with you I feel the safest I’ve ever felt.’

His breath eased out. He’d been unaware he held it as he waited. It was amazing how good that admission made him feel. Perhaps dangerously so. ‘Then what is the matter between us?’

He could read the struggle in her eyes and the indecision that crossed her face, but not the cause. Then she said it, baldly, and it was the last thing he’d expected.

‘I’m pregnant.’

## **Midwife in the Family Way**

BY

## Fiona McArthur



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

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](http://www.fionamcarthur.com)

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**Now it's time to meet Emma.**

**You'll love her as much as everyone else in Lyrebird Lake!**

Dedicated to my dear friend Michelle. One of the coolest, bravest, most amazing people I know, and whose journey has been my inspiration. And, like all people with and without the gene, who have been affected by or known those affected by Huntington's Disease, I pray for a cure.

## Chapter One

GIANNI BONMARITO stood isolated and imperious at the edge of the garden and watched an extended family embrace life—at a funeral. While the upbeat emotion on display made his neck itch, he couldn't help but envy the warmth of the mourners.

But, then, everything in this country was warm. Even the ridiculous Queensland sun beat into the darkness inside his head. He watched innocent toddlers wrestle like puppies in the grass, while older, lanky teenagers played back-yard cricket on the lawn with adults. And women laughed. At a funeral?

What place was this? This country outpost hours from Brisbane? A whole town nestled beside a mirrored lake ringed in trees. A small community so close that only first names were used.

The weatherboard doctor's surgery opposite Lyrebird Lake Hospital hosted a wake unlike any he'd seen and the enthusiastic if discordant bagpipes being played by the man he'd come to support was another bizarre example of it.

'Gianni, isn't it?' The blonde came only to his shoulder, trim and tiny, with a spring in her step that captured his attention and shamelessly proclaimed that this woman loved life.

He could barely remember himself like that. She had the most provocative smile he'd seen for a long time, and the most peculiar thing was that when she smiled at him, mysteriously she lifted the pall of darkness within him as if her fingers held daybreak.

As if she'd tied his troubles to one of those helium balloons the family had let go at the graveside earlier that afternoon. Whoosh. Gloominess soared away—but physical awareness settled like a hot bowl of liquid in his belly and reminded him what a fool his libido could make of him.

'Si. Gianni.'

She smiled again, no doubt at his accent, so strange in this place of vowels. Incredible, Gianni thought, and struggled not to look at her delightful breasts and slim little waist he could have spanned with his fingers. Startled by the first genuine admiration of a woman since his faith in women had shattered for ever, that realisation sent the familiar wave of coldness through his consciousness. How could he trust that feeling?

He reefed his disobedient eyes away from her body to scan her face for a sign of deceit but there was none he could see. He had to stop expecting it.

The sun glinted off the iridescent pink lip gloss she wore, which shone with an exuberantly vibrant colour. Strange choice for a funeral, his clinical brain noted, and he had to be content with that, because nothing else remotely offended.

Mischievous blue eyes scanned his length as openly as he'd scanned hers, and he frowned as his neck heated. What was this? Tangled glances with women did not perturb him. The very idea made no sense.

'I'm sorry.' His voice came out less cordially than he'd intended and the vibration deep in his gut echoed in spirals of awareness he didn't want—and denied adamantly. 'I don't believe we've met or I would have remembered.'

'Emma Rose.' She smiled. 'I'm a friend of the family and one of the midwives at the birth centre.'

He looked from her to the child he only then realised stood beside her, almost as tall in height, hinting at future beauty but surely too young to have reached double figures. 'Your daughter?' The mother looked a child herself.

Emma cast a proud glance at the fair-haired poppy at her side. 'Yes, my daughter. Grace. This is Dr Angus's friend from Italy.' Her voice lowered. 'Dr...?'

'Bonmarito.'

‘Hello, Dr Bon-mar-ito.’ Grace said carefully as she held out her small hand. She didn’t smile. ‘A doctor. That’s nice.’ Somehow Gianni felt a little boring as he took those tiny fingers in his big hand. Little girls were so fragile and made him aware of how much he didn’t know about children. Made him remember his wife had been pregnant when she’d died.

‘When I grow up I’ll be a midwife, like Mum,’ Grace stated in a small, determined voice.

Gianni blinked. Even with his limited exposure he could see she was incredibly assured for a young child. Like her mother.

At this child’s age Gianni had been interested in a rocket ship and moon walks, or Formula One racing. Life had been carefree then, before his father and mother had died, and unlike his brother he hadn’t been sure he would be a doctor. But then he hadn’t known about the realities of life, or near death, hadn’t even met Angus.

He shook Grace’s hand seriously and exerted himself to be less formal, less pompous around children, which he’d been accused of before. But when had he had the chance to learn? The nearest he’d been to fatherhood had been another man’s child that had died with his wife.

He swallowed the familiar bitterness and forced a smile. ‘Hello, Grace. You must call me Gianni, as everyone seems to be on first names here.’

As the little girl took her hand back he noted she had the same vibrant lip gloss on as her mother. Perhaps a family make-up party? He tried not to grimace at the idea of frivolity in a time of grief. Not something he was used to but, then, everything seemed different here. Even himself.

‘Your lipstick matches your mother’s.’ He looked back at Emma and the thrum in his belly growled louder, like a sleeping beast he seemed unable to control.

Now her blue eyes had softened compassionately as she concentrated on his face and he found himself drawn into her gaze, unable to break the connection.

When she said, ‘Ned bought that lip gloss for my daughter for Christmas, and we wore it today to honour him,’ Gianni sighed internally. He’d been wrong there, too.

Still she drew him in like a siren. Such sympathy, such warmth and promise of healing as he’d never felt before, as if she recognised his pain and shared the ache. Like the peace inside a tiny church on an Italian hillside.

He dragged his eyes away from her to her daughter. Ridiculous feelings needed to be ignored. Especially ones that left him floundering for composure.

‘No school today, Grace?’

Grace looked suitably downcast for a second as the reason they were there returned to her. He watched, annoyed with himself for the obvious question and the distress it had caused. Children brought out the worst in him, and he wanted to walk away and save them from his gaucheness, but he couldn’t.

The little girl forced herself to smile and explain. ‘It’s Ned Day. The school shut for Dr Ned’s “happy” wake.’

Emma rested one elegant hand on her daughter’s shoulder. ‘We all loved Ned. It must feel different for someone from another country. Funerals can be celebrations as well as sad events in different cultures, Grace.’ She smiled again at Gianni. ‘Ned said we had to celebrate life, not be maudlin at its natural conclusion. Hence the children and the balloons.’ She gestured to the youngsters playing on the grass. ‘And the back-yard cricket.’

He glanced at Angus, Ned’s son and his friend, the man who had pulled him many years ago from the earthquake debris when all others had given up. The man who had turned Gianni from a thoughtless playboy bent on self-destruction into a dedicated medic.

To be honest, Angus perplexed him, too. Gianni didn’t understand why Angus smiled as he struggled with the bagpipes he hadn’t mastered fully before his father had died. But, then, surely the fact that Angus could smile was a thing to feel relieved about.

Apparently this place was not for gravity and ceremony. He wished he'd met the man who inspired such warmth and feeling of life even after he'd gone. Perhaps he, Gianni, had needed somewhere like this in his grief because it felt he'd been in the darkness for such a long time.

Emma too looked across at Ned's son. 'Angus told me you lost your wife.' He winced at the memory of all that had happened that day but then she leaned forward and kissed his cheek in unselfconscious sympathy. 'I am sorry to hear that.'

The scent of strawberries hung on his face where she'd brushed her lips and he could feel the breeze on the exact spot, fanning the heat from her mouth.

In all his life strawberries had never caused such upheaval! Why had she kissed him? Though, when her blue eyes softened even more with empathy, it was strangely acceptable.

'And now,' she went on, 'you've come to be with Angus for his loss. That's kind. He'll miss Ned, sorely.'

He dragged his mind back to her words and couldn't believe how disorientated his usually clinical mind had become since she'd arrived beside him. 'Thank you. I regret I didn't come in time to meet Dr Campbell.'

'He was a kind man, too.' Her hand lifted and with one gentle fingertip she wiped the trace of colour from his cheek. 'Oops. Sorry.'

'It smells very nice,' he said, and allowed himself another slow glance at her mouth, unobtrusively. No law against that, and he imagined what her lips would taste like. Where was his brain going? To a place it hadn't been for a long time. He needed to stop these fantasies. 'Perhaps you would like to introduce me to your husband?'

She tilted her head and he saw the second she mentally stepped back. 'No husband.'

'A widow perhaps, or divorced?' She shook her head with a mocking little smile that made him want to taste her even more.

He was too interested in the facts. Looking for a reason not to be drawn to her. She must have been very young when her daughter had been born. Too young to be a mother and not the child herself. Whose fault was it she was not protected?

'None of those.' She didn't elaborate. He felt rather than saw the wall go up. Her expression remained friendly but there was a more assertive tilt to her delightful chin that dared him to judge. This woman had him far too intrigued for a man who would be leaving tomorrow.

He persisted. 'Your parents are here?'

'My parents don't live in Lyrebird Lake any more.' She lifted her chin higher. 'Have you any children?' Her turn to question.

Not of his own. And never would. 'No.'

She lifted an ironic eyebrow and glanced down at Grace, and the subject spluttered out like a candle in the rain.

From the gate a dark-haired girl of about Grace's age waved at them and Emma touched her daughter's shoulder until she saw her friend. Emma nodded. 'There's Dawn. Off you go.'

She ignored his flat 'no'. 'Dawn is the daughter of Andy, the medical director at our hospital, and his wife Montana,' she told Gianni. 'Montana began the birth centre in Lyrebird Lake and now we have seven midwives and a great team. People drive long distances to give birth here.'

Emma was filling the silence. Not something she usually did. He probably wasn't interested. She kept her eyes on her daughter as she skipped across the grass, but she was tempted to drink in one more close-up appraisal of the drop-dead gorgeous Gianni Bonmarito. Who for some reason she enjoyed teasing. There was something about the snippets told by Angus that captured her imagination. And confirmed the absolute tragedy and darkness she saw in his eyes.

She didn't know why he affected her so deeply, so achingly that she wanted to draw his big swarthy head down on her breast and soothe his brow. Maybe kiss those heavy, lash-framed eyelids

and comfort the inner demons she could see in his soul. Grace ran off with Dawn, and Emma turned back to the man beside her and glanced quickly one more time.

New heat that had nothing to do with an unexpectedly warm day tickled her skin. She'd known that final glance would ruin her. She looked away to the house instead. 'I'd better see if I can entice Louisa, Angus's stepmother, out to the group. She should be with us.' And I need to get away from you.

'I will come.' Gianni fell into step beside her and though her brain said, Please don't, she could feel the thrum of awareness between them like a tiny swarm of nuisance gnats that often dusted the lake in the late afternoon. All strange feelings she wasn't usually disturbed with.

She went for lightness. 'So you're good in the kitchen, are you?' It was easier to tease and the thought made her smile. He looked anything but the kind of man who would prepare a meal with his own hands.

'I enjoy cooking. My parents had a wonderful house-keeper who humoured me in the kitchen. Especially my national dishes. I find the sensuality of food delightful.' An unexpectedly wicked light shone in his eyes and as she intercepted the innuendo his words dusted her cheeks with pink. She promised herself she wouldn't be caught alone with Gianni in a kitchen any time soon and dropped the topic like the hot gnocchi it was.

The silence lengthened and she tumbled into speech. 'I tried to get Louisa to join us before,' she said, 'but she seemed happier focussed on the catering rather than being a part of the group in her loss.'

He didn't answer, didn't help the silence with his own attempt to lighten the awareness between them, until even the way they moved in perfect synchronisation towards the wide wooden steps that led onto the porch stretched her nerves. She'd never met anyone like him.

Politely, Gianni paused to allow her to precede him up the steps. He should say something but he could think of nothing except the way he was aware of her every movement and sway of her hips. Heat flowed between them as she slid past his body, and even though they didn't touch his flesh prickled. His eyes were drawn again to the swing of her slim hips. Hips that enticed as easily as his breath eased in and out. It was the sun raising both their temperatures, he told himself sternly.

The house was a large, many-gabled country home with a stained-glass-edged front door that led to a central hallway. It was dim and cool inside, to his relief, and the scent of furniture oil and eucalyptus grounded him.

He glanced into high-ceilinged bedrooms that led off the hallway and the old-fashioned furniture looked warm and welcoming. Like everything in this town.

She must have seen his look. 'The doctor's surgery and clinic rooms are in the back of the house and have a separate entrance,' Emma said. 'Visiting medical and nursing staff can stay here and Louisa caters for them.' Then they came to the back half of the house. 'This is the heart of the home—Louisa's kitchen.'

Louisa, a round dumpling of a woman with soft pillow breasts that many a tiny child had snuggled into, stood at the old stone sink and stared out the window, a dishcloth lying still in her hand against a cup.

She had the look on her face he'd seen too many times in his work, the grief for a loved one passing, Gianni thought with a rush of sympathy. The look he had seen so frequently in Samoa after the tsunami. Grief that stayed with him late in the night and never allowed his own demons to settle.

Emma crossed the room and rested one hand on the cup in case she startled Louisa into dropping it, and the other arm she slid around the little woman's waist.

'You okay?' Emma's voice was melodic, caring and made the twists in his belly ache harder. He watched her hug Louisa softly in sympathy and Louisa turned her lined face so she could rest her head against Emma's shoulder for a moment.

He could almost taste the comfort the older woman gained. Who was this Emma Rose, compassionately maternal to a woman three times her age? He wondered what had happened in this

young woman's life to give her such wisdom beyond her years. It was better to think of this than his whimsy for a hug himself.

But the glimpses of Emma's effect on him had been enough to warn him she was far too dangerous for hugging. Dangerous in a way he hadn't been susceptible to for too many years. In ways he didn't want to be susceptible to ever again.

'I'll be fine.' Louisa sighed and Gianni saw the effort she made to smile. 'I'm just thanking the Lord for the last five years, and the twenty years as his friend before that. He was a good man.'

Emma squeezed her shoulder one more time and then stepped away. 'I know it. And he loved you dearly, as we all do. Is there something we can do for you?' Gianni saw her glance back at him and even that brief acknowledgement was enough to make his belly tighten.

But this Emma was a woman from the other side of the world. A side of the world he was leaving tomorrow. He'd need to remember that.

'Bless you both. No.' The Yorkshire accent seemed broader as Louisa jollied herself back into efficiency. 'I'll come out and sit in the shade with you, though, and enjoy the company of Ned's family and friends.'

'Your family and friends,' Emma corrected gently.

'Aye, of course,' she said, and sighed.

Together the three of them moved out to the lawn and Gianni walked on Louisa's other side so that she was drawn into the group under the tree and settled in a comfortable chair.

Gianni watched as she was fussed over and one of the women handed her a baby to nurse. Instantly Louisa was diverted. He looked at Emma who unobtrusively nodded with satisfaction.

He liked it that she was pleased the older woman was comforted. The feel of these people made him think of the best times he'd had as a child. Times he and his brother had escaped to play with the happy-go-lucky village children where such a sense of support and warmth had been unburdened by the responsibility of being part of the most important family. Carefree. Like Emma made him feel. He needed to put distance between them. Even a little would help prevent his fingers from stroking her cheek because he could imagine the silk beneath his fingers too vividly. 'Perhaps you'd like a glass of punch, Emma?' Gianni indicated the clothcovered table under the tree.

'I'll come with you.' Emma glanced down at Louisa, who had buried her nose in the baby's hair. 'Louisa is settled.'

'Well done,' he said quietly as they walked away. 'The innocence of children is precious and a comfort even in terrible times.'

'That's true,' Emma said, looking up at him. 'Is that what you see often in your work?'

He had no idea why he would talk of something he never mentioned. He shrugged and ladled a glass of punch, watched her take a sip and found himself talking to distract himself from her mouth. 'I have seen many families suffer great losses but the safe delivery of one child can restart hope and life like nothing else.'

'Angus said you began working with the rescue forces not long after he did.'

'If not for Angus, I wouldn't be here. Did he tell you he pulled me from an earthquake's landslide? I'd been buried two days and all others had given up.' Did he tell you I had been on a road to wasting my life before that?

She smiled gently, her eyes intent on his face. 'Yes, but very briefly. Did you think he would tell me much?'

Gianni laughed, but without relief. 'No. I suppose not. We do tend not to speak of what we see. And he spoke of his work even less than I do now.'

'Which comes at a cost as tragic memories accumulate,' she said with great insight. She returned to the thing he wished she'd forgotten. 'Two days buried would give a lot of time for thought.'

'Hmm.' A long time to regret things in the past. He'd almost come to peace with those memories but perhaps they were covered under the new ones he'd collected.

She tilted her head and he felt her concentration not as curiosity but like balm to his hurts. 'I like to think good comes of everything. Even something that seems horrible at the time. What good came of that, Gianni?'

He was distracted by the way she said his name. Softly, rolling the vowels as if savouring the strangeness of them. He supposed his name was strange in this place of Jacks and Johns and Joes. But she was waiting and he needed to think of his answer.

Normally he would have ignored such a question, not that it had been asked before, but for this Emma, strangely he found he could answer honestly. 'It was a long time ago but, yes, it changed my life and created a need to do something useful. Like Angus did. I had been given back my life and I would not waste it again.'

She smiled at him. 'Had you been so useless before?'

He thought of the fast cars, the wild and thoughtless men and women he'd peopled his life with after Maria's death, but that was in the past and another tragedy—though one without a good result. 'I fear so.' His voice lowered as the memories returned. Memories he had to banish every time he was confronted with a similar event. 'Lying there, unable to move, barely able to breathe as I listened to those around me grow silent, made me swear that life was too precious to waste.'

He shook away the memories and forced himself to smile at her, 'But enough of me. You say you are a midwife. Have you always wished that? Like your little Grace has told me she has?'

'Some of the best people I know are midwives.' She grinned at him. Daring him to dispute a fact he knew little about. He had not known any midwives well enough to judge but he knew he liked this one.

'Like Montana and Mia and Misty.' She gestured with her hand at the colourful throng of people she worked with at Lyrebird Lake. 'Wise women and wonderful friends,' she went on. 'Like them, I consider my work a privilege.'

He understood that but it was rare for a person to say it. 'As I do mine.' He shrugged. 'So now we can be happy we have worthwhile lives, though I fear I may be a trifle too focussed on the excuse not to lead a more facetted life.' He grimaced in self-mockery. 'And what do you do for yourself, Emma?'

She glanced around for her daughter. 'I am also a mother.'

He smiled down at her perplexed frown. 'A mother, yes, and a good one, I think. And for Emma—the woman?'

She narrowed her eyes at him and declined to answer, preferring to fire it back at him. 'What do you do for the man, Gianni?'

Someone called out to her and she looked away. And then she smiled at him and was gone. He watched her go. Couldn't not watch her. An intriguing and magnetic woman he hadn't expected to meet. But his life would never change.

## Chapter Two

TWO hours later Emma found herself looking around for Gianni.

He would be gone tomorrow, which was as well because the fascination inside her seemed to revel in every brooding glance he sent her way. There was an escalating excitement in her stomach unlike anything she'd felt before, and as she checked on her daughter, she realised that she missed seeing Gianni in her peripheral vision.

She needed to remember he'd go back to the drama and tension of emergency rescue with the international taskforce that Angus had retired from five years ago and she'd go back to her work.

But her mind wasn't ready to relegate Gianni to a past experience. And she rearranged the knowledge she had in her brain and teased at it as if she could glean more.

So Angus had dragged the barely conscious Italian from the rubble and inspired him. Well, it had certainly sparked an unlikely friendship between the two men. And there was at least a ten-year gap in their ages.

Where had she been ten years ago when that had happened?

At school certainly. Not a teen mother yet. Her own mother still well and oblivious to the cloud that would destroy her life and cast a shadow over her family. But she wouldn't go there.

When this Italian intruder was gone, Emma would go back to life in Lyrebird Lake as if he'd never been, which was a good thing.

Ah. There he was. She found him talking to Angus and as if he'd felt her gaze he looked up. For a moment their eyes held and then Angus said something else and Gianni looked away. Hurriedly she walked on and berated herself for being drawn to him. But what could a girl do when she found herself so aware of a man?

Since their first conversation, whenever she'd moved to another group to talk, shortly afterwards he too would arrive to join the circle and always that thrum of awareness rumbled between them. He'd seemed no more than a few steps away from her all afternoon, despite the fact he barely spoke to her. She sifted through everything Angus had told her as she waited for him to come to her again. Strange how she knew he would.

'So you'll be gone tomorrow,' she said without preamble when he appeared to stand beside her. 'That is true.'

A tennis ball from the cricket game rolled to her feet like a faceless yellow bird and she picked it up and tossed it back to the bowler, glad of the distraction while she bolstered up her courage. 'It's a shame you can't stay a while and see more of the area around Lyrebird Lake.'

His glance swept over her. 'If I had known it would be so beautiful here I would not have made plans.' He smiled. 'Would you have shown me around, Emma?'

She could have found a little time. If he was that attracted to the place, why leave so quickly? 'Perhaps. And your plans can't be changed?'

He gestured fatalistically with his hands and she had to smile at the pure Mediterranean gesture. 'I go to see my brother. It is arranged. We haven't spoken in years. It is time.'

More snippets of the man. 'Did you fall out? Is he married?'

'Such questions.' But he smiled as he said it. 'He too has lost his wife now, so the reason for our disagreement is past.' That sounded even more intriguing and just a little tough on the poor wife, but she hesitated to persist. She was glad she hadn't offended him with her inquisitiveness.

But everything about him spoke of a different culture, a different life experience, and sometimes she despaired of ever experiencing a world away from Lyrebird Lake. She'd begun to think that she'd pinned her lack of experience of the world onto Gianni's multiculturalism and that was what was drawing her to him. It was as good a reason as any.

Maybe it was the fact that he was going that gave her permission to try and peer into that other world. She couldn't ever remember being so fascinated by a man as this Gianni. 'Tell me what it was like, growing up in Italy. Tell me about your parents.'

She suddenly realised how bold that sounded. 'I'm not normally nosy. But you intrigue me.' She frowned at herself and shook her head again. 'Please don't answer if you prefer not to.'

He smiled sardonically and raised his impossibly black eyebrows. 'And if I don't, will you walk away?'

She almost said maybe, and then corrected herself. She had never been a coquette. Why lie? She smiled. 'Of course not.' He was too compelling.

He shrugged his impossibly broad shoulders as if to say he couldn't imagine why she would be interested but he would humour her. 'Then I will tell you a little. My parents were both doctors but died in a boating accident when I was a teenager. I was held above the water, unconscious, by my brother until help came.'

'That must have been heartbreaking for two teenage boys.'

He nodded. 'If I had not hit my head, perhaps we could have saved them both, but that is all in the past.' The bleakness was back in his eyes and she'd wished she could retract her question about his parents. Not all of those memories were in the past. She resisted the urge to touch his shoulder in sympathy.

But he went on, almost as if he too was aware time was running out for both of them. 'Leon, older by two years than I, runs the Bonmarito Private Hospitals in Rome. In our family it is our custom for the sons to attend medical school and then marry the wife chosen by the family.'

She couldn't imagine being married to a man she barely knew, especially one as blatantly masculine as this man, but bizarrely she had no problem picturing the scenario.

'So you and Leon did that? Yours was an arranged marriage?' When he nodded she shook her head. What must his wife have thought as he'd approached the marriage bed? Or had she been glad he had been young and handsome?

'*Si*. And no prospect of divorce if it didn't work in the beginning.' He watched her shock with a flicker of sardonic amusement. Even at her expense, she was glad to see him lighten his mood a little. 'The statistics for good marriages in my country are similar to yours,' he said.

'And was your marriage a happy one?'

The bleakness swept back into his eyes. 'By the time she died I had fallen in love with my wife. Yes.'

Ouch. Conversation stopper. What was she doing asking such personal questions? And at a funeral? Weren't they all depressed enough?

The last golden rays of the sun began to dust the trees across the lake and it was time for the party to break up. Time for her to say goodbye to this tragically enigmatic Italian and get on with her own life.

'Thank you for your company, Gianni. I've enjoyed talking to you. I hope I haven't annoyed you with my silly questions.' She smiled at him but didn't offer her hand. Pure self-preservation on her part. 'Have a safe trip home.'

She looked across to the activity. 'I must help clear up. Louisa is going to Angus and Mia's house for tonight.' Emma could see Misty and Montana gathering glasses and plates from benches.

Gianni nodded and inclined his head as he watched her walk away. Such things he'd not spoken of for years. His words escaping from his mouth like suddenly released prisoners. It was a wonder she hadn't run away from him, not walked. He shook his head and glanced around, looking for Angus. Angus waved at the bench he wanted to move and Gianni strode across, glad to have something physical he could do.

They brought the last of the chairs inside as Montana touched Emma's shoulder for attention. He couldn't help but overhear.

‘Emma. I know it’s a favour, but I wondered if Grace could sleep over with Dawn tonight...’ Montana pointed out of the kitchen window to the veranda. ‘She’s really missing Ned. I think a little friend might help just for tonight.’

Angus had told him Montana had been the first midwife to board in Ned and Louisa’s home and Dawn had been a baby then.

He watched Emma glance out the kitchen window at the two earnest young heads together on the swing.

She nodded and he heard her say, ‘That’s fine. We were having an early night anyway. I’m taking her up to see Mum tomorrow afternoon.’ Then he had the next piece of furniture to move and the rest of the conversation was lost.

In her peripheral vision Emma saw Gianni and Angus move outside to search for more chairs and suddenly it was easier to concentrate. Montana nodded her thanks. ‘How is your mother?’

Emma thought of waving hands and erratic attempts to walk. ‘She didn’t seem as sad last week, but her moods swing pretty wildly. I just wish I could keep her at home but she’s even too much in the care she’s in sometimes. I don’t know what I’ll do if she has to leave the centre in Brisbane. And Dad misses the lake.’

Montana hugged her. ‘There’s no easy answer and we’ll be here for you if you need to talk.’

‘I know.’ Emma shook off the melancholy of worry that she worked so hard to hide and returned to the practical. ‘What time do you want me to pick up Grace in the morning?’

‘It’s Saturday. Sleep in. We’ll go shopping early and I’ll drop her home before lunch, if that’s okay.’

Emma nodded as Louisa came back into the kitchen with her overnight bag and suddenly everyone was ready to leave.

Home wasn’t far and Emma declined the offer of a lift in Montana’s bus-like vehicle. The evening was cool and it would be good to clear her head in the twilight breeze. To have space to mull over the day on the silent walk home.

The sudden loud snap of a breaking twig pierced her reverie and her head flew up. Then she heard the unmistakable scrape of a shoe on gravel behind her just before a tall shadow loomed over her.

Emma’s heart flipped like those silver fish did every afternoon in the lake and her hand came up to her throat as if to hold back a squeak. Up until now the idea of being nervous of the encroaching darkness had never crossed her mind. This was Lyrebird Lake and the safest place she knew. But at that moment her heart galloped crazily as she tried to pierce the gloom to see the person’s identity.

‘Who is looking after you?’ Gianni spoke quietly, but there was a tinge of outrage in his voice.

She peered through the dimness and confirmed it was his face. ‘Gianni!’ Her shoulders dropped as she breathed heavily out in an exasperated sigh. ‘Around here we don’t sneak up and scare people. As long as no one does what you just did, I don’t need looking after.’ She sighed again as her pulse rate settled. She tapped her chest as if to reassure her heart all was well. ‘You frightened the life out of me.’ She started to walk again.

His dark brows almost touched each other. ‘You should not be walking alone, it is almost dark. Please let me drive you to your house.’

Emma rolled her eyes. ‘I thought accepting lifts from strangers was dangerous?’ she said dryly. She glanced around. Now they were standing closer to the streetlamp but between the orange pools of each lamp it was pretty deserted and darker than she’d realised. But until the silly man had put the notion in her head she’d been happy.

‘Come,’ he said imperiously, and held out his hand.

Emma looked down at his strong brown fingers, even darker in the dim light, and considered the implications of his touch. Did she want to feel the warmth that she just knew was going to stay with her? She didn’t think so.

Emma avoided his hand and turned to his car. 'All right.' But as she reached for the door handle his fingers were there before her.

'May I?' he said. 'Please allow me?'

Emma stood back as he glided the door open. Touchy Italian, she thought. 'No problem. Feel free. I'm just out of practice with people opening doors for me.' She swung herself into the low-slung seat and glanced around the interior of the European sports car.

She read the label of the owner's manual on the console. She'd never been in a Maserati before. Her door clicked shut beside her shoulder and she forced herself to relax back into the seat. The leather was doeskin soft and she wiggled her shoulders in it. Nice. Different from what she was used to, that was for sure.

When he climbed in and secured his seat belt she leaned forward slightly, anticipating the car's forward movement. When it didn't happen she frowned and resisted drumming her fingers. He continued to linger and she turned to look at him with narrowed eyes. And you're waiting for...? she thought with rising suspicion.

'Would you like me to fasten your belt for you?' He'd turned to face her and she realised she'd forgotten the obvious. She bit her lip. The man was scrambling her brains the way her hands were scrambling to get the clasp done up before, heaven forbid, he did help her.

'Does the roof go up?' She was gabbling but suddenly it was very close inside the car.

'No.' He reached forward and the engine started with a muted roar. 'It's a coupé. A Cambiocorsa 2007. I have one at home.'

'Really? Only one?' she said straight-faced. The car was black and low to the ground. She could see that. But she doubted she'd ever feel the need to hire one. 'So you drove down from Brisbane? This is a hire car?' And he had one at home. He was certainly from a different world.

His profile shifted as he glanced at her. 'Are you interested in cars?'

Was she? The subject wasn't one she'd buy a magazine on. 'Not really.'

He nodded as if the answer was what he expected. 'Then let us not discuss them.' End of discussion.

Emma blinked. He'd assumed a protective and almost fatherly role, and Emma wasn't sure she liked it. Well, she was no doormat for obedience. Think of your own topic, then, buddy, she thought. He didn't offer any other conversational gambit and the silence stretched.

He was going tomorrow, she told herself, which made it acceptable if she gave in. 'I live straight down this road. Barely worth driving, in fact,' she said with less than subtle pointedness.

'Sì. And I also do not live far from here as I have rented a chalet at the Lakeside.' He glanced across and then away. 'They have a fine restaurant. Italian.' She could hear the smile in his voice, and she wondered if it was just because it was almost dark and she had to rely on other senses or if it was because for the first time today he'd smiled broadly enough that it affected his voice. She was glad she couldn't see the curve of his lips. She'd been trying not to look at the sinful promise of his mouth all day. No doubt the sight would haunt her.

'So?' he said.

What on earth was he saying? 'So, what?'

He sighed. Patiently, as if with a child, and with this man she was beginning to feel like one. Not something she'd felt since she the age of sixteen and not something she decided she enjoyed. 'Will you join me for a meal, please, Emma?'

Her heart did that fish thing again. Now? 'Aren't you going back to Angus's?'

He shook his head once in the dimness. 'His stepmother is there tonight. I dined with him last night and we talked. I will lunch with him tomorrow before I leave.'

Emma filled the silence while she considered the implications of his invitation. 'Angus had a wonderful relationship with Ned since he'd made up with his father.' Her mind skittered to the idea

of dining alone with Gianni in an intimate setting and away again. Her thoughts went back to Angus. It was safer. 'He seems to be at peace with Ned's passing.'

'Yes.' Gianni inclined his head while he contemplated her profile. 'Thankfully they had time to enjoy each other's company. And Angus was instrumental in my recent contact with my brother. But you haven't answered my question.'

The guy had a single focus. She went with the answer she'd known she'd make from the beginning. To live dangerously. 'Perhaps. I need to eat.' She looked down at her grubby skirt that she'd played cricket in. 'I'd like to get changed, though.'

He nodded again. 'How much time do you need?'

She thought about it. How much did she really need? Five minutes. 'Half an hour,' she said.

'Good.' Satisfaction was obvious. 'Much faster than I expected.'

She tried vainly not to smile and she hoped he didn't see or think she was making fun of him. 'It's this house, with the roses over the gate.'

She lifted her hand to the handle and his fingers came over the top to stay it. 'Please wait for me to open it,' he said quietly, and her hand froze under his. She sighed and leaned back against the leather.

She'd been right. His skin was warm and made the gooseflesh pop up on her arms like bubbles in the muddy sand at the edge of the lake. His hand moved away and she would have sworn his fingers were still there. Hot over hers.

If he could do that with just a touch, she was in big trouble if she invited anything else. But she wouldn't. It was just a meal, she was feeling flat after the funeral and Grace was away, and she didn't get to eat at the Lakeside very often. Never had, actually.

He opened her car door and she climbed out. It seemed a waste of energy to her but the cossetting was strangely compelling. He ushered her through the gate and up the path to her front door like an old-fashioned footman. Then waited while she unlocked the door and only left her when she entered her house, but he didn't drive away until she'd shut the door.

She heard the roar of the car as it accelerated away and Emma's heart flopped around as she leant back against the closed door. Her hand actually slid to her throat where her pulse pounded. What had happened to her in the last five minutes? It had just been a lift a few hundred metres but she felt vibrantly alive. Ridiculously so.

There were a hundred good reasons not to be attracted to this man, or any man for that matter, and fifteen good reasons to wallow in it.

The hundred were all complications and she didn't need them.

The fifteen were about the number of good years she estimated she had before the disease that had turned her graceful and gracious mother into a tormented bed-ridden shell of a woman could begin to do the same to her.

Fifty per cent chance of having the gene. In the last few years Emma had toyed briefly with the idea of taking the final genetic test, a test that could prove her fate irrevocably, but she'd always come back to that tiny spark of hope she'd not inherited the predisposing gene. She didn't think she'd cope if that hope was gone. She couldn't give up that tiny beam of optimism that once lost would never return.

Her arms crept around her waist and Gianni was forgotten, everything was forgotten, as her worst nightmare touched her again with cold fingers of dread.

The fear was for Grace, her daughter, and the fact that if Emma was shadowed then Grace had a fifty per cent chance of having it, too. Emma couldn't do it. At this time in her life she couldn't live with Grace being positive for Huntington's disease.

Instead, Emma lived her life as if she had only until she turned forty, like her mother had before she'd become ill, and she saved every penny to ensure Grace would have the choices for the support Emma might not be able to give.

But for this moment Emma was alive, she was well, and apparently she was an attractive woman. Not something she'd thought about for a very long time. She didn't know when she'd decided that she *wanted* to savour a little of what Gianni had to offer. If he was offering anything apart from a meal, that was.

She'd never looked for another boyfriend after she and Tommy had drifted apart. She'd been too busy. Too focussed.

As two sixteen-year-olds she and Tommy had discovered they'd little in common except Grace, and Emma had been sensible enough not to tie herself to a man she'd already grown out of. Tommy had left to see the world with Emma's blessing. But maybe she'd missed out on the subtle thrill of a man's appreciation.

In fact, even with the little exposure to Gianni's attention today she'd begun to revel in the unfamiliar feeling of being a fragile flower to be cherished and taken care of. Not something she had any experience of and no doubt it would irk her very quickly in the real world, but this was an out-of-the-ordinary opportunity to let herself be spoiled.

And there was something about Gianni that called to her in a way she'd never heard before. Heaven forbid, there might be a fabulous encounter her body was trying to tempt her into, and the idea had a compulsive magnetism, like the man did. As long as she was careful and it didn't get out of hand.

Gianni was right out of her comfort zone. And he was leaving soon. To go back to Italy. If she made a fool of herself, he was a ship in the night with a home port she couldn't get much further away from than inland Queensland.

She looked at her watch and bounced away from the door as if someone had poked her with a cattle prod. She'd wasted five minutes!

## Chapter Three

TWENTY-FIVE minutes later Gianni knocked on Emma's door and the sound echoed through Emma's chest and under her ribcage. Boom. Boom. Boom. He was here. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a real date. Probably never.

She sucked in her breath and ran her tongue inside her gums to make sure she didn't have any lipstick on her teeth. Still not convinced, she grimaced toothily at the mirror on the way to her door. Yep. All was well. Another deep breath as she paused and hoped she'd dressed right. She opened the door.

*Christo.* Gianni sucked his own lungful of air. Emma's blonde hair was loose over her shoulders and she'd abandoned the pink lipstick for a deep sultry red that matched the lush material of her blouse. To call it a blouse was a blasphemy. The soft material clung like a skin and lingered like his eyes on the swell of her breasts and plunged, also like his eyes, down into a V of paradise.

His breath jammed for a moment and then resumed, like his mesmerised surveillance of her preparations. All this in half an hour?

He'd never been attracted to trousers on women, preferring the femininity of a swirling skirt, but when she twirled to show him, the way her firm buttocks snuggled into the stretchy black material made his eyes blink. Then she moved back further to open the door for him and he could see it hung almost like a skirt, lots of fabric swirling around her legs from the tight tapering waist, teasing him with the thought of it in a pool of darkness at her feet.

'Hello?' Her voice broke the spell and he blinked and swore again in his head. What was it about this woman that grabbed him by the throat and demolished his brain?

*Bella.* You are beautiful and took my breath away.'

She laughed. Softly, and to him like the musical bells of his favourite chapel. Everything she did entranced him. 'Thank you,' she said. 'The men around here would be far too embarrassed to say that out loud.'

He frowned. 'I speak the truth.' He glanced around the inside of her house. A welcoming room, evidence of a family and very clean. But he wanted her in the dark, beside him in the close confines of the car, somewhere he could inhale her scent and absorb the vibrations her body caused in his. With no distractions. 'Shall we go?'

'Did you manage to get a table in the restaurant?'

He frowned again. Why would he not? 'Of course.' She glanced away and shook her head slightly, and he was teased by the tiny smile she tried to hide. 'I amuse you?'

'Very much so. But it's nice because you are so very different from the men around here.' She walked past him onto the veranda, the hint of roses she left in her wake teasing him almost more than her words, and then she handed him her house keys. 'I'm guessing you want to lock the door?'

*Grazie.* You learn.' Her profile against the lights from the veranda made his eyes gleam. Did she have no idea how seductive she looked in those trousers? He had changed his preferences already.

'I'm a smart woman.' She tossed her head teasingly.

The movement exposed her throat to the light. 'And very beautiful.'

'I could get used to this.' He heard the whispered words but was sure he'd not been meant to. How could this woman not have a hundred men beating a path to her door? It was a tragedy he went home tomorrow or he would have shown her what she deserved—or maybe it was a good thing. Either way he could introduce her to the way she should be cared for tonight.

As Gianni followed her down the path and under the rose arch he had the sudden urge to reach out and halt her progress, turn her beautiful face toward him and taste the promise he saw while the heady fragrance drifted around them, but he held back. Something he would regret later. No doubt the scent of roses would remind him of this moment that could have been.

This time she'd waited beside the car for him to open the door and the sleeping animal inside him growled complacently at securing her compliance. That beast had been dormant for a very long time and he'd forgotten the taste of cossetting a woman.

When she was seated he bent to lift a swathe of material from the hem of her trousers that had fallen outside the door and the material cascaded across his palm and fell like liquid around her tiny feet. All sensory input that teased him more. He clenched his fingers as he moved back to shut the door before he trod with restrained haste to join her. Still he could feel the material, cool and seductive like the woman who awaited him. She had him entranced.

Gianni's door closed quietly as he was seated and Emma felt the car shrink to only the space between them. Yet not claustrophobic. Different. It felt intimate and exciting, and every nerve in her body seemed to be waving its receptors at the man beside her. Strange feelings for a woman who thrived on control and organisation.

He glanced across before he started the engine and it was as if he touched her. A slow caress. Hurriedly she did up her seat belt.

He smiled, and his eyes seemed to glow like a browneyed tiger, and her belly kicked. 'I could have helped,' he said.

She rubbed her arms. Not likely, buddy. The thought of his hand at her waist gave her more goose-bumps.

'Do you live in your house all alone?'

She raised her eyebrows at him but doubted he'd see that in the dashboard light. 'Not something I should tell a man I barely know.'

'Good,' he said, and she laughed again. He was funny. And old-fashioned, and yet she had the feeling that his moral code might bend dramatically when it was his own desires that were at stake. She didn't think he realized how at sea she was. Luckily.

She looked out the window and back again. 'I live with my daughter. My father comes sometimes to stay when he can and my brothers used to live there but the last of them has just married. They're all shift workers so they used to come and go a lot anyway.'

'In my country, alone in a house is not good for a woman and her daughter. It is different here?'

She frowned. Now he'd annoyed her. Though, if she was honest, maybe a little of her response was due to the fact she didn't want to think about the example she was setting to her daughter by going out with a man who made her feel sexy for the first time in her life. 'Yes,' she said shortly. 'My daughter is safe. Lyrebird Lake is a safe place. We have very little crime. I know everyone in town.'

His heavy brows drew together. 'And people don't drift through?' His voice was dry. 'I'm sure Angus said there is a working mine? A transient miner population only up the road.'

She tilted her head at him. Defiantly. 'Where I live is fine. And not your concern.' His interest had become too pointed. 'In this country customs differ. Did you say we would eat?'

He sat back, and then nodded. 'My apologies. It is none of my business.' He started the car and of course now she felt guilty... But then she shrugged in the dark. He could get over it. Get used to the way women could look after themselves in Australia. Had to look after themselves. She thought with amusement about Tommy and her brothers, and the way she more looked after them. They should fly a women's independence flag for her at Lyrebird Lake.

No conversation occurred until they drove into the cobbled courtyard of the Lakeside and the restaurant lights spilled into the car park and reflected back off the water.

She stayed in her seat, very tempted to open her own door just to tease him, but that would be petty. Was she bored with his old-fashioned manners already? Her door swung away and he held his hand out to help her.

'May I assist you?' His voice was low and courteous, no hint of assertiveness as it curled around her like a tender scarf. It was interesting he hadn't presumed this time.

No, she wasn't bored with being spoilt, she thought as she shivered in the sensations and hugged them to herself. His fingers were warm and strong when she took his hand, just like last time, and she felt the same burning sensation up her arm and the tightening of her breasts.

'Are you cold?'

He was genuinely attentive. She didn't know how to deal with the unfamiliarity of his concern. 'A little,' she prevaricated, more to hide her embarrassment, and instantly he slipped his jacket off and the warmth of man-heated silk caressed her shoulders.

Like an unexpected gift the subtle wash of his aftershave mixed with the scent of male bombarded already overloaded senses and her heel slipped on the cobbles under her feet as she actually felt faint for a second.

His arm came around her. 'Are you well?' He frowned down at her. 'It has been an emotional day. Perhaps I should take you home.'

'No, I'm fine. Really.' She straightened out of his embrace and stepped back. 'I just slipped in my heels.' Her heart was thumping in her chest like a drum and she took a long cool breath of the night air into her lungs and stood tall. Or as tall as she could with her height. Despite the pinching in her toes she definitely needed high heels with this guy. 'I'm fine,' she said again. 'Just a silly slip. Let's go in.'

His brows remained creased, but he nodded reluctantly. 'As you wish.' He glanced over her attire again with a tiny glint in his eyes. 'It would be a shame not to share your beautiful preparations with the world.'

Yes, she thought dryly. She could hardly wait for the gossip. It would fly.

The restaurant was dimly lit with red lamps in brackets on the wall and candles on the tables. Maybe no one would see her. They were led to a white linen-covered table that faced out over the lake, a shiny-green-leafed ficus provided privacy from the next couple and the room buzzed with the hum of quiet conversations.

'And a good table, as well,' Emma said with a glance around, and strangely, for a town she'd grown up in, there wasn't a familiar face to be seen. But other tables seemed as private or strategically placed as theirs so maybe there were. Either way, the town would hear tomorrow that Emma had been out with a *man*! And a stranger.

She handed him back his jacket and Gianni lifted one imperious eyebrow as he waited for her to be seated but didn't comment. She didn't need it when she'd only been covering her nervousness anyway.

She sat and he did too and suddenly her brain froze as she had a brief moment of panic about what conversation she could make with this Italian she barely knew in such an intimate setting. How would they fill the time between courses?

It wasn't like she did this every night. Or spoke to strange men. The only men she conversed with were her family and friends and husbands and partners of women she cared for in labour. Then again, Gianni looked to be socially practised enough for both of them. She hoped.

His pale grey suit shone discreetly and she guessed some designer's label would be sewn inside on silk, and his shirt and tie, though understated, shrieked unlimited funds.

The maître d' draped the starched napkin across her lap and reverently handed her the menu. The choices had no prices, not to trouble her pretty head over cost, she guessed, and she smiled. Well, well, Lyrebird Lake. You multi-layered lady. Her country town had city chic. She'd had no idea. Another first, and she was going to enjoy the experience. If it killed her.

Her escort bent his head to discuss wine with the waiter and her eyes were drawn to the harsh lines of Gianni's face. Such a strong and arrogant jaw, angular cheek bones and a Roman nose that proclaimed lineage and power. He could almost be classified as too grand to relax with yet she didn't feel intimidated by him. Especially now she'd decided this was going to be fun.

She wondered why she still felt secure. He was certainly imposing, and so different from any man she knew, but something in his eyes, and perhaps that obscure vulnerability only she seemed to

see in the chiselled fullness of his mouth, drew her like a moth to a flame and dared her to touch the light. Thrilled her with danger that crackled along her nerves and dusted the smile on her lips that she couldn't seem to lose.

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