

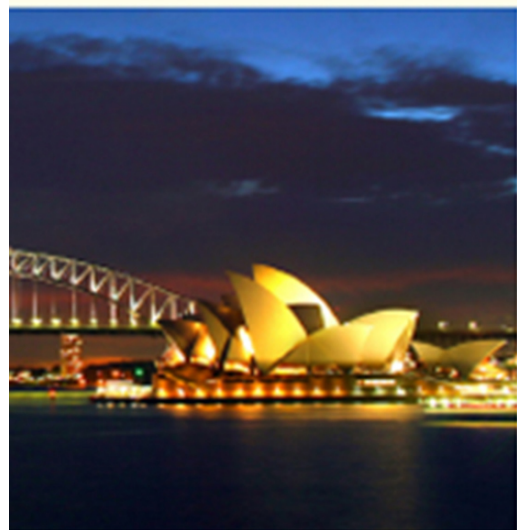


*Medical
Romance™*

FIONA McARTHUR

Sydney Harbour Hospital:

Marco's Temptation



Fiona McArthur

**Sydney Harbour Hospital:
Marco's Temptation**

«HarperCollins»

McArthur F.

Sydney Harbour Hospital: Marco's Temptation / F. McArthur —
«HarperCollins»,

For commitment-phobe surgeon Marco D'Arvello, his short-term consultancy at Sydney Harbour Hospital matches his love of short-lived flings. But meeting guarded single mum Emily Cooper makes him question handing back his scrubs so soon! Marco's last remaining job is to treat Emily's daughter, and for the first time ever his feelings are anything but temporary...

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Praise for Fiona McArthur:

'The entire story

(SURVIVAL GUIDE TO DATING YOUR BOSS)

is liberally spiced with drama, heartfelt emotion and just a touch of humour.'

—*RT Book Reviews*

A lifelong reader of most genres, **Louisa George** discovered romance novels later than most, but immediately fell in love with the intensity of emotion, the high drama and the family focus of Medical Romance. An English ex-pat, Louisa now lives north of Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband, two teenage sons and two male cats. Writing romance is her opportunity to covertly inject a hefty dose of pink into her heavily testosterone-dominated household. When she's not writing or researching Louisa loves to spend time with her family and friends, enjoys travelling, and adores great food. She's also hopelessly addicted to Zumba.

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

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**Sydney Harbour
Hospital:
Marco's
Temptation
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To Flo, who went above and beyond to help me do justice to Marco.

Looking forward to more journeys with glee, Fi. xx

Welcome to the world of Sydney Harbour Hospital (or *SHH* ... for short—because secrets never stay hidden for long!)

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Sydney Harbour Hospital

From saving lives to sizzling seduction, these doctors are the very best!

CHAPTER ONE

MARCO D'ARVELLO paused in a pool of sunlight on the suspended walkway and watched the boats in Sydney Harbour. Not your usual view from a hospital corridor. He hoped to do more than just observe this country before he had to leave, but once this last client was seen he was booked up with all the surgery he could manage before he moved on.

That was how he liked it.

His attention returned to the consultant's referral in his hand. 'Foetal urinary obstruction.' Should be a fairly simple scope and shunt, he mused as he pushed open the door to his temporary rooms. The lack of waiting-room chairs meant his patients had to wait in his office. It wasn't really ideal but the view was worth it.

'*Buongiorno*, Marlise.'

His borrowed secretary blushed. 'Good morning, Dr D'Arvello.'

'Please, you must call me Marco.' He perched on the edge of her desk, oblivious to the flutter he caused, and peered across at her computer screen. 'Has Miss Cooper arrived?'

Marlise sucked in her stomach and pointed one manicured figure at the screen. 'Yes. About ten minutes ago.'

'*Bene*.' No time for dawdling. He hated tardiness himself.

When Marco strode through his door the view of the harbour and his nebulous thoughts of probable intra-uterine surgery paled into the background as Miss Cooper's smooth bob swung towards him.

Bellissima! The sun danced on the molten highlights of her hair like the boats on the waves outside, and emerald eyes, direct and calm against his suddenly dazed scrutiny, stared back at him as he crossed the room and held out his hand.

She shifted the big handbag on her lap and a smaller one as well, and stood up. Two bags? He forgot the bags, focussed on the slender hand in front of his, and remembered to breathe. Her fingers were cool and firm and he forced himself to let them slide from his grasp.

Her face. Serenity, wisdom, yet vulnerable? How could that be? She was older than he had expected, perhaps late twenties, maybe early thirties, the perfect age, and where she hid her baby he did not know, but she certainly had that gorgeous pregnant glow about her.

Marco consulted his notes to give time to assemble his scattered thoughts but he only grew more confused. Twenty-six weeks' gestation? 'You don't look very ... um ... pregnant.' Hell. Say something unprofessional, why don't you?

Emily Cooper blinked. They hadn't told her the new hotshot O and G consultant exuded raw magnetism like a roving gypsy king. Hair too long, too dark, windswept, and gorgeous velvety brown eyes that made her want to melt into the hospital carpet.

Her have another baby? If she could make her mouth work it'd better not laugh. 'I'm not pregnant.' Once was enough, she thought.

She hadn't had a relationship in who knew how long. Her shaky legs suggested she sit, but once safely down she felt like a sex-starved midget with him towering over her. But it wasn't only that, it was the whole broad-shouldered, 'span your waist with his big hands' thing that was happening. A random 'if I was going to have sex it would have to be with someone like him' thought that made her blink. Not her usual fantasy—that was more in line with 'wish I could sleep the clock around'.

Thankfully he stepped around the desk and she savoured the relief of increased space between them.

'But you're here for in-utero surgery ... yes?' Such a delicious Italian accent. Emily tasted the sound like chocolate on her tongue.

Marco stared at the paper in his hand. He could easily grasp the most complicated sequences of micro-surgery but this he could not fathom. Not only the sudden misbehaviour of his rampant sex hormones but the concept of being inexplicably glad Miss Cooper was not pregnant. It was all very strange. Perhaps with the desk between them his brain would function.

Before she could answer, the sound of footsteps and a young woman appeared hurriedly at the door. Things fell quickly into place.

‘How could you start without me, Mum?’

Fool. He felt like smacking his forehead. But excellent. He could see the similarities as the still barely pregnant-looking daughter came into his office with a mulish look to her rosebud mouth as she took the other handbag from her mother.

‘My apologies, Miss Cooper.’ He smiled and held out his hand. ‘I am Marco D’Arvello.’ Reluctantly the young woman shook his hand. ‘We have yet to begin.’ He extended his apology to Emily. ‘And forgive me, too, Mrs Cooper.’

The daughter glowered and glanced at her mother. ‘We’re both Miss Cooper. Mum’s Emily and I’m Annie. Illegitimacy runs in the family.’

Emily. Marco struggled to keep his face neutral when, in fact, he wanted to stand between this little virago and her poor mother. He was slightly relieved to see that Emily had ignored her daughter’s outburst. Truly, family dynamics were none of his business, he didn’t want them to ever be his business, so why did he feel so discomfited by what was going on here?

He forced himself to concentrate on the younger woman. ‘Then let us discuss your child, Annie.’ He gestured to the other chair. ‘Please, be seated and we will begin.’

Emily held back the sigh along with the need to fan her face. Maybe she could disappear into the carpet until the air-conditioner cooled her cheeks. Why did her daughter’s newly emergent evil twin have to appear here? The secretive one she didn’t recognise. It was okay. Her daughter was emotional, scared for her baby and angry with the world since Gran had died.

Emily was pretty angry about that herself but really she just longed for the delightful girl child Annie had been up until the last two months.

Illegitimacy runs in the family. Cringeworthy at the very least. No chance of sex with him now.

The thought brought a reluctant whisper of ironic amusement and suddenly she didn’t feel the need to sink into that scratchy hospital carpet; she could focus.

Which was lucky because they’d carried on without her.

‘There are three types of foetal surgery. One we do only with a needle. Another is the opposite, and similar to a Caesarean section where we work directly on the anaesthetised foetus, which we remove from the uterus and then return.’

Incredible what they could do. Emily watched his face. So intense and obviously passionate about something he knew so well. She couldn’t imagine the tension in an operating theatre for such a procedure. It sounded easy. Too easy for reality.

‘The risks of premature labour are greatest the larger the incision into the uterus, of course, until sometimes it is better to wait to deliver the baby and perform the surgery ex utero.’

Annie was chewing her lip. ‘So can we wait for my baby?’

‘Those cases depend on the foetal problem. Your baby is twenty-six weeks old, too young for the risk of premature labour or delivery, too old to be left much longer before damage cannot be reversed, and so we move on to the next alternative.’

He picked up the large envelope of ultrasounds and crossed to the light projector on the wall to clip up the dark images.

They all moved to fan around the light source. ‘Foetoscopy would be my preferred option in your case. Or Fetendo—like the child’s game—because the instruments are controlled while watching a screen and are less than a pencil width in diameter.’

‘Neat.’

'Si.' He smiled, the room lit up, and Emily felt like grabbing her sunglasses from her bag. Probably just because working permanent nights made you sensitive to light.

Marco pointed with one longer finger. 'Your baby has a narrowing of the neck of the bladder.' He circled the darkness of the bladder on the film. 'In simple terms, the door to releasing urine from the bladder has closed almost completely and the kidneys are swelling with the retained fluid. I would have wished to perform this surgery at least four weeks ago for maximum protection of your baby's kidneys.'

Emily felt she had to explain. 'We've only just found out about my daughter's pregnancy. This is the first scan she's had. It's all been a bit of a shock.'

Understatement. And not just the pregnancy. Disbelief that her daughter had fallen into the same circumstances as herself had paled when they'd discovered Annie's baby was at risk.

Emily's fierce protective instinct embraced this tiny new member of their family wholeheartedly because already she loved this little dark gnome on the ultrasound films.

'Si. So we will schedule surgery as soon as possible. I believe the repair can be achieved by foetoscopy under ultrasound imaging.'

He smiled at Annie. 'The instruments are fine and require a very small incision.' He glanced at them both under dark brows. 'Tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow?' Annie's squeak made Emily's hand slip across the distance between them to squeeze her daughter's cold fingers.

'It's okay. Better have it done as soon as possible for baby.' She looked at this man they were entrusting Annie and her baby's future to.

His strong profile and unwavering eyes somehow imbued the confidence she needed that these risks were worth it. 'Do you think much damage has been done to baby's kidneys already?'

He tactfully shrugged his broad shoulders and their eyes met and held. She could feel his compassion. His understanding of her fear.

They both glanced at Annie. 'We wait. It will be difficult to tell until after the operation. Hopefully the amniotic fluid volume will increase as the bladder is allowed to empty. That will be a good sign.'

He looked at them both. 'And in a few months, after the birth, there will be tests to give a true indication.'

Marco watched the young woman to see if she realised there was still doubt on the final outcome. They did not intrude on the dark sea of the foetal world without good reason. Annie's eyes, glistening green like her mother's, were glued to his face. 'So the procedure is safe for my baby?'

Ah. She began to comprehend and this part of it he could reassure her on. 'I have performed foetoscopies many times, and while you must be aware of the risks—your own anesthetic, your baby's analgesia, which we administer to prevent the procedure causing pain, and the risk of premature labour I spoke about before—to not perform this surgery would ensure a poor quality of life for your child, with extremely damaged kidneys.'

Annie gulped and nodded. 'Yes. I see.'

Perhaps he had been too blunt? 'I do not say these things to frighten you, but for you to know I believe this needs to be done, and as soon as possible.' He touched Annie's shoulder reassuringly. 'Do you understand?'

Annie glanced at her mother and nodded her head 'Okay. But I don't want to know any more. Let's just get it over with, then.'

'Si.' He moved to the door and they both stood up. 'I will arrange this now.' He glanced at the notes in his hand. 'I have your mobile phone number and will confirm the time Annie is to arrive tomorrow morning. You live together?'

'Yes.' Emily nodded. 'How long will she be in hospital?'

He pursed those sinfully chiselled lips and Emily diverted her glance quickly away to watch her daughter. 'The risk of premature birth is still present so at least forty-eight hours. My secretary will arrange for Annie to have an injection to help mature her baby's lungs should premature labour occur. This will be repeated tomorrow before surgery. If we have to open the uterus, her stay in hospital would be almost a week.'

Emily glanced back, careful to avoid looking at his face, stared instead at his collar and nodded. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

Marco looked at Annie. 'You are sure you have no other questions?' All mulishness and bravado had fallen away and Annie looked what she was. An apprehensive young woman scared for her baby.

'As long as my baby will be all right, Doctor?'

'Please, call me Marco. And your baby's wellness is our goal. *Bene*. I will see you tomorrow.'

Annie stiffened her shoulders and lifted her chin. 'Tomorrow.' She nodded, resolute. Now he admired her. No doubt her courage came from her mother. 'Thank you, Marco.'

The mother, Emily, just smiled and followed her daughter. No doubt this woman's whole life revolved around the girl, which would explain why there was an imbalance of power for the teenage years. He watched them walk away and readjusted his thinking. The daughter wasn't too bad. Just stressed. And if his child had required what hers did, he'd be stressed too.

He tried not to think about the mother. Because he really wanted to think about her. A lot.

But she did not look the kind of woman to have an affair, a liaison for just a month, while he worked in Sydney.

Unfortunately, after such brief exposure, her image was burned into his brain. Miss Cooper. Emily. Green eyes and vulnerable wisdom.

Emily went to work that night, like she had so many nights before over the last sixteen years, though times had changed in the last decade as she had progressed in her career. Now she was in charge of the ward at night, instead of being the junior nurse.

She could have risen higher but she chose night work because night duty meant the only person who suffered was her.

Because Gran, dear Gran, the only one in her family who had unconditionally loved her, had supported her, and in the past had minded the sleeping Annie while Emily worked.

Gran was gone now, Annie was certainly old enough not to be minded, and though Emily had almost come to terms with having a grandchild, she hadn't really come to terms with the fact her daughter had had unprotected sex at sixteen.

Would that have happened if she hadn't worked nights? Who knew? After all those conversations!

The ward was quiet so far—unlike her mind. She set the scales beside the prepared bed for the impending transfer from a regional hospital and pulled the BP machine close to hand for when their patient arrived. Her thoughts roamed as she taped the name badge to the bed.

The new patient was under Marco D'Arvello as well. So they had an influx of foetal surgery now?

She shook her head.

'Is something wrong?' Lily, her colleague and friend, touched her arm and Emily gathered herself.

'No. I'm thinking about earlier today.'

'So how was Annie's appointment and the mysterious Dr D'Arvello?' Lily had recently met and fallen in love with the man of her dreams, a plastic surgeon, and she was keen for everyone else to be as happy as her. 'I hear he's a heartbreaker.'

Um. Gorgeous? Emily could feel the warmth creep up her neck. At least the dimness of night duty was good for hiding blushes. 'He seemed very nice. You tell me what you think when he comes to see the new admission.'

She didn't want to think about her visceral reaction at his office. 'Naturally it would have been better if Annie had had the ultrasound earlier. But I didn't find out until last week. How history repeats itself.'

Her young friend shook her head emphatically. 'From where I'm standing, history did not repeat itself. From what you've told me, your parents treated you with coldness and contempt. This time it's different. When you found out you didn't hesitate to support Annie. You're there for her and she knows it. Even if she won't tell you who the father is.'

Emily chewed her lip. 'She says it's over and he's not interested. I'm not pushing. But her life as a child will be gone. And now her baby might be sick.'

Lily might be young but she hadn't had an easy childhood. She was tough and could work anywhere in the hospital, used to be an agency nurse, but wards were vying for her shifts because she was so versatile. Luckily she loved Maternity and Theatres.

Lily knew how strong a woman could be if she had to be. 'Lots of girls manage beautifully. Even with sick babies. I survived. You survived. You took it on with your head high. She'll survive. And if her baby is like you two, she'll be tough, too.'

Emily breathed deeply. She would love to believe that. She squeezed her friend's shoulder. 'Thanks. I'm sorry. I shouldn't bring my worries to work.'

Lily shook her head emphatically. 'And where else do you go to unload? I'm glad to be here for you. Which reminds me, we should have coffee this week, and Evie wants to come.'

'And that's another thing.' Emily brushed her hair out of her eyes. 'Annie wants a baby shower.'

'Stop beating yourself up. You do a great job. It's been a hard year with your gran and now Annie's pregnancy.'

They both looked up at the sound of an approaching wheel chair. 'I'll try. Looks like our patient is here.'

The woman in the chair looked even younger than Annie and both women shared a sympathetic glance.

'Hello, there, June, is it?' Emily smiled down at the scared young woman. 'I hear you're having twins?'

June nodded. 'That's what the doctor said. Now I don't feel so bad I look like the side of a house.' Her smile dropped a little as her bravado faltered. 'My babies are going to be all right. Aren't they?'

'We'll be doing everything we can to stop your contractions and as my friend here is fond of saying, babies are tough little creatures.'

The porter wheeled her into the prepared room. June moved carefully, and her large abdomen became more obvious when she moved. She stopped for a moment and breathed through the next contraction and Emily rested her hand on June's belly to feel the muscles harden. 'The tightenings seemed strong. You're managing well with them.'

June breathed out a big sigh when the contraction had passed. 'I did one of those calming birth weekends. My friend's mum teaches them and it really does help.'

'I've heard they're excellent. Must get the number from you for my daughter later.' Emily helped June balance on the scales. 'With luck we'll weigh you and get you into bed and sitting up high before the next one.'

June swayed on the scales and she whistled at the numbers. 'I never knew babies were so heavy.'

Emily wrote down the weight with a smile. 'A lot of your tummy is fluid, not just babies.'

June glanced across at Emily. 'The ultrasound said one baby is bigger than the other.'

Not a good thing with twins, Emily agreed silently. 'That's why the new doctor is coming to see you. We'll get you settled and sorted before he arrives.'

June glanced at the clock on the wall. 'Is he coming tonight? It's after midnight.'

'Doctors work long hours. And this one is a specialist who's very experienced with twins that are different sized.'

'Oh.' June settled back in the bed and forced herself to breathe calmly through the next contraction.

'I've a tablet here for you that should help the contractions ease off while we wait. It's also used as a blood-pressure tablet so I need to check that before I give it to you.'

Emily wrapped the blood-pressure cuff around June's arm and pumped it up to check. Normal. Good. 'I'll check again in thirty minutes and if you're still having contractions we'll give you another then.'

June was well settled before the sound of voices drifted to her room. Emily completed her paperwork and put the chart in the tray at the end of the bed. 'Ah. Here's your doctor.' Lily brought Dr D'Arvello into June's room.

Lily winked from behind his shoulder and Emily chewed her lip to keep back the smile.

'Hello, there.' His eyebrows rose when he recognised Emily. He glanced at her badge. 'Sister Cooper?'

'Doctor.' He looked less immaculate than he had earlier today, with a subtle darkness of new growth over his strong chin and his hair unruly across his forehead as if he'd repeatedly pushed it back. Unfortunately he looked even more wickedly attractive.

'Ah.' She saw him file that away before he turned to their patient with a smile that had June relax back into the bed. Nearly as good as calming breaths, Emily thought, with a tinge of sardonic amusement.

'And this is June, who is expecting twins?' He shook June's hand. 'I am Marco D'Arvello. Congratulations.' He pulled the chair across and sat down as if it wasn't really midnight and he hadn't been at work all day.

Like he had all the time in the world to talk to June. Emily liked that. Not what she needed—but to find something else she liked about this guy—but she was pleased for June.

June breathed through another contraction, though this one lasted less than twenty seconds. Marco frowned. 'She still threatens labour?'

'That one was shorter after just one dose of the Nifedipine.'

'Good.' He smiled at June. 'Your babies are better off inside at their age so we hope the contractions stop. I've looked at your ultrasounds, June, and your twins have a problem that I think I can help you with.'

June squared her shoulders. 'What sort of problem.'

He smiled. 'I like a woman who gets straight to the point.' Emily tried not to file that away.

'Because your babies share the one placenta, even though they use their own part of the placenta, it seems there's an extra blood vessel connecting their blood supply that shouldn't be there. The problem with that is one twin often gets the lion's share of oxygen and nutrients while the other can be quite disadvantaged.'

'Is it dangerous?' June was nothing if not focussed. Emily felt like hugging the girl.

'For the less fortunate foetus, it certainly can be.'

June turned to look at Emily and then back at Marco. 'You said you can help?'

He nodded. 'I offer you the option of an operation with a small instrument that enters your uterus through the abdomen and seals off the unwanted blood vessel between the twins. We use a tiny laser.'

June's eyes widened with distress? 'A laser? Near my babies? And you've done this before?'

'Dozens of times.' He smiled and Emily felt soothed just watching him. 'Believe me ...' he smiled again '... I would do it very carefully but the risks are greater if I do not attempt this closure of the extra vessel.'

He was skilled with reassurance, too, Emily thought, but she could see June's apprehension so she tried to help with the little she knew. 'It sounds like science fiction, doesn't it?'

She gestured to Marco. 'Dr D'Arvello is consulting here on a secondment. Intrauterine surgery is his specialty and he's here to help our obstetric and paediatric surgeons increase their skills.'

June narrowed her gaze. 'So you're the expert?'

'Si.' Marco nodded.

'So you don't deliver babies, then?' June frowned. 'Just laser them?'

White teeth flashed as he grinned, and Emily could feel her own mouth curve because he just made her want to smile. 'But no. I am present for many births. Thankfully, only few babies need what I offer and a normal birth is always a joy.' He glanced at Emily. 'You would agree, Sister Cooper?'

'Of course.' Emily wondered if he did see many normal births. Nowadays, at Sydney Harbour Hospital anyway, obstetricians were usually only called when complications occurred. Or for hands-on service for their private patients, but perhaps it was different in Italy.

June had thought it through and now she nodded. 'So what happens now?'

'Tonight we give you the second injection to encourage your twins' lungs to mature in case premature labour cannot be stopped.' He glanced at Emily who inclined her head in agreement. 'And please, no more food or fluids until after we operate tomorrow morning.'

June chewed her lip as the closeness of the operation sank in. 'What time will they come for me?'

'It will be soon after breakfast.' He smiled. 'Which is not for you.'

She pretended to sigh at that and Emily wanted to hug her for being so brave, though the anxiety lay clearly behind her joking manner. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

Marco narrowed his eyes and studied her. 'You have a mother's courage. Would you like something to help you sleep? Sister could give you something to help you relax.'

'No. Thank you. I guess I won't be doing much tomorrow and I can catch up then.'

Marco stood up. *Bene*. Goodnight, then.' He caught Emily's eye. 'May I have a word with you, Sister?'

Emily nodded. 'One minute.' And smiled at June. 'I'll be back soon. Would you like a drink of water before I take it away?'

June swallowed half a glass and Emily collected the water and followed him out to the desk, where he was writing up his orders for the night.

CHAPTER TWO

EMILY glanced at the clock. A quarter to one. Dr D'Arvello would have little sleep before his surgery day. She wondered if he was as used to lack of sleep as she was.

From her height above where he sat at the desk she couldn't help noticing the thickness of his dark hair. No sign of grey but he must be in his mid-thirties. A few years older than her and so much more experienced with the world. That deficit hadn't bothered her before. Why should it now? Silly. 'You wished to see me, Doctor?'

His dark eyes swept up from the notes and over her face. He smiled and she found herself grinning back like a goose before she could stop herself. 'I did not know you were a midwife at your daughter's visit this morning.'

It felt so long ago. 'It's not important?'

He frowned. 'But I would have offered more explanation if you wished. Is there more I can tell you?'

'No. Thank you.' She shrugged, a little embarrassed to admit it. 'Of course I have researched the internet and read what I can find. I think I understand the operation well enough.'

He nodded. 'Sometimes I wish my clients would not look up on the internet but I am sure you picked well with your sites. The procedure is fairly simple. Perhaps a little more complicated than June's surgery, but over almost as quickly.'

He stood up, towered over her again, and seemed to hesitate. 'And will you have to come to work tomorrow night after your daughter's operation?'

Her stomach dropped with a tinge of alarm. Was there bad news he hadn't mentioned? 'Actually, I'm not.' Did he think she would be too upset?

Still he frowned. 'So when will you sleep?'

'I'll go home as soon as Annie is out of surgery. So I will sleep when she does, afterwards.'

'You will be tired.' He handed her the completed notes and she took them and stared at the pages. Not really seeing his looping scrawl. Looked anywhere but his face. It had been a while since anyone had wondered if she was tired and his kindness made her feel strange. This whole conversation was surreal because she was so ridiculously conscious of him.

She risked a glance. 'I was just thinking the same for you.'

He shrugged his manly shoulders and she felt her stomach kick. This was crazy. She was way too aware of this man, this transient doctor. 'I sleep less than four hours a night. Always have done.'

'And I survive on about the same. I'm used to it.' She opened the folder at the medication page. She needed to get this injection for June happening. The last one had been given twelve hours ago at the regional hospital. 'So we have something in common.'

He wasn't ready to let her go. 'Perhaps we have more than that.'

She blinked. 'I don't know what you mean?'

He smiled but there was mischief that made her cheeks pink again. 'A concern and empathy for our patients.'

What had she thought he meant? 'Oh. Of course. Well, thank you for your concern. I'll just go for the hydrocortisone for June.'

'Perhaps one more thing?' He held up one finger. 'The reason I asked.'

She stopped. 'I'm sorry?'

'Tomorrow night. Because your daughter will be in the hospital. Perhaps you will need diversion from worry. It is Friday.'

She didn't get it. 'And?'

'A favour. I have promised myself a dinner on your so beautiful Sydney Harbour. I am only here for a month. It would be more pleasant to have company.'

Good grief. He was asking her out. On a date? 'I'm sure lots of ladies would love to be your company.'

He shrugged, as if aware what she said was true, not with conceit but with disinterest. 'I would prefer you.'

Normally he had no problem asking a beautiful woman to dinner. So why was this difficult? He just wanted to enjoy a diversion with this woman, not ask her to have his babies. Why stumble around like a callow youth when she obviously wanted to get on with her work?

It seemed his offer was the last thing she'd expected. He did not think shock was a good reaction and waited with unusual tension while she recovered.

'Well, I guess you won't run away because you find I have a teenage daughter.'

'This has happened?'

'Imagine.' She turned away. 'Anyway. Thank you. But, no, thank you. I don't date.'

'But this is not a date. Just kindness on your part.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Really? Tricky. Then perhaps I could let you know tomorrow. In the mean time, you could keep looking. Now I must get back to June.'

'*Bene. Of course. Buonanotte.*'

'Goodnight.'

Marco left the ward with a smile on his face. It had seemed fortuitous to find the woman who had whispered through his brain at odd moments all day, unexpectedly, on this maternity ward.

A midwife, no less, and someone he would see a little of in the course of his work. And he had planned to dine on the harbour at some stage, though perhaps not tomorrow. And she intrigued him—though a conquest might not be easy. Always a challenge he could not resist.

But with sudden clarity he'd realised that Emily would be unlikely to leave her daughter unattended, except for work, when they lived together. So it had to be tomorrow or the next night or not at all. He smiled to himself. Perhaps her doctor could keep Annie in an extra night for rest. Bad doctor.

He didn't know why he was so sure there was no man in Emily's life, but she had the look of an untouched woman, and he trusted his instincts. She said she did not date. At least that instinct had been correct. A date would be good for her.

She hadn't said yes but that made it all more interesting. The degree of anticipation he could feel building already made him smile. He'd brushed off the need for appreciation and commitment, had had it leached out of him throughout his dark childhood, but a harmless dalliance could hurt no one and he would give much for Emily Cooper to look on his invitation with approval. But not until tomorrow would he find out.

Emily's night passed quickly and thankfully without time for the distraction of Marco D'Arvello's unexpected invitation. June's premature contractions settled, but the arrival of two women in labour, one after the other, left little time for her to work out how she was going to turn him down.

When Emily finished her shift the sun shone through the windshield straight into her eyes as she drove home to the little cottage above the pier at Balmain East she'd inherited from her gran.

On night duty public transport didn't work. Through the days she caught ferries. She couldn't actually see Sydney harbour from her windows but the swish of the wash on the shore from passing boats floated in her window at night as she dressed for work.

Annie was pacing the front veranda as she waited for her mother to arrive home.

'Why did you have to be late, today of all days?'

Emily carried her bag into the house and tried not to sigh. 'We've been busy. I didn't dawdle for the fun of it.'

Annie dropped her complaints and hugged her mother warmly. 'Sorry. I'm nervous ...' she twisted her fingers ... and started to worry we'd be late.' She shook her head. 'And baby was awake and moving most of the night. It's almost as if she's nervous too.'

'I wouldn't be surprised if she was. Babies pick up on their mother's mood.'

Annie tilted her head and studied her mother. 'Well, I can see you need a cup of tea so maybe I can pick up yours too. I made you raisin toast!' It was a large statement. In case Emily didn't get the significance she added, 'Even though I'm starving myself because I have to fast.'

Emily was pleased to see after the initial stress Annie had calmed down. And was being nice. Though the last thing she wanted to do was eat. Her stomach was in knots about Annie's hospital visit and impending anaesthetic for both her and her tiny granddaughter. 'Thank you for that. Saves me a few minutes while I shower and dress.'

Three hours later Emily put down the crossword. The surgery seemed to be taking for ever. The waiting-room magazines needed to be tossed into the bin and replaced. Still, Emily had flicked through them all. She'd chewed her nails down to the quick. Now she was onto the edge of her finger. Come on!

At ten-thirty the theatre doors swung open and Marco D'Arvello strode through them. It seemed his focussed glance searched until he found her sitting along the wall.

She bolted upright off her chair as if on a spring. In seconds he was at her side. 'It is good. All went well.'

Emily sagged. Thank God. A strange buzzing began in her ears and her face felt funny, numb. The room began to tilt. His arms came up to steady her shoulders and he steered her back into a sitting position. His head dipped towards her with concern. 'Sit. Not so fast. Have you eaten?'

'What?' The room stopped its slow turn and the humming noises in her ears faded away. She closed and opened her eyes slowly.

'Emily? Have you eaten?'

His hands left her shoulders and she felt strangely bereft, almost tempted to catch them back. 'Must have got up too fast.'

'Si.'

Had she eaten? She couldn't remember. 'Um. Raisin toast three hours ago.'

'Come. We will go for a cocoa and some more of your raisin toast before you drive home and go to bed. Annie is not yet awake but will be back in the ward in about thirty minutes. I will return with you then to see her.'

Now she felt silly. Imagine if she'd fainted at his feet. 'I'm fine. Just stood too fast. I'm sure you have better things to do than drink cocoa with me.'

'I cannot think of one.' He shrugged with that Latin assurance Italian men seemed to have and her brain couldn't function enough to think of a good excuse to decline. She had to admit the thought of not being alone for another thirty minutes was attractive.

He went on. 'I believe the prognosis for both your Annie and our friend June's babies has improved significantly. I can do no more for the moment.' He searched her face and seemed satisfied. 'Your colour has improved. But another half an hour of waiting without food will not help.' He held out his hand. 'Come.'

Bossy man. Though she was feeling better. 'You say that a lot.'

He looked puzzled. 'What is that?'

She dropped her chin and deepened her voice in imitation. 'Come!'

He inclined his head. 'I will attempt to refrain.'

They smiled at each other. Such quaint speech patterns and it seemed he could cope with teasing. Luckily. What had got into her? She picked up her bag and glanced at her watch.

'Then thank you. A hot drink would be nice. I start to get cold when I need to sleep. Just twenty minutes and I'll come back.'

'Si. Your daughter should be back in the ward soon after that.'

They turned a few heads when they walked into the tea shop in the hospital grounds. Or Marco did, Emily thought as necks swivelled. She didn't actually know many of the staff, having worked in

Maternity on nights most of her career, and not a frequent visitor to the kiosk either, but she'd bet someone would recognise them and spread the word.

This place was a minefield of gossip. Another reason she preferred nights.

There was Head of Surgery Finn Kennedy and Evie Lockheart, her friend she was to have coffee with later in the week with Lily. Evie was hospital royalty and heiress to the Lockheart fortune.

Evie and Finn sat, head to head, engrossed in a deep and meaningful conversation, and to her surprise Evie slid her hand across the table and gripped Finn's hand. Emily couldn't help wondering if something terrible had happened.

Evie's father had been kind to her all those years ago when she'd been a sixteen-year-old mother of an ill prem baby, and he'd been the one who'd suggested she would make a great nurse. He'd even provided the reference needed to start work as an unskilled nurse assistant until she could manage the extra burden of study. She liked Evie.

Finn, she was just happy to stay out of his way. He was a grouch. The hospital's most experienced surgeon, though rumours had begun to circulate that he suffered some kind of medical problem that was threatening his career.

Emily had enough on her plate. She didn't want to get anywhere near more drama and she steered Marco to the furthest corner of the kiosk.

More heads swivelled their way and instead of ducking her head she lifted her chin and smiled and nodded back.

Maybe she was sick of being boring. Ungossipworthy. Now she was the mother of a pregnant teenager, cavorting with the new Italian O and G consultant, and flaunting it all in the daylight hours, she may as well hold her head up.

Something had changed her. Marco sensed the stiffening of her shoulders and resisted the sudden urge to take her elbow. Surely she was used to people admiring her? Even bruised around the eyes from lack of sleep, she was a stunning woman.

He'd thought her attractive yesterday, but seeing her this morning when he'd left Theatre, she'd reminded him of a fragile Madonna and a strange urge to protect her had welled uncomfortably in his throat. A sudden desire to cradle her worried face in his hands and reassure her.

No doubt she would have something to say about him trying that and he shook off the uneasiness that feeling left him with. She stopped at a table that couldn't be described as secluded but it seemed it would do. Marco pulled out her chair.

'You are smiling? Something amuses you?'

'Gossip.'

He glanced around. 'In a hospital as large as this?'

'Especially in this hospital.' She followed his gaze. Tried not to look at Evie and Finn. 'I hate gossip. It lives and breathes other people's business. And here I am with the handsome Italian doctor who has operated on my daughter. I'm never seen with anyone.'

'At least you notice something about me.'

'You're a bit hard to miss.'

He looked around. 'I too despise gossip.' The memories tasted bitter in his mouth.

Emily heard the underlying resentment and wondered where that had come from. The waitress arrived as soon as they'd picked up the menu and Emily put it down again and smiled at the girl. 'We've only twenty minutes. Should we order food?'

'Sure. Promise I'll be quick. What would you like?'

She looked at Marco. 'Scones and cream?'

Marco smiled at the young girl and she blushed all the way to the roots of her hair. 'One hot chocolate, one coffee black, and two scones and cream. *Per favore.*' The girl nodded and sped off.

Well, that was that. She studied his face. He didn't look tired. So maybe he really did manage on four hours' sleep. She was beginning to droop. She stifled a yawn. 'So tell me how it went.'

'Very well. No complications. A simple scope and shunt away from the narrowed opening into the bladder. Initial ultrasound shows good drainage into the bladder already.'

'Do you think my granddaughter's kidneys will be very damaged?'

His face softened and he reached across to touch her hand. Just that one stroke made her feel better. Comforted. His hand moved back. 'This I cannot tell. We will hope not.'

What did she expect? How could he know that? She just wanted reassurance but wisely he had promised nothing he couldn't give. Still, she appreciated his empathy. He was a kind man.

The hot drinks and scones arrived and they both smiled at the waitress. 'So quick. *Grazie*.'

'Wow.' Emily too was impressed. 'Thank you.' The girl grinned and hurried off and almost bumped into Finn, who stood suddenly from his chair, almost knocking it over.

He growled something at their waitress and shook off Evie's hand before he stormed towards the door. Evie's face looked white and drawn and Emily looked away. Maybe she could catch up with Evie later. Check she was okay. There was no doubt she was in love with the man who had just left her and Emily felt her heart go out to the younger woman. She'd picked a hard road there.

'It seems our surgical chief is not happy.' Marco too had seen.

She refocused on the man beside her. 'I'm sorry?'

'Finn. We met in the States a few years ago. Got on well.'

Of course Marco would know him. They were both surgeons. She spread cream on the scone and then dropped a dollop of jam in the middle. 'Evie's tough. If anyone can bounce back from Finn's ill humour, Evie can.'

'And who is she?'

'A medical officer here, a darned good one, but she's more than that. Her father's the hospital's main benefactor, and the reason Sydney Harbour has so many ground-breaking programs.'

'Lockheart?'

'Yes. If rumour is to be believed, she and Finn have an on-again, off-again relationship that sometimes rattles the windows around here. But if I needed medical help, either of them would do fine by me.'

And you would do fine by me, he thought, and the premonition that this woman could rock his stable skim-the-surface world seeped into his bones with a wary premonition. 'I realise you have a lot on your mind but have you thought about dinner this evening?'

'No.' Not much anyway. 'I really can't think of anything until after I see Annie.'

'Of course. Forgive me.' He was not usually this impatient.

They sipped their drinks and the silence became a little strained. She broke it. 'So how long are you here? At Sydney Harbour?'

'A month. Then I fly out to the US for a consultancy in New York. Last month it was London.'

She sipped her cocoa and the heat seeped into her cold edges. His life sounded a little on the cool side too.

Suddenly she wasn't hungry. 'It sounds a glamorous life.' The creamy scone stared back at her. Like a red eye. She bet she had red eyes. Why on earth had this man asked her to breakfast? Kindness. That was all. Now she just needed to accept the favour and move on.

'Si. Glamorous.' He picked up his coffee and took a sip.

'So where is home?' At his frown she tried again. 'Your family.'

His expression didn't change but she felt stillness come over him. And the temperature dropped another two degrees. So he didn't like questions. 'I have no family. I rent when I need. Mostly I work.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry.' She glanced at her watch and took another sip of her cocoa. 'I might see if Annie is back.'

He'd been abrupt. Closed her out like he always did when people asked about his family. No wonder she wanted to leave. What did he expect to happen? He never answered questions about

himself. He'd learnt at a very young age when the police were eager for any news of his father. When neighbours had shunned his family as soon as they'd realised who they were.

But this woman would never do that. The voice came from nowhere. Just a whisper, like she'd whispered yesterday to his thoughts, and he closed his ears.

'I apologise.' He glanced down at her uneaten scone. 'Your food.'

'I'm not really hungry.' She yawned. 'Excuse me.' He wanted to pick her up and carry her to a big feather bed and tuck her in to sleep. Or not to sleep.

He glanced around for the waitress and managed to catch her eye. She nodded and started their way.

'We will go. See if Annie is back on the ward and then you must go home to bed.' There was that thought again. Emily in bed. He dragged his mind away from her golden bob of hair lying next to his on the pillow.

She dug into her bag for her wallet and he shook his head. 'Please. Allow me.' He laid a note on the table and stood up to help pull out her chair. The waitress arrived and he smiled and gestured with his hand that she keep the change.

Emily stood and he followed her out of the kiosk back towards the wards. He wanted to ask if she would come with him tonight but he would not ask again. Perhaps after she'd seen her daughter he would know.

CHAPTER THREE

'HI, MA,' Annie whispered sleepily. 'They said my baby's fine.' She lay in a twin-bed room and the other stood turned back, waiting for June to return to the ward. 'I'm gonna call her Rosebud.'

Emily ached with the thick swell of love in her throat. At the moment her daughter could call her daughter Medusa and she wouldn't mind. She was just glad Annie and her baby were okay. It was hard to realise her own baby was growing up. She didn't want to think about the time when she left her completely. And her little gnome granddaughter was safe from further harm too. 'That's wonderful, darling.' She squeezed the pale fingers on the sheet and stared mistily down at her daughter.

'It all went very well, Annie.' Marco's deep voice rumbled in her ear and his presence felt like a man they'd known a lot longer than twenty-four hours.

Emily stepped back to think about that, but he must have stepped forward at the same time.

His hands came up to rest on her shoulders and her shoulders fitted snugly up against a wall of chest she'd only dreamed about. It felt too good to move but Emily's attention flew to her daughter. Thankfully Annie's long lashes rested on her pale cheeks as she drifted in a post-anaesthetic haze and she couldn't see her mother's weakness.

From the pillow Annie's eyelids didn't flicker as her voice faded away. 'Thank you, Marco.' In her semi-doze Annie's palm slid across the sheet to protect the small mound of her stomach and Emily let herself relax for a moment.

Just enjoy the sensation of being held.

Take the comfort he was no doubt offering. She hadn't had a lot of that lately. Especially since Gran had died.

But this was different from Gran's gentle love. This was a virulent, protector of a man saying he was there for her, if only for the duration of her daughter's recovery, and she'd be a fool to not accept it for what it was. She didn't want to think about how some women had this twenty-four seven. It felt too damn good.

But it wasn't reality. She stepped away. 'I'll visit this afternoon, darling.'

Annie opened her eyes. 'Um. No. Don't. I'm just gonna sleep. See me tomorrow, Mum. Have a rest.'

Emily winced. 'If that's what you want.' She chewed her lip. 'You sure? I'll have my phone. Just leave a message on my phone and I'll come in.'

Annie nodded sleepily. 'Tomorrow. Love you.'

'Love you, baby.' She hesitated. Watched her daughter sink into a heavier sleep.

Marco steered her towards the door. 'Come.'

She flicked a glance at him and he grinned. 'I do not know another word. Leave does not seem to work the same.'

She smiled back. 'Come is fine.'

'Then—' he deepened his voice to a tease '—come.' They grinned at each other. 'She looks well, your Annie, and we can hope not too much damage is done. But for now, sleepyhead, are you going to go home to worry?'

'No. I don't think I will.' She'd try not to and think about leaning back into Marco's arms. 'I think I'll sleep well.'

'Good.'

Then she thought of tonight, of the empty house. Of waking this afternoon after the four hours' sleep she never seemed to be able to improve on, and wondering what it would have been like to go out with this handsome man, do something that would take her mind off the worry. Or she could sit at home and think about Annie. And maybe one day she could go on a dinner cruise on Sydney harbour on her own.

'I'm wondering ...' She hesitated but he'd stopped and his attention was fully on her. 'Um. Dinner. What time?'

She had to guess he hadn't found anyone between hot chocolate and now.

So that was how she came to be dressed, waiting, scanning herself in the mirror. Wondering if the top was too old, should she wear a scarf? Could she still walk in high heels—it had been so long!

The doorbell drilled her like a cold knife and she glared at the mirror. Nerves. She was a big girl, dump the nerves, put on the smile and let the man take you out. You know you fancy him and he's only here for a month.

This would be good practice for the time when Annie left for her own life. He'd said he'd pick her up so he had a car, must have hired one if he was only here for a month. She kept coming back to that. Just a month. Too short to lose her heart. She hoped.

She peeked out from behind the lace curtain. She hadn't expected an Aston Martin. Or the open-necked black shirt. He was standing at the door. Looking around. Waiting for her to answer, and she was watching him with nerves flapping like pelicans in her belly.

Marco breathed in. Was unexpectedly aware of the late afternoon light, as if he should remember this moment. The slosh of waves and chug of boats on the harbour a few houses away. The tang of salt and seaweed.

The drift of voices from homes close to Emily's. People who saw this woman every day. Probably had for years. How could she still be alone? How had some man not scooped her up and carried her and her daughter off?

When would she answer this door? He checked the number again just as the door opened.

His breath was expelled in a sigh. A woman with such style. *Bellísima.* Every time he saw her she captured more of his attention. Appeared more exquisite.

'Thank you. Come through.' She gestured to the quaint sitting area with the carved wooden archway between the rooms.

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