



JENNIFER TAYLOR

Saving His
Little Miracle



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Jennifer Taylor

Saving His Little Miracle

Аннотация

Bound together by their childPaediatric neurosurgeon Vincenzo Lombardi is stunned by Nurse Lowri Davies's dramatic re-entry into his life – he hasn't seen her since their passionate few days together five years ago. But with the news that he's the father of her adorable but seriously ill little girl he's left both reeling and heartbroken. Vincenzo had thought he never wanted a family, but Lowri and Megan are awakening in him strong new emotions! Saving his little girl will mean making love to Lowri one more time – except Vincenzo realises once will now never be enough...

She glanced at him, feeling tears spring to her eyes when she saw the expression on his face.

That he was deeply moved by his first sight of their child wasn't in doubt, and something inside her seemed to open up at the thought. For five long years she had tried her best to blank out the memory of that night. Now she realised that it would be impossible not to think about it.

She and Vincenzo had made love that night, and by doing so they had created this precious child—a child who desperately needed their help if she was to survive. While she had always been prepared to do whatever was necessary to save Megan, she had never expected that Vincenzo would feel the same.

She bit her lip as a wave of panic swamped her. Maybe the situation hadn't changed. Maybe it was still the same in many ways. However, knowing that Vincenzo cared what happened to Megan made a world of difference to how she felt about him. Making love again with Vincenzo wouldn't be merely a means to an end now. It would be so much more...

Dear Reader

Last year I was fortunate enough to enjoy a holiday in the Italian Lakes. I stayed in a beautiful old villa, which had been converted into a hotel, overlooking Lake Garda. It was the perfect spot for a holiday and I thoroughly enjoyed exploring the area.

One day when I was taking the ferry across the lake I spotted a young couple with their child. They were such an attractive

family, although it was obvious that the little boy had been ill. They were on the ferry again when I set off back to Garda later that afternoon and I got talking to the child's mother, who turned out to be English. She told me that they were having a holiday with her in-laws. Her son *had* been extremely ill, and they were hoping that fresh air and sunshine would help him regain his strength. We parted company soon afterwards, but what she told me stayed with me and triggered the idea for this book: what lengths would a woman go to if it meant she could save her child?

I really enjoyed writing Lowri's and Vincenzo's story. They are two strong characters who met by chance and now find themselves united in their desire to save their child. What neither expects is that they will find themselves falling in love during the process!

I hope you enjoy this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Best wishes to you all

Jennifer Taylor

Saving His Little Miracle

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JENNIFER TAYLOR lives in the north-west of England, in

a small village surrounded by some really beautiful countryside. She has written for several different Mills & Boon® series in the past, but it wasn't until she read her first Medical Romance™ that she truly found her niche. She was so captivated by these heart-warming stories that she set out to write them herself! When she's not writing, or doing research for her latest book, Jennifer's hobbies include reading, gardening, travel, and chatting to friends both on and off-line. She is always delighted to hear from readers, so do visit her website at www.jennifer-taylor.com

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Dedication

For Vicky, a wonderful mother and a wonderful daughter too.

Praise for Jennifer Taylor:

‘A superbly written tale of hope, redemption and forgiveness, **THE SON WHO CHANGED HIS LIFE** is a first-class contemporary romance that plumbs deep into the heart of the human spirit and touches the soul.’

—*CataRomance.com*

‘Powerful, compassionate and poignant, **THE SON WHO CHANGED HIS LIFE** is a brilliant read from an outstanding writer who always delivers!’

—*CataRomance.com*

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

HAD SHE MADE a mistake by coming here?

Lowri Davies took a deep breath as she watched the taxi drive away. It was too late to be having second thoughts at this stage. If there had been another option open to her, she would have taken it months ago. However, the fact was that Vincenzo was the only person who could help her.

If he would.

A shiver ran through her at the thought of what she was going to ask him to do. It might have been easier if she'd had some idea of how he would react but she knew too little about him to predict his response. All they'd had were those few weeks together and it hadn't been enough to get to know what sort of a person he really was. Would he agree or would he refuse to get involved? The fact that he hadn't replied to her letter didn't bode well but she couldn't let that deter her. She needed his help, needed it desperately if she hoped to save Megan!

Lifting her hand, Lowri pressed the button on the intercom speaker. The villa was huge, much bigger than she had expected it would be. Built on the hillside overlooking the glittering waters of Lake Garda, it was an imposing property. Through the ornate wrought-iron gates she could see immaculately tended grounds and grimaced. Although it had been apparent even from the brief

time they had spent together that Vincenzo was wealthy, she hadn't realised just how rich he was.

A house like this must cost a small fortune to maintain, and then there was his apartment in an exclusive part of Milan as well. Even a top surgeon like Vincenzo couldn't afford two such properties on his salary. He had to have private means, family money that helped to pay for this kind of luxurious lifestyle. The thought was unsettling. The last thing she wanted was him thinking that she was after his money.

'Sì?'

The sound of a deeply masculine voice coming through the speaker made her jump. Lowri pressed her hand to her racing heart. It was five years since she had seen Vincenzo and she'd not had any contact with him since yet she had no difficulty recognising his voice. It was as though it had imprinted itself into her brain and lain there, dormant, for all that time. Now all of a sudden it had awoken a lot of memories, especially of that last night they had spent together...

'Vincenzo, it's Lowri,' she said quickly, not wanting to go down that route. Nothing would change what had happened that night, the same as it wouldn't change what had happened afterwards. She and Vincenzo had slept together and there had been unforeseen consequences.

'Lowri?'

He repeated her name, his voice holding the faintest hint of puzzlement, and Lowri felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Had he forgotten her, erased her so completely from his memory that he didn't even recognise her name? If truth be told, she was probably just one of many women he had slept with. No more and no less than that.

'Lowri Davies,' she said, feeling her temper inch its way up the scale. Maybe she was merely another notch on his bedpost but he could hardly claim not to remember her after that letter she had sent him. It made her wonder if it was all an act aimed at getting rid of her. Well, if that was the case, he was in for a shock.

'You must remember me, Vincenzo. Whilst I'm sure there've been a lot of women in your life, I doubt if many have written to tell you they were expecting your child.' She gave a brittle little laugh. 'Does that ring any bells?'

* * *

Vincenzo Lombardi felt the air rush from his lungs. Just for a moment, he stood stock still and stared at the entryphone. Was this some sort of a sick joke?

Oh, he remembered her all right, remembered her far better than he would have expected. All they'd had were those few weeks yet he could recall with perfect clarity every second of the time they had spent together. He closed his eyes, surprised by the speed with which he conjured up her image: light brown hair falling softly to her shoulders; hazel eyes that could turn from green to gold according to her mood. Her body had been slender but womanly with full breasts and a narrow waist.

His own body gave its pronouncement on that memory and his

eyes shot open. What in heaven's name was he doing? He should be focusing on what she had said, not on how he had felt when they had made love.

'I have no idea what you're talking about, signorina. If this is some sort of a joke then it is in very poor taste.'

'It isn't a joke. I wrote to you a couple of months after we'd spent that night together, as soon as I discovered I was pregnant, in fact. Are you claiming that you never received my letter?'

The scorn in her voice made his face burn. Vincenzo stared at the receiver again, stunned that she could have this effect on him. It had been years since he had blushed, years since he had felt anything akin to shame. He had trained himself not to show his emotions, not to feel them most of the time even. He knew that his colleagues at the hospital in Milan considered him to be cold and arrogant but it didn't worry him. In his view, it was better to be in control than to suffer all the emotional traumas they did.

'I am not claiming anything, signorina. I never received any letter from you. That is a fact. Now, I'm sorry but I don't have the time to continue this discussion.'

Vincenzo replaced the receiver in its rest. Picking up the towel that he had tossed over the back of a chair, he headed to the bathroom. He had overdone things today and his body was aching from the punishing routine he had put it through, but the only way he was going to regain full fitness was by pushing himself. It had been six months since the skiing accident that had caused such havoc in his life and he needed to step up his training if he

hoped to get back into Theatre. Surgery was his *raison d'être*, the thing that gave him the most pleasure. He couldn't imagine how empty his life would be if he couldn't do it any more.

The sound of the intercom buzzing brought him up short. Vincenzo swung round and glared at the receiver. So she hadn't gone away. She was still here, still intent on perpetuating that ridiculous lie. Tossing the towel onto the floor, he strode out of the room, determined that he was going to put an end to this situation. He had no idea why she had decided to come here and make that ridiculous claim but he wasn't going to be a party to it. If Lowri Davies had had a child, it certainly wasn't his!

She was standing outside the gates when Vincenzo left the house and he slowed when he saw her. All of a sudden he felt the need to prepare himself and it was a surprise to feel that way. His confidence was legendary, his self-assurance absolute. He always knew what to do even when presented with the most difficult of situations, yet for some reason he felt unsure about how to handle this.

After all, there had to be a reason why she had come here today. It had been five years since he had seen her and if she'd had a child in that time, he or she must be at least four years old. So why had she left it until now to make that claim about him being the father? Intuition warned him that there was more to her visit than first appeared, although he had no idea what it might be. He would have to rely on his instincts to deal with this and if there was one thing Vincenzo hated it was trusting to luck. He

preferred his life to be free of surprises, mapped out to the nth degree. That way there was less chance of him getting hurt.

The thought stunned him, mainly because it was the first time he had admitted that he might be vulnerable in any way. Vincenzo's mouth thinned as he strode down the path. Maybe his self-control wasn't as absolute as he had believed, but it was good enough to deal with this unwelcome intrusion. It made no difference why Lowri Davies had come to see him. Whatever her motives were, he had no intention of being manipulated!

* * *

Lowri could feel her heart pounding as she watched Vincenzo stride down the path. That he was less than pleased to see her was obvious but she wouldn't let that deter her. In a fast sweep her eyes ran over him, taking stock of the changes the past five years had wrought.

Physically he had changed very little, she decided. His black hair was as thick and lustrous as ever, his skin gleaming with good health and vitality. He was wearing black running shorts cut high at the sides with a black vest and she could see that his body was still taut and honed.

It was only as he drew closer that she realised how much older he looked, older and even more self-contained. There had always been an aloofness about him, a tendency to distance himself from other people, and it was more apparent than ever these days. He looked cold and remote and far from happy about her turning up like this but it was hard luck. She didn't care how he felt. She

only cared about what he could do for Megan.

‘I don’t know why you’ve come here and I don’t wish to know either. However, let me make myself clear: if you’ve had a child, Signorina Davies, it has nothing to do with me.’

Lowri had to stop herself taking a step back as he stared at her through the gate. The coldness in his eyes was far more intimidating than anger would have been. Vincenzo had always been in control. Even though she had known him only for a short time, she had soon realised that he kept his emotions on a very tight rein—apart from that night when they had made love.

The thought sent a rush of heat through her and Lowri shuddered. She had tried not to think about that night. It had seemed pointless dwelling on it, foolish to imagine that it had meant anything to Vincenzo when his subsequent actions had proved that it hadn’t.

They had slept together for comfort, out of mutual need even, but that was all. It hadn’t been the start of something, neither had she wanted it to be. She had been in a bad place at the time, still struggling to come to terms with her ex-fiancé’s deception, and that was why she had slept with Vincenzo...

Wasn’t it?

The thought brought her up short. Lowri realised that she was in danger of allowing herself to be sidetracked and that would never do. She had come here for one reason and one reason alone—to help Megan. Their daughter. She squared her shoulders in readiness for the battle that lay ahead. Even though Vincenzo

might refuse to accept that Megan was his child, there was no doubt in Lowri's mind about her daughter's parentage.

‘She. We have a daughter, Vincenzo. Her name is Megan and she was four years old in March.’

Opening her bag, Lowri took out the first of the photographs she had brought with her, her heart aching as she looked at her daughter's smiling face and recalled how different Megan had looked yesterday when she had left her with her sister, Cerys. She didn't care what Vincenzo thought about her, didn't care if his life was about to be disrupted either. She only cared about this child they had created. Saving Megan was the most important thing of all.

Her eyes met his as she held up the picture so that he couldn't avoid seeing it. Oh, he might wish to dispute his parentage but anyone looking at the photograph could see in an instant how like him Megan was. The little girl had the same thick black hair and light olive skin, the same deep grey eyes. Even her nose was a smaller version of Vincenzo's, arrow straight without even the hint of a tilt at the end of it. Apart from her mouth—which was like Lowri's—Megan was the image of him and Lowri dared him to dispute it.

‘You can see from this that Megan is your child, Vincenzo. But if it isn't enough to convince you then we can arrange to have DNA tests done. I have brought samples with me so you can send them off to a lab of your choice.’

She paused, waiting for him to say something, but he just

stood there, staring impassively at the photograph. He seemed unmoved by the evidence she was showing him, uncaring even if Megan was his child or not, and her temper leapt a little further up the scale. 'It will be harder to argue with the results of them, I imagine.'

'What do you want?'

His voice was low yet Lowri flinched as though he had shouted the question at her. She took a quick breath, feeling her heart fluttering wildly inside her chest. The thought of what she was about to ask him to do made her feel sick, but she mustn't think about how she felt, but about what it could mean for Megan.

'It's quite simple, Vincenzo. I want us to have another child.'

CHAPTER TWO

'IF YOU WOULD wait in here, my housekeeper will bring you something to drink while I get changed. Which would you prefer: tea or coffee?'

'Neither. I didn't come here to sit around drinking tea, Vincenzo. I have more important things to worry about!'

Vincenzo heard the mounting hysteria in Lowri's voice and inwardly flinched. He hated scenes, hated any display of unbridled emotion. Swinging round on his heel, he strode to the door, determined that he wasn't going to be drawn into a discussion until she calmed down. They needed to talk about this calmly and rationally.

If that was possible.

His stomach roiled as he recalled what she had said. She had

asked him to have another child with her and if that weren't proof of her state of mind, what was? Even setting aside that claim she had made about him being the father of her daughter, what sane woman would have asked that of him? No, she was completely overwrought, unbalanced even, and he needed to proceed with the utmost caution if he was to avoid an ugly confrontation.

'Don't walk away from me, Vincenzo! I'm sorry if I've disrupted your day by coming here, but you're going to listen to what I have to say whether you like it or not!'

Vincenzo came to an abrupt halt when she caught hold of his arm. Her fingers were icily cold against his bare skin and he fought to suppress the shiver that ran through him. Turning, he stared into her angry face, his lips already parted to remonstrate with her. Nobody ordered him about; he wouldn't allow them to. Even if she was undergoing some sort of a mental crisis, she needed to understand that. However, for some reason he found the harsh words drying up when he looked into her eyes and saw the fear they held.

'I need your help, Vincenzo, not for me but for Megan. That's why I'm here. Because there's nothing else I can do for her.'

She let go of his arm and he saw the shudder that passed through her. It struck him then just how terrified she looked. Maybe she wasn't behaving rationally but it was obvious that she was under a huge amount of strain. The thought made him reconsider his decision to get rid of her as quickly as possible. Maybe they had known each other only for a very short time but

she had helped him through a difficult period in his life. He owed it to her to listen to what she had to say at the very least.

Vincenzo turned and made his way to the sofa, surprised that he felt this way. He rarely felt under an obligation and couldn't remember the last time he had put someone else's needs before his own. However, there was something about the fear in Lowri's hazel eyes that touched a chord inside him. He wanted to help her even though he had no idea why.

'Thank you.'

Her voice was soft, filled with a relief that made his skin prickle in atavistic response. It was as though it had sliced through all the layers that had built up over the years and cut right to the very heart of him. Vincenzo took a deep breath, feeling oddly disorientated. He always knew how to behave in any situation, was always able to harness his emotions and steer them in the direction he wanted them to go, but not now. Not when he could tell how much it meant to her to have him do her bidding.

'The fact that I am willing to listen to you means nothing,' he said harshly, hating the fact that he felt so vulnerable. It was such an alien feeling and one he didn't intend to foster either.

'Maybe not, but it's a start.'

She gave him a quick smile as she sat down and Vincenzo felt his own mouth start to curl in imitation of hers before he stopped it. Leaning back against the cushions, he stared coldly back at her, needing to set the tone for how the conversation would continue. Maybe she hoped to persuade him to agree to

her request by employing all her charm, but there was no way that it was going to happen. He had never wanted children and he wasn't about to change his mind...although if what she had said was true, perhaps it was already too late to turn his back on fatherhood.

The thought sent a chill coursing through him. Vincenzo shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Although he was loath even to consider the idea that he might be the child's father, he had to admit that she looked a lot like him. What if she was his daughter? What was he going to do then?

He had sworn that he would never have a family. His own less than idyllic childhood had put him off the idea. His mother had died shortly before his second birthday and he didn't remember her at all. His father had brought him up and he had made it abundantly clear how much he had resented the time he'd had to spend with him.

Vincenzo had taken his lead from that. In his view, children needed far too much time and attention. He had seen how his colleagues struggled to balance the demands of family life with their work and he had vowed that he would never place himself in the same position. His job came first and everything else a very poor second. He didn't have the time or the inclination to raise a family and he needed to make that clear before they went any further. Even in the unlikely event that the child turned out to be his, he didn't intend to get involved.

'I need to make my position perfectly clear, Signorina Davies.

If what you say is correct, and it does turn out that I am the child's father, I have no intention of getting involved in her life. Quite simply, children are not on my agenda and they never will be.'

He stared at Lowri, waiting for her to react, but her expression didn't alter and, strangely enough, he wished that it had. It would have been that much easier to know what to say next if she had reacted with anger or incredulity even. He cleared his throat, feeling his stomach churning because he suddenly found himself in the unwelcome position of having to second-guess what she was thinking.

'I am willing to have the DNA tests done if it means they will resolve this matter. If they prove that I am the father then naturally I shall make arrangements regarding the child's support. However, that is where my involvement ends. I have no desire to play any role whatsoever in her life, you must understand.'

'I do. I understand perfectly. However, I didn't come here to ask you for money, Vincenzo. I am more than capable of supporting our daughter without your help.'

Her voice held a disdain that made Vincenzo's skin heat with embarrassment. It was as though he had been put to the test and found wanting and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. He stared back at her, doing his best to rein in the odd mix of emotions that filled him. Anger and shame weren't things he was used to feeling and he didn't appreciate the fact that she could trigger such a response in him.

'You say that now but who's to say you won't change your mind

at some point? If I am the child's father then I shall instruct my lawyers to draw up the appropriate papers.' He shrugged, feeling easier now that he was back in control of the conversation. 'If you don't wish to use the money, it can be put into a trust fund for the child to use in the future.'

'Megan. Her name is Megan. Referring to her as the child won't change anything, Vincenzo. She's still your daughter!'

Lowri glared at him. If she'd had a choice she would have got up right then and left, but she didn't have a choice, did she? She needed his help so she had to stay, had to persuade him to do what she wanted.

Her stomach rolled as it struck her how unlikely it was that he would agree. Even though she had known from the outset that it had been a long shot, she had hoped that she might be able to convince him to help her. Now, after what he had said about children not being on his agenda, it seemed less likely than ever. The thought that she might have failed brought a rush of tears to her eyes but she blinked them away. She wouldn't give up, not yet, not until she had done everything possible to persuade him.

Reaching into her bag, she took out a second photograph. It had been taken the previous week, shortly after Megan had been allowed home from hospital. Despite the fact that she had been exhausted, Megan was smiling as she held up the new doll Lowri had bought for her. She'd been so brave, Lowri thought, running her fingertip over the glossy surface of the photograph. Megan had been through so much in her short life yet she had still found

the courage to smile for the camera. Now she had to be just as brave if she was to have any hope of saving her beloved daughter.

She laid the photograph on the coffee table then placed the first one next to it, her heart aching as she compared the two. Nobody looking at these pictures could fail to be moved by what they saw and she could only pray that Vincenzo's heart would be touched too.

'This was taken last week when Megan came home from hospital,' she explained, her voice catching. She cleared her throat, knowing that she couldn't afford to break down. She needed to persuade him to help her and to do that she had to be coherent, had to lay out her arguments in a logical sequence and convince him that it was the right thing to do.

The thought of what she wanted from him made her heart race but she ignored it. She would worry about that later; think about what it would entail after she had done this.

'She lost her hair after the chemotherapy but we're going to get her a wig as soon as I get back home.' She gave a little laugh, stopping the instant she felt it start to turn into a sob. 'Apparently, she wants a bright pink one, just like her favourite doll, so we should have fun choosing it.'

'What's wrong with her?' Vincenzo's voice was still cool, but Lowri heard the catch in it he tried so hard to hide and felt relief pour through her. So he wasn't totally impervious to their daughter's plight after all!

It took every scrap of strength she could muster to keep her

own voice steady; however, she knew that he would retreat behind that wall he had erected between himself and the world if she showed too much emotion, and then wondered how on earth she could possibly know that. They'd spent just three weeks together, twenty-one days, and it hadn't been enough to get to know him properly, yet she knew in her heart that emotion scared him.

Her voice softened, took on the same soothing note she used with Megan whenever she was afraid. 'Acute lymphoblastic anaemia. She was diagnosed last year, on her third birthday, in fact, and she's had almost a full year of treatment.'

'Is she in remission?' he asked bluntly.

'Yes.' Lowri tried not to read anything into the fact that he sounded less shocked this time. 'However, I've been warned that it's unlikely to last and that the cancer will return. Her consultant explained that her best hope is a stem-cell transplant. It's highly effective in young children like Megan and it could mean that she's cured.'

'And have you found a donor?'

'No. There's nobody on the bone-marrow register who's a match. I've been tested, of course, and my sister as well. Her two boys, Ben and Dan, have also been tested.' She smiled as she thought about her nephews. 'Ben's fifteen and Daniel's only thirteen but they insisted on being tested if it meant they might be able to help Megan. They adore her, see her more as a little sister than a cousin, in fact, but neither of them are a suitable match, sadly. Our best hope of finding a donor is if she had a sibling.'

‘Which is why you came to see me,’ Vincenzo said flatly.

He looked up, his eyes meeting hers, and Lowri felt a trickle of heat run down her spine when she saw the way he was looking at her. All of a sudden she knew that he was remembering that night they had slept together and her breath caught as her own head was suddenly filled with memories: the desire in Vincenzo’s eyes as he drew her down onto the bed; the coolness of his hands as he stroked her body; the heat of their sweat-slick skin as they clung to each other in the final seconds before the world dissolved in a shower of stars...

She stood up abruptly, desperate to break the visual contact. She had tried not to think about that night, had tried her hardest to erase it from her mind. There had seemed no reason to think about it after Vincenzo had ignored her letter so every time she had been tempted to recall what had happened, she had driven the thoughts away. Now all she could think about was how she had felt when they had made love. Vincenzo had aroused her passion to a level it had never reached before. She had wanted him more than she had wanted anyone, even Jonathan, her ex, and the thought stunned her.

She hadn’t been in love with Vincenzo. She couldn’t possibly have been in love with him! She had known him for too short a time and known him only on the surface too, not known him, the person he was underneath. It would be madness to imagine there was a bond between them. The only link that existed was their daughter and that was all there would ever be.

Unless he agreed to help her and they conceived another child. A child who might save Megan's life. A child who might also forge a stronger bond between them.

* * *

Vincenzo stepped into the shower, letting the hot water pound down onto his head. Would it clean his mind as well as his body? he wondered. Wash away the thoughts that were running riot inside his head?

That was why he had excused himself and left Lowri in the salone, drinking the tea his housekeeper had made for them. He couldn't have drunk a single drop; he had realised that and made his escape. He had run away, distanced himself from a situation he didn't know how to handle, and it didn't make him feel good to know that he had been a coward.

All his adult life he had prided himself on knowing what to do and doing it, on making a decision and sticking to it. But he had no idea what he was going to do about this. Lowri wanted him to give her another child, a child who might help to save the daughter he had known nothing about until today. Quite frankly, it was too much to take in!

Vincenzo swore under his breath as he stepped out of the stall. Drying himself on one of the huge white bath towels, he strode into his bedroom and flung open the wardrobe doors. He needed clothes that would say the right thing, give the right impression. Running shorts and a vest certainly hadn't helped. He needed something more formal, clothes that would help to protect his

mind as well as cover his body. He needed to feel like himself when he saw Lowri again, not like this person he had turned into, the one who couldn't make decisions.

What if he refused and Megan died—how would he feel then? Could he live with the thought that he might have been able to save her?

His hand stilled. He could feel his heart thumping, feel the blood pounding in his temples. He had sworn a solemn oath when he had qualified as a doctor that he would do everything in his power to uphold life, yet he was contemplating letting his own child die.

What sort of a man did that make him? What kind of a person? Maybe he hadn't expected to find himself in this position but if it was true, if the child was his, how could he turn his back on her? Yet if he did agree, and he and Lowri had another child, what kind of an impact would it have on his life? Would he be able to cope with fatherhood or would he turn out exactly like his own father had been, full of resentment and bitterness? Did he really want any child to have to endure the sort of loveless childhood he'd had?

His face was set as he reached into the wardrobe and took out a pair of chinos. He slipped them on then opened a drawer and pulled out a T-shirt and dragged it over his head. What he wore was irrelevant. What mattered more was that he did what was right, not just what was right for him but right for them all—him, Lowri and Megan. His daughter.

His breath caught because it was no longer a question of maybe but definitely. He knew the child was his flesh and blood, knew it with a certainty that would have shocked him before today. He never accepted anything at face value normally. He always checked that any facts presented to him were correct. However, in his heart he knew that Megan was his daughter and the fact that he was prepared to accept it as the truth scared him. If he relied on emotions rather than proof, he would never be in control of this situation.

Vincenzo left the bedroom, taking his time as he made his way downstairs while he assembled his thoughts. Instinct was all well and good but he refused to allow it to take over. There was a lot to discuss if he and Lowri were to work out a solution to this dilemma.

His mind skipped ahead, presenting him with a scene that made his blood heat, and he groaned. Thinking about making love to Lowri was the last thing he should be doing when he needed a clear head! He took a steadying breath then opened the door to the salone, frowning when he discovered the room was empty. Where was she? Surely she hadn't left?

He swung round then stopped when he saw her crossing the hall. She was wearing a sundress, pale green cotton with narrow straps at the shoulders and a full skirt. Vincenzo found himself thinking how much it suited her, the colour bringing out the golden lights in her brown hair and making her hazel eyes appear greener than ever. With it she was wearing a pair of leather

sandals and he felt his stomach muscles clench when he saw the gleam of fresh polish on her toenails. For some reason he found it incredibly touching that she had dressed with such care for this meeting. Lowri was prepared to do anything it took to save her daughter. Even if it meant sleeping with him. Now he had to decide if he was as brave as her.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY SAT OUTSIDE on the terrace. Lowri much preferred it there to the stiff formality of the salone with its antique furniture and priceless objets d'art and she was glad when Vincenzo suggested it. Now, as she looked around the gardens, she felt some of the tension seep out of her. Maybe it was foolish to see it as a positive sign that he would agree to her request, but at least he was prepared to listen to her.

'Who's looking after the chil... Looking after Megan while you're here?'

Lowri's mouth curved into a tiny smile as he corrected himself. Another positive step. 'My sister, Cerys. She's looked after Megan since she was a baby when I went back to work.'

'You returned to work soon after she was born?' Vincenzo queried, his dark brows drawing into a frown.

'When she was six months old.' Lowri shrugged, refusing to let him see how guilty she felt about having to leave her daughter at such a tender age. 'Needs must, and I needed to work to support us.'

'I see.' He glanced across the lawn, his eyes resting on the

glimmering vista of the lake just visible through the trees. ‘So you and your fiancé didn’t resolve your differences?’

‘No.’ Lowri didn’t elaborate. Although she had told Vincenzo the whole sorry tale five years ago, she didn’t intend to go over it again. If she was honest, she still felt foolish about allowing Jonathan to deceive her. He had promised her the earth—a home and a family, the happily-ever-after every woman dreamt about. Unfortunately, the one thing he had failed to mention was that he was already married.

‘It must have been difficult for you, Lowri. Working and caring for a baby can’t have been easy. You must have resented being burdened with such a problem.’ His voice was flat and she frowned, wondering at his choice of words.

‘It hasn’t been easy and especially not this past year. But Megan has never been a burden. She’s the best thing that ever happened to me, if you want the truth.’

‘Really?’ He sounded so surprised that she frowned this time.

‘Yes, really. She’s a happy and contented little girl who gets up to all sorts of mischief.’ She laughed. ‘Last year I had the paddling pool out in the garden and she used her watering can to fill my wellies with water. I only realised it when I put them on!’

‘And were you cross with her?’ he asked, studying her face with an odd intensity.

‘Of course not! I couldn’t possibly have been cross when it was so funny.’ Her expression sobered abruptly. ‘I only wish she was well enough to get up to that sort of mischief these days.’

‘She will be. I’m sure she’ll be doing all sorts of naughty things very soon.’

He touched her hand, his fingers making only the briefest contact before he drew away, but Lowri still felt her breath catch. It was the first time he had willingly touched her since that night five years ago and she felt dizzy with the rush of sensations that thought aroused. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to focus on what was happening. There was no point dwelling on the past when it was the present that mattered. However, it appeared that Vincenzo still had questions he wanted answered.

‘You said that you sent me a letter when you discovered you were pregnant. Was it true?’

‘Of course it was true!’ She sat up straighter, realising that she was in danger of forgetting just how tenuous her position really was. Whilst Vincenzo might seem more receptive to what she had to say, it wasn’t a foregone conclusion that he would agree to help her.

She blanked out the thought of what would need to happen if he were to agree. It was stupid to feel even the slightest hint of distaste. She had thought it all through and she was sure that asking him to donate sperm was the best thing to do. After all, she knew nothing about his life these days, if he was in a relationship or had remarried even. The last thing she wanted was to create problems for him so artificial insemination seemed like the best way forward.

Anyway, she certainly didn’t intend to sleep with him again.

She had been bitterly hurt by his rejection and had no intention of placing herself in the same position again, even though, if she was honest, it hadn't been an unpleasant experience at the time. Her cheeks burned at the thought and she hurried on.

'I wrote to you, Vincenzo, and sent the letter to your apartment in Milan. I don't know why you didn't receive it but I definitely sent it.'

'Neither do I,' he began flatly, and then stopped.

'What?' Lowri demanded, because it was obvious that he had thought of something.

'I went to America that year—to Chicago—for six months.' He shrugged. 'I was contacted by the surgical team there and asked if I would be interested in taking part in their exchange programme and I agreed.'

'When was this?'

'The beginning of September. I remember stepping out of the airport and wondering if I'd made a mistake because it was pouring with rain!' He gave a little shudder then looked at her. 'When did you send your letter?'

'The end of August, not long after I found out I was pregnant,' Lowri told him and frowned. 'But even if my letter didn't arrive before you left, it should have been waiting for you when you got back.'

'Oh, I'm sure it would have been if a new concierge hadn't been hired while I was away. Apparently, a lot of post went missing while he was in charge of the building, most of it

containing items of value. Your letter must have been one of the ones he threw away.'

'Good heavens!' Lowri exclaimed. 'That's awful.'

'It is. Thankfully, the police investigated following complaints by a number of residents and he was arrested, so he won't be doing it again. However, it doesn't make up for the fact that a lot of post went missing, your letter included, apparently.'

'It would explain it,' Lowri agreed slowly.

She bit her lip, mulling over what he had told her. For the past few years, she had assumed that he hadn't replied to her letter because he hadn't cared enough; however, it appeared that she had been wrong. The thought of having to adjust how she thought about him made her feel very on edge but she had to put it out of her mind for now. Right now she needed to find out what he intended to do and if she was right to think that he might agree to help her.

'I know that you probably need more time to think about it, but how do you feel about us having another child, Vincenzo? I wouldn't press you for an answer if it weren't so urgent.'

'I don't know how I feel. That's the honest answer.'

Vincenzo drew in his breath. Where was his legendary assurance when he needed it? He felt as keyed up as a teenager, his nerves so tightly strung that it was a wonder they didn't snap. He couldn't remember ever feeling this way before but, then, he had never been presented with this kind of a situation, had he? If he agreed to her request and they had another child, inevitably

there would be consequences. How could he make her pregnant again and walk away? He would be tied to her, tied to the new baby as well as to their daughter, and the idea scared him.

He wasn't father material. He had no idea how to behave in that role. What if he ended up ruining his children's lives, albeit unwittingly? Everyone believed him to be cold and uncaring and what if they were right? What if he had buried his emotions so deep and for so long that he could never unearth them? Children needed time and love. And love was something he knew very little about.

Oh, his grandmother had loved him. Nonna had done her best to make up for his father's lack of interest and she had succeeded to a point too. However, since Nonna had died, Vincenzo knew that he had become more withdrawn, even colder with other people. That was why his marriage had failed. Even though he and Carla had entered into the arrangement with their eyes open, his inability to show any emotion had been one of the reasons why Carla had divorced him.

What if he couldn't find it in himself to treat his children with the warmth they had a right to expect? What if he was incapable of loving them as they deserved to be loved? He could remember only too well how much he had longed to hear his father speak to him with affection. It had never happened but it hadn't stopped him hoping that it would. What if he was the same? What if he was emotionally bankrupt too?

Vincenzo felt panic assail him and it was such a rare feeling

that it hit him harder than it would have hit most people. He was out of his depth and he had no idea what to do to save himself.

Only this wasn't about him, was it? It was about a child. A little girl who could die if he refused to help her. His feelings didn't matter. His fears couldn't even compare to Lowri's.

He glanced at Lowri, his heart aching when he saw the lines that strain had etched on her face. She had been living with this nightmare for over a year, living with it and coping too. She must have her own doubts about what she had suggested but she had set them aside. She was prepared to have another baby with him if it meant she could save her daughter and yet here he was worrying about how he might feel and whether or not he would come up to the mark.

Vincenzo was suddenly filled with disgust at his own selfishness. Had he sunk so low that he was prepared to withhold the most precious gift of all, that of saving a life, to avoid having his own life disrupted?

'I'll do it.'

His voice sounded harsh in the softness of the summer day. All around them there were insects droning, bees buzzing, nature carrying on in its own gentle way. He saw Lowri turn, saw the question in her eyes, and knew he couldn't bear to hear her voice it out loud. If she asked him outright then he might just reconsider, allow cowardice to dictate his actions rather than compassion.

'I agree to us having another baby if there's a chance it will

help Megan,' he said shortly, wanting to make it perfectly clear with the minimum fuss.

'I... Thank you.' Tears glimmered on her lashes and hung there like precious jewels.

Vincenzo turned and stared at the lake, needing to focus on something other than her tears, tears that he longed to wipe away. He couldn't afford to get emotionally involved. He had to remember that the only reason she was here was for the sake of their daughter. If it weren't for Megan she would never have contacted him and the thought stung, for some reason.

'I'm not sure exactly how we set about this. Obviously, there's the time factor to consider. I did some research and apparently the fresher the sample, the better our chances of it working.'

'Sample?' Vincenzo repeated, pushing the thought aside. He saw her blush and frowned. 'I'm sorry but I'm not sure what you mean.'

'The sperm sample.' She took a quick breath. 'Naturally, you'll want to wait for the results of the DNA tests before we go ahead—I've brought everything you need with me so that won't be a problem. But we'll need to make arrangements for the sperm sample to be delivered to me.'

Vincenzo felt as though he had been struck dumb. It had never even crossed his mind that she had come here to ask him for a sample of his sperm! He cleared his throat, afraid that he would say something far too revealing. To let her know just how disappointed he felt that they wouldn't be sleeping together was

out of the question!

‘Of course. There’s an excellent medical courier service we use at the hospital. I can make arrangements with them.’

‘Oh. Right. That sounds ideal.’ She took a package out of her bag and placed it on the table. ‘There are DNA samples in there from Megan and from me as well. You just need to add yours and send it off. It shouldn’t take long to get the results back.’

‘No. The tests are fairly quick nowadays,’ Vincenzo agreed flatly, still reeling from the thought of what was expected of him. He took a deep breath, realising that he was in danger of making too much of it. So Lowri didn’t intend to sleep with him—so what? He should be relieved that he would be able to sidestep any unnecessary complications.

He stood up when she rose, wondering why he found the idea less appealing than he should have done. Getting involved with her was something he intended to avoid at all costs. It was going to be difficult enough to deal with the thought of being a father without adding anything else to the equation.

The thought steadied him, helped him regain some much-needed equilibrium, and he smiled coolly at her. ‘I shall be in touch once the results are back. We can finalise the arrangements then.’

‘Of course.’ She held out her hand. ‘I really appreciate this, Vincenzo. I know it’s a lot to ask, especially in the circumstances, but it’s Megan’s best hope of making a full recovery and I’m truly grateful to you.’

Vincenzo took her hand, trying to ignore the rush of awareness that hit him as his fingers closed around hers. 'You don't need to thank me. It's enough to know that I may be able to help her.'

He released her hand, relieved to break the contact. He led the way to the door, pausing briefly to glance at her. 'How are you getting back to Garda? I assume you came here by taxi, so have you arranged to be collected?'

'I...ehem...no,' she admitted. 'Don't worry. I'm sure I'll be able to flag down a cab on the way.'

'I doubt it.' He sighed, suddenly anxious to bring the meeting to an end. It was a lot to take in and he needed time to think about what had happened and what it meant. His whole life was about to change and it was worrying to know that the future he had mapped out so carefully now wouldn't follow the route he had planned.

'I'll get my gardener to run you back,' he said curtly. He shook his head when she started to protest. 'No. I insist. If you'll wait here, I'll go and find him.'

Vincenzo didn't give her time to say anything else as he strode out of the door. Alfredo was digging over a border but he stopped immediately when Vincenzo told him what he wanted him to do. Five minutes later the car was turning out of the drive but he knew it wasn't the end of the matter. It couldn't be when he had promised Lowri that he would help her.

A shiver ran down his spine and he turned away, wondering if he had made a mistake by giving her his word. There would

be no going back on it now, no way that he could reconsider, and the thought filled him with such a mixture of emotions that his breath caught. If Lowri's plan worked then he would be the father of not one but two children this time next year.

* * *

It was midnight by the time Lowri's plane landed. The flight had been delayed and she was exhausted after the hours she had spent waiting around in Milan. Cerys was waiting when she came through customs, anxiously scanning the faces of all the passengers. She opened her arms and Lowri stepped into them, feeling relief pour through her as her sister enveloped her in a hug.

'So, how did it go?' Cerys demanded as she let her go.

'He agreed.' Lowri drummed up a smile, although her insides were churning as they had been doing ever since Vincenzo had told her his decision.

'Really? Wow!' Cerys sounded so shocked that Lowri laughed.

'I know. I was stunned too. It was such a long shot, wasn't it? I mean, he hardly knows me...' She trailed off, unable to continue as her throat closed up with a sudden attack of nerves.

'You hardly know him, either,' Cerys reminded her, leading the way to the car park. She zapped open the car doors then treated Lowri to an old-fashioned look. 'You are sure about this? I mean, it's a huge step to have another baby even when you're in a proper relationship and this is very different.'

'I know, but what choice do I have?' Lowri's eyes filled with

tears. 'If I don't have this baby and something happens to Megan then I'll always wonder if I could have prevented it. I couldn't live with myself, Cerys, really I couldn't!'

'I know. Take no notice of me. You're doing the right thing, love, and I'll be with you every step of the way.'

Cerys gave her a smile then got into the car and after a moment Lowri got in as well. She knew her sister was simply concerned about her and she appreciated it, but she couldn't pretend that she didn't have her own doubts. Having a baby was a big decision for any woman and all the more so in this situation.

Even though there was a greater chance of a sibling being a match for Megan, it wasn't guaranteed. From the moment she had decided to approach Vincenzo, she had ruled out the idea of having the baby tested before it was born for the simple reason that she knew she could never abort it. To destroy one life to possibly save another was something she couldn't do so she was going to have to trust to luck that the baby would be a suitable donor.

Should she have made that clear to Vincenzo? she wondered suddenly. She would hate him to think that she had misled him and she made a note to mention it when they next spoke.

Her heart jolted because the next time they spoke, they would have to finalise the arrangements for the sperm donation. There simply wasn't time to delay if this was to work and yet it seemed so cold, so...so emotionless to conceive a child this way. She sighed. It was emotionless, though. Vincenzo had agreed to her

proposal purely to help Megan, not because he wanted to have another child with her. Feelings didn't enter into it, neither hers nor his...if he had any.

Lowri closed her eyes, unsure why the idea made her feel so sad. She and Vincenzo were just two people who had met at a time when each had needed comfort. They had fulfilled a mutual need but that was all it had been. Oh, she had found him very attractive; she still did. But she hadn't been in love with him or him with her. And yet for some reason the thought of him living his life in an emotional wasteland hurt. Vincenzo deserved more than that. He deserved to be loved, deserved to be in love too.

* * *

Vincenzo drove to Milan the following day. He went straight to a lab he had used many times during the course of his work and arranged to have the DNA tests done. He was a valued client and they promised to get the results back to him within a couple of days.

He gave them his phone number then headed to his lawyer's office next. Although Lowri had rejected his offer of financial support for Megan, he intended to make arrangements anyway. He also needed to know what his position was with regard to the child, and if he had any rights as her father. Maybe he was putting the cart before the horse when he still didn't have proof that Megan was his daughter but he needed to clarify the situation. Hopefully, he would feel better once he knew exactly what he was dealing with.

He sighed as he parked the car outside the lawyer's office. He had spent a sleepless night thinking about what had happened and what he had agreed to do and he still wasn't sure if he had made the right decision. The thought of how it was going to affect his life wasn't easy to deal with. Having one child would be difficult enough to cope with and having a second would only double the problems.

He could only imagine the impact it was going to have on his life and yet what else could he have done? If Megan was his daughter—and he was sure that she was—then he owed it to her to do everything he could to help her. After all, she was his flesh and blood and she would carry on the Lombardi name after he died.

The thought of having an heir had never occurred to him before and yet Vincenzo felt a sudden rush of pleasure at the idea. Getting out of the car, he made his way into the building with a new spring in his step. The name of Lombardi wouldn't die out now, as he had always assumed; it would be carried on by his own children. It felt remarkably good to know that too.

* * *

Vincenzo decided to go into work the following day. The meeting with his lawyer had taken far longer than he had expected but he now had a much clearer idea of his position. The lawyer had been quite blunt as he had explained that Lowri held all the cards at the present moment. She was the child's mother and until he had proof that he was Megan's father, he would have

to abide by her wishes. While he could make arrangements to set up a trust fund in Megan's name, he couldn't force Lowri to accept financial support from him if she refused to do so.

For a man like him, who was used to being in sole charge of his affairs, it was unsettling to realise how tenuous his position actually was. Hopefully, a visit to the hospital would help to put some much-needed balance back into his life.

The familiar smell of antiseptic greeted him as he stepped out of the lift and he inhaled deeply. He had missed this. Missed the smell. Missed the buzz. Missed the adrenaline rush that came from saving lives under the most difficult of circumstances. Neurosurgery was one of the most demanding specialities. It needed strong nerves and steady hands and he possessed both—or he had done until the skiing accident that had partially severed one of the major nerves in his arm.

Vincenzo flexed his fingers as he opened the scrub-room door. Although he was ninety-nine per cent certain that he had regained full use of his hand, there was still that tiny doubt, that one per cent of uncertainty. Until he was completely confident about his prowess, he wouldn't operate. He would use the time instead to sort out this business with Lowri and the baby.

Heat flowed through him at the thought of how he would like to sort it out and he paused, wanting to be in control when he saw his team. There was no point thinking that he would prefer it if they conceived this child the old-fashioned way; Lowri would never agree. However, he knew that it was one of the reasons why

he hadn't been able to sleep. Every time he had closed his eyes his mind had conjured up pictures of them together. Although he had tried not to think about that night they had slept together, the memories had obviously lodged in his brain and all it had needed was an excuse to unleash them.

A shudder passed through him as he suddenly found himself recalling how smooth and silky her skin had felt when he had run his hands over it and how firm her breasts had been as he had caressed them...

A burst of laughter issuing from behind the partly opened door brought him back to the present and he frowned. He couldn't remember his team laughing like that; he would definitely have discouraged them if they had. He was about to enter the room and remonstrate with them when he heard someone speaking and recognised the voice as belonging to his second in command, Jack Wallace.

'Now, now, settle down, guys. You know our beloved leader wouldn't appreciate it if he thought we were having fun.' Jack's voice changed, his American drawl replaced by the parody of an Italian accent. 'The work we do here is far too serious to joke about.'

More laughter greeted this. Vincenzo felt a wave of embarrassment wash over him when he realised that they were laughing at him rather than at Jack's abysmal attempt to mimic him. He let the door swing shut, stunned that he should take any notice. What did it matter if he was a figure of fun? Why should

he care if people thought he was too strict? He was a damned fine surgeon and he achieved the kind of results that most surgeons could only dream about. He didn't need their approbation or their love!

Swinging round, he made for the lift. Five minutes later he was in his car and heading back to his apartment. He parked in the underground garage then took the lift to the penthouse and let himself in. It took a mere ten minutes to pack himself a bag and that was it.

Glancing around the elegant, designer-styled rooms, he gave a dismissive shrug. There was nothing here he needed, nothing that he would miss either. They were merely things, purchased to create the right impression. He had no emotional attachment to anything in the apartment. No emotional attachment to anything in his life, in fact, and all of a sudden he hated it. Hated the apartment, hated the way he lived, although he had no idea what he planned to do about it.

Vincenzo picked up his case and left. He was going to take the first step towards changing his life and simply see where it led him.

CHAPTER FOUR

'SO THAT'S JUST about it. How's Megan? I bet she's thrilled to be home from hospital, isn't she?'

'Yes, she is.'

Lowri dredged up a smile, not wanting her co-worker Helen Graham to see that her comment had touched a nerve. Megan

had been very tearful when Lowri had left her with Cerys that morning and she couldn't help feeling guilty. However, the nursing manager had been very good about letting her take time off while Megan had been in hospital and Lowri knew that she couldn't keep on expecting preferential treatment. It wasn't fair to the rest of the staff on the paediatric intensive care unit to have to cover for her.

'She's really excited because we're going to choose her a wig tonight when I get back from work.' Lowri laughed, trying not to think about the last time she had told this tale. She couldn't afford to think about Vincenzo and the plans they had made or she wouldn't be able to concentrate. 'Apparently, she wants a bright pink one, just like her favourite doll.'

'Good for her.' Helen laughed. 'I wouldn't mind a change of hair colour either, although my hubby would have a fit if I came back sporting bright pink locks. Hmm, might be a good enough reason to do it. He needs a bit of a shake up to stop him getting too complacent.'

Lowri laughed as Helen gave her a wink and left. Helen and her husband were about to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary so whatever they were doing, it was obviously right.

She sighed as she picked up the patients' list. She hadn't even made it to the altar let alone started celebrating anniversaries. Although she'd had several relationships, none of them had worked out. When she had met Jonathan, she had honestly thought that she had found her ideal partner at last but look how

wrong she had been. It made her wonder if she could trust her judgement even if she did meet someone else.

The thought reminded her of meeting Vincenzo and she frowned. She had never been the kind of woman who jumped into bed with a man at the drop of a hat so why had she slept with him? They had met by accident, literally, when he had bumped into her in the street.

Lowri had gone to Milan for a break, needing to get away from the situation she had found herself in. Discovering that Jonathan was married had been a massive shock. She might never have found out either if she hadn't answered his phone one day when he had been in the shower. She wasn't sure who had been the most surprised, herself or his wife as the poor woman had had no more idea what had been going on than Lowri had done.

When Jonathan had told her a short time later that he and his wife had separated and had begged her to take him back, Lowri had refused. He had tricked her, betrayed her, and all she had wanted was to put the whole unhappy episode behind her.

She had flown to Milan, intending to spend a few days there sightseeing before moving on to the Italian Lakes. She had been coming out of one of the more exclusive stores when Vincenzo had cannoned into her. He had been speaking on his phone at the time but he had immediately ended his call and insisted on taking her back into the store and buying her coffee.

Coffee had led to lunch and lunch to dinner at an exclusive little trattoria where the menu hadn't mentioned anything as

vulgar as prices. Lowri had asked him to order for her, wary of choosing the most expensive dish, and when the food had arrived it had been superb. Whether it was because she had been in the mood to be reckless, but when he had asked to see her the following night, she had agreed.

They had got on so well together, she thought. There had been no uncomfortable gaps in the conversation, none of those uneasy pauses that could occur between strangers. He had told her he was a surgeon and had seemed pleased when she had explained that she was a senior sister on PICU. Whether that had created a bond between them, she wasn't sure, but talking to Vincenzo had been remarkably easy, the hours she had spent with him some of the happiest she could remember.

In a way, it was to be expected that they would end up in bed together, especially after he had told her about his divorce and she had told him about Jonathan's betrayal.

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