

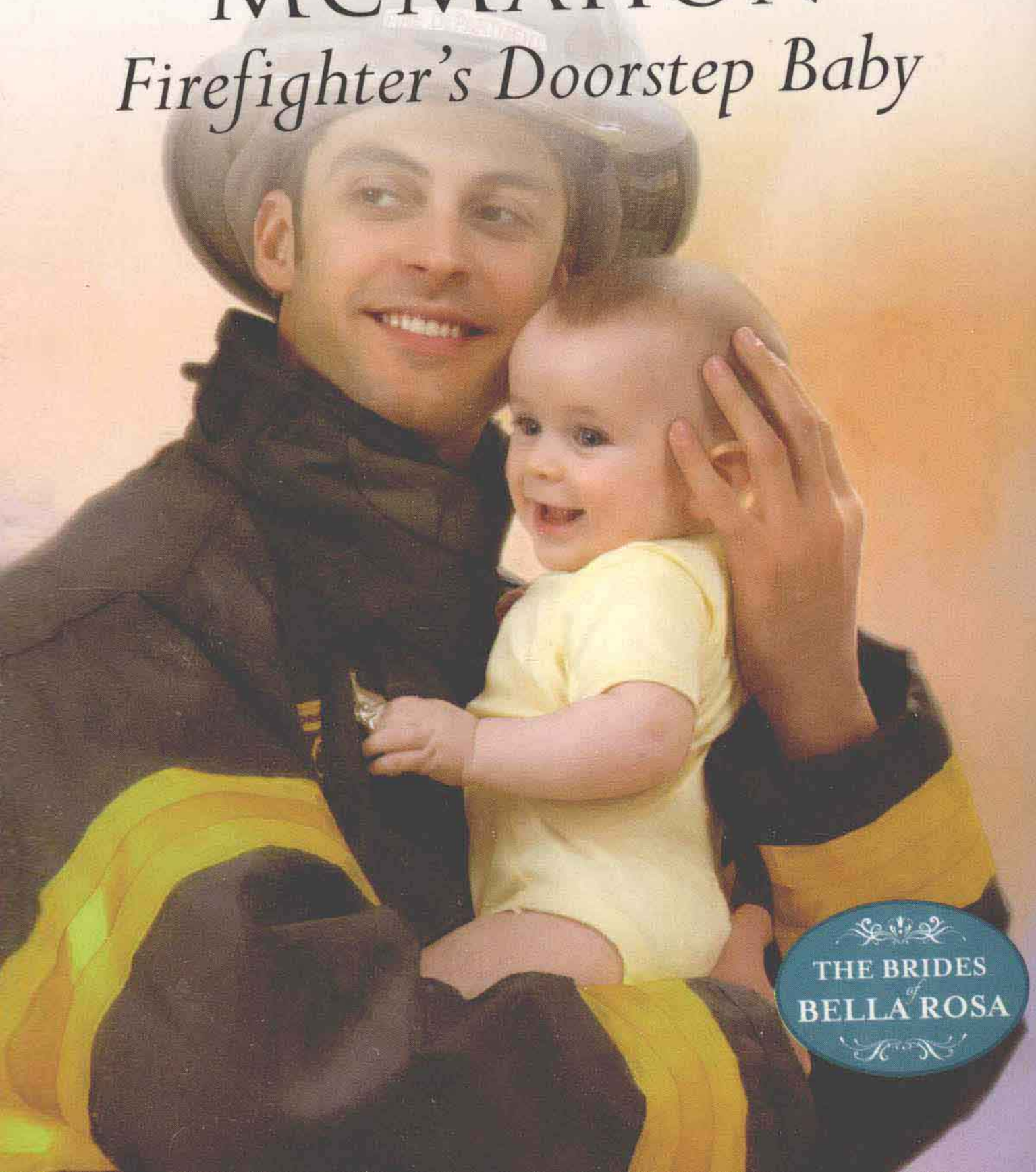


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BARBARA  
MCMAHON

*Firefighter's Doorstep Baby*



THE BRIDES  
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coming to my rescue.”

He tensed. Neighbor? *What neighbor kisses you like I did?* “That’s me, just the full-service landlord,” he said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He started to leave, but she put her hand on his arm.

“Jarrett, what I meant was you went beyond helping me.” Her eyes searched his face. “I’ve asked far too much of you.”

“Did you hear me complain?”

She shook her head. “You should. I feel like I’ve taken advantage.”

“Like I said, I haven’t minded.”

“And I’m grateful for everything...”

Grasping her hand on his arm, Jarrett leaned forward. The memory of last night’s kiss had him aching for another. “I didn’t do it for your gratitude, Mia.”

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BARBARA  
MCMAHON

*Firefighter's Doorstep Baby*



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**FIREFIGHTER'S DOORSTEP BABY**

First North American Publication 2010

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*Romance, rivalry and a family reunited.*

For years Lisa Firenzi and Luca Casali's sibling rivalry has disturbed the quiet, sleepy Italian town of Monta Correnti, and their two feuding restaurants have divided the market square.

Now, as the keys to the restaurants are handed down to Lisa's and Luca's children, will history repeat itself? Can the next generation undo its parents' mistakes, reunite the families and ultimately join the two restaurants?

Or are there more secrets to be revealed...?

*The doors to the restaurants are open,  
so take your seats and look out for secrets,  
scandals and surprises on the menu!*



Dear Reader,

When I think of Italy, I naturally think of beautiful cities, amazing countryside, delicious food and romance. When I visited years ago I was constantly enthralled by the history of the country, the gorgeous architecture, beautiful sculptures and paintings, and the warmth of the Italian people. I loved it! I want to go again.

But until that time comes I've settled for spending a few months with Cristiano and Mariella as they meet each other and begin to fall in love.

The setting is the countryside near Naples, with only one trip to Rome, revolving around the beauty of the area, the delicious food and the delights of love as they begin to realize each is perfect for the other—despite feeling they can't break free of their pasts.

Come feel the warmth of Italy and the magic of falling in love with two special people.

All the best

Barbara

**Barbara McMahon** was born and raised in the south U.S.A., but settled in California after spending a year flying around the world for an international airline. After settling down to raise a family and work for a computer firm, she began writing when her children started school. Now, feeling fortunate in being able to realize a long-held dream of quitting her “day job” and writing full-time, she and her husband have moved to the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, where she finds her desire to write is stronger than ever. With the beauty of the mountains visible from her windows, and the pace of life slower than the hectic San Francisco Bay Area where they previously resided, she finds more time than ever to think up stories and characters and share them with others through writing. Barbara loves to hear from readers. You can reach her at P.O. Box 977, Pioneer, CA 95666-0977, U.S.A. Readers can also contact Barbara at her website: [www.barbaramcmahon.com](http://www.barbaramcmahon.com).

*To First Responders everywhere—thanks for all you do to  
serve and protect every day. FDNY, we will never forget.*

## CHAPTER ONE

MARIELLA HOLMES stood on the small stone patio and gazed at the lake. Some daredevil was racing the wind on a Jet Ski. A spume of water arced behind it. The soft rumble of its engine faded as it sped across the surface of the water. She glanced into the cottage. Dante was still sleeping. She looked back at the reckless idiot on the Jet Ski; if the noise had woken the baby she'd have been more than annoyed. It had taken her longer than usual to get him to sleep.

What was the maniac doing anyway? If he fell in the water he'd be frozen in no time. Late October was so not lake weather. Yet even as she watched, she felt a spark of envy. He looked carefree skimming along at warp speed. If he was on vacation, he was certainly making the most of his time.

She gazed around the tree-covered hills that rose behind the lake. This would be lovely in the summer. She could picture children swimming in the water, canoes or rowboats dotting the surface. Imagine even more daredevils testing their skills with the Jet Skis; chasing the excitement, exploring the limits of their skills. Her gaze drawn back to the man, she continued to watch as she hoped this one wouldn't crash. There was beauty in the arc of water spewing from behind him, in the soft wake that radiated from the path

of the Jet Ski. Sunshine sparkled on the water, causing a misty rainbow when he turned.

She pulled her sweater closer and drank in the clean mountain air. Beautiful and peaceful. She had never visited this area before. She hadn't known what to expect. Forested hills, quiet lakes, small villages. It was enchanting. She wished she could explore everything, but they wouldn't be here that long. Whichever way things went, it would be a relatively short visit. She'd had a lull in work and so had acted on the spur of the moment when she'd decided to come see where Dante's father was from.

A loud smack of the Jet Ski on the water as it bounced over its own wake had her drawn again to the man. At this distance she could only see the dark hair and broad shoulders as he sat astride the machine. He seemed fearless as the engine roared louder and he went even faster. She could imagine herself flying along, the wind blowing all cares away.

Shivering, she stepped back inside the cottage. This would have been a perfect chance to call Ariana, tell her how much she was enjoying Lake Clarissa, and that she'd seen a man who fired her imagination. She still couldn't believe her best friend would never call her up again to talk a mile a minute about life. Would never get to hold her son or watch him learn to walk or start school. Mariella brushed the sudden tears from her cheeks. Ariana had been there for her when her own parents had died, but she was not here now. It was Mariella's turn to step up to the plate.

Time healed all hurts, Mariella knew that. She had gotten over the worst of her grief after her parents' untimely death when she'd been in New York during her first year at university. Her grief over Ariana's death would gradually ease too. She knew in her mind she'd remember her friend with love as the years went on. But sometimes she felt raw,



burning pain. Ariana had only been twenty-two. Her life should have stretched out until they were both old ladies. Instead, it had ended far too soon.

Shaking her head to dislodge depressing thoughts, Mariella focused on the future. She had Dante. She had a job. She had a quest. One day at a time. It had worked so far. So what if she felt overwhelmed some days? Caring for an unexpected baby wasn't easy. At least they were both healthy, well fed and comfortable. And she was getting the hang of being a mother. She hoped Dante would never remember her inept first attempts.

Crossing the small living room, she checked on the infant sleeping in the baby carrier still locked in the stroller. Checking the time, she knew he'd awaken soon for a bottle. She had a few minutes to unpack the groceries she'd brought and prepare his next meal before the first stirring.

She'd booked the room for a week, thinking that would be enough time to wander around and get a feel for the place and see if anyone here recognized the picture she had of Ariana. If not, they'd move on to Monta Correnti. She had no firm clues, no certainty she was even in the right place. She only knew this was the place Ariana had spoken about. The only clue she had given about Dante's father.

Ariana had been so sick and afraid those last weeks. Mariella wished her friend had called upon her earlier, but she had waited until graduation and Mariella's return to Rome before sharing the prognosis for the disease that ravaged her body. And, despite all Mariella's pleading, she had not revealed Dante's father's name. Only the bare fact that he came from this area, and they'd spent a wonderful weekend at Lake Clarissa.

The only child of older parents, Mariella was now alone in the world—and the guardian of an infant to boot. She'd always wished for brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and

cousins galore. She wished that for Dante as well. Maybe she could find his father, tell him of his son and discover he came from a large loving family who would take the baby into their hearts.

She glanced over to him again, her heart twisting. She loved this child. But it was so hard to be suddenly a mom. If she found his father, would she be able to give the baby up? Would a big family be best for him? She was still uncertain. At least she didn't have to make any decisions today. First she had to see if she could even locate his father. She'd decide then what course of action to take.

Cristiano opened the throttle full blast as the Jet Ski skimmed across the waves. The air was chilled, causing his blood to pump harder to keep him warm. The thrill of speed, the challenge of control, the sun glittering on the water all made him feel more alive than he had in months. All other thoughts and worries and memories evaporated. If the Jet Ski could go even faster, he would have relished the exhilaration, however short-lived. He pushed the machine to the max.

The injured ankle had healed. He'd been unable to use the Jet Ski during the warm summer weeks, but now, in the waning days of fall, he had the lake to himself. Power roared beneath him as he bounced over the small waves. The shore blurred by as he pushed the throttle surging to that last bit of power. He felt invincible. He'd cheated death once this year. He would not be taken today.

Drawing near the shore, he slowly banked toward the right, not sharp enough to capsize, but enough to swerve away from the rocky land that was fast approaching. He could ease back on the throttle, but what challenge was in that?

The Jet Ski bumped over its own wake and he stood up

to cushion the smacks as it slammed down on the water. Now his ankle ached a bit, reminding him he was not yet totally fit. Another circle and he'd return to the dock. It was cold enough that his toes were going numb. But there were few enough sunny days at this time of year. He'd take all he could get to enjoy being on the lake.

A few moments later, he slowed the ski and made a figure eight, then angled near the shore to make a big sweep that would take him back to the dock. Lake Clarissa was empty, the beach deserted. He was the only person in sight. The summer tourists had long left and the few people who came in the winter had not yet shown up. He had the place to himself.

As he skied past the row of cottages the Bertatalis rented, he noticed the far one was occupied. Lake Clarissa didn't offer the nightlife that Monta Correnti did. Most people weren't foolish enough to venture into the cold lake at this time of year. They had more sense than he did. It was probably some older couple who wanted to watch birds or see the leaves change. It wasn't that far to Monta Correnti they couldn't still drive over for some nighttime entertainment.

He pulled the Jet Ski up to the dock and in only moments secured it in the small floating ramp in the berth he rented. He tied it down and headed back to land. His wet feet left footprints on the wooden dock as he walked to his motorcycle. Drying himself, he quickly donned the jeans and boots he'd left across the seat, and pulled on a heavy sweater. It felt good to get warm. Donning the helmet, he mounted the bike and kick-started it. The rumble was not unlike the Jet Ski. Did power equate noise? He laughed at that idea and pulled onto the street. The small amount of traffic still surprised him after his time in Rome. Vacations in Lake Clarissa had always been fleeting, too much work



waiting at home when he'd been a child. Once grown, he'd preferred his exciting life travelling the world with his job, or the challenges of extreme sports, to spending much time in this little sleepy lakeside village.

Until the bombing had altered everything.

Shortly after one Cristiano got off his motorcycle on the side street by Pietro's Bistro. Lunch here would beat cooking for himself. His father would be horrified his own son didn't like cooking. It wasn't that he didn't like it precisely, it just didn't seem worth the effort for only one.

There was a wide patio for dining, empty this time of year. It wasn't that cool, yet the breezes blowing down from the higher elevation carried a chill. He entered the warm restaurant and paused a moment while his eyes got used to the dimmer light. Pietro's smelled like home. The restaurant he'd worked in most of his childhood, that his father still owned, was even of a similar rustic theme. Bella Rosa had more patrons and more bustle than Pietro's, but Pietro's was free of the ties to Cristiano's past he was trying to flee.

There were couples and groups eating at various tables—it was more crowded than he'd expected. Some people he recognized and nodded to when they looked up and waved. When Emeliano appeared from the kitchen, white apron tied neatly around his waist, heavy tray balanced on one hand, Cristiano watched. His arms almost ached at the remembered tiredness he'd felt after a long day at Rosa. He hadn't worked there in years, but some memories didn't fade. Even when he wished they would.

"Cristiano, sit anywhere. I'll be there soon," Emeliano called out as he deftly transferred the tray from his hand to the stand beside the table he was serving.

Cristiano walked toward his favorite table, near the big window overlooking the town square. It was occupied.