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FIONA MCARTHUR

Midwife, Mother...

Italian's Wife



Mills & Boon Medical

Fiona McArthur

Midwife, Mother...Italian's Wife

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Dear Reader,

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

Then she met Leonardo Bonmarito—tall, gorgeous, a brooding Italian doctor who was never going to settle in Lyrebird Lake, and who would never allow her the freedom she thrived on. And his son placed her own in danger. So what was she doing with her hands inside his shirt?

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

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

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

I wish you happy reading.

Fiona

About the Author

A mother to five sons, **FIONA MCARTHUR** is an Australian midwife who loves to write. Medical™ Romance gives Fiona the scope to write about all the wonderful aspects of adventure, romance, medicine and midwifery that she feels so passionate about—as well as an excuse to travel! Now that her boys are older, Fiona and her husband Ian are off to meet new people, see new places, and have wonderful adventures. Fiona's website is at www.fionamcarthur.com

Dedication:

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a problem but what was a man to do with a bodice just under eye level? It would be strange dancing with a woman willow-slim in body and almost as tall as himself. She felt twice the height of his late wife.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They both turned their heads to watch the children waltz and Leon felt the warmth of pride. Paulo did well and it had not been an easy few days for him. 'I hope so. He has been taught. A man must be able to lead.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One more dance and she was done. She felt like tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for the music to start again now the guests and not just the wedding party filled the floor.

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

No more being nice to Leonardo Bonmarito.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or maybe the strength of her disquiet about him had made her more aware. Either way she wasn't interested and needed to get away from him to her friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Drink your wine,' he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Delilah I believe. Tamara?' He rolled the name off his tongue as if sampling it, found the taste delightful and he nodded. That suited her better. 'There was a famous noblewoman called Tamara in Roman mythology. She, too, was tall and apparently rather arrogant. How ironic.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head and went on. 'We were held up on the way over and arrived later than expected. It will give Paulo a few days to get over the "excitement" before we have to return.' She nodded.

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

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

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

Leon frowned and looked across to where his son was talking to Grace and another girl. 'What is this "spotlight"?'

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

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

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

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

'Perhaps for a short while.' He tilted his head at his son and Paulo approached them. He spoke in Italian and Tammy looked away but she couldn't help overhearing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leon went on in a low, steely voice that made her eyebrows rise. 'He attends school. And your Jack? He appears very confident.' His eyes travelled over her. 'Like his mother.'

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

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

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

'Sì'. *Reluctance in the answer*. 'They died when we were young.'

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

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

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

He answered almost absently as his attention was distracted by the calls and laughter of the children. 'An elderly widowed aunt who has since passed away.' He frowned again as Paulo ducked with a grin behind a dark bush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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