

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a teal top, leaning over a baby who is lying on a white surface. The woman is kissing the baby on the forehead. The baby is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and looking towards the camera. The background is a soft-focus white surface.

BEST FRIEND TO WIFE AND MOTHER?

Caroline Anderson

 *Cherish*

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Аннотация

Stepping out of the 'friend' zone...Leo Zaccharelli is a gorgeous TV chef, but to Amy Driver he's just her best friend. Yet when he saves her from a disastrous near miss down the aisle, Amy escapes to Tuscany with Leo and his adorable baby daughter, Ella. Spending time with this beautiful little family, that has suffered so much tragedy after Leo's wife's death, opens Amy's eyes to the joys of being a mother...and a wife! Now she's seen Leo in a whole new light, can their friendship lead to forever...?

She watched Leo's face light up as he reached out for the baby and felt a pang of envy. What would it be like to have a little person so very pleased to see you?

Wonderful. Amazing.

He slid the sunglasses up onto his head and held his arms out, and she could see the wonder in his eyes.

'She's wet,' Amy warned him, but he just shrugged.

'I don't care. I need a shower anyway. Come here, *mia bellissima bambina*,' Leo said, reaching for the baby, but his fingers brushed Amy's breast and she sucked in her breath. It was barely audible but he heard it, and their eyes clashed and held, his darkening to midnight.

For a moment they both froze. She couldn't breathe, the air jammed solid in her lungs, and then with a muttered apology he lifted Ella out of her arms and turned away, laughing and kissing her all over her face, making her giggle deliciously and freeing Amy from his spell.

After a second of paralysing immobility she grabbed a towel and wrapped it firmly round herself, then gathered up their things and headed for the steps, Leo falling in beside her at the top. They walked back together to their apartment, Ella perched on his shoulders with her little fists knotted in his hair, while he told her a little about his day, and they both pretended that the moment by the pool hadn't happened.

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Caroline Anderson



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CAROLINE ANDERSON describes herself: ‘Mother, writer, armchair gardener, unofficial tearoom researcher and eater of lovely cakes. Not necessarily in that order. I love my family, my friends, reading, writing contemporary love stories, hearing from readers, walks by the sea with coffee/ice-cream/cake thrown in, torrential rain, sunshine in spring/autumn. What I hate: revising manuscripts, losing my pets, fighting with my family, cold weather, hot weather, computers, clothes-shopping. My plans? To keep smiling and writing!’

Huge thanks to Caroline and Adam, and Bryony and Owen, who inadvertently gave me wonderful wedding inspiration, and to Shirley and Roger, Mike and Trice, who invited us to share those days with them.

I love you all.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

‘ARE YOU READY?’

He eased a flyaway strand of hair from the corner of her eye, his touch as light as a butterfly’s wing, his fingertips lingering for a moment as their eyes met and held. His voice, as familiar to her as her own, was steady and reassuring, but his words didn’t reassure her. They sent her mind into free-fall.

They were such simple words, on the surface, but layered beneath were a million unasked and unanswered questions.

Questions Leo probably didn't even know he'd asked her. Questions she'd needed to ask herself for months but somehow hadn't got round to.

Was she ready?

For the wedding, yes. The planning had been meticulous, nothing left to chance. Her mother, quietly and efficiently, had seen to that. But the marriage—the *lifetime*—with Nick?

Mingling with the birdsong and the voices of the people clustered outside the church gates were the familiar strains of the organ music.

The overture for her wedding.

No. Her *marriage*. Subtle difference, but hugely significant.

Amy glanced through the doorway of the church and caught the smiles on the row of faces in the back pew, all of them craning their necks to get a better look at her. The villagers at the gate were mostly there for Leo, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favourite son, but these people in the church—her friends, Nick's—were here to see her marry Nick.

Today.

Right now.

Her heart skittered under the fitted bodice that suddenly seemed so tight she could hardly breathe.

I can't do this—!

No choice. Too late now for cold feet. If she'd been going to change her mind she should have done it ages ago, before the wheels of this massive train that was her wedding had been set

in motion. Or later, at a push—but not now, so late it was about to hit the buffers.

The church was full, the food cooked, the champagne on ice. And Nick would be standing at the altar, waiting for her.

Dear, kind, lovely Nick, who'd been there for her when her life had been in chaos, who'd just—been there, for the last three years, her friend and companion and cheerleader. Her lover. And she did love him. She did...

Enough to marry him? Till death us do part, and all that? Or is it just the easiest thing to do?

You can stop this, the voice whispered in her head. *It's not too late.*

But it was. Way too late. She was marrying Nick. Today.

A curious calm settled over her, as if a switch had been flicked, turning on the autopilot, steadying her fall into oblivion. The voice in her head didn't care.

Just because it's easy, because you know he'll be a good husband and father and he's safe? Is that enough?

Of course it was enough. It was just nerves unsettling her. That was all. Last-minute nerves. Nick was—fine.

Fine? Like safe, steady, reliable, predictable—that kind of fine? No chemistry, no fireworks? And whatever happened to amazing?

She tuned the voice out. There were more important things than amazing. Trust, fidelity, respect—and chemistry was

overrated—

How do you know that? You don't know that. You haven't got a clue, you've never felt it. And if you marry Nick, you never will...

She stifled the voice again, stuffing it firmly back in its box; then, easing her death grip on the bouquet, she straightened her shoulders, tilted up her chin and gave Leo her most convincing and dazzling smile.

‘Yes,’ she said firmly. ‘I’m ready.’

* * *

Leo felt his breath catch at that smile.

When had she grown up? Turned into this stunningly lovely woman, instead of the slightly chubby, relentlessly accident-prone girl who'd dogged his footsteps for ever? He'd turned his back for what felt like five minutes, and she'd been transformed.

More like five years, though, give or take, and a lot of water under the bridge for both of them. Far too much, in his case, and so much of it tainted by regret.

He cradled her pale cheek in his hand, and felt her quiver. She was nervous. Of course she was. Who wouldn't be, on their wedding day? It was a hell of a commitment. Literally, in his case.

‘You look beautiful, Amy,’ he said gruffly, looking down into the wide grey eyes of this lovely young woman he'd known so well but now hardly knew at all. ‘He's a lucky man.’

‘Thank you.’

Her eyes searched his, a flicker of uncertainty in them echoing

the tiny tremor in her cheek, the smile on her lush, pink lips a little hesitant now, and he felt himself frown.

Second thoughts? About time. There was nothing wrong with the man she was marrying, from what little he'd seen of him—in fact, he'd liked him, a lot—but they just didn't seem *right* for each other.

There was no chemistry between them, no zing that he could see. Maybe she didn't want that? Maybe she just wanted safe and comfortable? And maybe that was a really, really good idea.

Or maybe not, not for Amy...

He hesitated another second, then took her hand in his, his thumb slowly stroking the back of it in a subconscious gesture of comfort. Her fingers were cold, trembling slightly in his, reinforcing his concern. He squeezed them gently.

'Amy, I'm going to ask you something. It's only what your father would have done, so please don't take it the wrong way, but—are you sure you want to do this? Because if not, you can still turn around and walk away. It's your life, no one else's, and nobody else can decide this for you.'

His voice dropped, his frown deepening as he struggled to get the importance of this across to her before it was too late. If only someone had done this for him...

'Don't do it unless it's right, Amy, unless you really, truly love him. Take it from me, marrying the wrong person for the wrong reasons is a recipe for disaster. You have to be absolutely, completely and utterly sure that it's the right thing to do and for

the right reasons.’

A shadow flitted across her eyes, her fingers tightening on his, and after an infinitesimal pause that seemed to last an eternity, she nodded. ‘Yes. Yes, of course I’m sure.’

But she didn’t look sure, and he certainly wasn’t, but it was nothing to do with him, was it? Not his decision to make. And the shadows in her eyes could just as easily be sadness because her much-loved father wasn’t here to give her away. Nothing to do with her choice of groom...

Not your business who she chooses to love. God knows, you’re no expert. And he could be a lot, lot worse.

He hauled in a breath.

‘OK. Ready to go, then?’

She nodded, but he saw her swallow again, and for a moment he wondered if she’d changed her mind.

And then she straightened up and took a breath, hooked her hand through his arm and flashed a smile over her shoulder at her bridesmaids. ‘OK, girls? Good to go?’

They both nodded, and he felt her hand tighten on his arm.

‘OK, then. Let’s do this.’ Her eyes flicked up and met Leo’s, her fake smile pinned in place by sheer determination, but it didn’t waver and anybody else might have been convinced.

Not your business. He nodded to the usher, who nodded to the organist, and after a moment’s silence, broken only by the shuffling of the congregation getting to their feet and the clearing of a few throats, the evocative strains of Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*

Major filled the church.

He laid his hand over hers, squeezed her fingers and felt them grip his. He glanced down, into those liquid grey eyes that seemed flooded with doubt despite the brave smile, and his gut clenched.

He'd known her for ever, rescued her from a million scrapes, both literal and otherwise; dammit, she was his best friend, or had been before the craziness that was his life had got in the way, and he couldn't bear to see her make the mistake of her life.

Don't do it, Amy. Please, don't do it!

'It's still not too late,' he said gruffly, his voice muted, his head tilted towards her so only she could hear.

'Yes, it is,' she said, so softly he barely heard her, then she dredged up that expected smile again and took the first step forward.

Damn.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and slowly, steadily, walked her down the aisle.

* * *

With every step, her legs felt heavier and more reluctant, her heart pounding, the sense of unease settling closer around her, chilling her to the bone.

What are you doing?

Nick was there, watching her thoughtfully. Warily?

It's still not too late.

She felt Leo ease his arm out from under her hand and step

away, and she felt—abandoned?

It was her wedding day. She should feel a sense of joy, of completeness, of utter, bone-deep rightness—but she didn't.

Not at all.

And, as she glanced up at Nick, she realised that neither did he. Either that, or he was paralysed by nerves, which was unlikely. He wasn't remotely the nervous type.

He took her hand briefly, squeezed it in reassurance, but it felt wrong. So wrong...

She eased it away, using the excuse of handing her bouquet to the waiting bridesmaid, and then the vicar spoke, everyone started to sing 'Jerusalem', and she felt her mouth move automatically while her mind whirled. *Her mind*, this time, not the voice in her head giving her grief, or a moment of panic, stage fright, last-minute nerves or whatever. This time it was really her, finally asking all the questions Leo's 'Are you ready?' had prompted.

What are we doing? And why? Who for?

The last echoes of the hymn filtered away, and the vicar did the just cause or impediment bit. *Was* there a just cause? Was not loving him enough sufficient? And then she saw the vicar's lips move as he began to speak the words of the marriage service, drowned out by her thudding heart and the whirlwind in her head.

Until he said, 'Who gives this woman to be married to this man?' and Leo stepped forward, took her hand with a tiny, barely perceptible squeeze, and gave it—gave her—to Nick.

Dear Nick. Lovely, kind, dependable Nick, ready to make her his wife, give her the babies they both longed for, grow old with her...

But Nick hesitated. When the vicar asked if he would take this woman to be his wife, he hesitated. And then—was that a shrug?—his mouth twisted in a wry smile and he said, ‘I will.’

The vicar turned, spoke to her, but she wasn’t really listening any more. She was staring into Nick’s eyes, searching them for the truth, and all she could see was duty.

Duty from him, and duty from her? Because they’d come this far before either of them had realised it was bound to be—what were Leo’s words?—a disaster?

She gripped his hands. ‘Will you? Will you *really*?’ she asked under her breath. ‘Because I’m not sure I can.’

Behind her she heard the slight suck of Leo’s indrawn breath, the rustle from the congregation, the whispered undertone of someone asking what she’d said.

And then Nick smiled—the first time he’d really smiled at her in weeks, she realised—and put his arms around her, and hugged her against his broad, solid chest. It shook with what could have been a huff of laughter, and he squeezed her tight.

His breath brushed her cheek, his words soft in her ear. ‘You cut that a bit fine, my love.’

She felt the tension flow out of her like air out of a punctured balloon, and if he hadn’t been holding her she would have crumpled.

‘I did, didn’t I? I’m sorry, Nick, but I just can’t do this,’ she murmured.

‘I know; it doesn’t feel right, does it? I thought it would, but...it just doesn’t. And better now than later.’ She felt his arms slacken as he raised his head and looked over her shoulder.

‘Time to go, sweetheart,’ he murmured, his mouth tugging into a wistful smile. ‘Leo’s waiting for you. He’ll make sure you’re all right.’ He kissed her gently on the cheek and stepped back, his smile a little unsteady now. ‘Be happy, Amy.’

She searched his eyes, and saw regret and relief, and her eyes welled with tears. ‘You, too,’ she said silently, and took a step back, then another one, and collided with Leo’s solid warmth.

His hands cupped her elbows, supporting her as everything slowly righted itself. She turned to him, met those steady golden eyes and whispered, ‘Thank you.’

And then she picked up her skirts and ran.

* * *

She’d done it. She’d actually done it. Walked—no, sprinted, or as close to it as she could in those ridiculous shoes—away from disaster.

Leo watched her go, her mother and bridesmaids hurrying after her, watched Nick turn to his best man and sit down on the pew behind him as if his strings had been cut, and realised it was all down to him. Appropriate, really, since in a way he was the cause of it.

He hauled in a deep breath, turned to the stunned congregation

and gave them his best media smile.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it seems there isn’t going to be a wedding today after all. I’m not sure of the protocol for this kind of thing, but there’s food ready and waiting for you in the marquee, and any of you who’d like to come back and enjoy it will be more than welcome to do so before you head off. I gather the chef comes highly recommended,’ he added drily, and there was a ripple of laughter that broke the tension.

He nodded to his father, who nodded back, pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket to set the ball rolling with their catering team, and with a brief nod to the vicar, Leo strode swiftly down the aisle and out of the church after Amy.

The sun warmed him, the gentle rays bringing the life back into his limbs, and he realised he’d been stone cold at the prospect of watching her make a disastrous mistake. He flexed his fingers as he walked over to the vintage Bentley and peered inside.

She was in there, perched on the seat in a billowing cloud of tulle and lace, surrounded by her mother and bridesmaids all clucking like mother hens, and the villagers gathered around the gate were agog. As well they might be.

He ducked his head inside the car.

‘Amy?’ he murmured, and she stared blankly up at him. She looked lost, shocked and confused and just a little crazy, and he could read the desperate appeal in her eyes.

‘Take her home, I’ll follow,’ he instructed the driver tersely, and as the car whisked her away one of the crowd at the gate

yelled, 'What's going on, Leo?'

He didn't answer. They could see what was going on, they just didn't know why, and he had better things to do than stand around and tittle-tattle. He turned to scan the throng of puzzled guests spilling out of the church, milling aimlessly around, unsure of what to do next, and in the midst of them he found his parents heading towards him.

'Is she all right?' his mother asked worriedly, and he nodded.

'I think so. She will be. Let's get out of here. We've got things to do.'

* * *

She'd done it.

Stopped the train and run away—from Nick, from the certainty of her carefully planned and mapped-out future, from everything that made up her life, and she felt lost. Cast adrift, swamped by a million conflicting emotions, unsure of what to do or think or feel.

Actually, she couldn't feel anything much. Just numbness, a sort of strange hollowness deep in her chest as if there was nothing there any more.

Better than the ice-cold dread of doing the wrong thing, but not much.

She tugged off her veil, handing it to her bridesmaids. If she could she would have taken the dress off, too, there and then. She couldn't get out of it fast enough. Couldn't get out of all of it fast enough, the church, the dress, the car—the country?

She almost laughed, but the hysteria bubbling in her throat threatened to turn to tears so she clamped her teeth shut and crushed it ruthlessly down. Not now. Not yet.

‘Are you all right, darling?’ Her mother’s face was troubled but calm, and Amy heaved a shaky sigh of relief. At least she wasn’t going off the deep end. Not that her mother was a deep-end kind of person, but you never knew. And her daughter hadn’t ever jilted anyone at the altar before, so the situation wasn’t exactly tried and tested.

‘Yes, I’m fine. I’m really sorry, Mum.’

‘Don’t be. It’s the first sensible thing you’ve done for months.’

Amy stared at her, astonished. ‘I thought you liked him?’

‘I do like him! He’s lovely. I just don’t think he’s right for you. You don’t have that spark.’

Not her, too, joining in with her alter ego and reminding her she’d been about to do the wrong thing for the wrong reasons and should have pulled out much, much earlier.

Or he should. Both of them, for everyone’s sake. Oh, what a mess!

The car door opened, and she realised they’d come to rest on the drive. Gathering up her skirts, she climbed awkwardly out and headed for the front door. Her mother unlocked it and pushed it open and Amy was swept inside on the tide of her redundant bridesmaids, into the hallway of the house she’d left such a short time before as a bride on the brink of a nice, safe, sensible marriage. Now she was—she didn’t know what she was.

A runaway bride?

Such a cliché. She gave a smothered laugh and shook her head.

‘I need to get out of this dress,’ she muttered, kicking off her shoes and heading for the stairs and the sanctuary of her bedroom.

‘I’ll come,’ her mother said, and they all fell in behind her, threatening to suffocate her with kindness.

She paused on the third stair and turned back. ‘No, Mum. Actually, none of you. I think I’d like to be alone for a moment.’

They ground to a halt, three pairs of worried eyes studying her. Checking to see if she’d lost her marbles, probably. Wrong. She’d just found them, at the absolutely last minute. *Oh, Nick, I’m sorry...*

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ her mother asked, her face creased with concern.

‘Yes,’ she said, more firmly this time. ‘Yes, I’m sure.’ Sure about everything except what her future held. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything stupid.’ Or at least, nothing as stupid as marrying the wrong man would have been. Not that she knew who the right one was, or how she’d recognise him. She seemed to have a gift for getting it wrong.

They were all still standing there as if they didn’t know what to do now their carefully planned schedule had been thrown out the window, but it was no good asking her. She didn’t have a clue. She turned back to the stairs, putting one foot in front of the other, skirts bunched in her quivering hands.

‘Shall I bring you up a cup of tea?’ her mother asked, breaking the silence.

Tea. Of course. The universal panacea. And it would give her mother something to do. ‘That would be lovely, Mum. Whenever you’re ready. Don’t rush.’

‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

Her mother disappeared into the kitchen, the bridesmaids trailing in her wake as one after the other they came out of their trances, and she made it to the safety of her bedroom and shut the door before the bubble burst and the first tears fell.

Odd, that she was crying when she felt so little. It was just a release of tension, but without the tension there was nothing, just a yawning chasm opening up in front of her, and she thought she was going to fall apart. Pressing her hand to her mouth to stifle the sobs, she slid down the door, crumpling to the floor in a billowing cloud of lace and petticoats, and let the floodgates open.

* * *

He had to get to her.

He could only imagine what state she was in, but that look in her eyes when she’d glanced up in the car—

He pulled up on the driveway of his family home, and after checking that the baby was all right and the catering was under control he headed through the gate in the fence into Amy’s garden and tapped on the kitchen door.

Amy’s mother let him in, her face troubled. ‘Oh, Leo, I’m

so glad you're here,' she said, and hugged him briefly, her composure wobbling for a second.

'How is she?' he asked.

'I don't know. She's gone upstairs. She wouldn't let us go—said she needed to be alone. I've made her a cup of tea, I was just about to take it up.'

'Give it to me. I'll go and talk to her. This is my fault.'

'Your fault?'

He gave her a wry smile. 'I asked her if she was sure.'

Jill smiled back at him and kissed his cheek. 'Well, thank God you did, Leo. I haven't had the guts. Here, take it. And get her out of here, can you? She doesn't need all this hoopla.'

He nodded, took the tea and headed for the stairs. Her bedroom was over the kitchen, with a perfect view of the marquee on his parents' lawn and the steady stream of guests who were arriving for the wedding reception that wasn't.

Damn.

He crossed the landing and tapped on her bedroom door.

* * *

Someone was knocking.

Her mother, probably. She dropped her head back against the door and sucked in a breath. She wasn't ready to face her. Wasn't ready to face anyone—

'Amy? Can I come in?'

Leo. Her mother must have sent him up. She heard the knob turn, could feel the door gently pushing her in the back, but she

couldn't move. Didn't want to move. She wanted to stay there for ever, hiding from everyone, until she'd worked out what had happened and what she was going to do with the rest of her life.

His voice came through the door again, low and gentle. 'Amy? Let me in, sweetheart. I've got a cup of tea for you.'

It was the tea that made her move. That, and the reassuring normality of his voice. She shuffled over, hauling her voluminous skirts with her, and he pushed the door gently inwards until he could squeeze past it and shut it behind him.

She sniffed hard, and she heard him tutting softly. He crouched down, his face coming into view, his eyes scanning the mess her face must be. She scrubbed her cheeks with her hands and he held out a wad of tissues.

He'd even come prepared, she thought, and the tears began again.

She heard the soft click of his tongue as he tutted again, the gentle touch of his hand on her hair. 'Oh, Amy.'

He put the tea down, sat on the floor next to her and hauled her into his arms. 'Come here, you silly thing. You'll be OK. It'll all work out in the end.'

'Will it? How? What am I going to do?' she mumbled into his shoulder, busily shredding the sodden tissues in her lap. 'I've given up my job, I'd already given up my flat—we were about to move out of his flat and buy a family house and have babies, and I was going to try going freelance with my photography, and now...I don't have a life any more, Leo. It's all gone, every part

of it. I just walked away from it and I feel as if I've stepped off a cliff. I must be mad!'

Leo's heart contracted.

Poor Amy. She sounded utterly lost, and it tugged at something deep inside him, some part of him that had spent years protecting her from the fallout of her impulsive nature. He hugged her closer, rocking her gently against his chest. 'I don't think you're mad. I think it's the first sensible thing you've done in ages,' he told her gently, echoing her mother's words.

She shifted so she could see his face. 'How come everybody else knew this except me?' she said plaintively. 'Why am I so stupid?'

'You aren't stupid. He's a nice guy. He's just not the right man for you. If he was, you wouldn't have hesitated for a moment, and nor would he. And it didn't seem to me as if you'd broken his heart. Quite the opposite.'

'No.' There'd been nothing heartbroken, she thought, about the flash of relief in his eyes in that fleeting moment. Sadness, yes, but no heartbreak. 'I suppose he was just doing the decent thing.'

Leo's eyes clouded and he turned away. 'Yeah. Trust me, it doesn't work.'

'Was that what you did?' she asked him, momentarily distracted from her own self-induced catastrophe. 'The decent thing? When you married the wrong person for the wrong reasons?'

A muscle bunched in his jaw. ‘Something like that. Are you going to drink this tea or not?’

She took the mug that he was holding out to her, cradled it in both hands and sighed shakily.

‘You OK now?’

She nodded. She was, she realised. Just about, so long as she didn’t have to make any more decisions, because clearly she was unqualified in that department. She sipped her tea, lifted her head and rested it back against the wall with another shaky little sigh. ‘I will be. I don’t know; I just feel—I can’t explain—as if I can’t trust myself any more. I don’t know who I am, and I thought I knew. Does that make sense, Leo?’

‘Absolutely. Been there, done that, worn out the T-shirt.’

She turned to him, searching his face and finding only kindness and concern. No reproach. No disappointment in her. Just Leo, doing what he always did, getting her out of the mess she’d got herself into.

Again.

‘Leo, will you get me out of here?’ she asked unevenly. ‘I can’t stay here, not with all this...’

‘Of course I will. That’s what I’m here for.’

‘To rescue me? Poor you. I bet you thought you were done with all that at last.’

‘What, me? Change the habits of a lifetime?’ he teased, and she had to laugh, even though it wasn’t really remotely funny.

She glanced down at herself, then at him. He’d abandoned the

tailcoat, loosened the rose-pink cravat which showed off his olive skin to perfection, and turned back the cuffs on his immaculate white shirt to reveal strong wrists above hands criss-crossed with fine white scars. Chef's hands, he called them, but the scars didn't detract from his appeal, not in any way. He'd been fighting girls off with a stick since he'd hit puberty, and the scars hadn't put them off at all.

She managed a small smile. 'We might have to change first, before we go.'

His lips quirked. 'You think? I thought I looked rather good like this.'

So did she, but then she thought he looked good in anything.

'You do, but if the press catch a glimpse of us, they'll think the nation's favourite celebrity chef's secretly tied the knot again,' she said, her mouth on autopilot, and his face clouded.

'Yeah, well, it'll be a cold day in hell before that ever happens,' he said tightly, and she could have kicked herself for blundering all over such a sensitive area. She closed her eyes and let out an anguished sigh.

'Oh, God, Leo, I'm so sorry. I can't believe I said that—'

'It's OK, it doesn't matter, and you're quite right. I don't need that sort of publicity, and neither do you.' He smiled fleetingly, then looked away again. 'So, anywhere in particular you want to go?'

'I don't know. Got any ideas?'

He shrugged. 'Not really. My house is still crawling with

builders, and I have to fly to Tuscany tomorrow on business.'

'Oh.' Her heart sank at the thought of him going, and she felt her smile slip. 'I don't suppose you want to smuggle me out there in your luggage?' she joked weakly, and propped up her wavering smile. 'I promise not to be a nuisance.'

'How many times have I heard you say that?' he murmured drily, and she felt a wash of guilt flood over her.

He was right—she was always imposing on him, getting him to extract her from one mess or another. Or she had done, back in the days when they really had been best friends. And that was years ago.

She forced herself to ease away from him, to stop leaning on him, both metaphorically and physically. Time to get out her big girl pants and put their friendship on a more equal and adult footing.

She scraped up the last smile in the bottom of the bucket and plastered it on her face.

'I'm sorry, I was only joking. I know you can't. Don't worry about me, Leo, I'll be all right. It's my mess, I'll clear it up.'

Somehow...

CHAPTER TWO

HE COULDN'T DO IT.

He couldn't desert her when her life had just turned upside down—and anyway, it might well be the perfect solution for both of them.

He'd been worrying about leaving tomorrow and abandoning

her with the repercussions of all this, worrying about how he was going to juggle his tiny daughter and business meetings, and here was the answer, on a plate. Unless...

He studied her thoughtfully, searching her face for clues. ‘*Were* you joking about coming with me? Because if not, it could be a great idea. Not the smuggling, obviously, but if you did it could solve both our problems.’

A tiny frown appeared. ‘You’ve got a problem?’

He nodded. ‘Sort of. I’ve got meetings to go to, and business and babies don’t mix. Normally I’d leave Ella behind with my parents, but this is going to be for several days and it’s not fair on them at their age, especially on top of the wedding—and don’t say it,’ he added, pressing a finger lightly on her lips to stifle the apology he knew was coming.

She took hold of his hand and moved it away. ‘Why not, since it’s true? It *is* my fault, and they’ve gone to so much trouble—’

He pulled his hand back and placed it firmly over her mouth to silence her before she got back onto that again.

‘I don’t want to argue, Amy. Hear me out. Please?’

She nodded, and he lowered his hand and carried on. ‘I like to be there for Ella every day, even if it’s only for part of it, even if it means dragging her around with me. It’s the only way I’ve been able to look after her and my business, and it’s a precarious balance that so far seems to be working. I don’t want to upset that balance, abandon her for days and nights on end—and anyway, shortly after I get back I start filming the next TV series for eight

weeks or so, and I'm going to need my parents' goodwill for that. If you would come to Italy with us and look after her just while I'm in the meetings, it would be amazingly helpful.'

Amy eyed him thoughtfully. 'Really? You mean it? I *was* only joking, really. I didn't expect you to say yes. I was just trying to—I don't know. Make light of it, really. I don't want to be a burden to you.'

'Absolutely I mean it, and you wouldn't be a burden. Not at all. You'd be a real help. I'm trying to set up a contract with a family there to supply our restaurants. I tasted some of their products at a trade fair, and I was really impressed. I want to see how they operate, taste the whole range, negotiate the price and see if we can strike a deal. And doing all that with Ella on my hip *really* won't work.'

She laughed a little wryly. 'No, I can see that. Not exactly professional, and not really fair on her, either.'

'No, it isn't, and she's my top priority. If necessary, I'd cut the trip short rather than compromise my relationship with her, but I don't want to have to do that, because this is a really great business opportunity and it could be important for her future as well as mine.'

'So—will you come? You'll have lots of free time to take photos, and it's beautiful at this time of year. You can chill out away from all this, get some thinking time, clear your head, work out what you're going to do next. Maybe work on a portfolio of images, if that's where you think you're going.'

It sounded tempting. Very tempting, and she could see that he quite genuinely needed her help. He wasn't just making it up—and anyway, even if he was, did she have a better choice? No. And to stay here another minute was unthinkable.

She could hear the sounds of people thronging outside in the garden—not their garden, but his parents' garden next door, where the marquee had been set up for the reception.

Her hand flew to her mouth, her eyes locked on his. 'Oh, Leo! All that food...!'

She was swamped with guilt, but he shook his head briskly, brushing it aside as if it was nothing. Which it wasn't, far from it.

'It's not wasted. There are lots of people there to eat it, it's fine.'

'Fine?' It wasn't fine. Nothing was fine, and all of a sudden she was overwhelmed again. 'It was supposed to be a *wedding* present from you, and I didn't even *have* the wedding.'

'Oh, Amy,' he sighed, and pulled her head back down against his shoulder, soothing her as the tears spilled down her cheeks yet again and the enormity of what she'd done, the chaos she'd caused, the things she'd walked away from, gradually sank in and left her breathless with guilt and remorse.

'I can't even pay you back,' she choked out, but he tutted softly and cradled her head against that solid, familiar shoulder that felt so good she could have stayed there for ever.

'Hush. You don't need to. Forget it, Amy, it's the least important thing in the world right now. Don't worry about it.'

She pushed herself up, swiping the tears off her cheeks with her palms. 'But I *am* worried about it! At least let me pay you back for it when I get a job.'

If she ever did. Publishing was in a state of flux, and she'd just walked away from a great career in a really good publishing house because she'd thought she'd have financial security with Nick and could afford to try freelancing with her photography, and now she had nothing! No job, no home, no husband, no future—and all because of some vague sense of unease? She must have been mad—

'OK, so here's the deal,' he said, cutting off her tumbling thoughts with a brisk, no-nonsense tone. 'Come to Tuscany with me. Look after Ella while I'm in meetings, so I can work all day with a clear conscience and still put her to bed every night, and we'll call it quits.'

'*Quits*? Are you *crazy*? I know what your outside catering costs, Leo!'

He gave her a wry grin. 'There's a substantial mark-up. The true cost is nothing like the tariff. And you know how precious my daughter is to me. Nothing could be more important than leaving her with someone I can trust while I'm over there.'

He gripped her hands, his eyes fixed on hers. 'Come with us, look after her while I'm in meetings, have a holiday, some time out while you work out what to do next. And take photos for me—pictures of me cooking, of the produce, the region, the markets—all of it. Your photos are brilliant, and I can use them

for my blog. That would be really valuable to me, so much more professional, and certainly something I'd pay good money for. I usually do it myself and blag people into taking photos of me with chefs and market traders and artisans, and if I'm really stuck I get reduced to taking selfies, and that's *so* not a good look!

She laughed, a funny little sound between a chuckle and a sob that she quickly stifled, and he hugged her again.

'Come on. Do this for me—please? It would be so helpful I can't tell you, and it'll get you away from all this. You're exhausted and you need to get away, have a total change of scene. And I need you, Amy. I'm not making it up. Not for the photos, they're just a valuable added bonus, but for Ella, and I can't put a price on her safety and happiness.'

She searched his eyes again, and saw behind the reassuringly calm exterior that he was telling her the truth. He wasn't just being kind to her, he really was in a jam, and he'd never ever asked her for help, although God knows he'd given her enough over the years, bailing her out of umpteen scrapes.

Not to mention the catering.

No. She had no choice—and she realised she didn't want a choice. She wanted to be with Leo. His sound common sense was exactly what she needed to get her through this, and let's face it, she thought, he's had enough practice at dealing with me and my appalling life choices.

She nodded. 'OK. I'll come—of course I'll come, and I'll help you with Ella and take photos and do whatever else I can while

you're there. It'll be a pleasure to help you, and it's high time I gave you something back. On one condition, though.'

'Which is?' he asked warily.

'I help you with her care when the filming starts—take some of the burden off your parents. Then I'll call it quits.'

'That's a big commitment.'

'I know that, but that's the deal. Take it or leave it.'

His shoulders dropped, relief written all over him, and she felt some of the tension leave her, too.

'I'll take it. And thank you, Amy. Thank you so much.' His brow furrowed. 'Do you have a case packed ready to go?'

'Yes. I've got smart-casual, beach, jeans—will that do?'

He nodded and got to his feet. 'Sounds fine. I'll get Ella's stuff together and we'll go. I'm not sure, but we might even be able to fly out today.'

'Today!'

'Is that a problem?'

She shook her head vehemently. 'No. Not at all. The sooner the better. I was just surprised. I thought you said you were going tomorrow.'

'I was, but today would be better and I seem to be unexpectedly free now,' he added, that wry grin tugging at his mouth and making her want to hug him. 'I'll see what I can do. How soon can you be ready?'

She shrugged. 'Half an hour? Twenty minutes, maybe?'

'OK. I'll call if there's a problem. Don't forget your passport

—and your camera.’

‘In my bag. Just do one thing for me before you go. Get me out of this dress? I’d forgotten all the stupid buttons.’

She scrambled to her feet and turned her back to him, and he began undoing the million and one tiny satin buttons and loops that covered the zip underneath. And as he worked, button by button, he became suddenly, intensely aware of the smooth, creamy skin of her shoulders, the fine line of her neck, the slender column of her throat. He could see a pulse beating under the skin at the side, and feel the tension coming off her. Off him, too, but for an entirely different reason. Crazy. This was Amy, for goodness’ sake! She was his childhood best friend, virtually his sister!

He finally freed the last button and slid the concealed zip down, and she caught the dress against her chest and turned to face him, a peep of cleavage above some transparent lacy undergarment taking him by surprise. He hauled his eyes up away from it, shocked by the sudden heat that flared through his body.

Really?

Amy?

He backed up a step. ‘OK now?’ he asked tersely, his throat tight.

‘Yes. Thank you. I’ll get changed and see you downstairs in a few minutes.’

‘Good. Wear something comfortable for travelling.’ Preferably something that covered her up. He backed away further, turning

on his heel and reaching for the door handle, suddenly desperate to get out of there.

‘Leo?’

Her voice checked him and he turned and looked at her over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow in question.

‘I’m starving. Grab some food to take with us, would you?’

Food? He laughed, letting some of the tension go. Food was easy. Food he could do.

‘Sure. See you in a bit.’

He called the catering manager on the way down the stairs, rang his mother to prime her and went into the kitchen.

Three pairs of eyes locked on him instantly. ‘How is she?’

‘She’ll do. Jill, can you help her get ready? I’m taking her to Tuscany with me and we’re leaving as soon as possible. I’m trying to get a flight this afternoon.’

‘Tuscany? Brilliant, it’s just what she needs.’ She went up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. ‘Thank you, Leo. Bless you. She’ll be ready.’

* * *

It was tight.

While he packed he rang the charter company he used from time to time, and found they had a small jet flying to Florence for a pick-up; he could hire the whole plane for the ‘empty leg’ rate, but it was leaving City Airport at three. And it was twelve forty already.

Tight, but doable, if she was ready to go. He rang to warn

her, loaded the car in no time flat and drove straight round there, reaching the front door as Amy opened it.

‘I’m ready,’ she said, her smile a little forced in her pale face, her eyes still red-rimmed, but there was life in them now, unlike the blank eyes of the woman he’d walked down the aisle less than an hour ago. Sure, she was hanging by a thread, but she’d make it, especially once he’d got her out of here, and he was suddenly fiercely glad that he’d managed to convince her to come with him.

‘Got your passport?’

‘Yes, I’ve got everything. What’s the luggage limit?’

He smiled wryly. ‘There isn’t one. It’s a private charter.’

Her jaw dropped slightly. ‘Private—?’

He pushed her chin up gently with an index finger and smiled at her stunned expression. ‘It’s going on an empty leg to pick someone up—I’m only paying a fraction of the normal charge.’ Which was still extortionate, but she didn’t need to know that.

‘Wow. Great. OK.’ She turned to her mother, hugged her hard, hugged her bridesmaids and got in the car.

‘Thank you, Leo,’ Jill called, and he lifted a hand as he slid behind the wheel and closed the door.

‘Did you get food?’ Amy asked, and he leant over into the back and pulled out an insulated bag.

‘Here. You can feed me en route.’

‘Or I might just eat it all.’

‘Piglet. Buckle up,’ he instructed, but she was there already,

her bottom lip caught between her teeth, the eyes that kept flicking to his filled with a welter of emotions that he couldn't begin to analyse. He didn't suppose she could, either, but there seemed to be a glimmer of something that could have been excitement.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, but it was a fleeting parody of her usual open, happy smile, and he felt another sudden pang of guilt. What if it wasn't excitement? What if it was hysteria? She was on a knife-edge, he knew that. Had he imposed his own feelings about marriage on her? Put doubts in her mind when they hadn't really been there at all? He hoped not—even if Nick hadn't been right for her, it wasn't his call to sabotage their wedding.

‘You OK?’

She nodded. ‘Yes—or I will be, just as soon as we get out of here.’

‘Let's go, then,’ he said, and starting the engine he pulled smoothly off the drive and headed for London.

* * *

Amy had never flown in such luxury.

From start to finish, boarding the little jet had been a breeze. They'd driven right up to the Jet Centre terminal, their luggage and the baby's car seat and buggy were handed over, and the car had been whisked away to secure parking. The security check-in was thorough but almost instant, and then they had a short walk to the plane.

At the top of the steps the pilot greeted them by name as he welcomed them aboard, gave them their ETA, a benign weather report and told them there was a car waiting for them at Florence. Then he disappeared through the galley area into the cockpit and closed the door, leaving them with the entire little jet to themselves, and for the first time she registered her surroundings.

‘Wow.’ She felt her jaw dropping slightly, and no wonder. It was like another world, a world she’d never entered before or even dreamed of.

There were no endless rows of seating, no central aisle barely wide enough to pass through, no hard-wearing gaudy seat fabric in a budget airline’s colours. Instead, there were two small groups of pale leather seats, the ones at the rear bracketing tables large enough to set up a laptop, play games, eat a meal, or simply flick through a magazine and glance out of the window. And Ella’s car seat was securely strapped in all ready for her.

Leo headed that way and she followed, the tight, dense pile of the carpet underfoot making her feel as if she was walking on air. Maybe she was? Maybe they’d already taken off and she just hadn’t noticed? Or maybe it was all part of the weird, dreamlike state she’d been in ever since she’d turned her back on Nick and walked away.

A wave of dizziness washed over her, and she grabbed the back of one of the seats to steady herself and felt Leo’s hand at her waist, steering her to a seat at the back of the plane across the aisle from Ella’s.

‘Sit. And don’t argue,’ he added firmly.

She didn’t argue. She was beyond arguing. She just sat obediently like a well-trained Labrador, sinking into the butter-soft cream leather as her legs gave way, watching him while he strapped little Ella into her seat, his big hands gentle and competent as he assembled the buckle and clicked it firmly into place.

She hoped she never had to do it. It looked extraordinarily complicated for something so simple, and she was suddenly swamped with doubts about her ability to do this.

What on earth did she know about babies? Less than nothing. You could write it all in capitals on the head of a very small pin. He must be nuts to trust her with his child.

She heard voices as a man and woman in uniform came up the steps and into the plane, and moments later the door was shut and the woman was approaching them with a smile, her hand extended.

‘Mr Zacharelli.’

Leo shook her hand and returned the smile. ‘Julie, isn’t it? We’ve flown together before.’

‘We have, sir. It’s a pleasure to welcome you and Ella on board again, and Miss Driver, I believe? I’m your cabin crew today, and if there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.’

She smiled at Amy as they shook hands, and turned her attention back to Leo.

‘May I go through the pre-flight safety procedure with you?’

she asked, and he delved into the baby's bag and handed Ella a crackly, brightly coloured dragonfly toy to distract her while Julie launched into the familiar spiel.

It took a few minutes, showing them the overhead oxygen, the emergency exit—all the usual things, but with the massive difference that she was talking only to them, and the smiles she gave were personal. Especially to Leo, Amy thought, and mentally rolled her eyes at yet another effortless conquest on his part. He probably wasn't even aware of it.

And then it was done, another smile flashed in his direction, and Julie took herself off and left them alone.

'Was that from me?' Amy asked, pointing at the dragonfly toy Ella was happily playing with.

Leo nodded, sending her a fleeting smile. 'You sent her it when she was born. She loves it. I have to take it everywhere with us.'

That made her smile. At least she'd done one thing right, then, in the last year or so. He zipped the bag up, stashed it in the baggage compartment, put her hand luggage in there, too, and sat down opposite Ella and across from Amy.

His tawny gold eyes searched hers thoughtfully.

'You OK now?'

If you don't count the butterflies stampeding around in my stomach like a herd of elephants, she thought, but she said nothing, just nodded, and he raised a brow a fraction but didn't comment.

‘Do you always travel like this?’ she asked, still slightly stunned by their surroundings but rapidly getting used to it.

He laughed softly. ‘Only if I’m travelling with Ella or if time’s short. Usually I go business class. It’s just much easier with a baby to travel somewhere private. I’m sure you’ve been in a plane when there’s been a screaming baby—like this,’ he added, as Ella caught sight of the bottle he’d tried to sneak out of his pocket so he could fasten his seat belt. She reached for it, little hands clenching and unclenching as she started to whimper, and Leo hid the bottle under the table.

‘No, *mia bella*, not yet,’ he said gently, and the whimper escalated to an indignant wail.

Amy laughed softly. ‘Right on cue.’

She propped her elbows on the table and leant towards Ella, smiling at her and wagging her dragonfly in an attempt to distract her.

‘Hi, sweet pea,’ she crooned softly. ‘You aren’t really going to scream all the way there, are you? No, of course not!’

Finally distracted from the bottle, Ella beamed at her and squashed the toy. It made a lovely, satisfying noise, so she did it again, and Leo chuckled.

‘Babies are refreshingly easy to please. Give them a toy and they’re happy.’

‘Like men, really. Fast car, big TV, fancy coffee maker...private jet—’

He gave a soft snort and shot her a look. ‘Don’t push it.

And don't get lulled into a false sense of security because you managed to distract her this time. She can be a proper little tyrant if it suits her. You're a monster in disguise, aren't you, *mia bella*?

He said it with such affection, and Amy's heart turned over. Poor little scrap, losing her mother so young and so tragically. Leo must have been devastated—although not for himself, from what he'd said. He'd told her that marrying the wrong person was a recipe for disaster and it would be a cold day in hell before he did it again, so it didn't sound as if his marriage had been a match made in heaven, by any means. But even so—

'I need to make a quick call to sort out where we're going to stay tonight. Can you entertain her, please, Amy? I won't be a moment.'

'Sure.' Amy shut the door on that avenue of thought and turned her attention to amusing Ella. She'd got enough mess of her own to deal with, without probing into Leo's.

But Ella didn't really need entertaining, not with her dragonfly to chew and crackle, so Amy was free to listen to what Leo was saying. Not that she could understand it, because he was talking in Italian, but it was lovely to listen to him anyway.

She always thought of him as English, like his mother, but then this amazing other side of him would come out, the Italian side that came from his father, and it did funny things to her insides.

Or maybe it was just the language doing that? That must be it. There was no way Leo talking Italian was sexy, that was just ridiculous. Not according to his numerous female fans, of course,

but that didn't mean *she* had to fall under his spell. This was Leo, after all.

Yes, of course he was gorgeous, she knew that, and she'd had a serious case of hero-worship when she'd hit puberty, but she'd never felt whatever it was they all obviously felt—probably because she'd known him too long, knew all his weaknesses and irritating little habits as well as his strong points, like friendship and loyalty and generosity.

He was virtually a brother, a brother she loved to bits and would go to the end of the earth for. The best friend a girl could want. And no matter where she ended up, that would never change, but sexy? Nope—

'*Ciao. A dopo,*' he said in that delicious Italian of his, and her heart did a little back-flip to prove her wrong.

* * *

He put his phone away and smiled at Amy across the aisle.

'Well, that's our accommodation sorted,' he said with relief. 'I phoned Massimo Valtieri to tell him I'm bringing a friend to help with the baby so we'd make our own arrangements, but he wouldn't have any of it. He says there's plenty of room for you, too, and they're fine with us all staying at the *palazzo*, as from tonight. Problem solved.'

'*Palazzo?*' she squealed, and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'They live in a *palazzo*.'

Leo laughed softly at the awed expression on her face. 'Apparently. It's an old Medici villa. I've seen pictures of it, and

it's very beautiful. It's been in the family for centuries, which is why I want to deal with them because it's not just a business, it's in their blood, it's who they are. The meetings will be there and they all live very close by, apparently, so it makes sense us being there, too, so if Ella kicks off and you can't cope, I won't be far away. And his wife's there, so you'll have company.'

'Oh, that's good,' she said, and a little worried crinkle in between her eyebrows smoothed away. She shook her head, her mouth kicking up in a wry smile. 'I still can't quite believe I'm going to be staying in a *palazzo*.'

She looked so flummoxed it made him chuckle. 'Well, you've got about four or five hours to get used to the idea,' he told her.

He was just relieved he'd be on hand; he didn't know what she knew about babies, but she knew almost nothing about Ella, so having a woman around who was a mother herself could only be a good thing, especially under the circumstances. He didn't want Amy feeling any more overwhelmed than she already was.

She was leaning over now and chatting to Ella, telling her what a lucky girl she was to stay in a *palazzo*, and he settled back in the seat and studied her. She was smiling, the haunted look in her eyes retreating as she fell under the spell of his tiny daughter, and for the briefest of fleeting seconds he wondered what life would have been like for all of them if she'd been Ella's mother.

It took his breath away.

CHAPTER THREE

AMY GLANCED ACROSS at Leo and frowned.

He was staring at her with the strangest expression on his face. 'Have I got a smut on my nose or something?'

'What? No. Sorry, I was miles away. Ah, here's Julie, we might be in business,' he added, and he sounded relieved, for some reason.

'We're about to take off now,' Julie said. 'Is there anything you need to ask before we're airborne?'

'I'm fine. Amy?' Leo said, raising an eyebrow at her.

'No, I'm fine, thank you.'

Julie left them, took herself off to her seat behind the cockpit, and then the pilot's voice came over the loudspeaker and they were off.

Leo strapped himself in, reached across with Ella's bottle and began to feed her as they turned at the end of the runway.

'It helps her ears to adjust to the pressure change,' he explained, but Amy didn't care right then. She leant back, gripped the armrests and closed her eyes. She hated this bit—

'Oh!' She gasped as she was forced back into the seat and the plane tipped up and catapulted itself into the sky.

'Bit quicker off the ground than a heavy commercial jet,' Leo said with a grin as they levelled out and settled into a gentle climb, banking out over the Thames estuary and towards the coast.

She looked away from him, staring blindly out of the window at the slightly tilted horizon as the reality of what she'd done kicked in. They were still climbing—climbing up, up and away from England. Away from the wedding that hadn't been, the

redundant marquee on the lawn next door, the dress lying in a crumpled heap on her bedroom floor.

And she was going to Italy. Not on her honeymoon, but with Leo and Ella. Without a husband, without a wedding ring, without the engagement ring that was sitting on her dressing table at home where she'd left it.

She looked down at her hand. Nope, no ring. Just a faint, pale line where it had been.

Just to check, she ran her finger lightly over the empty space on her finger, and Leo reached out to her across the aisle, squeezing her hand.

'You OK?' he murmured, as if he could read her mind.

She flashed him a smile but it felt false, forced, and she looked away again. 'Just checking it's not a dream. It feels like I'm on drugs. Some weird, hallucinogenic stuff.'

'No drugs. No dream. You're just taking time to get used to it. It's a bit of a shock, such a drastic change of course.'

Shock? Probably. Drastic, certainly. It felt like she was falling, and she wasn't sure if the parachute would work. She met his eyes, worrying her lip with her teeth. 'I wish I'd been able to get hold of Nick. He wasn't answering his phone.'

'Did you leave a message?'

She shook her head. 'I didn't really know what to say. "Sorry I dumped you at the altar in front of all our family and friends" seems a bit inadequate, somehow.'

'He didn't look upset, Amy,' Leo reminded her softly. 'He

looked relieved.'

'Yes, he did,' she agreed. 'Well, I guess he would do, wouldn't he, not being stuck with me?'

Leo frowned. 'Why should he be relieved about that?'

'Because clearly I'm an idiot!'

Leo laughed softly, his eyes full of teasing affection. 'You're not an idiot,' he said warmly. 'Well, not much. You just got swept along by the momentum. It's easily done.'

It was. And he was right, she had. They both had. Was that what had happened to Leo and Lisa when he'd done the decent thing and married her for the wrong reasons?

The seatbelt light went off with a little ping, and Leo undid his lap strap and swung his seat round slightly as Julie approached them with a smile.

'Fancy a drink, Amy?' Leo asked her. 'Something to eat?'

Amy laughed. 'Eat? I couldn't eat another thing! That picnic was absolutely amazing. I'm still stuffed.'

'Well, let's just hope everyone enjoyed it. I'll have a cappuccino, Julie, please. Amy?'

'That would be lovely, thank you.'

Julie smiled and nodded, disappeared to the galley area behind the cockpit and left Amy to her thoughts. They weren't comfortable. All those people who'd travelled miles to see her married, and here she was running away with Leo and leaving them all in the lurch when she should have been there apologising to them.

‘I wonder if they’re all still there having a post-mortem on the death of my common sense?’ she murmured absently. ‘At least a lot of them turned up to eat the food. It would have been a shame to waste it.’

‘I imagine most of them will have left by now—and your common sense didn’t die, it just woke up a bit late in the day.’

‘Maybe.’ She sighed, and smiled at him ruefully. ‘The food really was amazing, you know. I’m glad I got to try it. Do you know how long it is since you cooked for me?’ she added wistfully, and he gave a soft huff of laughter.

‘Years.’

‘It is. At least four. Five, probably. You did it a lot when my father died. I used to come and hang out in your restaurant while I was at uni and you’d throw something together for us when you’d finished, or test a recipe out on me. I’ve missed that.’

‘Me, too. I’m sorry. My life’s been a bit chaotic since the television series.’

Well, that was the understatement of the century. ‘So I gather,’ she said mildly. ‘And you’ve opened the new restaurant. That can’t have been easy with a new wife and a baby on the way.’

A shadow flitted through his eyes and he looked away, his smile suddenly strained. ‘No. It took a lot of my time. Too much.’

So much that their marriage had fallen apart? If they’d even had a marriage in the real sense. It didn’t sound like it, but she knew very little more than he’d just told her and the rest was rumours in the gutter press. They’d had a field day, but his

parents didn't talk about it, and until today she'd hardly seen Leo since before his marriage.

All she knew was what had been in the paper, that Lisa had been knocked down by a car late one stormy night and had died of her injuries, and the coroner had returned a verdict of accidental death. Ella had been tiny—two months old? Maybe not even that. And Leo had been left with a motherless baby, a new business venture that demanded his attention and a television contract he'd had to put on hold. Small wonder she hadn't seen him.

'Your cappuccino, Miss Driver.'

The drink was set down in front of her, and she flashed a distracted smile at Julie and picked up her spoon, chasing the sprinkled chocolate flakes around in the froth absently.

His hand came out and rested lightly on her arm, stilling it. 'It'll be all right, Amy,' he murmured, which made her smile. Trust Leo to be concerned for her when actually she was worrying about him.

'I'm fine,' she assured him. And she was, she realised. A little stunned, a little bemused almost at the turn of events, but Leo was whisking her away from it all so fast she didn't have time to dwell on it, and that could only be a good thing.

She pulled out her little pocket camera and pointed it at him. 'Smile for the birdie!'

'Make sure you get my good side.'

She lowered the camera and cocked an eyebrow at him. 'You

have a good side?

He rolled his eyes, that lazy grin kicking up his mouth and dimpling his right cheek, and her heart turned over. She clicked the button, turned to get an interior shot while her heart settled, and clicked again.

‘Day one of your Tuscan tour blog,’ she said lightly, and he laughed.

She caught it, grinned at him and put the camera away.

* * *

They landed shortly before five o’clock, and by five thirty they’d picked up the hire car and were on their way to the *palazzo*. Ella was whingeing a little, so he pulled over in a roadside *caffè* and ordered them coffee and pastries while he fed her from a pouch of pureed baby food.

It galled him to do it, but it wouldn’t kill her. It was organic, nutritionally balanced, and had the massive advantage that it was easy. He had enough fish to fry at the moment without worrying about Ella.

He glanced up and met Amy’s eyes. She was watching him, a strange expression on her face, and he tipped his head questioningly.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Just—I’ve never really got used to the thought of you as a father, but you seem very comfortable with her.’

He looked back at Ella, his heart filling with love. ‘I am. I didn’t know what it would be like, but I love it—love her, more

than I could ever have imagined loving anyone. She's the most precious thing that's ever happened to me.'

Amy's smile grew wistful. 'It shows,' she murmured, and he thought of all the plans she'd mentioned that she'd walked away from, all the things she'd sacrificed. Like starting a family. And if he hadn't interfered...

She might have ended up in the same mess as him, he reminded himself, bringing up a child on her own after the disastrous end of a doomed relationship.

'Amy, it'll happen for you, when the time's right,' he told her softly, and she gave a wry little smile that twisted his heart.

'I know. But I have to warn you, I don't know anything about babies so it won't hurt to practise on Ella so I can make my mistakes first with someone else's child.'

He chuckled, ruffling Ella's dark curls gently. 'You won't make mistakes, and even if you do, you won't break her. She's pretty resilient.'

Her wry smile turned to a grimace. 'That's probably just as well. She might need to be.'

'Chill, Amy. She's just a little person. She'll let you know what she needs.'

'Yeah, if you can mind-read a ten-month-old baby,' she said drily, but the smile reached her eyes now and he let his breath out on a quiet sigh of relief. She'd been hanging by a thread ever since she'd turned her back on Nick, and it had taken till now before he'd felt absolutely sure that she'd done the right thing.

Having a baby with the wrong person was a disaster, and that's what she could have done if everything had gone to plan.

Which let him off the hook a bit on the guilt front.

'Here, you can start practising now. Give her the rest of this so I can drink my coffee, could you, please?' he asked, handing her the pouch and spoon and sitting back to watch. Amy took it cautiously, offered it to Ella, and the baby obediently sucked the gloop from the spoon, to Amy's delight and his relief. Contrary to her predictions, they seemed to be getting on fine. 'There—see?' he said lightly. 'Easy.'

She threw him a cheeky grin and put the empty pouch down. 'Well, this end was easy, but I think she'll need her daddy for the other one. I can only master one skill at a time and there'll be plenty of time to learn about that later.'

He laughed, put his cup down and scooped up Ella and the changing bag. 'I'm sure there'll be lots of opportunities.'

'I don't doubt it,' she said drily, but her wry, affectionate smile warmed his heart and he was suddenly fiercely glad that she'd come with them.

* * *

By the time the sun was getting low on the western horizon, they were turning onto the broad gravelled drive leading up to the Palazzo Valtieri.

The track dipped and wound along the valley floor, and then rose up the hill through an avenue of poplars to a group of stone buildings on the top, flushed rose by the setting sun.

‘I think that’s the *palazzo*,’ he told her, and Amy felt her jaw drop.

‘What, all of it? It’s enormous! It looks as big as some of the little hilltop towns!’

He chuckled softly. ‘There’ll be all sorts of other buildings there clustered around it. It won’t just be the house.’

But it was. Well, pretty much, she realised as they approached the imposing edifice with its soaring stone walls and windows that she just knew would have the most amazing views. She couldn’t wait to get her proper camera out.

They drove under a huge stone archway in the wall and into a large gravelled courtyard, triggering lights that flooded the area with gold. There were several vehicles there, and Leo brought the car to rest beside a big people-carrier.

They were facing a broad flight of steps flanked by olive trees in huge terracotta pots, and at the top of the steps was a pair of heavily studded wooden doors, totally in proportion to the building.

She felt her jaw sag again. ‘Oh. Wow. Just—wow,’ she breathed.

Leo’s grin was wry. ‘Yeah. Makes my house look a bit modest, doesn’t it?’

‘I haven’t seen your house yet,’ she reminded him, ‘but it would have to be ridiculously impressive to compete with this.’

‘Then it’s a good job I’m not a sore loser. Unless you count a sea view? That’s probably the only thing they don’t have.’

She cocked her head on one side and grinned at him. ‘That might just do it. You know me—I always wanted to be a mermaid.’

‘I’d forgotten that.’ His cheek creased, the dimple appearing as he punched the air. ‘Ace. My house trumps the seat of the Valtieri dynasty.’

‘I did say “might”,’ she pointed out, but she couldn’t quite stifle her smile, and he laughed softly and opened the car door.

‘You haven’t seen my view yet.’

She met his smile over the top of the car. ‘I haven’t seen theirs, either. Don’t count your chickens.’

‘Would I?’ He grinned again, that dimple making another unscheduled appearance, and her heart lurched.

‘I guess we’d better tell them we’re here,’ she said, but it seemed they didn’t need to.

One of the great wooden doors swung open, and a tall man in jeans and a blinding white shirt ran down the steps, smiling broadly, hand extended as he reached Leo.

‘Massimo Valtieri,’ he said. ‘And you’re Leo Zacharelli. It’s good to meet you. Welcome to Palazzo Valtieri.’

He spoke in perfect English, to Amy’s relief, faintly accented but absolutely fluent, and he turned to her with a welcoming smile. ‘And you must be Miss Driver.’

‘Amy, please,’ she said, and he smiled again and shook her hand, his fingers warm and firm and capable.

‘Amy. Welcome. My wife Lydia’s so looking forward to

meeting you both. She's just putting the children to bed and the others are in the kitchen. Come on in, let me show you to your rooms so you can settle the baby and freshen up before you meet them.'

Leo took Ella out of the car seat and picked up the changing bag, Massimo picked up Leo's bag and removed hers firmly from her grip, and they followed him up the steps and in through the great heavy door into a cloistered courtyard. The sheltered walls were decorated with intricate, faded murals that looked incredibly old, and more olive trees in huge pots were stationed at the corners of the open central area.

It was beautiful. Simple, almost monastic, but exquisite. And she couldn't wait to start capturing the images. She was already framing the shots in her mind, and most of them had Leo in them. For his blog, of course.

Their host led them around the walkway under the cloisters and through a door into a spacious, airy sitting room, simply but comfortably furnished, with French doors opening out onto a terrace. The sun had dipped below the horizon now, blurring the detail in the valley stretched out below them, but Amy was fairly sure the view would be amazing. Everything else about the place seemed to be, and she just knew it would be crammed with wonderful photo opportunities.

Massimo pushed open a couple of doors to reveal two generous bedrooms, both of them opening out onto the same terrace and sharing a well-equipped bathroom. There was a small

kitchen area off the sitting room, as well, and for their purposes it couldn't have been better.

'If there's anything else you want, please ask, and Lydia said she hopes you're hungry. She's been cooking up a storm ever since you rang and we'd love you to join us once you've got the baby settled.'

'That would be great, but she shouldn't have gone to any trouble. We don't want to impose,' Leo said, but Massimo was having none of it.

'No way! She's a chef, too, and not offering you food would be an unforgivable sin,' he said with a laugh. 'Just as soon as the baby's settled, give me a call on my mobile and I'll come and get you. Both of my brothers and their wives are here as well tonight. And we don't in any way dress for dinner, so don't feel you have to change. We'll be eating in the kitchen as usual.'

The door closed behind him, and Leo turned to her with a faintly bemused smile.

'Are you OK with this? Because I'm well aware you've had a hell of a day and I don't want to push it, but it does sound as if they want to meet us, or me, at least. If you don't feel up to company, just say so and I'll bring something over to you and you can have a quiet evening on your own. Up to you.'

Her stomach rumbled, answering the question, and she smiled ruefully. 'Honestly? Yes, I'm tired, but I'm absolutely starving, too, and I'm not sure I want to spend the evening on my own. And anyway, as you say, it's you they all want to meet. I won't

understand what you're all saying anyway, so I'll just sit in the corner and stuff myself and watch you all.'

'I think you will understand, at least some of it. His wife's English.'

'Really?' Another knot of tension slid away, and this time her smile felt a bit more spontaneous. 'That's good news. I might have someone to talk to while you're in meetings.'

Leo chuckled. 'I'm sure you will. I'll just bath Ella quickly and give her a bottle and pop her into bed, and then we can go and meet the rest of the family.'

Ella! She hadn't even given her duties a thought, but now she did. 'Will it be all right to leave her, or do you want me to stay with her? It's you they want to meet.'

He picked something up off a side table and wagged it at her. 'Baby monitor,' he said, by way of explanation. 'They really have thought of everything.'

They had. Absolutely everything. There were posh toiletries in the bathroom, the fridge was stocked with milk, juice, butter and fresh fruit, there was a bowl of brown, speckled eggs and a loaf of delicious-looking crunchy bread on the side, and a new packet of ground coffee next to a cafetière. And teabags. Amy was glad to see the teabags. Real English ones.

While Leo heated the baby's bottle and gave it to her, she made them both a cup of tea and curled up on the sofa to wait for him. Ella fussed a little as he was trying to put her down, but it didn't take long before she went quiet, and she heard a door

close softly and Leo appeared.

‘Is that for me?’ he asked, tilting his head towards the mug on the table in front of her.

She nodded. ‘I didn’t know how long you were going to be, so it might be a bit cold. Would you like me to make you a fresh one?’

‘No, it’s fine, I’ll drink it now. Thanks. I ought to ring Massimo anyway. I don’t want to keep them waiting and Ella’s gone out like a light.’

‘Before you call him—did you say anything to them? About me, I mean? About the wedding?’

A frown flashed across his face. ‘No, Amy, of course not. I didn’t think you’d want to talk about it and it just puts an elephant in the room.’

‘So—no elephants waiting for me?’

He gave a quiet grunt of laughter, the frown morphing into a sympathetic smile. ‘No elephants, I promise.’

‘Good,’ she said, smiling back as the last knot of tension drained away, ‘because I’m really, really hungry now!’

‘When aren’t you?’ he muttered with a teasing grin, pulling out his phone, and moments later Massimo appeared and led them across the courtyard and into a bustling kitchen filled with laughter.

There were five people in there, two men and three women, all seated at a huge table with the exception of a pregnant woman—Lydia?—who was standing at the stove, brandishing a wooden

spoon as she spoke.

Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at them expectantly, the men getting to their feet to greet them as Massimo made a quick round of introductions, ending with his wife. She'd abandoned her cooking, the wooden spoon quickly dumped on the worktop as she came towards them, hands outstretched in welcome.

'Oh, I'm so glad you've both decided to come over and join us. I hope you're hungry?'

'Absolutely! It smells so amazing in here,' she said with a laugh, and then was astonished when Lydia hugged her.

'Oh, bless you, I love compliments. And you're Leo,' she said, letting go of Amy and hugging him, too. 'I can't tell you how pleased I am to meet you. You've been my hero for years!'

To Amy's surprise, Leo coloured slightly and gave a soft, self-effacing chuckle. 'Thank you. That's a real compliment, coming from another chef.'

'Yeah, well, there are chefs and chefs!' Lydia said with a laugh. 'Darling, get them a glass of wine. I'm sure they're ready for it. Travelling with a baby is a nightmare.'

'I'm on it. Red or white?'

Leo chuckled and glanced over at Lydia. 'Judging by the gorgeous smell, I'd say a nice robust red?'

'Perfect with it. And it's one of your recipes,' Lydia told him with a wry grin. 'I've adapted it to showcase some of our ingredients, so I hope I've done them justice.'

They launched into chef mode, and Amy found a glass of iced water put in her hand by one of the other two women. It appeared she was also English and her smile was friendly and welcoming.

‘I don’t know about you, but travelling always makes me thirsty,’ she said. ‘I’m Isabelle, and I’m married to Luca. He’s a doctor, so more of a sleeping partner in the business, really. And this is Anita, the only native Valtieri wife. She’s married to Giovanni. He’s a lawyer and he keeps us all on the straight and narrow.’

‘Well, he tries,’ Anita said, her laughing words heavily accented, and Amy found herself hugged again. ‘Welcome to Tuscany. Have you had a good day so far? I thought Leo was supposed to be at a wedding today, but obviously not.’

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