

THE VALTIERI BABY

CAROLINE ANDERSON



Cherish

Caroline Anderson

The Valtieri Baby

«HarperCollins»

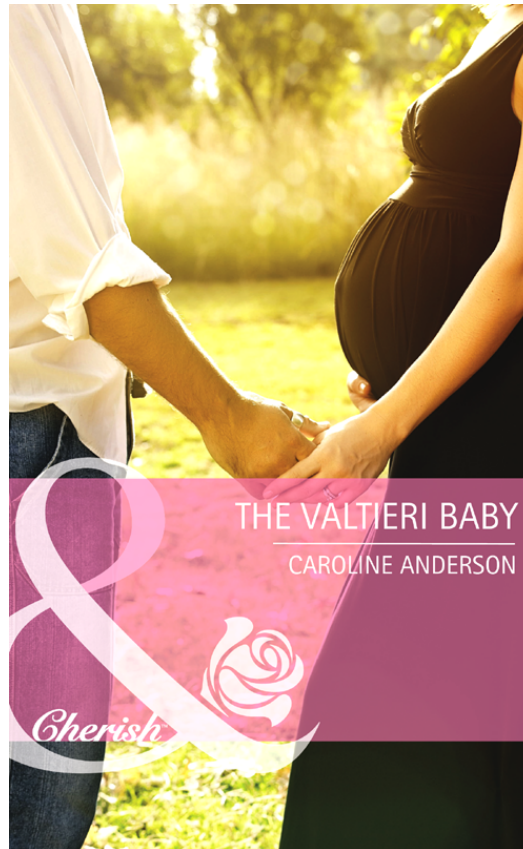
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Could he trust himself enough to try? Trust her? He wasn't sure.

What if she suddenly realised she wasn't as strong as she thought? What if it all fell apart and she found she couldn't take it and wanted out? If he let himself love her...

But if he didn't try, if he didn't let her try, then they'd lose it all anyway. Life had no guarantees.

'OK,' he said, feeling the ground fall away from under his feet. 'We'll try—but I'm not promising anything, Anita. I've never stuck at this in my life, and I'm thirty-five. That's a long time to spend moving on.'

'I know. And we'll take it step by step, and I won't put any pressure on you, I promise. Let's just see what happens.'

Her eyes were gentle, her face so close he only had to move his head a little way for their lips to touch.

She met him halfway, her breath easing over his face in a soft sigh as their lips met. With a ragged groan he gathered her into his arms and kissed her as if she was the most precious thing he'd ever held, and deep inside her she felt a glimmer of hope spring to life.

She knew he loved her. All she had to do was wait for him to realise it, too...

Dear Reader,

A few years ago I wrote a book, *The Valtieri Marriage Deal*, about a scrummy Italian doctor called Luca Valtieri. He had two brothers, equally gorgeous, who since then have clamoured for their own books. Massimo (*Valtieri's Bride*), a widower with three adorable children, was the eldest of the family, and Gio, a lawyer, was the youngest brother. They had a family friend, Anita, who planned Luca's wedding and then Massimo's, and I thought, What better than to match her up with Gio?

He's cynical, wary, commitment-phobic, and Anita has loved him her entire life. A wedding planner, she's deeply romantic and has been waiting years for him to realise that he loves her. But there's a tragedy lurking in his past—something he's never told her—and it's keeping them apart.

And then he's injured as a result of an attack, and she looks after him. They're thrown together, and there's no escape as they travel the passionate and emotional rollercoaster that ensues.

I've loved every one of these brothers, but Gio, for me, has a special place in my heart. I hope you find a place for him, too, as you travel their rollercoaster with them.

Love,
Caroline

About the Author

CAROLINE ANDERSON has the mind of a butterfly. She's been a nurse, a secretary, a teacher, run her own soft furnishing business, and now she's settled on writing. She says, 'I was looking for that elusive something. I finally realised it was variety, and now I have it in abundance. Every book brings new horizons and new friends, and in between books I have learned to be a juggler. My teacher husband, John, and I have two beautiful and talented daughters, Sarah and Hannah, umpteen pets, and several acres of Suffolk that nature tries to reclaim every time we turn our backs!' Caroline also writes for the Mills & Boon[®] Medical Romance[™] series.

The Valtieri Baby

Caroline Anderson



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my husband, John, my daughters, Sarah and Hannah, and my grandson, Maximus, who underline for me on a daily basis how precious and important family is. I love you.

CHAPTER ONE

‘SIGNORE Valtieri! Wait! Please, Signore, listen to me!’

Her distraught voice sliced through the evening shadows, and Gio’s heart sank. Not now, he thought. Please, not now. He really, *really* didn’t have the energy to deal with Camilla Ponti diplomatically, and he certainly didn’t have the time.

He’d already stalled his holiday once because of her, and he wasn’t doing it again.

She’d been about to take action against his client, Marco Renaldo, but Marco had insisted on talking to her before the case came to court. Gio had postponed his departure for a day so they could meet this afternoon, and she’d dropped her claim.

Not quietly.

She’d sobbed and begged and pleaded, but her former business partner had left her no choice. Drop the case, or he’d reveal her fraud and embezzlement of the company’s funds. She’d given in, but she’d blamed Gio for putting him up to it, because she was convinced he’d cost her her share of the company.

It was absurd. She’d forfeited any rights to it herself. He couldn’t believe she’d even thought she had a case! The meeting over, he’d sent a text to Anita arranging to pick her up at six, then, more than ready to get out of the city, he’d gone home and stripped off the exquisitely cut suit, the tasteful silk tie Anita had given him for Christmas, the blinding white shirt. He’d put away the immaculate hand-made shoes, the monogrammed cufflinks, also from Anita, and showered and pulled on his favourite jeans and sweater, the battered leather jacket and boots that had seen better days.

Then he’d pulled the refuse bag out of the kitchen waste bin, flung in the remnants of food from the fridge, tossed an empty wine bottle in on top and headed for the door.

He couldn’t get out of Firenze and away from all this quick enough. His luggage was in the car, and he was looking forward to two weeks on the slopes with his family skiing, eating, and thinking about precisely nothing.

Except Anita would be there. Just thinking about it sent a tingle of anticipation through his veins. He’d missed her recently. He’d been avoiding her ever since the night of his brother’s wedding when things had got a little complicated—again—but at least with his whole family present there’d be plenty of people to diffuse the tension, and he knew a huge part of the attraction of this holiday was that she’d be there.

He couldn’t get there soon enough. For some reason, the cut and thrust of his job had lost its lustre recently, and after a day like today he just felt tired and jaded.

And now this.

This woman, who’d somehow found out where he lived and was lying in wait so she could carry on their earlier conversation. Frankly, he’d heard enough.

‘Signora Ponti, there is really nothing more to say,’ he began, groping for diplomacy, but it was wasted on her.

‘You don’t understand! You have to help me—please, listen to me! I need the money—’

‘Signora, everyone needs money, but you can’t just have it if it isn’t yours, and as Signore Renaldo pointed out, you’ve already stolen more than enough from him—’

‘It wasn’t like that! I had reasons—’

‘Everyone has reasons,’ he said tiredly. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m meeting someone and I’m already late.’

‘But I *earned* that money, I really need it,’ she sobbed, reaching for him with desperate hands. ‘Please, you have to listen!’

He stepped back out of reach, his patience exhausted. ‘No, I don’t. I’ve heard enough,’ he said flatly, and started to turn away, the bag of refuse still in his hand.

'Nooooooooo!'

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her raise her arm, but it was too late to duck. His free arm was still coming up to shield his face when something large and heavy—her handbag?—crashed into his head and sent him reeling. He tripped over the edge of the kerb, twisting his ankle sharply, the pain sickening. It gave way under him, throwing him further off balance, and he felt himself falling.

He couldn't save himself.

He dropped the refuse bag, heard the tinkling sound of broken glass just too late to roll to the side, and then a sharp, searing pain in his thigh took his breath away.

On autopilot, still waiting for another blow to fall, he rolled off the bag and glared at her, but she was so distraught that he'd never be able to reason with her. It was pointless trying.

For a long moment he lay there, shocked, his eyes locked with hers, but then he became aware of something hot and wet dripping off his fingers, and he stared blankly at his hand, and then his thigh, and he realised he was in trouble.

So did she, her face crumpling as she took in what had happened.

'No! No—I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you! Please—oh, no...!'

And turning on her heel, she ran away, leaving him there alone in the dim light of the car park, the sound of her high heels rapping sharply on the stones fading as she fled.

Relief sapping the last of his strength, he slumped back against the wall behind him and closed his eyes for a moment.

Dio, he hurt.

He looked down at his foot, bent at a strange angle. No, not his foot, he realised with relief. The boot, twisted half off where he'd tripped. But his foot was inside it and the pain was just beginning to break through all the other insults, so his relief was short-lived. Maybe not so good after all.

And there was glass sticking out of his leg. He knew he probably shouldn't pull it out, but his leg was bleeding and with the glass in there he couldn't put pressure on it, so he pulled it out anyway.

Not a good move, apparently.

Wrapping his scarf roughly around his slashed hand, he closed his fingers tight over it and rammed his fist hard down on his thigh, then rummaged for his phone. He'd call Anita. There was no point in calling either of his brothers, they and their families were already at the ski chalet, as were his sisters and his parents, but Anita was expecting him. She had a meeting with a bride and he was supposed to be picking her up any time now.

She'd help him. She always helped him, she'd always known just what to do when he'd got himself in a mess. And she'd rescue him now. Relief coursing through him, his whole body shaking, his left hand struggling to cooperate, he speed-dialled her number.

It went straight to voicemail.

He listened to the message, heard the soft lilt of her voice and could have howled with frustration and despair.

'Why is it,' he said sarcastically when the cheery message finally ended, 'that I'm tripping over you all the time, and yet the one time I really need you you're not there?'

He cut off and watched the blood still slowly welling from his thigh for another few seconds before he did what he should have done in the first place. He called an ambulance.

And then he leant back against the wall behind him, and dialled her number again, and then again. He needed her, and he couldn't get her, but it was somehow comforting just to listen to the sound of her voice...

Her phone was ringing.

She could feel it in her pocket, vibrating silently as she wound up her meeting. It rang again. And again.

Damn. It would be Gio, wondering where she was. He'd be foaming at the mouth if she didn't go soon.

‘Right, I think I’ve got all I need for now,’ she told her client briskly. ‘I’ll go and put a few ideas together for you, and then we’ll get back together again when I’m back from my holiday.’

‘Oh—I was hoping we could do it all today...’

Anita’s smile faltered as the phone vibrated again.

‘I’m sorry, I’m already late. I’m supposed to be leaving for my holiday and I only fitted you in today because I was delayed, I should have gone yesterday. Don’t worry, please, there’ll be plenty of time to sort everything out. It’s seven months to the wedding.’

She shut her file and stood up, effectively ending the meeting, and held out her hand to the bride.

The girl smiled reluctantly and got up, taking her hand. ‘Sorry. I just want all the answers at once.’

‘Everybody does. It’s not possible, but it will happen. I’ll see you in two weeks when I’m back from my holiday. I’ll call you with a date.’

‘OK. And—thank you for fitting me in. I’m sorry to be a pain.’

‘You aren’t a pain. I’ll call you, I promise.’

And with one last brisk, professional smile she walked away, resisting the urge to pull her phone from her pocket before she’d left the café and was out of sight.

Six missed calls. *Six?*

And all from Gio. Damn. She really *was* late, and he’d be truly, no-holds-barred furious with her. He hated it when people were late.

Except he didn’t sound furious. He sounded...

She listened to her voicemail message in puzzlement, and tried to call him.

It went straight to voicemail, again and again, but she couldn’t give up, because something about his message was worrying her and she didn’t know what it was.

‘Why is it that I’m tripping over you all the time, and yet the one time I really need you you’re not there?’

Anita frowned, and played it again. Far from angry, his voice sounded odd. Odd, and slightly desperate. As if he was in trouble—

Her heart pounding now, she tried him again, and this time the phone was answered by a stranger.

‘Hello? Are you Anita?’

‘Yes—Anita Della Rossa. Where’s Gio? Who are you?’

‘This is a nurse in the emergency department...’

She didn’t hear the rest. For a second, all she could hear was roaring in her ears from the frantic beating of her heart.

‘I knew there was something wrong, I’ve been trying to get hold of him. What’s happened to him?’ she asked, desperate for information. ‘Did he have an accident? Is he all right?’

‘Are you family?’

She nearly lied, but there was no point, they were all too well known. ‘No, but I’m an old family friend. I’ve known him forever.’ Her voice cracked, and she tried again. ‘They’re all away—they’ve gone skiing. We were about to join them. Please, tell me how he is.’

‘He’s had an accident and he’s going to surgery. That’s all I can tell you. Can you give us his full name and family contact details, please? We need to ring them urgently.’

Urgently? Her heart lurched in her chest, and for a second she thought she was going to be sick.

‘Um—yes—he’s Giovanni Valtieri. His brother Luca’s a doctor at the hospital—a professor. Contact him. He’s with the others.’ She gave them Luca’s number just to be certain, then raced to the hospital, her heart in her mouth. But in the hospital emergency department she met another brick wall, built, no doubt, by the same protocol.

‘I spoke to a nurse,’ she explained. ‘I was calling Giovanni Valtieri, and the person who answered his phone said he was here. Can I see him?’

‘Are you family?’

Yet again, she thought of lying, but it was pointless, so she just trowelled on the connection. ‘No, but I’m an old family friend. We’ve been very close since we were born—almost like brother and sister.’

And ex-lovers, she nearly added, but that was nobody else’s business and she wasn’t going to spread something so personal all over the hospital. Not when his brother worked there.

So they wouldn’t tell her any more, but that was fine. There were strings she could pull, and she fully intended to pull every single one of them. Starting with Luca...

He felt like hell.

He lay there for a moment, assessing his body. It was throbbing, and after a bit the throbbing separated out so he could catalogue it.

His right hand hurt. He tried to flex his fingers, but it didn’t seem like a good idea and anyway his hand seemed to be heavily bandaged.

OK. Right thigh—well, that certainly hurt, with a deep ache close up by his groin, but thankfully not *that* close.

And his right foot. They’d cut his jeans off to get to his leg, and they’d wanted to cut the boot off—his favourite boots. It had taken ages to break them in like that. He’d refused to let them, vaguely detached from it all through loss of blood. Until they’d eased it off. He hadn’t been detached then, and the last thing he remembered was the sickening pain. He must have passed out at that point.

And he had a killer headache. He frowned. She hadn’t touched his head, but maybe when he’d fallen he’d cracked it on the wall behind him. Either that or she’d had a rock in that ludicrous bag.

He breathed in, caught the hint of a familiar scent and his eyes flew open, searching for her.

‘Anita?’

She came into view, her warm brown eyes troubled. She was smiling, but there was a slight tremor in her lips, and she was pale. He’d never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

‘*Ciao, Gio,*’ she murmured, leaning over him to brush a kiss against his cheek. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Fine,’ he lied, but she just snorted and raised a slender, disbelieving eyebrow a fraction.

‘I am. Of course I’m all right.’

‘Well, you don’t look it. You look like you’ve been partying with the vampires.’

‘Very funny,’ he said, turning away so he didn’t have to see the worried look in her eyes.

‘I called Luca,’ she said, and he snapped his head back round again.

‘You *what?*’

‘I called Luca. They wouldn’t tell me anything, wouldn’t let me in to see you, so I pulled strings.’

Damn. ‘What did he say?’

‘He’s threatening to come back.’

‘That’s ridiculous! It’s just a scratch—’

‘Gio, you don’t get taken into Theatre for a scratch!’

She broke off, took a breath and then carried on in a level tone, ‘Anyway, your mother snatched the phone off him before he could say much and she’s pretty upset. I promised I’d get you to ring her the moment you came round.’

He let out a short, harsh sigh and closed his eyes.

He shouldn’t have called her—except, of course, he would have had to because he was supposed to have been picking her up *en route*. And when he didn’t turn up and she couldn’t get him, she would have rung alarm bells anyway.

‘You shouldn’t have called him.’

‘They already had. They asked me for family contact details, and they wouldn’t tell me anything so I had no idea how badly you’d been hurt, but it sounded bad. They used the word “urgent”,’ she said drily. ‘It didn’t seem like the time to argue.’

No, of course not. What was he thinking? The moment he'd been admitted and they found out his identity they would have been on the phone to his brother, because he worked in the hospital and was known to all of them.

And now apparently Luca was threatening to come back and his mother was in hysterics and all because some stupid, *stupid* woman had come after him.

'So—what actually happened?' she asked, perching on the edge of the chair beside him and reaching for his hand, then thinking better of it because of the bandages.

'A client's ex-business partner hit me with her handbag,' he said, his voice disgusted, and she gave a tiny incredulous laugh.

'Excuse me? Her *what*?'

'Humiliating, isn't it,' he said drily, 'but it gets worse. I ducked out of the way, tripped over the kerb and fell over my own refuse bag. That'll teach me to do my recycling properly.'

Anita glared at him. 'Gio, how can you joke about it? They told me it was serious! What really happened?'

He gave a short, dry laugh. 'That is exactly what happened, and believe me, it feels pretty serious. I hurt like hell.'

'I can imagine.' She bit her lip, puzzled. She still hadn't got to the bottom of this, she was sure. 'So—what did she *actually* do to you? Really?'

'Apart from attempting to knock me out with her handbag? Nothing. She didn't need to. Goodness knows what she keeps in it, the thing weighed a ton. Anyway, it knocked me off balance and I fell over the refuse bag. Then I pulled the glass out. Not a smart move.'

She rolled her eyes, then frowned, sifting through his words again and coming up with something she didn't understand. 'What glass, Gio? Pulled it out of *what*?'

'I reckon it was a wine bottle. I dropped the bag, and I heard glass breaking before I fell on it. I cut my hand when I fell, and a piece stuck in my thigh, so I pulled it out, but it wasn't a good idea because it had severed the artery. If it happens again, apparently, I have to leave it there. Don't worry, it missed the important bits,' he added drily.

She glared at him, shocked he'd been hurt so badly and furious that he was treating it so lightly when she'd been going through hell. 'This is no time for joking, Gio! A severed artery? You could have bled to death!'

He reached out his hand, then remembered and dropped it carefully back onto the covers.

'Come round this side,' he said gruffly, but there was a drip there and it was no better.

Actually, that wasn't true. It was better. She sat down beside him, threaded her shaking fingers carefully through his and closed them firmly round his hand.

Dio, it felt good to hold her. The warmth from her palm spread into him and thawed the ice that seemed to have formed inside him, and as the tension eased, he realised how tight he'd been holding himself.

For a moment they said nothing, then she frowned slightly, her brow puckering as she tried to make sense of it.

'Why did she try to attack you, Gio? Who was she? One of your thwarted lovers?'

He laughed softly. 'No. A very disappointed woman. We had a meeting with her today, the reason I had to delay leaving, and she came off worst. She feels I cheated her.'

'And did you?'

'No. I just made sure she got what she deserved from my client, which was nothing,' he said, and he watched her frown again.

'Wow. And she attacked you for that?'

'Well, to be fair I did most of it myself when I fell up the kerb and landed on the bag. Apparently my ankle isn't broken, though, which is good news. It's just bruised and sprained.'

He nearly laughed at the 'just' but he hurt too much to bother.

‘And your hand?’ she asked, arching a brow towards his bandaged fingers. ‘I can still see all your fingers, so I guess you didn’t cut them off.’

‘No. They seem to be there and they all move. As I say, most of it was my own fault.’

‘Mmm. That really wasn’t very clever, was it?’

He snorted at the mild understatement, and her fingers tightened a little. ‘Sorry. The police are here, by the way, waiting for you to feel well enough to talk to them. And you need to phone your mother.’

He nodded. ‘Call her now for me—I’ll talk to her first. And then I’ll talk to the police. She didn’t really do anything.’

‘Gio, she attacked you. If she hadn’t, none of this would have happened.’

‘She hit me with her handbag. That’s all. The police don’t need to be involved.’

‘And if she comes after you again?’

He shrugged. ‘She won’t. And if she does, I’ll be ready for her this time.’

She gave up arguing. She dialled his mother, handed him the phone and then left him alone and went and found something to eat and drink.

It could have been fantastic, or cardboard. It wouldn’t have made any difference, because she couldn’t taste it, not with the image of him lying there like a ghost so fresh in her mind. But it was food, and she ate it mechanically while she beat herself up about not answering his first call.

What if he’d died? What if he’d rung her, and then passed out from loss of blood before he could call an ambulance? No, he must have called one first. He surely wouldn’t have been stupid enough to call her so many times before he called the medical services? Maybe, if he had her on speed-dial. Maybe he’d thought it would be quicker, but then she hadn’t answered, and that could have cost him his life...

She felt sick, and pushed away the last of her panini. Cardboard, she decided finally, realising she was probably being unfair, but whatever, she couldn’t eat any more of it. She went back to him, and found him propped up on his pillows looking pale and drawn and very tired.

‘What did the police say?’

‘They’re going to talk to her. Apparently she called an ambulance, so she at least has a conscience, but her phone’s now switched off—’

‘She called an ambulance?’

‘Yes—why?’

Because it meant he wouldn’t have died because of her. She shook her head, relief taking her legs out from under her, so she sat down shakily on the chair beside him. ‘Nothing. I’m just surprised. So how are you feeling?’

He shrugged. ‘Much the same. The doctor’s been, as well, while you were gone. They’re going to keep me in overnight and review me in the morning, but they think I can probably go home tomorrow. I have to have another blood transfusion. The vampires were a bit greedy.’

He smiled, but she couldn’t smile back. Not when he’d come so close. She looked at her watch. Nearly midnight.

‘I’ll go home now, then, and I’ll come back in the morning. Do you want me to bring you some clothes in when I come?’

‘Please. My bags are in the car already. If you could bring the small one, it’s got everything I’ll need. The big one’s just ski stuff. You’d better clear it with the police on the way out, or they might not let you get it. It’ll be a crime scene now, apparently. I’ve told them they’re over-reacting, but they seem to feel they need to collect the evidence. Here, my keys. It’s the little Mercedes sports, by the way.’

‘Where’s the Ferrari?’

He smiled. ‘I do too much driving in the city. It was fun, but not practical in the city streets. The Mercedes is much more sensible.’

‘That doesn’t sound like you.’

‘Maybe I’ve changed.’

She just laughed at that. Giovanni Valtieri would never change. She’d given up hoping for miracles.

She took the keys from him, and bent and kissed his cheek, letting her face rest there for a moment. She could feel the slight rasp of stubble, the roughness curiously comforting and reassuring as he turned his head against hers and touched her cheek with his lips.

‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ she murmured, and with another light brush of her lips against his jaw she straightened up and met his dark, weary eyes.

‘Ciao, Anita,’ he mumbled tiredly. ‘And thank you.’

‘Prego. You take care. No more fighting with women.’

He gave a soft chuckle and raised his good hand as she left, and she winked at him and went out into the corridor. The policeman was there, and she asked him to contact the team at his apartment building to alert them that she’d need access to his car.

Then she walked away without waiting for the OK. She was tired and emotionally exhausted, and she just wanted to get home, but first she had to get his bag. The area was cordoned off by the police, as he’d said, and she had to get them to escort her to his car and get the soft leather grip from it.

She made her way home, undressed and crawled into bed, but she couldn’t sleep. She could so easily have lost him—not that he was hers anyway, but the thought of him dying—

‘No! Stop it! He’s going to be all right. Stop torturing yourself.’

But all she could see was his washed-out face.

‘So can you go?’

‘Yes, but I have no idea *where* I’m supposed to go. I can’t drive like this, I can’t get upstairs to my apartment, and the police have said it’s not a good idea to go back to my apartment anyway until they’ve spoken to Camilla Ponti and assessed her state of mind, but they can’t find her anywhere. She wasn’t at her home address or any of the other places they’ve tried, and they just don’t think it’s a good idea for me to hang around in Firenze.’

She nodded. That made sense.

‘So why not go on holiday as we’d planned? I can drive.’

‘On a skiing holiday? What’s the point? I won’t be able to do anything. You go and join the others, I’ll just go home to the *palazzo*. Carlotta can look after me.’

She shook her head. ‘They’re away. They’ve gone to visit their grandchildren in Napoli while your family don’t need them. There’s no one there.’

Damn. He’d forgotten that. So what was he supposed to do?

‘Well, you’d better come with me, then,’ she said after a slight pause. ‘I’m on holiday now, so are you—we’ll go to my villa, and I can look after you.’

‘No. You’re supposed to be going skiing. You can’t do that for me,’ he objected, ludicrously tempted.

‘Why on earth not? I’ve been rescuing you since you learned to climb trees. Why not now? You can’t cook, you can’t walk, you can’t drive, but you can rest and recover there while you keep out of the way and wait for the police to catch her. It’s the obvious solution.’

It was. So obvious he’d already thought of it and dismissed it. On the surface it sounded the perfect plan. The only ‘but’—and it was a huge one—was that it meant spending the next two weeks with Anita alone, with no one to diffuse the tension.

And that was a *bad* idea.

CHAPTER TWO

IT took them a while to discharge him, but finally he was wheeled to the entrance.

Anita's car was there, drawn up to the kerb, engine running. All he had to do was get out of the wheelchair and into it.

Huh. It was a nightmare, but he gritted his teeth and managed somehow. His inflexible right foot in its support bandage was the most awkward thing—that, and the fact that his wounded thigh muscles really didn't want to lift his leg, and his heavily bandaged right hand was all but useless.

It didn't help that it was tipping down with rain, either, but at last he was in, more or less dry with the help of a man with an umbrella, and the door was shut.

'OK?' she asked briskly as he was finally settled beside her, but he'd known her nearly thirty-five years, and the concern in her voice was obvious to him.

Obvious, and strangely reassuring.

'I'm fine,' he lied through gritted teeth. 'Just get us out of here.'

He turned up the collar of his rain-spattered and bloodstained leather jacket and hunched down in the seat as she pulled away. He was glad to be getting out of the city. He didn't think Camilla Ponti posed a real threat, but the last thing he wanted was Anita in danger, however slight the risk.

She left the city streets behind, heading out of Firenze, and after a few minutes she turned her head and flashed him a smile. 'Better now?'

They were on the A1 heading south past Siena towards the Montalcino area where both his family and hers had lived for generations.

Home, he thought with a sigh of relief.

'Much better,' he said, and resting his head back on the seat, he closed his eyes and drifted off. He was asleep.

Good. He'd lost a lot of blood, and he'd be exhausted. She didn't suppose he'd slept much last night, what with the pain and awkwardness of his injuries, and anyway, it was easier for her if he wasn't watching her while she drove, because his presence, familiar as it was, always scrambled her brains.

Even when he was fast asleep she was ludicrously conscious of him, deeply, desperately aware of every breath, every sigh, every slight shift of his solid, muscular body.

She knew every inch of it. Loved every inch of it. Always had, always would.

Fruitlessly, of course. The one time she'd felt there was any hope for them it had been snatched away abruptly and without warning, and left her heart in tatters. Anyone with any sense would walk away from him, tell him to go to hell and find his own solution, but Anita couldn't do that.

She couldn't walk away from him. Goodness knows she'd tried a hundred times, but her heart kept drawing her back because deep down she believed that he loved her, whatever he might say to the contrary.

And one day...

She gave a soft, sad huff of laughter. One day nothing. She was stupid, deluded, desperate.

'Hey.'

She turned her head and met his eyes briefly, then dragged hers back to the road.

'How are you?' she asked. 'Good sleep?'

'I'm just resting.'

'You were snoring.'

'I don't snore.'

'You do.' He did. Not loudly, not much, just a soft sound that was curiously comforting beside her. As it had been, for those few blissful weeks five years ago.

'Why did you laugh?'

'Laugh?' She hadn't—

‘Yes, laugh. If you can call it that. You didn’t look exactly amused.’

Ah. *That* laugh, the one that wasn’t. The laugh because against all the odds she could still manage to believe he loved her.

‘I was thinking about my meeting yesterday,’ she lied. ‘The bride thought we could wrap it all up in an hour. She was miffed when I left.’

‘Is that where you were when I rang you?’

She nodded, biting her lip at the little rush of guilt, and he tilted his head and frowned.

‘Anita? It wasn’t your fault. I knew you were in a meeting.’

‘I should have been out by then. I could have answered it—*should* have answered it.’

‘I wouldn’t have answered you if I’d been with a client.’

Of course not. She *knew* that, but it didn’t make any difference, and if he’d died—

His hand closed over hers, squeezing gently. ‘Hey, I’m all right,’ he said softly. ‘I was fine, and the ambulance came really quickly, because she’d already called it.’

‘Well, good. I don’t suppose there was a lot of time to waste, and what if she hadn’t called it? What if you’d passed out?’

He dropped his hand again. ‘It was fine, the bleeding was all under control,’ he lied. ‘And I’m all right, you can see that. Now I just have to get better. I wonder if they’ve found her yet.’

‘Will she go to prison for it?’

He laughed a little grimly. ‘What, for hitting me with her handbag? No. She didn’t mean to do this, Anita.’

‘You’re very forgiving.’

‘No, I’m not. I’m thoroughly peed off because I shouldn’t even have been here, I should have been on holiday and the only reason I wasn’t was because of her. I’m just a realist and anyway, it’s not really me she’s angry with, it’s Marco. It’s just profoundly irritating.’

Irritating? She nearly laughed. ‘So, have you warned him? Your client? She might go after him.’

‘Don’t worry, he’s out of the country now. He was leaving yesterday straight after our meeting, but anyway he has very good security.’

‘Maybe you should move to somewhere more secure. Your apartment isn’t exactly impenetrable. OK, she might be just a bit of a nutter, but what if it was someone really serious, with a real grudge?’

He shrugged, contemplating the idea not for the first time, but he loved it where he was, overlooking the rooftops. He had a fabulous view and he was loath to lose it. Sometimes he sat out on his little roof terrace and imagined that the rolling hills there in the distance were home.

They weren’t, he knew that, but sometimes he just had a yearning to be back there, and those distant hills made him feel closer. The idea of moving to some gated community or apartment complex with hefty security and nothing to look at through the windows but carefully manicured grounds brought him out in hives.

‘I’ll think about it,’ he said, knowing full well he wouldn’t, and he closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic swish of the windscreen wipers as she drove him home.

He was asleep when she turned onto the long gravel drive that led to her villa.

It had once been the main dwelling on her family’s farm, long superseded by a much larger villa, and she loved it. It was small and unpretentious, but it was hers, it had stunning views, and it was perfect for Gio’s recovery because it was single storey and so he wouldn’t have to struggle with stairs.

Her headlights raked the front of the villa, and she drew up outside and opened the door quietly, easing out of the car without disturbing him. She’d put the radio on quietly while he slept, and she left it on while she went in and turned up the heating.

It wasn’t cold, exactly, but it was cheerless even though the rain had stopped now, and she pulled sheets out of the linen cupboard and quickly made up her spare bed for him. It was a good room, the view from the bed stretching miles into the distance, and on the top of the hill on the horizon was the Palazzo Valtieri, home to his family for hundreds of years.

The lights were off now, the *palazzo* deserted, but normally she could see it in the dark. It was quite distinctive, and at night the lights could be seen for miles. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd lain there in her bedroom next to this one and stared at them, wondering if he was there, if he was awake, if he was looking for the lights of her villa.

Probably not. Why would he? He didn't feel the same about her, he'd made that perfectly clear five years ago when he'd ended their relationship without warning. And anyway, most of the time he was in Firenze, where he lived and worked.

But still she looked, and wondered, and yearned.

'Stop it!' she muttered, and made the bed. Torturing herself with memories was pointless—as pointless as staring at the *palazzo* on the hill like a love-struck teenager night after night.

But she *felt* like a love-struck teenager, even after all this time. Nothing had changed—except now she didn't have to imagine what it felt like to lie in his arms, because she *knew*.

She tugged the quilt straight, turned it back so he could get in, and went outside, switching on the porch lights.

He was awake. She could tell that, even though his eyes were closed, and as she walked towards him, her boots crunching on the gravel, they opened and looked straight at her through the windscreen.

He didn't want to come in. She could tell that, just as she'd been able to tell he was awake. Well, that was fine. She didn't really want him to, either, because it meant keeping up an impossible charade of indifference for the next two weeks, and she really, really didn't know if she could do it.

But it seemed that neither of them had a choice.

He had to do it.

There was no point delaying it, he had to get out of the car and hobble into the house and try, somehow, not to remember the last time he'd been in there.

The night of his brother Massimo's wedding, nine months ago.

Long enough to make a baby.

That was a random thought. And if he hadn't stopped, if he hadn't walked away and got back in his car and driven back to Firenze, they might have done just that.

They'd had a great day. A quiet family wedding, with a simple ceremony in the town hall followed by a meal in a restaurant owned by a member of their housekeeper Carlotta's family.

And then Massimo had taken his bride home, and the rest of them had ended up at Luca's with all the children. Too much for him, and too much for Anita, so he'd given her a lift home, and she'd offered him coffee before he headed back to Firenze, and he'd accepted.

Except they'd never got as far as the coffee—

'Gio?'

He eased his fragile and protesting foot out of the car with his one good hand, and then swung round and stood up, propping himself on the door for a moment.

'OK?'

'Bit light-headed.'

She clicked her tongue and took his good arm, draping it round her shoulders and sliding her arm around his waist so she could help him to the door. He didn't lean much weight on her. He couldn't, she was tiny, so he wasn't sure how much of a help it was, but it gave him a legitimate excuse to be close to her for a moment.

He actually didn't need her help. So long as he took tiny, short steps, it was OK. Not good, but OK. And if he took it slowly, he'd be fine.

Did he tell her that?

No, because he was weak and self-indulgent, and he was enjoying the feel of her arm around his waist too much, so he told himself he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

As if it would. Anita was made of sterner stuff than that. He'd ripped her head off a million times when she'd been helping him limp home after he'd fallen out of a tree or off a wall or come

hurtling off his bike at some crazy break-neck speed, and she'd never once turned a hair or paid any attention to his objections.

So he kept quiet and let her help him, and enjoyed the side-effect of being close to her firm, athletic body, savouring the nudge of her hip against his, the feel of her arm around his back, her warm fingers curled around his wrist.

And the scent of her, the perfume she always wore, the perfume he'd bought her countless times for Christmas or birthdays, always apologising for being unimaginative but doing it anyway because that scent, for him, was Anita.

'All right now?'

He nodded, words failing him for a second, and she shot him a keen look.

'You really are feeling rough, aren't you? I was expecting you to tell me to let go and stop interfering and that you didn't need my help and go and do something useful like cooking—'

She broke off, meeting his eyes and then laughing as she saw the wry humour reflected there.

'Surely not? Surely you haven't finally learned to be gracious, Giovanni Valtieri, after all these years?'

'Hardly.'

He chuckled and lifted his good hand, patting her cheek patronisingly. It always annoyed her and her eyes flared in warning.

'Don't push your luck,' she said, and dropping him there in the entrance hall like a hot brick, she stalked into the kitchen, hips swishing. 'Coffee?'

He followed her slowly, enjoying the view in a masochistic way because there was no way he would act on this crazy attraction between them. 'Only if you've got a decent coffeemaker now. I don't suppose there's any food in the house?'

'Not yet. It's in the car. I'll put the coffee on. Do you want to lie down for a while, or sit in here?'

And there it was—the sofa, an old battered leather one where he'd nearly lost his self-control last June. But it looked really inviting, and it was set opposite a pair of French doors out onto the terrace and he could see the familiar lights of the valley twinkling in the distance. His home was out there somewhere in the darkness, and if he couldn't be there, then this was the next best thing.

'Here looks good,' he said, and made his way over to it and lowered himself down cautiously. So far, so good, he thought, and stretched his leg out in front of him with a quiet groan of relief.

'Better?'

'Much better. Have you got that coffee on yet?'

'I thought you didn't like my coffee?'

'I don't, but I need caffeine, and it has to be better than the stuff in the hospital.'

She gave him a look, but got two mugs out and found some biscuits in a tin.

'Here. Eat these while you wait. We'll be having dinner in a while. I bought something ready-made so we can have it whenever you're ready.'

'Good. I'm starving.'

She laughed. 'I've never known you when you weren't starving. It's a miracle you're not fat.'

'It's my enormous brain. It takes a lot of energy.'

She snorted, but he could see a smile teasing the corners of her mouth, and he turned away so she wouldn't see him laughing in response. Then his smile faded, and he closed his eyes and sighed quietly.

If it wasn't for this intense physical tug between them which had appeared suddenly when they were fourteen and never faded, life would have been so, so much easier. They could have just been friends, just as they had all their lives until that point. They'd been inseparable, getting into all manner of scrapes together, but then their hormones had made things awkward between them and she'd started spending more time with the girls, and he with the boys.

But despite the occasional awkwardness, they'd stayed friends, and they still were, twenty years later. She was the first person he called if he had something interesting or sad or exciting to share, but since that time five years ago when they'd somehow lost their restraint and ended up in bed for a few giddy and delirious weeks, things hadn't been the same.

He hadn't called her as much, hadn't leant on her in the same way, and if she'd leant on him, he'd given only what he'd had to and no more.

He'd been easing away from her, trying to distance himself because it was just too darned hard to be so close when he could never give her what she wanted—until last June, when he'd nearly lost the plot. He'd hardly seen anything of her since then, and he'd missed her more than he would ever admit.

She heard a quiet sigh, and looked over to where he was sitting.

He looked thoughtful, sombre, and she wondered what he was thinking about. The silly woman who'd got him in this mess with her unprovoked attack?

Or the last time he'd sat on that sofa, when they'd so nearly—

'Here, your coffee,' she said, dumping it down on the table beside him. She went back for her own coffee and the biscuits, and handed them to him.

'No chocolate ones?'

'Do you know, you're like a demanding child,' she grumbled, going back to the cupboard and rummaging around until she found a packet of chocolate coated wafers. 'Here. I was saving them for a special occasion, but since you can't cope without them...'

He arched a brow, but she ignored it and tore the Cellophane and put the packet down on the cushions between them, reaching for one at the same time as him. Their fingers clashed, and she withdrew her hand.

'After you,' she said, 'since you're clearly going to die if you don't eat soon,' and his mouth curved into a slight, fleeting smile and he picked one up deliberately and bit it in half.

She looked away. He was teasing her, tormenting her, but her fingers were still tingling from the brush of his hand.

How could she feel like this still? Always, all the time, year after year without anything but hope to feed it?

Except he'd given her hope. They'd had an affair, and last year, they'd so nearly started it up again. So very, very nearly—

'Good biscuits.'

'They are. That's why I was saving them. Don't eat them all, you won't want your dinner.'

'Unlikely.'

She snorted, and put the rest away in the tin and put the lid on, and he just leant back and stretched out his long, rangy body and sighed.

He looked so good there, as if the sofa was made for him, as if it was his body that had moulded it to the saggy, comfortable shape it now was—except he'd only ever been on it once before, and she really, really didn't want to think about that time.

'How's the coffee?' she asked to distract herself, and he glanced down into the mug and shrugged.

'It's coffee. It's not great. Why don't we go and buy a coffee maker?'

'Now?'

He chuckled wearily. 'No, not now. Tomorrow? I don't know if I can cope for two weeks without proper coffee.'

'This is proper coffee. You're just a coffee snob.'

'No, I just know what I like.'

'And you couldn't possibly compromise to spare my feelings?'

He turned his head and gave her a mocking smile. 'Now, you know that's ridiculous.'

Oh, goodness, she couldn't do this! That smile cut right through her defences and left her so vulnerable to him, but there was no way he was going to know that. So she laughed and hit him lightly with a cushion, then hugged it to her chest and pulled her knees up, propping her feet on the edge of the sofa and changing the subject back to the safer one of his attacker.

'I wonder when they'll find her. She makes me nervous.'

His lips kinked in that lopsided smile that was so familiar to her and made her heart lurch once again. 'It's not a Bond movie, Anita. She's just an angry woman who's probably now very scared.'

She nodded. 'Probably. What on earth did she want from you?'

He shrugged. 'Money? They were in business, she cheated him for years, he found out and told her to go quietly and broke up the partnership, and then she decided to go after what she thought was her half. So he produced all the evidence to show she'd cheated him and she gave in, but instead of gaining money, she's ended up with a legal bill, and she blames me.'

Anita laughed in astonishment. 'Why? She didn't seriously expect to win?'

'Apparently.'

'She's deluded, then. Either that or she hasn't heard of your reputation. She should have just gone quietly.'

'Of course, but she was distraught. Much more so than I would have expected, and she was so insistent on talking to me. It wasn't normal behaviour. Maybe if I'd listened I wouldn't be in this mess now.'

He looked slightly bemused, as if he was still trying to work it out, and she reached out a hand and rested it on his shoulder. Silly of her to touch him, so risky and not really necessary, but she needed to feel his warmth, just to reassure herself that he *was* still alive, that this woman's actions hadn't actually caused his death after all.

But then he turned his head and their eyes locked. His pupils flared, darkening his already dark eyes to midnight, and it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. Heat scorched through her, a heat born of want and need and a deep and unbearable longing to just lean over and rest her head on his shoulder and hold him close.

For an age they said nothing, and then she pulled her hand away and got up.

'I'll get the food in from the car and cook the dinner,' she said, her voice jerky and tight, and pulling her boots back on, she went out to the car and stood for a moment sucking in the cool air and getting herself back under control.

How could she still love him, still want him, like this? Five years she'd had to get over him, and she'd thought she was doing OK, but tonight she felt as if she hadn't made any progress at all. And now they were supposed to be stuck together alone here for two weeks, and keep their hands to themselves?

They'd never do it.

He was on the phone when she went back inside with the shopping, talking to his mother.

She could tell it was her, just by the tone of his voice and the patient, slightly indulgent expression on his face.

'I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, Anita's looking after me. Of course I'll be nice to her. I know she's a nice girl.' He glanced across at her and winked, and then his mother said something else and he looked hastily away. 'Don't be silly. Of course not.'

Of course not what? Of course not, any chance of them getting back together? It would make his mother a very happy woman. Hers also. Her, too, come to that, happiest of all of them, but it was a fruitless waste of energy thinking about it any more, so she dumped the shopping down on the worktop and started to put it away.

If only she could tune out the sound of his voice, instead of catching every word as if she was eavesdropping! Not that she could help it.

She left the shopping and went into the bathroom, giving it a quick clean. Hopefully by the time she'd finished, he would have got off the phone and she wouldn't be forced to endure the warm murmur of his voice and that soft chuckle which melted her bones.

By the time the taps and mirror were gleaming and they could have eaten off the fittings, she decided the bathroom was probably clean enough. She went back into the kitchen, but he was still on the phone. To Luca, this time, she thought.

There was medical stuff—details of his treatment, a report on what hurt, what tingled, what ached—definitely Luca. And he was lying, as well. She took the phone from him.

'Luca? Hi. This is mostly lies. He hurts, he looks awful, he's dizzy—Gio, no, you can't have the phone back.' She stepped further away, listening to Luca's advice for feeding him things to replace the iron while Gio protested from the confines of the sofa.

'Will do.'

'And don't let him walk on that foot yet.'

'OK. I'll do my best.' She swatted his hand away. 'He wants you back.'

'Anita, before you go, I know this is difficult for you,' Luca said softly. 'We're really grateful to you for being there for him. You just take care, OK? Don't let yourself get hurt, and if it all gets too much, call, and one of us will come.'

She swallowed hard. 'I'm fine. Here he is.'

She handed the phone back and retreated to the kitchen, wishing she'd bought raw ingredients instead of a ready-made meal. It might have given her something to do for the next hour or so, instead of turning on the oven, putting the pan of lasagne into it and then twiddling her thumbs for half an hour.

She closed the oven door and thought about what Luca had said. Dark green vegetables and red meat, with whole grain bread and pulses.

Well, the red meat was taken care of, and she had some pâté and a mixed salad she could give him for a starter, and the ciabatta was made with stoneground flour. That would have to do for now, and tomorrow she'd go shopping.

She pulled plates out and started arranging the salad. He was watching the television now, flicking through the channels, and then he stopped. 'Oh, no, for heaven's sake, why can't they leave me alone?'

'What?'

'It's made the news. Look. The police said it might and they were going to do some damage limitation, but it doesn't sound like it.'

She put the knife down and went over, perching on the end of the sofa and watching.

'Police say Giovanni Valtieri was released from hospital at midday today following an incident yesterday in which he was assaulted. He was seen being driven away from the hospital by a woman believed to be Anita Della Rosso, a friend of the family and one-time girlfriend of the lawyer, who's been at his side since the incident.'

'What!' She plonked down onto the sofa next to him and stared at the television in astonishment. 'How did they find that out?'

He shrugged. 'They're everywhere. Listen.'

There was a reporter standing outside the hospital now, talking about how she'd been seen arriving yesterday and again this morning, and then further talk about their relationship.

'A hugely successful lawyer in his own right, Giovanni is the colourful and flamboyant youngest son of Vittorio and Elisa Valtieri, members of one of Tuscany's oldest and most respected families, and his renewed relationship with society wedding planner Anita Della Rossa is bound to be a cause for speculation. Will Anita be planning her own wedding soon?'

The screen went suddenly blank, and she looked at Gio.

His face was rigid, his lips pressed tightly together into a straight line, a muscle in his jaw jumping. He threw down the remote control and sat back, arms folded, fulminating in silence.

He was furious, she could tell, but more than that, he was worried.

He dragged in a breath and turned to her.

‘I never should have dragged you into this. All this talk about our relationship—it’s so public, and now they’re going to point Camilla Ponti straight at you.’

She smiled a little ruefully and touched his cheek. ‘Gio, it’s OK. This is my private bolt-hole, a secret hideout that hardly anybody knows about. She won’t look for us here, everyone thinks I live either in my apartment in Firenze or with my parents. There’s nothing to link it to me, not even the address. I give my parents’ villa as my postal address here. This is just like a guest villa.’

‘Talking of your parents, you’d better warn them,’ he said. ‘If they’re watching this news bulletin —’

Her phone rang, right on cue, and she spent the next five minutes telling her mother he was all right, they were at her villa and it was all just idle speculation. She was simply looking after an old friend.

‘You expect me to believe that? There’s no smoke without fire, Anita.’

She coloured. Her mother didn’t know about their brief affair five years ago. Nobody did, not really. They certainly hadn’t told anyone. Luca and Massimo had guessed, but nobody else had, as far as she knew. Well, apart from the press and now half of Tuscany—

‘It’s just rumour,’ she said lightly. ‘Ignore it. I have to go, I’m cooking supper for us.’

But her mother wasn’t stupid. ‘Take care, *carissima*,’ she said softly, and Anita swallowed.

‘I will. *Ciao*, Mamma. Love to Papà.’

She lowered her phone and met his eyes.

‘Is she OK?’

‘She’s fussing.’

‘Of course she’s fussing, she’s your mother. I’m surprised she’s not over here right now checking the sleeping arrangements.’

‘Well, she’ll be disappointed, then, because I’ve made up the spare room for you. Do you want to eat where you are, or at the table?’

‘Here? Do you mind? I can’t be bothered to move.’

Subtext: it’ll hurt too much, even though he’d had his painkillers with coffee earlier. She took his food over to him, with a glass of wine to wash it down.

Not that she approved, but it might help relax him and she wasn’t in the mood to play his mother.

‘Thanks, that looks really good. I can’t tell you how hungry I am.’

She’d spread the pâté on the toasted ciabatta, so he could eat it one-handed, and he forked in the salad and mopped up the dressing with the last of the toast. ‘That was good. Tasty. What can I smell?’

‘Lasagne. I thought you could eat it with a fork.’

‘Great idea.’

She took his plate and brought it back with the lasagne on it, and after they’d eaten it he leant back and sighed in contentment.

‘Better?’

‘Amazing. That was really good. I was ready for it. I haven’t eaten anything proper since the day before yesterday.’

He rolled his head towards her, his eyes serious, the food forgotten. ‘Anita, I hate involving you in this. You should be on holiday, not sitting here babysitting me while they gossip about us on the news.’

‘Don’t worry. I don’t care if people talk about us.’

‘Well, I do, and I’m not thrilled about them giving Camilla Ponti directions.’

‘She won’t come after you,’ she said with more confidence than she felt. ‘She’s in Firenze somewhere, trying to hide from the police. Even she’s going to realise she’s in deep enough trouble without making it worse. And anyway, I thought you said she was mortified.’

‘She was. She really didn’t mean to hurt me.’

‘Well, then, we’ll be fine,’ she said firmly. ‘The outside lights come on if anyone approaches, so we can’t be sneaked up on. I’ll set the alarm and put the car in the garage, and nobody would know we were here, if that makes you happier.’

What would make him happier was knowing that Camilla Ponti had been found and seen by a doctor. Until then, this would have to do.

‘Fine.’

‘Good. Now I think it’s time you went to bed.’ Their eyes clashed again, and then he levered himself to his feet.

‘You’d better show me to my room, then,’ he said, and she led him down the hall and pushed open the bedroom door. She’d unpacked his bag and laid his things out on the top of the chest, including his painkillers.

He was pleased to see them. He’d just had some, but he had no doubt he’d need more before the night was out. He hobbled awkwardly past her, looked around and then met her eyes again. ‘It’s a nice room. Thank you.’

‘*Prego*. I’ll bring you a glass of water. The bathroom’s across the hall, and I’ve put out clean towels and your pills are on the chest. Will you be all right getting ready for bed, or do you want me to help you undress?’

He gave a soft huff of laughter.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

Their eyes locked, his dark and unfathomable. As well as she knew him, she couldn’t read them.

She could feel the heat scorching her cheeks, but she held her ground. ‘I thought you weren’t feeling great.’

‘I’m not, but I’d have to be dead before I let you undress me. *Buonanotte*, Anita.’

And he closed the door softly in her face.

CHAPTER THREE

HE stood there for a moment, listening, and after a long pause he heard the sound of her banging around in the kitchen.

She sounded mad with him. Not surprising, really. It hadn't been the politest rejection, and she'd only been trying to help, but—*Dio*, just being that close to her was killing him, and he might not be feeling great today, but his body clearly didn't care about that. It was interested in Anita, and saying so.

No way was she taking off his clothes and finding that out!

Which meant he had to do it on his own, and frankly he wasn't sure he could one-handed. The first thing he had to do, though, was use the bathroom, because he wasn't going to wander around the house half naked. He knew his limitations, and keeping a lid on his libido was one of them. The more he was wearing when he was exposed to her, frankly, the better.

There was no sign of his washbag, so he assumed she must have put it in the bathroom already. He frowned, feeling another pang of guilt, which was silly. It was nothing he wouldn't have done for her, and he wouldn't have taken no for an answer about helping her undress, either. Clearly his skin was tougher than hers. And she wouldn't have been so rude.

Guilt again.

He limped to the bathroom, spent a few infuriating minutes in there struggling to clean his teeth with the wrong hand, and when he opened the door she was outside.

She hadn't been able to stay away. She'd gone into the kitchen, steaming mad with him, deeply hurt—

I'd have to be dead before I let you undress me.

What was that about? He'd been keen enough for her to undress him five years ago, for goodness' sake, so what on earth had changed so much that he wouldn't even let her help him when he was injured? She'd thought they were friends still, but clearly not. They'd crossed a line when they'd had the affair, and now—now everything was different, and there was no going back.

They couldn't just undo the fact that they'd been lovers. She realised that, but this was nothing to *do* with sex! Except clearly, for him, taking off his clothes was something he did on his own, or a prelude to lovemaking. Often, for them, the only prelude, she remembered, because on occasions they'd been so desperate they'd almost torn each other's clothes off—

'Oh, stop it! This is ridiculous!'

She slammed the dishwasher shut, battened down the hatches on her memories and swiped a cloth over the worktop. The plates were in the dishwasher, the kitchen was tidy.

And still he was in the bathroom.

In difficulties?

So she'd gone to investigate, listened outside to the sounds of frustration as he struggled with something—his toothbrush?

And then the door opened, and she saw the pain etched into his face, the frustration, the tiredness, and she just wanted to hug him. He shook his head, closing his eyes briefly, and when he opened them she could see guilt written all over his face.

Goodness knows what was written on hers. It must be a mass of emotions, and it seemed he could read them all.

'I'm sorry, *cara*,' he said gruffly, reaching out one-handed to hug her, and then she was there against him, her arms around him, her face buried in his chest just breathing him in and holding on.

'I'm sorry I flounced off,' she mumbled. 'You look awful. I've been so worried about you—'

Her voice hitched, and he sighed and rubbed her back gently. 'I'm fine, Anita. Come on, don't cry. Go and make us some hot chocolate, and I'll get my clothes off. No more tears, eh?'

—, She eased away, sniffing slightly and scrubbing tears from her cheeks. ‘Sorry. I’m such an idiot

‘You’re a lovely idiot. I’m lucky to have such a good friend.’

There. He’d said it. Friend.

Not lover.

She nodded, and walked away towards the kitchen to make the hot chocolate, and he gritted his teeth and made it the last few steps to the bedroom.

Then he looked at his foot.

The nurses had struggled to get his trousers on over it without hurting him. What hope did he have, one-handed? He couldn’t do it alone.

Which meant asking Anita.

She came back with the hot chocolate while he was sitting on the side of the bed scowling.

‘Problem?’

‘I can’t get my trousers off on my own,’ he said grudgingly.

She suppressed a smile. ‘No, I don’t suppose you can. And you need something to keep the weight off your foot in the night.’ She plonked the chocolate down on the bedside table, threw the bottom of the quilt back and put two pillows in the bed.

‘OK. That should do it. So, are you sleeping in the trousers, bearing in mind that you’d have to be dead to let me help you?’

He winced at the mild tone which belied a world of hurt—hurt of his making. He deserved her sarcasm. Hell, he deserved more than that. It would serve him right if she left him to struggle on his own. So he swallowed his pride. He needed her help, like it or not, and he realised he might have to grovel to get it.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that quite as it came out. No, I’m not sleeping in them, but I have no idea how to get them off, I just know it’s going to hurt.’

‘Not if I do it—assuming you’ll let me help you?’ she asked more gently.

He shrugged, hating it but out of options, and unfastened his trousers, pushing them down to his knees before sitting back down on the edge of the bed. He felt naked and vulnerable. Ridiculous. He’d been fine with the nurses, so why was he worried about Anita?

Because I know what it’s like to make love to her.

‘Just do it, Anita,’ he said, and she gave a little shrug and knelt down at his feet, which brought her eyes in line with the telltale bulge in his jersey shorts. And just south, on the inside of his muscular thigh, was the transparent dressing over his wound.

She winced. ‘That was close. It could have been really catastrophic.’

‘My sex life’s not really your problem,’ he said shortly, struggling with her proximity and wishing she’d just look somewhere else before he gave himself away, but she just rolled her eyes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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