

Venetian Masquerade



by

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Venetian Masquerade

Chapter One

‘Amy, you’re so late! For Heaven’s sake hurry into the meeting and bow and scrape to Jake. He’s fuming.’ Sandra rose to her feet as her boss flung herself through the office door.

‘I expect he is, Sandra...and guess what, I don’t give a toss!’ Amy replied, fighting back tears.

‘I’ll go and tell them you’re on your way, shall I? Are you all right?’

‘No. Yes. I don’t know Just let me count to ten and compose myself.’

A few minutes later Amy leaned on the conference room door, listening to the muted buzz of conversation behind it, before taking a deep breath, pinning a bright smile on her face and breezing in. ‘Good morning, everyone. Sorry to be late, I had a minor traffic accident.’

As she had known it would, all recrimination dropped from Jake’s face and he came swiftly to her and took her arm. ‘Are you hurt – no whiplash or anything?’

‘No, Jake, thank you; nothing like that. I’m afraid I backed into a car outside while parking and broke the lights.’

A titter ran round the five men gathered at the board room table and she felt the colour rising to her face. Jake lowered his considerable bulk back into his chair. ‘Not my car, I hope?’ he said, raising an eyebrow.

‘No, Jake, not your beloved Mercedes – it was a red Jaguar with one-way glass in the windows, and I haven’t a clue who the owner is. I left a note on the windscreen with my mobile phone number. Now, shall we get on? Here are the reports you wanted and I’ve translated them into both French and Italian.’

An hour later the meeting ended. Jake and his colleagues left the room while Amy remained, gathering together a mountain of documents which represented yet another

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series of late nights. Her friend and PA, Sandra, popped her head round the door. ‘Sorry, Amy - phone call. It’s your mother.’

Amy glanced at Sandra feeling vaguely alarmed. Her mother never called unless there was an emergency. ‘Okay, put it through here, would you?’

Sandra transferred the call to the boardroom and Amy grabbed the receiver. Speaking in French she demanded ‘Mama, what’s wrong, has something happened to James?’

‘No, no darling, calm down, James is fine, it’s Maria. I’m afraid she’s dying.’

‘Oh, lord, that’s awful.’

‘Antonio called – and apparently she’s deteriorated badly. They only give her a few days – a couple of weeks at best. She wants you to go to Venice to visit her and I really think you should.’

‘Oh, Mama, this couldn’t come at a worse time, I’m snowed under here. Look, let me think for a few minutes - I’ll call you back.’

‘Amy,’ Jake bellowed, re-entering the room. ‘The car you hit belongs to a new client and he’s furious. How could you be so stupid? I haven’t yet told him who’s responsible – it doesn’t make a very good impression, but he’s going to find out soon enough.’

She gazed at him, angry tears filling her eyes. ‘Jake, I am sorry, but I’ve a little boy at home I hardly ever see, I worked on those reports till two o’clock this morning, I haven’t had a day off for three weeks, nor a holiday in a year. Now I’ve just been told my dear Godmother is dying. I am totally exhausted...and...and what’s more I’m taking some leave, starting now. I need to go to Venice to be with Maria and that’s just what I’m going to do. And if you don’t like it you can fire me, I really don’t care anymore!’

Jake looked at her in amazement for a moment. ‘All right,’ he conceded gruffly, ‘If things are as bad as that, you can take two weeks leave, starting now.’

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‘Thank you.’ She stood to face him and he took a step backwards. ‘What about all this work?’ she asked, lowering her tone a little and indicating a pile of folders on her desk.

‘Janice can take over for once. I’ll take her off her current project. You knew this was a high pressure job when you took it on – if you can’t cope, perhaps...’

‘I can cope – but I need a break.’

‘I’m sorry; I suppose I have overloaded you recently. Take two weeks compassionate leave.’

‘Thanks.’

With a sigh of relief Amy re-arranged the work pile and stuck yellow labels on the most urgent things Janice would need to organise. Finally she picked up her bag, and was about to leave the office when Sandra popped her head round the door.

‘That car you hit. Turns out it belongs to an Italian client called Alessandro di Benedetto. He only came to us today, so it’s a bit embarrassing...Amy, what on earth is wrong. Are you okay?’

Amy had collapsed back into her chair, ashen faced, her blue eyes wide with shock. ‘No...no, I don’t think I am, Sandra. This is appalling. If there’s one person in the whole world I can’t see, or have any contact with at all, it’s him?’

Concerned, Sandra came to sit by her friend. ‘Who is he? I mean apart from being a drop-dead-gorgeous, Italian property developer worth more money than I could spend in two lifetimes...’

‘He’s James’s father,’ she said in a hoarse whisper.

‘What! We’ve been friends for two years and you’ve never mentioned him.’

Sandra sat back, mouth agape, staring at Amy.

‘Oh, my God, Sandra, what am I going to do? He doesn’t know about James and he must never find out.’ She covered her face with shaking hands and Sandra came to sit beside her and gave her a hug.

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‘Why ever not? I met him in the office and he seems a sweetie. A rich and adorable sweetie.’ She sighed theatrically, fanning her face with a sheaf of papers.

‘Sweetie...huh, a manipulative, lying bastard who thinks he’s God’s gift to the planet would be a better description. His family is powerful – what passes for Italian aristocracy - and ever since James was born I’ve lived in dread they might find a way to take him away. At the very least they’d claim the right to spend time with him and that would mean I’d have to see Alessandro regularly.’

‘Amy, I’m stunned. But he is James’s father, and sooner or later that’s going to become an issue with the boy. What are you going to tell him?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But one day you’ll have to give him some sort of explanation. Amy...you liked Alessandro once...I mean if you were lovers...’

‘It’s a long and painful story. Sandra, I can’t see him and you are sworn to secrecy over James. I never meant to tell you – or anyone. My mother is the only one who knows the truth. If he is now a client here, at this firm of lawyers, I have to leave.’

‘Stop panicking, Amy. You are going away for two weeks and you don’t have to see him today. By the time you get back these initial meetings will be over and I expect he will only be in contact with Jake by e-mail and telephone.’

‘That’s true. No, it isn’t! Sandra, I hit his car – and I left my mobile phone number on his windscreen.’

‘Whoops. But he hasn’t called you?’

‘I turned my phone off in the meeting. Listen, can you go down to talk to him and pretend the car is yours?’

‘He’ll need a name for the insurance...and if I give your name...well, there aren’t too many girls called Amy Storace in the phone book.’

‘Amelie, my full name is Amelie...he may not remember that...’ She ran her fingers distractedly through her tangle of curly, dark hair.

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‘Go down and face it out, Amy.’ Sandra said firmly. ‘It’s all you can do. Exchange numbers and insurance details, and walk away. You don’t need to get involved or tell him anything else, do you?’

‘Easier said than done.’ Amy, walked nervously around the room, anxiety oozing from every pore. ‘I walked out on him, and you know what Italians are like for holding grudges.’

‘What did he do to upset you so much?’ asked Sandra.

‘I’ll tell you when you have a week or two. Oh dear... I suppose I’d better go and face the lion. Wish me luck.’

She went to the rest room to splash her face with water and repair her lipstick. The pale, heart-shaped face staring back at her in the mirror was etched with anxiety. She was horrified at the idea of coming face to face with Alessandro and her heart was beating so violently she felt light headed. At last, taking a deep breath, she took the lift to the ground floor. Perhaps Alessandro had simply left his number on her car and gone, she thought, crossing her fingers. Maybe he was late for another meeting and she wouldn’t be forced to face him. But when she stepped outside into the August sunshine, she knew lady luck was not on her side at all that day.

The tall, rangy figure of Alessandro di Benedetto was standing by the red Jaguar. He was talking into his mobile phone in rapid Italian, gesturing dramatically with his free hand; a habit which had always made her laugh. He didn’t see her at first and it was a moment before she could move, so stunned was she by the impact of setting eyes on him again. Still lean, darkly tanned with almost saturnine good looks, a straight Roman nose and that deep dimple in his chin, he had changed very little in six years. He was wearing a black, immaculately tailored suit with a plain red tie and white shirt, but an image of Alessandro without his clothes on flashed, unbidden, through her mind, and Amy felt an instant heat rush through her body. She stayed out of his sight for a moment longer until she could breathe normally again, smiling ironically as several women walking by slowed down to gaze at the handsome Italian. Yes, she mused, he still has the wow factor. Swine!

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As she watched, he switched off his phone, glanced at his Rolex watch, tapped his foot in irritation and wandered round to examine the damage to his car.

If I just wait a bit, perhaps he will drive away, thought Amy. But then she realised he couldn't move his car because she had left hers too close in front for him to pull out and a van had parked behind almost touching his bumper. Ha! Alessandro the Great is blocked in, how humiliating, she thought with a smirk of satisfaction. Taking a deep, steadying breath she walked up to him.

'Hello, Alessandro.'

He spun to look at her and his eyes widened, then darkened, as he gazed at her in utter surprise. 'Amy?'

'I'm sorry, but the long arm of coincidence has touched us. I'm afraid I am the culprit.' She gestured to the damaged cars and making a great effort to be calm, fished around in her bag for a notepad and pen. 'If you give me the number of your insurance company I will make sure the claim is settled immediately.'

He folded his arms and leaned back against his car, staring at her in astonishment. 'What are you doing here?'

'I work as an interpreter for Judge and Jameson's... the lawyers I believe you employed today to represent you? But don't worry, with your linguistic skills you won't need my services, so there will be no need for us to be in contact after today. Now if you could give me the details...'

'Wait a minute. I need to catch my breath...after six years you appear in front me like a ghost from the past and all you want is the number of my insurance company?'

'That's right.' She wished her heart rate would calm down – it was almost painful.

'Amy, I don't believe this! Can't we at least have dinner?'

'No.'

'Coffee – there's a coffee shop across the road?'

'No. The number please...'

'Where did you run away to? Why did you go?'

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‘That has nothing to do with you.’ Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Here she was, facing James’s father after almost six long years and the pain was as acute as on the day she had left.

‘On the contrary, I think it has everything to do with me,’ he said, taking her arm.

‘Let me go.’ She stepped away from him, shaking from head to foot. ‘Please give me the number, Alessandro or leave it with my PA, Sandra. If you’ll excuse me I need to go. I have a plane to catch.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Timbuktu.’

‘Why are you so angry? It’s my car with broken headlights – you’ve only got a crack in your reversing light.’ He touched her face – the merest whisper of a caress and a million volt shock went through her. The same sensual cologne wafted past her nostrils, the same tension flooded hotly to her loins; the same urge to pull his mouth down on hers...

‘No, don’t touch me.’ Roughly, she pushed him away and scrambled for her ignition key which had sunk to the bottom of her bag. Somehow, in her anxiety to get away, the contents tipped onto the pavement and in despair she crouched to pick up her makeup, purse and a photo of James, which she palmed into her pocket. Alessandro took her hand, pulled her to her feet and inspected her fingers.

‘Not married?’

‘None of your business,’ she gasped, tugging her fingers away. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m running late.’

‘I think you and I are running late, Amy, by about six years. Do not imagine I am going to let you escape again, at least until I find out what the hell happened.’

His eyes blazed down at her and something between raw terror and raw desire made her heart leap in her chest.

‘Get in the car.’

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‘No.’

‘Unless you want me to make the most embarrassing scene here in the street, outside your office with a dozen people almost leaning out of the window to listen, you will do as I say. I can’t kidnap you - you’ve blocked in my car.’

Glaring at him, she permitted him to open the car door and slid inside. He climbed in the other side and sat staring at her. ‘I don’t believe this.’

‘Neither do I.’ Close proximity to him made her feel faint. It was like being in a time warp which was why, when he reached across and pulled her violently to him, she barely resisted.

‘How could you throw away what we had – have you forgotten the love, the passion?’ he demanded.

‘No, nor the pain, the betrayal. You’ll never hurt me like that again. Now let me go. Whatever we had is long gone and I really do have a plane to catch.’

‘Not quite yet,’ He brought his mouth down on hers in a crushing kiss and his hand slid between her legs stopping half way up her thigh. She was horrified at the shudder of anticipation which passed through her and knew he felt it too. His kiss became deeper and it was several seconds before she was able to gather the strength to push him away.’

‘No! How dare you presume to touch me like that? I have nothing to say to you. Haven’t you done enough damage?’ She turned and began to open the car door but he caught her hand and pulled her round to face him.

‘Damage? What happened, Amy, we had so much. You have to tell me why you ran away when I know you were as much in love with me as I was with you.’

‘No!’ Somehow she wriggled free, opened the car door, and fled to her own black BMW parked in front. She managed to lock herself in before he reached her side.

‘I’ll call you.’ he shouted through the closed window.

‘Please don’t.’

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‘Amy, you ran out of my life with no explanation and I searched for you for a year after that. We’ve unfinished business and I will pursue you until it is resolved. I now know your number and where you work.’

‘You finished any business between us a long time ago you arrogant pig. Go to Hell, Alessandro. I hate you.’ And she drove off into the lunchtime traffic and headed out of London to the relative peace of the Hertfordshire countryside.

The drive home seemed interminable. Even at mid-morning, traffic on the motorway was at a standstill and it was steamily hot. Frustrated, she switched on her phone and called her mother. ‘I’m on my way home. I’m taking two weeks leave and, Mama, I want to be on a plane tonight – this afternoon if possible. Could you book for James and me to go to Venice? I have an account with BA and they have my credit card numbers. Will you call me back when you’ve confirmed the flight? Thanks, I should be with you in an hour if the traffic moves.’ A few minutes later the phone rang and she answered quickly, anticipating her mother.

‘Amy, where are you. Please, can we meet this evening?’

‘No we can’t, Alessandro. I told you, I’m going away.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘None of your business. Leave me alone.’ And she switched her phone off and flung it on the floor of the car. To her relief, the traffic began to move and she gave all her concentration to her driving. One accident in a day was enough...no, make that two, because meeting up with Alessandro di Benedetto could be a far worse catastrophe than a broken reversing light.

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Chapter Two

When Amy finally reached home, her mother told her she had flights for five-thirty from Heathrow, which just gave Amy time to pack.

‘I’ll drive you to the airport so you don’t need a taxi...you’re very pale and stressed, are you all right?’

‘Yes, Mama, and no. Apart from feeling so sad about Maria, I had a terrible shock today; I backed into another car and it belonged to Alessandro.’

Her mother sat down abruptly and stared at her. ‘Oh, how very unfortunate.’

‘Putting it mildly. What’s worse, before I knew who my victim was I left my mobile phone number on his car, so now he will keep calling me and he knows where I work.’

‘Well, at least you will be away for two weeks and you can turn your phone off now.’

‘Yes. Where’s James?’

‘Next door, playing with Beth. I decided not to tell him you’re taking him away; he would have got over-excited. Amy, what did you feel, seeing Alessandro again?’

‘Nothing, Mama, absolutely nothing.’

‘I don’t believe you. Be careful *cherie*.’

Amy and James stepped out of the plane at Marco Polo airport into late evening sunshine. She dragged their case to where the *vaporettos*, the Venetian water taxis, bobbed in the choppy water, their owners chatting over cappuccinos at the quayside bar. She was about to buy a ticket when a voice behind her enquired ‘Signorina Amy Storace?’

Startled, she turned, almost into the arms of a man who towered over her.

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‘Si, signor,’ she said, stepping back from him and looking up at a ruggedly handsome, vaguely familiar face. Brown eyes twinkled flirtatiously down at her and a generous and very sexy mouth widened to a broad and infectious smile.

‘Maria asked that I meet you with the boat and bring you to the villa. It’s over here.’ He indicated a launch a few yards away.

He looked familiar but she couldn’t place him. ‘Wait a minute... who are you?’ she asked in Italian, standing her ground and hanging onto her case as he tried to take it from her. James craned his neck to stare at the man and was rewarded with a salute and handshake, which made the child laugh aloud.

‘You don’t recognise me, Amy? Well, I recognised you, even after so long. I am Gabriel, Maria’s nephew.’

For a second she stared at him in astonishment, remembering the little boy she had played with on visits to Venice with her parents. A little boy who turned into a lanky teenager, who had taunted her unmercifully when she was fifteen and with whom she had had many a quarrel. ‘Gabriel? Yes, yes of course I remember you. You were horrid to me and I think I still owe you a ducking in the pond at the villa.’

With a smile she held out her hand which he took and raised to his lips. Amy was amused at his gallantry. ‘And who is this young man?’ he asked.

‘My son, James.’

‘Hello, James, welcome to Venice.’

‘I’m nearly five,’ replied James, in perfect Italian.

‘So grown up. I shall take you fishing; would you like that?’

‘Really? Oh, yes please. Is that your boat?’ he asked, brown eyes wide with excitement.

‘Yes, come along, I’ll lift you in.’ And with an easy movement he placed the small boy safely in the boat and turned to help Amy who, with a smile, stepped into the small launch unaided; but as he lifted in her heavy case, the boat rocked alarmingly and

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he steadied her by holding her round the waist, lowering her into a seat, his hands lingering a second longer than was necessary.

‘Thank you,’ she stammered, and he chuckled, started the boat, and turned it towards the marked boat lanes heading for Venice. ‘It was very kind of you to collect me. I could have taken a *vaporetto* to the Lido.’

‘No problem.’ He turned and studied her frankly. Irritated, she flushed at his scrutiny aware of his eyes taking in her petite figure and shapely legs.

‘Do you approve?’ she asked frostily, and he turned away laughing.

‘You should be flattered.’

‘Well I’m not.’

‘It seems we are destined to fight as much now as we did as children. It will be fun.’

‘Gabriel, I came here to spend time with Maria. I don’t want to fight with you or anyone else.’

‘So, you are now a housewife?’

‘No, I’m an interpreter with a law firm in the City of London.’

‘So, who cares for your son, his father?’

‘No, my mother.’

‘I see.’ He fell silent for a moment and she felt his disapproval.

‘I need to make a living for us both,’ she said defensively. ‘James is very well cared for...’

‘And he will be here in Venice. This will be a new life for you both.’

It was a statement, rather than a question and she was puzzled. ‘I’m only here for a visit. Two weeks, only two weeks’

‘I see... obviously nobody told you...well, never mind. I presume you don’t have a lover in England – someone to go back to?’

‘No,’ she said sharply, ‘and anyway, that’s none of your...’

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‘Was his father an Englishman? He has an English name but the boy looks more Italian than I do.’

‘Will you mind your own business? He’s named after a Scottish Great Grandfather,’ she snapped, thinking how little that irritating teenager had changed in the fourteen years since she had last seen him.

‘I apologise.’ He steered the boat towards the glorious city, sitting like a jewel in the Adriatic. The setting sun turned the water to fire with the Doges Palace and bell tower, a floating apparition, shimmering before them.

‘I’d forgotten how beautiful it is,’ Amy murmured. ‘Look, James...’ But the little boy had fallen asleep, his head on her lap.

‘He’s a fine boy, and already he speaks Italian.’

‘And French. You may remember that my mother is French and she’s with him during the day. My father was half Italian, so I speak to him in English and Italian at home.’

The little boat picked up speed and headed for her godmother’s house on the Lido, the long narrow island separating the Venetian lagoon from the Adriatic Sea. Twenty minutes later they veered out of the boat lane into a little canal, passing under some low bridges and Gabriel moored the boat outside Maria’s villa. He helped Amy, carrying the sleeping James, up a flight of steps onto the road and brought their case from the boat.

She stood gazing up at the large villa, saddened to see the almost derelict state of it; the garden was overgrown and the paintwork peeling. Clearly, the elderly lady whom she remembered as a robust and feisty person, full of life, was in decline.

Gabriel came to stand beside her. ‘I wanted her to move somewhere smaller where she could be looked after, but she wouldn’t hear of it. Neither will she consent to an army of servants running around after her. There’s only Carmela and Antonio who are quite elderly themselves. They live here and shop, cook and tidy for her, but the house is in a sad state.’

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The front door opened and Carmela, with a cry of welcome, beckoned them in. ‘Signorina Amy, come in...I’m so glad you are here...Oh, what a beautiful boy.’

‘I’m so happy to see you too, Carmela.’

‘You have grown into a beauty,’ smiled the elderly lady. ‘So like your dear mother; the same curly dark hair, blue eyes, and yes, a very similar mouth.’

She could feel Gabriel’s eyes on her mouth and when she glanced sharply at him, he ran a tongue round his own lips and smiled cheekily, his eyes narrowing. She instinctively knew what he was thinking and glowered at him. Italian men, she thought, are born with a whole section of brain dedicated to bottom pinching and the seduction of any woman under fifty. No, more like sixty. And Gabriel was, without doubt, a past master, with his good looks and easy smile. I bet there’s a different girl in his bed every night, she thought contemptuously. Well, he’s not having me!

Amy followed Carmela into the salon, where the remaining light filtered through a grimy window and fell on her godmother, seated in her wheelchair, with hands outstretched. ‘My dear, dear, girl! Let me look at you...Oh, your mother... so like your mother. How lovely. Come and sit beside me...Gabriel, will you take her case upstairs please, it’s too much for Antonio, and Carmela, please can you make us coffee...or tea; Amy, would you prefer tea?’

‘Tea would be perfect, please,’ laughed Amy, stooping to kiss Maria’s papery cheek. Clearly, her godmother was still in charge of her life – and everyone else’s. James opened his eyes, stuck his thumb in his mouth and regarded Maria from his mother’s lap.

‘He’s so handsome, Amy. Those dark eyes and that huge dimple in his chin. He’ll be a heartbreaker when he is older.’

Exactly like his father, thought Amy wryly.

‘I am glad you were able to come and I hope you will stay. I want to spend some time with you and your child before I move beyond the veil...and I’ve plans I’ll tell you about tomorrow when you are rested. Tell me, what do you think of Gabriel?’

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‘Charming, good looking and I expect we shall fight just as much as we did as children.’

‘Good. So you will have fun. He is a kind man – take no notice of his flirting; he has a good heart.’

‘He hasn’t married?’

‘No. In spite of his eye for the ladies – and there have been a number,’ the old lady chuckled, ‘he’s a soft old romantic at heart and he’s waiting for someone special.’

They talked for a while about Amy’s life in England but soon the elderly lady began to tire. ‘I need my bed, child. If you will push my wheelchair to the foot of the stairs I can get into the stair lift and manage into my bedroom. Carmela will come and help me.’

As the bedroom door closed on the old lady, Gabriel joined Amy at the top of the stairs. ‘This is where you are sleeping,’ he said, opening another door. A large double bed took centre stage and the room overlooked the canal, now in darkness. ‘James has a bed in the dressing room through there...and over here is your bathroom.’

‘And you? Do you live here?’

‘Me? No, I live in an apartment on the island. I’m an art and antique dealer and I travel a lot around Europe. But tonight I shall stay here. Maria keeps a room for me because I sometimes sleep over if she is particularly unwell.’

‘That is kind. How long has she got...have the doctors told you?’ she asked sadly.

‘Not long. She is not in pain, fortunately, but she gets weaker each day and it’s only a matter of time before she is completely bedridden.’

‘It’s very cruel.’

‘She doesn’t see it that way. She has her faith and no fear of dying. Now, why don’t you put James to bed? Carmela will take care of him, while I take you to dinner.’

Amy suddenly realised she was starving. James had eaten everything put in front of him on the plane, but she had been too stressed to have more than a cup of coffee, her mind continually flipping back to her encounter with Alessandro. She became very still

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and thoughtful as she contemplated her problem until Gabriel gently touched her shoulder.

‘Amy, did you hear me? Would you like dinner?’

‘Yes, thank you, I would -very much.’

After a quick shower and change of clothes, she tucked up James with Teddy, his beloved bear, and watched as he almost instantly fell into a deep sleep.

If only I could sleep like that, she thought, remembering the endless nights she had worked until two or three in the morning in her small study at home, and how she had then been mentally too active to sleep until dawn.

Gabriel had changed into jeans and a tee shirt. ‘We’ll go to the pizzeria near the water taxi station. It’s cheap and cheerful, but I’m sure you are not in the mood for a cordon bleu meal tonight.’

She was grateful for his thoughtfulness. ‘Perfect. I’ll let Carmela know we are leaving.’

Walking along beside the lagoon with the moon rising above the distant towers of the Doges Palace and the Bell Tower across the water, Amy began to relax. The air was balmy and she gave a deep sigh, glad to be away from London and the unsettling presence of Alessandro di Benedetto.

‘Tell me about him.’ Gabriel said and she turned to him and pulled a face.

‘I told you earlier, Gabriel, there’s nothing to tell.’

‘Then why are you so sad...and sighing so sorrowfully? Okay, I know, none of my business.’

They ate at a candle-lit table outside the restaurant and Gabriel regarded her solemnly for a moment. ‘You’re truly very lovely Amy. You were a thin, spotty teenager but even then you had good bones.’

‘And you were a horrible tease; you knew how self conscious I was at fifteen. I didn’t like you at all.’

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‘I hope we can be friends now. There are difficult days ahead, so please put the past aside and see me as someone you can depend on. I will flirt shamelessly with you, and if you should fall in love with me, as I could so easily with you...well, who knows... that might be wonderful. But first we should be friends. What do you say?’

Tears sprang to her eyes and she touched his hand across the table. ‘Thank you, I appreciate that. Can we go now? I can hardly stay awake.’

For the first time in weeks, Amy slept for more than eight hours. The next morning, rubbing sleep from her eyes she pulled back the curtains to let in the sunshine and then wandered into the dressing room to find James’s bed empty. She could hear him chattering to Antonio in the garden, so reassured, went downstairs in search of breakfast.

The house appeared even more dilapidated in the morning light. The old wallpaper was ochre-coloured with age and as a result of the forty-a-day smoking habit Maria had been unable to break, in spite of her illness. The threadbare stair carpet and dusty, old-fashioned furniture depressed her. This house had always been full of light and laughter.

Carmela was in the large, airy kitchen, the windows and shutters thrown open to let in the early morning breeze.

‘Antonio and James have been to buy croissants. Sit here and eat while I make some coffee for everyone.’

‘Has Maria had breakfast?’ she enquired, smiling up at Gabriel as he came into the room.

‘She can no longer eat solid food so she survives on a milky protein drink. You can go in to see her soon.’ The elderly woman bustled round the kitchen and called Antonio and James in from the garden to eat.

‘Maria wants to see you this morning, Amy. She has things to say which won’t wait any longer.’ Gabriel drank his coffee standing by the window, shoulders drooping sadly.

‘You’ll miss her.’

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‘I will,’ he said simply. ‘You go and talk to her while I take James to the park for half an hour. Would you like that James?’

‘Yes please! Can we take a football?’

‘There’s a toy shop on the way; I’ll buy you one. Come on – who’s your favourite team?’ The small boy slithered down from his chair, grabbed Gabriel’s hand and Amy watched them chatting animatedly as they went through the garden gate.

She knew how much James missed having a father and hoped that in the two weeks they would be in Venice he would not become too attached to Gabriel. Clearly Maria had been right when she called him a kind man, thought Amy, wishing she could give her heart to someone as uncomplicated as Gabriel.

Amy knocked gently and went into Maria’s bedroom. Her godmother propped up by several pillows, looked tired, her skin pale and waxy.

‘My dear girl, come and sit beside me and take this envelope.’ Her breathing rasped in her chest and she had to wait a moment before she could speak again. ‘It gives you details of who my lawyer is and he will advise you what must be done when I’ve gone. You can trust him completely.’

‘I don’t understand...’

‘Amy, I am leaving you the villa and the bulk of my fortune. There are bequests for Carmela and Antonio of course, which will ensure their comfortable retirement and a gift for Gabriel. But for you and James, there is security.’ She paused and signalled for a glass of water, which Amy, almost numb with shock, helped her to sip. ‘The house has ten large bedrooms, and I had an architect take a look at it a few years ago. He agreed the villa is perfect for turning into a small hotel. There’s enough money to do the conversion, if that is what you decide and you can either keep it and run it, or sell it for...well, quite a lot of money.’

‘Maria...I am utterly stunned. But...well, why me? I’ve hardly been a model goddaughter have I?’

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‘Your father was a treasured friend. No, my dear, not a lover, but he was a brilliant financier who helped me make some investments which prospered wonderfully. If he had failed me I would have lost everything. He and your mother became very special to me. It was a blow when they left Venice for London when you were a baby, but I was honoured to be asked to be your godmother and I promised your father that when my time came, I would leave you whatever was left. And actually, there’s rather a lot. I spent very little, as you can see by the state of the villa. So really, you see, this is a legacy from your father.’ Maria paused for a moment, gathering the strength to continue. ‘And you mustn’t feel badly about Gabriel; he has more money than he can spend already and a successful business. You could do a great deal worse than marry him Amy; I would smile down on such a match from my place in Heaven.’

‘Maria...please, give me a minute to absorb all this,’ she gasped. ‘Does Gabriel know your plans?’

‘He does. He’s known for the past year and has promised he will help you over the next few months. Now, in return I want you to do something for me.’

‘Anything.’

‘I want you to tell me the name of James’s father. I shall take it to the grave with me, but curiosity has been eating away at my soul.’

‘Ah...’

‘I think I already have an idea, although I hope I’m wrong. Is it someone you met in Rome when you were doing your masters degree?’

‘Yes. Yes, Maria.’ She paused, a wave of anxiety washing over. Just talking about Alessandro was an ordeal. ‘He’s the owner of Benedetto International.’ She continued at last. ‘A property developer – worth millions.’

‘Alessandro?’

‘You know him?’ she asked aghast. How many more shocks was this day going to bring?

‘By reputation.’

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‘He doesn’t know about James and I dread him finding out.’

‘Then your life is going to be interesting, Amy. I am sorry to tell you that some of the investments your father made for me were done through his company. His father was running it at that time of course, but there’s no way you can avoid contact with the di Benedetto family while the will is being sorted out. His company holds a lot of the paperwork for me so I’m afraid your name may come before him and he will inevitably track you down.

‘I simply don’t believe this,’ Amy groaned. ‘I spent five and half years trying to put him out of my mind. I moved to France until James was born. A couple of months later, because part of my life plan was to travel, I got jobs which took us to Canada for two years and down to Florida for another year. Fortunately, with my language skills I could get a job almost anywhere. I only went back to London two years ago, thinking Alessandro would have long forgotten me. Yesterday I backed into his car in London.’

‘How did you first meet him? Tell me the story, Amy; indulge me,’ pleaded Maria, a twinkle briefly appearing in her eyes.

‘All right.’ She took Maria’s hand and began. ‘I told you I was working in Rome as a post-graduate after I got my degree as an interpreter at Geneva University. At twenty-one with the world at my feet, I found a job with the Tourist Board. I escorted coach tours, helped tourists in distress, accompanied them to see doctors and so on. Well, one day I was in the office when a very aggressive and pushy American woman, a Mrs Wentworth, came in and asked – no, demanded - the services of an interpreter for her first meeting with a property developer she’d employed to project manage the building a hotel for her. Her PA had gone sick and the local agencies couldn’t help her. My boss thought it would be good experience for me, offered to rent me out to her for an exorbitant fee, and to my amazement she agreed. I barely had time to freshen up before she dragged me off, almost by force, to her meeting. Chairing the meeting, of course, was Alessandro.’ Amy paused, remembering the electric charge that had shot through her body the first time she had seen him. He’d ignored her at first, poring over some papers, his long

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fingers shuffling the reports around as he talked to a colleague; then he had looked up and frozen for a moment as their eyes met and locked, each, in a split second, recognizing destiny. It was such a cliché Amy had giggled and turned away to hide the deep flush spreading up her neck.

‘Go on, Amy – what happened next?’

‘Well, this ghastly American woman swooped on Alessandro, almost pinning him to the wall, chattering at him. I spent the next two hours interpreting for both of them and I could hardly fail to be impressed by his mind. Of course, he arranged a deal that suited him and she turned to jelly before my eyes. “Yes, Alessandro, no, Alessandro...that’s a wonderful idea, Alessandro”. By the time we finished she was so bemused she thought everything they agreed had been her own idea – so she left, very pleased with herself and didn’t realise he’d manipulated her all along. Clever.’

‘And then?’

‘Everyone else left the room and I picked up my belongings from the table intending to leave too...’ She took a deep breath to calm herself. ‘And he came over to me and kissed me.’

Amy struggled to control the quiver in her voice and for a moment fell silent, remembering the moment. Alessandro, leaving her no choice, no chance to say no, simply walked around the table and took her in his arms. After looking searchingly into her wide, astonished eyes, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her so deeply and with such expertise, that she had wilted in his arms under the impact. Afterwards he tipped her chin back and smiled triumphantly, saying in perfect English, ‘That was as wonderful as I knew it would be. For two hours that wretched woman kept me from you and I thought she would never go.’

‘What did you do when he kissed you?’ pleaded Maria.

‘I stepped back, and slapped him very hard round the face.’

‘And what did he do?’

‘He kissed me again.’

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And he had told her there was no point in fighting it because he could feel her body responding, her lips growing soft and responsive and moving a hand to her breast, her nipples harden. But Amy kept those details to herself.

‘I knew, I just knew that he was going to be a part of my life whether I wanted him to be or not. He was so arrogant, I absolutely disliked him, but there was a fire in me I had never felt before. Well, I managed to break away when a secretary came bursting in with an urgent message for Alessandro and I fled back to the office in a state of shock.’

‘And he came after you?’

‘He must have called Mrs Wentworth to ask where she’d found me. Within the hour a florist’s van arrived outside. For five minutes the driver went to and fro bringing in about a hundred and fifty red roses, all in crystal vases. My boss and the other girls were in hysterics. The phone rang every five minutes but I refused to speak to him for the rest of the afternoon. Being Alessandro, he wouldn’t give up and came bursting in to the office in person and dragged me off into the back of his car outside. The chauffeur shut the door, drove off and I was virtually kidnapped.’

‘Oh, Amy, how romantic.’

‘Yes, Maria, it was. It was...’ and to Maria’s obvious frustration Amy went into a reverie, remembering how Alessandro sat on one side of the car and she, as far away from him as possible, on the other.

‘How dare you do this, Signor,’ she had said, glaring at him. ‘Just who do you think you are?’

‘Oh, I know who I am, Amy,’ he said, smiling at her. ‘And I know who you are - and who you are going to be.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you are going to be mine. You already know it, so there’s no point in fighting me – although I am sure you will. The minute you walked into the room and I looked at you, I think we both understood our lives would be intertwined forever.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Where are you taking me?’

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‘Only to dinner. What did you think I was going to do, drag you to my castle and take you by force?’

She turned to glare at him. ‘I imagine you are capable of anything. Now let me go, Signor. I don’t know you?’

‘Yes, you do, and my name is Alessandro. Your soul recognised me straight away, as mine did yours.’

‘Amy!’ protested Maria, ‘stop floating away. What happened next?’

‘Sorry....well, because he gave me no choice in the matter, I had dinner with him in a small, very unpretentious bistro. After the way he’d kissed me at the office, I had visions of fighting him off afterwards and I was prepared to make a real stand but, to my utter amazement, he took me back to my flat, gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek and left.’

‘And then what?’

‘I wondered if I would ever see him again. I presumed he thought me an unsophisticated little fool and not his type at all. But he was waiting for me outside the office the next evening and the same thing happened. He didn’t make a move on me...just dinner and an avuncular goodnight kiss. For three weeks the same thing every evening; we went to the ballet, to art galleries, restaurants and every night he took me home and gave me a kiss on the cheek at my front door. He was really very charming and funny and he stretched my mind. He would tell me about his business interests, his view on life and wanted to know about me. By then, of course, I was madly in love with him and he knew it. But he was prepared to wait for me to tell him when I was ready to...to.’

‘Make love?’

‘Yes,’ laughed Amy. ‘Are you shocked?’

‘At my age, my dear, it would take more than that. What happened next?’

‘Maria, you can guess what happened next. One night after the theatre, when he went to kiss my cheek, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I kissed him. It was the signal he had been waiting for and the effect was...indescribable.’

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‘So, you became lovers?’ asked Maria, sleepily.

‘Yes, Maria, we became lovers,’ Amy replied softly, as the old lady closed her eyes with a smile, drifting into a light doze.

Sitting beside her godmother, Amy remembered that kiss as if it had happened yesterday. Alessandro had brought her home and led her to the garden gate, leaning on it with such a look of longing in his eyes her heart somersaulted. He didn’t touch her, not even a kiss on the cheek and then, to her dismay, he turned to leave. ‘Goodbye, Amy,’ he whispered, and panic had stricken her heart.

‘That sounded very final, Alessandro,’ she whispered.

‘Do you want it to be?’

‘No.’

‘Then you must show me what you do want.’

Amy had taken a deep, shaky breath, knowing what would happen, but she was in an agony of need, longing to be in his arms. Slowly, she walked towards him and standing almost on tiptoe, brushed her lips across his. The effect had been electric and with a groan he had taken her face in his hands and kissed her back, gently at first and then more and more deeply; she had been swept away in a tidal wave of desire and flung her arms around his neck.

‘At last,’ he murmured. ‘I would have gone insane if you had made me wait any longer. Come with me, my darling, come with me now....now...’

And he pulled her back into the car and told the driver to head for Lido di Roma. He made a mysterious phone call, saying simply ‘Luigi, tonight.’

‘Where are we going?’ she gasped, coming up for air a few minutes later.

‘We are going to my yacht. I am taking you away for a few days.’

‘Your yacht? I can’t, I have to work. You have to work...I haven’t packed...’ But he laughed and kissed away her protests and by the time they arrived in the old Roman port she felt as if her insides had turned to liquid fire. The port was lit by myriad lights and Alessandro took a bag from the boot of the car, which she later discovered contained

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everything she might need, and sent the driver back to the city. Then he led her to a beautiful white yacht named Silver Lady, gleaming in the moonlight, moving sensuously, to the lap of the waves, and led her on board. 'We'll stay in port tonight. Tomorrow Luigi and my crew will come on board and I shall take you on a cruise you will never forget. Now come with me.'

He led her to his stateroom - a room such as she had never seen, furnished with exquisite taste with antiques and leather sofas. Next he took her through to the bedroom, in the centre of which a vast double bed dominated the room, draped in blue silk damask, with a bottle of champagne on ice by the bed.

Amy began to laugh. 'Did you learn all your romantic gestures from Hollywood B movies?'

'Too much? All right, we'll take the champagne on deck and look at the moonlight.' Amy laughed even more, going into paroxysms, making it difficult to breathe.

'You are impossible, Alessandro.' She gasped at last. 'I don't want the grand gesture for Heavens sake. I just want...'

'Me?' he had asked tenderly. 'Please, say you just want me, *cara*.'

'I do, Alessandro, truly I do...but...'

'But what, Amy?'

'I'm not very...experienced. I'm afraid you will be disappointed...' she murmured awkwardly, remembering ruefully her only previous sexual encounter with a fellow student after a party. It had been such a let down, she had fought off all comers ever since.

'It will be my sublime pleasure to teach you, Amy. Relax, darling, simply relax. Come here...' And she had gone shyly into his arms.

Sitting beside the slumbering Maria, Amy remembered every erotic, sensual detail as it replayed in front of her eyes. She heard herself crying out joyfully many times

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during that night, and remembered Alessandro burying his face in her hair afterwards, whispering her name over and over.

When she woke, after the most exhausting and unforgettable night of her life, the boat was at sea and the Italian coast had fallen behind the horizon. Alessandro has disappeared but his side of the bed was still warm and she laid her cheek on his pillow, breathing in the scent of him. Her body felt languid and achy after such a night of love and she sighed, a contented smile on her face. The memory of his hands, touching, exploring and delighting her body made her tremble anew; and his mouth... Oh, how he knew how to use that. Lying there naked in the silk sheets, she blushed and giggled knowing that she'd been led to do things which she could barely have imagined, for Alessandro was an inventive and generous lover. But there had been no embarrassment – just a soaring need to give herself to him as he had to her.

‘Good morning, my sweet. Breakfast.’ He came into the room dressed only in white shorts, carrying a tray bearing scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and a steaming pot of coffee. She propped herself on one elbow and smiled at him, admiring his slim, athletic physique, as he sat on the bed, placing the tray between them. His eyes darkened as he looked at her and she had known that one touch of his hand would ignite the flame all over again. Seeing it in her eyes he laughed softly.

‘I must let you eat or you won’t have the energy you are going to need.’

That amazing week she had needed a lot of energy; it had been an unforgettable experience as they visited Corsica, Nice and Barcelona. Alessandro delighted her mind during the day and her body every night and by the time they got back to Rome Amy knew she had changed. She glowed with a new confidence, a new joy in life, a new love and hope for a future which could only be spent with Alessandro. Only it hadn’t worked out that way.

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Chapter Three

Amy crept out of Maria's room, taking with her the envelope she had been given. She went to find Gabriel whom she finally discovered fussing over his boat.

'We met a little girl and her rather gorgeous mother in the park. They live down the road and James has gone to play. Sonya will bring him home in time for lunch.'

'Sonya?'

'We got chatting while the children were playing. She's lovely – short dark hair, enormous grey eyes and a cute figure.'

'I see.' Amy gave him a questioning smile.

'Don't worry, James is quite safe. She only lives a hundred yards away. Do you want to come for a boat ride? You look as if you could do with some fresh air.'

'Yes, can we go somewhere quiet, where we can talk?' Amy climbed in, taking his hand and sat facing him. He started the outboard motor and steered the boat back along the little canal and into the lagoon, before turning towards Arsenale, named after the old ammunition factory and fort, ten minutes away. Amy sat quietly, trying to absorb the turn her life had taken and the fact that she was effectively, rather a rich woman. Gabriel didn't interrupt her thoughts until he had moored the boat and helped her onto the quayside.

'Coffee?'

'Please.' They strolled to a restaurant and sat outside under a parasol.

'What am I going to do, Gabriel? I had absolutely no idea, you must believe me. I presumed you would inherit everything – or that she might have left me a small legacy...but this...' She laid the envelope on the table.

'Maria gave me my legacy early to start my business ten years ago, Amy. She put me firmly on my feet and I can never thank her enough. As she had no children of her

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own, she is right to give back to you what your father helped her to accrue. I hold no grudges.’

‘Thank you. I understand now what you meant by difficult days ahead, and I am certainly going to need a friend.’ Her eyes filled with tears and he took her hand.

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart, you have one. I shall treat you as my sister unless you ever give me the signals that you want it otherwise.’

In that moment, Amy thought it would be very easy to give Gabriel those signals. He was good looking, thoughtful and kind and she was sure he would never hurt or let her down. But a dark shadow lurked in the background and she knew that Alessandro, much as she hated him, would always come between her and falling in love with someone like Gabriel.

An hour later Gabriel moored the little boat outside Maria’s villa and helped Amy onto the road; ‘I’ll come and say goodbye to her before I go back to the island. Tomorrow I am going to an auction in Padua and I want to do some research into one of the lots on offer. Carmela has all my phone numbers so call if you need me.’

Maria had decided to stay in bed so he went in to say farewell. A few minutes later, Amy and James, who was still very excited to have met a playmate, watched as his boat began to move away. The little boy jumped up and down yelling ‘Come back soon. You promised to take me fishing!’

‘On Saturday!’ called back Gabriel, waving.

‘Mama, can I invite Donna round soon? She’s my new friend and I like her Mama too. She makes great muffins.’

‘Yes, James, of course she can come to play – and her Mama; it will be lovely for us both to have friends.’

When they went inside, Amy picked up the phone, impatient to speak to her own mother. ‘Mama, did you know Maria had planned to leave me the villa and most of her money?’

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‘Yes, I did. But she and I decided not to tell you until now because we wanted you to make a life for yourself first; enjoy a career, travel, and maybe marry, before having to make a big decision about moving back to Venice. Now you can choose to sell it and invest the money, or you can do as she suggests and turn it into a business.’

‘I suppose I’ll consider all that when the time comes.’

‘All right my dear. Give Maria my love, and be careful because you are emotionally very vulnerable right now. How is James?’

‘James is in love. This morning he discovered a little girl called Donna who lives in an apartment down the road and they are already inseparable. Her mum invited him to play.’

‘And Gabriel...do you like him?’ her mother asked tentatively.

‘Yes, Mama, I like him enormously. But that’s all it could ever be.’

For the next few days Amy spent most of her time with her Godmother and watched sadly as she grew weaker and weaker. She and Gabriel took turns to sit with her during the night and at dawn one morning he came and gently woke Amy.

‘I think you should come to Maria’s room.’

She went into the dimly lit bedroom, took Maria’s hand and whispered in her ear. ‘I’m here Maria. And I want to thank you for being so wonderful, to Gabriel and to me. We love you very much.’

The elderly lady focused with difficulty, first on Gabriel and then Amy. Faintly she murmured, ‘And I love you both. Be good to each other. Goodbye, my dears.’ She closed her eyes and seemed to relax; her breathing became shallower and shallower, and finally half an hour later she peacefully faded away. Amy sat, clutching Gabriel’s hand and after each of them had kissed Maria’s cheek, together they wept.

As custom demanded, Maria’s funeral was two days later. Mass was said for her and attended by many friends and neighbours, who packed out the local church and followed

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the hearse to the cemetery. Amy and Gabriel were treated by everyone as the chief mourners and at the graveside they held hands, listening, as the final prayers were said for the lovely lady who had given them both so much. Afterwards, Amy, linking her arms through Gabriel's and leaning her head on his shoulder, walked with him back towards the gates of the cemetery. 'I once saw in a book, the words *remember me with love and I am immortal*. I'd like that to be engraved on her headstone. What do you think?' she asked, wiping the tears from her eyes.

'Amy, I think that's beautiful. She would love it.' Gabriel, turned her to face him and putting his arms around her, kissed the top of her head.

Almost thirty people came back to the villa, where Carmela and Amy had prepared a buffet lunch. Constanzo and Simona, who lived in the equally large house next door, were particularly upset.

'We have been such friends for so long,' sighed Simona, 'and we shall miss her. Now that Constanzo and I are getting so old perhaps it's time for us to sell up and find somewhere smaller. It won't be the same without dear Maria. They stayed until late, chatting and reminiscing, and Amy came to appreciate just how many lives Maria had touched with friendship and kindness.

At last the house was quiet. Carmela and Antonio had gone exhausted to bed and James was staying over at Donna's apartment. Donna's mother, Sonya, had been to the villa several times over the preceding few days where she and Amy discovered how much they liked each other.

Gabriel poured a glass of Chianti for Amy and made her sit down. 'It's time to start making some decisions.'

'I know. I am due back in London the day after tomorrow.'

'Yes. If you want to go back permanently, I can put the villa on the market for you. It should sell very quickly because properties here become available so rarely. Your life need not change, except you'll have enough money to be secure for life.'

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She twirled her glass thoughtfully. The prospect of returning to work in the pressure cooker of the London office appalled her. The past two weeks had meant precious time with James and she had come to realise her little boy was growing up fast and she was missing out. More importantly, so was he. ‘Gabriel – I’m staying. I shall phone Jake in the morning and tell him. I couldn’t stand going back to that rat race.’

Gabriel nodded and smiled. ‘I thought that is what you would say, and I’m glad. But I think you are running away from more than your job. Would you like to talk about it?’

‘Yes, I would - and I’m sure I can trust you. My problem is James’s father. I accidentally met him for the first time in nearly six years the day before I came out here. He doesn’t know about James and I’m desperate to keep it that way.’

Gabriel came to sit opposite her after topping up her glass with Chianti. ‘What did he do to you that was so awful you don’t want him to know his own son? Did he beat you?’

‘No...no of course not.’ She laughed weakly. ‘Well, in short, we...I... fell madly, and irrevocably in love with him. I was young and he a romantic figure who swept me, quite literally, off my feet. We were together for three glorious months and I naively assumed he would ask me to marry him, but I had reckoned without his dynastic family. They are worth millions, but truly it wasn’t what attracted me to Alessandro. On the contrary I just loved the simple things about him; his sense of humour, his humanity, and he has a mind like a cleaver. The other stuff – the yacht, the mansion, they were fun, but...well, unlikely as it may sound, not at all important to me. When we were together we often spent weekends on Silver Lady or at his house and sometimes if he was travelling on business he flew me out to Vienna or Cape Town to be with him. And then, one evening he took me to a party. It was the first time he had ever done that and it had crossed my mind that it was strange I had never met his friends or family. I realised of course his social circle are the rich and famous of Rome, and I knew that if the local media picked up on his relationship with me we’d come under scrutiny, so I was happy to

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keep things very quiet and private. That night I was nervous, so I dressed to kill and he said how proud he was to be with me. But he was obviously very stressed about the evening. When we entered the reception salon at The Ritz Hotel a kind of silence fell...just for a couple of seconds, before people started talking again. He introduced me to some people who were clearly very taken aback and curious. I went to the Ladies room followed by two women who practically sat on me, asking all sorts of questions. When they discovered I was a nobody from nowhere, in their terms, they all but spat in my face. I overheard one of them mention Sophia and the others went off into gales of laughter.’ Amy took a gulp of wine, grimacing at the memory. ‘They were horrible. I felt a complete outsider, but at the time I assumed they were all jealous and being catty. I tried to keep my dignity, went back into the party and took Alessandro’s hand. He was edgy and uncomfortable and I found out why a while later when his parents arrived.

Giovanni and Dolores made an entrance like the royal family; people almost bowed and scraped to them and I was totally intimidated. I begged Alessandro to let me take a taxi home, but he insisted I stayed and finally half way through the evening he introduced me to them.’

‘What happened?’ Gabriel was totally intrigued.

‘I smiled and shook hands and after an initial coolness his mother took me aside and asked me some very personal questions. Did I come from a good Italian family, how long I had known Alessandro, was I a business acquaintance and she was clearly distressed to be told I was his girlfriend. Afterwards I felt so uncomfortable, as they made no secret of the fact they were talking about us. Dolores had retired to a corner with Giovanni and was angrily prodding him in the chest and gesturing at me. I felt like a worm and we left.’

‘Alessandro apologised and took me back to my flat. He was leaving for Berlin early the next morning but he stayed for a couple of hours...’ she paused remembering how he had made love to her so tenderly that night. It had been quite extraordinarily ecstatic, gentle and so fulfilling she had begged him to stay with her, but he couldn’t. ‘I

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have a flight at six in the morning, angel, and haven't packed yet. I'll be back in two days, and then we need to talk.' She had been upset and perhaps that was why, after showing him out she had flung herself back into bed and forgotten to take her contraceptive pill. By the time she woke the next morning James had been conceived.

'I presume the family put pressure on you to give him up,' said Gabriel, eager to recapture her attention.

'The next day there was a knock at the door – obviously Alessandro's father had had us followed the night before. To my surprise he was actually very sweet when he came in. He asked for a cup of coffee and said he wanted to talk to me. I had expected him to say simply that I wasn't good enough for his family and to leave town on the first train out. But he took my hand and told me his son was a first class bastard and he was ashamed of him. He told me Alessandro had been engaged to Sophia Bellucci for a year – there had always had been an understanding between the families and he showed me pictures of them together – obviously on holiday, at various functions and one was a posed studio portrait, which he told me was their engagement picture. He said he felt sorry for Sophia because he was sure Alessandro would destroy her as he had always had so many mistresses and that he didn't want to see a nice girl like me hurt by his wayward son.' Amy remembered so clearly Giovanni's words: 'There have been so many, my dear, and most have been older and wiser than you – though none so beautiful. If you have any sense of self preservation you will leave before he returns from Berlin. Let him ruin his own life – and that of poor Sophia – but don't let him ruin yours. Find someone who will love and cherish you, because that's what you deserve.'

Naturally I was totally devastated. It had just never crossed my mind Alessandro could be such a two-faced bastard. I asked around the next day and it didn't take long to discover Sophia Bellucci was a millionairess who would inherit a chain of hotels from her father. She was the perfect match for the di Benedetto millions. I also remembered Alessandro had said we must talk when he returned from Berlin and it seemed obvious

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what he wanted to say; that he was going to marry Sophia and buy me a nice little love nest where we he could come when he fancied a change of bed mate.'

'What did you do?'

'My mother was living in Paris with her sister at the time, my father having died some years earlier. I packed my things and left Rome without telling a soul. It was three weeks later I realised I was pregnant and you can imagine what a shock that was. But, by then I had decided that although I desperately wanted his child, I had to cut Alessandro completely out of my life, so there was no way I was going to tell him about the baby. I stayed with Mama until a few months after James was born and never saw Alessandro again until the day before I came to Venice, when I backed into his car outside my office.'

Gabriel walked up and down the threadbare carpet for a few minutes. 'Did he marry the heiress?'

'Yes. About a year later, I saw the pictures in a society magazine.' She remembered the tearfully sleepless night she had spent after seeing those photographs. But, for James's sake she had thrown the magazine away and resolved never to think about the wretched man again. It hadn't worked of course and even though she went on a few dates, she couldn't bear the thought of a sexual relationship with anyone else and had ended each liaison before it got too serious.

'Well, he has no business to pursue you now,' said Gabriel, 'and of course, if you need me to pose as your partner, I shall do so with relish,' he added fiercely.

'You're such a flirt, Gabriel.' Amy managed a weak smile. 'But you do cheer me up. Now, lets go to bed...no, I mean, I'm going to bed because I am on my knees with weariness and tomorrow...well, tomorrow will be the beginning of a new adventure.'

Amy woke early and went downstairs to finish clearing up after the funeral. She washed the remaining plates and put the kettle on the range to make coffee. Carmela emerged a short while later, rubbing her eyes, calling for Antonio to go to the bakery for

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bread and rolls. Then James arrived back with Sonya and Donna, having enjoyed his sleepover. Gabriel, who had stayed overnight also wandered, yawning, into the kitchen. Suddenly, the room was full of kind, caring people and Amy began to cry.

James ran to her. 'Mama, what's the matter? You're not ill like Maria are you?'

'No, darling, I'm not ill. I'm sad because Maria has gone, but I'm happy too, to be here in Venice with all these lovely people. Thank you, all of you, for being so supportive.'

They gathered around her, murmuring and patting her and soon the whole company had assembled around the table for breakfast. Coffee was poured and hot rolls spread with butter and jam.

'Mama, are we going home to London soon?' James asked her, as she wiped raspberry jam off his chin.

'Do you want to go back, James?'

'No. I miss Grandmamma, but I like it here and I am going to marry Donna.'

Amy almost choked, and managing not to laugh aloud, she hugged him. 'Then, we'll stay.' She turned to the assembled company of friends and told them, 'As you all know, the villa is mine now and Maria had the idea of turning it into a hotel, so that's what I plan to do.'

'I'm so glad.' Gabriel put an arm round her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. 'I know an excellent architect; he's a friend and he is honest. Shall I ask him to come to see you?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'I can help you get James settled. He's almost the same age as Donna, so they will be in the same class at school,' chimed in Sonya. 'And I am a cordon bleu cook, so maybe, when the hotel is up and running...'

'You've got the job,' said Amy, giving her new friend a hug.

'We can still do a bit of cleaning and gardening till you get on your feet,' offered Carmela, and Amy was deeply touched that the sweet old couple wanted to be involved.

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‘It’s a deal.’

‘What are you going to call the hotel?’ asked Donna. ‘It has to have a name like all the others down the road.’

‘Hotel Maria,’ she replied without hesitation. ‘It will be Hotel Maria.’

Chapter Four

Amy called Jake during the morning and explained to him how her circumstances had changed. She told him she would be returning briefly to England the next week to pack her belongings and have them shipped to Venice and that she would call into the office to clear her desk. He was grumpy, but in the circumstances, understanding and wished her well. Janice, it seemed was poised to step into her job, so everyone would be happy.

Nervously, she asked if there had been any repercussions from her small traffic accident and he said no, Alessandro di Benedetto was set to spend a great deal of the money with the company and all was forgiven.

‘It seems you know the man?’

‘From years ago. Can I speak to Sandra?’

A few minutes later her friend came to the phone agog to hear all the news. Amy filled her in quickly then asked anxiously how much Alessandro had divined about her from conversations at the office.

‘He never mentioned you, Amy, until Jake said how sorry he was about the car. Then Alessandro casually mentioned he had known you some years ago and asked where you were living now. I jumped in and said you were about to move house and we didn’t yet know the new address. He looked very hard at me and nodded, obviously realising I had been primed to keep my mouth shut.’

‘No-one mentioned James?’

‘No. I was holding my breath, but I guess, being a man, it never occurred to Jake to say anything.’

‘Sandy, I think I have to ask you to take Jake into your confidence and under pain of death, ask him never to mention James to Alessandro. Tell him why and I’m sure he will understand. I’m coming over to pack my things in a few days – we’ll catch up then.’

‘Okay. I can’t wait to see you.’

‘Me too – bye, and thanks, Sandy.’

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The next few days passed in a fever of activity. Amy hardly went out of the house and was almost continually covered in dust and cobwebs from clearing out the worst of the junk.

Gabriel's architect came to the villa several times and was able to tell Amy that the house could be converted easily to make a ten bed hotel with a two-bedroom apartment for her and James. He agreed to draw up the plans which needed to be submitted to the planning department for approval and to get quotes from builders for her. If all went well, he told her, building should be able to commence in a couple of months or less.

Amy then went to see the head mistress of the local school where James would be going with Donna, and was impressed with the friendly atmosphere, so it was agreed he would start the next week when term began. It meant she couldn't take him to England with her when she went home to pack, but Sonya was happy to look after him for a few days and James was completely unfazed at the prospect. He adored Donna, and was used to his mother being out of his sight. So, Amy booked her flight and then began to go through all Maria's things; a heartbreaking job after any death. She disposed of bags of old clothes, gave some treasured mementos to Carmela and Antonio and with Gabriel went through her papers.

By the time she left for England the worst was done and she was glad to get away to catch her breath. She still found it difficult to comprehend how drastically her life had suddenly changed, but she couldn't deny a frisson of excitement at what now lay ahead.

James came with Gabriel to the airport in the boat and waved her off quite happily. She smiled as she watched them together, wishing she could feel for Gabriel the way she had for Alessandro. How simple life would be.

She arrived at her flat late and slept badly. Alessandro kept intruding into her dreams, and he was there like a ghost in the background when she finally gave up on sleep and went downstairs. She was still in her dressing gown, trying to make sense of a

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pile of post which had been on the doormat when her mother, who lived very close by, arrived with milk, bread and eggs.

‘I thought you would like a hand sorting out the things you are taking to Venice,’ she said, putting the kettle on to boil. ‘Are you going to sell the flat or let it?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it – selling it seems rather final. Mama, why don’t you come to Venice too? There’s lots of room.’

‘No, Amy, my life is here. I never learned much Italian and I love England. But, never fear, I shall come and visit – and if you sell the flat, you will always have a bolt hole with me if you need one.’

The next day Amy drove to her office in London. She parked close by and walked warily towards the building, looking out for signs that Alessandro might be there. No red Jaguar was anywhere to be seen, so she went in and took the lift to the third floor. Sandra came rushing to her for a hug and her other colleagues crowded round wanting to hear her news. They swept her off to their old watering hole nearby for lunch and afterwards Jake waved her to come into his office. To her surprise he also gave her a hug and wished her well, telling her the company would always take her back if things didn’t work out for her, and she was touched.

‘Sandra told me your secret, Amy. To say I was astonished would be an understatement, but no-one will get to hear about James from me. By the way, you know he married Sophia Bellucci?’

‘Yes. Please can we not talk about him?’ She stiffened, wishing he would change the subject.

‘Very well, but I wondered if you knew that he...’

‘Please, Jake, I know. I know everything I need to know about Alessandro di Benedetto.’

‘Fine. Sorry. Well, here are your papers and a reference in case you ever have to work again...which I doubt. Good luck, Amy. We’ll miss you,’ he said gruffly.

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With a quivering smile she left his office and went into her own to clear her desk. Ten minutes later, the door opened and she didn't instantly look up because she was shuffling through a pile of papers. But then a long shadow fell over her and a waft of a familiar scent drifted past her nose. With a violent start she gazed up into Alessandro's blazingly angry eyes.

Her whole body went into a spasm, as though she had been electrocuted, and with a horrified gasp she clutched the edge of her desk and stared, mesmerised by him.

'Please come with me...unless, that is, you want me to cause you great embarrassment by carrying you off over my shoulder.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Alessandro,' she managed to say at last. 'I'm not going anywhere with you. Get out of my office.'

'It plainly isn't your office anymore.'

'Nevertheless, I won't be bullied by you. Who do you think you are?'

'*Déjà vu,*' he murmured. 'You asked me that once before and I told you then that our souls recognised each other. Nothing has changed. Now come...'. He held out a hand, but ignoring it, she rose and brushed past him, watched by the fascinated staff in the main office as she preceded him into the lift.

Once inside she knew she had made a mistake because suddenly she was trapped in a very confined space with Alessandro. She folded her arms protectively over her breasts and giving him a withering look, leaned back against the wall. He mirrored her action, leaning against the opposite wall and glared at her in silence until the lift doors opened at the ground floor.

'Where are we going?' she demanded as they emerged into the sunshine.

He took her arm and led her to his car. The red Jaguar, now mended, sat outside and he opened the passenger door and almost pushed her into the car. Wordlessly, he pulled out into the traffic, causing a blaring of horns from irate taxi drivers, and headed for Kensington.

'How did you know I was at the office?' she demanded.

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‘I had a call.’

‘Can’t I trust anyone?’ she groaned.

‘You could have trusted me!’ he flashed at her.

‘Oh, really?’ She tossed at him scornfully. ‘Where are you taking me? Is this another of your over-the-top grand gestures? Are you going to surprise me with a fabulous apartment in Kensington?’

‘How well you know me, my darling. Yes, as a matter of fact; except it’s not just an apartment; it’s the new hotel your former employers have just helped me negotiate for.’

Amy, in spite of herself, began to laugh.

He led her through reception and a buzz went round the staff and guests. As always, Alessandro was a striking figure in his grey, Italian suit. He oozed good looks, style and money and beside him, in her Levi’s and tee shirt, her hair caught in a curly ponytail, Amy felt incongruous. She had not dressed for the office, intending only to stay long enough to collect her belongings, and then to be gone.

Alessandro pulled her into the lift and pressed the button which said ‘Penthouse’.

‘I don’t believe this,’ sighed Amy. ‘It’s like something out of a nineteen -fifties B movie. But standing so close to him, even when they were both feeling so antipathetic, the hairs on her arms rose and every fibre of her being seemed to be aware of him. Her nerves jangled, her breathing was uneven and a rising sense of panic threatened to engulf her. No, no, she pleaded, silently. Please don’t let him try to seduce me. I hate the man and now to make matters worse, he’s married. But a fire had been lit and she was terrified of being alone with him. The pain she had already suffered at his hands was enough for a lifetime.’

After what seemed like an eternity, the lift door opened and he took her across the hallway into a predictably, sumptuous apartment.

‘Please sit down, Amy. I don’t know about you, but I need a drink.’ And he poured himself a scotch and soda and raised his eyebrows, gesturing to the drinks cabinet.

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‘A brandy,’ she snapped.

When he brought it to her, he sat opposite her, studying her thoughtfully. ‘You look amazing. You have filled out a little, but it suits you.’

She didn’t answer and simply twirled the brandy in her glass. If he thought a few compliments and this over-stuffed apartment were going to seduce her he was going to be disappointed.

‘Why did you run away, Amy? I thought you loved me.’

‘And I thought you loved me, Alessandro. That was my big mistake. You trampled through my life when I was young and inexperienced, and made a fool of me. You tried to dazzle me with all your worldly goods – but you know what, I wasn’t impressed with them – I’m still not impressed by them. I was impressed with you. You were exciting and fun and I saw...thought I saw... a man who had humanity and who cared for me. You taught me to make love in a way I had only ever dreamed of and I was so, so stupid because I really believed it might be for life.’ She was on her feet now, screaming at him in a rage.

‘So why, in God’s name did you disappear into thin air?’ he demanded.

‘Because, I would never be your clandestine mistress Alessandro; the courtesan of a rich Italian kept in a pretty flat in Rome.’

‘I never asked you to do that...’

‘But that’s what you had in mind for me wasn’t it? I was never going to be rich enough or influential enough to be a part of you family; just an adoring lover who would satisfy your every whim on a Saturday afternoon while your beautiful wife was playing bridge. That’s why I ran away. That’s why I want you to stay out of our lives.’

‘Our lives?’

‘Yes!’ Amy realised her mistake, ‘Me and ...and my mother, who had such a terrible time watching me suffer after I left. Now, if you will excuse me, I have things to do.’

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‘No, I won’t excuse you!’ He moved swiftly between her and the door and stared into her furious face, his eyes dark and intent. She knew she had no chance of getting past him and tears of rage began to pour down her face. Instantly he moved to her, and she was helpless when he reached out with his thumb and wiped them away. His touch and the suddenly soft look in his eyes lit a fuse and he knew it.

‘No! No, Alessandro, No!’ she moved backwards but he was too quick for her.

‘Yes, Amy. There are many explanations to make, but they can wait a while. You want this as much as I do – there will be plenty of time to talk after I have convinced you that you are only ever going to be mine.’ And he took her in his arms and brought his mouth down on hers in a crushing kiss, which left her too breathless to remonstrate with him. She was powerless and melted in his arms as he had known she would.

He lifted her, as though she weighed no more than a feather and carried her into the bedroom, where he dropped her on the bed and proceeded to undress her, tugging off her jeans and inch by inch, kissing and caressing each exposed part of her body until, not long afterwards, an ecstatic cry escaped her lips. Triumphant he moved across her and with a moan, possessed her as only he ever could, or would.

Afterwards she lay staring at the ceiling, incapable of speech, wondering what on earth she had done.

Alessandro laid very quietly, eyes closed, beside her, caressing her stomach and she turned and examined his face. There were a few extra fine lines on his brow and one or two silver hairs among the dark ones at his temple, which only served to make him look more distinguished. She gazed at the deep dimple in his chin and knew that if he ever saw James, he would know instantly the boy was his. This had been a disastrous mistake and she knew that somehow she had to escape.

Unexpectedly, her chance came when his mobile phone rang and with a curse he got out of bed, picked it up and looked at the number flashing on the screen. ‘Please excuse me a moment, I have to take this and then we must talk. Don’t move.’ He took the phone into the dressing room searching for a pen and she slithered out of bed and pulled

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on her clothes in record time. Then, before he returned she slipped quietly out of the apartment and frantically pressed the lift button outside. To her everlasting relief the door opened immediately, but the journey to the ground floor seemed to take forever and she shivered with shock at what had just happened, and anxiety in case Alessandro was already descending in the other lift trying to catch her. She fled from the hotel gasping with relief when a taxi pulled up in front of her immediately, but in the traffic it took an age to get back to the office to collect her car, by which time she was a nervous wreck. Amy paid the taxi driver with shaking hands and crossed the road to her car, looking around all the time in case Alessandro had caught up with her. By chance, Sandra was going to the post and Amy called to her urgently as she left the office.

‘Amy! What happened? You have to tell me!’ she demanded breathlessly.

‘Something that never should have, Sandy, and now I have to fly back to Venice as soon as I can get a flight. I only cleared half the things out of my office, but I can’t go back, so will you finish it for me? Can you put any personal stuff in the post?’

‘Of course I will. Keep in touch Amy. I’ll call your mother if there is anything to report.’

‘Thanks, you’re a star.’ They hugged and Amy raced off to collect her things from her house, say a hasty goodbye to her mother and make a dash to Heathrow airport. By the evening she was flying over the English Channel and away from Alessandro di Benedetto. But as she stared down from the aircraft window, her heart ached for what she had lost.

Chapter Five

Having left London in such a hurry, Amy had not had a chance to alert Gabriel, so there was no-one to meet her in Venice and she took a *vaporetto* back to the Lido. She dragged her case the few hundred yards from the landing stage to the villa and went inside to find Sonya in the kitchen making dinner for everyone.

‘Mama!’ James flew to her and she swept him into her arms.

‘Amy! Heavens, we had no idea...I’m so embarrassed,’ said Sonya, colouring a bright pink. ‘You must think it very strange to find me cooking in your kitchen, but we’ve all been working hard and I thought a huge pot of spaghetti would be a good energy booster.’

‘I don’t mind in the least,’ Amy smiled, sniffing the wonderful aroma appreciatively, ‘as long as there’s enough for me. It’s so kind of you.’

Sonya relaxed and shooed the children to set the table. Carmela and Antonio appeared, looking tired and dusty. ‘I’ve been in the attic room, Amy.’ Antonio told her, ‘with Gabriel. All the old trunks have been brought down and we got rid of everything except some old photos. We found one of your father, with you as a little girl – look.’ They all pored over the pictures seated around the table eating Sonya’s delicious spaghetti and drinking a well-earned bottle of Chianti; Amy thought, not for the first time, how close they had all become and how lucky she was to have such wonderful friends.

Later, she and Gabriel wandered round the house which now looked rather bare. A few basic bits of furniture remained, but they had taken down the dusty old curtains and thrown away the threadbare rugs. Sonya had cleaned the windows and moonlight flooded the rooms.

‘It’s going to be lovely, Gabriel. This is going to be the dining room, overlooking the canal. The proportions of the villa are so graceful and Maria will be proud when she looks down and sees how beautiful it will be.’

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‘Once the plans are through, the main house can be converted in about three months, so with luck you should be able to open for business in February – in time for the Venice Carnival.’

‘That would be wonderful. I’ve never seen it, except in pictures.’

‘Then you have a treat in store. Amy, I have to be away for a few days. I’m going to be travelling to auctions in Zurich, Barcelona and Turin; possibly Christies in London as well. If you take me to the airport tomorrow, you can keep the boat while I’m away.’

‘Thank you, Gabriel, that would be so useful. We must buy our own soon; perhaps you can help me to choose one when you get back?’

Gabriel fell silent for a moment then turned her to face him. ‘Did you see him?’

‘How did you know?’

‘It’s in your eyes.’

‘He came to the office while I was there.’

‘And?’

She fell silent, her shoulders bowed with misery.

‘I see,’ sighed Gabriel. ‘You know the lawyer will be corresponding with his company to transfer deeds to some of Maria’s investments to you? He might see your name on some documents.’

‘I know.’

‘Amy...would it help if...if I married you?’

‘Gabriel!’

‘Well...I care for you very much and I would be good to James. I think we could make a go of it.’

‘But why? Why would you do something like that when you know how I feel about Alessandro? I could never love you like that, even though I adore you as my friend.’

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‘Because then Alessandro would have no hold on you. I would adopt James so that, even if he did find out about him, he would be powerless to take him away from you.’

Amy put her arms around Gabriel and rested her head on his shoulder. ‘That is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever offered to do for me, darling Gabriel.’

‘Think about it. Give me your answer when I get back from my trip.’ He tipped her head back and kissed her lightly on the mouth. ‘I think it would be fun being married to you, Amy. We should fight a lot, but I think I can promise you it would be interesting making up.’

‘You are outrageous,’ she laughed softly. ‘And I do love you, truly I do.’ Neither of them heard the door softly close, as Sonya crept sadly back to the kitchen to take Donna home to bed.

The next morning, when Amy returned with the boat, which she was now very adept at using, Carmela told her Sandra had called from England and that she should call back urgently. With trepidation she called the office and Sandra answered, sounding very flustered. ‘Amy, I got this number from your mother because I had to talk to you personally. After you left, Alessandro came back to the office and went straight to your room. He went through your remaining personal stuff, even though I gave him a real roasting for it. He said he couldn’t believe you had run away from him again and that there had to be a reason. Fortunately there was nothing with your number or address in Venice in the drawer – but there was a picture of James.’

‘Oh, no,’ sighed Amy. ‘What did he say?’

‘He looked at it long and hard and put it in his pocket. I think he knew instantly – well you could hardly miss the likeness could you? He went very pale and just left the building without saying a word to anyone.’

‘Well, I suppose it had to happen sometime. Now that he has edged back into my life, I had a gut feeling that he would find out. Thanks for letting me know Sandra.’

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‘Look, Amy, he can’t just come in and take James away – however powerful his family is, there is still the law. And you know it might be important for James to know his father, have you thought of that?’

‘Yes, increasingly, I have. I am so confused, Sandra, because James has been my reason to live ever since I split up with Alessandro. I have an almost pathological fear of losing him too. But I have denied him his father and one day he may hate me for it.’

‘I think you should just wait and see how Alessandro deals with the knowledge, which I am certain he now has. He will probably move heaven and earth to find you, so be on your guard. But I wonder how he will explain an illegitimate son to his wife?’

‘Has she been to the office?’

‘No, nor has he mentioned her at all come to think of it. But then we have kept all discussions on strictly business footing, and he hasn’t socialised with any of us. I know he was due fly to Paris today and then back to Rome next week with a couple of stops along the way so you’re not likely to see him for a while. He has a busy schedule and he still doesn’t know you’re in Venice. Take care, Amy, keep me informed.’ She rang off, leaving Amy staring at the phone in dismay.

For the next few days Amy was very jumpy. She spent a lot of time with James after school, and most days Donna came round to play. The children rarely quarrelled so it was with some concern that Amy went running to the garden when she heard their voices raised. A shouting match was in progress and James was bright red, with tears running down his face.

‘I never had a Papa,’ he yelled. ‘I didn’t need one because I had Mama and Grandmama. And you’re telling lies! You never had a Papa either because he wouldn’t have left you if he loved you! Papas who love you, stay.’

Donna instantly burst into tears too. ‘I did have a Papa,’ she sobbed, ‘and he did love me, he did! But God took him away because he was ill and couldn’t stay with us any more. But he still loves me from Heaven and my mama too. If your papa doesn’t know you, how can he love you? If he’s in Heaven he must be wondering who you are.’

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Amy moved quickly between the children and gave them both a hug. ‘Now, now, little ones, that’s enough. Come and have some tea and be friends.’

The children quickly forgot their quarrel, but Amy knew that coming so soon after her conversation with Sandra, it was an omen; the time was coming to talk to James about his father.

The next day, being Saturday, she asked Sonya and Donna to come with her and James for a day of sight seeing. She had had very little time to visit any of the wonderful places in Venice during the five weeks she had been there. ‘I need a breather – and some new clothes, so what do you say?’ she begged.

‘We would love to come,’ said Sonya. ‘We’ll take a water taxi early and have breakfast when we get there. What a good idea.’

The late September day dawned fresh and clear and by eight o’clock they were all jammed onto the water taxi with the many workers on their way to shops and offices on the islands. The children were excited by the outing, enjoying the choppy crossing. The boat docked at St.Mark’s Square and they joined the thousands of awestruck visitors gazing at the scene before them. They stood on the bridge and looked up the canal at the Bridge of Sighs, over which so many miserable wretches had been led to the dungeons and a horrible death; they walked past the graceful arches of the Doge’s Palace and into St.Mark’s Square itself, to stand and stare at the Byzantine basilica with its four horses gazing down at them from their balcony.

‘It’s stunning,’ murmured Amy. ‘It’s so long since I’ve seen it I had forgotten the impact of just being here.’

‘Can we feed the pigeons?’ pleaded Donna. So they bought the children some packets of corn from one of the many sellers in the square and laughed as the children quickly disappeared under a grey flapping cloud of hungry birds. James stood frozen as one sat on his head and three others clutched at his sweater and clambered up his arm; but he didn’t panic and bravely held out his hand for them to feed. When they had finished, it was time for a late breakfast at a restaurant overlooking the canal.

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While the children were busy looking at nearby stall, selling every kind of souvenir, Amy told Sonya about the conversation she had overheard between the children. ‘I am sorry if James upset Donna,’ she sighed, but he doesn’t understand about fathers because I am afraid I have never told him anything about his own. Donna obviously remembers her papa?’

‘Yes, she does. He died about eighteen months ago, from leukaemia; he was only thirty-five and it was very traumatic for us both. She remembers him cuddling her and she knows that he still loves her. I sometimes hear her talking to him in her room. She has adjusted really well, as children do and mercifully seems to only remember the nice things.’

‘You, on the other hand, are still coping with the aftermath,’ said Amy softly, taking her friend’s hand.

‘I am much happier now, especially since you and James have moved in so close by. I am ready to move on. What about you?’

‘James is everything to me. I never married his father and he doesn’t figure in our lives at present. But I am afraid the time has come to be honest with James and I’m dreading it. After hearing his confused conversation with Donna, I know I have to try to explain things to him.’

‘Just keep it simple. Don’t overburden him with your own anxiety and he’ll accept it. Kids do. Shall we shop?’

They spent the rest of the day wandering round the back streets, over endless canal bridges, watching gondoliers punting along with boats full of camera-hung Japanese tourists, and had lunch. They explored a couple of the incredible Renaissance churches, drooled over paintings by Titian and Tintoretto, and Amy found some clothes she liked in a boutique. Finally, they caught a late ferry back to the Lido with two exhausted children sleeping on their laps.

‘Gabriel will be back tomorrow,’ said Sonya. ‘Shall we all have dinner together? I will make some pasta and salad for everyone?’

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‘That’s a great idea,’ yawned Amy. ‘I have missed him.’

‘Have you?’ murmured Sonya and almost to herself she added ‘So have I.’

Chapter Six

The following morning dawned wet and cooler; autumn was taking a grip and the water taxis chugged to and fro in the very choppy lagoon; the waterscape was colourless, mist hanging over the distant silhouettes of the Bell Tower and Doge's Palace.

Amy took the children to school and returned to find some post on the kitchen table. There was a letter from her mother, some utility bills and an envelope from Benedetto International in Rome. Nervously she tore it open and sighed with relief to find it was a formal letter telling her that most of Maria's assets had now been successfully transferred to her name and asking for instructions. It was signed by someone she had never heard of, so she began to hope that she had a breathing space before Alessandro made any connections about her whereabouts through his company. Feeling happier, she went shopping and returned at lunch time to find Gabriel at the house. He gave her a hug and beamed at her. 'I've just talked to my architect friend and he has heard informally that the plans for Hotel Maria will be accepted. You should get a letter in a week or so, but in the meantime we... sorry, I mean you, can decide which builders you want to go with. They could get started in the middle of October and the main part of the house and your apartment could be ready in about three months.'

'In time for the Venice Carnival! That's wonderful news, Gabriel. But I really do want you to help me make some of the big decisions, if you don't mind.'

'My pleasure,' he said. 'The first decision you have to make is where you are going to live while all this is going on. You could move in with me if you like, I have a spare room you could share with James.'

'That's sweet of you, but you live a long way across the lagoon – it would be difficult with school for James, so I think we shall simply stay here and tough it out. The kitchen is a relatively straightforward job; they will take out all the old fashioned stoneware and replace it with modern stainless steel. It shouldn't take more than a few days and during that time we could stay with Sonya. Once the water and electricity are

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back on, we can move back into the bedroom we have now and the men can work around us. We don't mind a bit of dust and noise; it will be fun and exciting.'

'It sounds like a nightmare to me, but if you are sure...'

'Absolutely,' she said firmly.

'You're a very remarkable woman, Amy. By the way did you consider our discussion?'

She went to him and put her arms around his waist. 'Gabriel, I can't tell you how much it meant to me that you would be willing to marry me, and I will always love you for it, but my answer is no. It would be wrong for both of us and destroy a most precious friendship.'

'Ah well, rejected again...' he grinned at her. 'But no hard feelings and now that's out of the way, let's get down to work.'

They spent the rest of the day working and fine tuning plans, and by the evening they had chosen a builder who could start the next week as soon as planning permission was official. Gabriel suggested it was worth the extra money to ask the builder to put in a big team to reduce the time of the conversion.

Sonya, who had arrived to collect Donna, watched them poring over papers alternately laughing and quarrelling gently between themselves as they always had, her lovely grey eyes clouded with longing.

Things began to move quickly the next week; skips arrived outside which were quickly filled with rubble and the old house reverberated to hammering and drilling and clouds of dust floated into the road. Carmela and Antonio had moved temporarily to stay with their daughter and son-in-law while flat hunting. They planned to live nearby and were determined to be involved in the new project; Amy was delighted and quite sure Maria would approve of that. After staying for a week with Sonya and Donna, Amy and

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James moved back into the villa and were amazed at how much progress had been made; the kitchen was once more operational and much of the really messy work had been completed; walls were down, where walls had to come down and rebuilt where they had to be rebuilt. Sonya and Amy set up a running buffet for the builders in the kitchen which bought them a great deal of good will. The building was a hive of activity and Amy thought it was positively one of the happiest times of her life; except of course for those wonderful months with Alessandro.

At first she had lived each day expecting him to find her. Every time the phone rang she jumped out of her skin; every time someone rang the door bell she peeped fearfully from a window expecting to find him standing on the doorstep. But there was nothing, and in truth she didn't know whether to be happy or disappointed. Perhaps he had decided that his wife would not cope with the fact that he had a son – and for sure his family would have strong opinions on that too – so maybe, she thought sadly, he had decided to stay away from her and James; the very opposite of what she had expected.

But she still had to deal with telling James about his father and the opportunity came one Saturday when James was feeling very miserable with a streaming cold and wracking cough. The builders had finished for the weekend and Amy had brought the little boy downstairs into the kitchen where it was warm. He sat sniffing over a warm drink into which he was dipping some biscuits before sucking them noisily.

Out of the blue, James suddenly said 'Is my papa in Heaven with Donna's?'

Amy felt a tremor run through her. 'No, James,' she said at last. 'He is still alive.'

'Why doesn't he live with us like a proper papa then? Doesn't he love us?'

'James, if he met you, he would love you very much, and be very proud of you.'

But he and I are not friends and we couldn't live together.'

James was quiet for a few minutes. 'Everyone says Donna looks like her papa...do I look like my papa?'

Heartbreakingly, thought Amy, tears close to the surface. 'Yes, James, you look very much like him. He is extremely good looking and clever, just like you.'

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‘Why can’t I see him? Other children in my class see their papas even though they don’t live with them.’

‘It isn’t possible at the moment, but maybe one day.’

‘Then, can I have a puppy?’

‘Oh, James,’ she laughed softly. ‘Yes, you can have a puppy.’

And so, a few days later Snoopy, a two-month old mongrel puppy with floppy ears, big brown eyes and even bigger feet, came to live them. James said nothing more about his father, but Amy knew that sooner or later, she would have to tell him the whole truth.

One evening a few days later, Gabriel called in and invited Amy to a concert in a small church next to St.Mark’s Basilica. ‘You haven’t been out for ages, Amy, and I have a spare ticket, so come on – take a break and come and listen to some Vivaldi and Mozart.’

‘It sounds absolute heaven, thank you. I’m sure Carmela will baby sit. But I insist on taking you to dinner somewhere expensive first, to say thank you for everything you’ve done for us.’

‘How expensive?’

‘Very,’ she smiled.

‘It’s a deal,’ he grinned. ‘I’ll go home now to change and make myself presentable...’

‘And I will take a water taxi to St.Mark’s and meet you there at say, seven?’

‘I’ll book a table at Danieli’s.’ And he jumped into his boat and roared off down the canal.

Amy spent a blissful hour soaking in a hot, deep, scented bath. She hadn’t had a chance to dress up in months, so she gave herself a manicure, grimacing at the rough hands and chipped nails which had worked so hard for so long. She swept her dark curls

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into an elegant topknot and made up her face carefully before slipping on a very elegant little black dress which showed off her figure to perfection. Gold sandals completed her outfit and pleased, she twirled in front of a mirror.

‘You look pretty, Mama.’

‘Thank you, James. It’s nice to dress up for once.’

‘Are you going out with Gabriel?’

‘Yes, darling – we’re having dinner and going to a concert.’

‘If you married Gabriel, would he be like my papa?’

‘James, I won’t be marrying Gabriel. He is our friend and we all love him, but no, he won’t be like your papa. But he is like an uncle isn’t he?’

‘I want a papa.’

Amy hugged him. ‘I know James, I know. I wish I could solve that for you. Now, why don’t you go and play with Snoopy in the garden?’

‘Okay.’ And looking rather forlorn, he clattered down the bare staircase, and Carmela and Antonio soon had him laughing, throwing a ball for the puppy outside.

It was a cool, still evening and taking a warm wrap with her, Amy strolled to the boat quay and sat watching the twinkling lights around the bay. The water taxi was approaching, overflowing with workers on their way home. She found a seat and enjoyed the half hour journey to St.Mark’s Square where Gabriel was waiting.

He beamed with pleasure as she stepped off the boat. ‘You look gorgeous,’ he enthused, kissing her warmly and taking her hand.

‘So do you.’ Gabriel, in immaculate evening dress, looked more than presentable, and she slipped her arm through his as he led her to his favourite restaurant in Danieli’s Hotel, next door to the Doge’s Palace.

‘Oh, this is so beautiful,’ she sighed as they entered the lobby. ‘Just look at all this pink marble and the glorious staircase...I can just imagine sweeping down that in my crinoline.’

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‘It was originally built for the Dandolo Doge of Venice in the fourteenth century,’ Gabriel told her. ‘But now it is furnished in the eighteenth century style, which was of course the real heyday of Venice. It’s the place where you are likely to see the rich and famous dining, especially during the carnival and the film festival in a couple of weeks.’

‘Well, I feel rich and famous tonight, so let’s go and swagger into the restaurant like stars.’ She took his hand and laughing, they wandered into the fabulous dining room to be met with a bow by the head waiter. He led them to a table overlooking the lagoon, now alight with thousands of lights on boats and gondolas. ‘I could get addicted to this,’ sighed Amy.

Happily she swivelled in her chair surveying the other diners and then froze. At a table a few yards away, was Alessandro with a very glamorous blond, talking intently. Sensing her eyes upon him, he lifted his gaze to Amy and stared at her with eyes like flints, before speaking to his companion. Amy turned back to Gabriel, pale with shock.

‘What is it?’

‘Alessandro. He’s over there by the pillar and he’s with his wife.’

‘Ah...well, Amy, don’t let him see you are flustered. You knew this had to happen sooner or later. Now, what shall we choose from this delectable menu? I’m ravenous... Amy, Ignore him!’

Amy took a deep breath, gave Gabriel a weak smile and decided he was right; the evening was not going to be spoiled by Alessandro. When the waiter came to take their order she asked for a bottle of champagne, and she and Gabriel smilingly toasted each other. To her surprise, she was able to enjoy her dinner, in spite of the presence of Alessandro in the room, and she managed to resist the urge to turn and look at him. Gabriel kept making her laugh and at one point took her hand across the table and raised it to his lips. To anyone watching them, and especially to Alessandro, they looked like a young, very attractive couple who were deeply in love. Finally, when they rose to leave, she turned with some trepidation to face the table where he had been sitting. But it was empty.

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The concert afterwards was a very emotional experience for Amy. The beautiful music by Vivaldi and Mozart was played by a string quartet, accompanied by a young soprano with a voice which reached to Heaven. It seemed to touch a chord within Amy's heart and she sat letting it wash over her. In her imagination the music drifted into a bedroom, where she lay entwined with Alessandro, whispering words of love, making promises...so many things that could never be.

Gabriel offered to take her back to the Lido in his boat afterwards, but she gently refused, preferring to go back alone on the water taxi.

'I shall be quite safe,' she told him. 'And anyway, it's a while since I had a chance to practice my jujitsu skills. Just wait with me till the boat comes.'

'It's been a wonderful evening, Amy. Thank you for dinner. I hope you can afford to eat for the rest of the week.'

She laughed. 'Just about. Thank you too, Gabriel, for a lovely evening. Even an encounter with you-know-who couldn't spoil it.' She reached up and kissed him and he gave her a hug as the boat arrived; a few moments later she was heading back to the Lido, alone with her thoughts, the image of Alessandro and his lovely companion etched in her memory.

Chapter Seven

A cold wind was blowing the next morning, whipping up white horses on the lagoon. Amy had taken the children to school and tired of the noise and mess at the villa, walked to the park with Snoopy. He was a lively little fellow, just getting the hang of fetching a ball, and she sat on a bench for a while, watching him hunt for his toy in some bushes, his tail wagging furiously.

Afterwards, Amy recalled she had not really been surprised when Alessandro walked towards her and wordlessly came to sit beside her. His hands were deep in the pockets of his coat and he made no move to touch her.

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‘You have a son,’ he stated finally.

‘Yes.’

‘Is he mine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dear God, Amy, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I was afraid I might lose him. Your family is quite capable of moving against me and taking him away.’

‘Did you not think I had at least a right to know about him?’

‘No.’

‘Then what about his right to know about me?’

‘I...I had to take a chance he would understand why I did what I did.’

‘And does he?’

‘No.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘That he has begun to ask why he doesn’t have a papa.’

‘Does that imply that you would let me meet him?’

Amy sat silently, staring at her hands which were tightly fisted with anxiety.

‘I don’t know what to say, Alessandro. Once he knows who you are he will want to spend time with you and I don’t think I could bear to have you in my life on a permanent basis. My life has moved on and for the first time in years I have a kind of happiness.’

‘I know your life has moved on. I saw you last night with your...what... lover, fiancé?’ Amy didn’t enlighten him, nor did she turn her face to look at him for he would have seen the longing, the burning, aching desire for him in her eyes. Just sitting beside Alessandro made breathing difficult, and talking even more so. ‘All right, I accept that you have a new life and I won’t try to take you from your new love; although I cannot imagine how you could have given yourself to me so passionately that day in London, if

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you love someone else. So we must deal with the situation with ...what is his name? I don't even know my son's name.'

'James,' she whispered.

'James...we must discuss the situation with James dispassionately and decide what is best for him. Do you agree?'

'I suppose so. But you must promise me on everything you hold holy that you will never try to take him away.'

'Amy, what do you take me for?' he spat out, so scornfully she felt about an inch tall. 'I am appalled that you have such a low opinion of me after everything we shared. Quite apart from any moral issues, I and my company have a reputation to be proud of and I would hardly sully that by being accused by the media of being a child kidnapper, even of my own son.'

'I'm sorry. But what will your wife say when she finds out about James?'

'My wife? You mean Sophia?'

'How many wives do you have? You remember – the woman you were with last night?' she flashed sarcastically back at him.

'But that wasn't... ' he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, choosing his words. 'Sophia has nothing to do with this – or anything.'

So, Amy mused, the marriage was probably now in tatters and poor Sophia had been hurt, just as Giovanni had predicted and Alessandro had found himself a mistress to keep him amused; just the role he had obviously intended for her, if she hadn't had the courage to leave. Obviously, the woman he had been dining with the previous night had not been his wife after all – she had not seen her face. Maybe he had spent a passionate night with her at the Danieli hotel...and her heart turned a painful somersault at the thought. But none of that made any difference to the fact that James should be allowed to meet his father.

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‘All right, Alessandro,’ she said at last. ‘I will bring James here, to the park after school tomorrow. You can see him and talk to him, but please don’t tell him who you are until he gets used to you.’

‘Thank you, Amy.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘Your former colleague, Janice had heard a rumour you were in Venice and called your mother, pretending she needed to send you some documents.’

‘I can’t believe she told you where I was. They all promised to keep my secret.’

‘But Janice needed a new car,’ he smiled wryly.

‘Bitch!’ Amy spat the word out and Alessandro shrugged.

‘Everyone has their price. She told me you have inherited a property from your godmother?’

‘Yes. Maria Vicente was my godmother and if the name rings a bell it is because my father used your company to make some investments for her about twenty-three years ago. She and my parents became great friends and as she had no children she named me as her heir. It was totally unexpected, but now I have a real home for James and we are converting the villa into a small hotel. It’s security for life.’

‘I am pleased for you, Amy.’

‘We’re happy here, Alessandro.’ The implication, ‘please don’t spoil it’, hung between them. After a moment she called the dog. ‘Snoopy! Here, boy.’

‘Your puppy?’

‘He’s James’s.’

Alessandro leaned down to fuss the little dog, who snuffled at his hand before giving him a long, wet lick. ‘He likes me,’ he smiled. ‘I suppose that’s a start.’

Amy clipped on Snoopy’s lead and stood up, looking directly at Alessandro for the first time. She was pale and trembling and he stood to face her, taking her shoulders. ‘You can trust me, Amy. I don’t know why you think I am such a villain, but I guess that doesn’t matter anymore,’ he sighed very deeply, ‘I just want to know my son.’

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‘All right. I’ll see you here tomorrow at four o’clock.’ And shaking herself free, she walked away, feeling sick with anguish and fear of what the next few days might bring.

Disconsolately, she wandered along the waters edge and arrived at the boat landing in time to see the water taxi mooring up. On a whim, she bought a ticket and jumped aboard. She decided to go to Gabriel’s antique shop on the island to see if he had time to discuss ideas for furnishing Hotel Maria – anything to take her mind off Alessandro’s hands on her and the dread that from now on, however peripherally, he was destined to be a part of her life. She recalled that first day in Rome, when the same thought had gone through her mind, but she had had no idea then of how painful the reality was going to be. Snoopy whimpered with fright on the rocking boat, so she cuddled him on her lap, soothing him softly until the boat docked, half an hour later at St.Mark’s Square.

When she reached Gabriel’s shop he was busy with a customer, so she wandered round looking at the selection of furniture, silverware and paintings he had displayed so artfully. The shop almost looked like a living room. At last he was free and came to her with a broad smile. ‘Can’t stay away from me, huh?’ Mutely, she nodded, and then sank into a chair, her head in her hands. ‘What is it, Amy? Or should I guess?’

‘I met him in the park. He knows about James and wants to meet him. I’m so frightened, Gabriel.’

‘Perhaps it’s for the best, Amy. If I was in his shoes I would want to meet James too.’

‘I said I would take James to the park after school tomorrow, so the die is cast.’ She paused, and then, taking a deep breath said ‘Gabriel, Alessandro thinks you are my lover. Do you mind if we keep up that illusion for the moment?’

‘No, I would be honoured, Amy, but don’t tell him outright lies for James’ sake. If you have to have a relationship with him, however tenuous, don’t build it on lies.’

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‘He did!’ she snapped but then seeing a mutinous flash in Gabriel’s eyes, she climbed down. ‘Let’s not talk about him anymore. I want you to help me furnish the hotel.’

‘I would love to. It was built in the late twenties, early thirties so, left to my own devices I would furnish it in that period, with Art Deco.’

‘That’s a wonderful idea!’ she said, brightening up.

‘It wouldn’t be too expensive to use reproduction art deco, for example chrome banister rails on that lovely staircase and it’s very easy to get repro posters for all the bedrooms. Then there are furniture makers who still make pieces in that fashion, so your bedrooms could have lots of character and style. I spend so many nights in hotels all over Europe which are as welcoming as a doctors’ waiting room and they are so depressing.’

Amy began to get some colour back in her face as she saw his vision and together they pored over some books for more ideas. ‘I would love to have some genuine Art Deco in the dining room and the room we have decided would be good for small meetings and conferences. Could you help me find some things for those?’

‘Yes, of course. There is an auction next week in Padua where I would expect to find some good pieces. Come with me?’

‘Love to. Well, now I am feeling more cheerful I’ll go home – it’s nearly time to collect James and Donna from school. Sonya and I take turns.’

Gabriel saw her to the door and gave her hug. ‘Keep your chin up. Say Hi to Sonya for me.’

‘Yes...yes, I will. Come on, Snoopy, time to go home.’ The little dog stirred from a very comfortable cushion he had dragged under a table, shook himself and licked his lips. ‘Yes, I know it’s past your dinner time, but I can’t risk you throwing up on the boat. I’ll feed you at home’ she told him, as together they made their way back to the water taxi.

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Somehow, Amy got through the next twenty four hours. The prospect of seeing Alessandro again was agonising and even more so now that he was to meet James. Sonya brought the children home after school and then Amy told James that she was taking him to the park with Snoopy.

‘Can’t Donna come too?’ he begged.

‘Not today, darling. I want you to myself.’ And with that he had to be satisfied.

‘Can I take my football?’

‘Yes, James, as long as you don’t expect me to be in goal.’

As they walked along he jumped and skipped and teased Snoopy, who was on his lead. He didn’t see the man, dressed in jeans and a thick Aran sweater, sitting on the park bench for some time, as he ran round with the puppy, throwing a ball for him and shrieking with delight when the little dog actually caught it. Amy went to sit on the bench, as far from Alessandro as she could and said nothing for a while. She could sense the tension between them; it felt as though they were joined by an over-stretched guitar string which could snap at any moment. Alessandro’s eyes followed James as he ran round the park and at last, his voice cracking, said ‘He is so beautiful...and he’s speaking Italian to the dog.’

‘He speaks Italian, French and English,’ Amy replied softly.

‘You must be so proud of him.’

‘He’s my whole world, Alessandro.’

They watched James play for a while, and then Amy called him to her. ‘James, I want you to meet a friend of mine. This is Alessandro.’

‘Hello,’ beamed James. ‘I’m five next week and this is my dog, Snoopy.’

‘Hello, James.’ For a moment that was all Alessandro could manage, but then he cleared his throat and patted the puppy as Snoopy came gambolling up to him. ‘He’s a cute dog.’

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‘He likes you,’ said James. ‘I’ve got a ball, can you play football? My favourite team is Manchester United but Gabriel says I should support Juventus now we live in Italy.’

‘Juventus is my team and I go to see them whenever I can.’

Amy glanced at him in surprise and he caught her eye. ‘Is that true?’ she asked.

‘I have shares....Oh damn, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to say that. Yes, James, they are a great team. Perhaps we could go and watch them together one day?’

‘Can I, Mama? Perhaps you could come too...and Gabriel?’ he faltered and looked from one to the other, puzzled, picking up on the atmosphere between them.

‘Do you want to kick a ball around?’ asked Alessandro.

‘Yes! That’s the goal, between those trees, okay?’ And the two of them trotted off, while Amy sat and watched with amazement. A few moments later the elegant, suave sophisticate she thought she knew was sprawling full length on the damp grass after trying to stop a ball from his five year old son. And loving it.

After half an hour, they came back to the bench exhausted and covered in mud. ‘He’s good,’ gasped Alessandro.

‘It’s my birthday on Saturday – will you come to my party?’ asked James suddenly and Amy caught her breath.

‘That depends on whether your Mama is inviting me,’ he replied.

‘Please, Mama?’

Cornered, she had no choice but to agree. ‘If you are still going to be in Venice. What about your busy schedule?’

‘I have a project here which will take a few days before I have to go back to Rome.’

‘Then, please come to James’ party. I presume you know where we live?’ she added dryly.

‘Yes, I do.’ They watched as James ran off into the bushes with Snoopy and he turned to her, his eyes dark and shining. He reached out suddenly and brushed a curly

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tendril from Amy's face, and the effect on her body was so direct, she gasped, stepped backwards and almost fell. He instinctively moved towards her and caught her and for a horrified moment she thought he was going to kiss her. His face was so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek and smell that evocative cologne. The texture of his skin, so familiar, made her fingers ache to touch him and his mouth, so close, so achingly sexy and inviting was an inch away. She closed her eyes, shutting out the image, and with muttered thanks moved away from him, picked up her bag and called James.

‘We must go; it's time for supper, James. Say goodbye to Alessandro.’

She watched as Alessandro squatted down and took the small boy's hand.

‘Goodbye, James. I hope we can play football again.’

‘Goodbye. Don't forget my party.’

‘I won't.’ He watched them walk away, his expression a mixture of joy and pain, and if he could have seen Amy's face, he would have seen the same expression reflected in her eyes.

Chapter Eight

For the next two days Amy was kept busy preparing for James' party as well as reaching the point where she had to choose wallpaper and flooring for the hotel. She didn't have time to brood too much about Alessandro, but sometimes when his face popped into her mind she felt her stomach tense and her heartbeat quicken.

Will I always feel like that she asked herself? Will I never be able to fall in love with someone else and get married? Perhaps I should have accepted Gabriel's proposal – perhaps he is right and we could have made a go of it. But she knew it would have been a second best for her and that Gabriel deserved far better than that.

Just then he popped his head round the door and asked in a loud stage whisper 'Where's the birthday boy?'

'Round at Donna's – where else!' she laughed. 'What's the big secret?'

'I need you to help me hide his birthday present.'

'Is it that big then?'

'It's a bike. I hope you don't mind, but I saw it in a shop in Padua and couldn't resist it. It is about the right size for the little chap and has stabilisers till he gets his balance.'

'Gabriel, he will love it! Thank you so much. We can hide it in the shed and lock it until tomorrow. We'd better do it now; he's due back at any time.' As they wheeled the bike down the garden she continued, 'I...um...I haven't had a chance to tell you yet, but he did meet Alessandro and they seemed to get on really well. He's coming to the party tomorrow.'

'Well...that's good isn't it?'

'I suppose so. James doesn't know yet that Alessandro is his father.' She locked the shed and together they walked back to the house, Gabriel's arm across her shoulders.

'One step at a time...Oh, hello Sonya.' He beamed as Sonya and the children burst through the gate with Snoopy who was barking excitedly. 'Hi, kids.'

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‘Hello, Gabriel,’ smiled Sonya and there was a gentle sadness in her eyes. ‘Amy, I have finished the birthday cake and I contacted Coco the Clown for you. He’s free tomorrow afternoon, so I booked him.’

‘You’re a star, Sonya. I don’t know how I would have coped with ten small children for three whole hours!’

‘I’ll play some games with them if you like,’ volunteered Gabriel.

‘Oh, yes please...what sort of games?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘You’ll see,’ he grinned. ‘I have to go – see you tomorrow.’

After his boat had chugged away, Sonya and Amy wandered back into the house. ‘Sonya, I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet, but James’ father tracked us down. I met him in the park a few days ago and the next day I took James there to meet him.’

‘Amy, I am glad...I know it’s difficult for you, but it will be better for James. Donna would give anything to have a papa and James has one but doesn’t know him, which is a shame.’

‘James invited him to the party, so will you please help me get through the day?’

‘Don’t worry, we’ll all make him welcome...what’s his name and what does he do?’

‘His name is Alessandro di Benedetto and he’s a property developer worth...I don’t know, millions.’

Sonya stared at her in amazement. ‘And you left him?’

‘Yes, and then he married someone else.’ Amy couldn’t bring herself to enlarge on that and Sonya, whilst clearly puzzled, refrained from any more questions.

To everyone’s enormous relief, the next morning dawned clear and sunny. Carmela and Antonio, determined to help, arrived with croissants for breakfast and then Antonio spent much of the morning blowing up balloons and hanging up paper decorations. By three o’clock James was almost sick with excitement but it was actually Snoopy who threw up all over the kitchen floor, having stolen, and eaten, a packet of

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butter. Amy was still on her knees, clearing up the revolting, smelly mess, when the doorbell rang for the first time. ‘Oh, no,’ she muttered, tugging at her rubber gloves ‘Don’t say they have all arrived ten minutes early! James, open the door will you?’

A moment later, footsteps advanced into the kitchen, and she looked up into Alessandro’s amused gaze. ‘I’m sorry if I’m early. Would you like a hand with that?’

‘Oh, no...no, thank you.’ She rose to her feet, and picked up the bucket of disinfectant, feeling rather like Cinderella when Prince Charming came to call. She was still in a scruffy pair of jeans and tee shirt and he was dressed in a navy slacks with a short-sleeved, white shirt, open at the collar, with a cashmere sweater thrown over his shoulder. ‘James, take Alessandro through to the dining room and ask Sonya to fix him a drink. I shan’t be a moment.’ She dumped the bucket outside the door and fled upstairs to change into something that didn’t smell of puppy sick.

‘Come on, Ales...Alessdro, it stinks in here because my puppy yucked on the floor.’

‘It does.’ Chuckling he took the small boy’s hand and led him into the hall, where he handed him a beautifully wrapped present.

‘Ooh, thank you,’ gasped James, ‘can I open it?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Amy came downstairs a few minutes later to find James sitting beside Alessandro, ripping the paper off his gift. She hoped it wasn’t anything too extravagant, knowing Alessandro’s penchant for over-the-top gestures and was relieved to see a complete strip for Juventas with number ten on the back of the shirt and a pair of football boots appear from the packaging. James was ecstatic and rushed off to show them to Gabriel as he walked through the door.

‘Thank you, Alessandro, he will love that.’ said Amy. ‘I’d like you to meet Gabriel.’

The two men shook hands, eyeing each other thoughtfully.

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‘Gabriel!’ James flung himself at his friend and was enveloped in his arms. ‘Look what Alesdro gave me.’ He proudly held up the football strip for Gabriel to admire.

‘*Cara*’ he said to Amy, ‘Can I give James my gift now?’

She nodded and smiled, watching as Gabriel led him down the garden to the shed. He proudly wheeled out the bicycle and James, flushed with pleasure, flung his arms around Gabriel. ‘Thank you Gabriel. I do wish you were my papa.’

An awkward silence fell for a few seconds until the doorbell rang and James’ classmates, who all seemed to have come together, rushed in, a noisy and exuberant crowd who surrounded him with parcels and cards.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ murmured Amy, but Alessandro shrugged pragmatically and accepted a glass of wine from Carmela.

‘I hope that in time he will be allowed to know who I am, but for now I am content. I just find it hard to believe that six years ago you gave birth to my son and I wasn’t there.’

The doorbell rang again and Constanzo and Simona were ushered in by Antonio, with yet another card and gift for James, who was by now looking a little overwhelmed.

Amy moved to welcome everybody and herded the children into the dining room. Simona, who still had an eye for a handsome man, went to talk to Alessandro and he smiled, found seats for the elderly couple, brought them some drinks and stood chatting to them for quite some time.

He really can be quite personable and kind thought Amy. I never saw that side of him.

The afternoon passed quickly with games organised by Gabriel, Amy and Sonya - and to her surprise, even Alessandro joined in. He seemed very relaxed with the children and when Donna fell and grazed her knee he took her to the kitchen, washed the wound and put on the plaster Carmela found for him. Amy watched, unseen from the door frame, and was even more astonished when he showed Donna his open hand, then in a flash

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produced a two euro coin, apparently, from her ear. She quickly forgot her sore knee and giggled with pleasure.

He just loves children, thought Amy. I have denied James so much and now, whatever the cost to me, I must somehow put that right.

‘Mama, Alessdro, come and play blind man’s buff with us,’ called James and it was then that Alessandro realised she had been watching him with Donna. He smiled a little self consciously and shrugged.

‘I belonged to the magic club at university. Most of life is an illusion, don’t you think?’

Like your love for me was, she thought, turning away.

‘Mama, come on!’ James tugged her hand and she returned to the garden, a smile on her face which did not reach her eyes.

When it was Sonya’s turn to wear the blindfold, James spun her round until she was dizzy and pleading for mercy, before pushing her into the crowd to find her victim. She groped around, as children danced around her calling her name, and finally she made a grab for a small boy who suddenly dodged out of her way; with a shriek, she lost her footing and fell into Gabriel’s arms. He held her for a moment before removing her blindfold and the colour flooded to her face.

‘It’s my lucky day,’ murmured Gabriel. ‘Okay kids, that’s enough of that, I do believe tea is being served.’

Tea was sumptuous with a magnificent birthday cake in the shape of a train, which Sonya had made and then Coco the Clown arrived. For the next hour squeals of delight and laughter rang round the old villa. At six o’clock parents arrived to collect their tired children and James, flushed and happy was finally able to ride his bike around the garden. It was almost dark and Gabriel walked behind him protectively while Sonya and Donna cheered him on as he wobbled round the lawn.

‘He’s a good man’ said Alessandro. ‘For that much, I am grateful.’

‘Yes, he is a good man. I love him dearly.’

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‘Do you?’

She knew that she was on very dangerous ground, and close to telling an outright lie. ‘Alessandro, he’s kind and...and normal...and yes, he makes me happy.’

‘Does he, Amy?’ Suddenly, unable to help himself any longer, Alessandro turned to Amy and pulled her round to face him. Before she could protest, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her. She tried to protest, but her traitorous body was having none of it. As her lips parted and he invaded her mouth so sweetly, she slipped her arms around his neck and he pulled her tightly to him so that she was pressed along the length of his body and able to feel how much he wanted to possess her. Finally he pulled away and looked into her eyes, his own full of anger. ‘So, he makes you happy does he? Well, I think the poor man is in for a lot of pain and I feel sorry for him. No doubt one day you will run away from him too. I’m leaving now, Amy. Say goodbye to James for me. I am returning to Rome tomorrow but my secretary will contact you next time I am due to be in Venice. I hope you might then let me take my son out for the day.’

He turned on his heel and left, and Amy pressed her head to the window, eyes squeezed tightly shut, in an agony of remorse. When she finally opened them, she realised Sonya was staring at her from the garden, having seen the whole episode, and the expression on her face was one of disdain.

The exhausted children came into the house a few minutes later and Sonya gathered her sweater and handbag. ‘We must go, Amy. I’ll come by in the morning to help you clear up.’ There was a coolness in her voice and a tight smile on her face.

‘Sonya, I’ll walk you home, before I go back to the island.’ volunteered Gabriel.

‘Thank you,’ she smiled at him.

‘Goodbye Amy, I’ll see you in a few days.’ He gave her squeeze and kiss on the cheek.

James came yawning to the door and kissed everyone, including a blushing Donna. ‘Thank you for my lovely day,’ he said sleepily and Amy picked him up and cuddled him as they watched their friends walk down the road. In the street lights Amy

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saw Donna move between Gabriel and Sonya and take a hand of each. They suddenly looked like a family and the image made Amy feel so lonely and wretched she buried her face against James, breathing in the warm scent of him.

‘Mama?’

‘Sorry, James. I just needed a hug,’ she whispered. ‘Let’s go and find Teddy and get you both to bed.’

Once he was settled, she showered and flung herself naked into her own bed, weary but unable to sleep. Alessandro’s kiss replayed and replayed in her mind; her lips grew warm remembering his touch and her body ached with longing for him. But in her head, as she had so many times before, she heard his father Giovanni telling her ‘He’s a heartbreaker my dear. You are one of many...if you have any instinct for self-preservation you will leave’.....and knew that she had to be strong. She would have to maintain a cool, polite relationship with Alessandro for James’s sake and keep her own emotions severely under lock and key. He was a married man and she had no right to him – or he to her. But she knew that through James, Alessandro had all the keys to her heart and mind and that the child was now the fulcrum on which her relationship with his father balanced.

Fitfully she tossed and turned because something else was worrying away at her subconscious and then she suddenly saw Sonya’s face, staring up at her from the garden and remembered how cool her friend had been after that.

She saw him kiss me and thinks I am going to start an affair with Alessandro and she disapproves, Amy decided. Tomorrow, I will try to explain. And finally she drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, being Sunday, Amy woke to the sound of church bells. James was still sleeping peacefully and she looked down at his innocent face, long dark lashes resting on his cheek and that entrancing dimple in his chin. Leaving him to rest, she slipped on a robe and went downstairs to make some much needed coffee. The debris from the party was still strewn all around and she began to fill the new dishwasher with cups and plates whilst the coffee machine bubbled and spat. Then the doorbell rang and assuming it to be Sonya, Amy went to the door and opened it without checking.

Alessandro came striding in and walked straight into the kitchen before turning to face her. She gaped at him in astonishment and pulled her robe protectively over her nakedness.

‘I thought you would be on your way back to Rome.’

‘My flight is this afternoon. I was rude yesterday and I came to apologise. If we are to have an arrangement over my access to James, I realise we have to be civilised with each other and I have no right to interfere in your life. Gabriel will obviously be kind to James – I can see that the child adores him and I promise I won’t try to spoil that relationship.’

‘Thank you. Would you like some coffee?’ Alessandro’s shoulders relaxed visibly at the invitation and he nodded and sank into a chair. ‘I have been thinking too, Alessandro. I had no idea you would have such a rapport with children – frankly it’s a side of you I never saw and it came as a complete surprise. I feel very sad, mostly for James that he has been denied knowing you and I plan to put that right.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes, if you promise never again to do to what you did yesterday.’

‘You mean never to kiss you?’

‘It doesn’t help anything does it? We’ve both moved on; we have other commitments now and that...relationship...has to be put in the past. What we decide now

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must be for James' sake. If you will accept that, then I will tell James you are his father and you can spend whatever time you like with him.'

'Amy, it would mean the world to me. Is he still asleep?'

'Yes, you can come and see him if you want to.'

He nodded and followed her upstairs into James' room. He was just stirring as they went in and he sleepily regarded Alessandro before putting his arms out to Amy for a cuddle. She pulled him onto her lap and smoothed his ruffled hair.

'Alessandro has come to say goodbye. He's going back to Rome this afternoon.'

'I enjoyed your party, James,' said Alessandro, squatting down to face his little boy 'And I wondered if I could come to see you the next time I come to Venice in a few weeks?'

'Can we play football?'

'Yes, we certainly can.'

'I like my football kit. I'll wear it next time you come.'

'I'll look forward to that, James.' Amy could have sworn there was a sparkle of tears in Alessandro's eyes. 'I have to go now, but I'll see you soon.'

To the amazement of both his parents, James suddenly put out his arms to Alessandro, and with a glance at Amy, asking her permission, he took his son in his arms for the first time.

Neither Amy, nor Alessandro were able to speak and it was James who finally broke the tension. Prodding his father's face he said 'You've got a dimple in your chin, just like mine.'

'Yes, I have, and one day you will have just the same problem trying to shave round it as I do.'

A few minutes later, having left James to play in his bath, Amy and Alessandro went downstairs, just in time to come face to face with Sonya as she and Donna breezed through the front door, which had been left ajar. Sonya's eyes widened as she took in the

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image of Amy, wearing a loosely gathered robe with obviously nothing on underneath, and Alessandro fully dressed, clattering down the stairs behind her.

‘I’m so sorry,’ stammered Sonya, ‘I had no idea...I mean... the door was open and I thought...we’ll come back later.’

‘Sonya, please stay!’ called Amy, but her friend had rushed, scarlet-faced, out of the gate and was hurrying down the road dragging poor Donna by the hand.

‘Shall I go after her?’ asked Alessandro.

‘No. I need to talk to her properly. Don’t worry.’

‘Amy, here are all the details of where you can contact me if you should need to. May I take your phone number?’

She nodded and wrote it down for him.

‘I won’t rush in and spoil James – he is a fantastic little boy and a real credit to you – but if there is anything at all you or he need...well, you know what I’m trying to say.’

‘Yes, Alessandro and I appreciate it. But James has everything he could possibly want right now; he has a happy life with lots of friends, he loves his school and he’s very secure. There is nothing you could buy him that would improve on that.’

‘You never were very impressed by material things were you Amy?’ he smiled.

‘No. I’m sure it’s difficult to know who your friends are when you are so rich and I couldn’t bear to have to wonder if the people I cared for just had an eye on my bank balance. I’m sorry, Alessandro, I didn’t mean to sound so cynical.’

‘I’ll call you soon.’ He turned and walked towards the water taxis and she went back into the house, closed the door and leaned against it feeling weak; being so close to Alessandro, and watching him hold James so lovingly, had been such an ordeal that she felt quite dizzy. How was she ever going to get through the rest of her life, cope with this pain and longing, she wondered, knowing this scenario was going to be repeated every time Alessandro was in town?

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With a groan, she went back upstairs to where James was splashing in the bath, dive bombing a plastic boat with a large turtle.

‘I like Ales..Alessodo...I can’t say his name Mama...can I have a different name for him? What can I call him?’

‘We’ll think of something,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, I know you like him and he likes you too. Very much.’

Half an hour later Amy and James walked down the road to Sonya’s apartment and rang the bell. It was a while before she came to the door and it was immediately clear that she was upset. ‘Come in. James, Donna is in the lounge watching television, why don’t you go and find her?’

‘Okay.’ He potted off and Amy followed Sonya into the kitchen.

‘I am sorry for walking in on you this morning, Amy. I am deeply embarrassed. I should have realised yesterday that there was something afoot with Alessandro – I just hadn’t expected him to stay the night. It’s all right,’ she continued, before Amy could answer. ‘I am not condemning you, it isn’t my place to, but I am concerned you will hurt Gabriel very badly.’

‘Gabriel?’

‘Surely you realise he is in love with you...and I had rather assumed you felt the same.’

‘He’s not in love with me!’

‘Of course he is.’

‘Sonya, you don’t understand. Gabriel and I are just...we’re simply...I love him too, but...’

‘Then you have a funny way of showing it. I can see why you would be attracted to Alessandro, he’s sex on legs, but Gabriel is a kind and dear man who doesn’t deserve to be two-timed. Oh, you needn’t worry; I won’t tell him what you did, but...’

‘Sonya, will you shut up for a moment! I didn’t spend the night with Alessandro. He came round this morning to say goodbye to James, who was still upstairs in bed.’

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‘Oh...I’m sorry. Anyway it’s none of my business.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ she snapped. ‘But for your information I have promised to tell James that Alessandro is his father and have agreed they can spend time together, which was your advice, if you remember. This means that Alessandro will visit from time to time – it does not mean I am having an affair with him. He kissed me last night and I know you saw that. But I have made him promise never to do that again if he wishes to see James and he has agreed. Understood?’

‘Yes...I’m sorry.’

‘Well, I’m going home now and if you are in a better frame of mind, perhaps you and Donna would like to come round later to finish the party left-overs with us. I’m sick of the sight of jelly, ice cream and cold sausages.’

The two women looked at each other for a moment and then both began to laugh. ‘Oh, Amy, thank God you don’t hold a grudge. Am I forgiven?’ sniffed Sonya

‘Yes, of course. I don’t blame you for drawing the conclusions you came to, it must have looked very peculiar. Now, if that is fresh coffee I can smell, please can I beg some?’

Relieved that her friendship with Sonya was back on track, Amy left James to play with Donna and went back to the house to finish clearing up. She leaned on the gate and looked at the old house, which was now transformed almost beyond belief. Gone was the peeling grey paint, replaced by a pale terracotta finish. New windows replaced the old sash ones which had been so hard to open and draughty when closed. Inside, the building alterations were complete; ten refurbished bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, and nearing completion, a small apartment on the ground floor for James and herself with two bedrooms and a living room. The magnificent dining room with adjoining conference suite were all completed except for decoration and furnishing. They were well on track to finish by mid-January and she had to plan some advertising to fill the hotel in time for the Venice Carnival in February. She also needed staff to cook and clean so there was still a lot to organise.

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Constanzo and Simona were walking slowly down the road on their way back from church.

‘The house is lovely, Amy. Maria would be very pleased to see what you have done with it. We did enjoy being with you yesterday at James’ party and it’s good to see the old place alive again. Maria used to have such lovely parties years ago, especially at Carnival time; everyone in fancy dress with masks and wonderful gowns.’

‘Well, we will too, Simona – we’ll have a big party on opening night during carnival fortnight.’

‘Oh, how lovely. Constanzo and I might have moved by then, but we will still be close by in a smaller place. I hope we’ll be invited.’

‘Of course you will! Have you put your villa on the market yet?’

‘Ah, no. We may have a buyer, someone we know...’

‘Well, that’s wonderful. Now I must go and clear up the debris from yesterday. It looks as if we had a party for a hundred, instead of ten small children.’

She bade them farewell and went inside to spend the rest of the day restoring order in the house. It echoed and its bareness depressed her; she hoped the auction in Padua would provide some nice furniture to complement the décor she and Gabriel had planned. Hopefully most of the decoration would be complete before Christmas; Christmas, now only five weeks away and still so much to do. It will have to be a small event this year, she thought. I haven’t the time or energy to make too much effort. Perhaps Mama will come over from England... I wonder how Alessandro will spend Christmas – probably on a lavish cruise on his yacht with Sophia or a grand celebration at his parents’ mansion in Rome. But somewhere in her heart she had a feeling he would rather be kicking a football round the park with a small boy.

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Chapter Ten

By the beginning of December Amy and James had moved down into their apartment. James' room was pale blue with a frieze of Thomas the Tank Engine around the walls and he was excited to have a bunk bed so that friends could come to stay.

He was home after school, watching television, when the phone rang, and with one eye on his programme, he picked up the receiver before Amy could reach it. 'Hello, this is James,' he said.

'Hello, James. This is Alessandro.'

'I've got a new bedroom now and so has Mama. Are you coming to see me?'

'Yes, very soon. Can I speak to Mama?'

'It's Alessdro,' he said handing over the phone and switching his concentration back to his cartoon programme.

'Alessandro...where are you?' Her heart beat rose at the sound of his voice and she struggled to sound cool and collected.

'I'm in Rome. Amy I have personally been through all of the papers we have concerning your godmother's investments and as you know, most of them are now transferred to you.'

'Yes, I had a letter a few months ago. Is there a problem?'

'Not really, but there is an item I would prefer to discuss with you; something which needs some careful thought and I think we should meet.'

'All right. When will you be in Venice?'

'The day after tomorrow. Can I take you to dinner?'

'No, but if you come to the house you can spend some time with James. I'll make supper.' She heard herself say the words, but they seemed to have been spoken by someone else. What on earth was she doing?

'I appreciate that, Amy. I have missed...I missed him.'

'Six o'clock then?'

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‘I’ll see you then.’ And he was gone.

Amy put the phone down and turned to look at James who was sprawled on the floor with one arm round a sleepy Snoopy. ‘Shall we take Snoopy for a walk?’ she asked, and James immediately lost interest in the television.

‘Yes! Can I take my football?’

Fifteen minutes later they left the house, wrapped up in warm jackets and gloves against the December chill and James took Amy’s hand as they headed for the park.

‘Is Alessdro coming to see us?’

‘Yes, James. He’s coming to see us on Saturday.’

‘To play football?’

‘If it doesn’t rain.’

‘Do you like him Mama?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘More than Gabriel?’

Amy was taken aback. ‘We can like all sorts of people, James. I knew Alessandro a long time ago.’

‘Before I was born?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wish he lived in Venice. He’s better at football than Gabriel.’

They had reached the park and Amy led James to the bench and sat beside him.

‘James.’ She felt as though a lump had formed in her throat, but she knew this was the time to tell James the truth and she wondered whether life would ever be the same afterwards. ‘James, you know you asked who your papa is.’

‘And you said he wasn’t your friend anymore so we couldn’t see him.’

‘Yes. Well, now we are friends again.’

‘So, he can come and see me?’

‘Yes. Would you like that?’

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‘Yes...I think so.’ He sat thoughtfully for a moment before turning an anxious face to her. ‘But supposing I don’t like him? What if he doesn’t like me? He won’t take me away from you will he?’ His little face crumpled and tears ran down his face. James was suddenly panic stricken as so many thoughts and worries crowded into his previously trouble-free world.

‘No, sweetheart, he would never take you away. But he does want to know you.’ Amy put her arms tightly around him.

‘Why didn’t he want to know me before?’

‘I didn’t tell him about you until a few weeks ago. He didn’t know you existed.’

‘When will I see him?’

‘On Saturday. James you have already met him and you like him. Alessandro is your papa.’

James raised his tear stained face to hers and a small smile quivered on his lips. ‘He promised to take me to see Juventas.’

‘He did, and he will.’

‘Is he going to live with us?’

‘No, James. He is married to someone else now. But he will come and visit and take you out. And maybe, when you know him better and you are a bit older, you can visit him in Rome.’

‘Can I call him Papa?’

‘He would love you to call him Papa; you never got the hang of Alessandro anyway, did you?’

‘I can’t wait to tell Donna. If Alessdro is going to be my papa, maybe Gabriel can be hers.’

‘It doesn’t work quite like that James. Shall we go home?’

But the image of Gabriel, Donna and Sonya walking down the road together came back to Amy and suddenly, in an intuitive flash, she knew that Sonya’s anger after James’s party had something to do with her own feelings for Gabriel. With a gasp she

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wondered how she could have been so blind. Poor Sonya was in love with Gabriel, but believed Gabriel was in love with Amy.

‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave...’ she muttered to herself. ‘Now what am I going to do?’

When Amy and James arrived back at the villa, the decorators were leaving for the day and darkness had fallen. Gabriel had called in and was waiting for them in the kitchen and James ran to him and flung his arms round his legs.

‘Guess what Gabriel! Alessdro is my papa.’

Gabriel glanced at Amy and she shrugged. ‘I had to tell him. You were right Gabriel, life moves on and he has...they both have... a right to know each other.’

Gabriel took James on his knee. ‘James, I am very glad for you. Alessandro is a fine man and he will be very proud to have you as a son.’

‘I can still love you though can’t I? I won’t stop seeing you because of him?’ he asked, anxiety once more clouding his face.

‘Oh, James, of course not.’ He hugged the boy, deeply touched. ‘Sonya, Donna and I, we’re like your family and we all love you and Mama.’

‘And Carmela and Antonio?’

‘Yes, we are all best friends and nothing will change that. I tell you what, why don’t I take you fishing on Sunday morning – just you and me?’

‘Oh, yes! Thank you.’ He wriggled down and went to watch television in the new living room.

Amy sat opposite Gabriel at the kitchen table and wondered whether he had any idea that Sonya had feelings for him. She had no intention of dabbling between them; her own life was far too complicated already and anyway it was something they had to discover for themselves.

‘How are you – inside I mean – now that James knows the truth?’ Gabriel asked her.

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‘I don’t know. Glad, sad, confused...remorseful they have both missed out on five years together because I was so angry with Alessandro. When I look back I realise what an idiot I was. I mean, why would a millionaire, whose family is practically Italian aristocracy, even think of marrying someone like me? If I had been more worldly, I would have understood, and possibly even accepted the situation. Maybe I should have stayed and simply been his mistress, but I was an idealist and I felt betrayed. My illusions were shattered and so was my heart. Now I have to grow up and deal with my feelings for James’s sake.’

‘Well, to cheer you up, tomorrow, why don’t you and I go to Padua for the day? There are some lots coming up at the auction which would be perfect for the dining room. If we leave after James goes to school, Sonya or Carmela will pick him up. We’ll be back by about seven o’clock?’

‘Yes, that sounds a lovely idea. Gabriel, you are such a good friend.’

‘Yes, I am.’ He stood and passing behind her chair, ruffled her hair.

‘Gabriel...’she faltered, but she had to know. ‘Sonya believes you and I are an item. You know I would never hurt you and ...well, we are all right aren’t we...I mean you’re not really...?’

‘In love with you?’ He paused. ‘I definitely was, because although you were never aware of it, I had the most enormous crush on you when you were fifteen.’

‘You did? But you were horrible to me!’ she laughed

‘That was because I was too gauche to cope with my feelings and I am sorry. But the truth is I used to dream about you – in spite of the spots - so yes, in those days I can say I was madly in love with you. When you came back a few months ago I knew it would be all too easy to let my feelings develop; you are a lovely woman and it would be a cold man who didn’t fancy you. But, I quickly realised your heart was elsewhere and you were a lost cause. So, ever the pragmatist, when you rightly turned down my proposal, I knew your friendship and the relationship that has grown up between all of us – Sonya, Donna and you and James would be one of the most important of my life and I

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wasn't about to wreck it. I've had a lot of girl friends – so far none have been right for me and for now, I am just happy to be with all of you. Inevitably the dynamics of our friendship will evolve as time goes on. We'll just have to wait and see what those changes are won't we?'

Amy rose and gave him a hug. 'I am so glad you said all that.'

'Are you going to enlighten Alessandro about the true relationship between you and me?'

'Not yet. It's like a buffer; it gives me a breathing space. Do you mind?'

'No. I'm going now, but I'll pick you up at eight-thirty and we'll take a water taxi to the train station. I'm glad you told James about Alessandro.'

'Yes,' she sighed. 'I suppose I am too.'

He kissed her cheek and left, chugging off down the canal in the boat towards the lights of Venice on the horizon.

Their trip to Padua was a great success and they bought a number of pieces of furniture and some pictures for the communal rooms of the hotel. As luck would have it, the delivery van drew up outside the house the next day just as Alessandro arrived.

'You've been shopping?' he said, sidling through the door past a burly removal man.

'Yes, I went to Padua with Gabriel yesterday. These things are for the dining and conference room. We hope to open the hotel at the end of January, before the carnival.'

'Are you going to run it together – you and Gabriel?'

'No, it's my hotel. Gabriel is an art and antique dealer. He has a shop and apartment on the main island, not far from St.Mark's Square.'

'He doesn't live here?'

'No, he just stays over sometimes...'

'I see.'

Amy realised the implication of what she had just said and flushed.

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‘Sorry, Amy, I didn’t mean to pry.’

She shrugged and indicated to Alessandro to sit down. ‘James is in the back garden on his bike. I wanted to tell you that I have explained to him that you are his father. I told him we are friends now and he knows you didn’t know about his existence until recently. He is also worried you might take him away from me.’

Alessandro rose and went to look through the window at James, now quite confidently riding round the garden. ‘Can I go out and see him? I promise I will reassure him’

‘Of course. And, Alessandro...’

‘Yes?’

‘He wants to call you Papa.’

She watched as the tall, elegant, utterly gorgeous man, she knew she would love for the rest of her life, walked down the lawn and crouched down to talk to James. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but after a few moments, James hesitantly moved to Alessandro and the tall man picked up the small boy and held him tightly, his shoulders shaking with emotion.

A while later they came into the warmth of the kitchen where Amy was preparing supper. She had set the table for the three of them and indicated to Alessandro to sit down. He looked as if he might fall down, she thought, as his face was pale. She set a large scotch in front of him and left him to collect his thoughts while helping James choose a suitable TV programme in the adjoining room. When she came back, the colour had returned to his face and as she walked by, he suddenly caught her hand.

‘Amy, I can’t begin to tell you...’

‘You don’t need to. I could see for myself.’ She pulled her hand gently away and moved across the kitchen out of touching distance.

‘You don’t need to feel threatened – I would never hurt either of you.’

She regarded him silently, her eyes dark and brooding, thinking that he could hardly hurt her more than he had already. And yet, in these past few weeks she had seen a

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side of him she had previously not suspected; his affinity with children, his less arrogant attitude, his liking for football for goodness sake. Here he was, completely out of his normal environment – no Silver Lady, no mansion, no Jaguar car – just an untidy kitchen with James’s toys stacked in a corner and rather large puppy pulling at his shoelace. And he seemed to like it.

‘You said you wanted to see me about some investments which still need to be sorted out?’

‘Yes. I have them here.’ He picked up a briefcase he had come in with and took out a sheaf of papers. ‘The investments you already had in your name were worth close to half a million euros and your solicitors have helped you liquidate those to give you the money to convert the hotel. However, there is another one – a property in Rome, which, when Maria bought it, was worth very little – a large old hostel – and she must have had amazing foresight to buy it.’

‘My father was her adviser.’

‘He advised her well. Now, because of where it is sited, it is worth a fortune. It could be converted to offices with shops and restaurants underneath at ground level.’

‘A fortune?’

‘Potentially.’

‘It would cost a great deal to convert it wouldn’t it?’

‘That wouldn’t be your problem.’

‘No, Alessandro – I don’t want any favours...’

‘Not a favour; we could do it as a joint project and I would take my profit, just as if you were any other client; except I would put my share in a trust fund for James. Would you allow me to do that?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose so,’ she said, doubtfully. ‘What’s it like, this building, have you seen it?’

‘Yes, I went to have a look last week. It’s a run down wreck in a suburb of Rome; but there are new rail links and lots of businesses are moving out of the city; you would

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have no problem letting shops and offices. I have a photograph – but...I hardly dare suggest this, but why don't you and James come to Rome to take a look for yourself?'

'I...no, I don't think so. I've never been back to Rome since...' she shuddered at the prospect.

'Since you ran away from me?'

'I don't want to talk about that – it's in the past and that's where I want to keep it.'

'All right...but just answer me one question.' He paused, considering his words. 'Amy...I have to know...did you love me so little?'

Her control suddenly snapped and she yelled at him 'I adored you, Alessandro, but you were the one who was promised to someone else – to Sophia Bellucci and her millions. You let me believe, silly little fool that I was, that you loved me and that we might have a future together. Then you took me to that awful party and I just knew that I was living in a fool's paradise. I could sense immediately that I was an outsider in that society and then your father came round the next day and told me what a bastard you were – how you had hurt so many women and that you would do the same to me. He said he felt sorry for Sophia because you would be incapable of being faithful to her! So yes, I got the hell out. It's what your father called self preservation!'

He went even paler, clearly deeply shocked. 'He did *what?*...and you just took his word for that did you?' he stormed at her. 'After three months of practically living with me, loving with me, sharing every intimate thing two people can share, you just took his word? You never gave me a chance to explain or put my side of the awkward situation I was in? How could you do that, Amy? Not only did you destroy our relationship, but you robbed James of his father for the first five years of his life and we can never retrieve that!'

As they stood staring furiously at each other across the kitchen table, they became aware of a snuffling noise and both turned to the lounge door where James stood watching them. He had wet himself and tears streamed down his face.

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Amy rushed to him and swept him into her arms. 'It's all right James, there's nothing to worry about.'

'James, I'm so sorry,' began Alessandro, moving towards them, but the little boy buried his face in Amy's neck, refusing to look at his father.

'I think it would be better if you left, Alessandro. Call me later.'

Without a word, he picked up the papers from the table, turned on his heel and went out of the house, closing the door quietly on the way out.

'Now you're not friends anymore,' sobbed James 'and my Papa has gone again.'

'Darling, we just had a quarrel...it's over now and Ales...Papa will come back.'

'No, he won't...I bet I don't see him again.' And he laid his head on her shoulder and howled.

'Shh...James, I promise you, you will see papa tomorrow,' she told him, rocking him gently, 'and...well, how would you like to go to Rome?'

'With you...and Papa?'

'Yes,' she gulped at the commitment she was making. 'With me and Papa.'

'When?'

That was a question she hadn't resolved yet...'I'll talk to him, James.'

'Will he take me to the football?'

'If there is a game on while we're there, I expect so.'

James cheered up, so she changed his damp clothes and persuaded him to return to his TV programme. Amy poured herself a glass of wine and sat wondering whether she was making a huge mistake; but now it must be done. Warily she rose to answer the ringing phone and was not surprised to discover it was Alessandro, calling from his mobile.

'Amy, I am so sorry...'

'It was my fault as much as yours. He's never heard me quarrel with anyone before. He's all right but I hope you meant what you said about us coming to Rome.'

There was a small silence before Alessandro cleared his throat.

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‘Yes, of course I meant it.’ She could hear the restrained joy in his voice.

‘Then, when school breaks up for Christmas at the end of next week perhaps we could come for a couple days. He wants you to take him to a football match.’

‘It’s a promise.’

‘I wondered...if you could book us into an hotel?’

‘Leave it to me. I was afraid you would tell me to stay out of his life after what happened this evening.’

‘That isn’t what he wants or needs. Come tomorrow and take him to the park...if you have some football boots to hand.’

Chapter Eleven

Gabriel called round the next day. ‘I wanted to check the furniture had arrived safely,’ he said, and together they admired the way Amy had arranged the new acquisitions in the dining and conference room. ‘It’s going to look stunning,’ he said with satisfaction.

‘I have someone coming to measure for curtains tomorrow – I thought plain cream with tie backs and swags...what do you think?’ asked Amy.

They were deeply engrossed when Sonya and Donna knocked on the door. ‘We just wanted to see how things went yesterday with Alessandro and James,’ said Sonya, casting a shy smile at Gabriel.

Chattering happily they all retired to the kitchen where Amy busied herself making coffee and drinks for the children. The next tap on the door revealed Carmela and Antonio who were enfolded into the group and James ran to Antonio, dragging him out to the garden to watch him ride his bike.

Finally, Alessandro appeared. They didn’t see him at first as he stood in the open doorway, watching the crowd of friends laughing and talking, but Amy suddenly glanced up and caught such a look of longing and sadness on his face she could barely stop herself from going to him and putting her arms around him.

‘Come and join us,’ she smiled at him and he came to sit beside Carmela and accepted a cup of coffee. ‘James is in the garden, I’ll call him.’

The little boy appeared a moment later and stood for a moment looking anxiously at Alessandro. There was a small silence as the gathered friends watched James nervously approach his father who picked him up and sat him on his lap.

‘Are we going to play football?’

‘Yes, as soon as we’ve finished our drinks.’

‘Can I come?’ asked Donna.

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‘Why don’t we all go?’ suggested Amy. ‘Snoopy needs a walk and come to think of it, so do I – and as there is rather a lot of food here which is going to get wasted, you can all stay for lunch.’

Carmela and Antonio elected to stay behind to set the table and organise the food, so the rest of them set off in the December sunshine.

Gabriel and Alessandro soon had James and Donna running round, with an excited Snoopy trying to join in, while Amy and Sonya watched from the park bench.

‘He doesn’t behave much like a millionaire property tycoon, does he?’

‘Fatherhood seems to suit him. He’s so different here. To be honest, having met his parents, I can’t imagine that he had a very happy childhood.’

‘You’re still in love with him Amy – it shines out of your eyes.’

Amy could hardly deny it. ‘Yes, but he’s married, Sonya. It’s something I have to live with for James’s sake.’

‘So, what about poor Gabriel?’

‘Sonya...I love Gabriel dearly as my friend, as he does me. But he’s not in love with me.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Very sure.’

‘But...well, I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I heard him propose to you.’

‘Oh...yes, well he did. But that is only because he knew how scared I was of losing James to Alessandro. He offered to marry me and adopt James, which was an amazing thing to do, but we both knew it would have been a disaster. Gabriel is one of the most wonderful people I know, and I can’t tell you how often I have wished I could fall in love with him; but the chemistry isn’t right between us.’

‘I see.’

‘However, at the moment I am allowing Alessandro to believe that Gabriel and I are a couple. He will find out soon what the real truth is, but I need a breathing space to

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let him and James get to know each other before he turns his attention to me. I really couldn't cope with all that at the same time.'

'Oh, I see.' Enlightenment dawned in Sonya's eyes.

'You like Gabriel don't you, Sonya?'

'I think he's wonderful. You won't tell him will you?' she added anxiously.

'No, it will be our secret, if that's what you want.'

'It is, because if he can't feel the same way about me, at least I want to keep him as a friend.'

Amy watched as Gabriel scooped Donna into the air and heard the little girl shriek with delight. She hoped with all her heart that the three of them might find happiness together one day.

Exhausted, the party finally meandered back to the villa and sat drinking Chianti over lunch. Amy was aware of Alessandro's every move and often felt his dark eyes upon her as she sat next to Gabriel talking and giggling. 'Do you remember, Gabriel, when I came here with my parents when I was fifteen,' she said, prodding him in the ribs, 'and you threw me in the pond?'

'I didn't throw you in, Amy; I just stepped out of the way when you charged towards me on your roller skates. It wasn't my fault you couldn't stop in time. You came up with tadpoles wriggling out of your hair, covered in black mud and had a tantrum to end all tantrums.'

'And I had to wash her hair,' laughed Carmela. 'It took nearly an hour to clean her up.'

'And you said you were in love with me then, Gabriel.'

'So I was...but I was still young enough to enjoy the prospect of seeing you fall in the pond.'

'Horrible man.'

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After lunch, everyone except Alessandro rose to leave. They all knew he wanted to spend some time alone with James, so they made their farewells and drifted away into the early evening darkness.

‘Are you still prepared to come to Rome?’ he asked Amy.

‘Yes.’ He was standing too close to her and her pulse was rising.

‘Then I will book the flights for next Friday? I can take James to see Juventus on Saturday as they’re playing in Rome.’

‘All right – we’ll stay until Tuesday so we can be back here in time for Christmas.’

‘You’re spending it with Gabriel?’

‘And Sonya, Donna, Carmela and Antonio; I shall invite Constanzo and Simona as well -they are moving just after Christmas to a sheltered flat. Where are you spending Christmas?’

‘At home as usual I expect. Amy, is small talk the best we can manage now?’

‘What else is there, Alessandro?’

‘I’m sorry. May I put James to bed and read him a story?’

‘Yes, of course.’

He disappeared into James’s bedroom with him and a while later Amy heard him reading Red Riding Hood, James’s current favourite story. She stood outside the door until she heard James say ‘Goodbye, Papa. I can’t wait till I see you in Rome,’ before creeping back to the kitchen.

Alessandro appeared a few minutes later. ‘Can we talk?’

Amy turned to look at him, her eyes wide and apprehensive. ‘About James?’

‘About us.’

‘There is no *us*, Alessandro. There never really was; it was one of your illusions.’

‘You really believe that?’

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‘Yes.’ She raised her chin and looked at him, her heart, as always, pounding unbearably, and she was shaken by a longing to be in his arms. He returned her gaze, looking deeply into her eyes and finally turned away.

‘I will go now. I’ll confirm the flight times and see you in Rome on Friday.’

‘And you will book a hotel?’

‘Everything will be arranged. Goodbye, Amy.’

She watched him go and then sank into a chair, exhausted by her feelings. Would the ache ever go away, she wondered in despair.

Work on the hotel had progressed at a pace and she was delighted with the building. Curtains were ordered, the furniture had arrived for the ten bedrooms and she and Sonya spent a lot of time arranging the rooms so that they were all individual. Framed Art Deco posters graced the walls, nineteen- thirties taps and reproduction sanitary ware in each *en suite* bathroom, rugs on the planed, original wooden floors. The chrome banister rails gleamed and the multi-coloured Tiffany lampshades made in the glassworks at Murano, the Venetian island world famous for its glorious glassware, were all in place.

‘It looks fantastic,’ said Gabriel with satisfaction.

‘Largely thanks to you,’ she beamed, giving him a hug. ‘Your vision has come to life.’

‘Now we need to promote it in time for your grand opening. I have a friend who designs web sites who has contacts at the Venice Tourist office...’

‘You do have some useful friends, Gabriel,’ she laughed. ‘Architects, builders, web site designers...’

‘Absolutely,’ he grinned. ‘And now we have to devise a list of services you can offer; bed and breakfast of course, but what about making the restaurant the most *de*

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rigueur on the Lido? It has the style and class and we could seat about forty – all you need is the chef.’

‘Sonya is going to work for me and she is certainly happy to do breakfasts and lunches – but she wouldn’t be able to do evening work because of Donna. You don’t have a friend who’s a chef I suppose?’ she chuckled.

‘No...but I know a man who does,’ he mused. ‘Leave it with me.’

‘The new computer has arrived and it’s in the office in a mountain of boxes. I can use the horrible things, but I can’t set them up...would you mind.’

‘Women,’ he grinned, ‘So independent until something important needs doing.’

They wandered back to the kitchen and Amy poured them both a glass of wine.

‘We’re going to Rome on Friday for the weekend,’ she told him.

‘I’m glad, Amy. It’s good for James.’

‘We’re just going to look at an old hostel which could be converted to shops and offices and Alessandro is taking James to football,’ she said defensively.

‘Why don’t you just stop fighting it? You adore the man and you only have to look in his eyes to see he feels the same about you.’

‘I won’t be his mistress,’ she flared at him.

‘Okay, okay, lead me to the computer...’

Amy spent the next two days interviewing prospective staff to start work at the hotel in the middle of January. Thanks to a friend of a friend of Gabriels’, she found two chefs, Paulo and Carlo who seemed to come as a pair. They had references to die for and seemed temperamentally perfect.

‘He’s the artist,’ said Paulo, indicating his partner, ‘but I am the organiser. We’ll need a kitchen hand of course.’ Amy would have promised them two. ‘Give us three months and you will have the most prestigious restaurant on the Lido. Now we would like to check the kitchen equipment to make sure we have everything we need and then we will want at least half a dozen meetings to discuss menus.’

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‘We’ll be having a Gala opening night at the beginning of the Carnival. Can I rely on you to provide food for about a sixty people in costume?’ she asked them.

‘Standing on our heads, darling,’ they chimed together. ‘What fun!’ And they disappeared to make an inventory of the kitchen.

If only everything else in my life could be that simple, she thought.

Chapter Twelve

James’s school broke up for Christmas the following Thursday. As he and Amy walked home he was in high spirits, cheeks flushed with excitement having excelled as a donkey in the class nativity play. ‘Donna was good as Mary wasn’t she, Mama?’

‘Fantastic.’

‘When are we going to Rome?’

‘Tomorrow.’ Amy’s heart thumped at the prospect, but she kept her tone light.

‘I can’t wait,’ squeaked James, jumping between cracks in the pavement.

And I can’t wait until we are safely back in Venice Amy muttered to herself.

After a sleepless night, Amy was up at six o’clock, her eyes sore and tired. She took a long, hot shower, dressed with care in black trousers and high heeled boots with a pale blue sweater and packed everything they might need before waking James, who bounded out of bed and was washed and dressed in record time. She forced some breakfast down both of them before catching an early water taxi to the airport. Irrationally she kept hoping the flight had been cancelled and they wouldn’t have to go; but it was on time, and by ten-thirty they were landing at Leonardo da Vinci airport.

As they emerged through the Arrivals gate, Alessandro stood waiting for them. He was dressed for the winter chill and as always looked the picture of sartorial elegance.

James rushed towards him, then stopped just short and looked at him a little warily, suddenly unsure of himself. Alessandro ruffled the child’s hair and took his hand,

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indicating to his chauffeur to take the case from Amy. He greeted her with a kiss on the cheek murmuring, 'I trust that was allowed,' and Amy, overcome by the nostalgic scent of him, could only nod.

He led them to the car and they headed towards the city where they were embroiled in the mayhem of Roman traffic and James bounced up and down with excitement as they passed the Forum and Coliseum. But they drove straight through the city without stopping, past all the hotels and Amy suddenly realised that Alessandro was taking them to his mansion.

'Alessandro,' she protested, 'you promised we could stay in a hotel!'

'Amy, it will be far more convenient if you stay at the house. As you will recall, there are endless bedrooms and James can see where I live. It is ludicrous to keep driving into the city to see you, when you can stay quite comfortably with me.'

'But what about...'

'Sophia?' he asked dryly. 'Sophia is not there.'

Well, that at least was a relief, thought Amy, but the idea of spending three nights under the same roof as Alessandro was reason enough to panic.

As they pulled into the forecourt of the glorious Palladian house with its classical white columns, she remembered the many times she had come here with Alessandro during their time together. How they had sometimes burst through the door, tearing their clothes off, and often had not made it to the bedroom before making love. The sofa, the Persian rug in front of the fire, even the stair landing, held erotic memories which instantly replayed as she walked through the door. She glanced at Alessandro and saw from the darkening in his eyes that he was replaying the same memories. She wanted to turn and run – hail a taxi back to the airport – to be anywhere but here; but James was running from room to room, wildly excited. 'Mama, there's a swimming pool downstairs!'

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‘I know James.’ That was another place they had made love...and in the sauna. A flush came to her cheeks and Alessandro took pity on her.

‘Let me show you your rooms. Lucia, my housekeeper won’t be back until this evening, it’s her day off.’

Amy was pleased to see that her bedroom was at the opposite end of the corridor to Alessandro’s, and James’s was opposite hers across the hall. Both were palatial with *en suite* bathrooms and she thanked him with a wan smile. She reflected, as she looked out of the window onto the acre or so of garden, that this house actually felt more like a hotel than a home. She hadn’t noticed when she had been here as Alessandro’s lover – but then she hadn’t really noticed anything at all, except him, during those months; but now everything seemed too perfect, too expensive and somehow it looked as though it had been furnished by an interior design team rather than by the people who lived in it. There was nothing of Sophia, nothing particularly feminine about the house, which after five years of marriage she would have expected. But perhaps, she mused, Giovanni’s prophecy had come true and maybe Sophia now spent very little time here.

Quickly she unpacked and went downstairs with James. Alessandro was in the kitchen hunting among the cupboards for coffee and biscuits; clearly it was uncharted territory for him.

‘Are you tired, James?’ he asked.

‘No, thank you.’ James wriggled onto his mother’s lap, overawed and put his thumb in his mouth; a sure sign that he was out of his comfort zone.

‘Then, Amy, I suggest we go to look at the property I told you about before lunch so that we can discuss it later this evening?’ He had finally wrung coffee out of the machine.

‘Very well.’ She accepted a cup whilst James drank his milk and scattering biscuit crumbs all over the table. ‘Oh, James...’ somehow this was not a house where crumbs would be welcome and she went to wipe them away.

‘Amy, relax – it’s fine. Now if you are both ready, shall we go?’

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The drive to the suburb of Rome took about half an hour but finally they pulled up outside a large, scruffy building with boarded-up doors and windows; graffiti was scrawled all over it and half torn posters for long past events, hung limply on the walls.

‘The building is worth nothing of course, but the land is conservatively worth two million euros.’

‘What!’ Amy was staggered.

‘I doubt Maria had any idea, to the day she died, that this old dump was her single most valuable asset. It will cost several million to turn it into a commercial venture but I know we would get planning permission for three storeys of offices with shops and restaurants at ground level which you can either sell or let. Either way, you will have a very handsome return on it, and so will James. You look rather pale, Amy – come on, I’ll buy you lunch,’ he laughed. ‘Where would you like to go?’

‘Macdonald’s, please,’ piped up James.

‘Good heavens. All right, it will be a first for me,’ said Alessandro with a grimace, and Amy could barely keep a straight face a while later as she watched him gingerly working round a large hamburger and pick at his French fries. ‘Do you do this often?’ he asked.

‘No – it’s definitely a treat,’ laughed Amy.

‘A treat?’ he grimaced.

By the early evening, James was exhausted and by seven thirty, after an early tea, fast asleep. Alessandro’s housekeeper Lucia had returned and was happy to baby sit, so Alessandro asked Amy to go to a restaurant for dinner.

‘And if we are seen together...?’

‘Who is going to care?’

Amy assumed he was inferring that it was nothing unusual for him to be seen around town with a woman who wasn’t his wife, so with a shrug she accepted. It was better than being in the confines of the house with him all evening. She wore a simple

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green silk shift dress and black sandals and left her hair loose, unaware of the effect it had on Alessandro's fingers as it cascaded round her shoulders.

He took her to a predictably expensive restaurant where the head waiter almost scraped his nose on the floor while ushering them to a private table in an alcove. After they had ordered, Alessandro leaned back in his chair and studied her.

'Amy, this really can't go on.'

'Meaning what?'

'This stupid situation between us. You know that sooner or later you are going to end up in my bed, so I really don't understand why you are fighting it. Every move, every glance tells me that you feel exactly the same as I do and all you are doing is torturing us both.'

'You're very sure of yourself,' she snapped, wishing she could deny every word he had said.

'I have reason to be. Your face when we walked through the door at my house gave you away, even if nothing else had. You could see us, naked and entwined on the sofa – and all the other places – as clearly as I could. And you were just as aroused as I was – it was in your eyes. It's still in your eyes.'

She lowered them from the intensity of his gaze which was now burning the top of her head.

'Amy, look at me and tell me you don't still love me.'

At last she raised her eyes to his, but kept her mouth mutinously closed, afraid of what words might spill out. Yes, she still loved him, but she was in mortal danger of turning the clock back six years – of becoming his mistress; her friends would despise her and his friends would abhor her in their society. She would be in limbo and she had worked too hard and gone through too much to tolerate that.

'Amy, everything my father told you on that night was a lie. I had a few girlfriends of course, but they were never serious and I never deceived them. Nobody got hurt. Sophia's family and mine are distantly related and as often happens in dynastic

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families like ours there was a hope that we would marry. Dolores was particularly keen on the idea and Sophia and I were old friends; we went out on dates together from our teens but I never had any intention of marrying her.'

'Then, why did you?'

'After you left I was devastated, and had no idea why you had gone or where. Certainly I had no idea you were pregnant. I couldn't imagine what I had done to make you run away and I was humiliated and angrier than I have ever been in my life. If I had known then what my father had told you, I think I might have killed him. I looked for you for a year, but you did a good job of disappearing and I had to reason that if you had really loved me you would have contacted me sooner or later with an explanation. But you didn't – so in the end I bowed to family pressure and married Sophia. There didn't seem to be a reason not to – except I wasn't in love with her – nor, as it turned out, was she with me.'

'Where is she now?'

'In Florence, with her lover.'

'You separated?'

'We divorced, Amy – two years ago. We are still extremely good friends and there was no legal wrangle afterwards.'

'You are divorced!' she gasped incredulously. 'You could have told me that weeks ago.'

'If you remember, when I saw you at Danieli's in Venice, you appeared to be madly in love with Gabriel. I needed to find out how serious that was before I bared my soul to you. In fact, I still don't know.'

'I love him dearly – but no, I'm not in love with him and I'm not going to marry him. And who were you with that evening?'

'My cousin Louisa, she runs the Venice office for us.'

Alessandro raised his eyebrows quizzically at her. 'But we were talking about Gabriel...you're not in love with him, but he sometimes stays overnight?'

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‘If we are working late on plans for the hotel he sometimes stays at the villa - in a separate room. We are not lovers. There hasn’t been anyone else. Not that that is any of your business...’ she added defensively.

‘I think it is.’ His eyes softened and he reached for her hand over the table but she snatched it away.

‘No, Alessandro. It isn’t as easy as that.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m scared.’

‘Scared of what, my darling? Of making love with me; scared of the way you body responds in my arms, scared of the joy, the pleasure, the ecstasy we had together?’

‘I’m scared to come into your world. Alessandro. I have a wonderful life in Venice; friends, security, a home and now a new business. It’s all real and it matters to me and to James. He is a happy little boy and it would be cruel to uproot him again. I would hate to live in Rome, hate the artificial lifestyle, the people...’

‘My family?’

‘I only brushed up against them once and look what happened!’

He was silent and the waiter came to take away the cold food which had been sitting in front of them for half an hour.

‘You never have to see them again. In fact I positively forbid it.’

‘But...James is their grandchild. Won’t you want them to meet him?’

‘No.’ He looked grim and intractable. ‘And I don’t want to talk about them tonight.’

‘All right...it has nothing to do with me anyway,’ she snapped. ‘Would you take me back to the house now please, I should check on James, he had a bit of a headache earlier from all the travelling.’

‘Of course.’ Tight lipped he signed a slip for the waiter, and neither spoke on the way back to the house where all was quiet; clearly James and Lucia were soundly asleep.

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‘Would you like a brandy?’ he asked, ushering her into the salon where a log fire had been lit.

‘Yes, thank you.’ She slipped off her sandals and curled up in an armchair watching him fix the drinks. He wasn’t married, she thought, still astonished by the knowledge - and he wanted her...but in what role; wife or mistress? But even more amazingly, he didn’t want her to allow his parents to meet their grandchild; but then, she supposed James was a grandchild they would probably look on with disdain, just as they had dismissed her as not good enough for their son.

Alessandro came to sit beside her in an adjoining armchair. ‘I know you don’t really want to discuss it, Alessandro, but just one question...have you spoken to Giovanni about the way he effectively destroyed our relationship that night?’ she asked curiously. ‘I would have expected you to give him a piece of your mind, if he caused you as much grief as you are implying?’

‘It was Dolores’s hand behind it – she is a bitter and spiteful woman. My father had a severe stroke three years ago. He is partially paralysed and needs twenty-four hour care.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said softly.

‘I don’t think I can ever forgive them. I might never have found you again. The most important thing to me is that you and James are back in my life. If I have to settle for what we have now, I will, I promise you. I can’t force you to love me, and I will wait, just as I did when we first met, for you to give me a sign to show me that you want me. But, Amy, I warn you, once you give me that signal, there will be no going back.’

He rose and wandered round the room, clearly very tense. Her own body was in torment and she knew that one more touch from him would dissolve any token resistance. She downed the rest of her brandy in a gulp and then wished she hadn’t, because she had drunk wine at the restaurant without eating more than a few mouthfuls. Now she was feeling decidedly less able to make rational decisions. What she wanted desperately to do now was not rational or sensible but her heart was aching and her body demanding to be

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in his arms. There seemed little point in fooling herself anymore. Whether her future would be as his wife or his mistress seemed irrelevant. She wanted him, more than life itself.

She watched Alessandro, standing with his back to her looking out of the window, feeling her insides melting with need and longing. Sensing her eyes upon him, he turned suddenly to look at her. For a few seconds they simply stared at each other, and then he moved to stand over her and ran his fingers down her cheek. ‘Amy?’

Wordlessly, she rose and stood facing him, knowing it was out of her control. And then, just as she had six years before, she rose onto her tip toes and brushed his lips with her own. He moved slowly, tantalizingly to take her face in his hands and ran his thumbs across her lips, causing a gasp to escape them. The warm pressure of his sensual hands had always aroused her almost to screaming point and, she soon discovered, nothing had changed. He raked his fingers through her hair, pulling her face close to his and looked so deeply into her eyes she was sure he must see her very soul. And then he began to kiss her; gently at first, with soft, butterfly touches which whispered across her skin but which quickly deepened to intense, penetrative kisses, leaving her as limp as a rag doll in his arms. ‘Oh God, Amy, you have no idea, my darling, how much I have longed to do this. Tell me you have wanted me too,’ he begged her.

‘Every minute, of every day, since I left,’ she whispered, almost faint with raging desire.

He led her to the thick rug in front of the fire and pulled her down into his arms. Somehow their clothes were discarded and at last she lay naked and ecstatic as Alessandro kissed and touched every part of her body in a way she had long remembered and ached for, trawling his fingers across her skin; allowing them to stray from her taut breasts down to the softness of her inner thighs and then to touch her deeply, before following their path with his lips and tongue. He smilingly forbade her to touch him in return. ‘No, sweetheart, this time its my turn to drive *you* crazy; I want to remind you of a few things,’ he murmured and for an almost unbearably long time, he held her at a fever

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pitch of pleasure, gasping and shuddering in his arms until she begged him, 'Please, please, darling.' At last he moved across her and possessed her, and a few moments later they both cried out with joy and then lay exhausted, holding each other in tender amazement in the firelight.

'Stay with me tonight, Amy. I want to make love to you all night and to be able to look at you as dawn breaks.' Already longing for him again, she kissed him, nodded and quickly, gathering up their clothes, they ran upstairs, giggling like school children in case Lucia should emerge from her room and catch them.

'I must go and check on James,' she told him softly as he pulled her towards his bed. 'He will expect to find me in my room if he has a nightmare and comes looking for me.'

Reluctantly, he let her go and lay naked, aroused and smiling on the silk sheets. 'Be quick – I need you.' She slipped on his robe and walked quickly down the corridor to James's room.

The second she opened the door, she knew something was terribly wrong. James had been sick on the floor and was lying on his side moaning softly. When she touched him, he was burning with fever and he seemed unable to focus on her. All over his body was a pink rash.

'James!' she gasped, 'What's wrong?'

'Mama,' he murmured. 'Headache.' And promptly threw up again.

Amy knew instinctively that James was seriously ill and rushed back to Alessandro's room. 'It's James,' she yelled. 'He's desperately ill and we need to get him to hospital.'

'What's wrong?' asked Alessandro, leaping off the bed and reaching for his clothes.

'I don't know, but he's sick, burning up and covered in a rash.'

'We'll take him in the car; it will be quicker.'

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Within five minutes Alessandro was driving at speed through the dark streets of Rome to the hospital, as Amy cradled James, wrapped in a blanket, in the back of the car, tears streaming down her face. He was barely conscious and she was sure he would die before they even reached the hospital. ‘Keep breathing Jamie, don’t leave me. The doctor will soon make you well darling; just hang on in there for a few minutes,’ she pleaded with him. But his breathing was getting more and more difficult, and as they dashed into the emergency department, it stopped altogether.

‘Please, help my little boy!’ she screamed as they ran into the emergency department. ‘He isn’t breathing – he’s dying.’

A doctor came to them at a run and after a quick glance yelled ‘He’s arrested,’ and grabbed his limp little body. Suddenly there was bedlam as the crash team came at speed from all directions and surrounded James as he lay, looking so tiny and vulnerable, on the bed. They shocked him with a defibrillator and at first there was no response; the second time, his heart started to beat again and he took a deep, reviving breath.

Amy stood staring in disbelief at the scene and Alessandro held her tightly, his face white and ravaged with anxiety.

Once James was breathing for himself again, a nurse took his parents aside and told them that James would now be given pure oxygen, while they tried to find out what was wrong with him. Tests and more tests and intensive observation would be imperative. They stood clutching each other, unable to speak, until a doctor came to them half an hour later.

‘I’m so sorry to tell you that James has meningitis,’ he said gently. ‘He is extremely ill and we don’t know yet what his chances are. We are giving him massive doses of anti-biotic, he’s on fluids and we have done blood tests to make sure he is getting the correct drug. He is having a lumbar puncture to relieve pressure on the brain and X-Rays to check there are no other sites of infection. He will then be transferred to Intensive Care and you can stay with him.’

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‘He was well when he went to bed,’ whispered Amy. ‘How could he be taken so ill so quickly?’

‘I’m afraid this illness can flare up incredibly fast. It isn’t your fault so please, just be grateful you went in to check on him when you did. If you hadn’t, he would have been beyond hope by the morning. As it is, he’s a strong little boy, so we will pray for a good result.’ He patted her hand kindly and moved away to his next patient.

Amy and Alessandro were guided to James’s bedside by a young nurse who brought them some chairs and paper cups of hot coffee. Their son lay, his eyes closed, with drips and tubes attached to his little body; the bleep-bleep of the heart monitor the only sound in the room. Every few moments, a nurse came to check on him and take his blood pressure.

‘How long before we will know anything more?’ asked Alessandro.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘The next forty eight hours will be very critical. Try to get some rest; there’s a bed for you to lie on in the next room; you could take turns to be with him.’

But Amy pulled a chair to James’s bedside and sat holding his little hand. ‘I’m staying. He will know I am here.’

All through the night they watched over him and grim-faced doctors occasionally came in to see how he was doing. There was no change as dawn broke and finally Amy and Alessandro were persuaded to go home for a rest and some breakfast.

‘Amy, we’ll be back in a couple of hours,’ Alessandro said, gently leading her to the door. ‘You are going to make yourself ill; you had no dinner and now you must have breakfast.’

‘I couldn’t.’

‘You must. You have to stay strong for James.’

With a deep sigh and a last backward glance at the small, helpless body of her son, she allowed him to lead her to the car and drive her back to his house. Lucia had

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been forewarned and breakfast was ready as they walked through the door. She too looked strained and upset.

‘I am desolate,’ she wept. ‘He was sleeping peacefully when I looked at him before I went to bed. A little flushed, but he didn’t seem to be ill.’

‘Lucia, no-one is blaming you,’ Alessandro reassured her. ‘The doctors have said that this illness can strike out of nowhere.’

After a quick shower and change of clothes, they made their way back to the hospital. James looked very peaceful and his temperature had dropped, but he was still unconscious.

‘Talk to him,’ advised the doctor. ‘Tell him stories, talk to him about everything he’s familiar with. He can almost certainly hear you and it helps to stimulate his brain.’

So, all morning they took turns to tell him things; sometimes about themselves, sometimes about him and how much they loved him. Amy told him Little Red Riding Hood and Alessandro talked about Juventus; they told him how much Snoopy would be missing him and that it would soon be Christmas. But still he lay there, oblivious to it all.

‘I must go and phone my mother and Gabriel,’ sighed Amy, rising. ‘He can let the others know.’

Gabriel was horrified and immediately offered to come to Rome to support her.

‘No, there is nothing you can do. I promise to let you know how things are going,’ she told him. ‘Give our love to everyone.’

‘We’ll all be praying for you,’ he told her.

Her mother also wanted to come straight to Rome, but Amy dissuaded her, promising to keep in close touch. She felt very strongly that she and Alessandro needed to cope with this trauma together – as James’s parents.

Disconsolately, she wandered back to James’s room and was just about to enter when she heard Alessandro’s voice speaking softly to James.

‘Come back to us, James. Your Mama and I are going to be together now, like a proper family. I’ll never let either of you out of my sight again, I promise.’

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Whether it was his words which struck the vital chord in James's mind they would never know, but his eyelids began to flicker, and slowly he opened his eyes and turned to focus on his father.

'Amy!' whispered Alessandro urgently. 'Look!'

She rushed to the bedside to see James painfully turn his head to look at her.

'Oh, thank God!' she sobbed. 'James, my darling boy, you have returned.'

The doctors were quickly summoned and they shooed Amy and Alessandro out of the room while they did a number of tests, but within the hour they were able to tell them that they were hopeful James would make a full recovery. His reflexes were good and he recognised his parents.

'We'll keep him in intensive care for at least twenty-four hours, but then he can go to the children's ward. You might just about have him home in time for Christmas next week.'

When James was once again sleeping peacefully, Amy and Alessandro slipped away and went back to the house. They were both emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

'I need to sleep for a while,' Amy yawned. 'I can't see straight.'

'Then come to bed with me, Amy.'

'To sleep?' she smiled wanly and he took her in his arms.

'To sleep.'

And so, for four hours, they slept together and when they woke, because it was irresistible, very gently they made love and were restored.

'Shall we go for a walk?' suggested Amy a while later. 'I need some air and exercise before we go back to the hospital, and I need to talk to you.' So donning coats and scarves, they strolled through the quiet, dark streets.

'What's on your mind?' Alessandro asked after a few moments.

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‘We almost lost James,’ she murmured, a catch in her voice. ‘It put things into perspective and...well, if you think it would be appropriate...I believe he should get to know his grandparents.’

‘That is incredibly generous of you, sweetheart, but no.’

‘Will you be seeing them soon?’

‘I have no plans to.’

‘Alessandro?’ He had suddenly withdrawn into himself.

‘Amy, I have only seen them once since you told me what my father did that night. I went round and very calmly told them that their interference had all but destroyed my life and that I would never give them a chance to do further damage.’

‘I see...did you tell them about James?’

‘No. He is no concern of theirs. I told them it would be a long time before I felt the need to see them again. It’s only pure chance that brought us together again, Amy. I’m not sure I can forgive him for that.’

‘But your father is old and ill.’

‘Amy, please, I don’t want to talk about it. It’s a family thing.’

And I’m not family, she thought. But James is.

For the next two days James remained very ill, but eventually, three days before Christmas he was well enough to walk up and down his room and to ask when he might go home.

‘We can’t go back to Venice for Christmas because the doctors want to check on you for a couple of days,’ Amy told him, ‘so we are staying here in Rome, until the doctors say you are well enough to travel. You can come back to Papa’s house on Christmas Eve, that’s the day after tomorrow, if you are well enough.’

The idea of Christmas with both his parents was a great spur to the little boy, and he began to improve radically. He grew stronger and his headaches faded away, although he still got tired very quickly.

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‘He’s been lucky,’ said the doctor. ‘In truth, I thought we might lose him, but he has a fighting spirit and in a couple of weeks he will have more or less forgotten all about this.’

Amy and Alessandro spent the last two days before Christmas decorating the house, putting up an enormous Christmas tree and buying presents. Amy chose lots of small things for Alessandro, including CD’s of some very particular music, and also bought a gift for James to give him.

Then, the day before Christmas Eve, having spent a restless night thinking about what she had to do, Amy made an excuse to escape from the house and asked to borrow the car and Franco, Alessandro’s chauffeur.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Alessandro.

‘Just shopping,’ she replied, crossing her fingers, and as he nodded and disappeared into his study to answer the phone, she climbed into the car and asked Franco to take her to Giovanni’s home.

As they approached the exclusive house, which actually looked more like a palace, she almost changed her mind. The security guard, recognising Alessandro’s car, let them into the vast grounds and then it was too late; there was no going back. The huge, oak front door opened as the car drew up outside and a flunky came to open the car door, expecting to see Alessandro.

‘You have an appointment?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘No. But I would like to see Signor and Signora di Benedetto. It’s very important.’

Doubtfully he asked her name and allowed her into the hallway – a vast atrium with a glass roof through which sunlight streamed onto marble tiles, Persian rugs and a wide curved staircase descending past portraits of past di Benedettos. It was awesome, she thought, like a Hollywood set. If Alessandro’s house seemed rather austere, this place was like a museum. It echoed his footsteps as the man servant walked away.

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A few moments later, he returned and asked her to follow him into surprisingly cosy room with a log fire burning in the grate. Giovanni was seated in a chair and his wife Dolores rose from the sofa to inspect Amy as she stood in front of them.

‘Signorina Storace. What can we do for you?’ she demanded.

‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ she asked softly.

‘I...yes...yes, indeed.’ For a few seconds she looked uncomfortable but then with a gesture, invited Amy to sit down. ‘You have caused us much distress, young lady.’

‘And you separated me from Alessandro by telling lies. Thanks to you, my son has only just met his father.’

‘Your son? Oh, dear God, she has set the oldest trap in the book. So now you have reappeared to claim vast sums of money from Alessandro?’

‘I have no need of money from him. If that had been my aim, I would hardly have stayed away for nearly six years, would I?’ she snapped, trying to keep calm. Clearly there were good reasons why Alessandro avoided his mother. ‘I came here thinking that perhaps you might like to get to know your grandson and hoping that there might be reconciliation with Alessandro. I came to invite you to spend Christmas day with us, but obviously I made a great mistake. I am very sorry to have bothered you.’

She turned to leave, but Giovanni suddenly called her back. His face was contorted slightly and he had great difficulty speaking. Reluctantly, she turned to face him.

‘Young lady...please.’ He held out a gnarled hand and slowly she went towards him. ‘I have a grandson? I can’t believe it.’

‘Yes, Signor, you do,’ she replied gently, taking his proffered hand. ‘He is six and his name is James. We live in Venice. Would you like to see a photograph?’

‘I would.’ His rheumy eyes begged her and she pulled out of her bag a picture of James, riding his bike around the garden, laughing at the camera, his eyes alight with mischief. ‘He is so like Alessandro...see, Dolores.’ Shakily, he passed her the picture and

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she gave a bad-tempered sigh as she took it from him and stared, silently at the image. Unexpectedly, her eyes brimmed with tears and overflowed.

‘History repeats itself,’ she said through gritted teeth, and with a loud derisory sniff, she stuffed the picture back into Giovanni’s hand and abruptly left the room.

‘Sit with me... Signorina.’

‘My name is Amy,’ she told him.

‘Amy. I did you both a great wrong.’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Can you forgive me?’

‘Yes, Signor, for the sake of my son, and for Alessandro. That is why I came. James almost died this week from meningitis and he is still in hospital. It made me realise that he might never have had a chance to meet his family.’

‘Alessandro may never forgive me,’ he told her sadly.

‘I am sure he will.’ She rose and walked to the door. ‘The invitation for Christmas day still stands. Lunch will be at two o’clock.’

‘Amy, thank you,’ he called after her as she slipped out of the room.

‘Franco, that visit was secret between you and me. I just hope I did the right thing,’ she said to the chauffeur, getting back into the car.

As it grew dark on Christmas Eve they were finally able to go to the hospital to collect James. Alessandro carried him to the car and gently strapped him in. He was happy and excited and there was a sparkle back in his eyes which lifted Amy’s spirits. As the car approached the house, James gave a shriek of delight as he saw the twinkling lights adorning the garden, and as they carried him inside to see the Christmas tree, he beamed with pleasure.

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Lucia had prepared a traditional Christmas Eve meal of fish and seafood, to honour the apostles who, she told them, were fishers of men; but just before they went in to eat, there was the sound of music from outside.

‘What’s that?’ asked James.

‘Come and see,’ smiled Alessandro and took him to the front door. Outside the *zampognari*, folk bagpipers, had come to play the Christmas songs *Cantata dei Pastori* and *Gesu Bambino* for James, before moving on to the Piazza Navona where they would give their Christmas concert. The little boy was enchanted and Amy was almost overcome at such a lovely gesture.

James went to bed soon after dinner and snuggled into his duvet with Teddy. They had decided to exchange Christmas presents the next day as the child had had so much excitement already. Alessandro stayed to tell him a story before coming downstairs and pulling Amy onto his lap on the sofa. The only light in the room was a glow from the fire and a shaft of moonlight through the window and for a while she just wrapped her arms around him, soaking up the scent of his hair, the firmness of his body, the exquisite pleasure of just being so close to him. But she knew it had to end soon.

‘We have to go back to Venice in a couple of days,’ she told him. ‘I can’t leave Gabriel and Sonya to organise everything. There will be a gala night at the beginning of the Venice Carnival, so I have a big event to plan – and,’ she added with a huge smile ‘I am going to indulge myself with the most beautiful costume I can find.’

‘Am I invited?’ he asked quizzically.

‘Of course. But you must also come in costume.’

‘You won’t recognise me!’ he promised with a laugh. ‘But I have commitments I can’t avoid, Amy, and since I have a duty of care to my clients’ money, I’m afraid I shan’t be able to come to Venice for a couple of weeks.’

She was crestfallen. Since hearing him tell James that he would never be parted from them again, she had been wondering what he had in mind, and somehow she couldn’t bring herself to ask. Living in Rome was not a possibility for her; she wasn’t

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comfortable there and knew that the social circle in which Alessandro's family moved would be closed to her. Not that she could imagine being a part of the rich set that spent their lives gossiping and sleeping with each other's husbands and wives. Amy was happy in Venice and more importantly, so was James. He would be devastated to be moved again away from the friends who had become his extended family. But clearly, Alessandro's business and home were in Rome, so she concluded with regret, there seemed little chance that they could ever live together permanently. It had been a promise to James he clearly would not be able to keep.

'What are you thinking?' he asked.

'Oh, just thinking ahead to how much work I have to do before the hotel opens,' she lied.

'I was thinking of more romantic things,' he whispered, kissing her very thoroughly. 'The soft moonlight falling through the window on your face makes you look just like a Bellini angel.'

'I don't actually feel very angelic,' she teased him, sliding a hand down his body and causing him to gasp.

'I think it's time for an early night, don't you?' he murmured, and taking her hand, led her to his bed, where once again the night passed with very little sleep for either of them.

Chapter Thirteen

Christmas day dawned fair, and Amy woke to find herself blissfully wrapped around Alessandro. He opened his eyes at the same moment, smilingly pulling her into an even deeper embrace.

Just then the door creaked open and they both turned their heads to see James, shyly peeping around it. He looked a little confused to find his mother in the wrong bedroom, but since his main ambition was to be allowed to open his presents he made no comment other than to ask when they were coming downstairs.

Half an hour later, they gathered round the Christmas tree and watched as he excitedly pulled the wrapping off a complete train set, a computer games console and a radio controlled car.

While he was happily entertained, Amy and Alessandro drifted into the kitchen to make breakfast and exchanged their own gifts, mostly small fun things which made them both laugh, but Alessandro then produced a small wrapped box for Amy. She smilingly unwrapped it and discovered the most exquisite emerald and diamond ear rings, which must have cost a fortune.

‘Thank you, they are lovely – I’ll wear them later.’ Her heart began to pound as she wondered whether Giovanni and Dolores would accept her invitation to lunch – and whether Alessandro would be furious with her. Well, she thought, it’s make or break time.

The morning passed in a fever of cooking and preparing a traditional Christmas day lunch of Parma ham with salami and olives, followed by an egg soup and then a selection of roast meats and vegetables. Lucia came to help before going off to join her own family and by two o’clock, everything was finally ready. The table gleamed with silver and candles and Amy could hardly contain her tension waiting to see whether Alessandro’s parents would arrive. The clock ticked on, and at two-fifteen she decided

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they were not coming and went to remove two place settings from the table before dragging Alessandro and James away from the toys.

‘Lunch is ready. James, go and wash your hands please.’

Just then, there was a crunch of gravel on the drive and a large Daimler pulled up outside the house.

‘What the...’ Alessandro went to the window and his face darkened with fury as he watched the chauffeur help his parents from the car. ‘Amy...did you invite them?’ he demanded.

‘Yes, I did – please don’t be angry because it’s time to draw a line under what happened. James needs to know his family – and you need to make friends with your father before he dies.’

‘It was not your place to arrange this,’ he growled.

‘I think it was. I was wronged as much as you – because I was left with a child to bring up; but if I can forgive them, so can you!’ She faced him, her chin raised and eyes sparkling with determination.

‘Amy, this is unforgivable interference.’ For a moment he glared at her then turned on his heel and went to open the front door.

Nervously, Amy waited in the living room, and a few moments later, Alessandro drew his parents into the room. Giovanni, in a wheelchair looked very pale and ill. Amy went to him and took his hand while Dolores looked on from the doorway.

‘I’m so glad you decided to come. Alessandro, could you fix some drinks please. I left a tray in the kitchen.’

With a curt nod, he left the room and returned a few moments later bearing a bottle of champagne and glasses. Silently, he popped the cork, poured the wine and passed the flutes to Amy and his parents.

‘I need to tell you, Alessandro, that I am sorry,’ said Giovanni in a querulous voice. ‘I manipulated both of you and I don’t deserve your forgiveness. But I am a sick old man and I don’t want to die without seeing you – and my grandson.’

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Alessandro stood silently for a moment, then went to his father, knelt down and put his arms around him. ‘It is over, Papa. We are friends and you are welcome in my house.’

‘Thank you, son, thank you.’

Dolores still stood frostily by the door, clearly acutely uncomfortable. Amy crossed to her and quietly murmured, ‘Please, come and sit with me.’ Shrugging off Amy’s hand from her arm, she went to sit on the sofa, disdain and dislike in every angle of her body.

‘Where is the boy?’ she asked finally.

‘I’ll go and bring him,’ said Alessandro crisply. ‘Please remember he has been extremely ill – he must not be upset.’

He called James, who had gone back to play with his train set, and the child came into the room. His eyes widened as he regarded the elderly man in the wheelchair, and the stern looking woman seated beside his mother.

‘James, I want you to meet your *nonno* and *nonna*, my parents. Will you come and say hello?’

The child stood for a second before crossing the room to his mother and climbing onto her lap. He smiled uncertainly at Dolores, who merely nodded at him, but Giovanni caught his breath as he looked at his grandson and the child smiled shyly at him.

‘Why are you in that wheelchair?’ he asked.

‘Because my legs are old and tired,’ he replied. ‘Will you come and tell me about your Christmas presents?’

‘Yes! I had a train set and Papa has been helping me set it up. Do you want to come and see?’

‘He speaks Italian,’ whispered the old man. ‘You taught him Italian.’

‘He speaks three languages,’ Alessandro told him proudly.

Turning back to James, Giovanni held out a gnarled hand. ‘Yes, James, I would love to see your train set. Alessandro...will you push me?’

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The three of them left the room and Amy sat beside Dolores waiting for her to speak; after a few awkward moments, she raised her eyes to Amy.

‘This is going to cause quite a scandal. It was bad enough when Alessandro and Sophia divorced. Now everyone will be gossiping because he has a child outside of marriage.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘You know that if he marries you it will only be because of the boy.’

‘We haven’t discussed it.’ Amy felt angry colour flood her cheeks and fought to control her temper. This awful woman knew nothing of the passion between Alessandro, and herself and looking at the cold, hard expression, she decided that Dolores had probably never felt a flicker of passion in her entire life. For that, Amy supposed, she should be pitied.

‘He is a good catch young lady, and you have played a clever game. I can see that today you have only invited us here so that you can gloat over your victory. My husband insisted on coming, it was not my choice’

‘If that is your opinion Signora, there is nothing I can do to change it. I invited you here today because I wanted to see you both reconciled with Alessandro - and so that James could meet his grandparents.’

‘James will be welcome in our home – we acknowledge him as family, not least because he is so like his father.’

‘If you will excuse me, I need to finish preparing lunch.’ Taking a deep breath in an effort to calm herself, Amy left the room, banging the door behind her.

By contrast, across the hallway, she heard laughter as Giovanni and Alessandro took turns to press the controls for the train set while James knelt in the centre of the track, watching the trains circle around him. Perhaps, thought Amy, not all of her efforts had been in vain.’

A while later, they all gathered for lunch and although Dolores contributed almost nothing to the conversation, Giovanni and James carried on a spirited discussion about

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football and fishing. Alessandro sat back and watched them, a small smile on his face, but when Amy caught his eye, he regarded her coolly.

To her relief, the elderly couple left shortly after lunch, as Giovanni was tired and in need of his medication. He took her hand at the front door and simply said ‘thank you, my dear.’ She leaned and kissed his cheek and James also came forward to give his grandfather a peck. But Dolores got into the car and called Alessandro to her. Amy could not hear the exchange between them, but he returned to the house grim-faced.

As the car pulled away, Alessandro turned to her and said quietly, ‘Please don’t ever do anything like that again. My family are none of your concern. If I had wanted to see them, I would have arranged it myself.’

Tearfully, Amy took James upstairs for a rest and called the airline to book flights for them both back to Venice the next day. She slept in her own room that night and when she emerged the next morning she discovered Alessandro had left the house. Lucia told her he had gone to the office and would be back at lunch time.

‘We will have left by then,’ Amy told her. ‘Our flight is at one o’clock.’

She packed their clothes and Lucia found an extra box for James’s presents. She called a taxi to take them to the airport and bade farewell to Lucia. As she watched the house recede into the distance, she wondered whether she would ever see it again; clearly Alessandro was very angry because she had so seriously overstepped the boundaries of their relationship.

As they sat in the departure lounge, James looked miserable. ‘Why didn’t Papa say goodbye to us?’ he asked. ‘Are you not friends again?’

‘He had to go to the office early, sweetheart. He will come to Venice to see you soon.’ I hope, she added silently.

Amy was greatly relieved to land at Venice airport and delighted to see Gabriel waiting for them. James rushed to him for a hug and he enfolded Amy in his arms as well.

‘I’m so glad to see you both – we’ve all been so worried.’

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‘It was a close call,’ she gulped, suddenly overcome, ‘But he’s fine now except he still gets tired quickly.’

‘He looks okay, but what about you, dear girl?’

‘In bits. Everything was going so well and I actually began to hope there might be a future for us; but I made a huge mistake and invited his parents to spend Christmas Day with us without telling him. He’s furious and has barely spoken to me since.’

‘Give him time.’

‘How did you spend Christmas?’ she asked, eager to change the subject.

‘With Sonya, Donna, Carmela and Antonio. Sonya cooked an amazing meal and we had a great time, except we missed you two. Come on, the boat is waiting and I want to get back before the weather breaks. We’re expecting a storm anytime now.’

The trip to the Lido was uncomfortably rough but the villa was warm and welcoming and Amy collapsed in a chair with a sigh of relief. James yawned and put his thumb in his mouth, so, after feeding him a huge sandwich, she tucked him in his bed for a rest and came back to the kitchen where Gabriel had made coffee. Within a few minutes Sonya and Donna arrived, followed by Antonio and Carmela and soon they were exchanging stories and talking so loudly Amy almost missed hearing the phone ring. She went into the living room to answer it, knowing who it would be.

‘Alessandro.’

‘You did it again didn’t you?’ he barked at her. ‘You ran away without talking to me. I had to go to the office and you were still sleeping so I didn’t wake you. I expected to have time to explain things to you later. When I returned I found you had just taken off. It’s a tiresome habit, Amy, and it has to stop. I really can’t handle it anymore.’

‘I...I’m sorry.’

‘I have a stack of papers here which you need to sign in respect of the new project, and we need to discuss in some detail what you want to do with it. I had hoped we could have dealt with all that this evening, but now I shall have to come to Venice

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over New Year, which is the only time I have in the next three weeks. Will that be convenient?’ he demanded angrily.

‘Yes...of course...’

‘Then I’ll see you in a few days. How is James?’

‘He’s well. Sleeping at present.’

‘Give him my love. Tell him I’m missing him.’ And he put the phone down, leaving Amy feeling sick with shame; how stupid she had been - how juvenile. He must now think her a complete fool and be wondering what he had ever seen in her – apart from a strong sexual attraction. Clearly, the relationship was in tatters and it was all her fault. Miserably, she returned to her friends in the kitchen and sat down with a deep sigh.

‘What is it?’ asked Sonya, taking in her pale, pinched face.

‘I destroyed any chance of a relationship with Alessandro, because I’m an idiot; but I don’t want to talk about it now. We need to discuss the opening of Hotel Maria and the Gala night. There’s only four weeks to go and although the invitations have gone out to nearly a hundred people, we have done almost nothing about organising anything.’

‘I took the liberty of ordering a marquee for the garden,’ chipped in Gabriel. ‘I have a friend...’

In spite of her depression, Amy began to laugh and clutched his hand. ‘Gabriel, you are star; what would we do without you and your friends!’

They discussed catering, music, entertainment and publicity to help get the new Hotel noticed and by the evening a plan of action had been agreed.

Then the predicted storm arrived; strong gusts of wind bent the leafless trees along the road and rain hammered down on the road. Sonya and Donna fled to their apartment down the road and Antonio and Carmela called a taxi home.

‘Please stay here tonight, Gabriel,’ Amy begged him. ‘You can’t possibly cross the lagoon in this weather in a small boat.’

‘Thank you, I think I will. St.Mark’s Square will almost certainly flood with this volume of rain. Anyway, you look as though you need someone to talk to.’

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Amy nodded and he pulled her to sit beside him on the sofa.

‘Tell me.’

‘He’s not married. He and Sophia were divorced two years ago. He says they never loved each other.’

‘Do you believe him?’

‘Actually, yes, I do.’

‘If I’m allowed to ask, has he proposed to you now, or made any other commitment?’

‘No. And since I blew a hole in our relationship by interfering between him and his parents, I doubt he ever will.’

‘Would you marry him if he asked you?’

‘Of course I would,’ she whispered. ‘He’s all I ever think about, but there are too many obstacles. For a start, I couldn’t bear to live in Rome and that is where his business is focused. His mother detests me and I wouldn’t fit in with his friends. I can’t abide the socialites he has to mix with.’ She shuddered, remembering the withering looks and acid comments she had endured at the awful party that night six years ago. ‘So it seems that James will have to be content with a long distance relationship with his papa. Poor little chap, he’s very confused.’

‘Kids are far more resilient than adults; he’ll be fine. You, on the other hand simply cannot go on like this.’

‘Any suggestions?’ she groaned. ‘I seem to be incapable of getting my own life in order...I suppose you don’t have a friend who’s a counsellor?’

‘Oh, Amy,’ he laughed. ‘Let’s just concentrate of getting this lovely hotel launched in four weeks time. You’ve put so much into it and now you have to make a success of it. I have some adverts planned for local papers to promote the restaurant; the chefs want a dummy run on that on New Years Eve, so they are cooking dinner for us, plus anyone else you want to invite.’

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‘That is a wonderful idea. We’ll invite all the new staff and their partners so they can get to know each other.’

‘The web site is up and running,’ continued Gabriel, ‘and the Venice Tourist Board are ready to promote the hotel internationally.’

‘Good grief,’ gasped Amy... ‘you’ve done all that in the few days I’ve been away?’

‘Yes,’ he grinned, pleased with himself, ‘with a lot of help from Sonya.’

‘She’s a wonderful person,’ sighed Amy, regarding Gabriel from under her lashes.

‘Yes,’ he agreed softly, ‘she is.’

So, thought Amy with satisfaction, perhaps that relationship might move in the right direction, given a little time.

‘I’m shattered,’ she yawned. ‘See you in the morning.’

It rained all night and by the morning television reports showed the island of Venice under several inches of water. Gabriel paced up and down, itching to get back to his shop, but there was no possibility of leaving until the waters subsided and the lagoon had calmed down.

‘It happens every year,’ he grumbled, ‘and they will already have wooden walkways across St. Mark’s Square, but it is frightening to think that the place is sinking slowly. Can you imagine what would be lost if the restoration were delayed? The new system of locks and all the new barriers will be finished in about four years, so let’s hope it solves the problems.’

‘You love this place don’t you?’

‘Yes – don’t you?’

‘I never want to live anywhere else...I just wish...’

‘I know.’ He patted her hand. ‘Look, the rain has stopped and it’s about time for the tide to change. I should be able to go home this afternoon.’

Chapter Fourteen

The day after the storm dawned bright, with a hint of warmth in the sun. Donna came to play quietly with James, and Amy was touched to see the children hug each other.

‘Amy, we really need to sort out our own costumes for the gala night,’ said Sonya. ‘There are companies on the mainland who specialise in hiring out, but we’ve left it rather late.’

‘We have. Can you sew?’

‘Not really...the odd button...but surely you don’t intend...’

‘Come and see what I found in a trunk.’

Together, they went up to the small store room and Amy opened a cupboard to reveal yards and yards of blue, crimson and gold silken material.

‘Oh, it’s gorgeous...but we don’t have patterns.’

‘But we do have designs, we can look in the museums...and guess what, Carmela mentioned the other night that when she was a girl she used to work for a company which did nothing else except make carnival costumes. If she will help us, we have everything we need. I brought my sewing machine in my shipment from England and there are lots of shops selling trimmings, cottons and muslin for the petticoats and we can easily make the hoops for under the skirts. What do you think? I can see you in that azure blue and gold is definitely my colour. We could get masks, wigs and shoes from any of the shops in Venice?’

‘Well...all right! It will be fun.’

‘There is so much material we could make costumes for the children as well.’

‘We’re going to be busy!’

‘We certainly are!’ And my mind will be occupied, she thought, trying to push away thoughts of Alessandro. How am I going to face him when he arrives at New Year?

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Carmela was ecstatic to be asked to help make costumes and arrived the next morning with a basket of sewing paraphernalia, a box of costume patterns, an enormous pair of scissors and a folded cutting board covered in squares. She remembered Maria buying the material, which had been ordered to make curtains and never used, but she said it would be perfect for what they had in mind. The years seemed to drop off the elderly lady as she took the measurements of Amy and Sonya and helped them choose designs which would flatter their svelte figures and then she shoed them away while she drew up the patterns to scale.

Whilst Amy and Sonya were reviving themselves with a cup of coffee, the two chefs arrived to discuss menus and to make sure the new equipment they had asked for had arrived. There would be forty guests for dinner for New Years Eve and if everything went to plan they were keen to open the restaurant before the end of January.

‘People know we’re coming here, darling,’ they told Amy ‘You’ll be rushed off your feet.’

Amy hid a smile at what seemed like their arrogance, but to her amazement the next day, the phone started to ring. Word had indeed got round and customers were lining up to book tables. So, she agreed the restaurant would open for business on the third of January – just a week away and called all her prospective staff together to tell them the news.

‘I must be mad!’ she said faintly to Carmela the next day while having a dress fitting. ‘It’s three weeks ahead of what I was planning; then we have the gala, the costumes to finish and after that a hotel to run.’ She was filled with panic.

‘It will be all right, Amy,’ the old lady smiled. ‘All this was meant to be, just you wait and see.’

It was now four days since Alessandro had called her and although Amy had picked up the phone a dozen times to speak to him, she had never quite plucked up the courage. She knew he would be busy and he was obviously still angry with her. With

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only two days to New Years Eve she too was rushed off her feet with last minute preparations.

‘If you have finished nipping and tucking my dress, Carmela, I really must go and sort out the bomb site which passes for the office. I’ll do some sewing on the dresses this evening if you leave me some instructions.’

‘You can go...slip it off carefully.’ Carmela slid her creation off her shoulders and Amy stepped carefully out of it.

‘It is going to be the most beautiful dress I have ever worn,’ she told Carmela. ‘Wait till you see the black jewelled mask, white wig, fan and the rhinestone shoes to go with it.’

‘You will be the belle of the ball.’

The small office – a converted fuel store behind the kitchen - was awash with paperwork; orders and invoices everywhere, unwashed cups and an overflowing rubbish bin. Amy was desperately trying to put the important things in files while answering the phone, and the computer was making an unaccustomed beeping noise. She looked a wreck; her hair was a tangle, there were dark shadows of tiredness under her eyes and she was wearing a pair of aged jog pants and baggy sweater. Then Alessandro walked in.

As always her stomach did a back flip at the sight of him and she seemed to forget how to breathe. Quickly she ended her call and ran her fingers through her hair, thinking that once again Prince Charming had caught poor Cinderella in her rags. Where was her fairy godmother when she was needed, she wondered.

He said nothing for a moment but simply leaned on the door frame, arms folded and looked at her. Naturally, he was immaculate in a cashmere sweater over an open necked white shirt, with jeans accentuating his delectable body. His dark hair had been cut shorter and it made him look younger, almost boyish.

‘Do you need a hand?’ he asked at last.

‘No...thank you.’ She stuffed the remaining papers in a drawer and turned off the computer.

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‘You look exhausted.’

‘I am. We’re opening the restaurant ahead of time; there’s a lot to organise, but I think we’re on course. I didn’t know you were arriving today.’

‘I managed to concertina some meetings last week and got away a day early.’

‘Well...that’s good...isn’t it?’ She cleared her throat, not knowing what to say or think. At last she raised her eyes to him and saw only softness and love.

‘Come here, Amy,’ he commanded her, and slowly she moved from behind the desk and came to stand in front of him. He lifted her chin and looked into her tear-filled eyes.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispered. Wordlessly he kissed her and then took her into a deep, healing embrace. The warmth of his body, the scent of him as he held her, the beat of his heart under her cheek left her weak with relief. This was a moment she had feared might never come and for a while she was incapable of doing more than stand there, her arms around him, fighting for control of her emotions.

‘Come for a walk?’ he asked at last.

‘Yes. I’ll get my coat.’

Hand in hand, they walked along the canal to the waterfront and when they came to a bench, Alessandro pulled her to sit beside him.

‘I need to tell you some things about my background, Amy; things which have wrongly been kept secret because my...mother...is terrified of scandal.’

‘I know she is. She bereted me for turning up with your child and is obviously still very angry about your divorce.’

‘She has been angry at me from the moment she set eyes on me. You see she isn’t my real mother. She either couldn’t or wouldn’t have children and how my father has tolerated her foul temper and spiteful nature for so long I really can’t imagine.’

‘So...you were adopted?’

‘No. My father had an affair with a young woman who worked at the house. I believe he was truly in love with her, and she became pregnant with me. He apparently

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asked Dolores for a divorce and she threatened him with the biggest scandal he could imagine. She said she would say he was a violent husband and that she would reveal some rather unsavoury business dealings in which he had unfortunately been involved and which at that time would have destroyed him and possibly even put him in prison. It was outright blackmail, but he gave in to her on condition that when I was born my mother and I would live nearby, that I would have his name and that she would never stop him having contact with us.'

'What happened?' asked Amy, totally intrigued.

'When I was born, my mother died of a haemorrhage. My father was devastated and naturally took me to live with him and Dolores. As it happened, Dolores had been away for several months and returned a few days after my birth – so my father insisted that they could pass me off as her baby since no-one had seen her for a while anyway. I am sure most people knew what had happened but in 'polite society' nothing was said and I was accepted as their child. But she hated me all my life. She still does – that's why she bullied my father to tell you those lies and send you away. She thought you were below her class and that her friends would look down on her if I married someone who wasn't on the 'A' list. And anyway she couldn't bear the thought that I might be happy.'

Amy stared out across the lagoon, thinking that in her story it was Prince Charming who had the wicked stepmother.

'I am sorry, darling,' she murmured, resting her head on his shoulder. 'I had no idea what a mine field I was meddling with. But your father...he obviously adores you.'

'Yes, I'm sure he does. He's always had my best interests at heart, but Dolores has dominated him and blackmailed him for forty years. He taught me the business and handed it over to me when he retired. Since then it has trebled in value and now it's clean of anything underhand. However, since he left the business I have had little contact with either of them; just the odd duty visit. So you see I have a lot to learn about how families and friendships work. No-one ever taught me, and when I came here and saw you with

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your friends, and how you were with James and Donna, I just craved to be a part of a family.’

‘And I kept running out on you.’

‘Papa!’

‘James.’ The little boy came running along the towpath with Donna and Sonya in tow and flung himself into Alessandro’s arms.

‘Have you come to stay, Papa?’

‘For a few days.’

‘Oh,’ his little face fell. ‘Will you take me to football? There’s a game tomorrow?’

‘Of course...if that’s all right, Amy?’

‘Of course it’s all right. Shall we all go back to the house? It’s getting cold.’

Companionably they sauntered back and as they drew near the villa, now with its proud sign ‘Hotel Maria’, they noticed a removal van outside Constanzo and Simona’s house next door.

‘They are moving to their new flat today,’ said Sonya, ‘We shall miss them.’

‘Well, they’re not moving far, and they are joining us for New Year and for the gala night,’ added Amy.

‘I’m going to say goodbye,’ yelled James, dashing inside.

‘You would never believe he had been so ill,’ marvelled Alessandro.

A moment later he re-emerged, dragging Constanzo by the hand, closely followed by a tearful Simona.

‘We have lived here for fifty years,’ she sniffed. ‘But I am glad it is going to be a family home again – and now I shall only have a small place to clean. The bad news is that I shall also have Constanzo under my feet all day.’ She smiled at Alessandro and he moved forward quickly to take her hand.

‘Who bought it?’ asked Sonya, suddenly realising she had never been told.

‘A lovely young family. You’ll like them.’

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‘I am sure you will be very happy in your new home,’ Alessandro said, shaking Constanzo by the hand.’

‘I hope...I hope so too, Signor. Thank you.’

‘We’ll see you the day after tomorrow,’ Amy smiled, hugging them both. ‘Good luck. Come on everyone... I wonder when the new people will be moving in?’ she mused as they gathered in the large kitchen. ‘I should have asked them.’

After mugs of hot chocolate, topped with whipped cream had warmed everyone up, Sonya and Donna went home and James, who had suddenly drooped after so much activity, nodded off on Alessandro’s lap. Together they put him to bed for an afternoon rest and then Alessandro insisted Amy should sit opposite him at the kitchen table.

‘If I sit close to you I can’t think straight, and I really want to sort out the plans for the project in Rome. Look, these are the drawings by the architect, which we know will be passed by the authorities; they are desperate to develop the area which was very run down and this is just the sort of project they want to encourage.’ They pored over the plans and Amy was delighted with them. ‘Good,’ grunted Alessandro with satisfaction. ‘Now, if you will just sign all these papers, we can get on to much more interesting things.’

‘Like what?’ she asked mischievously, taking his proffered pen.

‘Just sign, woman, and then you’ll find out,’ he growled.

‘My father told me never to sign anything I hadn’t read,’ she teased him.

‘If you are going to sit there and read all those documents, I think I shall go insane!’

So, she signed everything he put in front of her, aware only of a growing need in both of them, which would not be denied any longer.

The following morning, the day before New Years Eve, Alessandro rose early; Amy rolled over sleepily and tried to pull him back to bed, but with a groan, pleading with her to release him, he extracted himself from her arms.

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‘If you knew how sexy and delectable you look right now,’ he murmured, ‘you would understand what a strong act of will it is taking to leave you. But I have some important things to organise this morning if I am to take James to football later.’

‘What things?’ she asked.

‘Just business. Can I use your office to make some phone calls before I go out?’

‘Yes... but surely everyone has gone home now for the holidays?’

‘Not the people I need to talk to.’

‘You’re being deliberately mysterious.’

With a grin he went into the adjoining bathroom and turned on the shower. Amy, unable to resist the sight of him naked, flung off the bedclothes and went to join him.

‘You wretch,’ he laughed, pulling her into the steamy cubicle.

It was probably one of the longest showers in history, but eventually they emerged and Alessandro dressed quickly and left a smiling Amy to do the same. Somehow, she managed to refocus her mind on the myriad details which still had to be attended to and managed to keep an excited James from over tiring himself before the big match.

Sonya and Donna arrived a short while later, and as the children went off to play, Sonya inspected her friend with frank curiosity. ‘You have the look of someone who spent a lot of time in bed but got very little sleep,’ she smiled.

Amy giggled and blushed. ‘I really don’t know where this relationship will go,’ she admitted, ‘but if I have to settle for what we have, I will.’

‘He’s never mentioned marriage?’

‘No. But it really doesn’t matter any more. You know he had a bad experience, and well, now I know a bit more about his past, I can understand why he might be rather reticent about marrying again – at least for some time. But, I do think he loves me and that is really all I care about.’

Sonya hugged her. ‘I am glad for you. Now, we have to tidy up; those darling chefs will be here soon.’

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‘Yes...I’m delighted with them, but I shall miss having the kitchen to myself. They have definitely made it plain that it will be their territory and that I will be there under sufferance. Getting under their feet will cause tantrums.’

‘Gabriel’s coming over this afternoon, so for now I shall go and help Carmela with my dress. She’s taught me so much about sewing and now I really quite enjoy it. Wait until you see what we have in mind for the children.’

True to his promise, Gabriel arrived at lunchtime with bags of decorations for the dining room. He popped his head into the office, where Amy was still battling with her new filing system and she smiled happily at him.

‘Ah ha! I take it Alessandro has arrived.’

‘Gabriel!’ she remonstrated with him. ‘Didn’t I ever smile before?’

‘Not often. Is Sonya here?’

‘Yes...she’s helping Carmela with her dress....Gabriel....’

‘Yes.’

‘You and Sonya...do I sense a change?’

Gabriel suddenly dumped his bags and came to sit opposite Amy in the cramped office. ‘I can trust you not to breathe a word to her, can’t I? I just need to talk to you, Amy. You see...I can’t stop thinking about her. She haunts my dreams and when I’m with her I just want to grab hold of her.’

‘Then, why don’t you?’

‘I’m not getting the right signals. I don’t know how she feels.’

I do, thought Amy, but I promised not to tell...however... ‘Gabriel, for goodness sake ask her out tonight. Donna can sleep over here on James’s top bunk and you can spend some time alone together.’

‘I’m afraid to ask her, Amy. If she doesn’t feel the same, I risk ruining an important friendship.’

‘Gabriel...I had exactly the same conversation with Sonya.’

‘You did?’ he said, brightening up.

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‘Just ask her.’

‘I will...thank you, sweetheart.’ He leaned over and kissed her cheek, just as Sonya walked into the office. She looked from one to the other, puzzled and Amy rose and with a cheeky grin at her friend, left the office, closing the door behind her.

Alessandro reappeared just in time to snatch James and rush off to the football match. The little boy was beside himself with excitement and Amy had a lump in the throat as she watched them jump into the small launch Alessandro had hired which was waiting with its driver on the canal outside Hotel Maria.

Sonya came up to her as she watched the boat roar away and there was a definite sparkle in her eyes. ‘Do you mind if Donna stays over tonight with James? I can hardly believe it, but Gabriel has asked me out to dinner.’

Amy hugged her gleefully. ‘I’m so glad – it’s about time!’

Arm in arm they walked back into the villa where they discovered the phone was ringing. Amy picked up the receiver and her smile faded to a frown. ‘Lucia...yes, this is Amy...what is it?’ She replaced the receiver a few moments later and sat heavily in a chair.

‘Bad news?’

‘Yes, it’s Giovanni, Alessandro’s father. He has had another stroke and isn’t expected to survive.’

‘Does Alessandro have a mobile phone with him?’

‘No. He left it on my desk; he said it was his time off and he didn’t want to be interrupted.’

‘Then we have to wait until he gets back. Perhaps you could book him a flight for later this evening?’

‘No. He will always get a seat if that’s what he decides to do. He could even charter a small plane but I am not interfering again. Lucia said Dolores was insisting he

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returned immediately and was shouting and screaming at her down the phone. He may not choose to go back to that.'

'She sounds a witch.'

'She is.' Amy briefly told Sonya about Alessandro's relationship with Dolores.

'Poor guy. Well, at least now he has you and James.'

'But we live here and he lives in Rome. And I don't see how that can change with his business commitments. But that's a problem for another day. Go and bring Donna's things over and then you can spend a couple of hours pampering yourself before this evening.'

'I feel quite nervous,' she murmured. 'Supposing it doesn't work...'

'Sonya! I happen to know that it will. He's as mad about you as you are about him. Just go and have fun – you deserve it and so does Gabriel.'

'Thank you, Amy...I do love you.' And she tripped off down the road with a bounce and lightness in her step which brought a warm smile to her friend's face. 'I hope your life is more straightforward than mine,' she sighed, wondering how Alessandro would react when he returned home with James.

They didn't come in until after seven o'clock and by that time Amy knew that Giovanni had died peacefully in his sleep. Gently, she sent James to the kitchen and gave him and Donna some supper before taking Alessandro into the living room and shutting the door.

Alessandro looked at her questioningly and she went to him and put her arms around him. 'Alessandro, I couldn't contact you, but I have to tell you that your father died about an hour ago. He had another stroke this afternoon.'

For a few moments he stood holding her without saying a word, but then he drew back and looked at her. 'I am so glad now that you did what you did. He and I were reconciled and he met his grandson. Thank you, my love.'

'Will you go back to Rome tonight? Dolores is apparently in a terrible state.'

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‘I will call her, but she will have her cronies with her for tonight – there is nothing I can do, so no, I shall leave tomorrow and I expect the funeral will be the day afterwards, as is the custom.’

Amy poured him a drink and sat beside him. ‘Does this change things for you?’

‘The company is now legally mine, with an obligation to give Dolores an allowance for her lifetime – a very generous one – and the house is hers until her death, when it reverts to me. None of it seems to matter very much right now. I can’t believe my father is dead.’

They sat staring thoughtfully into the firelight until the children burst in and climbed onto them demanding a game before bedtime. Amy tried to discourage them, but Alessandro shook his head at her with a sad smile and took them upstairs for a story. He put them both to bed and when he came down they ate supper together before going to Amy’s bed, where, for once, they lay quietly in each others arms all night. Alessandro slipped away very early to return to Rome and Amy had no idea when she might see him again.

Chapter Fifteen

Gabriel and Sonya arrived at mid-morning to collect Donna. They both had a glow about them and Amy had no doubt that Gabriel had not returned to his own flat the night before.

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Amy told them Giovanni had died and that their New Years Eve gathering for the new staff would go ahead without Alessandro. The chefs had already taken over the kitchen and it was almost impossible for anyone else to go in there without being frowned on.

‘I shall have to have a kitchenette fitted into my apartment somehow. I can’t even go into the main kitchen to make coffee!’

‘Perhaps you should look for an apartment like mine,’ suggested Sonya. ‘At least then you would be away from the hotel some of the time.’

‘Maybe, but I can cope for the time being. I gather you two had a good evening?’ The fact that they could barely stay more than two inches from each other and kept touching, told her everything she wanted to know.

‘We did.’ They exchanged a glance and Amy felt she was distinctly in the way. ‘You can leave Donna here for the day, if you have...other things to do. But be here at seven sharp for dinner, otherwise I won’t be accountable for the behaviour of my chefs.’

‘Amy, I promise we will – and thank you.’ They floated away and James and Donna stood watching them from the door.

‘I think Gabriel is going to be your papa,’ said James. ‘Then we’ll both have papas again.’

Donna looked a little doubtful. ‘Does that mean he will live with Mama and me?’

‘I don’t know. My papa comes and goes. I wish he did live with us.’

Amy shoed them off to play in the living room and went upstairs to the bedroom where Carmela was working on the costumes.

‘I have a couple of hours free, what shall I do to help?’ she asked.

‘You can put the trimming on the cuffs of your dress – are your hands clean?’

‘Yes, I just washed them,’ Amy laughed. ‘Carmela, I do hope this is not too much of a chore for you. I didn’t expect you to do so much work.’

‘I’m happier than for a long time, my dear. It’s good to feel useful again, and to do something creative. You are going to look quite stunning in this dress.’

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The two shades of gold she had so artfully combined shimmered in the sunlight and the sequins and diamante beads attached to the bodice sparkled.

‘It’s gorgeous,’ Amy gasped. ‘Can I try it on?’

‘Yes, but lock the door. It would be a shame for anyone to see it before it’s finished.’

The eighteenth-century style bodice, which pushed her breasts up to two delightful curves, had to be laced up from behind, and the long, full skirts of pale gold with the over panels of darker gold fell in graceful folds. Carmela pinned a few places which needed to be slightly altered and then stood back with a smile of satisfaction. ‘You look like Cinderella.’

‘And you are my fairy godmother.’

‘What is Prince Charming going to wear?’

‘I don’t know. He’s being very mysterious about the whole thing. I just hope he will be able to get here for the gala. Now that his father has died he will have a lot of legal things to sort out and he’s already rushed off his feet.’

‘Of course he’ll be here. You should have more faith in him, Amy. Now slip off that gown and let me show you the costumes I am making for the children.’

The elderly lady proudly held up a blue and gold dress for Donna which any little five year old girl would have killed for. It was Little Bo Peep personified. For James there was a suit with blue trousers and a gold jacket. ‘He will need long white socks, buckle shoes and a tricorne hat, but you should be able to get those from the costumier.’

‘And for Sonya?’

‘Only half finished yet, but a similar design to yours in blue. She looks ravishing in that colour.’

‘She would look ravishing in any colour right now – she’s in love.’

‘I know, isn’t it wonderful? She’s perfect for Gabriel – just as you are perfect for Alessandro.’

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Amy's eyes suddenly filled and overflowed and Carmela came and put an arm around her. 'I can't bear it when he is away. But my only option is to move to Rome to be with him but I don't know how I would survive there.'

'My advice is to take one day at a time. And tonight is the start of a new year, with new hope for all of us.'

'You're right, dear Carmela; now hand me that lace and let me make myself useful.'

The chefs arrived at mid day, together with their kitchen help and soon there was a lot of noise, raised voices and banter between them as they began to prepare the meal they had planned for the evening.

At seven sharp, the guests began to arrive, shyly greeting each other and Carmela, Antonio, Sonya and Gabriel moved amongst them, offering champagne, and putting everyone at ease. Cesare Minnelli, who was to manage the day to day running of the hotel, stood with Amy, inspecting the staff and professed himself to be satisfied with her choice.

'I know some of them from other hotels, and they are good. We will do well,' he proclaimed. He was a small, rotund man with a moustache and an infectious laugh, which rang out around the room, causing everyone else to smile.

At seven-thirty they all gathered at the tables in the new dining room and Amy gazed around, almost unable to believe they had achieved so much in such a short time. The lovely room had been transformed from the dingy, dusty salon she had inherited less than four months before, into an Art Deco palace.

She had placed her close friends around her at a large table, and as everyone else found their seats, she asked them to sit, but remained on her feet and summoned the chefs from the kitchen.

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‘I just want to welcome you all to Hotel Maria. As members of my staff you are all valued and I hope you will soon become friends and learn to work together as a team. We are all in this together and it is going to be an exciting and sometimes exhausting time for us all in the weeks to come. I could not have done any of this without my very dear friends Gabriel, Sonya, Carmela and Antonio, to whom I will be eternally grateful. So I wish you all a happy evening, a happy new year, and I would like to propose a toast to my godmother Maria. I hope she is smiling down on us all tonight.’

Glasses clinked and a low hum of conversation began as the chefs and their kitchen helper served the starters. To Amy’s eternal relief it was as delicious as she had hoped, and the rest of the meal followed suit.

‘I think we have a winner in this restaurant,’ beamed Gabriel, leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach. ‘That was the most delectable meal I have eaten outside of Danieli’s.’

‘The staff seem to be enjoying themselves,’ chimed in Constanzo. ‘No clashes of personality so far.’

‘I must circulate and talk to them all,’ said Amy. ‘The restaurant staff start work the day after tomorrow and the hotel employees will be coming in for training the week after. Cesare has a rota already organised, so I hope that everything will go smoothly. We open the hotel for business on the thirtieth and already we are fully booked for the first five weeks; it’s quite amazing.’

‘It’s all so exciting, Amy,’ said Sonya.

‘But it won’t seem like our home anymore,’ interjected James suddenly, and there was an awkward silence because they had all come to the same conclusion. The whole character of the villa had changed, and the little boy was clearly feeling very unsettled.

‘We will still have our apartment, James, and if we outgrow it, in a few months perhaps we will find an apartment near Sonya’s.’

He shrugged. ‘I like it here.’

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Amy moved away, a shadow thrown over her evening, but with a bright smile she went round to welcome her guests. A local musician with a keyboard played for them and with a little persuasion everyone took to the floor as midnight approached. James and Donna bopped together and Amy watched with a mixture of satisfaction and sadness as the clock struck twelve when, amidst cheers and laughter, everyone kissed and exchanged good wishes. Sonya and Gabriel exchanged quite a number of kisses before including anyone else, but then they, and all of Amy's friends surrounded her with hugs and congratulations on her achievement. But Alessandro wasn't there and she thought she had never felt so lonely.

He called her early the next morning sounding weary and sad. 'The funeral is late this afternoon. Not the way I would wish to be spending the first of January.'

'How is Dolores?'

'Unspeakable. She is saying the shock of having you and James turn up in their lives is what brought on the second stroke.'

'Alessandro! Do you believe that?'

'Of course not, my darling. He was thrilled to find out he had a grandson. I don't know how to get through today with her ranting and raving at me. I just want to grieve for my father, but she seems to think I have no right to; he was her exclusive property and she is going to be there with the horrible creatures she associates with fawning all over her. An enormous reception has been laid on at the house and of course the paparazzi are all over the place. It's just awful.'

'Alessandro, if I were to get a flight in a couple of hours, would I be in time to be with you?'

'Well...yes...but I can't ask you to do that.'

'You're not asking me; I'm telling you.'

'That would be wonderful,' he replied quietly. 'Thank you.'

'Call me back in fifteen minutes when I will have had time to organise things and I'll tell you when to meet me.'

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‘I love you, Amy.’

She caught her breath. It was the first time he had said the words so directly. ‘I love you too,’ she replied softly.

She knew Gabriel was at Sonya’s, so she called and asked them to look after James and for Gabriel to take her to the station in his boat; then she checked the train timetable and flew upstairs to shower, change and pack an overnight bag. Within half an hour, she was on her way, with Gabriel coaxing every last ounce of energy out of the boat to get her to the airport in time.

‘I’m so happy for you and Sonya,’ she told him wistfully.

‘Thank you, sweetheart. She is adorable and I am stunned that she seems to feel the same way about me.’

‘Then don’t let her go.’

‘I don’t intend to,’ he grinned.

‘Gabriel, this is Alessandro’s phone number, if you should have any problems at the hotel and can’t reach me on my mobile.’

‘I’m sure we’ll cope. I have no auctions or important clients for the next couple of weeks – so I shall be around most of the time.’

They docked at the airport landing stage and rushed in to find she was just in time to board the flight to Rome. ‘I’ll call Alessandro to tell him you’re on your way,’ called Gabriel.

‘Thanks!’ she called back as they hustled her through Departures.

The flight arrived in Rome just after mid-day and Alessandro was waiting for her as she emerged through the Arrivals gate. She went into his arms and he held her silently for a couple of moments, before taking her hand and leading her to where Franco was waiting with the car.

‘I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you,’ he told her.

He looked pale and drawn and her heart ached for him.

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‘Let’s go somewhere quiet for lunch,’ she said, ‘and then you can tell me all about it.’

They settled on a small bistro; Amy led him to a table at the back and ordered a light lunch for them both.

‘I didn’t realise it would have such an impact on me, losing my father,’ he said sadly. ‘And I can’t share my feelings with Dolores as she is so hostile to me and, I am afraid, to you.’

‘Never mind; you can share anything with me,’ Amy told him softly.

‘Then let me share this. I love you and I want to be with you and James.’

‘I want that too, Alessandro.’

‘Truly?’

‘Truly. I hate every moment away from you and so does James. But let’s get today over with and we’ll talk about it when you are feeling less emotional.’ Her heart was pounding and at that moment she made a decision. No matter how difficult it would be, the hotel would have to be sold and she and James would move to Rome. Whatever the cost she just wanted a life with Alessandro and so did James; if that meant coming to live with him in his huge house, then that was what she would do. But she decided that now was not the time to tell him; they needed to get the funeral over with first and to allow time for him to grieve for Giovanni.

They went briefly back to his house to change; Alessandro into a black suit with a white shirt and black tie, Amy into the black dress and coat with a small black hat she had worn for Maria’s funeral, then they went to Giovanni’s house from where the funeral procession would leave.

A servant opened the door to them and Dolores glared at Amy before turning her back on them both.

‘Ignore her,’ Amy whispered. ‘After today you need never see her again.’

They had to travel with Dolores in the same car to the packed church where Mass was to be said for Giovanni, and sat uncomfortably in the same pew during the service.

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Alessandro kept his eyes on the flower laden coffin, his eyes bright with unshed tears, clutching Amy's hand as if his life depended on her. Dolores wept ostentatiously into a lace handkerchief and as they left the church, she grabbed Alessandro's arm forcing him to escort her to the graveside. Amy smiled and shook her head at him when she could see he was about to object, and followed sedately behind to the special garden set aside for departed di Benedettos. She watched sadly as the coffin was lowered into the ground, thinking that James had lost his grandfather after only one meeting.

When the final prayers had been said, they all returned to what was now Dolores's house, where an enormous buffet had been laid on for the two hundred guests. Moving among them, it was clear they were not there to mourn Giovanni, but to be seen and to discuss business; this was nothing more than a charade and a networking opportunity. So, when Alessandro had spoken to those people he needed to greet, she took his hand and calling Franco, pulled Alessandro into the car, instructing the driver to take them back to the graveside.

'Why, Amy?' asked Alessandro, puzzled.

'So that you can say goodbye to your father properly, in private,' she told him.

As they pulled up at the cemetery, he got out of the car and walked back to the grave, now filled and covered in hundreds of flowers. He looked a lonely figure, she thought, standing there in the fading light and for fifteen minutes he remained quietly in contemplation. Eventually, Amy went to him and he turned and put his arms around her, finally able to weep for his father.

After a while they went back to his house where Amy made them scrambled eggs and later they sat cuddled together by the fire, drinking a bottle of wine; at nine o'clock, exhausted, they went to his bedroom and undressed. He held her in his arms as they lay together and sometime later, very gently they made love and slept entwined together.

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The next morning Alessandro rose early and returned to the bedroom with coffee and toast. Lucia was on leave but Amy was amused to see he had found his way around the huge kitchen.

‘I’m impressed,’ she chuckled. ‘You figured out the coffee machine, huh?’

‘Yes, my sweet and that’s not all I’ve figured out. I have figured out that I cannot, and will not, be parted from you again.’

‘Before you go any further,’ she halted him, ‘I had figured that out too. Alessandro, once the hotel is up and running in say a couple of months, I am going to sell it. If it is what you want, James and I will move to Rome to be with you.’

‘You would do that?’ he asked softly.

‘Yes,’ she nodded firmly. ‘You’re right, this simply can’t go on; I can’t bear it. The simplest solution is for us to move here.’

‘Amy, I can’t let you do that. You’ve put so much into that hotel and you have your friends around you and James is happy there. And anyway, I like Venice...so...Oh dear, I don’t know how to tell you this because now it sounds so underhand.’

‘What?’ she asked curiously.

‘Well...er...when I came to James’s birthday party and talked to Constanzo and Simona, they told me they were thinking of selling their house next door. I told them that when they were ready, I would buy it and...well...that’s what I did.’

‘You did what?’ She sat staring at him in amazement.

‘I hoped that one day things between you and I might resolve; I knew I was still deeply in love with you and I really couldn’t believe you were in love with Gabriel after our passionate encounter in London, so I took a flyer. I swore them to secrecy, so that if we didn’t get together, I could just quietly sell it on and no-one would be any wiser. It must look like a very arrogant decision to have taken without asking you, but I decided to take the chance.’ He walked up and down the room for a moment, clearly embarrassed, before coming to sit beside her on the bed. ‘If you would like it to be our home, Amy, the

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three of us, then, that is where I want to live. I love you and James, and your friends are wonderful – I yearn to be a part of all that, if you'll have me.'

'But what about your business?' she stammered. 'Your house, your own social life...your life has always been so different to ours and the villa next door only has six bedrooms...'

He began to laugh. 'The company has a small office in Venice which I can expand and my cousin Louise, who runs it, is willing to move to Rome. In fact she would be more than delighted to move into this house and take over the reins; and anyway, even if I came into Rome a couple of times a week we could be together the rest of the time.' He looked anxiously at her when she remained silent. 'You don't like the idea do you?' he sighed.

'Like it? Alessandro, I am just totally stunned – I can't believe what I'm hearing. But of course I like it! I think it's wonderful...fantastic, amazing...' and she flung herself into his arms with a shriek.

'Thank God,' he chuckled into her hair. 'I have been bracing myself to tell you about it but the time never seemed right.'

'But after this great mansion it must seem very small – are you sure you won't regret this?' she asked.

'Amy, it is plenty big enough for the three of us, and a dog; and as you said, this is a mansion, a statement of money and power. I want a home.'

She kissed him then with such passion that it was an hour before either of them said anything more; but eventually, with great regret, Amy pulled herself away and went to have a shower. 'I have to go back to Venice today. The restaurant opens for business tomorrow and I can't leave the chefs and Cesare to it; the Gala is looming large and bookings are pouring in for the hotel.'

'What a busy lady...I'm so proud of you.'

'When will I see you?'

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‘I don’t know, my angel. I have a thousand things to do here for the next three or four weeks, not only business, but legal stuff after my father’s death. But look, here are the keys to our house. I don’t suppose you noticed Constanzo slip them to me the other day as they were moving out?’

‘No, I didn’t...they kept your secret well.’ She smiled up at Alessandro. ‘What do you want me to do with the house?’

‘Well, make it habitable for now so that we can move in soon, and then we can turn it into a real home together. It will be fun and I want it to be...well, not like this.’ He gestured to the glitzy finery around him.

‘You mean you want an untidy kitchen, with Snoopy’s bed by the Aga, undies hanging in the bathroom, and a train set under the dining table...that, my darling, is what you are letting yourself in for.’

‘It sounds wonderful.’

‘Yes it does, doesn’t it?’ She kissed him, ‘Now, please will you take me to the airport because I too have a business to run.’

Amy travelled back to Venice in a haze of disbelief and excitement. The water taxi seemed to take forever and then the walk back to the Hotel twice as long as usual. The chefs, who were in the kitchen deep in consultation with Cesare, looked up as she came in before, with a glance at each other, moving apart.

‘Is something wrong?’ she asked nervously.

‘Of course not, we were just having a meeting about final details for the restaurant. Everything is on schedule to open tomorrow and we are fully booked.’

‘That’s good...’ She floated away, still slightly uneasy, but now desperate to go into the house next door which was to be her home. James was alone in the garden and she called him to her.

‘Come with me, James. I have something to show you.’

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He came to her and she took his hand and led him next door. She fitted the key into the door and they went inside. It was in a slightly better state than Maria's villa had been, but clearly the whole house would need to be stripped out and refurbished...and then how lovely it would be. The three living rooms would be spacious and airy, the kitchen, slightly smaller than the one at the hotel, she visualised with modern furniture and appliances with a huge pine table in the centre where they could all gather...and the bedrooms...

'Why are we in Constanzo's house, Mama?' James asked, puzzled.

She came back from her reverie crouching down to face him. 'What would you say if I told you this is now our house? It's for you, me and Papa and we're all going to live here together?'

His face flushed red and he looked at her anxiously. 'Do you mean it?'

'Papa bought the house from Constanzo and Simona without telling us. Now he wants to move to Venice and for us all to be a proper family.'

'And Snoopy?'

'Of course.'

The only way James seemed able to express his joy was by running round and round and whooping.

'Can I choose my bedroom?' he begged breathlessly at last.

'You have the choice of any of them, except this one,' she told him, opening the door of the large master bedroom. 'This one is ours.'

It overlooked the canal, and already had an aged *en suite* bathroom. James rushed off to explore while Amy sat on the bedroom window sill. Rubbing a clean space on the dusty window, she gazed out, almost unable to believe the changes in her life over the last five months. Next door she watched as Gabriel, Sonya and Donna arrived at Hotel Maria, closely followed by Carmela and Antonio. They were chatting and laughing, and she suddenly could hardly wait to see them and called James.

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They locked the house and went back to find everyone gathered in the kitchen. A small silence fell as she walked in and then they all came to hug her in turn.

‘Is this a union meeting?’ she joked.

‘Of course not... we just thought we should all get together before tomorrow night to make sure everything is in order.’

‘And I have to work on the dresses,’ chimed in Carmela.

‘Well, I have news for you. Alessandro sprung a real surprise on me this morning.’

‘He did?’ Gabriel lifted an eyebrow and her friends exchanged looks which verged on alarm.

‘He bought the house next door. We’re going to live there together.’

‘Amy, that’s wonderful!’ Sonya laughed.

Donna jumped up and down with James in a frenzy of excitement. ‘Now you will have a proper Papa and so will I.’ she squeaked. ‘Gabriel is going to be my new papa.’

A hush fell over the group as they all turned their gaze on Sonya, who was blushing furiously, and Gabriel who was beaming from ear to ear.

‘Sonya has agreed to marry me, and Donna has agreed to take me on too – so I consider myself a lucky man.’

Champagne was poured and somehow Paulo and Carlo produced an instant lunch for them all. Sonya shyly showed them her diamond and ruby engagement ring and the happiness in the room was tangible.

‘This was all very quick,’ Amy smiled at them. ‘You only started dating last week.’

‘But we’ve been in love for ages; we just didn’t realise it was mutual, until you took a gentle hand. Now there seems no point in waiting, so we plan to get married in a few months, when we too have found somewhere new to live.’

Amy regarded her dear friends with satisfaction and thought how simple their path to love had been compared to her own. She glanced at her own bare fingers with a

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slight sigh, but then decided not to be concerned about marriage. It was obviously something Alessandro was not ready for, but he had made a commitment to her and to James and she was content to settle for that.

The restaurant opened the next night to great acclaim. It was an exhausting evening for Amy who greeted all her guests and hovered anxiously to make sure the waiting staff were doing a good job and that everyone was happy. Soft music played, the dining room was lit by the multicoloured Tiffany lamps and there were fresh flowers and candles on every table. White table linen glowed, silver sparkled and the diners went into raptures over the food. As she finally closed the front door at midnight, she knew she had a success on her hands.

Now there was just the Gala night and the opening of the main hotel to worry about she thought, trying to force down a wave of panic..

The next few weeks flew by; when she wasn't involved at Hotel Maria she was next door supervising cleaners, and then decorators who were stripping off old wallpaper, sanding the lovely wooden floors back to a deep shine and painting the interior of the whole house white. 'We can start from scratch after we move in,' she told Alessandro on the telephone that evening.

He sounded tired and stressed. Dolores was calling him hourly with problems and demands, and was enraged at his plan to move to Venice. Amy's heart ached for him.

The marquee arrived two days before the Gala and it was huge, covering most of the garden. It had a wooden floor, room for the string quartet Amy had booked to play during dinner, and the inside was prettily draped in white and gold. 'It's gorgeous,' she marvelled to Gabriel, who had come to inspect it.

'Wait till you see it all set up with tables and flowers.'

'Flowers! I haven't ordered flowers!' she panicked.

'All taken care of,' he said smugly.

'I know... you have a friend who's a florist...'

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‘Indeed. Just relax, Amy. All you need to worry about is presenting yourself looking beautiful; everything else is arranged. It’s what you employ all these people to do,’ he added, gesturing to the staff who were happily buzzing around, erecting tables and hauling in chairs.

‘Then I shall go and have a last check on my dress...I presume you have a costume for the night.’

‘Of course. I shall look stunning,’ he said, with mock arrogance.

‘I hope Alessandro will be able to make it. I don’t suppose he’s had time to sort out a costume though...do you think you could call and ask him? He might need some advice...perhaps we could order one...even at this late stage.’

‘Amy, will you stop worrying! He’ll be here and it’s going to be a great night; now go and sew sparkly things on your dress and leave everyone else to get on with what they have to do. By the way, I have booked for you and Sonya to go to the beauty parlour on the afternoon of the Gala for a massage, facial, manicure – whatever you want. My treat.’

‘Gabriel, that is very sweet of you, but we can’t...there’s too much to do.’

‘Nonsense - it’s all organised – stop fussing!’

Grumbling, she went up to the bedroom where Carmela was in the final stages of completing her handiwork. ‘I’ve been banished from downstairs,’ Amy told her. ‘I don’t know why, but I just get a feeling they want me out of the way at the moment. Perhaps I intimidate them, hovering around.’

‘Perhaps you do. You need a rest, my dear; you’ve been through a lot these past few weeks, what with James’s illness and getting the hotel on its feet. You have to learn to hand over some of the reins now or you’ll be a nervous wreck.’

The costumes were finally finished that afternoon and a sense of unreality settled over the Hotel. Venice was already in a state of heady excitement with colourful regattas up and down the Grand Canal. Buildings were decked out with decorations, there were concerts every evening and the place was even more crowded than usual with many

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tourists in town to see the biggest fancy dress party in the world. Hotels were crowded and the marina crammed with visiting yachts.

Worryingly for Amy, there was no word from Alessandro. She had not heard from him for a week and whenever she called his office he seemed to be in a meeting or just rushing off to one. On the morning of her own Gala night his secretary finally called her to say that he would be at the Gala, but that he might be late and sent his apologies.

Crossly, at lunchtime, she and Sonya went off to the beauty parlour and submitted to the ministrations of the masseuse. 'I have been practically ordered out of my own hotel,' Amy complained. 'Supposing something goes wrong at the last minute?'

'Amy, everyone knows exactly what they have to do. You have trained them well, so now have faith in them,' murmured Sonya from the next bed.

'But by the time we get out of here it will be evening. We'll barely have time to get changed before the guests arrive.'

'Uh, huh,' Sonya replied drowsily as her beautician massaged her neck and shoulders. 'Stop fretting.'

The afternoon passed slowly for Amy who, under protest, endured a prolonged facial, an everlasting manicure and finally submitted to a full makeup, complete with a beauty spot on her chin.

'Now, can we go, Sonya?'

'Yes, Amy,' she chuckled. 'Now we can go.'

'That was all orchestrated to keep me out of the way wasn't it?'

'Yes. You were driving everyone crazy.'

'Well, now we'll have an almighty rush to be ready on time. The guests will be arriving in fifteen minutes and I won't even have time to check anything.'

Gabriel was waiting for them in a car to drive them back to the hotel and she could barely bring herself to speak to him. Still annoyed, she stomped inside and upstairs to the rooms where they were to get into their costumes. There was no-one around – the

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building was silent when she had expected to see staff running around making last minute adjustments to things. ‘Oh, where is everybody?’ she fretted.

A smiling and beautifully attired Carmela was waiting to dress Amy, and Sonya disappeared into the next room where Gabriel was waiting to help her into her own gorgeous blue costume.

Amy did begin to relax as the beautiful gold dress was slipped over her head. Carmela laced it up at the back and gently tugged it into place over the layers of petticoats and hoop which made the skirts stand out fully, emphasising her slim waist and full bosom, peeping enticingly over the top of the bodice. She then carefully put on the pretty white wig with ringlets caressing her cheeks and a feathery headdress. She tied on the sparkling black mask which covered her eyes, and lastly Carmela handed her an embroidered fan and helped her step into diamante covered slippers. The elderly lady then stepped back to admire her handiwork with satisfaction. ‘You look a dream, Amy.’

‘Carmela, how can I ever thank you?’

‘I wish you happiness my dear.’

Amy turned from the mirror to kiss her but she had gone, closing the door softly behind her. After a last glance at herself, Amy took a deep breath and went downstairs, still mystified by the silence. Surely someone ought to be around – the house seemed to be totally deserted. The hallway was lit only by candles and as she reached the bottom stair, she started violently as a man emerged from the dining room and came to stand in front of her. He was dressed in a glittering gold and black, long jacket over black leggings, with a gold tricorn hat and a jewelled black mask, similar to her own, over his eyes.

‘Amy, you look incredible.’

‘Alessandro!’ He raised her hands to his lips and then leaning forward, kissed her mouth softly and so tenderly, she sighed with pleasure.

‘I was so afraid you wouldn’t be here on time. Did you fly in this afternoon?’

‘No, I sailed here on Silver Lady. She is waiting for us in the marina.’

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‘Waiting for us?’

The candlelight in the hallway cast deep shadows and gently Alessandro removed her mask and then his own. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked, confused.

‘At this moment I want us to look into each others eyes to see the true feelings there. I told you the first day I met you that you would be mine. It was an arrogant assumption then, but it is still what I want more than anything. Amy, my dearest darling, will you marry me?’

For a couple of seconds Amy was too shocked to reply, but then, ‘Of course... Oh, Alessandro, of course I’ll marry you,’ she whispered.

‘And will you settle for the shortest engagement in history?’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked, mystified.

‘I have had to enlist the help of your...our... wonderful friends to make this happen, but in the marquee all our guests are waiting. They include the Registrar, who has permission to marry us here...now... if you agree.’

She gaped at him, quite sure her knees were about to give way, but then joyfully, she looked up at him, smiling through happy tears and nodded. Taking her hand, he led her through the hallway to where a curtain had been draped across the entrance to the marquee. Beyond it, a smiling Sonya was waiting to hand her a bouquet of crimson roses before gently pushing a beaming James and Donna to follow them to the centre of the rearranged marquee, where the Registrar, also in costume, waited for them.

The string quartet played Vivaldi and in the soft candlelight, surrounded by friends and family, Cinderella finally married her prince.

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