

Extract from “The Only Way is Up”

Chapter 1

‘This is the life,’ I say, gazing out over the picture-perfect Tuscan countryside from the comfort of my sunlounger.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ my friend Amanda agrees. ‘More Chianti, Lily?’

She splashes some of the rich, ruby wine into my glass. The sun – unbroken since we’ve been here – is beating down again and that, combined with the wine, is making my eyelids pleasantly heavy. The fragrant scent of lavender that wafts from the hedge bordering the terrace is adding to the soporific effect of the sun. If I’d gone completely native in the last two weeks of our holiday, it would be a good time for a siesta.

I lower my sunglasses and gaze across the terrace and the garden beyond. My children – Hettie and Hugo – and Amanda’s – Amelia and Arthur – are playing happily together in the azure pool just beyond the terrace. We’ve tried desperately to keep them from burning in the fierce sun, smothering them all in Factor 30 a dozen times a day but, despite our ministrations, they’re all sporting a golden glow and kisses of freckles across their noses.

The children attend the same school – Stonelands, one of the very best private schools in Buckinghamshire – and get on famously, but you can never be entirely sure whether that will last over an extended holiday period. The girls are both eight, the boys ten years old – the age where they all like to squabble ceaselessly. But I have to say that they’ve all been angels. Amanda and I haven’t had a cross word either and that’s always difficult when you’re bringing two families together. It was their idea – the Marquises – to join together for a holiday, and it’s been a great success. I’d certainly like to do it again next year.

The villa is magnificent. Amanda chose it. The place is a restored Tuscan farmhouse just outside the film-set village of an Gimignano, and no expense has been spared on it. The old stone walls blend beautifully into the vine-smothered rolling hills that cocoon us. It has eight bedrooms so we’ve had more than enough space not to be on top of each other. The pool has been a great hit with Hugo and Hettie and the Marquis children.

We’ve fully enjoyed the life of ease here. Someone comes in every day to set out breakfast and lunch, and a couple of times she’s left us homemade pizza bases and a host of fresh ingredients in the kitchen, so we’ve had great fun trying our hand with the outdoor oven. In the evenings we’ve taken our cars for the short drive into San Gimignano, sampling a different and usually excellent restaurant every night.

It’s been just perfect.

‘Look at those two, Lily.’ Now Amanda lowers her sunglasses and gestures with her glass of wine towards our respective husbands, and laughs. ‘All they ever do is work, work, work.’

Ah, yes. One small glitch in paradise.

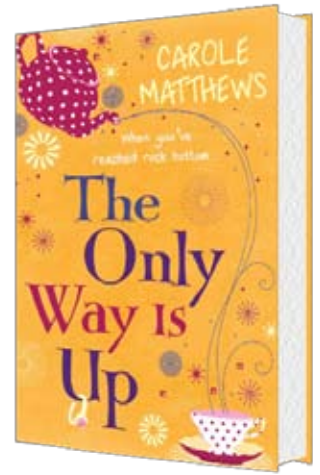
Amanda’s husband, Anthony Marquis, and my own dear husband, Laurence Lamont-Jones, are pacing relentlessly at the other side of the pool, Blackberrys clamped to ears. Anthony’s voice is raised but, thankfully, he’s far enough away that we can’t quite hear who he’s shouting at or what.

Amanda and I tut indulgently and exchange the familiar look of the hard-done-by spouse.

But secretly I know that we’re both extremely proud of our husbands as handsome men at the top of their game. Laurence has classic good looks – it’s one of the reasons why I fell for him hook, line and sinker the minute I clapped eyes on him. We were both at university. Laurence was malnourished and impoverished and, despite that or because of it, I knew he was The One. He still wears his dark hair swept back from his face – rather unfashionable these days, I think, but it suits him.

Anthony has more rugged, rugby-player looks and is slightly more portly now – due, I’m sure, to an excess of corporate hospitality over the years. Laurence is still relatively slim, but there are slight signs of a businessman’s paunch developing. Once upon a time, he used to run daily when he came home from work, usually in the dark and wearing one of those little high-viz vests. But now he has no time to maintain his fitness as he’s back so late and is so exhausted. He’s also been drinking much more lately – and not just on this holiday, where the wines are temptingly divine – and the pounds are slowly starting to creep on. Too much good living, I joke with him.

It’s fair to say that our other halves have failed miserably when it comes to succumbing to the



truly heavenly delights of the Podere Cielo. But then relaxation has never been Laurence's strong suit – that's why I was so keen for us to get away together. Both men brought their golf clubs but, in two weeks, haven't even managed to fit in one round. My husband was always such a charmer, always ready with a warm laugh, but there hasn't been much evidence of that recently. His work seems to be grinding the life out of him. And he's taken to chain-eating indigestion tablets. I must get him to go to the doctor when he has a moment. I'd hate to think he was getting an ulcer.

'They're cut from the same cloth,' Amanda shakes her head, exasperated. 'They work so hard.'

'It's very difficult out there,' I concur. 'So Laurence says.'

'Hell,' Amanda agrees, and takes another sip of her wine.

Watching my husband pace, I can't help but feel a shadow cross over me. This holiday has been, even by our standards, extortionately expensive, but I thought it would be money well spent as I hoped it would bring us closer together. We've been drifting apart – a terrible cliché, I know – but that's exactly how it happens. You drift. Slowly, but surely. Circling leisurely out of each other's reach. There's no deliberate intention to form separate lives within your marriage but, over time, that's what happens. Laurence might be at the top of his game, but there's no way he can rest on his laurels. I fully appreciate that. But the downside is that Laurence is never at home. He's a fund manager or some such thing in the City and his work takes him all over the world. One week he's in New York, the next in Hong Kong. Very rarely is he with us at our beautiful house in Buckinghamshire.

But then he tries to make up for it in other ways. His not insubstantial salary pays for all this. I take in the breathtaking sweep of the Tuscan hills again. The children board at Stonelands even though it's relatively close to home, we all have the most wonderful horses and stables at the house – we pay for someone to come in and exercise Laurence's – and I have more jewellery than I can ever wear. We really are very lucky.

My husband snaps his phone shut. I see his shoulders sag and my heart goes out to him. They never leave him alone for a moment. He strides over towards us. I had hoped that at this late stage in the holiday – we're going home in a few more days – he would be in relaxation mode, strolling or perhaps even reclining, but the pacing has never gone.

Perhaps we should think about a change of lifestyle for him when we get back from holiday. Cut back on the booze, persuade him to come to the health club that he pays royally for but never visits, have some hot stone massages. Amanda says that she knows a great holistic acupuncturist.

He comes over to the terrace where we're splayed out on the loungers.

'Everything okay?' I ask.

'Fine.' The word is crisp and says that all is *not* fine.

'Bloody office,' I mutter sympathetically. 'Can't they manage without you for two weeks?'

'I need to go back,' he says bluntly. 'There's something urgent I have to attend to.'

'Can't someone else do it?'

'If there was someone else, Lily, I wouldn't need to go back.' He doesn't try to hide his exasperation with me. 'I could get a flight later today and be back tomorrow.'

This is the last straw. 'No, Laurence.' I lower my voice as I wouldn't want the Marquises to know that things aren't quite right between us. Their relationship is marvellous – Amanda tells me so constantly and I want to give the impression that ours is perfect too. 'I'm putting my foot down. This is our family holiday. The time should be sacrosanct.'

'I have to do this,' he says.

'No. I won't have it. Nothing can be that important. You've spent most of your time here on the damn telephone. We'll be home in a few days, anyway. Can't it wait until then?'

Laurence says nothing, but the sigh that escapes his lips is ragged.

'It's not all about money,' I remind him tightly. 'Your children, your wife are important too.' He's also been irritable with the children as he's so unused to spending any extended period of time with them and I want that to change. 'Sometimes you just have to say no.'

'It is absolutely all about money, Lily.' His lips are white, bloodless. 'I really need to do this.'

'No. And that's the last I'll hear of it.' I settle my sunglasses on my nose. What on earth will Amanda think if my husband just trots off at a moment's notice and leaves us stranded here?

'You'll stay here for the rest of the holiday and sort out whatever needs to be sorted out when you're back in work on Monday.'

My husband looks defeated, but I take no joy from it. He shouldn't even be thinking about abandoning us and jetting back on his own. This is our family holiday, for heaven's sake. Is it too much to ask that he enjoys it?

I stifle a sigh. 'Is that the end of it, Laurence?'

'Quite probably,' he says enigmatically. 'Quite probably.'

'Have a glass of this.' I proffer the Chianti as a peace-offering. Cutting back can start another day. 'It has healing properties.'

He gives me a doubtful look, but picks up a glass anyway.

Then Anthony rejoins us and the discussion is closed. Laurence is not flying back home for a day. How ridiculous. I won't allow it.

'Don't bother with the Chianti, my friend.' Anthony Marquis slaps Laurence on the back heartily. 'Champagne is in order.'

Just clinched a deal for ten million.'

I have no idea what Anthony actually does, but he's in the same sort of line as Laurence – something or another in finance – and, although they move in different circles, they do have a few mutual acquaintances in the City.

'Champagne?' Amanda, who was starting to doze, opens her eyes. 'Wonderful.'

'Congratulations,' I offer.

'All in a day's work.' Anthony allows himself a delighted guffaw.

'You're supposed to be on holiday,' Amanda chides with an indulgent tut.

'Well, now that's sorted, I can kick back. Maybe we'll even get that game of golf in now, Laurence.'

He nudges my husband with his elbow and I note, with some embarrassment, that Laurence hasn't yet offered his congratulations to Anthony.

'Hmm. Perfect timing. It looks like lunch is served.' Anthony nods towards the covered dining loggia on the terrace where the housekeeper is setting out plate after plate of delicious-looking food. He rubs his stomach appreciatively. 'I've eaten so much bloody pasta I'm going to have to spend a month in the gym after this.'

We all laugh. Except Laurence, who's surprisingly quiet. All this fuss about not being able to fly back. I think that my husband needs to get his priorities right! Then, when I look at him closely, I note that there's a bleakness in his eyes that I've never seen before. I stand up and touch his arm.

He pulls away from me.

Amanda and Anthony take towels over to the children and chivvy them out of the water. Then they all wander off to the loggia. Laurence and I fall into step beside each other and start to follow them.

'This is the right thing to do, Laurence,' I say gently.

'You have no idea,' my husband says scathingly.

I soften. I have won this little skirmish and it wouldn't hurt to be gracious to him. 'Want to tell me about it then? What's so important that you feel you have to dash back?'

'When have you ever taken an interest in what I do, Lily?'

He turns to me and his face is grim. 'There's little point in you starting now.'

I'm so taken aback that I can't come up with a suitable reply. And, as we go to the loggia for lunch, the sun suddenly disappears behind a cloud.

Chapter 2

We all sit down at the teak dining table beneath the white canopy, and a welcome breeze billows the fabric. I help Hugo and Hettie to pour themselves some freshly-squeezed orange juice – though at their age, they're perfectly capable of managing without my assistance. It's so beautiful here and school holidays are precious days for me as it's the only chance I get to spend quality time with my children – and my husband. I had hoped that Laurence might feel the same way too.

Clearly not.

'Have you had fun here?' I ask, smoothing my daughter's wayward hair from her eyes. Hettie's hair is the same shade of titian as mine, but there the similarity ends. Mine is styled in a sleek bob that I keep cropped short whereas Hettie's is an untameable tangle of curls provided by some genetic mystery that must go back generations. At least I know that our green eyes come from my mother.

'Oh, yes,' Hettie says. 'Alice is going to Barbados, but I think this is much nicer.'

'I like this as much as skiing,' Hugo informs me. My son favours his father and is dark-haired,

with eyes the colour of the Tuscan sky. ‘Can I try snowboarding this year?’

‘Let’s get one holiday out of the way first,’ I chide, laughing. Laurence sighs and I know that he is annoyed that they don’t stop to enjoy one thing before they’re wanting the next. That’s what children are like these days and, if he was around to talk to them more often, he’d know that. ‘But, yes. If you want to do snowboarding, then I don’t see why you can’t try it.’

‘Coolio,’ Hugo says.

‘Maybe we could all go skiing?’ I suggest. This has been a resounding success. Other than the unseemly spat between Laurence and me, that is. I don’t see why it wouldn’t translate to the slopes. A snow-sprinkled chalet in the mountains for the Marquis/Lamont-Jones crowd sounds wonderful. Laurence has to learn to appreciate that we need these breaks together as a family.

Amanda shrugs her agreement. ‘We know a lovely place in Klosters. The Robinsons go there every year. But we’d need to be booking up soon.’

‘We should do it the minute we get back,’ I agree.

Laurence shoots a dark look at me. Well, let him. And if he wants to spend the entire time with his phone clamped to his ear while we’re on the slopes, then that’s up to him too. One of the reasons that Amanda thought it would be a good idea to rent a villa together is that she too has spent enough holidays trying to entertain the children by herself while Anthony’s mind was back at the office.

I use the orange juice pouring and food dishing up as a distraction technique, so that I don’t have to sit down and face my husband, as I still feel stung by his comment. In some ways he’s right though – we never find time to talk to each other any more. On holiday or at home. It’s never the right time, is it? There’s always something else to do. The minutiae of daily life doesn’t stop just because you’re going through a bad patch, does it? I did think that we’d find time to address our relationship difficulties while we were here in Tuscany, but then Laurence has been tense the whole time and I didn’t want to spoil our marvellous time here by bringing up something unpleasant.

Laurence and Anthony sit at the far end of the table and it looks like they’re already talking business. Again. I love my husband though, whatever little faults he may have. I’m sure I’m not perfect myself.

Amanda ties a sarong around her white bikini that shows off a figure that has been honed by hours in the gym. I know because I’m usually there alongside her.

My friend and I go to the same health club and spa – the only decent one in the area. It’s expensive – what isn’t? – but the facilities are truly marvellous. Laurence is a member too, of course, but never finds the time to go. I don’t think he’s graced the place once yet this year.

Amanda is always glossy and groomed. Her tan, at the moment, may be down to the Mediterranean sun, but it’s maintained at this level all year round by judicious applications of Tropéz by a lovely young girl at the health spa. Even in her swimsuit, my friend is wearing a full complement of gold and diamond jewellery and designer kitten heels. On Amanda’s recommendation, I go to the same hairdresser as her and have subtle slices of blonde put into my classic bob to keep me on the right side of being classed as a redhead. At thirty-eight, Amanda is two years younger than me, but she’s already the leading light in the local Women’s Institute and is a force to be reckoned with on the school committee. As well as going to the health club we also ride out together two or three times a week. Amanda is of the Hollywood, stick-thin breed whereas I consider myself elegantly curvy. We go to a little boutique together in Woburn Sands and she helps me to choose what suits me as, to be honest, I’ve never had much of a clue.

I don’t know what I’d do without her. She introduced me to the ‘in’ crowd and I remember how lonely my days were before I met her. The house is a bit out on a limb and the only person I ever seemed to talk to was my cleaner – a darling woman from the village, but she was obsessed with her bunions and one quickly ran out of chit-chat once that topic had been exhausted. Of course, there was my hairdresser and massage therapist, but no one I could really talk to, not like I talk to Amanda. We share everything. Although, of course, I wouldn’t dream of confiding in her that everything wasn’t tickety-boo with Laurence. What would I do if our other friends found out?

The table is groaning with dishes of pasta – one with fresh pesto sauce, another with a basil-scented ragu. There are salad leaves and a plate of ripe tomatoes with buffalo mozzarella and avocados and some pungent garlic bread. Anthony disappears into the kitchen and moments later returns bearing four flûtes and a bottle of fizz, he then splashes it out for us.

‘To business,’ he cries.

We all raise a toast. ‘To business!’

My husband is late. ‘To business,’ he says alone.

‘And thank you for a lovely holiday,’ I say. ‘Let’s have a toast to us.’

We raise our glasses again. ‘To us!’ I try to catch Laurence’s eye, but he looks away from me.



'This has been just wonderful,' I add. 'I hope we can do it again.'

'To next year,' Anthony proposes.

'To next year!'

'Do you think we could top it and find somewhere even more amazing?' Amanda wants to know.

'This is idyllic,' I say with a contented sigh. 'I can't see how we could better it.'

'Come on,' her husband says. 'Stop chatting, you girls! Let's tuck in. All this toasting is making me hungry.'

While Anthony digs into the pasta, Amanda helps herself to some salad – her low-fat, no-carb diet hasn't, it must be said, been abandoned for one moment since she arrived.

She passes me the dish. 'I hate to raise this,' she says, dropping her voice so that only I can hear her. 'Especially now. But all this talk of "next year" brought it to mind.'

I wait as she pauses. 'I gave you the invoice for your share of the villa, didn't I?' my friend goes on.

'Yes,' I murmur back. It was for an extraordinary amount of money. This sort of luxury doesn't come cheap, but this place is as high-end as high-end comes.

'Some time ago,' she adds.

The balance was due six weeks before we flew here. I distinctly remember putting the statement on Laurence's desk. I feel myself colour up.

'Hasn't Laurence paid it?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'I'm so sorry, Amanda. It must have completely slipped his mind.' Laurence is never normally like that. 'I know that he's been under a lot of pressure lately.'

She goes to speak.

I hold up a hand. 'That's no excuse. I should have reminded him. The minute we get back, the *very* minute, I'll ask him to give me a cheque.'

Amanda pats my hand. 'Thank you, darling. I knew you'd understand. It's an awful lot of money to have outstanding.'

Thousands and thousands of pounds. The villa rental was over fifteen thousand pounds for the two weeks, and on top of that was the car hire, the food, the considerable quantities of booze. Anthony didn't want to slum it by flying budget airline. They are so used to business class, I'm sure they're physically allergic to economy, so that cost extra too. There'll be little change out of forty thousand pounds – for a two-week holiday. But that is for two families. Even for us, it was a stretch though. Laurence was very grudging when he agreed to it. But it was money well spent as it was beyond perfect.

I worry at my nail. Amanda has paid for all this in advance and we, it seems, haven't yet stumped up a penny. I had no idea. Obviously, I thought my husband was seeing to all that. I had all the new clothes to buy and the packing to do. He can hardly expect me to deal with the money side of things too. That's not how we work. I feel awkward that Amanda has even had to raise it. That's terrible of us. I hope this doesn't make her think any less of me as a friend. Also, this is the first time that Amanda has ever mentioned money to me before. Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but perhaps things are tighter in the Marquis household than she's admitting. I wouldn't be entirely surprised. Anthony did seem to be sweating on that deal. He must be so relieved that it's clinched.

I feel so sorry for them if things are difficult – goodness only knows that we're all over-extended and the current economic climate isn't helping much. So I believe. But that's just life, isn't it? We're all living on someone else's money. That's what everyone does. My dear parents, if they were still alive, would baulk at the way we spend; they could have lived for a year on what we get through in a week. I was brought up to watch the pennies – goodness only know where that went wrong. My monthly credit-card bill alone is like the national debt of a small developing country. Most families would struggle to pay it. For all their outward show, it seems that the Marquises aren't immune to the credit crunch. Surely this fabulous contract that Anthony has just landed will take the pressure off them. I do hope so, for their sakes.

'You know, Amanda, if there's ever anything we can do to help,' I say it almost as a whisper. I would hate for Anthony to think that I know they're having difficulties. 'You only have to ask.'

And I have no idea how those words will come back to haunt me.