



# Jodi Gibson

## *The Five Year Plan*

Demi had a plan. Fate had a different one.

Jodi  
Gibson

*The  
Five  
Year Plan*

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BOOKS

# Chapter 1

It was my favourite time of the day. Right before I unlocked the café door and the morning rush began. I glanced around the café that my parents had bought back in the seventies when they immigrated from Italy. Sure the worn timber tables needed to be disguised by red and white checkered tablecloths and the faded black and white print of the Colosseum hid flaky paint and crumbling plaster, but I'd fix all that. One day, when the café was mine.

Ever since I could remember, the only thing I'd ever wanted was to run the café and serve Melbourne's best coffee and Italian delights. All I had to do was wait for my father to announce his retirement so I could take over. Although, I might as well be waiting for Peter Mitchell on the six o'clock news to announce that pigs in bright blue waistcoats were flying across Port Phillip Bay. It seemed more likely.

Behind the counter, I began plating up the dessert of the day. Today it was Mum's cherry *crostata*. The rich, red cherries glistened in the centre with crumbly, buttery pastry folded around the edges in true peasant style. I could have easily sliced and devoured a piece then and there, but eating the profits wasn't good for the bottom line—or *my* own bottom line, for that matter.

The bell on the front door rattled as it swung open snapping me

from my thoughts of devouring sweet pastry. The balmy March morning air gushed in along with sounds of slow moving cars and tram bells, and in walked Dad. His solid five-foot, six-inch frame shuffled towards the counter with his grey, bushy eyebrows knitted into one above his eyes.

‘Dad? What’s wrong? Are you limping?’

He swatted his hand dismissively. ‘Bah! Just my knee giving me trouble. It’s the weather.’

Dad always had some excuse for his bad knee, usually the weather. But lately it hadn’t only been his knee troubling him. Last week he had complained of aching arms. I guess a lifetime on the go running a busy café was beginning to take its toll. Or so I hoped. In the nicest possible way, of course.

‘Coffee?’ I asked.

Without waiting for a reply, I slid two cups under the spout of the coffee machine and pressed the shot button to prepare two ristrettos. I’d been working on a new blend of beans and was excited for Dad to try the new combination. I soaked up the smell of coffee as the machine whirred and poured. When finished, I removed one of the cups and lifted it towards my lips to take a sip. The sweet base notes of the Brazilian beans hit my tastebuds first, followed by the sour hints of the Colombian ones rich on my mid-palate. And finally, the high floral and citrusy notes of the Kenyan beans burst into dance at the back of my mouth as I swallowed. It took all my resolve not to do a happy shuffle on the spot. I’d finally nailed the blend. I picked up Dad’s cup and passed it along the counter to him.

‘One ristretto,’ I announced proudly.

Dad eyed my odd enthusiasm with narrowed eyes before he took a long sip of the steaming coffee. His eyes flickered, then widened as the flavours hit his palate. Then, with a lick of his lips, he tilted his head questioningly.

‘Do you like it?’ I asked, squeezing my hands together behind my back.

Dad twisted his mouth from side to side and my breath caught. *Oh, God! He doesn’t like it?*

‘It’s good.’ He shrugged half-heartedly with one shoulder. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s the new blend I’ve been working on. Thirty-eight percent Brazilian, forty-two percent Colombian, twenty percent Kenyan.’

Dad took another sip.

‘Well?’ I prompted.

‘It’s fine.’

‘It’s not fine. It’s so much more than fine, Dad.’ I snatched his empty cup from the counter. ‘I’m going to trial the new blend on the menu. I’m one hundred percent certain it will be a hit.’

Dad let out a long sigh, as if the thought of it was too much to consider. Not that it was any effort to him.

‘Why you need to do this, Demi?’ he said. ‘You are always chopping and changing. Why not leave things as they be for once?’

‘What do you mean, *leave things as they be?*’ I replied in my best mock-voice.

‘Changing things. There is nothing wrong with our coffee. Why change it?’

‘I’m not changing it. We’ll offer this as a new blend as well as our original. This is just another option to see how people like it.’

‘I think we’re best staying with what works. What’s not broke—’

‘Doesn’t need fixing,’ I finished the sentence with the roll of my eyes. I’d heard it so many—too many—times over the years. Dad didn’t like change. He was old school. What he didn’t understand was we needed to keep ahead of the game.

‘Dad,’ I said, drying off the coffee cup with a tea towel, ‘We need to change things to keep up with the competition.’

‘The competition? Those new fancy-schmancy cafés that sell all that nut milk rubbish a cat wouldn’t touch?’ He harrumphed and then tapped at the laminated menu on the counter. ‘Like this?’

‘The Mediterranean poke bowl?’

‘Bah! Poke bowl!’ Dad turned his nose up.

‘They’ve been popular.’

Dad grunted. ‘No more, Demi. This is Moretti’s. Traditional Moretti’s. The way it should be.’

‘Fine,’ I huffed, turning to wipe down the coffee machine. I ground my teeth. It wasn’t the first time Dad had knocked back my ideas. Last week, he refused to even look at the quotes I’d organised for a new counter. One was a bit pricey, but the other one was a great deal. It would certainly give the place a lift with the rustic timber and corrugated tin combination I’d chosen, not to mention the design offered more counter space on top and shelves below. But Dad had waved it off, refusing to even consider it despite my best efforts at trying to convince him. I returned to plating the crostata and raised the issue of the toilets, surely a more pressing matter.

‘Also,’ I said, slicing the last piece neatly, ‘the plumber came to look at the toilet in the ladies and he’s fixed it temporarily, but he reckons we need a new one.’

‘A new toilet? Why?’

‘Maybe because that one is over thirty years old.’

‘It will be fine for a few more months. If it starts again, we’ll look at it then.’

‘Dad,’ I said, slight frustration edging into my voice. ‘We have to keep the maintenance up on the place. Like the oven. Pat said the right-hand oven isn’t keeping temperature. It’s going to need to be replaced soon.’

‘Exactly my point. The oven will have to be done when it goes, and the toilet, it can also wait.’

I placed the crostata into the case and closed the glass door with a little more force than necessary and bit my tongue. I'd been doing a lot of that lately. Biting my tongue, holding back my opinions. Maybe I was getting too impatient. I had been putting aside money to do minor renovations and updates when I took over, but in the meantime, it was Dad who had the final say. Every day it was on the tip of my tongue to bring up his retirement, but Mum had warned me—the more I pushed, the more Dad would push back. I knew she was right. As much as I loved him, Dad was as stubborn as baked-on cheese.

Dad lumbered his cumbersome frame from the stool. 'I going to see Pat,' he said, making it clear our conversation was over. 'Maybe he won't have any problems for me.'

I shot Dad a look and his face formed a cheeky grin, his mouth pushing his rosy cheeks into plump circles. I rolled my eyes to stifle a smile. As frustrating as Dad was, he meant well. He loved this place. I just wanted him to realise how much I did too. But as I wiped the crumbs off the counter, pinpricks of annoyance began to resurface.

I was thirty-three now, and practically managing the place. Why couldn't he step back? I was the only one who'd stuck it out with him. Not like my siblings. My older brothers, Nick and Anthony, had both treated the café as a chore and couldn't wait to use uni and then full-time work as their escape plan. As for my younger sister, Josie, she'd also shied away from the café and went into teaching. No one loved this place as much as Dad, except me.

Just then, the door swung open. I took a deep breath and shook away the thoughts. *Just be patient*, I reminded myself.

'Demi!' A loud, friendly voice boomed into the café. It was Marco, one of our regulars.

'What a beautiful morning it is,' Marco's offsider, Christian,

added, clapping his hands together with a huge smile slapped on his wrinkled face.

‘Ciao, gentlemen,’ I chimed. I didn’t need to force the smile. These guys were like part of the furniture. Here every weekday morning—rain, hail, or shine—smack on seven o’clock for their coffee after their morning walk.

‘What will it be?’ I grinned. ‘Tea? Chai latte?’

Marco’s expression pained. ‘None of that rubbish. Two espressos, per favore.’ He tapped the counter and took up his regular spot next to Christian.

‘Coming right up,’ I said. ‘But it’s my hospitality you’re really here for, isn’t it?’

‘Of course.’ Marco grinned. ‘Although Christian, he only comes for the coffee.’

Christian feigned wounded innocence before chuckling. ‘You are the highlight of my day, mon cherie!’

‘Well, in that case,’ I said, packing the ground beans into the basket, ‘do I have a treat for you today.’

‘Oooh!’ Marco purred, raising his wiry eyebrows. ‘Is this the special blend you’ve been working on, si?’

‘Yep. And I think I’ve got it. This is going to be our signature blend. We’re going to have people coming from five suburbs over for this.’ *If I get my way*, I huffed under my breath.

‘Ah, Demi, you tease us!’ Christian boomed. ‘Hurry up!’

The men chatted between themselves as I prepared each of them an espresso. Even though I knew how good it was, Dad’s reaction remained a sinking weight in my stomach. Maybe it wasn’t as good as I thought.

I placed the two espressos on the counter in front of Marco and Christian, steam curling from the cups. Then, holding my breath, I waited.

They each took a moment to inhale the aroma and then,



almost in unison, they tipped the cup to their lips, took a sip and placed the cups down. Marco's head was the first to start nodding, then Christian's eyes widened.

'Mmmm,' Christian said, with a grunt of satisfaction. 'Demi. Si! This is good.'

Marco shook his head, 'No, no. This is not good. This is bellissimo!'

I exhaled, feeling the nervous energy disappear and the weight in my stomach transform into flutters of excitement. 'What do you taste?' I said, eager to know.

Christian took another sip. 'Mmm. A perfect blend of sharp, creamy and bitter.'

Marco nodded. 'Si, but with a sweet, almost nutty, chocolatey aftertaste.'

Christian frowned at Marco and juttred his head back with a confused look on his face.

'What? It is what I taste! Ah, you shut up, okay?' Marco replied, dismissing Christian with a wave of his hand.

Christian chortled. 'Demi, it is perfecto,' he said, with a sincere note to his voice as he finished the dregs with a satisfied sigh.

I couldn't stifle my grin. I'd definitely nailed it. And no matter what Dad said, I knew this was the way forward. Maybe I'd have to forgo the new counter until Dad retired, but I was going to win this battle.

## *Chapter 2*

Fumbling in the darkness to find the right key, I unlocked the door and let myself into Anna's apartment. Anna and I had been best friends for over ten years. We'd met when she was studying photography at uni and would come to the café for a vanilla soy latte. I flicked on the lamp and sunk into the chocolate-coloured velvet lounge suite. Anna and I had nicknamed it "the couch of death" as the cushions were so fat and full that they swallowed you up as soon as you sat down. We picked it up for a bargain a couple of years back at a South Melbourne garage sale. With the velvet arms shiny rather than soft, Anna saw it as old and worn, whereas to me, it was well-loved. I bargained them down to a hundred dollars, and they included delivery thanks to some eye-batting from Anna.

While I was waiting for Anna to get home, I checked how many views there were on my latest Instagram post for the café—a snap of the new three-cheese and mushroom pizza Pat had just added to the menu. Already well over a hundred. Not bad for a couple of hours. I swiped out of the app and into my contacts and pressed my boyfriend Wil's number. I'd tried calling him earlier, but he hadn't answered. Probably with a client at a house viewing. Wil worked for his dad at their real estate agency—one of the most prominent in the area. He, too, was waiting for his

dad to retire so he could take over the reins, but his dad was in his mid-sixties and had no hint of slowing down. Wil was “biding his time” as he liked to say. His dad wasn’t the easiest of people to work for and treated Wil more like an employee than a son or future owner. Wil’s phone rang and then clicked through to his message bank.

*‘Hi, this is Wil Brooks of Brooks Real Estate. Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you at my earliest convenience. Cheers.’*

‘Hon, just wanted to say hi, but well, you’re obviously still busy. I’m at Anna’s, but I’ll be home by half nine or thereabouts. There’s leftover curry in the fridge if you haven’t eaten. All right, see you then,’ I said, then hung up, chewing at my bottom lip.

Wil and I had been dating for almost a year now and he’d asked me to move in with him a couple of months earlier. I’d been hesitant to call him “the one”, but when he asked me to move in, it felt right. But these past few months, he’d been distracted. He was harder to catch on the phone, he was late home more often than not, and frequently stared off into the distance during conversations. He’d tried to tell me it was work, but there was something that had been unsettling me. A gut instinct that wouldn’t budge no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

A key jingled in the lock and Anna burst through the door.

‘Oh, hey!’ I said, jumping up for a hello hug, but her puffy eyes and forlorn look stopped me in my tracks. I’d seen that look before. Over the past ten years I’d come to learn Anna’s track record with men was about as successful as my resistance to spaghetti carbonara.

‘What is it?’ I asked, bracing myself for the news, even though I knew from the trembling of her bottom lip what was coming—another break-up.

Anna dumped her handbag on the floor and burst into tears without uttering a word.

I'd had a feeling about Mark. Not that I'd mentioned it to Anna, but he seemed a bit cagey to me, always being the one to set the times and locations of their dates. Never taking her back to his place. Yeah, suss.

'Here, sit down.' I manoeuvred her to the couch and passed her a box of tissues. 'This calls for ice-cream,' I said, as I made a bee-line for the kitchen and returned with a tub of macadamia and white chocolate ice-cream. I plonked myself on the couch beside Anna and handed her a spoon.

'He's met someone else,' Anna said after taking a huge spoonful of ice-cream and shoving it into her mouth.

'Oh, hon, I'm sorry.'

'But why, Dem? he was so nice! I really liked him.'

'I know you did,' I said, trying to think of something useful to say. From past experience, I knew it was better to let Anna have the floor and wallow in her self-pity, for a moment at least. 'Well, I guess he didn't technically cheat on you,' I offered. 'At least he was up-front.'

Anna's face dropped. 'You're not helping.'

'All I'm saying is at least he showed his true colours now rather than later.'

'I guess. But it still doesn't help.' She sniffed. 'I'm destined to end up alone and lonely.'

'Don't be silly.'

'And not only that, my boss, Paul—remember I told you how much of a sleaze he's been lately?—he practically propositioned me today.'

'What?'

'Uh-huh! Not in a way that I could prove or even accuse him of—he's very careful—but in a way that totally spun me out. I'm thinking of quitting. I hate it anyway.'

'Seriously?'

Anna nodded, the mouthful of ice-cream preventing her from speaking.

‘Day from hell, hey?’

‘Yup. I’m destined to be broke, alone and end up in a retirement home with not even a cat to keep me company.’ She handed the ice-cream to me and blew her nose into her tissue.

‘We’ve still got The Plan. Maybe refocus on that.’

‘*The Plan?* Yeah, right,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘Like it’s worked well so far.’

The Plan was something Anna and I had devised after a terribly hideous double date a couple of years ago. Over a bottle of champers, we’d sat cross-legged on our lounge room floor and devised a five-year plan to get our lives on track. Anna had been in her job as an architectural photographer for a few years and was bored, and I was working in the café dreaming of one day taking it over. Although a little vague and devised mostly as a joke, we’d vowed—loosely—that it would change our lives. I was sure I still had the battered exercise book scrawled with messy, drunken handwriting somewhere in my room at Mum’s.

— *Demi & Anna’s Five-Year Plan* —

1. *Get our careers on track – Demi, take over café. Anna, run her own photography business. Maybe. Or something else.*
2. *Travel – Demi’s dream destination: Italy, Anna’s – anywhere involving an Airbus 380.*
3. *Buy a couch and ditch the camping chairs*
4. *Find a man worthy of our gorgeous selves.*  
*Demi: Dark-haired, good sense of humour, must love food.*  
*Anna: Intelligent, must want to travel the globe and not think monogamy is an outdated practice.*
5. *Live our best lives!*

As I said, it was vague, but it was always something that we reminded each other of when either of us was having a down moment. And number one on the list, was continually on my mind. Front and centre.

‘It’s all right for you, Dem,’ Anna said. ‘Your plan is pretty much all signed, sealed and delivered.’

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ I replied, staring into the almost empty ice-cream tub as if it held all the answers to both our problems.

‘Of course it is. Your dad’s due to retire any day, you have Wil, you live in a gorgeous apartment. Before you know it, you’ll be honeymooning in Italy and gloating on how your café and real estate empires are taking over the world.’

I dug my spoon forcefully in and out of the ice-cream and we both went quiet before Anna spoke again.

‘You know I’m only joking, right? You totally deserve all of that. And more,’ she said, softly.

I shook my head. ‘It’s fine. I know you’re kidding. But it’s not that,’ I said, my eyes still focused on the ice-cream which was now turning to soft serve thanks to my digging effort.

‘What is it then?’

‘It’s nothing’ I sighed. ‘But it’s everything at the same time. Dad’s being increasingly difficult. I don’t reckon he’s ever going to retire. Mum is continually on my back about my ticking biological clock, Josie’s doing my head in with wedding plans, and Wil . . . well, I don’t even know what is going on with Wil.’

‘What do you mean?’ Anna said, shifting her legs under her.

I paused, contemplating the thoughts that had been playing on my mind recently causing me sleepless nights and distracted days. I lowered my eyes. ‘I think he might be having an affair.’

‘What? No! Not Wil. He wouldn’t do that to you.’

‘I know! But he’s been so stressed and distracted lately.’

Something's definitely up. I don't know what else to think.'

'Have you asked him?'

My mind flitted back to the conversation I'd had with him last week. I'd made him a cup of tea while he was buttering our toast for breakfast.

'Are you cheating on me?' I'd said, sliding the tea across the bench.

He'd laughed. 'What?'

'I mean are you having an affair? Is there another woman?'

At that point he'd dropped the knife and it had clattered onto the marble benchtop. 'What? Why would you think that?'

'Because you're never home. You're working late all the time. And even when you are home, it's like your mind is elsewhere. We haven't had sex in two weeks,' I'd blurted.

With that, Wil had put his arms around me. 'I'm sorry, Dem. Things have been catching up with me. Dad's continually on my back, I've had sales fall through that were almost done and dusted, and we're short staffed at the office with Terry leaving. I know it's no excuse. I'm just tired and stressed. Things will settle down soon. I've got things in the works.'

I'd left it at that, but I still had a nagging feeling in my gut that something wasn't right.

I explained it all to Anna, who reassured me that I was, indeed, being silly. 'Wil is number four on the list. He's the one. You've both just got a lot on your mind at the moment, that's all.'

'You're probably right,' I shrugged, putting a spoonful of now mostly runny ice-cream into my mouth.

'Look,' Anna said, sinking back into the couch. 'I know you are going to be fine, Demi Moretti. You're always fine. You and Wil will get past this slump, and before you know it, your dad will announce his retirement and give the café to you.'

'He's not giving it to me—I'll pay him out the others' shares.'

Anna rolled her eyes at my technicality. ‘My point is, you’re so close. Stop overthinking things.’

Anna was right. I did tend to overthink things. What can I say? It was a talent of mine. ‘Hey,’ I said. ‘How did this turn into *you* cheering *me* up?’

‘It’s what we do.’ She shrugged, picking up the remote for the TV. ‘Now, enough of all of this. I’m done with Mark. Done with men, actually. Well, for now at least. So, let’s forget all about everything and watch some Netflix. Something to cheer us up. *Gilmore Girls?*’

I nodded as Anna found one of our favourite episodes, but as I tried to focus on Lorelai and Rory, my mind wandered off. I wanted Anna to be right. I wanted things to sort themselves out soon. The problem was, everything seemed so close, but at the same time, it all seemed so far away.



## Chapter 3

There were seven more sets of traffic lights before the turn-off to Wil's parents' street in the heart of Toorak. I knew this because the first time Wil took me to meet them I was so nervous I'd counted them all the way from the café where Wil had picked me up. I'd been right to be nervous. Not only had Wil told me horror stories—okay, so maybe horror was also too strong of a word, let's just say stories—from his childhood. His parents weren't horrible, sadistic people or anything like that. Just your typical well-to-do people who had no idea what life in the real world entailed. If you didn't drive a European branded car, or spend your days either in a suit or attending charity galas, they couldn't relate. They'd sent Wil off to boarding school at the age of twelve, which had horrified me in itself. Wil, on the other hand, said they were the best years of his life. And after meeting his parents that first night, I could see his point.

Don't get me wrong, Ray and Marlo were polite, respectful, well-mannered people, they just weren't normal people—not *my* people. Which, on more than one occasion, had me wondering if Wil was my people or if, in fact, I was *his* people. But Wil was different. Although he'd been born into wealth and affluence, boarding school had also given him a taste of life outside the four and a half square metres of the Toorak bubble. He was

down-to-earth, hardworking, and wanted to be anything but like his parents. The only reason he was still working for his father was the promise of the real estate agency one day. It was his inheritance.

We came to a pause at the sixth traffic light and I glanced across at Wil, the glow from the dash illuminating the worry lines between his eyes.

‘You okay?’ I asked. ‘You’ve hardly said anything since we got in the car.’ Wil didn’t respond, so I prompted him again. ‘Wil?’

‘Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Just a lot going on.’

I wasn’t sure how much more I could take of this *a lot going on*. It had become the standard answer lately. I had a lot going on too, but I tried not to let it impact our relationship. Wil, on the other hand . . .

‘Have you ever thought of starting fresh?’ Wil said out of the blue.

‘Sorry?’

‘Like, a new start. New job, new house, new life.’

Wil’s statement caught me off guard. ‘Ah, no. What do you mean, exactly?’

‘As in move away from Melbourne. Maybe somewhere along the coast?’ Wil was talking fast, as if the idea was growing momentum in his brain as he spoke. ‘Maybe even a regional area. Country real estate is hot right now. City people wanting a tree change, the simple life and all that. We could move. Start fresh.’

The lights changed, and Wil put his foot down on the accelerator with force and I was lurched back into my seat.

‘Sorry,’ he said, as he glanced over and slowed down.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I don’t know what this is all about, but I’m not sure that’s the answer.’ He was worrying me now. I’d never seen him as anxious as this.

‘I’m serious, Dem,’ he replied, almost impatiently. ‘I know

your life is here with the café and everything. But maybe . . .' He paused.

'And everything? You mean my family? You want me to move away from my family and *my* future at the café just so *you* can get away from yours?'

'We can make our own family. Our own life.'

My throat became choked with a barrage of emotions. *What the absolute hell?*

'We have our own life, Wil. You know how hard I've worked to get to where I am, and I'm within reaching distance of it. How could you think I would just walk away?' I stopped myself short of adding *even for you*. My breath caught.

'It wouldn't be giving up. It would be starting fresh, building everything you want, your way.'

'That's not what I want. I *want* the legacy. The café *is* family. My heritage. My dream. Always has been since I can remember. Carrying on the family name and tradition is everything to me.' The waver in my voice faltered over the car engine. Wil must have sensed it as his face softened.

'I'm sorry. I know it's too much. I was just . . .' He trailed off.

I continued to stare out the window, my chest rising and falling heavily the mood heavy between us. One set of lights to go.

Wil pulled his Audi to a stop in the driveway of his parents' imposing double storey Mediterranean style mansion and turned to me. 'I'm sorry, Dem. That was stupid of me. Let's forget it, okay?' He squeezed my hand. 'Let's get through the night, okay? Together.'

I nodded, pulling my emotions back in check. I wasn't sure I could forget what Wil had just suggested, but I knew he must be under immense pressure to even consider such an idea.

We walked up the path hand in hand. Everything was as I remembered from last time. The gardener had manicured the

pristine topiary hedges, not a leaf out of place, and the lights that bordered the path to the front door twinkled serenely. The house was stark white with large French windows and wrought iron balconies on the top storey. It wouldn't have been out of place in one of those architectural magazines Anna used to leave lying around our apartment.

'Right-o, here goes nothing.' Wil exhaled as we reached the front door.

If only we were about to enter my parents' triple fronted cream brick veneer with the fig tree in the front yard. My family may be loud, and unashamedly so, but the moment you stepped inside, you were part of the family. Welcomed into the noisy ambience of chatting, bickering, and laughter. And fed like you hadn't eaten for six weeks. I can't say I'd ever felt welcomed like that here. I shook away my thoughts, pushed back my shoulders and took a deep breath.

Wil led me through to the sitting room where his parents usually sat with a pre-dinner martini before dinner each night. As you do. Not! My parents sat at the kitchen table and bickered about the café over a vino before dinner.

'Mum? Dad?' Wil said, announcing our arrival as we entered the doorway.

'Ah, darling.' Marlo—Wil's mum—floated towards us as if in sync with the soft jazz music playing in the background. 'You're looking tired, darling,' she said, patting Wil on the cheek. 'Are you taking your vitamins?'

'Yes, Mum,' Wil sighed, and placed a kiss on her rouged cheek. He acknowledged his father who was seated on the couch with a nod. 'Dad.'

'Hi, Mrs. Brooks,' I said, as I shrank into my Diana Ferraris—the most expensive but surprisingly comfortable heels I owned. Marlo's embrace barely touched me. There was an art to it, the

air kiss. And she had it down pat, the soft audible mwah and all.

‘Demi, lovely to see you,’ she purred.

With her white pant suit, Marlo blended perfectly into the décor of the room. I had to admire her confidence in wearing all white to dinner. I could imagine the spaghetti sauce I’d spill on it.

‘Demi, hello.’ Ray stood and placed an almost-there kiss on my cheek. He’d loosened his tie and undone the top button of his shirt, and the dark circles under his eyes were more profound than last time we’d met.

‘Hi, Mr. Brooks.’

We stood in an uncomfortable silence for a moment then Wil made some small talk. ‘Martini?’ Ray offered.

‘Ah, no. I might wait til dinner,’ I replied, instantly regretting my decision. Having something in my hand and gin fizzing in my head was probably necessary to make the night more bearable.

Once the conversation stilted, Marlo clapped her hands together and declared it was time to eat. I exhaled the tension I’d been holding in my shoulders as we made our way to the formal dining room lined with what I imagined were expensive art pieces. I didn’t know my Rembrandt from my Picasso to be honest.

We took our seat at the huge dining table and I remembered Marlo didn’t cook. Ever. She was far too busy organising the many charity functions for which she was a chair. It was a full-time job, apparently. Who’d have known?

‘So,’ Marlo said, ‘It’s a special night, so I’ve engaged one of the country’s finest Italian chefs to cater our little family celebration.’ She looked straight at me, and I wasn’t sure if I should be offended or impressed. I smiled and nodded, my intrigue piqued. At least the food would be worth putting ourselves through whatever it was we were celebrating.

‘What are we celebrating?’ Wil asked.

‘The Anderson sale,’ Ray said, pouring himself a glass of red wine. ‘It’s a done deal.’

‘The Anderson’s house? St. Georges Road,’ Wil asked, his eyebrows knitted.

‘Enough, you two,’ Marlo interrupted. ‘Business later. For now, let’s enjoy this wonderful food.’

Wil exhaled heavily and I placed my hand on his leg, which was quite a stretch considered we were seated so far apart. Probably on purpose.

The first dish was served. Minestrone soup. Which you would think sounds a little lacklustre from an apparently top Italian chef, but after one mouthful, I knew this was more than any old minestrone soup. Vibrant flavours of tomato, oregano and, if I was right, one of the best pork broths I’d ever tasted filled my mouth.

‘Wow,’ I said as I sipped it from my spoon. ‘This is amazing.’

Marlo nodded. ‘Mmm, it is. So, Demi, how is your little coffee shop going?’

‘Demi’s dad’s about to announce his retirement and hand it over to her,’ Wil said, before I had a chance to answer.

‘Well, not exactly,’ I corrected him. ‘One day soon, I hope.’

‘She’s got some fantastic ideas, and a great business brain,’ Wil continued. ‘Some great plans to keep the tradition of the place but add some new flair.’

Mr. Brooks raised his eyebrows, seemingly impressed.

‘That’s lovely, dear. I’m sure it will be very rewarding,’ Marlo said, as our soup bowls were removed by a silent staff member. ‘Oh, Wil, darling,’ Marlo continued, her face lit with excitement as if she’d just had a brainwave. ‘You’ll never guess who I saw the other day.’

Wil shifted in his seat. ‘Probably not,’ he replied, taking a gulp of wine.

‘Nicole!’

She pronounced it Nic-*whole*. I disguised my giggle as I wiped my mouth with my napkin.

Wil glanced sideways at me. I knew who Nicole was. Wil's most recent ex-girlfriend. The model. A Miranda Kerr look-a-like. I *may* have googled her once or twice. Wil had told me his parents had adored her—of course they had. He'd also pre-warned me that Marlo had never gotten over him breaking it off with her. Nicole was from another well-to-do Toorak family and, after her international success as a model, had since been making a name for herself as a fashion designer. *Haute couture*, of course.

'Oh, she's looking stunning,' Marlo continued. 'She has highlights through her hair and she's just come back from France. Paris, to be precise.'

'Mum,' Wil warned through gritted teeth. 'Do you mind?' His eyes flicked in my direction, and I instantly wished I was anywhere but here.

'I was simply *saying*, darling. Can't I talk about an old friend? She's doing so well. She has her own shop front on High Street in Armadale now. Apparently all the footballers' wives want her to dress them for their events this year.'

'That's great. I'm pleased for her,' Wil said.

'She's still single, you know,' Marlo added, raising an eyebrow. An involuntary cough escaped my mouth.

'Mum, please.' Wil gasped, almost choking on his mouthful of wine.

Marlo's expression pained. 'I'm only making conversation.'

'Well, don't. You can be so insensitive sometimes,' Wil said, shaking his head.

I wiped my mouth and excused myself from the table to use the bathroom. My shoulders had crept up to kiss my ears from all the tension in the room so I stretched my neck from side to side and wandered down the parquet-floored hallway and into

the marble bathroom. I closed the door behind me and exhaled. Marlo was something else. No wonder Wil loved boarding school. For once, I was glad I was born into a life of blue-collar struggle. It was moments like this that my heart swelled thinking of my family.

On the way back to the dining room, I could smell wonderful things coming from the nearby kitchen. Giving into my curiosity I detoured and peeked into the kitchen to catch a glance at the chef. He was standing in his chef whites, hovering over the stove stirring a large pot. The aroma was both sweet and spicy, and most definitely tantalising. As the chef, spun on his heels, I recognised him instantly. Roberto Pasqualini, head chef of Cucina Rustica. He was one of the most renowned Italian chefs in the country and a regular guest-chef on *Masterchef*.

‘Oh, sorry,’ I said, as he caught my eyes. I began to retreat.

‘No, no, come!’ He smiled and motioned for me to enter. His dark, kind eyes stared at me intently, and then he tilted his head. ‘Italian?’

‘Is it that obvious?’ I smiled, smoothing down my black curls.

Roberto let out a small chuckle, which made his thin moustache wriggle above his lip. ‘Ah, be proud. Italians do it better!’

I laughed. I’d heard Roberto bucked the arrogant chef reputation. Seemed they were right. I immediately felt at home.

‘Something smells amazing,’ I said, my nose tingling.

‘Come. See,’ he said, stirring the concoction on the stovetop. ‘What do you smell?’

I closed my eyes and inhaled the wonderfully delicious aroma. ‘Mmm. Wine. Chili. Garlic, of course. And . . . mmm . . . a seafood . . . is it lobster?’

‘Ah, very good.’ Roberto raised his eyebrows. ‘Not lobster. Close. Blue swimmer crab. I will serve with freshly made linguine.’ Roberto gestured to a mountain of freshly made pasta on



the flour-topped counter that looked perfectly smooth and silky. 'You know food. Are you a chef?'

'Me? No, not a chef. My family own a café in Richmond. Moretti's. I work there, well, help my dad manage the place. I do a bit of everything, really.' I blushed. As if Roberto Pasqualini would have heard of our little café or care what I did there.

'Si. Si.' He nodded. 'I started in my family ristorante in Florence. The kitchen, it was no more than a bench and a stove, but my papa, he was the best teacher.' He nodded proudly. 'He show me everything in that little kitchen, and when I turn eighteen, I come here to Australia and got a job at *Otto* in Brisbane. I start from bottom and work my way up. And now'—he smiled and gestured with open arms—'now, I can cook like this.' He inhaled the steaming pot with a look of pride.

'My family are from Bari,' I said. 'I'd love to go there one day.'

'Ah, Puglia.' Roberto's eyes danced. 'A beautiful part of our country. You have not been there?'

I shook my head.

'Oh! You must go,' Robert said passionately as he instructed his sioux chef to drop the linguine gently into a large pot of boiling water. 'You want to one day run your café?'

'I do. When my dad retires.'

'Well, then you must one hundred percent go to Italy. To Puglia. Learn the traditional way of cooking. It is the only way. Our country is very special, you know? Of course you know!' He chuckled as he swirled the pasta. 'So many different regions. Different specialities. Different ways of doing things. Which way the best?' He tilted his head with a cheeky grin and tapped his nose. '*That* is the question!'

Roberto clicked his fingers and a server appeared at the ready with a huge colander to drain the pasta.

'Well, I'd better head back,' I said, nodding to the dining

room. 'Thank you for sharing your kitchen. I can't wait to taste the pasta.'

'Prego. You are very welcome, Ms. Moretti. I hope you enjoy.' Roberto nodded with a smile. 'And,' he paused with a grin, 'enjoy Italy.'

I wandered slowly back to the dining room, my head awash with Roberto's words. Should I go to Italy? *Could* I go to Italy? It wasn't like Dad was that much fun to work with at the moment. Maybe Dad and I just needed a break from each other. We still had family back in Bari, and Dad's brother apparently still ran the family trattoria. If I sounded vague, it's because Dad hadn't spoken to his family since he came to Australia and he'd never offered a reason why. Every time one of us had asked, we were brushed aside with some half-hearted comment, 'I tell you one day.' But one day had never come. Maybe I could go. Meet them. Learn from them. My head skipped with possibilities, but it didn't last long. As I approached the dining room, I heard voices on the other side. Heated voices. It sounded as if Wil and his father were arguing. I pushed open the door quietly, hesitant not to interrupt.

'You work for the vendor, not the purchaser,' Wil's father said sternly. 'Three weeks was more than enough time to arrange finance.' He took a swig of his wine.

'They were almost there!' Wil replied. 'I'd spoken with the broker only yesterday and he said they were just waiting on the final approval.'

'Well, they were out of their finance clause. It's too late. The new deal is done. No finance. All signed and off to the solicitors. And the Andersons are more than happy.'

'And what am I supposed to tell my purchasers?'

I sat down in my seat and glanced towards Wil. His face had turned a shade not unlike a ripe peach.

‘You tell them they missed out. Show them the Morgan property. Maybe they can afford that.’

‘Ray, Wil,’ Marlo said with a tired tone to her voice. ‘This is supposed to be a celebration. The biggest sale price in Toorak, isn’t it darling?’ She looked at Ray with hopeful eyes. Ray nodded.

Wil threw his napkin on the table. ‘Sorry, Mum,’ he said, and then turned to me. ‘Let’s go.’

Marlo stood and reached across to Wil’s arm. ‘Please, darling. Stay. We’ll change the subject.’

Wil looked at me, but I wasn’t offering any comment. I froze in my seat, unsure what to do or say or even where to look. You know when they say you could cut the air with a knife? Well, I don’t think a chainsaw would have made headway through this level of tension.

Wil sighed heavily and sat back down, topping up his wine-glass before the server appeared with plates of pasta. I turned my gaze to the plate of seafood linguine in front of me. Despite the friction in the room, I was glad that Wil sat back down. This, I didn’t want to miss. The presentation was impeccable. Like something from a recipe book. And the aroma was divine. I took a mouthful and was sure I had just died and was floating towards heaven in a cloud of the softest pasta, butteriest crab and most flavourful sauce I’d ever experienced. I slowly savoured every mouthful.

Despite the amazing food, the remainder of dinner was quiet and had crossed the line of uncomfortable. Marlo tried to make conversation, talking about the lingering warm summer and her latest charity function. At one point, I felt sorry for her as her eyes flicked between her husband and her son with a faraway look.

Following dessert—one of the fluffiest zabaglione I’d ever tasted—Wil stood.

‘I think it’s time we left,’ he said. ‘Thank you, Mum.’

‘But what about coffee?’ Marlo frowned as much as her boxed face would allow.

‘Next time.’

Marlo rose from her seat, rounded the table, and leaned in to kiss Wil. ‘I wish you wouldn’t leave,’ I heard her whisper in his ear. ‘You know your father.’

Wil’s shoulders stiffened. ‘I’m sorry, Mum.’

‘Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Brooks,’ I said. ‘And please, thank the chef,’ I said to Marlo. ‘It was wonderful.’

Marlo and Ray nodded a silent, forced smile goodbye.

—

The purr of the idling engine was the only sound as we sat at the traffic lights. Wil stared blankly ahead.

‘You okay?’ I asked, turning in my seat to face him.

‘Yeah. I guess.’ He sighed. ‘They both bloody frustrate me so much. I mean, how’s Mum bringing up Nicole, for God’s sake,’ he said with a clenched jaw.

‘It’s okay. I’ve got thick skin.’

‘That’s not the point. Mum’s plain rude. And then Dad . . .’ He trailed off.

I reached over to Wil’s leg. It trembled under my hand. ‘I wish there was something I could do.’

‘What does it matter, anyway?’ Wil said with an edge to his voice. ‘I’ve got plans. Something ticking away on the side.’

‘What do you mean plans?’ I asked.

‘To get me—us—ahead.’

‘As in?’

‘Still in property,’ Wil continued matter-of-factly. ‘Investments. Once they come through, I could leave, you know.’

‘Leave your dad’s agency?’

Wil nodded.

‘But what about taking over from your dad down the track?’

‘I need to make it on my own. Prove to Dad I don’t need him or his money.’

An uneasiness pricked at my skin.

Wil grabbed my hand, and squeezed it. ‘I’m going to do this, Dem.’

‘This?’

‘Get enough money for us to walk away.’ He held a palm up as he continued. ‘I know you don’t want to leave the café, but how long are you going to wait? For all we know, your dad mightn’t retire for another ten years.’

‘It won’t be that long,’ I said, pulling at my seatbelt which all of a sudden felt like it was way too tight across my chest.

‘And what till then?’ Wil said, drawing up beside another car at a red light. ‘Keep waiting?’

‘I don’t know. Keep saving, I suppose. Keep planning for what I want to do when it happens.’ My tone was clipped. Wil was acting strange, and I didn’t like where his thoughts or ideas were going for the second time this evening.

‘What if we travelled instead? You’ve always said you wanted to go to Italy—’

‘I know, but—’

‘But what if there was no reason not to go?’

Roberto’s words seeped back into my mind. *You must one hundred percent go to Italy.*

‘Look, Wil, I don’t know. This is all too much right now.’

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘I get it. Look, when all my business is done, we can talk more then.’ He smiled. ‘It’s going to be okay, Dem. I know it.’

The lights changed to green. I wasn’t sure what Wil was up to, but that uneasy feeling in my gut stirred again. One thing I was sure on, though, was that I couldn’t ever leave the café. Could I?

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## *What do you do when everything doesn't go to plan?*

At 33, Demi's five-year plan is on track. She's moved in with boyfriend, Wil, and is waiting patiently for her father to retire so she can take over the running of the family café.

But when her father blindsides her by handing the café to her older brother Nick, and discovers Wil is hiding something, Demi's five-year plan crumbles like crostoli.

Determined to get her life back on track, Demi travels to Italy to learn about her Italian heritage and mend her frayed heart — hoping her father will come to his senses while she's away.

However, Demi's Italian escape isn't so perfect. Long-held family feuds, a love triangle from the past, and a surprising new friend in Leo, find Demi questioning everything; especially her five-year plan.

Will Demi get her plan back on track? Or will she learn that the best plans are the ones you don't make?

*The Five-Year Plan* is contemporary women's fiction with a touch of humour and a lot of heart. It will appeal to readers who want to be whisked away from their day-to-day life and immersed in a feel-good story full of food, travel and romance.

**Jodi Gibson is the author of *The Memories We Hide* and lives in regional Australia with her family on a mini-farm. When not writing, Jodi spends her time baking or reading.**



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