

EXCERPT: “WITCH OF NAPOLI”

That’s when she first told me about her crazy scheme.

When Rossi first approached her to do séances, Alessandra negotiated a weekly fee of five *lire*, but lied to Pigotti and said they offered four. She was secretly pocketing one lira from each séance. She had already squirreled away 20 *lire*, hidden in a slit inside the straw of her mattress. When she saved up enough, she said, she was going to escape to Rome, rent a small room all her own, with a flowerpot on a sunny windowsill, and live all by herself, and when she got old and fat she’d get a cat like Rossi’s to keep her company.

It was incredibly risky. You don’t do side deals when your partner is Camorra. You end up in a gutter with your throat slit. And even if Pigotti didn’t find out and kill her first, it would take her forever to save up the money, and besides how would she live when she got there – broke and without friends? She’d end up in a rat-infested tenement there too, begging for work just like a thousand other peasants from the South.

It was never going to happen, but I didn’t have the heart to tell her that. *La speranza e il pane dei poveri*, as we say in Naples. Hope is the bread of the poor.

“Everybody’s leaving Naples these days,” I said, trying a smile. “I’ve been thinking of going to America myself.”

Just then, we heard loud male voices. Alessandra jerked around.

“Oh God, no!” she cried. “He’s coming! Hide, Tomaso!”

I looked at her bewildered. “Who’s coming?”

She shoved the photo into my hands and pushed me towards the shadows.

“Run!”

I ran to the side of the garden, jumped the hedge, and threw myself flat on the ground. Peering through the bushes I saw two men round the corner of the church wall. One was Pigotti. Next to him was a squat, beefy man who looked out into the garden.

“There she is,” he growled. He pointed towards the bench where Alessandra sat rigid.

“Fucking bitch!”

Pigotti flew down the steps and sprinted across the grass, cursing loudly. When he got there, he yanked Alessandra off the bench.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he screamed. She jerked her arm away.

“I told Vito,” she shot back. “I went to the cathedral to light a candle.”

“Then why the fuck are you out here in the dark?” he snarled. “You come here to see someone? Where is he?”

He shoved her down on the bench and wheeled around, his fists clenched, eyes darting around the garden. “I’ll kill him!”

I buried my face in the dirt, trying to make my body as flat to the ground as I could.

“Vito!” I heard Pigotti shout.

“Boss?”

“Find him! He’s around here somewhere.”

I peeked up and saw Vito heading towards the hedge, holding a big stick in his hand. I looked towards the piazza. I could outrun Vito, but then Pigotti would know, and he would kill Alessandra – I was sure of it. I turned around and crawled on my knees as fast as I could down the hedge and deeper into the darkness until I bumped into a wooden cart. I pushed my way under it and lay there motionless with my hand stuffed into my mouth, praying he wouldn’t find me.

I could hear Vito coming down the opposite side of the hedge towards me, whacking the bushes with his stick. When he got near me, he stopped and listened. I could hear his heavy breathing. I curled up tighter, terrified my foot was sticking out. He jabbed into the hedge and his stick struck the cart. I could hear the bushes creak as he leaned over the hedge. I shut my eyes and held my breath.

After an eternity, I heard him grunt, the bushes creaked again, and he moved on. Finally he yelled back to Pigotti.

“Nobody around, boss.”

I slid out from under the cart and peered through the hedge to see Pigotti staring hard at Alessandra, trying to read her face.

“Lucky for you,” he finally grunted. He lit a cigarette, yanked her to her feet and shoved her towards the church. “Get moving.”

I looked down and I had pissed my pants.